

**Exploring academic writing at the Master's level: Perceptions of graduate students and  
professors**

by

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## Abstract

This qualitative study explores academic writing (AW) at the master's level focusing on the perceptions of graduate students and professors. A grounded theory approach was used with the purpose of developing a base that would allow following up on the findings of this research. The participants of this study were 1<sup>st</sup> semester graduate students, 3<sup>rd</sup> semester graduate students or more, and professors who taught graduate course and/or belonged to graduate students committees. These participants represented a sample of graduate students and professors of the Masters of Arts in English Education (MAEE) from the English Department at the University of Puerto Rico, Mayaguez Campus (UPRM). Audiotaped interviews were conducted with each population according to their academic preparation. These interviews revealed experiences and perceptions regarding academic writing in order to explore how these may or may not comply with the expectations of a graduate level program and these were aligned among graduate students and professors. Academic writing samples were administered to graduate students and their task was to identify them accordingly. This served as a diagnostic assessment to discover if graduate students were familiar with the academic writing they might encounter at the graduate level. Findings revealed themes and categories such as overlapping perceptions, expectations, awareness, improvements, AW definitions, and concerns regarding AW on behalf graduate students and professors of the MAEE. Through these themes and categories, insights on AW perceptions were voiced. The outcome of this study is to assess the current needs of graduate students concerning academic writing and to serve as the foundations for future research including quantitative studies with a larger population which could lead towards recommendations for the improvement of academic writing at the graduate level through the development of courses and/or workshops addressing academic writing.

## Resumen

Este estudio cualitativo investiga la escritura académica a nivel de maestría explorando la percepción de estudiantes graduados y profesores. Un enfoque de teoría fundamentada fue utilizado con el propósito de desarrollar una base que permita darle seguimiento a los resultados de este estudio. Los participantes fueron estudiantes graduados cursando su primer o tercer semestre en adelante de maestría y profesores que enseñen cursos graduados y/o pertenezcan a comités de estudiantes graduados. Estos participantes representan una muestra de estudiantes graduados y profesores de la Maestría en Educación en Inglés (MAEE). Se llevaron a cabo entrevistas (grabadas digitalmente) y la población fue clasificada de acuerdo a su preparación académica. Estas entrevistas revelaron experiencias y percepciones acerca de la escritura académica para así explorar como estas cumplen o no cumplen con las expectativas de un programa académico a nivel graduado y para alinear estas percepciones entre estudiantes graduados y profesores. Muestras de escrituras académicas fueron presentadas a estudiantes graduados con el fin de identificarlos correctamente. El propósito de este avalúo (diagnóstico) era descubrir si los estudiantes graduados estaban familiarizados con la escritura académica que podrían encontrar a nivel graduado. Los resultados revelaron temas y categorías tales como expectativas, conciencia, mejoramientos, definiciones de escritura académica, preocupaciones y áreas en que coincidían ambas poblaciones (estudiantes graduados y profesores). A través de estos temas y categorías, percepciones acerca de la escritura académica fueron articuladas. Los resultados de este estudio identifican las percepciones actuales de estudiantes graduados en cuanto a su escritura académica y sirven como base para investigaciones futuras incluyendo estudios cuantitativos con una mayor población el cual pueda dar paso para recomendaciones a cómo mejorar la escritura académica a nivel graduado través de la creación de cursos y/o talleres que atiendan esta necesidad

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## **Dedication**

This thesis project not only represents the completion of a degree, it represents devotion and believing in yourself. Along this journey, when feeling overwhelmed, I would raise my chin and see my family at the finish line cheering me and reminding me how proud they were. If there is something they never doubted was of my capacity of growing, spreading my wings, and rising up to share my passion and prosperity. Therefore, I dedicate this accomplishment to my beloved family.

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## **Dedicatoria**

Este proyecto de tesis no solo representa el completar un grado, representa devoción y creer en uno mismo. En esta trayectoria cuando me sentía agotada, levantaba mi frente y veía a mi familia al final del camino apoyándome y recordándome lo orgulloso que están de mí. Si hay algo de lo que nunca dudaron, fue de mi capacidad de crecer y de querer expandir mis alas y levantar vuelo para así compartir mis pasiones y logros. Por ende, dedico este gran logro a mi querida familia.

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### **List of Abbreviations**

AW	Academic Writing
CA	Completely Answered
CCR	College and Career Readiness
CV	Curriculum Vitae
CITI	Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative
DEPR	Department of Education of Puerto Rico
ED	English Department
IRB	Institutional Review Board
MAEE	Master of Arts in English Education
NA	Not Answered
PA	Partially Answered
PF	Professor Female
PM	Professor Male
S1F	Student First Semester Female
S1M	Student First Semester Male
S3F	Student Third Semester Female
S3M	Student Third Semester Male
TA	Teaching Assistant
UPRM	University of Puerto Rico at Mayaguez

## Chapter 1: Introduction

*The beginning is the most important part of the work.*

—Plato

### Justification

At the beginning of my master's degree, my initial topic for my thesis was on vocational education and college persistence. This topic was of interest since my former education was vocational still there was something about my performance as a graduate student that deep down inside raised questions and concerns. It had to do with the education I received and my writing at this new stage in my academic life. Towards my third semester, in conversations with other graduate students regarding their own stances on academic writing, I discovered that I was not alone. Therefore, what I believed was a personal issue, in fact seemed more pervasive than I actually knew. It is then when I decided to address it as an important matter to me and for the benefit of other graduate students in this program—it became a public concern. Therefore, it is imperative to address the elephant in the room.

When admitted into to any academic program in college, students are expected to complete a certain amount of workload required for the level of study pursued and part of this workload naturally involves a great amount of reading as well as writing. The expected academic writing depends highly on the level of the degree desired, i.e. bachelors, masters, or doctoral. When writing, writers tend to communicate their ideas and while developing their piece (as Christine Sinclair indicated) “Authors acknowledge each other’s writing, and perhaps valorize, critique, or extend it and thereby incorporate into their own work” (2015, p. 44). Therefore, following Sinclair’s line of thought of cause and effect: “Students are expected to emulate this practice, but most academics will have heard students’ complaints about rigidity of citation conventions, and the difficulties they present for both reading and writing” (2015). With the

purpose of exploring the perception of graduate students and professors within academic writing, this research focused on graduate students of the Masters of Arts in English Education (MAEE) at the University of Puerto Rico, Mayaguez Campus (UPRM) during the first semester of the academic year 2015-2016.

Throughout their undergraduate and graduate academic careers, students identify themselves as writers based on how they learn and master this essential skill, to discover themselves as writers in an ongoing process. Victor Shaw stated “Graduate students must develop an expansive repertoire of writing styles ranging from styles suitable for abstracts and critiques to formats used for opinion papers, grant applications, and journal articles” (as cited in Ondrusek, 2012, p. 179). Therefore, at the graduate level, students may probably encounter writing they had never done before (in their undergraduate studies) which requires them to acquire new knowledge related to the act of writing.

Academic writing when seen as a whole (process and outcome) can be expanded and analyzed from different perspective; therefore it can be seen as a broad field which may portray a student’s academic performance. Graduate students should be aware of all the components encompassed in their own writing since essential writing skills build upon previous knowledge thus turning them into proficient writers. Part of this development has to do with how they consider themselves as writers; the confidence they feel when they sit down to write a paper, and the initiative and desire they have to improve and master new fields of writing. Paul J. Silvia (2007) suggests students should evaluate themselves to determine what areas of improvement they need to reach in order to become the writer they want to be. As he recommended in his book, one should become a reflective, disciplined writer (p. 3).

The pressure of mastering this higher level of writing might seem daunting and stressful when compared to what graduate students might know regarding writing versus what they are expected to write. As Becker detailed “I want to remove the mystery and let them see that the work they read is made by people who have the same difficulties they do” (2007). It is important for graduate students to understand that every person who achieves the academic writing they follow or read in their graduate courses (literature reviews, essays, academic papers, theses, and others) went through the same process they are undergoing as well. This entire process of mastering and adapting at a new level should be complemented with guidance from those in charge of educating graduate students.

... it is your job as a professor or Ph.D. advisor to emphasize the importance of writing in your teaching and advising, to point your students towards the available resources, and of course, to spell out the rules for drafting a text in your discipline. (Gehring, 2015, p. 24)

Having said this, working hand in hand through the writing process may reduce the stress and pressure during these academic years at the graduate level. Exploring graduate students’ perception of their academic writing is highly recommended since this can reveal if this perception is aligned with professors’ expectations in order to comply with general requirements at the graduate level. “Any training courses should strive to achieve its objectives starting from the actual needs of the participants or trainees, and not just aim at developing skills starting from abstract or generalized premises” (Bojan & Pavlenko, 2014, p. 80). Following this line of thought, just as any course in progress, a graduate program should explore and determine what are the academic writing needs of graduate students are required in order to address them and guide these students towards their academic career. Believing or assuming graduate students’ writing skills creates nothing but unrealistic expectations since no concrete knowledge of what

they may or may not know is explored beforehand. Valuable information about the strengths and weaknesses of this important skill can be unveiled for the benefit of both, graduate students and professors.

The intention of this research was to uncover areas of improvement and development, focusing on the academic writing expected at the master's level on behalf of graduate students. This information will serve three areas: First, as a starting point to discover what common apprehensions these graduate students have; second, to work hand to hand with professors who encounter this situation on a daily basis and third to provide the foundations to develop workshops and/or courses which may aim directly to these writing needs.

This study revolved around previous knowledge and experiences of two groups: graduate students and professors in the MAEE graduate program; therefore this study portrayed their perception of the AW accomplished during that period. As part of this process, professors play an important role as those who teach, mentor, and guide these graduate students. Hence, professors were also taken into consideration since they work with them on a daily basis and can clearly provide feedback of their students' academic writing.

## **Objectives**

The main purpose and objectives for this research were to explore graduate students' and professors' perceptions on academic writing at the graduate level. Through this qualitative study, the specific objectives were the following:

1. Identify graduate students' perceptions of their academic writing (AW) according to the semester in which they are enrolled (1<sup>st</sup> semester or 3<sup>rd</sup> semester or more) as well as professors' perceptions.

2. Discover whether the AW achieved by graduate students is aligned with the skills and competencies expected by graduate professors.
3. Identify areas of improvement when it comes to enhancing writing skills at the graduate level.
4. Disseminate findings graduate students may encounter with academic writing at the master's level.

Keeping in mind the objectives established, the researcher formulated interview questions according to the population of each group. There were three groups: graduate students were divided into two sub-groups: 1<sup>st</sup> semester graduate students and 3<sup>rd</sup> semester and more graduate students, and professors. Each group had different sets of interview questions which revealed their perceptions regarding AW centered on the preparation and experience they had at that point of the interview. The interview questions intended to gather the necessary data to answer the following research questions:

1. What do graduate students understand by AW?
2. What perceptions do graduate students have about their AW?
3. What skills and competencies professors expect from a graduate student?
4. Is the AW performed by graduate students aligned with skills and competencies expected by professors?
5. What areas of graduate students' AW can be improved?

### **Chapter overview**

Chapter 2 on Literature Review offers extensive research on AW overall, narrowing it down to the conceptualization of AW. Perceptions of AW are revealed from the perspective of graduate students and professors as well. Studies support the ideology that what is expected from

graduate students depends on the degree they are accomplishing and how many times these meet or do not meet expectations. Skills and expectations among AW are presented from different points of view to support the possibility that not always they are aligned and how they may differ. In order to provide a solution, most of the literature encourages the development of workshops and/or courses to improve AW at the graduate level.

Chapter 3 on Methodology explains how this research was shaped in order to comply with the objectives and to potentially answer the research questions established. It provides the necessary institutional requirements to carry out this study as well as the paperwork approved by the office of IRB. The research design is described while introducing the research site and participants. Consequently, the instruments used to collect data are explained along with how the data was analyzed and validated.

Chapter 4 on Results and Analysis reveals the data collected from the methodology section in a visual way through the use of tables. This chapter presents each of the three sets of interview questions and the categories that emerged according to each population. Afterwards, a complete analysis is conducted based on what these categories and themes may represent regarding academic writing.

Chapter 5: Discussions answers the research questions established in Chapter 1, offers suggestions for future research, acknowledges limitations of the study, and offers final thoughts pertaining academic writing.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

*The natural desire of good men is knowledge.*

—Leonardo da Vinci

When envisioning this project, I saw myself as a graduate student who was curious and thirsty for research that would explain my biggest fear of not being competent when it came to academic writing. Before being hard on myself and my performance, I needed to consult journals, articles, books, and other medium to know if I was alone in this struggle. Little that I know, this personal issue is considered a general concern. The problem was not mine alone.

Publications regarding academic writing at the graduate level, in general, loosely identify specific issues. This research aimed at a specific difficulties and issues around academic writing in its initial stages. However, focusing on the perceptions graduate students and professors have regarding students' writing and exploring how these are aligned or not with the expectations at the graduate level seemed the appropriate way to introduce this research into the writing field.

