# The Value of Explicit Writing Instruction for Graduate Students

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Center for
Writing Excellence

# Roadmap

**Part 1:** The value of explicit writing instruction

- The place of writing instruction in graduate nursing curricula

- What is explicit writing instruction?

- The benefits of explicit writing instruction for graduate students

**Part 2:** Application to Teaching Practice

- Developing student learning outcomes for graduate writing

- Designing assignments that support students' skill development

- Revision-focused commenting strategies

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# Activity 1: Graduate writing needs

Take a moment to reflect on your perceptions of graduate student writing needs. What skills are your students lacking? What challenges do they face? What challenges do you face as a faculty member when trying to develop graduate students' writing skills?

Paste your thoughts into the chat or raise your hand to contribute.

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# AACN (2022) PhD essentials

"The PhD is a research-focused degree that prepares individuals to create, translate, and communicate new knowledge as leaders within institutions of higher education and outside of academia" (p. 1).

### Faculty Advancement of Nursing Science

"To acquire and generate knowledge, students must have access to a curriculum that provides strong foundational knowledge of the philosophical and theoretical underpinnings of research methods and analyses as well as the skills to conduct research […] Faculty need to encourage and assist students to share their research through posters and presentations at professional conferences, grant writing, publications, and communications with stakeholders with relevant interests" (pp. 16-17). Faculty can assist students "through role modeling and coaching" (p. 17)

# AACN (2022) PhD essentials [2]

## Role Domain I: Develop the Science

"Research-focused doctoral programs in nursing focus on the generation and translation of the knowledge of the discipline through research" (p. 4).

## Role Domain II: Steward the Discipline

"The PhD in nursing graduate should be prepared to analyze, synthesize, articulate, disseminate, and translate the social and political contexts that shape health inequities" (p. 6)

# AACN (2021) DNP/APRN essentials

Role Domain 4: Scholarship for Nursing

"The generation, synthesis, translation, application, and dissemination of nursing knowledge to improve health and transform health care" (p. 10).

Nursing Practice Concepts:

- Communication

- Evidence-Based Practice

- Health Policy (pp. 12-13)

# What is "explicit instruction?"

Explicit instruction is "an unambiguous and direct approach to teaching that includes both instructional design and delivery procedures. Explicit instruction is characterized by a series of supports or scaffolds, whereby students are guided through the learning process with clear statements about the purpose and rationale for learning the new skill, clear explanations and demonstrations of the instructional target, and supported practice with feedback until independent mastery has been achieved" (Archer & Hughes, 2011, p. 1).

| Clarity about purpose and rationale | Supported practice and feedback | Independent mastery |
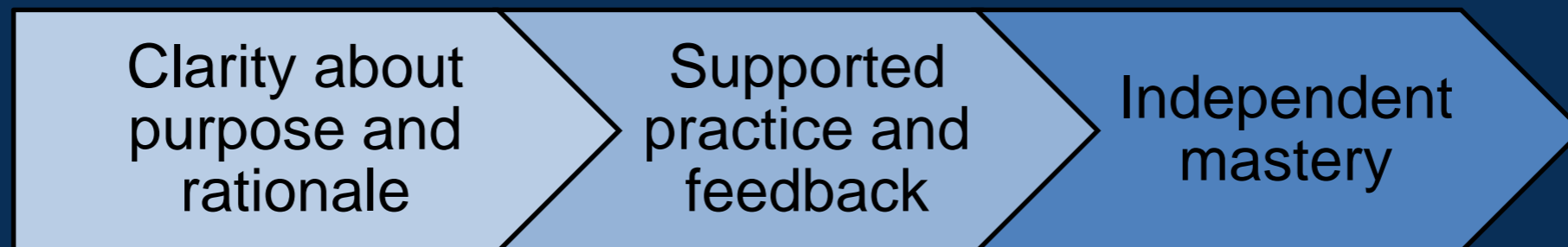
# What is explicit **writing** instruction?

- Clearly states the writing objective(s) and skill(s) assessed and connects these to larger learning outcomes or disciplinary/professional expectations;

- Teaches writing as a process interconnected with research and content learning. Students are given recursive opportunities to brainstorm, draft, revise, and edit their work. Scaffolding is used to break down complex writing assignments into manageable tasks that build upon one another sequentially, with feedback provided at each stage;

- Provides successful writing models for students to use, with clear explanations of models;

- Provides directive instruction in the objective(s) and skill(s) assessed through low-stakes activities and peer and instructor feedback;

- Provides students with opportunities to discuss and reflect on writing development/process as a central component of the course.

