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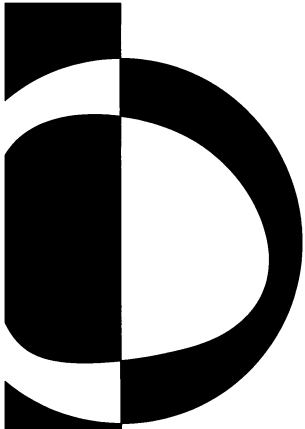
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Sarah Summers

## Building Expertise: The Toolkit in UCLA's Graduate Writing Center

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### Abstract

This study of UCLA's Graduate Writing Center (GWC) analyzes the strategies that allow consultants to adapt to the discipline-specific, technical documents that graduate writers bring to the center. The author's observations of new-consultant training and interviews with new and experienced consultants illuminate the tensions between expertise and insecurity—the feeling that accompanies a real or perceived lack of expertise—among graduate students and consultants. Because of the expectations of content, genre, and disciplinary knowledge at the graduate level, the GWC provides a rich site for studying the role of expertise in writing consultations and considering the role of expertise-building in new consultant training. The findings focus on what the author calls “expertise-based tools.” These tools blend both conventional strategies, such as modeling and managing expectations, with potentially unconventional strategies, such as masking one's own expertise or even relying on past experiences reading science fiction. Consultants employ these strategies to address the complicated relationships between expertise and inexperience at the heart of graduate students' roles as writers and new members of academic communities. The article concludes with a discussion of consultant training how GWCs can position themselves as safe spaces for graduate students to build expertise and rehearse their roles as experts.

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## Introduction

Graduate students bring highly specialized, discipline specific genres to their consultations in Graduate Writing Centers (GWCs).<sup>1</sup> In a 2012 survey I conducted of twenty-two GWC coordinators, respondents selected dissertations (80%) and dissertation proposals (80%) when asked what documents their consultants most often encounter in the GWC. Both in terms of form and content, executing these high-stakes and highly-technical documents intended to show disciplinary expertise requires a level of writing and disciplinary knowledge that both GWC consultants<sup>2</sup> and graduate students sometimes lack. The expectation of expertise on the part of the writer is one of the things that sets GWCs apart from their undergraduate counterparts and deserves more attention, both in individual centers and in studies of GWCs more broadly.<sup>3</sup>

The rhetorical situations faced by graduate writers are often unique to their learning context, which—unlike most undergraduate contexts—is professional as well as academic. For example, dissertations and prospecti are very different genres from the course-based writing that is tutored in most UWCs. As Anne Harrington & Charles Moran point out in *Genre Across the Curriculum* (2005), undergraduate writing assignments are part of “genre sets” that include a syllabus, assignment sheets, and classroom conversations and instruction (p. 249). In contrast, graduate writing tasks lack these supporting documents. So, while UWCs often tutor relatively short, self-contained writing assignments (such as response papers, course research papers, and lab reports) ac-

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- 1 For the purposes of my study, I defined GWCs as university writing centers that offer individual, one-with-one, peer consultations to clientele composed primarily of graduate students across the disciplines.
  - 2 Throughout the article, I use the term consultant to refer to the “knowledgeable peer” (Bruffee, 1989) who might, in other centers, correspond to the role of tutor. Most GWCs, including UCLA, and even some UWCs have adopted the term consultant. As John Thomas Farrell (1994) argues that the term “consultant” helps “establish adult, professional relationships with graduate students,” whereas “tutor” might be seen as remedial or infantilizing (p. 4).
  - 3 Graduate writers have only recently received sustained attention in writing center scholarship, and there is still a great need for more work. A long history of overlooking these students’ needs contributes to centers’ uncertainty about how best to support them. For example, John Thomas Farrell (1994) attempted to “initiate a dialogue” in the writing center field about supporting graduate writers. Yet, over a decade later, Betsy Palmer & Claire Howell Major (2008) admonished that “despite what we have learned about the benefits of this approach [peer tutoring] at the undergraduate level, little work has been done to examine peer tutoring at the graduate level” (p. 164).

accompanied by assignment sheets from the instructor, GWCs are likely to see large, long-term, and highly specialized projects that depend on sophisticated genre knowledge rather than a professor's instructions.

Such complex documents should require GWC tutors to develop new practices in order to tutor students working in a variety of disciplines, genres, and formats that are different from successful UWC practices. As Judith Powers (1995) explains, when her writing center began tutoring graduate students, "the model conference approach we had been using with great success with undergraduate writers in basic courses across the curriculum did not work well with research writers in the disciplines, particularly graduate thesis and dissertation writers" because of the "multiple objectives and models for graduate research writing across campus and technique material of high density and sophistication" (p. 14–15). Twenty years later, however, my survey results revealed that many GWCs offer their staff little formal training. Eleven of the twenty-two respondents wrote that they provide either no training for their tutors or rely on their tutors' previous experience working as tutors in UWCs or in other professional contexts. Other tutor-training strategies listed include shadowing or observing current tutors, conducting practice tutorials, asking current tutors to observe new tutors, and holding in-service meetings prior to or throughout the semester. In response to questions about training tutors in specific areas (writing in the disciplines, multilingual writing, and tutoring with technology), those who did offer training sometimes listed readings from collections written for UWCs: *The Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors*, *The Longman Guide to Writing Center Theory and Practice*, and *ESL Writers: A Guide for Writing Center Tutors*, for example. None of these texts have a special section devoted to graduate writers. Thus, while these collections undoubtedly provide valuable theoretical and practical advice for all tutors, reliance on UWC texts for training graduate consultants indicates a lack of specific theoretical and pedagogical support for the work of GWC tutors.

My findings are corroborated by Talinn Phillips's 2013 survey of fifty-one writing centers (not necessarily separate GWCs) that serve graduate students: "Fifty-six percent of respondents did not provide any training for tutorials with graduate students" (n.p.). This finding is made clearer when compared to the more than two-thirds of writing centers surveyed by Phillips who *did* provide training for tutorials with multilingual writers. In other words, the majority of these writing centers see multilingual students as a distinct population whose presence merits additional tutor training; these same writing centers do not make a meaningful distinction between undergraduate and graduate students.