### **Writing at the college level**

There seem to be many gaps regarding the concept of “writing at the college level”. While it is true that graduate students are expected to complete a vast amount of writing to comply with a workload which will serve as an assessment to evaluate their performance, still, something that was not taken into consideration at the beginning of this thesis project was the different kinds of writing graduate students might encounter throughout their master's degree and how these could impact the concept of writing. When encountering “Academic writing at the graduate level: Improving the curriculum through faculty collaboration” by Mary A. Bair and Cynthia E. Mader, they presented three types of writing to classify the written outcomes of graduate students with the purpose of clarifying definitions which they later used in their study.

The types of writing were academic writing, professional writing, and informal writing. Bair and Mader described the writings as it follows:

*Academic writing* applied reason to advance an argument or position; was written for an informed audience; and was grounded in primary sources and scholarly literature.

*Professional writing* applied knowledge to strategies or procedure; was written for a professional audience; and could be grounded in secondary sources and professional literature.

*Informal writing* reflected one's opinion or beliefs, and was grounded in the writer's own knowledge and experience or that of others. (2013, p.4)

After going over these types of writings suggested by Bair and Mader, the importance of comprehending the differences among them seems imperative and essential to the extent of having graduate students identify what type of writing professors expect from them.

Although these types of writings play an important role and contribute to the development of graduate students, each one aims towards a completely different focus. In the study mentioned above and this study, the type of writing researched was academic writing.

### **Focusing on academic writing**

When defining academic writing (AW), a simple answer might be: writing done for academic purposes. Hence, is there a more precise definition for AW? Swales and Feak quoted: "Deciding what is academic or not is further complicated by the fact that academic style differs from one area of study to another" (2012, p. 14). Taking this into consideration, it seems AW cannot hold a specific definition since it varies among degrees, field of studies, and concentrations. A fair attempt to reach a possible concept of AW might be to become familiar

with the workload expected at a certain level and to pursue the AW required that meets the criteria expected.

“Academic writing is always a form of evaluation that asks you to demonstrate knowledge and show proficiency with certain disciplinary skills of thinking, interpreting, and presenting” (Irvin, 2010, p. 8). Therefore, no matter if in school or at the college level, without doubt, academic writing serves as an important assessment when it comes to measuring students’ performance across a particular subject. Still, how can we ensure a student’s knowledge regarding a particular topic can be completely portrayed through their writing? What if a student has an excellent point of view but cannot present it effectively in an academic form? This question was unexpectedly answered by one of the participants during the interview who indicated for this research project “I think while listening and reading ... are super key, if students can’t put that into good writing, they are going to have a very difficult time at succeeding”. On the other hand, Anita L. Ondrusek’s literature review presented and quoted a professor’s inquiry: “... please tell me how you deal with grading content vs. grading awful writing” (Chelton, 2008). Therefore, we can infer academic writing cannot hold a specific definition since it varies depending on what each field in academia requires.

### **Understanding what academic writing entails: From a broad to a specific view**

While going through research to find a concept which might actually define AW, the researcher identified various books and articles which tended to describe AW instead of actually defining or saying what is expected from it. To the surprise (as a graduate student), most of the research highlighted the following:

Table 1 *Expectations and difficulties revealed by the literature*

<u>Expectations</u>	<u>Difficulties</u>
“Academic writing training is increasingly recognized as fundamental to any research-training programme in a higher education context” (Bojan & Pavlenko, 2014)	“meeting the needs of graduate students is a great challenge” (Dehnad, Bagherzadeh, Bigdeli, Hatami, & Hosseini, 2013)
“Graduate students are typically expected to know how to write” (Salle, Hallett, & Tierney, 2011)	“Most students come to their graduate programs with academic writing skills insufficient to excel in their studies” (Plakhotnik & Rocco, 2012)
	“This article focuses on a group of struggling writers rarely considered: doctoral students in education” (Turner & Edwards, 2006)
	“Academic writing is challenging for the novice scholar” (Wang & Bakken, 2004)
	“Many graduate students face thesis or dissertation writing under-prepared” (Delyser, 2003)

Perhaps AW does not hold a concrete definition, still these quotes may be an indication of how AW is portrayed and this may actually state what AW represents. According to Table 1, Is AW considered a skill to be mastered at the graduate level? Is AW a field that needs improvement? The suggestions presented in Table 1 reveal what is expected by a graduate student and the need to improve certain AW skills; regardless that no concrete answer was provided on what AW is.

Lennie Irvin referred to AW as an *argument* with a “carefully arranged and supported presentation of a viewpoint” (2010, p. 9). An analogy of a courtroom was used to explain that you cannot present a claim without evidence to support it. Applying this analogy to AW, writing should not only be presented in a comprehensive form, it should demonstrate knowledge, evidence, and mastering of what is being written. Academic writing was also referred as an

*analysis* that “breaks a subject apart to study it closely, and from this inspection, ideas for writing emerge” (2010, p. 11). AW not only offers insight on a particular topic, it should offer a complete overview on how it was accomplished and why it was accomplished for others to understand.

A standard definition of AW cannot be provided since it may vary according to what graduate students have learned from their previous experience. What one may consider an important skill to master in AW, others might not consider it as important. Keeping this in mind, how might the concept of AW concur between graduate students and professors?

In order to comprehend AW, each article referred to the task according to the context of the research carried out. The article “Students’ and Teachers’ Perceptions: An Inquiry Into Academic Writing” by Wolsey, Lapp, & Fisher, presents how the concept of AW among students and teachers overlapped and a brief literature review offered in this article states the following:

Coming to an understanding of what academic discourse might be is complicated by a set of overlapping and complementary terms. These include academic language (Cummins, 2005), disciplinary literacy (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008), academic vocabulary (Coxhead, 2000), academic writing, and academic register. Further, what constitutes academic discourse in one disciplinary community may look somewhat different in another. (Vacca & Vacca, 2008)

Following this quote, academic writing is influenced by a series of components which need mastering. This might imply that failing to understand and comprehend certain skills can lead a more complex mastering of AW. Understanding that AW has a variety of components

might help graduate students break down each one of these and consider them individually in the process of understanding and carrying out AW.

Irvin (2010) referenced and quoted Lee Ann Carroll since she recognizes AW is more than just being able to construct sentences and form paragraphs. AW requires a higher level of skills which Carroll refers as “literacy tasks”.

Projects calling for high levels of critical literacy in college typically require knowledge of research skills, ability to read complex texts, understanding of key disciplinary concepts, and strategies for synthesizing, analyzing, and responding critically to new information, usually within a limited time frame. (2002)

Therefore, this implies a successful AW entails the mastering of a set of skills. At the end of what might be considered a complete AW assignment, the combination of “literacy tasks” must be seen clearly.

### **Graduate students and writing skills mastering**

The article “What the Research Reveals about Graduate Students' Writing Skills” (2012) by Anita L. Ondrusek in the field of the Masters of Library and Information Science Program (LIS), reveals the core competencies of scholarly writing in her review of articles which carefully study academic writing at the graduate level. She also recognizes reading and submitting papers as fundamental tasks required to assess student outcome. Ondrusek quoted a professor who emphasized his concern when asking how he could deal with grading content vs. grading awful writing (Chelton, 2008). This portrays potential disputes when assessing student outcome and how students’ writing does not comply with expectations at the graduate level.

Ondrusek also quotes Victor N. Shaw’s article (published in *College Teaching*, Volume 47, Issue 4) “Graduate students must develop an expansive repertoire of writing styles ranging

from styles suitable for abstracts and critiques to formats used for opinion papers, grant applications, and journal articles” (2012) supporting the mastering of AW conventions. Along with Ondrusek’s literature review, she searched for major sources and portrayed them in a table to illustrate how each article focused one way or another on advanced writing competencies such as organization, mechanics and grammar, argument, evidence, logic, content, voice, audience, among others (Ondrusek, 2012, p. 178).

After considering Ondrusek’s literature review and the flaws graduate students might have, Didia Delyser emphasized the need graduate students have when it comes to writing skills and techniques since these will be used throughout the academic writing required at the graduate level. As a possible solution to this problem, Delyser teaches a seminar called Social Science Writing for graduate students. This three-hour course is divided into three broad sections with the intention of addressing the main areas where graduate students struggle the most:

1. Readings on the process and mechanics of writing.
2. Readings from books or journals articles.
3. Students’ writings to “workshop” in class.

Delyser highlights the importance of combining these three sections in order to accomplish what she describes as:

... the creation of a culture of writing in the class, the formation of a group of students who can talk with each other about their writing, who are able to share their work, and help themselves and one another with the writing process. (2003)

Delyser’s main purpose is to “encourage others to develop similar courses” to address this situation. Considering the literature review which points out what research reveals on graduate students’ writing skills and a possible solution to what might be a problem which

concerns professors and graduate students alike; this might be the first step in addressing this situation. Therefore, discovering graduate students' and professors' perceptions on academic writing at the graduate level might lead toward a clearer understanding of what professors expect from their students within the writing field.

### **Graduate students' and graduate instructors' perception on academic writing**

When planning a course and its assessment, do educators really know about students' prior knowledge on the topic? Do educators take into consideration students' background or do they just assume what students are "supposed" to know and based on that, plan classes?

According to Li-Shih Huang, a graduate student and/or graduate instructor's perception regarding academic language need, in general, can shed light which might serve as a springboard to improve student's performance at the graduate level. In the article "Seeing eye to eye? The Academic Writing Needs of Graduate and Undergraduate Students from Students' and Instructors' Perspective", Water & Vilches indicated "Various needs analysis frameworks studies related to the academic language needs of graduate and undergraduate students across disciplines are mostly outdated" (as cited in Huang, 2010, p. 519). Every semester, the classroom setting is a different one with students who come from different educational systems and have different language proficiencies. Therefore, frameworks and teaching techniques should be updated constantly with the purpose of reaching the skills desired. "Instructors, curriculum developers, and material developers may have to rely on personal perception, experiences, or intuitions about students' needs when planning courses" (Huang, 2010, p. 519). This line of thought shows an effective way to tap into students' previous knowledge and current needs in order to build upon what they already know.

### ***Overlapping on the concept of AW.***

Research by Huang (2010) took place at a comprehensive university in British Columbia in Canada with the purpose of evaluating undergraduate and graduate students' perceptions of their academic language needs. An essential standpoint was to consider instructors' perspective as well. This way, both perspectives were compared to analyze if in fact students and instructors were on the same page when it came to the importance of the skills required to be successful in college.

This research focused on graduate students and graduate instructors' perception regarding academic writing. Although Huang's study encompasses academic language skills in general, this article focuses on the writing section of the study. Through a volunteer online questionnaire, graduate students and instructors were invited to inform their perception of their academic writing and possible areas of improvement. The purpose was to develop workshops and programs that would enhance student's academic writing skills. The research questions were developed according to the following criteria:

1. Importance of language skills.
2. Status of language skills.
3. Importance of language skills vis-à-vis status of language skills.

According to Huang, regarding perception and self-assessment, graduate students (master's and doctoral level) identified writing as the most important language domain and identified that the top five most important skills involve the following:

1. Demonstrate competence in discipline-specific writing tasks (e.g. research papers, thesis proposals, grant proposals, theses).
2. Organize writing in order to convey major and supporting ideas.

3. Use relevant reasons and examples to support a position or an idea.
4. Demonstrate a command of standard written English, including grammar, phrasing, effective sentence structure, spelling, and punctuation.
5. Produce writing that effectively summarizes and paraphrases the works and words of others.

These students also acknowledged they needed support on the ability to use appropriate transitions to connect ideas and information and also to develop disciplinary writing skills. Graduate students and their instructors identified writing as an important top skill. However, among the top five most important writing skills (mentioned above), graduate students identified a writing skill that was not shared by instructors which was to produce sufficient quantity of written text appropriate to the assignment and time constraint.

When it came to areas where graduate students needed the most help, the majority was in the writing domain such as:

1. Organizing writing in order to convey major and supporting ideas.
2. Showing awareness of audience needs.
3. Write to a particular audience or reader, and others.

Overall, instructors pointed out that graduate students needed help and development with their writing and speaking skills. Comparing both perceptions, this study portrayed an overlap between what graduate students and instructors considered to be a “very important” and essential skill, however graduate students are aware of what language skills instructors consider they should achieve in order for them to complete their degrees (Huang, 2010, p. 531). It is essential to take into consideration what students know to ensure they are on the same page. Even though it might seem to be a difficult task due to the variety of proficiency levels instructors might

encounter, they should always aim towards what students are expected to reach at the level they are. Huang (2010) concluded in his article that:

Our duty is to offer targeted, varied workshops that meet their individual and disciplined specific needs. An ongoing questioning of learners' needs help instructors begin their instruction where the learners and the knowledge gained will enable instructors to prioritize what they teach. (p. 535)

On the other hand, "Teaching Writing in Graduate School" by Margaret Sallee, Ronald Hallet, and William Tierney (2011), decide to address the situation keeping in mind how the concept of academic writing differs among graduate students and professors. They clearly state expectations versus reality when it comes to graduate student performance implying that in fact there is a gap when completing AW in masters or doctorate programs.

... the expectation is that students already know how to write before they begin graduate school. Instructors of graduate students may assume that students learned basic writing skills during their high school and undergraduate years. However, a visit to freshman English courses will confirm that the focus is on expressing ideas with less attention to how they are delivered. (p. 66)

Graduate students do accomplish AW in their undergraduate years learning basic skills. Nevertheless, the focus and objectives in graduate school may change drastically according to the level of education desired increasing and requiring a higher level of writing mastering.

