

Thesis Club! Thesis Club! Describing A Thesis Proposal Workshop Class Designed To Mentor Students Through The Academic Writing Process

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Introduction/Need for Innovation

The major project for many master's and doctoral students is a synthesis of learning projects in the form of presenting research in a thesis or dissertation. Walking in, these projects may seem intimidating and can lead to elevated stress, anxiety, and apprehension due to their length and complexity. There are many tips available for handling stress, including gaining feedback on one's writing progress and setting a schedule to keep up with all writing tasks (Gastel & Day, 2022; LinkedIn Community, 2024). However, at [university] there is not a proposal class currently in the graduate curriculum, leaving all academic writing techniques to the research methods class taken during many students' first semester of their graduate program. By the time thesis writing comes, many students feel lost and overwhelmed.

Sternad & Power (2023) suggested academic advisors could start a writing group with students around the same point in their academic careers to mentor them through the writing process. Mentoring in a group setting can help foster strong support and, even further, better writing as the advisor shares knowledge and information with the mentees (Hastings et al., 2015). A group approach to mentorship would be influential for students struggling to get words on the page. Additionally, having students reflect on the writing process together could also improve confidence while reducing anxiety (Lawson et al., 2021). Throughout the sessions, graduate students could have the opportunity to collaborate and lean on each other when writing gets stressful. Further, a large part of great writing is strong revising; these groups offer opportunities for students to foster collaboration, practice revising, and become stronger writers (Gastel & Day, 2022). Thus, the purpose of this innovative idea is to create a thesis writing club and share the details of how we approached it during the summer semester.

How It Works

During the summer semester, four graduate students met weekly with their graduate advisor to complete the first three chapters of the thesis. The 'thesis club' had a semester-long agenda with dates for key milestones in the thesis completion process. The summer semester was designed to encourage discussion and collaboration for the first three chapters (e.g., introduction, literature review, and methods). For each chapter, each week had a different topic focus: key tips for completing the thesis chapter, writing and APA resources, or peer review. In addition to introducing students to each of the first three chapters, each member of the 'thesis club' was supplied with a writing or research book to read throughout the summer. Each book provided tips and strategies for improving research writing. The timeline was designed to encourage discussion, provide collaborative tips, and create feedback for each of the chapters. All shared documents and tips were stored in a Microsoft Teams channel. After the students' peer reviewed each other's work, the graduate advisor read and reviewed the chapter.

Results to Date

At the time of submission, we are halfway through the first 'thesis club.' However, we have created a thesis writing toolkit on MS Teams. In the toolkit, students have access to key timelines and guidelines for the introduction, literature review, and methods chapters including key areas that need to be addressed (i.e., a basic outline), definitions of sections, and other resources.

Students were asked to find at least two examples to help them with their projects. Each student added these to Microsoft Teams and shared them with the cohort. These examples provided specifics to help guide their document development. Students have also pointed out areas where prior examples did exceptionally well. For example, they found a limitations and assumption section that all members of the cohort liked and shared these with the group to incorporate in their own projects. To create collaboration and collegiality, students have worked as a cohort to develop APA and writing tip sheets. The APA resources include an APA thesis document template and most used citation examples. They also created a Canva presentation to share writing tips amongst the group derived from their writing books. Students are encouraged to lean on their 'thesis club' cohort members. Discussion of projects, advice, and reading takeaways are a major part of this process. It has already been noted a few times during meetings how the cohort can help get past writer's block, learn new organization techniques, and other important skills needed for thesis writing. Working through the writing process with others helps build confidence in writing and openness to ask clarifying questions.

Future Plans/Advice to Others

In the graduate curriculum, there is a clear need to develop research proposal classes that introduce students to the writing process. The 'thesis club' was designed to take the guesswork out of the writing process, provide specific strategies for conquering long-form writing tasks, create guidelines of what types of information are needed for each chapter, and encourage collegiality between cohort members. Throughout the semester, students were tasked with creating a collaborative APA tips sheet, APA template, and writing advice. In addition, the advisor created guidelines for writing each chapter. Finally, it provided a place to ask questions amongst the group. The materials developed for the thesis club will be shared with future graduate students in the form of a thesis writing toolkit. We recommend that these materials be shared with all students in the program. We also recommend that each cohort should find and share examples, read the writing books (or find other books to share), and create their own APA template and citation sheet.

This was the first summer that this type of curriculum has been offered at Texas Tech University; however, we recommend others provide this type of resource for future students. This could be in the format of a 1-hour seminar course, or it could be incorporated into thesis hours. Mentoring students through the writing process has often been found to be challenging due to time constraints on the faculty level, and the thesis is a daunting task. This type of structure allows for mentorship at a group level. It also provides a mechanism to help the advisor through initial peer reviews before seeing a solidified draft. As described in the writing book (Sternad & Power, 2023), having a cohort or group to write with helps with gaining confidence. Students can ask questions, but also it provides support and collegiality.

Cost and Resources

The thesis club is relatively inexpensive to complete; however, it does take a considerable amount of time. Each week, the club meets for one hour. However, the advisor should take time for the planning of the club and creation of materials, and the students should take time working through collaborative tasks (e.g., APA citation tip sheet) and writing their chapters. We stored all items on a shared Microsoft Teams channel, which was free for all university students and employees. We did purchase two books; however, the other two books were free from the advisor's collection. The only real financial commitment was the cost of coffee at local coffee shops for a much-needed break from the office.

References

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