Writing consultants often need new strategies to support graduate writers, and this article draws on my case study of UCLA's GWC to identify some of those strategies. These strategies come from what UCLA consultants call their "toolkit," an evolving collection of strategies developed in new-consultant training and organically during consultations to accommodate the writing and disciplinary expertise of both consultant and writer. In "The Role of Disciplinary Expertise in Sharing Writing Tutorials," Sue Dinitz & Susanmarie Harrington (2014) call for more empirical work to determine "*how* expertise affects what happens in sessions" (p. 74). Because of the expectations of content, genre, and disciplinary knowledge at the graduate level, the GWC provides a rich site for studying the role of expertise in writing consultations. Specifically, my study illuminates the tensions between expertise and insecurity—the feeling that accompanies a real or perceived lack of expertise—among graduate students and consultants and reveals the strategies that UCLA's GWC consultants develop to deal with these tensions. Ultimately, this case study demonstrates how UCLA consultants blend both conventional and unconventional writing center strategies to address the complicated relationships between expertise and inexperience at the heart of graduate students' experiences as writers and new members of academic communities.

To examine these strategies in depth, I first describe the design of my study, including why the institutional context surrounding UCLA's GWC makes it a data-rich site to examine questions about consultant expertise and disciplinary writing and how to approach those questions in consultant training. The remainder of the article describes my findings: the tools in the consultants' "toolkit," which range from more traditional discussion-based and text-based tools to more unconventional expertise-based tools. These tools allow consultants to respond to a variety of genres, disciplines, and levels of writing expertise. Moreover, I argue that these tools also allow consultants to transcend the debates about generalist vs. specialist tutors by providing them with a range of strategies that draw on both generalist and specialist practices.

## **Study Design and Methods**

My research questions arose from my own experiences as coordinator of Penn State's GWC from 2010–2011. I wanted to know how other GWCs approached the administrative and pedagogical challenges I faced, such as reading long, highly technical documents in the standard fifty-minute writing center appointment and helping students in disciplines very different from my own. Thus, this project began as what

Sarah Liggett, Kerri Jordan, & Steve Price (2011) call in their taxonomy of writing center methodologies “pragmatic inquiry,” which “begins with a local, practice-related experience or observation that prompts the Practitioner to engage in research that results in local, personal, practice-related implications” (p. 61). I soon realized, however, that just my list of other GWCs—let alone knowledge of their practices—would be valuable beyond my local context, so I created an empirical project to study GWCs.<sup>4</sup>

My mixed-methods study included a survey distributed to thirty-two potential GWC administrators<sup>5</sup> followed by three case studies at University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), The Pennsylvania State University (Penn State), and Liberty University. These case studies included observations, interviews, and the collection of documents to investigate administrative and pedagogical practices in depth. This qualitative approach was complemented by library, online, and archival research, including the collection of documents from each case study site. This article focuses on my case study at UCLA, during which I observed the three-day new consultant training in September 2012 and conducted hour-long interviews with GWC Coordinator Marilyn Gray, two experienced GWC consultants, and one new consultant. I also conducted two follow-up phone interviews with new consultants in April 2013.

**Subject selection.** I selected UCLA as a case study site based on the data that Gray provided in response to my survey. Like many GWCs, UCLA offers free, fifty-minute, one-with-one peer consultations to graduate students across all disciplines. In addition, the GWC designs and hosts workshops and dissertation and thesis boot camps and facilitates writing groups. Two unique features of UCLA’s GWC made it stand out as a data-rich site for studying the role of consultant expertise and insecurity in relationship to writing in the disciplines. First, UCLA’s center was initiated from the ground up by graduate students who asked for more writing support through a Graduate Student Association referendum. Every graduate student pays an annual fee that helps fund the writing center. As Christine Wilson, the director of the Graduate Student Resource Center, explained to the new consultants during their

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4 The project identified relevant issues faced by GWCs and described the practices and pedagogies developed by GWCs in response to their unique institutional contexts. This article draws on my case study at UCLA and their approach to tutoring writing across the disciplines. Other areas of focus in the project were tutoring multilingual graduate writers and tutoring graduate writers online.

5 Some of the potential respondents I identified no longer had GWCs at their institutions or served graduate students *ad hoc* in their UWCs.

training, this graduate student ownership gives UCLA’s GWC a unique focus: “It does mean that there’s something very different and special about the writing center. The money for the writing center is directly out of the pockets of graduate students [who] said, ‘I vote for this fee. Here’s the money. Give me a writing center.’” As a result, the GWC is committed to making its services relevant and valuable to students across all disciplines.

Second—and related to this goal—UCLA’s GWC has a large and diverse group of consultants. Whereas most GWCs, in part because of their funding structures, employ graduate students primarily from English departments, UCLA’s consultants come from across the disciplines. Of the eighteen consultants during the 2012–2013 school year, fewer than one-third were from Humanities disciplines, with only two coming from the English department. Table 1 provides information about the participants included in this study, including their disciplinary affiliation.<sup>6</sup>

**Table 1**

**UCLA Case Study Participants**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Role</b>
Marilyn Gray	GWC Coordinator
Mark	Experienced GWC Consultant Science Ph.D. Student
Candace	New GWC Consultant Social Science M.A. Student
Janelle	New GWC Consultant Social Science Ph.D. Student
Rachel	New GWC Consultant Science Ph.D. Student
Debra	Experienced GWC Consultant Social Science Ph.D.
Tiffany	Experienced GWC Consultant Social Science Ph.D. Student

<sup>6</sup> All consultants’ names have been replaced with pseudonyms. The names of the GWC coordinator and other university administrators have not been changed.