Mary A. Bair and Cynthia E. Mader conducted a study in order to "to identify the source of academic writing difficulties among graduate students and find ways to address them" (2013). It took place in a college of education at a master's degree where faculty members and students were surveyed. Three institutional problems were recognized and these carried along

incongruence between faculty members and students. These were difficulties synthesising [*sic*] theory and research, imbalance between professional and academic writing, and discrepancy between espoused and enacted curriculum.

The first problem was “Difficulties synthesising [*sic*] theory and research”. Faculty members commented the following:

The biggest hurdle seems to be identifying a theoretical perspective and then applying that perspective. I get the sense that many students find a bunch of research and then almost randomly try and tie it together rather than knowing how it fits into their overall theoretical perspective. (Bair & Mader, 2013, p. 5)

Another comment was: [Lack of] depth of critical thinking; [lack of] willingness to engage in the process of writing and rewriting” (2013, p. 5). To this first problem, students complained in an attempt to justify faculty comments by stating that they “had not been taught what they are being asked to produce” and they also complained about “the lack of opportunity in their graduate program to develop those very skills”. (2013, p. 5)

The second problem identified was “Imbalance between professional and academic writing”. At the beginning of their study, Bair and Mader developed writing definitions with the purpose of classifying the types of writing done in this institution. These were academic, professional, and informal writing (described above in the *Writing at the college level* section). These definitions and the course syllabi of the graduate program were used to create a curricular map of written assignments. After classifying the types of writing provided, a matrix revealed the percentage of assignments assigned in each program and the outcome was the following: 45% professional writing, 36% informal writing, and 19% academic writing. A significant imbalance

among writing was identified, possibly justifying why academic writing is the category where students struggle the most.

The third and last problem identified was “Discrepancy between espoused and enacted curriculum”. This problem pointed out if AW was being carried out in either emphasis or core courses. When asking faculty members and students regarding this matter, there was a noteworthy inconsistency. Bair and Mader (2013, p. 7) reported that:

- Sixty-seven percent of emphasis-area faculty claimed that their courses prepared students to identify a theoretical perspective; only 10% of students reported receiving any such instruction in these courses. In contrast, approximately 39% of students reported that they received this guidance in the core courses.
- Approximately 76% of emphasis-area instructors reported that their courses prepared students to synthesise [*sic*] information into a coherent literature review; only 9% of students concurred.
- Sixty-seven percent of instructors reported that the emphasis courses taught students how to think critically about the literature; only 9% of students agreed.

The results of the three problems identified represent in a way a *blaming game*. Each population had the urge of defending their position and justifying their claims. However, student suggestions for improving graduate preparation were considered to reach a solution to this problematic.

Beyond all the situations presented in the previous research, one pattern was evident. There are constant discrepancies between professors and graduate students when it comes to expectations, performance, preparation, and other components of AW. The result of these overlapping situations were carefully researched and revealed with the ultimate goal of finding a

solution for both parties: professors who teach graduate courses and graduate students who seek to become masters in their field of interest.

### **Approaching academic writing at the graduate level**

The main purpose of this study and of every researcher who has explored academic writing is not to state a problem or to find blame but to contribute in finding a solution for the graduate population who are in the process of becoming professionals in their areas of expertise. The following table presents an overview of some of the studies on academic writing which served as a base to expand and build upon in this research. Information such as the authors, year of publication, the sources consulted, the findings of their research, and the suggestions made are presented with the purpose of visualizing the literature consulted and understanding why the topic of academic writing is relevant in the academic field

Table 2 *Academic research articles consulted*

<u>Year of Publication</u>	<u>Title of Research</u>	<u>Author</u>	<u>Findings</u>	<u>Contribution and/or suggestion</u>
2014	Needs and Attitudes towards Academic Writing. A Practice-informed Course Structure	Cristina Bojan & Sonia Pavlenk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attitude towards writing is important since it opens the individual towards acquiring something new or developing further a skill that s/he already possesses.</li> </ul>	A course design that should begin with a re-setting of the individual's attitude.
2013	Academic Writing at the Graduate Level: Improving the Curriculum through Faculty Collaboration	Mary A. Bair & Cynthia E. Mader	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discrepancies between faculty and student perceptions about graduate preparation for academic writing.</li> <li>• Identification of several problems with the process which prepared students for AW at the master's level.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Suggestion of taking core courses early in the degree.</li> <li>• Programs identified courses where students could develop a thesis proposal.</li> <li>• Programs are still exploring ways to embed theory, research and AW skills.</li> </ul>
2012	Students' and Teachers' Perception: An Inquiry Into Academic Writing	Thomas De Vere Wolsey, Diane Lapp, Douglas Fisher	Discrepancy between what teachers and students perceive as an academic writing task.	A Model of Academic Discourse Uptake with the purpose to assist teachers in bridging the gap between what students perceive and what teachers expect.

Continuation Table 2 *Academic research articles consulted*

<u>Year of Publication</u>	<u>Title of Research</u>	<u>Author</u>	<u>Findings</u>	<u>Contribution and/or suggestion</u>
2012	What the Research Reveals about Graduate Students' Writing Skills: A Literature Review	Anita L. Ondrusek	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Writing plays an integral part in graduate education and fluency with basic writing is a pre requisite to advanced AW.</li> <li>• Scholarly writing is difficult.</li> <li>• Deficiencies in writing skills block a student's advancement towards fulfilling degree requirements.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inventory of writing tasks expected of entry-level to middle management librarians.</li> <li>• Agreement on writing requirements that will be integrated into core courses.</li> <li>• Development of standards for evaluating writing samples that any professor will administer consistently.</li> </ul>
2011	Teaching Writing in Graduate School	Margaret Sallee, Ronald Hallet, & William Tierney	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Instructor commitment is key.</li> <li>• Schedule the course as early as possible in students' program.</li> <li>• Incorporate a focus on writing into any course.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Make research and writing more manageable.</li> <li>• Encourage students to support each other.</li> <li>• Focus on all aspects of writing.</li> <li>• Role model the writing process.</li> <li>• Invest in the students while designing instruction and pedagogical materials.</li> </ul>

Continuation Table 2 *Academic research articles consulted*

<u>Year of Publication</u>	<u>Title of Research</u>	<u>Author</u>	<u>Findings</u>	<u>Contribution and/or suggestion</u>
2010	Seeing eye to eye? The academic writing needs of graduate and undergraduate students from students' and instructors' perspective.	Li-Shih Huang	Overlap in skill items identified as "very important" between graduate and undergraduate students and instructors.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Incorporating into instruction individual skill items in writing domains.</li> <li>• Support services should focus on writing issues at different levels.</li> <li>• Content related writing issues showing an awareness of audience needs, writing to a particular reader and disciplinary writing.</li> </ul>
2003	Teaching Graduate Students to Write: a seminar for thesis and dissertation writers.	Dydia Delyser	Seminar developed to address unprepared graduate students writing resulted beneficial for graduate students and professors.	Author developed this seminar in the hopes that others will be interested in teaching similar courses.

After reviewing the literature pertaining academic writing, it is evident the need of research in this field which could lead towards the contribution of possible solutions to this matter. Chapter 3 will present how this study was structured; from the research design used in this study; the data collection procedure which involved describing the research site and population; explaining how the instruments were utilized to carry out the research; and the data analysis process while transcribing and coding the data collected.

## Chapter 3: Methodology

*Tell me and I forget, teach me and I remember, involve me and I learn.*

—Benjamin Franklin

### Introduction

Although many books were consulted and courses on research were taken; carrying out the research allowed understanding what the process was about. Each step of this methodology taught me that in order to reach an utmost result, one should be involved throughout the process. Therefore, working and re-working with the data in a recursive manner was an enriching learning experience in itself.

Exploring perceptions of graduate students and professors required a structured design in qualitative research. To solidify this study, three different populations were taken into consideration and watched for possible aligning or overlapping of themes or categories among them. This chapter outlines the institutional requirements followed, a description of the qualitative research designed, the instruments used to collect data, and the coding procedures.

### Institutional requirements

In order to explore the perceptions of graduate students and professors held regarding academic writing, the researcher conducted interviews. However, to carry out these interviews, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at UPRM requires a series of procedures. The office of IRB should receive all proposals involving human participants “so that the boards can review the extent to which the research being proposed subjects individual risk” (Creswell 2003, p. 64).

The office of IRB required the following documents to ensure this research complied with UPRM protocol of human participants’ investigation:

- a. A Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) certificate (Appendix A) which qualifies the researcher as a potential researcher by “providing high quality,

peer reviewed, web based, research education materials to enhance the integrity and professionalism of investigators and staff conducting research” (“CITI Mission and History,” n.d.).

- b. A completed and detailed application for Review of a Research Project Involving Participation of Human Subjects.
- c. Thesis proposal with all the instruments to be used in the research and a well-developed and clear consent form.

After completing the online course for Students Conducting no more than Minimal risk research from the (CITI) program, the IRB application was completed and submitted. On September 28, 2015, Dr. Rafael Boglio called from the IRB office suggesting minor changes to the consent form. After editing for changes and submitting the revised consent form, the IRB was approved on September 29, 2015 (Appendix B).

It is important to mention that after the IRB was approved, a technical difficulty was identified when sending out the electronic surveys which would help the research identify potential participants. Therefore, the data collection section underwent minor modifications in order to successfully recruit participants. This modification was notified to the IRB office on October 30, 2015 (Appendix C) and on November 5, 2015 Dr. Rafael Bolgio approved the modification by stating that it “did not imposed any additional risk to participants nor they alter the guarantees of anonymity and confidentiality” (Appendix D).

### **Qualitative research**

When identifying the topic to be researched and narrowing it down to perceptions of academic writing, it was imperative to carry out a qualitative research since it would allow to

discover the underpinnings ideas or notions on behalf both populations. John W. Creswell's definition on qualitative research identifies all the components included in this thesis project:

Qualitative research begins with assumptions and the use of interpretive/theoretical frameworks that inform the study of research problems addressing the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. To study this problem, qualitative researchers use an emerging qualitative approach to approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analysis that is both inductive and deductive and establishes patterns or themes. The final written report or presentation includes the voice of participants, the reflexivity of the researcher, a complex description and interpretation of the problem, and its contribution to the literature or a call for change. (2013, p. 44)

While explaining this definition, Creswell presents what he considers several common characteristics of qualitative research. These characteristics are aligned with this research project in the table below to illustrate how this study complies with qualitative standards.

Table 3 *Common characteristics of qualitative research alignment with research project*

<u>Characteristics presented by Creswell</u>	<u>Research project</u>
Natural setting: Qualitative researchers often collect data in the field at the site where participants experience the issue or problem under study.	Natural setting: University of Puerto Rico, Mayaguez Campus. English Department, MAEE program.
Researcher as key instrument: Qualitative researchers collect data themselves through examining documents, observing behavior, and interviewing participants.	Researcher as key instrument: The researcher was in charge of collecting the data through recorded interviews and notetaking.
Multiple Methods: Qualitative researchers typically gather multiple forms of data, such as interviews, observations, and documents, rather than rely on a single data source.	Multiple methods: Data was collected through interviews and academic writing samples to reach possible conclusions.
Complex reasoning through inductive and deductive logic: Qualitative researchers build their patterns, categories, and themes from the “bottom up” by organizing the data inductively into increasingly more abstract units of information.	Complex reasoning through inductive and deductive logic: When analyzing the data, it was important to look across the three populations addressed to find any similarities or differences when interpreting transcriptions and codifying.
Participants’ meaning: The researcher keeps a focus on learning the meaning that the participants hold about the problem or issue, not the meaning that the researcher brings to the research or writers from the literature.	Participants’ meaning: Participants are graduate students and professors who teach graduate courses and/or belong to graduate student committees. Professors represent the population that constantly carries out or provides feedback on AW. Therefore, they were expected to provide relevant information on the topic researched.
Reflexivity: Researchers “position themselves” in a qualitative research study.	Reflexivity: This research project started off as a personal issue about the researcher’s own performance on AW, which eventually turned out to be a public concern to be studied for the benefit of others in academia facing the same situation.
Holistic account: Qualitative researchers try to develop a complex picture of the problem or issue under study.	Holistic account: When analyzing the results provided by interview questions and writing samples, a set of categories and sub-categories emerge revealing the perceptions required to build upon this research project.

After aligning qualitative characteristics with this research project, it was evident that exploring the perception of this population was required to discover the different themes or concerns which might set the ground for a possible follow up quantitative study to focus on the categories and results that emerged.

### **Research design**

The research design is based on grounded theory (GT). According to Robert Thornberg, “Grounded theory is a qualitative and inductive research approach which is designed to explore, analyze and generate concepts about individual and collection actions and social processes” (2012, p. 85). Along this line, this study seeks to explore academic writing at the Master’s level, centered on the perception of graduate students and professors have while taking into consideration their previous knowledge, expectations, and performance regarding academic writing. Thornberg indicated: “GT was originally developed by the sociologist Glaser and Strauss (1967) as a new research approach defined as ‘the discovery of theory from data’” (2012, p. 85). Therefore, grounded theory will allow exploring key ideas and themes regarding if students’ and professors’ perceptions on academic writing are aligned with expectations required at the graduate level. “Grounded theory is a qualitative research design in which the inquirer generates a general explanation (a theory) of a process, an action, or an interaction shaped by the view of a large number of participants” (Creswell, 2013). Thus, this research will provide information on academic writing from graduate students and professors which will lead to explore data, analyze findings, and make recommendations.