# The need for explicit writing instruction

"One of the primary goals of graduate education is to provide graduate students training for careers in academic disciplines. Despite this purpose, some graduate students are not mentored into the professional writing norms of their disciplines nor do they engage in the process of writing for professional scholarship until they face their thesis or dissertation writing task" (Brooks-Gillies et al., 2020, p. 7).

Margaret Salee et al. (2011) state, "the expectation is that students already know how to write before they begin grad school. Instructors of graduate students may assume that students learned basic writing skills during their high school and undergraduate years" (p. 66).

Disciplinary communities "have rarely integrated systematic writing instruction into their curricula to initiate the neophytes consciously into the written conventions of a particular field" (Russell, 2002, p. 17)

A systematic literature review of writing across the curriculum in nursing education programs found that "students…enter nursing programs with varying degrees of scholarly writing abilities…Structured approaches that integrate writing instruction across the curriculum are needed to promote development of students' scholarly writing abilities" (Hawks et al., 2016, p. 262).
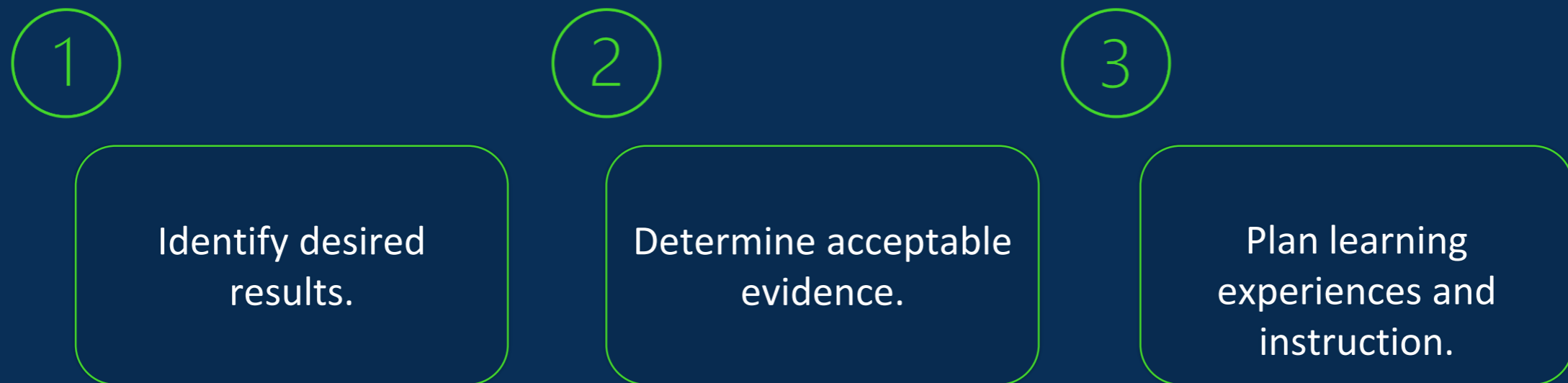
# How can explicit writing instruction benefit graduate students in nursing?

- Develop essential core competencies required by AACN;

- Demystify disciplinary conventions to facilitate development of scholarly identity;

- Deepen relationships and sense of community (peer-to-peer and student-to-faculty), which contributes to progression and retention;

- Diversify the nursing profession and provide socially/linguistically just programming;

- Develop students' metacognitive awareness of their writing process and abilities, including growth areas, which contributes to a sense of scholarly agency;

- Improve content knowledge and grow disciplinary expertise by treating writing not just as a product meant to convey information, but as a process that is central to "doing" and "knowing" in the discipline (Carter, 2007).

# Application to Teaching Practice

# Map writing development in the curriculum

**Use backward design at the level of courses and the program:**

**1**

Identify desired results.

**2**

Determine acceptable evidence.

**3**

Plan learning experiences and instruction.

(Wiggins & McTighe, 2005, p. 18)

# Step 1: Identify desired results


Learning outcomes and structure

Developing writing student learning outcomes (SLOs) for your program and courses is a good starting point for integrating explicit writing instruction into your graduate curriculum.

# Bloom's Taxonomy and SLOs

Focus on the desired writing skill first. What do you want them to learn?
Then think about activities that develop the skill.