This decision to hire such a diverse staff speaks to the way the GWC achieves their cross-disciplinary goal: extensive staff training, which as I noted in the introduction, makes UCLA stand out among other GWCs. Because so few of UCLA's consultants have Humanities—and specifically English—backgrounds, very few of them have previous writing center experience. Thus, they receive training in writing center theory and practice. Their training also focuses heavily on genres across the disciplines that graduate students might bring to appointments. They are not trained to be discipline-specific tutors, although they sometimes take on that role. Instead, they are trained to recognize and respond to a variety of genres and disciplinary writing. Of the three ten-hour training days that I observed, a full day was devoted to what is labeled on the schedule as “Understanding Graduate Writing and Genre Acquisition.” Ongoing staff training throughout the year also focuses on specific genres, with consultants often sharing their disciplinary expertise with the group. Because, as UCLA's survey responses indicated, GWC clients most frequently come from disciplines as diverse as the Social Sciences, Education and Information Studies, Humanities, and Biochemistry, consultants must confront issues of expertise and insecurity as they read and respond to writing from a variety of disciplines.

**Data collection.** During my visit to UCLA, I obtained informed consent from all participants and then conducted observations of tutor training activities during which I wrote detailed field notes. I also audio recorded these activities. Following my observations, I conducted and audio recorded semi-structured interviews with the director and consenting consultants. After assigning pseudonyms to participants, I sent the transcripts from these interviews and observations to Fox Transcribe (now Rev Audio Transcription Services) to be transcribed. I also collected relevant documents, including consultant schedules, promotional materials, handouts, and training materials and took digital photographs of the physical location and layout of the center.

**Data analysis.** My data analysis was guided by grounded theory, which John Creswell (2007) describes as a methodology in which “theory-development does not come ‘off the shelf,’ but rather is generated or ‘grounded’ in data from participants who have experienced the process” (p. 63). In other words, grounded theory begins with the data—as opposed to external theories—and allows data collection, analysis and theory building to be related, recursive processes. Central to grounded theory is the concept of letting themes emerge from the data itself rather than imposing *a priori* theories or categories onto the data. While I designed the survey with topics based on my own experiences in a GWC, the survey results reframed my thinking about these themes and



introduced new ideas. In turn, these emerging themes influenced the selection of case study sites and the creation of interview questions.

Not only is grounded theory the most reasonable approach for this project due to the lack of previous theorizing of GWCs practices, it also best affords me the flexibility to account for the complexity of these sites. In fact, Kathy Charmaz (2006), a sociologist and expert in grounded theory, calls grounded theory a “systematic, yet flexible” approach to collecting and analyzing data because it allows researchers to adapt their methods, their thinking, and their theory-building to their research settings (p. 2). As Joyce Magnotto Neff argues in “Capturing Complexity: Using Grounded Theory to Study Writing Centers” (2002), grounded theory is particularly valuable for pedagogical research in writing centers because it values description and theory equally; acknowledges the complexity of social interaction; supports collaboration among researcher and participants; and recognizes the value of the researcher’s experiential knowledge (p. 134). Thus, grounded theory honors the collaborative nature of writing centers as well as the value that writing centers place on practitioner knowledge.

Given the collaborative spirit of writing centers, I also employed collaboration as a central methodology in this project by engaging in extensive collaboration with my participants. Peter Mortensen (1992) argues that “talk about writing tells us much about the community that makes that talk—the people who talk. Our reporting of that talk in a sense continues the conversation” (p. 124). This article is a continuation of the conversations UCLA’s coordinator and consultants are having about graduate students and their writing, conversations that I was privileged to listen in on during my research. Yet, as Mortensen (1992) argues, these representations of my participants are still “necessarily narrow and selective because they must mold to the narrative form and serve the arguments readers expect to find in published reports of research. Consequently, the value of these presentations is primarily rhetorical. Effective representations of talk about writing make for persuasive arguments about the nature of discourse” (p. 106). By using the data itself to generate theories of GWC consultations and letting my participants speak, I hope I have effectively balanced my representations of my participants with the creation of a persuasive—although necessarily incomplete—argument about GWCs, disciplinary tutoring, and the need for genre-based training.

Grounded theory also guided my process for coding interviews and observations. Drawing on Sharan B. Merriam’s *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation* (2009), I performed open and axial coding on all of the interview and observation transcripts. I first

open-coded transcripts by hand within one week of each case study visit. Neff describes using open coding as an inventional strategy to “brainstorm categories” (p. 135). Similarly, I approached the transcripts with an open mind and wrote words or phrases in the margins that captured the themes I saw emerging. At this point in the process, no detail was insignificant and no codes were rejected. To best capture these themes in the data, I coded transcripts by focusing on key terms repeated by participants, participants’ actions and beliefs, and the relationships between consultants and disciplinary knowledge. When possible, I used *in vivo* codes, or code names that are “the exact words used by participants” (Creswell, 2007, p. 153). For example, both Gray and the UCLA GWC consultants use the term “toolkit” to describe their range of strategies, and so I used “toolkit” to code the times consultants talked about their range of approaches to consulting. Ultimately, this code became an important part of my findings.

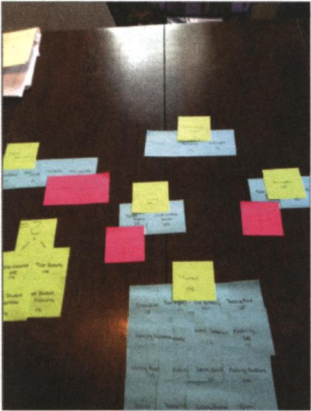
Following my initial hand coding, I shared the transcripts with a writing group of peers who also open-coded the data. After we discussed their reactions, I printed out a new copy of the transcripts and coded by hand again with the goal of using these new insights to see patterns or ideas I might have missed the first time. Throughout the open coding process, I continued to write in my research journal (Ortlipp, 2008) about themes that were emerging, ways I was defining individual codes, and categories that I might use later in the coding process.

Once I had two sets of hand-coded transcripts, I compared the two and entered them into Dedoose, a web-based coding software program, during axial coding, which further refines the categories developed in open coding. If open coding is invention, as Neff suggests, axial coding is arrangement. Differences in initial codes allowed me to re-examine my codes and the transcripts to consider how I could best represent the data. I merged similar codes together into larger categories and rejected some codes that were not significant to the data set. I then entered each remaining code into Dedoose and created a memo in the program that defined the code. This process also enhanced my ability to use the constant comparative method to ensure that all excerpts associated with a single code fit the definition of that code or to reframe codes to better account for new information. Dedoose facilitates this process by allowing the user to select a single code and see all of the excerpts associated with each code. Because I could also upload to Dedoose the field notes of observations and documents collected, I was able to triangulate the data that I gathered at each site to create a more comprehensive picture and to identify any conflicts or incongruities among the data.