Grounded theory consists of two approaches: systematic and constructivist. For the purpose of this research, the systematic approach was used. This procedure was developed by Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998). Creswell quotes Strauss and Corbin to describe this approach

where “the investigator seeks to systematically develop a theory that explains a process, action, or interaction on a topic” (2013). In this case, this research attempts to discover the perceptions of graduate students and professors and explain them according to the findings from the interviews.

Grounded theory usually carries out studies through theoretical sampling since it “prevents researchers from becoming unfocused and overwhelmed in the practice of data collection and analysis” (Thornberg, 2012, p. 86). The data collection (which is discussed further) and analysis (discussed in Chapter 4) is combined through this sampling allowing the analysis of the data collected to be further developed according to the responses from the interviews.

Coding the data was an ongoing and recursive task to identify patterns concerning academic writing. As the data was analyzed, categories emerged and were created to organize and gain a better understanding of the perceptions of graduate students and professors when it came to academic writing. “Grounded theorists constantly treat their constructed codes as provisional and open for modification and refinement in order to improve their fit with the data” (Thornberg, 2012, p. 87). It is important to highlight that the coding process was subjective to changes due to the flexibility grounded theory provides when it came to applying new discoveries in the already existing data until the very end when all the possible categories were established.

## **Data collection**

### **Research site and participants**

This research took place at the University of Puerto Rico, Mayaguez Campus where participants belong to the Masters of Arts in English Education (MAEE) of the English

Department. Participants were divided into two groups: first, graduate students in their first semester or third semester and more, and the second group were professors who belong to graduate student committees and/or taught graduate courses in the fields of English education, linguistics, or literature. Participants were selected through purposeful sampling and the type of sampling addressed was homogeneous sampling which focuses on examining and analyzing a small group with the purpose of understanding and describing in depth the nature of the participants (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). These participants represented a community of graduate students and professors based on their academic preparation. Therefore a set of different questions were asked to each group during the interviews. Special attention was given to the impact of students' experiences when accomplishing academic writing so they were subdivided into two groups.

To describe the MAEE program population, accessible and general information was considered such as academic level and gender for professors and year of study and gender for graduate students. The purpose of having this information was to compare the general population of the MAEE program with the participants and to have a possible overview of the population researched.

A total of six professors and six graduate students participated of this study. It is important to point out the nature and results of this study are a sample which represent the UPRM MAEE program academic year 2015-2016. Generalizability is taken into consideration due to the fact that this study does not intend to create a general concept of the academic writing status at the MAEE program. Still, this research aimed to represent a specific population at a specific point in time with the purpose of carrying out a quantitative research in the future with a larger population to focus on the results and recommendations revealed in this research.

Table 4 *Total Participants*

<u>Gender</u>	<u>Total</u>
Female	7
Male	5
Total	12

Table 5 *Female Participants*

<u>Gender</u>	<u>Total</u>
Professors	4
First semester graduate students	1
Third semester or more graduate students	2

Table 6 *Male Participants*

<u>Gender</u>	<u>Total</u>
Professors	2
First semester graduate students	1
Third semester or more graduate students	2

### ***Participant confidentiality***

It is important to highlight that when participants agreed to participate in this research, the privacy of their identity was ensured. As stated in the consent form they signed before being interviewed: “You do not need to identify yourself. Participants will use a pseudonym in the interview, since I am categorizing you according to your academic level and gathering all the information provided in your interview along with all the other participants’ interviews” (Appendix E). Therefore, each participant was classified according to the following:

Table 7 *Pseudonyms for graduate students and professors*

<u>Population</u>	<u>Semester</u>	<u>Gender</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>Pseudonym</u>
Student	1 <sup>st</sup>	F	1	S1F1
Student	3 <sup>rd</sup>	M	2	S3M2
Professor	N/A	F	1	PF1
Professor	N/A	M	2	PM2

### **Surveys**

The English department director was contacted to request current mailing list with the emails of all graduate students and professors with the purpose of inviting them to participate of

this research (Appendix F). Through the online survey development program Survey Monkey, graduate students and professors from the MAEE program were contracted and invited to answer an electronic survey with a yes or no question format so they could respond if they were interested in participating in this research (Appendix G). The results of this initial survey helped identify the potential participants for this research. Afterwards, those who answered “yes” to participate in this study were contacted and invited to schedule a meeting for an interview on a day and time of their convenience.

### **Interviews**

In order to explore graduate students’ and professors’ perception regarding academic writing, interviews were conducted. According to Carolyn Mears: “An in-depth interview provides a way for a research to journey into another’s perspective about a circumstance or event, so meaning can be learned and significance shared” (2012, p. 170). Following this thought, these participants answered interviews according their experiences in the graduate program. From a general idea or assumption regarding academic writing, these interviews provided real life experiences to explore and analyze.

Rubin & Rubin (1995), indicate when structuring an interview for qualitative purposes, one must take into consideration three types of qualitative questions in order “to maintain balance between separate lines of inquiry and ensure that there is time to go into depth on each major subject” (p. 145). The three types of qualitative questions are:

1. Main questions: the initial question
2. Probes: to clarify the initial question and/or request examples and evidence
3. Follow up: may ask for elaboration.

These questions appeared subsequently according to the interviewees' understanding of the question or the answer provided. Taking into consideration the varieties of answers that could have been provided by the interviewees, interviews were carefully structured to comply with these three types of qualitative questions in case they were needed.

It is imperative to highlight, these interview questions went through a series of modifications with the purpose of reaching the most from each participant in regards to AW. After developing a preliminary version of interview questions for both populations, a meeting with the thesis committee was held to go over them and identify any possible modifications which could improve understanding them. Because the interview questions were initially developed by the researcher from a graduate student perspective, the intervention and judgement of the graduate student committee members (which consists of PhD. professors) was important to keep these questions as neutral as possible to ensure credible and valid answers. After a series of modifications regarding what was being asked and the question structure, the final set of interview questions for graduate students and professors was established.

Each interview consisted of three to six questions depending on the population they belonged to: 1<sup>st</sup> semester graduate students (Appendix H), 3<sup>rd</sup> semester or more graduate students (Appendix I) and professors (Appendix J). As indicated by Silverman (2005): "Many interview studies are used to elicit respondents' perceptions" (p. 48). That is why each set of questions aimed directly to a specific population with the purpose of obtaining a particular data that may represent the population's perception of academic writing.

It is important to highlight, participants were given the option of choosing if they felt comfortable being audiotaped or not. As Rubin & Rubin (1995) suggest "We strongly feel that you *must* receive permission before taping. Permission is legally required in most states when

taping a telephone conversation, but you should request permission to tape whether consent is legally required or not” (p. 127). For this study, all participants agreed to be audiotaped. Once participants agreed and signed the consent form, the instructions were explained and once the interview started, the audiotape started to record to ensure the quality of the information provided. If it was the case, having both situations where participants agreed or disagreed to be audiotaped, notes were taken to secure the data provided by the interviewee as well as to back up when listening to the audio-recording.

### **Academic writing samples.**

Besides the interview, the population of graduate students completed a qualitative assessment (Appendix K) where they identified a set of five academic writing samples which represented the possible writing tasks they are expected to accomplish at the graduate level. Their task was to analyze and identify the AW samples provided to measure the knowledge they have or might not have regarding the academic writing they are expected to accomplish at some point during the master’s degree. Mary J. Allen describes qualitative assessment as: “Assessment findings that are verbal descriptions of what was discovered, rather than numerical findings” (2004, p. 171). Therefore, these writing samples serve as an example of what they might know of a specific skill (in this case, AW). The selection of samples which represented the academic writing presented to graduate students was done by going over several core course syllabuses of the MAEE. After identifying the AW expected in these courses, writing samples were selected and consulted with the chair of the graduate student committee Dr. Rosa Roman (who also teaches graduate courses) to ensure that these embodied AW done at the master’s level.

Instead of focusing on how many AW samples graduate students could identify, special attention was given to what AW was correctly identified. Although the instructions for item # 5

of the interview questions stated: “Identify the following academic writing samples” it was taken into consideration if graduate students would be able to identify any documentation style.

Chapter 4 explains the selection and structuring of the AW administered.

### **Data analysis**

As indicated previously, this research followed a grounded theory design that would allow targeting the standing point of a particular audience which were graduate students and professors of the MAEE program at the University of Puerto Rico, Mayaguez Campus. As indicated in the data collection section, these participants were going to receive a request with a brief description and invitation to participate in this study. As stated, the data provided which offered background information of the population researched (academic level: graduate students or professors, gender, and year of study) was essential to understand the nature of the possible results.

Larry V. Hedges stated:

To identify cultural knowledge that members need to know, understand, predict and produce, the ethnographer engages in a range of decision including: selecting phenomena to study ethnographically; selecting methods and resources (e.g. interviewing, writing field notes, video/audio recording, collecting artefacts, documents and/or photographs).

(as cited in Green, Skukauskaite, & Baker, 2012, p. 309)

When basing this research on the grounded theory approach, the data collected was used to identify the perception of academic writing at the graduate level, to later build on the results and come up with an in-depth investigation. Following Glaser and Strauss:

Their claim is that data shapes the research process and its product in an innovative way.

This allows data that is grounded to be identified, discarded, clarified and elaborated

upon (relative to that situation) through a simultaneous data collection and analysis.  
(Waring, 2012, p. 298)

While analyzing the data after following the transcription and coding procedure (discussed ahead from pages 38-41), it was evident what information provided by the participant was relevant for this study. Since this research looked at the perceptions of three different populations, it was important to keep in mind that although the data might vary, consistency in the analysis and categories was required to focus on the initial purpose of exploring perceptions of AW.

### **Transcriptions**

As mentioned in the Data Collection section, participants were asked if they agreed to be audiotaped to ensure the quality of the information provided and to ease the process of analyzing and understanding. Committee members strongly suggested transcribing each interview immediately to recall any notes that might be useful during the analysis of such, therefore transcriptions were already done before 24 hours after each interview. Mears (2012) also recommended to “Be sure to transcribe each interview before conducting the next one” (p.173). This would avoid the buildup of recorded interviews to be transcribed. After going back and forth the recordings and transcribing all 12 interviews, a second round of listening to the interviews was indispensable to ensure the transcriptions were accurate with what the participant said.

### **Coding procedure**

In an attempt to explain how the data was coded, Kathy Charmaz’s ideology was embraced on how “grounded theorists create their codes by defining what they see in the data” (Thornberg, 2012, p. 86). Although theory and literature in GT coding was essential to the

completion of this study, it was not until the chapter was re-read to understand that the coding process occurred naturally. Thornberg describes the coding process as consisting of three staged: Initial coding, focused coding, and theoretical coding. The coding process for interviews was linked to these stages for a better understanding of how categories emerged.

#### ***A. Initial coding***

This first phase is recognized since “the researcher stay close to the data and remain open to exploring what they define is going on in these data” (Thornberg, 2012, 86). After transcribing all interviews, each one of them was read and re-read carefully to explore what each participant wanted to communicate while answering the set of questions assigned. The emergence of possible categories to take in consideration took place in this phase and as described by Thornberg: “The grounded theorist constantly treat their constructed codes as provisional and open for modification and refinement in order to improve their fit with the data” (2012, p. 87). Although jumping into conclusions was quite tempting at this stage, it was important to leave an open possibility on initial findings and go in-depth to explore more concrete categories.

#### ***B. Focused coding***

The focused coding stage is referred as a stage “in which the core category becomes a guide to further data gathering and coding” (Thornberg, 2012, p. 87). As stated in the initial coding stage, possible categories were identified; still they were premature and lacked analysis. Charmaz referred to this stage “as a second phase and as a result of identifying the most significant or frequent initial codes, which become treated as focused codes in the study” (Thornberg, 2012, p. 87). When analyzing the data, a set of similar categories emerged spontaneously for each of the three populations. Color coding with high-lighters and assigning a

specific color to similar categories, to study them further on as a whole somewhat simplified the task.

After completing the high-lighted coding procedure, it was evident the categories identified gravitated to a particular perception among the population interviewed. While completing the process of identifying categories, the data unfolded itself and subcategories automatically emerged, leading towards a better comprehension of how these could be interpreted to unveil how the perceptions of graduate students and professors was portrayed through these interviews.

### *C. Theoretical coding*

After reading, analyzing, and coding the transcribed interview into categories, the last stage took place. Thornberg quotes Glaser (1978) when referring to theoretical coding as a stage where “researchers analyze how categories and codes generated from data might relate to each other as hypotheses to be integrated into a theory” (2012, p. 89). It is important to highlight that before conducting these interviews, the researcher did an extensive review of the literature on academic writing at the graduate level.

Understanding the literature beforehand contributed immensely to a better comprehension of what was being portrayed when conducting these interviews. In the stage of identifying focused codes, the review of the literature was consulted to connect what has been found to that point to this study.

