

# Why Don't We Teach Graduate Students How to Write?

By Paul J. Silvia

Most of us learned academic writing on the street. People learn a lot on the street, but the writing street isn't the tree-lined boulevard where you learned about smooching or the sandy boardwalk where you learned about what follows smooching. The writing street is a grimy slum of shuttered buildings ("For Lease: Owner Didn't Get Tenure"), grad students selling pirated copies of SPSS out of a van, and half-starved I/O psychologists burning old editions of the *Publication Manual* to keep warm. Walk warily.

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Why should we learn writing on the street? Are our graduate advisors too bashful to talk about what happens when two clauses come together? Writing is an oddity—graduate programs in psychology do a good job of teaching other professional skills. Let's start with statistics. No one learns statistics on the street: they take at least one undergraduate class in probability and statistics and suffer through at least two graduate classes in statistics. Experts in statistics (i.e., smart people with graphing calculators) teach novices (i.e., we, the crassly ignorant). Students who take two classes will get around 200 hours of structured practice in statistics, according to my graphing calculator; students who take more classes can get around 1000 hours.

Let's turn to teaching. Psychology does

a good job of training people to teach. Fresh-faced grad students cut their teeth on an easy teaching-assistant assignment: they grade a few tests, give a mini-lecture to the class, and coerce false confessions out of suspected cheaters. Students rarely teach their own course without some supervised experience as a TA. While teaching their own course, students typically take a seminar on the teaching of psychology, where they read books about teaching, learn from grizzled teaching veterans, and get feedback about their instruction. Learning to teach, like learning statistics, involves hundred of hours of training.

But how many hours of structured practice did you get in writing? How many times did an expert explain the general principles of writing, give you skill-building assignments, and then provide feedback and criticism? Did you take a class in professional writing? Did anyone ever recommend a book about writing to you? Some people, I've found, received good training in writing during graduate school. These people write well and often, and one suspects that causation lurks beneath this correlation. Most departments, however, lack a graduate class on professional writing: students are expected to learn writing tacitly while working on their research. This creates a sad cycle of ignorance. When they get jobs, students who lack formal training in writing can't give formal training to their students. The grimy writing street becomes more populous with each academic generation.

Psychology ought to do a better job of training the next generation of writers. If you're a grad student at a program that lacks formal training in writing, it's time to indulge in some Protestant Work Ethic clichés: take personal responsibility for pulling yourself up by

your bootstraps (for the corporate I/O psychologists) or by your Birkenstock straps (for the pinko social psychologists). Buy some books about writing, read those books, and practice. If you're a professor, think about the formal training at your institution. Add a graduate class on professional writing, but set an enrollment cap: grad students across the university will want to take it. (Professors will take it, too, but "only to observe.") If enough departments teach students to write, the urban planners can redevelop the writing street into something more useful—another sandy boardwalk, perhaps.

Some books about grammar and style:

Hale, C. (1999). *Sin and syntax: How to craft wickedly effective prose*. New York: Broadway.

Zinsser, W. (2006). *On writing well* (30th anniversary edition). New York: Quill.

Some books about academic writing:

Boice, R. (1990). *Professors as writers: A self-help guide to productive writing*. Stillwater, OK: New Forums Press.

Silvia, P. J. (2007). *How to write a lot: A practical guide to productive academic writing*. Washington, DC: APA.

Sternberg, R. J. (Ed.). (2000). *Guide to publishing in psychology journals*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

*Paul Silvia is an Assistant Professor at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. How to Write A Lot: A Practical Guide to Productive Academic Writing is his latest book. He doesn't really own a graphing calculator. ■*