Let's take as an example my coding of an interview with Candace. In response to a question about the variety of genres she will encounter as a consultant, she says, "I'll get a lot of exposure to different types of writing, which I feel I actually still need help with. That's the imposter side of me that feels like I'm not fully qualified for this position, but I hope to grow into it." During open coding, I keyed in on the word "imposter" and created an *in vivo* code, writing "imposter" in the margin. When I revisited the transcript for axial coding, after also coding the other transcripts from the case study, I revised the code to "tutor insecurity" and grouped it with twenty other excerpts that were also coded "tutor insecurity." I also wrote a memo that defined that code as tutors discussing imposter syndrome, insecurity, or discomfort as a result of "being unfamiliar with disciplinary knowledge or graduate writing genres." All of the excerpts within the code "tutor insecurity" fit this definition.

In the final stage, selective coding, I further refined these codes into the core categories that best captured the story of each site. I combined digital and non-digital technologies to help me visualize these categories. I first wrote out all of the codes on sticky notes and spread them across my dining room table and grouped similar codes (fig. 1). Then, rather than counting codes, I looked at the word-cloud created by Dedoose (fig. 2), which allows users to visualize the frequency of codes and helped me determine what themes had been most common at each site. I grouped and regrouped codes into categories until I was satisfied that I had core categories that best represented the site. In a final step before drafting, I arranged these categories into a visual map (fig. 3) that showed their relationships to one another and formed the basis for the theory I developed. In creating the outline for the case study report, I followed Creswell's (2007) advice to "develop a 'story' that narrates these [finalized] categories and shows their interrelationship" (p. 240). For example, Figure 3 shows a bubble with "insecurity/expertise." The "tutor insecurity" code ended up as part of this larger grouping that acknowledged the tensions between insecurity and expertise and eventually helped me build the argument for this article. The examples I've chosen to include in this article represent the richest, most informative examples of the patterns and categories that emerged when I coded interviews and observations. In other words, these examples are not unique data points; instead, they are representative of the patterns that emerged from the careful coding of data.

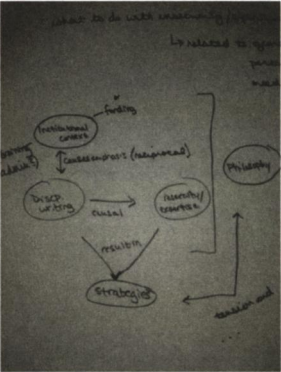
**Figure 1. Codes from UCLA case study written on sticky notes and grouped together during selective coding.**



**Figure 2. The same codes in a word cloud generated by Dedoose.**



**Figure 3. A visual map of core categories from UCLA case study and their relationships to one another.**



**Limitations.** Because I observed consultant training, this study does not include observations of actual consultations with graduate writers. The training happened prior to the start of UCLA's fall quarter; thus, there were no consultations for me to observe and I was unable to examine how these tools are employed in actual consultations. The following descriptions and analyses are based on an ideal that is presented in training to prepare new consultants and on experienced consultants' reports of their previous appointments. In the reality of a consultation, I am confident that the strategies consultants use are far more fluid than I am able to present in my findings. Moreover, there are surely consultations that fail to help writers. Despite this limitation, however, the toolkit presented and practiced during UCLA's GWC training—as well as the acknowledgement that some tools develop more organically with experience—provides a general model for considering how to approach the challenges of training GWC consultants<sup>7</sup> and supporting graduate writers with various levels of expertise across disciplines.

### **The Role of Expertise in Graduate Writing and Peer Consulting**

Much of the writing center literature related to disciplinary expertise focuses on the debate between generalist and specialist tutors (Hubbuck, 1988; Kiedaisch & Dinitz, 1991; Shamon & Burns, 1995; Haring-Smith, 2000). While these conversations are important to considering hiring practices and the tutor/writer relationship, they often skip over the question of how to prepare tutors—be they specialists or generalists—to recognize and adjust to their own disciplinary expertise and that of the writer. The notion of disciplinary expertise is—as my findings demonstrate—fluid and relational. That is, a consultant's feelings of expertise vary depending on the context and the expertise of the writer. Thus, regardless of what kind of tutors writing centers hire—particularly at the graduate level—they need robust training that helps them confront their own disciplinary expertise and that of the writers they consult. Understanding the role of disciplinary expertise becomes particularly important in a graduate context where the ability to learn discipline-specific language and genres contributes to graduate students' success, both academically and professionally. The ability to demonstrate disciplinary expertise marks graduate writers as members of the appropriate academ-

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7 For more on the challenges of designing a writing center training specifically for graduate student consultants, see LeCluyse & Mendelsohn (2008), which describes a rhetorical approach to training graduate students to work in a UWC.

ic communities. Indeed, much of the scholarship on graduate students as writers positions them as newcomers working to initiate themselves into disciplinary discourse communities by developing the necessary writing expertise (Berkenkotter, Huckin, & Ackerman, 1991; Prior, 1998; Paré, Starke-Meyerring, & McAlpine, 2009; Tardy, 2009). GWCs are important resources for graduate writers as they move from newcomer to expert. However, because disciplinary conventions are often opaque and rarely taught (Russell, 2002; Bazerman, 2009), GWCs must find ways to accommodate a lack of disciplinary knowledge on both the part of the writer and the consultant.

Throughout my observations and interviews at UCLA, discussions about disciplinary writing were often explored through the idea of expertise and the feeling of insecurity that accompanies a real or perceived lack of expertise. As Carrie Leverenz (2001) explains in “Graduate Students in the Writing Center: Confronting the Cult of (Non)Expertise,” “When graduate students come to the writing center, everyone’s expertise is at stake: the graduate students’ expertise in a particular discipline [and] the tutor’s expertise in writing and tutoring” (p. 50). The graduate writing consultants I spoke with were keenly aware of the potential role of expertise, and they experienced the insecurity associated with a lack of expertise on two levels: first, as graduate writers and second, as graduate writing consultants talking with writers from other disciplines.