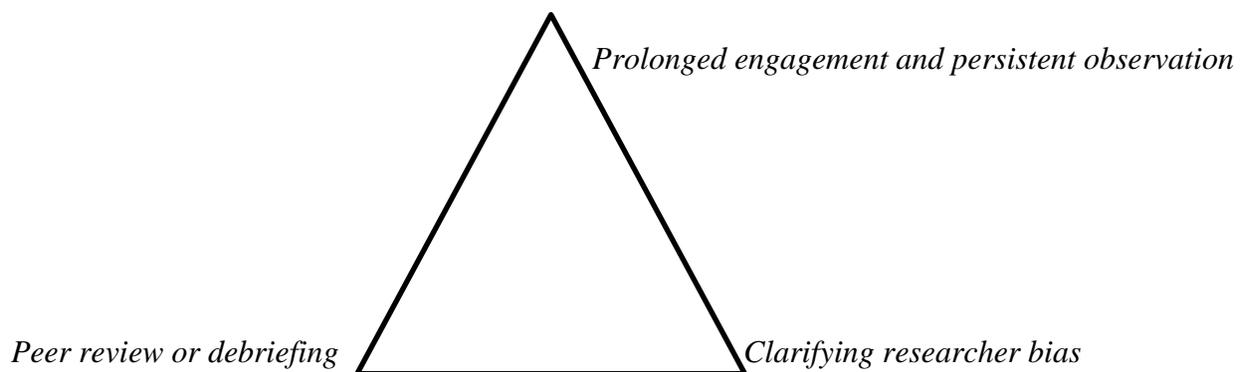
### **Validation**

Creswell addresses validation as “to emphasize a process” (As stated by Angen, 2000), therefore validating this research and its results was intended so as to further replicate without any problem. Although there are many perspectives and terms used to validate qualitatively,

Creswell and Miller (2000) focus on eight strategies to convey validation and Creswell suggest the usage of at least two of them to carry out an efficient qualitative study.

### **Triangulating the research**

When validating the research as a whole, three strategies were triangulated according to Creswell's theory of complying with at least two of them. Each vertex in Figure 1 represents how these strategies grant authenticity when complying with a qualitative framework.



*Figure 1. Triangulation of Validation Strategies for Research*

### ***Prolonged engagement and persistent observation***

The researcher was able to observe closely the population under study because she was part of this population; observations regarding to academic writing among graduate students is developed in the master's program. The researcher considered important a study exploring AW at the graduate level while supporting Creswell's line of thought when stating "In the field, the researcher makes decisions about what is salient to study, relevant to the purpose of the study, and of interest for focus" (2013, p. 251). That said, while being part of the MAEE program, this study emerged as a relevant matter that needed to be addressed.

### ***Peer review or debriefing***

Throughout the completion of this research, peer review or debriefing was constantly done on behalf of the researcher's thesis committee. Constructing the design of this research, choosing and developing the adequate instruments to carry it out successfully, and revising each chapter of this thesis were a hand to hand task. The committee members of this study served as what Lincoln & Guba (1985) referred as the "devil's advocate" (As stated by Creswell, 2013, p. 251). Frequent meetings were held with the purpose of setting meeting schedule, providing feedback, and bouncing ideas around to strengthen the categories.

### ***Clarifying researcher bias***

It is important to point out this research project was triggered by a personal concern on behalf of the researcher's own performance on academic writing when entering the graduate level. While struggling at some point with this issue, the researcher discovers that what seemed a personal issue was indeed the concern of other graduate students. This phenomenon prompted the researcher to investigate further which resulted in various literatures such as Bair & Mader (2013), Wolsey, Lapp, & Fisher (2012), Ondrusek (2012), Salle, Hallet, & Tierney (2011), Huang (2010), Delyser (2003) confirming this problem as a public one, hence it is not particular of graduate students at UPRM or Puerto Rico.

### ***Triangulating the data collection***

When choosing the data collection sources for this study, it was important to consider how these could connect to one another to ensure qualitative and reliable results. Since the scope of the study relied on exploring perceptions of academic writing, the most suitable way to reach these perceptions was by interviewing, taking field notes/observations, and collecting AW writing samples.

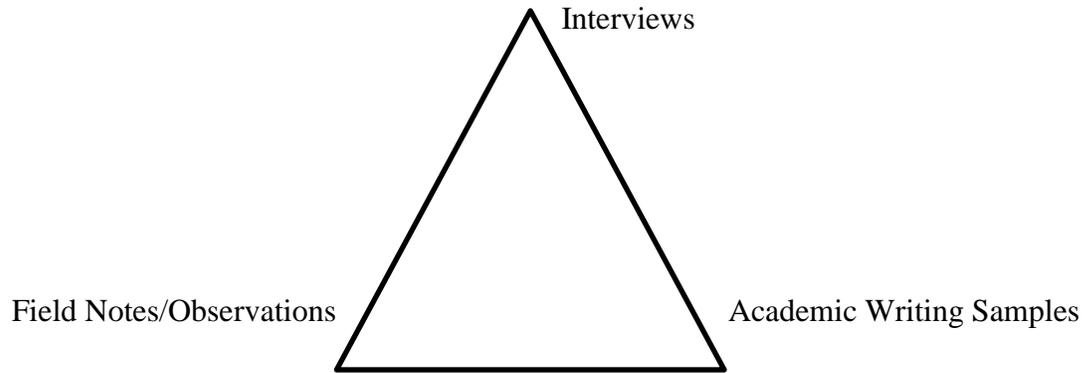


Figure 2. Triangulating the Data Collection

### ***Interviews***

Interviewing graduate students and professors seemed the most appropriate way to tap into the perception of AW. To secure the quality of these interviews, these were audiotaped and then transcribed.

### ***Field notes/observations***

Besides audiotaping these interviews, the researcher took field notes of the most salient points in the interviews. Field notes helped in a great matter to corroborate the audio-taped information. Not only had the researcher taken field notes on what was being said by the participant, field notes were also taken based on the observations made while the interviewee was answering the questions (for example: body language, if the question was successfully answered or not, comments made or questions asked among other observations.)

### ***Academic writing sample***

Since many of the interview questions relied on the knowledge and self-perception of AW, graduate students were provided AW samples for them to identify correctly. This assessment would uphold if in fact the knowledge they assume to have or not, regarding AW, is portrayed when identifying these writing samples. At the same time, field notes and observations were taken while these graduate students were completing the assessment.

Chapter three explained how this research was carried out step by step. After triangulating this research through prolonged engagement and persistent observation, peer review or debriefing, and clarifying researcher bias and triangulating the data collection process through interviews, field notes/observations, and academic writing samples, reliability and validity were established. The next step was to discover the emerging themes and categories; these are discussed and analyzed in chapter four.

## Chapter 4: Results & Analysis

*The question isn't who is going to let me; it's who is going to stop me.*

—Ayd Rand

This chapter presents the perceptions of graduate students and professors regarding academic writing at the master's level. While exploring these perceptions, it was not intended to judge or point fingers, but to follow up on this relevant topic with the purpose of satisfying my academic curiosity and voicing graduate students' concerns. Therefore, when concluding this stage of my educational career, my aim is to address this manner through a series of possible workshops and/or courses that may build upon the perceptions explored in this study.

The main purpose and objectives for this research were to explore graduate students' and professors' perceptions of academic writing at the graduate level. This chapter presents the results gathered through the interviews conducted, a completed analysis based on the categories that emerged in the coding process, and a brief discussion of these results and analysis.

After interviewing all three groups, the recordings were transcribed, coded, categorized, and organized into tables to visualize how the answers provided by the participants represented each group. As stated by Rudestam and Newton "Grounded theory offers a unified procedure for developing categories of information and moving from these categories to construct a narrative to connect them and generate a set of theoretical proposition" (2001, p. 158). They referenced an approach that involves two essential sub processes to reach the basis of inductive analysis known as unitizing and categorizing:

*Unitizing* is a coding operation in which information units are isolated from the text. In the second sub process, *categorizing*, information units derived from the unitizing phase are organized into categories on the basis of similarity in meaning (Rudestam & Newton, 2001, p. 158).

When coding the gathered data, reference was made to Strauss and Corbin's (1998) description of the steps in the inductive process focusing on step two: Axial coding which relies on "relating categories to their subcategories according to their properties and dimensions. At this point the data are assessed for how major categories relate to each other and to their subcategories" (Rudestam & Newton, 2001, p. 158). Therefore, after various categories emerged for each group, these were narrowed down into sub-categories to conduct an in-depth analysis and gather specific information in regards of AW.

The following data is displayed in three parts since each group was asked different questions according the population they belonged to when interviewed. Part one analyzes and discusses 1<sup>st</sup> semester graduate students response focusing on AW conceptualization, part two reveals 3<sup>rd</sup> semester or more graduate students' responses regarding AW development, and part three highlights professors' AW expectations.

The interview questions for each group were explained, analyzed, and linked to the research questions to demonstrate how these align with the research objectives.

Table 8 *Research question alignment with interview questions*

<u>Research question</u>	<u>Interview questions</u>
1. What do graduate students understand by AW?	1 <sup>st</sup> semester: Items 2 & 4 3 <sup>rd</sup> semester: Item 2
2. What perceptions do graduate students have about their AW?	1 <sup>st</sup> semester: Item 1 3 <sup>rd</sup> semester: Items 1, 3, 5, & 6
3. What skills and competencies professors expect from a graduate student?	Professors: Item 1 & 2
4. Is the AW performed by graduate students aligned with the skills and competencies expected by professors?	1 <sup>st</sup> semester: Items 2 & 4 3 <sup>rd</sup> semester: Items 2, 4, & 5 Professors: Items 1 & 2
5. What areas of graduate students' AW can be improved?	1 <sup>st</sup> semester: Item 1 3 <sup>rd</sup> semester: Items 1 & 3 Professors: Item 3

It is important to point out that part one and part two which are composed by graduate students' responses, hold four interview questions in common since the only variability of this population is the semester they were enrolled in.

**Part I: 1<sup>st</sup> semester graduate students**

Categorizing the data provided through the interview questions offered the opportunity of seeking 1<sup>st</sup> semester graduate students outcome on what they might expect while being the “newbies” in the graduate program. In this group, only two out of twelve 1<sup>st</sup> semester graduate student volunteered to participate of this study.

Table 9 *1<sup>st</sup> semester graduate students*

<u>Participants</u>	<u>Quantity</u>
Male	1
Female	1
Total	2

After examining the data collected, two categories emerged from interview questions. These categories followed by sub-categories consisted most of the answers provided.

Table 10 *Coding categories*

<u>Participant</u>	<u>AW Definition</u>	<u>Awareness</u>
S1F1	X	X
S1M1	X	X

The interview initiated according to the following:

*After being admitted into the Masters of Arts in English Education (MAEE), answer the following questions according to your experience as a graduate student.*

**Item 1: On a scale from 0 to 5, how would you rate your writing? Explain.**

- 5-Excellent
- 4-Proficient
- 3-Good
- 2-Average
- 1-Fair
- 0-Poor

This likert scale question consisted of two parts: A. Aimed to rate graduate students' writing and B. required a follow up explanation which would justify the rate chosen. When evaluating their writing, both 1<sup>st</sup> semester graduate students rated their AW as **4-Proficient**. After completing the first part of this question, graduate students proceeded to the second part which consisted of explaining why they rated their writing accordingly. While answering this question, graduate students were aware of how their writing was proficient, still insisted that there is space for improvement in order to comply with AW conventions. This answer was limited to a certain extent since students recognized opportunities for improvement, still they did not address what aspects of AW could be improved. Therefore, the category of *awareness* was sub-categorized into the following:

Table 11 *Category: Awareness*

<u>Subcategories</u>	AW conventions Opportunity for improvement
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An attempt to further explain the fact that graduate students were aware that their AW had *opportunities for improvement* would have been achieved if the participants would have offered more details on what aspects could have been improve, still their answers were limited to answers such as “I am very confident of my AW, I still see some areas of improvement” and “By norm I know my writing is not perfect, I make my mistakes and I know I could be better in some aspects”.

**Item #2: What do you understand by academic writing?**

This question served as a diagnostic assessment to discover graduate students’ knowledge regarding writing they would do during their first semester at the graduate program. When answering item #2, these students identify through their responses a set of conventions of their understanding of AW.

Table 12 *Category: AW Definition*

<u>Subcategories</u>	Audience Purpose Settings Skills
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Although this question probed more for a definition as answer (since specific elements are asked in the following question), these students tended to list what AW is composed of, such as where this form of writing takes place, to whom, and other subcategories explained further in item #3. Answers to this question identified what regulations AW entails instead of providing a concept of AW itself.

**Item #3: What are the elements of an efficient academic writing?**

What makes item #2 different from item #3 is that item #2 requested a broad explanation on AW while item #3 asked for specific tasks or practices necessary to carry out an efficient AW. The purpose of obtaining these specific elements was to have graduate students mention what they might consider important when it comes to identifying AW conventions or guidelines which would result as an efficient academic piece.

Although there is a fine line between item #2 and item #3, both items aimed directly towards AW with the goal of tying them and reaching a complete perspective on AW. While proofing their knowledge, students identified the following categories as crucial components of AW.

*Table 13 Coding category and sub-categories: AW Definition*

<u>Subcategories</u>	Audience
	Purpose
	Settings
	Skills

Although the same categories as item #2 came up, in this section graduate students pointed out the importance of knowing their AW target *audience*, the *purpose* of why they are completing a particular AW (fulfilling a degree, applying to graduate school, presenting in conferences, the *setting* in which they are writing, and the necessary *skills* to master in order to successfully carry out AW.

