

A genre based approach to teaching doctoral writing

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Citation:

DONAGHUE, Helen and ADAMS, Gill (2025). A genre based approach to teaching doctoral writing. Supervising PhDs blog. [Other]

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A genre based approach to teaching doctoral writing

This is a guest post by [Dr Helen Donaghue](#), Senior Lecturer at Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh and [Dr Gill Adams](#), Associate Professor in Education at Sheffield Hallam University. For this post the authors draw on their [recent article on genre-based writing pedagogy](#).



Do your doctoral researchers struggle with writing? Is writing instruction included in your doctoral programme? Are new researchers supported in developing their writing? [Our recently published article](#) tackles these questions and argues that doctoral programmes should include planned, explicit writing instruction. We also suggest an effective way ([genre analysis](#)) to do this.

Writing is crucial to doctoral researchers. Through writing, they construct knowledge, build identities, achieve key milestones such as completion, and become legitimate members of the academic community. However, doctoral writing is difficult and can be a source of anxiety or fear. To help doctoral researchers write with confidence we believe that doctoral programmes should include writing instruction. In our article we describe and evaluate an initiative which embedded writing instruction into an EdD programme.

Doctoral writing is often outsourced to university services (e.g. study skills centres) under the misguided belief that writing is a universal skill which can be acquired and then transferred across different contexts and disciplines. However, while some aspects of writing (e.g. writing management, habits, routines, monitoring and negotiating supervisory relationships and feedback) can be supported by people outside the discipline, different disciplines have their own ways of writing which doctoral students need to learn. This means that writing needs to be taught within the discipline and by disciplinary experts.

Our embedded writing instruction was taught by disciplinary experts (programme tutors) and based on genre analysis. Genres, e.g. doctoral theses, evolve over time and the people who write them follow conventions of how they should look and sound. We designed tasks which prompted doctoral researchers to analyse the content, structure and language of genre examples to help them recognise the conventions and features of genres they needed to write (e.g. research proposal, literature review).

This genre analysis helped them to:

- revise their understandings of doctoral writing
- find their voice
- develop a conscious awareness of writing
- build a writer identity
- experience positive emotions

Revising understandings of writing

Genre analysis helped doctoral researchers to revise preconceptions about doctoral writing and feel more confident about their writing. Common preconceptions were that doctoral writing had to be ‘clever’ and ‘difficult to understand’ and that there was a stipulated correct way to do it.

Analysing examples of genre-situated text helped doctoral researchers see doctoral writing as achievable:

Reading those [examples] made me think well maybe it's not so far away from what I can produce. I was thinking that I had to write something a lot more complex or a lot more difficult to achieve for somebody of my research experience, so that was very good for building my own confidence

Writing yourself in

Genre analysis helped doctoral researchers to realise that within their discipline (education), voice and stance (the ways writers express an attitude or point of view in relation to literature, readers and content) are important. Many believed that writing had to be ‘neutral’ with everything supported by literature, but through analysing genre examples they appreciated how

writers expressed their own point of view and doctoral researchers translated this into their own practice:

It's that thing of who am I to be saying anything really! And so feeling like I'm having to constantly drop in a reference all the time to sort of justify whatever I've said and actually I'm realising that – you need to have done the reading – but there needs to be that coherent argument that you're developing and then as you're doing that, you're kind of interweaving your own ideas and thoughts, but I was kind of, like, it was probably quite stilted what I was writing before, because it was reference here, reference there. I needed to kind of draw connections really, which I don't think I was doing as well as I should have been. I think I probably was a bit scared of my own voice actually, but I think that's coming.

Conscious awareness of writing

Genre analysis helped doctoral researchers to develop a conscious awareness of writing, especially flow and cohesion:

I think these sessions have been really helpful because you feel like it's OK to just get everything out on the page and if you do get stuck OK then I'll sit and analyse it and I'll use all these techniques and try and figure out why does that sentence not work ... how do I link these two sentences together and what does my first paragraph need to look like and the editing of it was actually really enjoyable

Identity and emotion

As doctoral researchers learned that doctoral writing was not something distant and complex, but rather something they could achieve, they developed confidence as doctoral writers. As they realised the importance of voice and stance and moved from a tendency to 'stand back' to having the confidence to express their opinion, they developed an authoritative writer identity, a process which brought positive emotions:

When I began this doctorate, we talked about academics and I thought I'm going to become an academic, that could be one of the outcomes of it, work academically and a researcher, so sort of different identities. I hadn't thought that I might become a writer, a better writer and I love that ... I'm really surprised by that and that it's a really nice surprise – I just hadn't anticipated it and that's great

We call for doctoral programmes to include planned, explicit writing instruction. We argue that genre analysis is particularly suitable for doctoral researchers as it focuses on developing writing expertise via analysis of genres within the disciplinary community. We argue that writing

support should be embedded in the curriculum and delivered by disciplinary experts who can familiarise new researchers with the discipline's characteristic discourses, language, structures, values, and audience expectations ([McGrath et al. 2023](#)).

However, many doctoral supervisors and tutors are not academic writing specialists and their disciplinary writing knowledge is often tacit ([McGrath et al., 2019](#)). If tacit, it's likely that you will be unable to communicate this knowledge to others. An important part of developing doctoral writing, then, is providing supervisors and tutors with professional development activities to help them – first to transform writing knowledge from tacit to explicit, and second to communicate this knowledge to students. This is especially important in disciplines where there is no tradition of genre analysis, critical self awareness about writing as a learned practice, or the pedagogies of doctoral writing.

In addition to this article, we are also part of a team of researchers and doctoral scholars who have recently published a [Toolkit of Tasks for Doctoral Education](#). Many of these tasks focus on developing doctoral writing.