**Expertise and inexperience as graduate writers.** My interview with new consultant Candace reveals the extent to which, as a graduate student herself, she is aware of the expectations of disciplinary expertise. During our interview, she suggested that many graduate students—herself included—feel like imposters in their fields and that they’re “very anxious” about their abilities to write and keep up with disciplinary expectations. Speaking from her own experience, Candace says:

I don’t feel like my department understands how many different levels of writing experience we possess. Even though I’m entering this as someone who has a master’s degree and who has taught writing, I’ve never written a research proposal before. I’ve never done a research study before. Never written an abstract. Never picked keywords.

Candace’s experience echoes the arguments of those like Michael Carter (1990), Kristin Walker (1998), and Irene Clark (2005) who present the need for both global writing strategies and local, genre-based

strategies. In other words, even though Candace has general writing strategies from previous experiences, she is not familiar enough with genres in her field to apply them confidently. Thus, she feels like an imposter.

In “Entering the Conversation: Graduate Thesis Proposals as Genre,” Clark (2005) refers to the syndrome that Candace identified as “the necessity of pretending to be an expert” and suggests that when graduate students do not know how to meet these expectations of expertise, they feel that “they shouldn’t have been admitted to the program” (pp. 144–145). It is precisely because the consultants at UCLA’s GWC are graduate writers themselves that the GWC is acutely aware of this “imposter syndrome.” Thus, the consultation strategies in the toolkit that I describe later in the article are highly attuned to this issue.

**Expertise and inexperience as GWC consultants.** Beyond the imposter syndrome they might feel as graduate writers themselves, UCLA’s GWC consultants also feel pressure to meet expectations of expertise as consultants. Of course, Gray does not expect her consultants to be experts in their consultations. She said repeatedly during training: “We’re not expecting you to be experts in the appointments.” Still, even experienced consultants frequently admitted to feeling the need to convey expertise—or cover insecurity—during appointments. For example, experienced consultant Janelle, despite her confidence in her writing skills, experienced insecurity about her helpfulness as a tutor when confronted with dissertation projects: “I was really, really, intimidated about that at first.” Because dissertations are a genre specific to advanced graduate writing, many consultants are unfamiliar with them when they begin tutoring. Particularly if GWCs want to hire consultants who can provide continuity and stay on the staff for several years, consultants, like Janelle, might be too early in their programs to have experienced writing and reading dissertations. Janelle goes on to admit that she “didn’t want to tell anyone I’m just a second year [Ph.D. student]. I kept it to myself, and they didn’t know.” Her unwillingness to admit her inexperience suggests that she thinks it might jeopardize the perceived quality of the appointment. For example, her clients may have then assumed she could only focus on mechanics and resisted her genre- or content-based advice (Waring, 2005; Chen, 2010). Thus, not only do consulting strategies have to be devised to accommodate inexperience and anxiety on the part of the writer, but they must also accommodate these factors on the part of the consultant.

The feelings of inexperience among new consultants were most visible during my observation of Mark’s session on NIH and NSF grant

proposals.<sup>8</sup> The following exchange between Mark and a new consultant, psychology Ph.D. student Rachel, occurred while Mark was trying to help new consultants devise strategies for helping writers eliminate jargon.<sup>9</sup> On the screen, he showed a paragraph that begins “Focal Adhesion Kinase (FAK) is a non-receptor tyrosine kinase localized to matrix adhesions and becomes activated following engagement of  $\beta$ 1 and av integrins” and continues in the same jargon-heavy way.

**Rachel:** I think everything you’re saying makes complete sense in theory, but in actual practice ... Yeah, the language, I just get so overwhelmed by it that as a counselor or as a consultant, I can’t really tell what’s wrong with it, you know, so ...

**Mark:** But you have a feeling something is wrong with it, right?

**Rachel:** I don’t have a feeling.

**Mark:** Well, do you understand the sentence?

**Rachel:** I don’t understand it, but I think I don’t understand it because I’m not familiar with the jargon there.

**Mark:** You’re too nice of a person. [Laughter.]

I coded Rachel’s responses as “tutor insecurity” because her inexperience with disciplinary content is interfering with her ability to apply her knowledge as a reader and writer to the paragraph. Ultimately, she fears that she would let this paragraph go undiscussed in a consultation because she could not pinpoint—or even recognize—its problems. In fact, Dinitz & Harrington’s (2014) study about the effects of disciplinary expertise on the effectiveness of consultants suggests that Rachel would be likely to let this jargon stand in a consultation. They found that tutors who lacked disciplinary expertise “accepted the student’s statements and assessments; there was little pushback to the student’s point of view” (p. 81). If a writer defended the use of jargon, Rachel might back down and assume her own lack of expertise caused the lack of understanding. Indeed, Dinitz & Harrington (2014) argue that confidence plays a key role in limiting the effectiveness of tutors without disciplinary expertise. These tutors, they write, “often had inklings that the paper and session needed to move in a different direction but seemed to lack the confidence to push back on students’ ideas, assessments of their work, and goals for the session” (p. 94). The consultant toolkit at UCLA is

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8 For more on the NIH grant as a graduate genre, see Ding (2008).

9 In a follow-up interview with Gray, she noted Mark’s commitment to making sure that science writers do not hide behind jargon. In this training session, Mark similarly challenges consultants not to hide behind jargon and let it create a barrier to discussing writing and meaning.



designed to help Rachel and the other consultants build the confidence to approach texts outside their disciplinary expertise.