**Item #4: Are you a teaching assistant (TA) at UPRM? If the answer is yes, what course are you teaching?**

When entering the MAEE program, graduate students are given the option of becoming TA's and teaching the following undergraduate courses: Basic English, Reading and Composition or Intermediate English. These courses are for undergraduate students and they

have a wide variety of English proficiency. As TA's, graduate students are expected to implement and promote listening, reading, speaking and writing skills. The workload expected from these undergraduate students is mostly portrayed through the form of writing prompts and essays.

Therefore, this item intended to reveal if the experience of being a TA had a direct impact in the AW of these graduate students. 1st semester graduate students who were interviewed were TA's teaching college level courses for their first time.

Table 14 1<sup>st</sup> semester graduate students: Teaching Assistants

<u>Participant</u>	<u>Course currently teaching</u>
S1M1	INGL 3201: English Reading and composition
S1F1	INGL 3201: English Reading and composition

When answering this interview question, graduate students simply answered “yes”, and the course they were teaching at the time. No comments were made regarding if being a TA has impacted their AW performance.

**Item #5: Identify the following academic writing samples.**

This final item consisted of administrating AW samples for graduate students to identify correctly. As stated previously in chapter three, these AW were chosen carefully and discussed with a professor who teaches graduate courses to ensure they represented the academic writing graduate students might encounter in the master's program. The purpose of this exercise was to assess if these 1<sup>st</sup> semester graduate students were familiar with AW they might be expected to perform. A deeper analysis of these results will be discussed in Part III of this section.

**Part II: 3<sup>rd</sup> semester or more graduate students.**

Categorizing the data provided by 3<sup>rd</sup> semester or more graduate students intended to reveal perceptions among AW centered on their experience in the MAEE program. Therefore the information provided relied on various semesters carrying out AW. In this group, four out of 43

3<sup>rd</sup> semester or more graduate students volunteered to participate of this study. These graduate students were enrolled in their 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> semester of the MAEE program.

Table 15 3<sup>rd</sup> semester or more graduate students

<u>Participants</u>	<u>Quantity</u>
Male	2
Female	2
Total	4

After carefully analyzing the data provided by these 3<sup>rd</sup> semester graduate students, along with the categories of *awareness* and *AW definition* (which arose within 1<sup>st</sup> semester graduate students), two new categories (*Improvement among AW & concerns*) were identified and revealed potential results which exposed a different point of view on AW:

Table 16 Coding Categories

<u>Participant</u>	<u>AW definition</u>	<u>Improvement among AW</u>	<u>Awareness</u>	<u>Concerns</u>
S3M1	X	X	X	
S3M2	X	X	X	X
S3F1	X	X	X	X
S3F2	X	X	X	X

These categories emerged from a set of six interview questions that hold items #1, #2, #4 & #5 as the same from the interview questions of 1<sup>st</sup> semester students. With this group, two questions relied on their experiences in the MAEE program.

The following prompt initiated the interview:

*Answer the following questions according to your experience as a current graduate student in the Masters of Arts in English Education (MAEE).*

**Item #1: On a scale from 0 to 5, how would you rate your writing? Explain.**

- 5-Excellent
- 4-Proficient
- 3-Good
- 2-Average
- 1-Fair
- 0-Poor

This likert scale question, as well as the one for the 1<sup>st</sup> semester graduate students was composed by two parts: A. Aimed to rate graduate students' writing. B. Required an explanation that would justify the rate chosen. When evaluating their writing, two out of the four graduate students rated their writing as **4-proficient** while the other two rated their writing as **3-good**. After completing the first part of this question, graduate students proceeded to the second part which consisted in explaining why they rated their writing accordingly. While answering this question, graduate students between the rates of **4- proficient and 3-good**, did not hesitate on recognizing that in order to comply with AW conventions, improvements should be considered. In contrast of 1<sup>st</sup> semester graduate students, 3<sup>rd</sup> semester graduate students were open on recognizing certain level of awareness of why their writing was not rated **5-Excellent**. Hence, the category of *awareness* was sub-categorized into the following:

<u>Table 17 Category: Awareness</u>	
<u>Subcategories</u>	AW conventions
	Lack of skills
	Opportunity for improvement

While 1<sup>st</sup> semester graduate students' *awareness* category branched out into two sub-categories, third semester students shared two categories (*AW conventions and Opportunity for improvement*) and the new subcategory *Lack of skills* emerged. This last category in combination with *Opportunity for improvement* composed most of the explanation when rating their writing accordingly. These students combined how the lack of skills they might experience led them to recognize that there is room for AW improvement.

**Item #2: What do you understand by academic writing?**

When analyzing the responses of 3<sup>rd</sup> semester graduate students, they presented a variety of components which revealed what they understand by AW. These components represented as sub-categories may reflect their perceptions on AW based on their experiences.

*Table 18 Category: AW Definition*

<u>Subcategories</u>	
	Audience
	Purpose
	Setting
	Skills

These sub-categories addressed 3<sup>rd</sup> semester graduate students' perception of AW with the highest frequency on the purpose and skills required for AW. Although this question particularly required the understanding of AW, throughout the interview graduate students constantly pointed out descriptions of AW and these descriptions were placed under this category.

It is important to mention, items #1 and #2 opened up a new category in which three out of four 3<sup>rd</sup> semester graduate students agreed a this new category was labeled under *concerns*.

*Table 19 Category: Concerns*

<u>Subcategories</u>	
	Under-preparedness
	Insecurity

Under this category, when classifying their academic writing in item #1, graduate students would justify their rating by stating how they felt under-prepared or insecure when it came to skill of writing while combining it with the category of *awareness/lack of skills*. Besides stating they were aware of their lack of skills in AW, they voiced their concerns by providing details on how “I don’t think I always meet what they (professors) expect” or how “any graduate courses has helped them”. When stating, what graduate students understood is academic writing in item #2,

one graduate student after setting all the conventions AW might entail, then justified that because of all these conventions, he struggled when concentrating on AW and how he feels that “I don’t think what I’m doing is too good”.

Unlike 1<sup>st</sup> semester graduate students, 3<sup>rd</sup> semester students had already experienced the AW workload for three or more semesters. Therefore, they might have encountered difficulties or obstacles while doing AW to fulfill expectations required at the graduate level, resulting in *concerns* which needed to be addressed.

**Item #3: How do you consider your writing skills at this point compared to your first semester? Explain.**

This item consists of two parts. First: students were expected to reflect upon their writing development across semesters and compare it with the writing done when they were first year graduate students in the MAEE. Second: Graduate students were asked to explain in depth the answer provided with the purpose of obtaining details of their before and after performance with AW.

When comparing their writing skills to the ones they possessed during their first semester, all 3<sup>rd</sup> semester graduate students recognized their writing skills had improved immensely due to the following aspects:

<i>Table 20 Category: Improvements among AW</i>	
<u>Subcategories</u>	Courses
	Experiences as a TA
	Reflection on self
	Practice

In contrast to 1<sup>st</sup> semester graduate students, this category emerged within 3<sup>rd</sup> semester or higher graduate students.

When explaining how they considered their writing skills at this point compared with their first semester, graduate students relied completely on their experiences and development as a graduate student in the MAEE program. These students have been practicing AW for approximately two years and when asked this question, immediately they compared and contrasted their AW practices allowing the recognition of improvement throughout the semesters.

Comparing and contrasting their performances throughout the semesters in the MAEE program may have led these 3<sup>rd</sup> semester graduate students to acknowledge the courses they have taken in a possible combination with the practice done has resulted in great improvement. Also, being a TA has had an impact on these graduate students since they have polished and enhanced their writing skills in order to teach them correctly. Therefore, this question revealed a probable before and after perspective of their AW.

**Item #4: Can you do academic writing without guidelines? Explain.**

Item #4 consisted of two parts: First, to have graduate students state if they could accomplish AW without guidelines and secondly, to have them explain and expand their answers. The answers to this question were 50/50. Two graduate students stated that they can achieve AW without guidelines because of their experience with this type of writing and two graduate students indicated that they cannot do AW without guidelines. These last two graduate students explained how they needed to know what was expected from them in a certain AW in order for them to carry it out successfully, therefore needing guidelines.

Among all graduate students, three of them did acknowledge that with or without guidelines, AW entails certain instructions that need to be taken into consideration (similar to the

aspects students pointed out when answering item #2). This acknowledgement relates to the category of *Awareness* focusing on the subcategory *AW conventions*.

<u>Table 21 Category: Awareness</u>	
<u>Subcategories</u>	
	AW conventions
	Lack of skills
	Opportunity for improvement

**Item #5: Are you a teaching assistant (TA) at UPRM? If the answer is yes, what course are you teaching?**

Third semester or more graduate students are allowed to be a TA in the English department. This program offers graduate students up to three years of teaching experience at the higher education level involved with undergraduate students. As indicated earlier when presenting this item for 1<sup>st</sup> semester graduate students, while teaching undergraduate courses such as Basic English, Reading and Composition, and/or Intermediate English, TA’s assign a work according to what is required in the course syllabus and it mostly involves a great deal of writing.

This item intended to reveal if graduate students were current TA’s and what courses they taught throughout the semesters taking into consideration their previous experiences teaching college level courses.

Table 22 3<sup>rd</sup> semester or more graduate students:  
Teaching Assistants

<u>Participant</u>	<u>Courses taught</u>
S3F1	INGL 3103: Intermediate English I INGL 3104: Intermediate English II
S3F2	INGL 3103: Intermediate English I
S3M1	INGL 3103: Intermediate English I INGL 3104: Intermediate English II
S3M2	INGL 3103: Intermediate English I INGL 3104: Intermediate English II

When answering this question, three out of four graduate students revealed they had been TA's since they started the MAEE program (approximately one year and a half to two years). One graduate student stated it was her first time teaching a college level course; still, this graduate student was previously an English teacher in the DEPR. Therefore, this graduate student had a teaching background. Third semester or more graduate students pointed out how being a TA has contributed to their development in AW. The category of *Improvement among AW* was identified falling into the subcategory of *Experiences as a TA*

Table 23 Category: *Improvements among AW*

<u>Subcategories</u>	<u>Courses</u>
	Experiences as a TA
	Reflection on self
	Practice

**Item #6: Identify the following academic writing samples.**

This final item was also administered to 1<sup>st</sup> semester graduate students. It consisted in providing AW samples for graduate students to identify correctly. These AW samples were the same for both graduate student populations. The difference depended on the semester in which the graduate student was enrolled. These AW samples represented the workload these 3<sup>rd</sup>

semester or more graduate students might have encountered during their master's degree. A deep analysis will be conducted in the following section while analyzing AW samples both individually and as a whole.

### **Part III: Academic writing samples**

As explained earlier when briefly discussing the results of 1<sup>st</sup> semester and 3<sup>rd</sup> semester or more graduate students, five academic writings samples were administered as part of the diagnostic assessment. Instructions were provided equally to both populations, without specific instructions in regards to identifying a particular formatting style to perceive if at this level graduate students incorporated any formatting style on their own as part of their AW conventions. The academic writing samples were the following:

AW Sample 1: Annotated Bibliography (APA format)

AW Sample 2: Work Cited Page (MLA format)

AW Sample 3: Abstract. For the purpose of analysis, this AW sample will be disqualified since none of the graduate students could identify it, leading towards a potential misunderstanding in regards to the selection of the AW sample.

AW Sample 4: Excerpt of a Literature Review (APA format)

AW Sample 5: In Text Citation (APA format)

After presenting the academic writing samples and disqualifying one of them, the analysis will be based on only four academic writing samples. These results were measured in two categories: if the AW was correct (C) or incorrect (IC) and if any formatting style was identified by stating yes (Y) or no (N).

Table 24 *Academic Writing Analysis*

Participant	AW Sample 1		AW Sample 2		AW Sample 4		AW Sample 5	
	C/IC	Formatting	C/IC	Formatting	C/IC	Formatting	C/IC	Formatting
S1F1	C	N	C	N	C	NA	IC	N
S1M1	IC	N	IC	Y/C	IC	NA	IC	N
S3F1	IC	N	C	Y/C	IC	NA	IC	N
S3F2	C	Y/C	C	Y/C	C	NA	C	Y/C
S3M1	C	N	C	N	C	NA	C	N
S3M2	C	N	IC	N	C	NA	IC	N

First semester graduate students demonstrated less knowledge regarding academic writing. While one student did not identify any of the four AW samples correctly, the other student identified correctly three out of four of them. Regarding formatting, both of the 1<sup>st</sup> semester graduate students identified formatting only once, out of ten AW samples, correctly. One student commented while completing the assessment, “I know what this is; I just can’t remember the name”.

Third semester or more graduate students could not be compared directly to 1<sup>st</sup> semester graduate students due to the difference in sample size. Still, when it came to identifying academic writing samples as a whole, from 19 academic writing administered to four graduate students, five of them were incorrectly identified while the other 11 academic writing samples were correct. When it came to formatting, only four times was this aspect considered when naming academic writing samples. This might be an indication that formatting is not being considered a major aspect when it comes to writing; still formatting was not requested in the instructions, therefore it might be possible they do know or do not know about formatting. When completing this task, some graduate students commented: “este me tiene pensando” [this one got me thinking] and “I should give something like this to my students actually, especially first

semester students”. These comments can be interpreted as this diagnostic assessment as effective to probe what writing students are familiar with and to build upon it.

