

# Chapter 68

## Using Principles of Andragogy to Teach Writing to Graduate Students Online

**Beth Kania-Gosche**  
*Lindenwood University, USA*

### ABSTRACT

*While online courses may be more convenient and fulfilling for adult learners, they pose an additional challenge because much of the communication between student and instructor is in writing. This is in addition to more formal, traditional written assignments like research papers. The challenge multiplies with graduate students, who may be years or even decades distant from their undergraduate writing courses, while the expectations for their writing are higher. Many graduate programs culminate with a final project, thesis, or dissertation, which often involves extensive research and writing. Many similarities exist between the literature on teaching writing and teaching adult learners; however, teaching writing within the context of an online graduate course is an area of research that still needs to be expanded.*

### INTRODUCTION

Teaching graduate students is both an honor and a burden. The preparation and assignments are more extensive, but often instructor and student form lasting relationships because of shared interest in the content of the course, smaller class sizes, and the mentoring that comes with participation on a thesis or dissertation committee. These culminating projects involve complex, sophisticated writing and research. If students' writing skills

are lacking, they may struggle in coursework and especially in completion of the final thesis or dissertation. Many instructors of graduate courses assume that students have the necessary writing skills, and few universities offer support for graduate students or instructors to improve writing or writing instruction, although this is gradually changing (Rose & McClafferty, 2001). This is similar to the assumptions often made about online courses. Universities may assume that students have the necessary skills to succeed in this environment and instructors have the necessary training to support their success, while this

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may not always be the case, especially if training has not been provided (Hewett & Ehman, 2004).

Teaching online and teaching writing are closely linked. Online teaching presents new challenges, as most communication between instructor and student or student to student occurs in writing, either through email, discussion boards, instant messaging, wikis, or more formal papers (Warnock, 2009). Again, if students lack the necessary writing skills, they may struggle with this type of course delivery. In a face to face discussion, students must simply raise their hands and express a thought verbally. Online, students must compose a response in writing, a much more complex and time consuming task. “The OWcourse forces an environment that is not just writing intensive but also writing exclusive” (Warnock, p. xi). As online courses and programs gain popularity, instructors must ensure that they are providing appropriate support to students who struggle to express themselves in writing. Thus, instructors of an online course, or truly any graduate level course, must consider themselves teachers of writing, even though that is not necessarily the content of the course.

As many graduate students are working adults, instructors should integrate adult learning principles into their teaching, online or face to face. Many of the best practices for adult learners overlap with those for effectively teaching writing, although little literature exists that makes this connection. Most research on graduate student writing consists of firsthand accounts of graduate classes (Belcher, 2009; Rose & McClafferty, 2001) or writing centers created specifically to improve writing skills (Alter & Adkins, 2001). Literature on teaching writing to adults is often focused on those who are learning to read and write for the first time rather than graduate students who clearly can read and write enough to function in society but not necessarily thrive in the academic culture of graduate school. Faculty often lament the lack of writing skills students possess, especially those in graduate school (Lovitts, 2007).

In this chapter, the author compares the principles of adult learning to those of teaching writing. While many of these best practices work effectively in all environments, specific recommendations for online course instruction at the graduate level are given, including creating and assessing writing assignments. The author also gives some recommendations for thesis and dissertation committee advisors, as this is often a requirement of graduate school faculty. Finally, the author discusses emerging trends in these fields of research, especially in online writing instruction (OWI).

## **BACKGROUND TO BEST PRACTICE OF TEACHING WRITING**

“Until the 1970s, most writing pedagogy emphasized learning and assessing a sequence of essential skills: forming letters, building vocabulary, identifying parts of speech, diagramming sentences, mastering grammar and punctuation, and following paragraph types and genres of writing” (National Writing Project & Nagin, 2006, p. 19). This focused mainly on the product of writing rather than the process. Much of writing instruction consisted of grammar and vocabulary worksheets rather than actual writing. When writing was assigned, usually the teacher was in control. The teacher was responsible for developing the assignment and the rubric or scoring guide. The students completed the assignment, often the night before it was due, and returned it to the teacher. The teacher then handed the assignment back with a grade and perhaps some comments. In this model, everyone is working in isolation, and the product is the focus of the assessment. If the student receives a low enough grade, he or she may be able to rewrite to improve the grade, but the focus is on meeting the teacher’s demands. This traditional model is popular but not effective.

The writing process approach, the method for teaching writing encouraged by the National

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