### **Developing a Toolkit: UCLA's Strategies for Tutoring in the Disciplines**

As Mark's advice to the new consultants indicates, it is important to have a range of strategies from which to draw during a consultation. Throughout my interviews and observations, Gray and experienced tutors referred to these strategies as their "toolkit." As experienced consultant Debra explained to the new consultants, a key aspect of a consultation is "just knowing what your toolkit is. For this student and these circumstances, I'm going to pick this out of my toolkit. It's a matter of the range of approaches you could use." Guided by this notion of a toolkit, I then coded the transcripts of observations and interviews for mention of various "tools" that belong in the kit. The toolkit developed in new-consultant training includes both text-based and discussion-based strategies that are likely familiar to writing teachers and common in writing center consultations. Text-based tools include strategies like reading aloud, identifying problem patterns, and editing or proofreading. Examples of discussion-based tools include asking the writer to summarize the text or larger project, asking questions about the rhetorical context of the project, and conversations about general writing strategies. Yet toolkits, however thoughtfully designed, do not always contain all of the tools necessary to complete a task.

In fact, it's important to consider carefully the metaphor of the toolkit—one that I've come to understand as generative, rather than limiting. Tools are meant to stand in for capabilities we don't quite have. Thus, the idea of the consultant's toolkit breaks down the binary of expertise and inexperience. If consultants are able to identify gaps in their own knowledge, they needn't abandon the consultation. Instead, they can reach for their toolkit to fill in those gaps. It's important, though, that the toolkit we imagine is not too neat and tidy, with one clear tool for every problem; the consultant's toolkit is much messier.

In the tidy image of a toolkit, like the one my father had when I was growing up, each tool hangs neatly on pegboard, and the socket wrenches are arranged in descending order. It's easy to find the right tool for every job. Then, there's the toolkit my husband and I use: a giant plastic box full of tools (and maybe some junk) that we reach our hands into, root around in, and hope we pull out a tool that will fit our needs. In order to be sustainable, a writing center toolkit needs to be more like the latter—an organic, sometimes even messy, collection of

strategies that allows consultants to dig around for something new and just try things. Without haphazardly reaching into our box of tools, my husband and I may never have come up with the combination of magnets, screwdriver, and T-square that allowed us to rescue items from the dryer vent. Similarly, consultants, especially in a GWC, sometimes need the serendipity of reaching for unexpected tools to account for the range of genres and writers they encounter.

In what follows, I focus on these more organic tools, which I've termed "expertise-based tools." Consultants develop these strategies as they gain experience tutoring, precisely because of complexities of disciplinary expertise faced by writers and consultants. The consultants add these tools to their repertoire, making them better able to adapt to a range of writers, genres, and disciplines. My interviews with experienced consultants confirmed that the more formal—and somewhat traditional—discussion and text-focused tools could not fully account for the relationships between expertise and inexperience that consultants confront during appointments. In these situations, consultants employ experience-based tools that often arise organically from the context of the appointment and the relationship between consultant, writer, and genre. As Howard Tinberg (1997) argues, "when students become tutors of their peers' writing, they, too, must acknowledge the expertise that they bring to the exchange and visualize their own behavior as demonstrating a critical response for inexperienced writers" (p. 68). Experience-based tools exemplify the kind of critical response that Tinberg (1997) describes in the context of not just inexperienced writers, but inexperienced consultants as well. I coded this third set of tools as those strategies intended to deal directly with the tensions between expertise and inexperience previously described. Discussion of these tools followed conversations about inexperience—either on the part of the writer or the consultant—and focus on ways to create feelings of expertise that balance feelings of inexperience.

Expertise-based tools also allow consultants to transcend the debates about generalist vs. discipline-specific tutors—and the practices associated with each approach—that I discussed at the opening of this section. For example, in "A Critique of Pure Tutoring," Linda Shamoon & Deborah Burns (1995), who advocate for discipline-specific tutoring, suggest that when a tutor "redrafts problematic portions of a text for a student, the changes usually strengthen the disciplinary argument and improve the connection to current conversation in the discipline" (p. 185). On the other hand, Susan Hubbuch (1988) suggests that an "ignorant tutor," her term for a generalist tutor, provides greater advantages to students in the long run because the tutor "must have the student spell

out for him all of the student’s immediate premises; he must ask for the student’s definition of key terms; he needs to have the connections the student is making between parts of the argument explicitly stated” (p. 27). Rather than conform to a single philosophy of tutoring strategies, the toolkit I outline below allows consultants to draw from both approaches. Ultimately, these tools allow consultants to take disciplinary expertise into account as they work with writers and choose strategies according to the expertise and inexperience of both the writer and the consultant.

Expertise-based tools include managing the writer’s expectations for the session, modeling, and discussion of specific conventions for typical graduate genres, such as literature reviews. Yet, because the notion of expertise is fluid and also moves between rhetorical expertise and discipline-specific expertise, these tools are complex to categorize. Table 2, which provides the organization for the remainder of this article, attempts to capture how these tools were discussed in terms of expertise during the training. When I created the matrix, I returned to my drawing in Figure 3 that mapped the themes for this case study. I zeroed in on the relationship between expertise and insecurity and tutoring strategies and then returned to Dedoose to look at the codes that connected those ideas. I then tried to capture those connections in an organized and linear way for a reader. While their actual use is much less fixed, this matrix is intended to be a heuristic to display the various possibilities for addressing expertise and inexperience within a tutorial.

**Table 2**

**Expertise Based Tools**

	<i>Consultant Expertise</i>	<i>Consultant Inexperience</i>
<i>Writer Expertise</i>	Genre-specific tools	Manage expectations Blame the writer Refer the writer
<i>Writer Inexperience</i>	Model texts Hide consultant expertise	Janelle’s “sci-fi” tool Rely on discussion-based or text-based tools

**Writer Expertise–Consultant Expertise.** Throughout the training, there was little discussion of situations in which both the consultant and the writer might be experts, perhaps in part because the new

consultants did not yet feel like expert consultants. However, a presentation during the training on writing literature reviews gives insight into how an expert-expert consultation might work. Tiffany, an advanced Ph.D. in the social sciences, explained an approach to literature reviews that asks the writer to develop a Venn diagram of “concepts” that relate to the writer’s project. The overlapping sections represent the focus of the literature review, with the concepts at the center being the most important. A highly genre-specific approach like this might capitalize on both the genre-expertise of the consultant and the content-knowledge expertise of the writer. As Tiffany explained, “the literature review is familiar territory. It’s common ground. It’s difficult, but it’s common ground.” In other words, the literature review is a common enough genre that consultants can feel like experts in its conventions and help writers understand those conventions. Then, the writer can use his/her content-area expertise to meet the structural needs of the genre that the Venn diagram exercise makes clear.