As mentioned previously, due to the difference in sample size, one cannot measure if one population of graduate students is more familiar when identifying AW than the other. However, what could be noticed by analyzing these that graduate students not are able to identify some of the AW they might encounter at their master’s degree. To another extent, although many students did identify many of the AW, they did not consider formatting most of the times. This assessment did not intend to concretely target flaws when it comes to academic writing, it mostly aimed to provide suggestions for unveiling AW conventions such as recognition, formatting, and mastery.

#### **Part IV: Professors**

When exploring the perception of graduate students regarding AW, it was considered essential to explore professors’ perception as well to align these two populations. By doing so, two areas were targeted: expectations of professors and the exploration of the perception of graduate students focusing on their AW performance. Therefore, these interview questions were centered on the writing skills and competencies a professor may expect from graduate students.

Professors who qualified for this research were those who were currently teaching graduate courses and/or were part of graduate student committees. Both options could offer feedback on graduate students’ AW if they comply with either of the requirements. All professors of the English department were invited to participate in this study. The reason for such population is because although these professors might not be teaching graduate courses at the moment of the study, they might have recently been involved in graduate student committees. For this population, six out of 38 professors agreed to participate in this study’s interview. It is

important to highlight, although all of these professors are involved with graduate students, their specialization areas vary greatly.

*Table 25 Graduate Professors*

<u>Professors</u>	<u>Quantity</u>
Male	2
Female	4
Total	6

As stated previously, these professors were involved with graduate students in different ways, which qualifies them as potential participants to reveal expectations of their AW. The following overview presents their connection to graduate students:

*Table 26 Professors' involvement with graduate students*

<u>Professor</u>	<u>Teaches graduate course</u>	<u>Members of graduate student committees</u>
PF1	X	
PF2		X
PF3	X	X
PF4	X	X
PM1		X
PM2	X	

It is important to highlight that while answering the interview questions, many answers were hard to either analyze or follow up on. Therefore, the following table offers a detailed description of the professors' interview and which questions comply to a "certain degree" with the goal of this research. The answers to the interview questions were classified in the following three categories based on the accuracy of the response. The categories are the following:

1. Completely answered (CA). The response provided fulfilled the information required for the interview question.

2. Partially answered (PA): The response to the question was somewhat complete. The information required is in part provided in a short answer; however no supporting details were offered which made it difficult to comply with answering the interview question.

3. Not answered (NA). The response did not fulfill the information required; it was difficult to code and establish categories since the answers were off topic.

<u>Participant</u>	<u>Question 1</u>	<u>Question 2</u>	<u>Question 3</u>
PF1	CA	NA	CA
PF2	CA	PA	CA
PF3	CA	CA	CA
PF4	CA	CA	CA
PM1	PA/NA	NA	CA
PM2	CA	PA	CA

As a result of the three interview questions addressed to professors, these are the categories that emerged which revealed their perceptions of graduate students' AW are as follows:

Table 27 *Categories and Subcategories: Professors*

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<u>Category</u>	<u>Subcategories</u>
Concerns	Difficulty/Lack of basic skills Frustration and insecurity Not complying with expectations Students need for assistance
Expectations	Knowledge/performance of academic skills Performance according to degree reached Student/professor mentoring
Skills	Academic communication Research Skills Intersecting Skills
Personal Experiences	Reflection on self Teaching Self-validation
Perceptions of academic writing	Acknowledgment Difficulty and lack of AW mastery Awareness of SLA students Variety of writing proficiencies

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Based on their experiences, either belonging to graduate student committees or teaching graduate courses, professors answered the following interview questions:

**Item #1: When you receive a graduate student, what skills and competencies do you expect them to bring?**

The main purpose of this question was to explore the expectations a professor has regarding graduate students who entering a master's program. Instead of focusing on AW, the intention of this question was to see what expectations for graduate students as a whole are held and to grasp what role (if any) AW played within what is expected from graduate students. As

estimated, two categories which significantly emerged when answering this question were *skills* and *expectations*.

Table 28 *Category: Skills*

<u>Sub-category</u>	
Academic Communication	Writing Listening Reading Speaking Language
Research Skills	Introduction/Justification Literature Review Methodology Analysis
Intersecting Skills	Combination of Academic Communication and Research Skills

When explaining what skills and competencies are expected from graduate students, professors offered a wide variety of answers, ranging from the simplest skills to the most complex ones. Still, a noticeable outline of how these skills could have been sub-classified was evident. The first sub-category remained unnamed for a while since these referenced the set of skills of writing, listening, reading, speaking, and language. It was evident these could be clustered under a same sub-category, however a reference that reinforces and backs up this subcategory is presented in the MAEE Graduate Student Handbook. Under the section of *MAEE Mission and Goals* the handbook states as one of its goals the following: “To support our students as they develop proficiency in academic communication at all levels (reading, writing, listening, and speaking)” (MAEE Graduate Handbook, 2014, p. 3). Therefore, the unnamed sub-category was labeled as Academic Communication, as referencing one of the goals in the MAEE Graduate

Student Handbook. The MAEE handbook addresses one of the ultimate goals of the program and is eventually identified as an expectation for graduate students throughout this study.

The first sub-category of *Academic Communication* consists of the skills for reading, writing, listening, speaking, and language (this last one being added due to the importance professors gave to the skill of mastering the English language) which happened to coincide with the revised Puerto Rico Core Standards English Program of the DEPR (Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, Department of Education, 2014, p. x). When talking about skills expected, these were constantly addressed and combined among each other. PF3 states “I expect students to be able to do academic readings and analyze them critically”. This line of thought could be linked to PF2’s statement when mentioning that “sometimes I get the sense that in doing critical analysis, students and professors leave the analysis in the first level”. Therefore, what could be understood is that all these skills need to work together in order to reach an ultimate level of mastering and understanding expected at the graduate level.

The second sub-category discovered was *Research Skills*. This subcategory consists of all those skills needed to carry out the research process efficiently. When analyzing the raw data, a set of particular skills was familiar. It was noticeable that these were making reference to research. Therefore, when linking this subcategory to a process that could exemplify in understandable way what the data revealed, reference was made to a research process composed by: Introduction/Justification, literature review, methodology, and analysis. These could be described as the following when engaging with them in the research process:

1. Introduction/Justification: Outlines the research and justifies the importance of the study. The researcher offers background information on the topic to be researched as well as the objectives and the research questions that will guide the research. While

- doing so, the researcher exposes its point of view on a certain topic and argues the relevance of such study.
2. Literature review: Presents previous research on the topic of interest and offers background information on the topic to be researched. Therefore, being familiar with reliable databases is essential when searching for credible information. Besides a literature review, annotated bibliographies can be associated with this section since it offers an overview on what the study is about and how it contributes to the intended study. As a result of the literature review and the entire research, a reference page is considered important at this stage since the original sources should be acknowledge through the incorporation of in-text citations because of their contribution in the field of study.
  3. Methodology: At this point, the research process is described taking into consideration institutional requirements, research design, research site and participants, data collection process, among other processes depending on the study.
  4. Analysis: the researcher analyzes the data and explores possible categories which would contribute to understanding it. The analysis of the data may result in the fulfillment of the proposed research questions, concluding in an insightful study for future research.

The data revealed that professors not only expected students to master these research skills, but to be able to “research topics” or “argue points” which eventually would lead and contribute towards the completion of a particular research area.

A third sub-category was identified as *Intersecting Skills*. These set of skills referenced skills which link the first and second subcategories: academic communication and research

skills. At the beginning, these seemed like a gray area where they could either belong to academic communication or research skills. After going over them, these skills can be defined as one depending of the other. In order to accomplish a particular research skill, students should master a particular academic communication and so on. An example of this was stated by PF3:

“1. That they understand what they have been reading in the form or section of the lit review that they will produce for the main assignment of that course which is the proposal, that they demonstrate that and 2. That they understand or they can clearly convey how they intend to use that for they own research, so again is the idea of being able to connect what I’m reading and what I was saying to my own work”.

This excerpt exemplifies the importance of not only reading and understanding what is being read, but also how crucial it is to be able to apply it to the research being conducted.

All three sub-categories were addressed constantly by professors in an attempt to explain what skills these graduate students should possess when entering a graduate program. Throughout the other two interview questions, these come up but not as frequently as they did in this first question.

The second category revealed in the first interview question was *expectations*. This category was subcategorized into three categories:

<u>Table 29 Category: Expectations</u>	
<u>Subcategories</u>	Knowledge/performance of academic skills
	Performance according to degree
	Student/professor mentoring

When referring to *Knowledge/performance of academic skills*, professors expect graduate students to not only have prior knowledge of certain skills (what was addressed earlier as academic communication skills and/or research skills) but to be able to carry it out efficiently. As

stated in the previous category, when referring to skills, they constantly intertwine the mastering of academic communication skills and research skills. When answering the questions, many professors stated what they “at least” expect from graduate students, which sets the stage of a minimum requirement of how proficient a graduate student should be.

Following the line of how proficient a graduate student should be, the subcategory of *Performance according to degree* was noticeable. In many occasions, professors suggested graduate students were expected to write according to the degree they were enrolled in. PF1 declared: “I assume, I make the assumption that they (graduate students) have a writing level that will allow them to be able to do the kind of work that is expected of them in a graduate program ...” Therefore, what could be understood is that these students are required to enter the program with a proficient knowledge of AW which will allow them to comply with certain expectations at the graduate level.

The last expectation subcategorized was *Student/professor mentoring*. Professors recalled the importance of student/professor mentoring during the process of completing a master’s degree. This mentoring expectation ranged between visiting during office hours, accepting suggestions, having conversations, asking for guidance, among others. Although this subcategory is also portrayed in interview question #3, when seeing a complete picture of how these subcategories may work as a whole in this first interview question, *Student/professor mentoring* might lead towards a better understanding of what professors expect when it comes to *Knowledge and performance of academic skills* and *performance according to degree*.

**Item #2: When teaching a content course, what skills should your graduate students master to carry out the course efficiently?**

This interview question is similar to item #1. The difference between these two is that the first questions required expectations of skills and competencies as a whole when entering a graduate program, the second question focused on what skills students should master in order to comply with the requisites of a particular graduate course. The answers for this question vary in a great manner since at the moment, not all professors were teaching graduate courses. Their responses relied on one experience they had in the present and past while teaching graduate courses and/or belonging to a graduate student committees. It is important to highlight that for the purpose of this interview question, at the moment as indicated in Table 26, 4 out of 6 professors were teaching graduate courses.

Due to the similarity with interview question #1, the categories of *Skills* and *Expectations* came up as well. Notice that in interview question #1, professors enunciated what they expected overall (when entering the program and in their course), therefore it was hard to target a specific answer in this question pertaining content courses.

**Item #3: What do you think of your students' academic writing? Explain.**

This interview question opened up the opportunity for professors to voice their perception of the academic writing of their students. While doing so, professors exposed personal experiences that in one way or another shaped their perception on AW. Therefore, this item prompted two categories: *Perceptions of AW* and *Personal Experiences*.

Table 30 *Category: Perceptions of AW*

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Subcategories	Acknowledgement Difficulty and lack of AW mastery Awareness of SLA Students Variety of writing proficiencies
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The category of *Perceptions of AW* revealed professors' insight regard how they perceived the academic writing of their graduate students. These perceptions were subcategorized into the following:

*Acknowledgments:* Professors recognized graduate students in the MAEE are capable of producing “wonderful” and “pretty good” written work. Professors also express how they have seen these graduate students grow as writers and professionals.

*Difficulty and lack of AW mastery:* Besides acknowledging their qualities as graduate students, professors also recognized that many graduate students either lack or had difficulties when grasping AW at the masters' level.

*Awareness of SLA students:* While describing their perceptions on AW, many professors made reference to the fact most of these graduate students were SLA students and that at some point this aspect may have had an impact on their performance.

*Variety of writing proficiency:* All six professors interviewed highlighted a variety of proficiency levels when it came to the skill of writing. Ranging from “I have been pleasantly surprised, I think that for the most part people in this program are pretty good writers” to “students that can barely put a sentences together”, professors enunciated their awareness of how all these levels of writing are encountered when working with graduate students.

The second category prompted when answering item #3 was *Personal Experiences*. When explaining what they thought of their graduate students' academic writing, professors narrated personal experiences that in one way or another might shape their perceptions of academic writing in general. This category was subcategorized into the following:

Table 31 *Category: Personal Experiences*

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Subcategories	Reflection on self Teaching Self-validation
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Personal experiences shape the development and perspective of a person. That is, for these educators, it was almost automatic for them to make reference of a personal experience for them to justify or support their statements.

*Reflection on self:* This subcategory consisted mostly of professors recalling when they were graduate students or the growth they had experienced through the years when writing and publishing.

*Teaching:* As anticipated, these professors referenced their teaching experience and how their perception of graduate students and their academic writing is shaped by them. Most of these professors mentioned the course they taught at the moment of the interview while addressing how the teaching of a course demanded particular AW skills which resulted in the narration of an experience while teaching their course.

*Self-validation:* Professors qualified themselves for the scope of this study by addressing to previous experiences in academia. Such experiences include courses taught in the past, academic degree, research conducted, and articles and/or book publications.