**Lower order thinking skills** ⟶ **Higher order thinking skills**

| Remember | Understand | Apply | Analyze | Evaluate | Create |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Recognizing<br>• Identifying<br>Recalling<br>• Retrieving | Interpreting<br>• Clarifying<br>• Paraphrasing<br>• Representing<br>• Translating<br>Exemplifying<br>• Illustrating<br>• instantiating<br>(and more!) | Executing<br>• Carrying out<br>Implementing<br>• Using | Differentiating<br>• Discriminating<br>• Distinguishing<br>• Focusing<br>• Selecting<br>Organizing<br>• Finding coherence<br>• Integrating<br>• Outlining<br>• Parsing<br>(and more!) | Checking<br>• Coordinating<br>• Detecting<br>• Monitoring<br>• Testing<br>Critiquing<br>• Judging | Generating<br>• Hypothesizing<br>Planning<br>• Designing<br>Producing<br>• Constructing |

(Iowa State University CELT; Anderson et al., 2001, pp. 66-68)

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# Example writing SLO

Professional Nursing Education Domain 4: Advance the scholarship of nursing.

Learning goal 4.1.h: Professional nurses should "Disseminate one's scholarship to diverse audiences using a variety of approaches or modalities" (p. 37).

Possible program SLO:
Students will **produce** scholarly texts in a variety of professional genres.

Possible course SLOs:
By the end of NURS XXX, students will:
1. **Recognize** and **differentiate** genre conventions for scientific posters, policy briefs, and research proposals.
2. **Generate** original scholarship on a single topic in three modalities (scientific poster, policy brief, and research proposal) for distinct audiences and purposes.

# Steps 2 & 3: Determine acceptable evidence & plan learning activities and instruction



Once you have program SLOs and have broken these down into course SLOs throughout the curriculum, you can design activities that help students develop the skills they need to meet desired outcomes.

# Possible activity/assignment: Genre analysis

Assignment objectives:
1. Recognize genre conventions of scientific posters
2. Connect genre conventions to disciplinary values and practices

Directions: Each short answer response should be one paragraph and will identify and analyze at least two concrete examples from the poster.
1. Who is the poster's intended audience? How do you know? You may draw from content, organization/structure, and language to support your interpretation of audience.
2. What do you learn about the organization and design of scientific posters by looking at this model? What information is prioritized? What does this tell you about the values of the field?
3. How are headings and visual displays of data used in the poster? Do visuals repeat, complement, or supplement written text? Why might posters incorporate both visuals and text?
4. What do you learn about scientific writing style by analyzing this model? How do the authors achieve concision, precision, and objectivity in their poster? How does style enhance clarity?

# Your turn: Draft a writing-related SLO



Based on your perception of writing skill gaps, draft an SLO that could fit into one of your graduate courses. If time allows, brainstorm an activity and assessment that could be used to develop this skill.

Paste your draft SLO in the chat or raise your hand to contribute.

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# Sample SLOs based on skill gaps and desired outcomes

- Apply principles of concision, precision, and objectivity in scientific texts

- Identify and explain common components and conventions of scientific genres

- Identify and explain the audiences of scientific texts by analyzing genre and stylistic conventions

- Create, apply, and reflect on a personalized writing process that incorporates invention, drafting, engagement with feedback, revision, and editing

- Use university writing resources, including one-on-one consultations offered at the CWE, to improve written and spoken texts

# More sample SLOs based on skill gaps and desired outcomes

- Apply principles of synthesis and group citation to complete a literature review
- Apply the CARS (Create a Research Space) model to organize a scientific introduction
- Evaluate scientific writing ability by identifying one stylistic and one genre-related area of improvement, applying improvements through revision, and reflecting on changes.
- Engage with faculty and peer feedback by writing a revision reflection that identifies changes and improvements
- Apply principles of rhetorical awareness by writing scientific texts for two different audiences within specific, identified contexts

# Additional tips: Scaffold: Writing development is ongoing.



- Identify the outcomes of each stage/course in the program

- What prior knowledge and writing skills will students need to be successful in each stage of the curriculum?

- How can SLOs be added to each course in sequence to develop students' writing and communication skills so they are ready for each stage of the curriculum?

- What activities exist or can be added to support these SLOs? How might activities or assessment need to change to make writing instruction explicit throughout the curriculum?