**Writer Expertise–Consultant Inexperience.** When the writer feels like an expert in his or her discipline but that discipline is unfamiliar to the consultant, the consultant may feel inexperienced or insecure. For example, the writer might ask specific questions of genres or disciplinary conventions that the consultant cannot answer. The tools that address this situation seem focused on making the consultant feel more comfortable in his or her ability to still help the writer. For example, Mark’s somewhat off-the-cuff suggestion to “blame the writer” empowers the consultant to help the writer even when that consultant is inexperienced. As Mark explained in his presentation, “You can’t always blame yourself or your lack of expertise [in the field]. You have to be able to blame the other person . . . If you can’t follow their argument, then they are doing something wrong, and you can be confident in that.” While Grey encouraged Mark to soften his advice and call it “asking for clarification,” Mark’s point is an important one. Rather than use inexperience as an excuse to gloss over confusing concepts or unclear prose, the tool of “blaming” the writer actually uses the consultant’s inexperience as an excuse to get the knowledgeable writer to do more rhetorical work. As Hubbuch (1988) suggests, when a tutor admits a lack of understanding, it can “raise issues that the student must make decisions about, based on their conception of the purpose, context, and audience of the specific paper they are writing” (p. 29). By encouraging a consultant to say, “I don’t understand your point here,” the tool of blame—which could be productively reframed as writer responsibility—encourages the writer to rearticulate and refine their ideas with a broader (and often more realistic) audience in mind.

Experienced consultant Debra also recommends managing expectations for the consultation, particularly if the consultant is worried about a lack of experience. For example, new consultants voiced that they needed more time to read an unfamiliar text in order to really understand it but felt awkward taking that much time to silently read a document. Debra responded, “The main thing I usually do, if I’m doing anything in the session, I’m just honest with them about what I’m doing. So, I just say, ‘I’m going to skim for five or ten [minutes] and it might be kinda weird since you’re just sitting here, but I want to understand what your text is about.’ Then you don’t have to feel anxious as it’s taking you more and more time.” Like Debra, Janelle admits that she is “up front” with writers when she is unfamiliar with their discipline in order to put limits on the kind of help they expect. In her article “An Alternative Approach to Bridging Disciplinary Divides,” Catherine Savini (2011) calls this making “transparency” part of a consultation. She suggests that “discussions about genre and discipline require that tutors reveal their lack of expertise” even though it may be uncomfortable (p. 3). By being transparent about their lack of experience and the time they need to become more familiar with a text, UCLA’s consultants are managing the kind of help writers can expect and may also be encouraging writers to be more proactive about explaining their disciplinary and generic expectations. If writers still feel like they want more specific disciplinary writing help, consultants are also encouraged to refer them to other consultants in the writer’s field—another possible advantage of hiring students from across the disciplines.

**Writer Inexperience—Consultant Expertise.** A consultant with expertise in a particular genre or discipline can be more directive in their approach by providing model texts for writers who may feel inexperienced or unaware of disciplinary conventions. Shamon & Burns (1995) argue that “at its best, directive tutoring provides a sheltered, protected time and space within the discipline for these intermediate and advanced students to make the shift between general strategies to domain strategies” (p. 182). In other words, more directive tools like modeling help writers develop specific strategies for their disciplines and see themselves as a part of their “domain community” (p. 183). Models may come from provided handouts, articles, online resources, or the consultant’s own modeling of how to revise a portion of the text.

In these situations, the consultants are drawing on two kinds of expertise. First, they have enough disciplinary awareness or expertise to match a student’s writing with an external model. Second, they are using expertise they have developed as graduate writers in terms of how to apply models. As the new consultants discussed their past writing ex-

periences and development as writers during a training exercise, nearly all of them mentioned looking at examples and trying to apply those examples to their own work. They are employing, in Amy Devitt's (2004) terms, "critical genre awareness," which allows them to examine models for their rhetorical purposes and applications to new and existing tasks. This approach, which teaches writers to recognize the rhetorical features and ideologies of genres, Devitt argues, "may enable writers to learn newly encountered genres when they are immersed in a context for which they need those genres" (p. 192). In other words, by understanding how to interpret the rhetorical and social features of a genre, critical genre awareness allows writers to more readily recognize and apply these features when they are faced with new genres. In the context of a writing center, critical genre awareness provides a way for consultants to approach the unfamiliar genres that writers bring to consultations. Consultants can then share this approach with writers to give them an adaptable framework for approaching writing tasks.

Gray synthesized the new consultants' explanations of the way they use models in their own writing to help them see modeling as a tool in the toolkit:

One of the things that you brought up is how you have looked at models and how you have been really attentive to what you read and how you've been learning to write by looking at models. And that's the kind of coaching that we actually do a lot of in the writing center. It's really—we're helping people learn things, but more importantly, we're helping people learn to teach themselves things. So all those strategies you've used on your own, feel free to show people how to do it. Pull up an article and walk through it and look at the sections. Help people to approach samples with that eye to treating it as a model.

By drawing on their awareness of models and their expertise using them, consultants can help less experienced writers learn how to use models in their own writing and build their expertise at recognizing conventions in their disciplines.

While modeling may be a more traditional tool than many of the other expertise-based tools, the ways consultants report employing this tool grows out of the expertise/inexperience balance in the appointment. Creating or providing models also gives consultants an alternative to being too hands on if they are content experts in a writer's field. While consultants with disciplinary expertise can be valuable in terms of asking field- or genre-specific questions of a writer, they still attempt

to maintain a collaborative, rather than authoritative, stance. This stance can be difficult to achieve if a less expert writer perceives that a consultant is an expert in their shared field. In these cases, Debra admits that she often hides or downplays her expertise. “If somebody comes in with a linguistics paper, and I would know everything they’re talking about, and I would know who they’re citing and all that stuff, I don’t think it’s fair for me to give them a much different appointment. So . . . sometimes I would have to hide that I knew something.” Dinitz & Herrington (2014) confirm Debra’s instincts that her content-area expertise might hinder an appointment. Their findings suggest that shared knowledge of a writer’s content area “leads the tutor to be too directive” (p. 91). To counter this potential problem, instead of correcting a student or providing directive answers to a problem, Debra relies on other tools like asking questions or providing models—strategies that still rely on her expertise but allow her to treat students the same regardless of their disciplines.