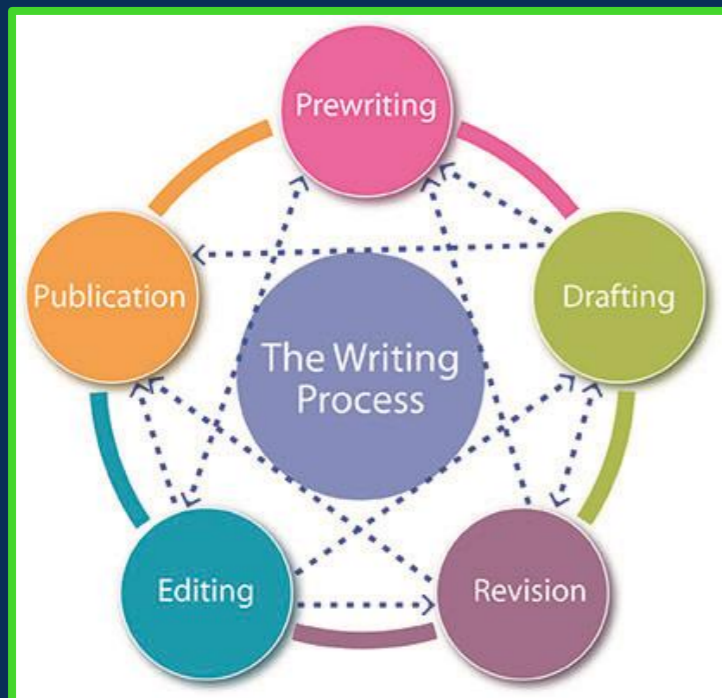# Additional tips: Remember: Writing is a recursive process.
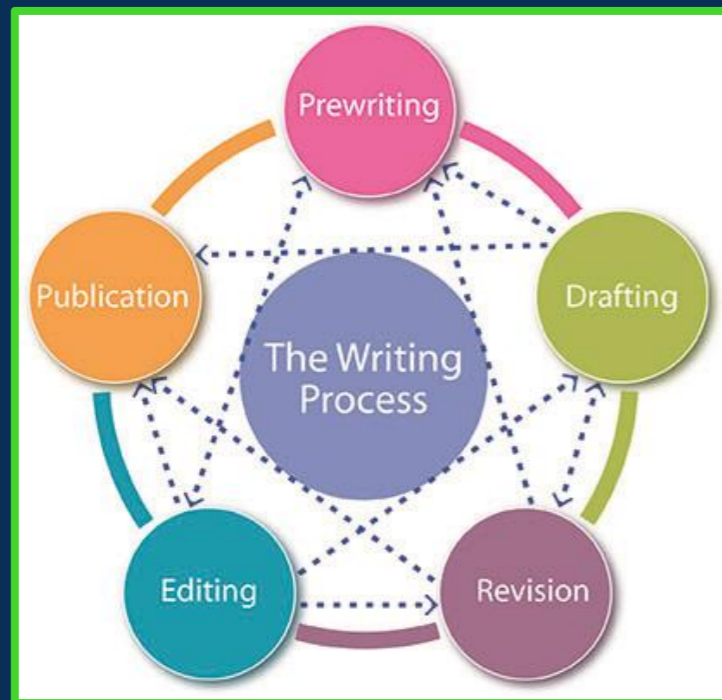


- Provide students with opportunities to engage in and reflect on all stages of the writing process

- Design assignments so students have the opportunity to revise based on peer and instructor feedback; place grade emphasis on process rather than product

- Recognize that the writing process is personal and recursive

- Balance formative and summative feedback on writing

- Use writing as a means of learning, not just as assessment of learning

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# Additional tips: Provide revision-oriented feedback: Feedforward


The Writing Process: Prewriting, Drafting, Revision, Editing, Publication

"Feedforward is about phrasing our commentary so that it gives students the information they need to take that step toward improvement" (Rysdam & Johnson-Shull, 2016).

| Feedback | Feedforward |
|---|---|
| "The methods section lacks adequate description." | This methods section would be stronger with more specifics about *what* materials were used to conduct the experiment and *why* those methods were chosen. With greater specificity about the materials, your audience will trust that your methodology is suitably rigorous. How you frame this, though, will also depend on the journal that you submit to. *Journal X* will want more information about participant selection, while *Journal Y* will require more detail about your methodological orientation. |
| "This introduction is disorganized." | As a reader, I found myself struggling to follow the organization of your introduction. I could see two ways to go about it: first, you set out this series of key terms in the introduction, so you might use that as a way to organize it, leading up to your preview of the article's content. Since you're also making a methodological argument, another way to organize your introduction would be to begin by comparing and contrasting the ways that other methods have been used to approach your topic. |

**Note:** While "feedforward" commenting strategies might *appear* to take a lot of time, offering a smaller number of in-depth comments that help students imagine a path forward will ultimately benefit them more than frequent, shorter comments that leave them wondering what to do next!

# Additional tips: Provide revision-oriented feedback: Be explicit and directive

**Vague comment:** This writing is not at the graduate level. Your tone is not academic.

**Explicit/directive comment:** Graduate writing in Nursing should adhere to scientific style. Scientific style is formal and prioritizes concision, precision, and objectivity. You can make your writing concise and formal by eliminating all contractions and shortening sentences. For example, in paragraph 1, sentence length averages 36 words—that's long! Richard Lanham's "Paramedic Method" offers great strategies for writing concisely: https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/academic_writing/paramedic_method.html

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