**Writer Inexperience—Consultant Inexperience.** In the final situation, where both consultant and writer lack expertise, the available tools are less clear. Indeed, Judith Powers (1995) argues that writing center strategies generally assume that “someone—either the writer or the tutor—knows how to solve a particular writing problem” (p. 14). Thus, there are few models for addressing a lack of expertise on the part of both the consultant and the writer. So in many cases, the consultant might rely on another set of tools, such as the text-based reading aloud or the discussion-based asking the student to summarize. Janelle, however, has an interesting approach to these situations where she cannot rely on a writer to give her the necessary background to understand a text.

Sometimes I just, especially with hard science ones, I try to treat it a little bit like a science fiction book. [Laughs.] There are things that I’m not going to understand, and that’s okay. I’m just going to plug in some foreign word, and it’ll take the place of a noun or whatever it needs to take the place of. And we’ll go from there.

Janelle attempts to rely on the experience she has as a reader, and she maintains an attitude of flexibility. By not getting too intimidated by jargon, Janelle can still address issues such as syntax and paragraph organization. The sci-fi strategy helps Janelle get a big-picture understanding of the text, which might then allow her to guide the writer to terms that prevent her full understanding. Rather than letting a lack of expertise limit her engagement with the text, as Rachel admitted during the training exercise that she might, Janelle approaches the text

with an open mind that both she and the writer can still develop some understanding from the session.

Together, these four categories of expertise-based tools recognize the role that both general and discipline-specific writing expertise plays in graduate education. The variety of tools in this category also accounts for the fluid and dynamic nature of expertise, thus recognizing that graduate students are a diverse population of writers with a variety of needs. The “toolkit” as a whole is meant to prepare consultants to meet these needs with flexibility and confidence, even when they lack experience with particular disciplines or genres.

### **Implications: Rehearsals of Expertise in Consultations and Training**

In UCLA’s GWC, consultants build their toolkit through their initial training and collect additional tools during required professional development and as they gain experience as consultants. All of these tools are shaped both by and for their GWC’s particular context. Because their institutional position and funding necessitates a focus on writing in the disciplines, the toolkit must be able to help consultants adapt to a variety of genres, disciplinary conventions, and students’ writing backgrounds. Consultants adapt discussion- and text-based tools from more traditional undergraduate writing center practices, but they also develop new (and sometimes contradictory) practices, like “blaming” the writer or hiding their own knowledge to account for the expertise and insecurity of both writer and consultant.

By developing strategies that take into account the level of expertise of both writer and consultant, the UCLA GWC allows for both parties to perform what Leverenz (2001) calls “rehearsals of expertise,” or opportunities to practice the role of experts (p. 57). In much of literature about graduate student writers, the mentoring relationship that allows for disciplinary enculturation is characterized as between a less experienced writer and an expert writer. For example, in their study of engineering students, Mya Poe, Neal Lerner, & Jennifer Craig (2010) define these relationships as “a person-to-person engagement between a novice and an expert (of one sort or another) in which the novice’s activities are commented on and shaped by the more experienced mentor” (p. 179). Mentors provide a real audience for whom writers can rehearse their growing understanding of their field.

The toolkit at UCLA’s GWC, however, creates opportunities for more than a one-sided mentorship. The relationships between writer and consultant often provide opportunities for fluid movement between



expert and novice where both have opportunities to build and rehearse expertise. In other words, the GWC becomes a site where both consultants and writers can learn to ask questions about genres and disciplinary conventions that enhance their ability to build expertise in the rhetorical and social features of disciplinary writing.

Those who work in UCLA's GWC see it not as just a space to rehearse expertise, but as a safe space to do so. From the administrative level to new consultants who desire a safe space to practice and learn new writing skills, a range of participants in the study referred to the GWC as a "safe space" or used associated metaphors, such as the GWC as "safety net" or "life preserver." Stepping into a writing center and being "blamed" for unclear prose might not seem safe upon first thought, but GWCs can at least provide safer—if not entirely safe—places for writers to hone their expertise. Hearing from a peer that an argument is unclear, for example, is much lower stakes than hearing it from an advisor or a fellowship selection committee. UCLA's GWC, then, is situated between the isolation of the novice graduate writer and full participation as an expert in a professional discourse community. They can act as a stepping stone between the novice and expert where writers and consultants receive feedback and rehearse their participation before fully positioning themselves as experts in their field.

Future research and praxis should consider how to more consciously help consultants develop these expertise-based skills and facilitate rehearsals of expertise for themselves and the writers they meet. One potential implication is for consultant training, which as I noted in the introduction, is largely nonexistent in GWCs. Expertise-based tools, which are often implicit and organic, need to become more explicit in order for consultants to use and adapt them. "Targeted tutor training" about disciplinary expertise, as Dinitz & Harrington (2014) call it, provides one potential solution (p. 95). Such training might include, for example, asking consultants to compose in unfamiliar genres. As part of their training, they might be asked to create research posters, write web text for the center's site, draft a conference abstract or grant proposal, or collaborate on a writing center budget proposal. Of course, these writing experiences would introduce them to the research and administrative components of writing center work. But of equal importance, these assignments would move consultants into the unfamiliar and sometimes uncomfortable space of composing in a new genre. Often, writing center consultants choose that role because they are good writers—challenging them with new or difficult writing tasks is an important way of making the writing strategies they've internalized more obvious to them. As consultants reflect on that experience and the

writing strategies they used, they will build both empathy and practical skills for helping writers who face similar challenges as they move from novice to expert. And consultants rehearse—and thus strengthen—their own confidence and expertise as knowledgeable peers who can consult with, support, and challenge writers across disciplines.

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