Throughout all three interview questions, there was a noticeable category which came up constantly and it was the category of *concerns*.

Table 32 *Category: Concerns*

Subcategories	Difficulty/Lack of basic skills Students' need for assistance Not complying with expectations Frustration and insecurity
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*Difficulty/Lack of basic skills:* In several occasions, professors stated how graduate students had difficulties or lacked of basic skills. These skills (mentioned above in the category of *Skills* from item #1) were considered basic since these were seen as skills they should have been mastered in order to comply with many of the expectations in a graduate program.

*Students' need for assistance:* Many professors mentioned how graduate students need guidance and assistance when it came to academic writing. This aspect ranged from composing a paragraph to formatting features.

*Not complying with expectations:* When it came to academic writing, many professors expected graduate students to have higher knowledge in this field because of the degree being pursued and to at least be familiar with certain AW conventions such as formatting and research. As stated: "I make the assumption that they have a writing level that will allow them to be able to do the kind of work that is expected of them in a graduate program". Therefore, not complying with certain expectations resulted in a great concern which could affect the development of a graduate student when achieving a master's degree.

*Frustration and insecurity:* When not meeting certain expectations, professors revealed how they and graduate students experienced a series of negative feelings when it came to the accomplishment and results of academic writing.

### **Overall analysis**

When looking at all three populations as a whole, one may notice various perceptions that at some point are aligned due to the population each group represents. Each set of interview

questions were developed to reach the perceptions with the purpose of understanding the standing point of these populations in regards to academic writing to later on build up on them for the benefit of all the populations under this study and overall in future research.

As a way to present a visual analysis of the how these categories and themes emerged and how they seem intertwined while representing perceptions of academic writing across graduate students and professors, the following diagrams are illustrated.

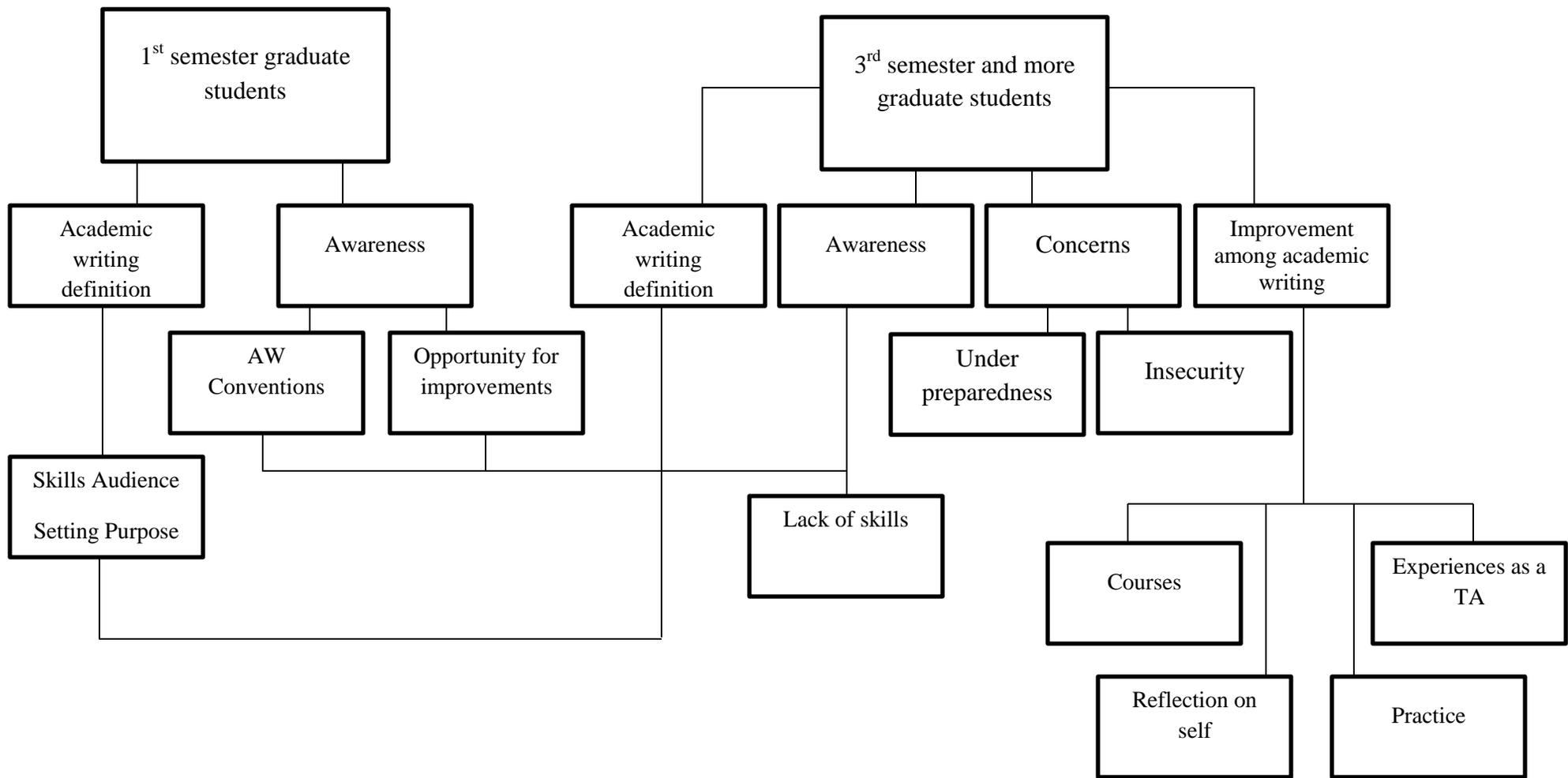


Figure 3. Categories and Themes: Graduate Students

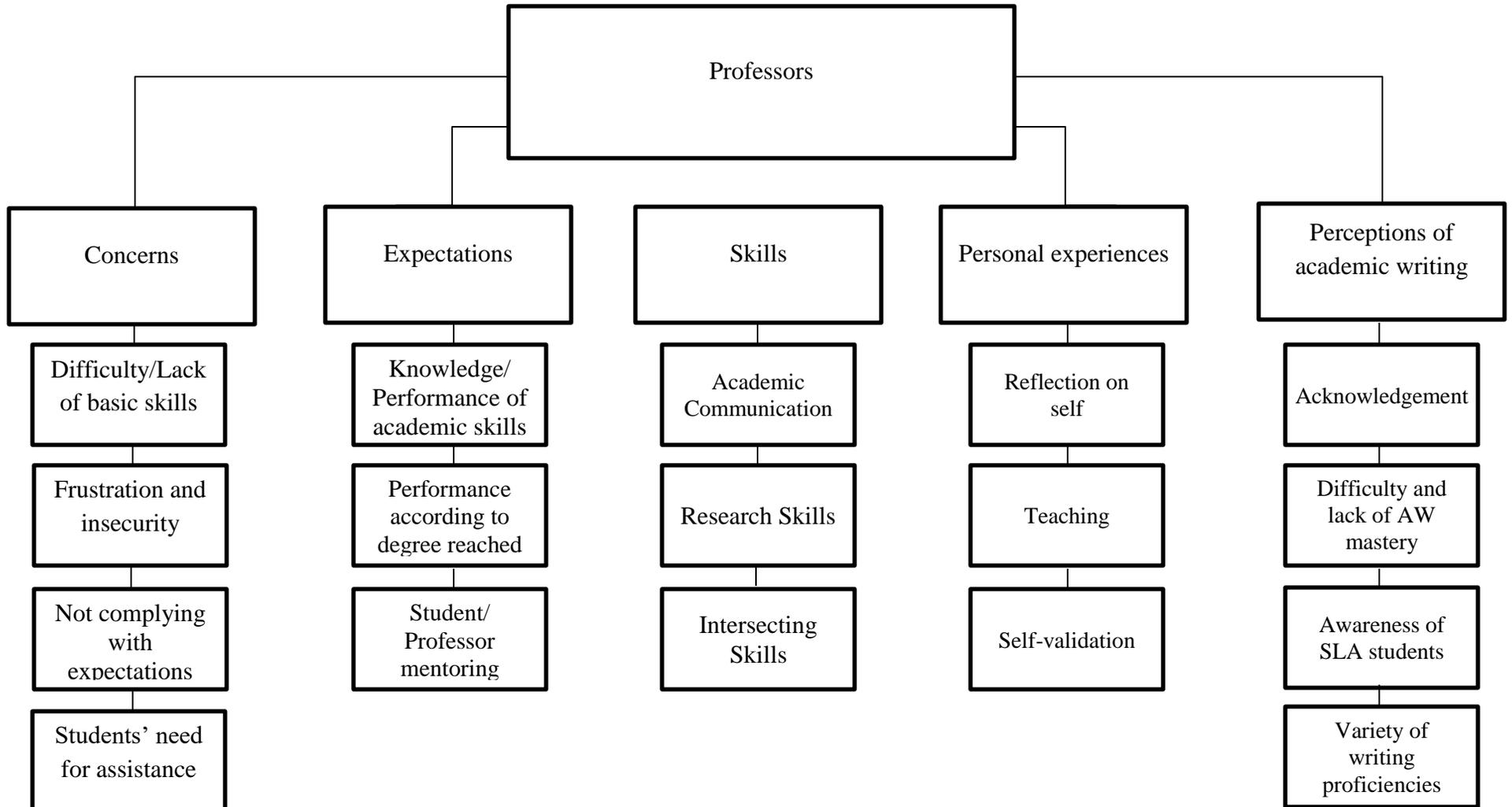


Figure 4. Categories and Themes: Professors

These diagrams are presented individually: graduate students and professors. The purpose was to portray the difference across populations when it comes to categories and themes generated representing academic writing perceptions.

Figure 3 depicts graduate students' (1<sup>st</sup> semester and 3<sup>rd</sup> semester and more) perceptions on AW; both groups have the categories of *AW Definition* and *Awareness* in common. The emerging of one new subcategory from the category of *Awareness*, and three new categories on behalf 3<sup>rd</sup> semester and more graduate students may represent how their development throughout the semesters in the MAEE has contributed to the understanding of AW while shaping the perception of AW.

On the other hand, Figure 4 presents how broad the perception of academic writing can be on behalf of professors. The way the categories of *Concerns*, *Expectations*, *Skills*, *Personal Experiences*, and *Perceptions of AW* are portrayed can offer insights that AW perceptions may be shaped by a set of components according to each professor. Therefore, the spectrum or range these sets of components can result in an abstract understanding making it hard to discover what is expected when it comes to AW at the graduate level.

When analyzing both diagrams, it is noticeable a difference among complexities in categories and themes representing possible perceptions of academic writing. Graduate students focus their attention and understanding on the conceptualization of AW and their exploration as writers, while professors go beyond, voicing expectations, skills, and concerns; all of these revealing how their perception on AW may be shaped. Therefore, the difference in perception of AW when it comes to graduate students and professors may represent a gap between what is being expected versus what is known regarding this skill, creating an unbalanced notion of a skill that is mostly used as an assessment to measure the performance of a graduate student.

Chapter five presents an overview of how each research question was answered according to the responses which emerged through these interview questions. It will also offer general discussion on the results and analysis of chapter four including how these perceptions among populations are aligned. Pedagogical implications and limitations of this study are presented for those scholars who seek to follow up on academic writing.

## Chapter 5: Discussions and Recommendations

*There will come a time when you believe everything is finished. Yet that will be the beginning.*  
—Louis L'Amour

As I reach the final chapter of this research project, I realized that I ended up with more questions than I started. I also discovered how passionate one can become when working from the heart and exploring the perception of graduate students and professors regarding academic writing is just the beginning of this journey.

As stated in chapter one, the main objective of this research was to explore graduate students and professors' perceptions regarding to academic writing at the graduate level. By doing so, the ultimate goal of this investigation is to follow up on these perceptions and grasp a better understanding of what is expected of graduate students', focusing on the skill of writing. Therefore, not only was it important to explore perceptions in general, it was imperative to view the population under study at different stages: 1<sup>st</sup> semester graduate students, 3<sup>rd</sup> semester graduate students, and professors. These stages would represent and perhaps shed light on perceptions reached throughout this study. When structuring the research questions for this study, the three populations under study were taken into consideration with the purpose of reaching a complete overview on academic writing. As illustrated previously in Table 8, page 47, each set of interview questions (targeting each population) were aligned to the research questions in order to obtain the desired perception and overview on AW at the graduate level.

### **Conclusion for research question #1**

**What do graduate students understand by AW?** It is important to highlight that graduate students' understanding of AW was tempered by their experiences: 1<sup>st</sup> semester graduate students as incoming scholars in the MAEE and 3<sup>rd</sup> semester and more graduate students as those who had been exposed to this type of writing throughout three semesters or

more. As stated in chapter four, these students instead of providing a likewise definition of AW, they enunciated a set of conventions that entailed their understanding of AW. Although both groups belonged to the same population of graduate students, their responses can be summarized by the understanding of the following conventions:

***AW audience:*** Graduate students recognize their target audiences are professors, faculty members, scholars, and peers. Therefore, their AW is evaluated by higher authorities in regards to title and degree. By the same token, this audience consisted of other graduate students who may constantly engage in peer review and feedback. A graduate student referred to this audience as a “whole community of people who are professionals in a field”.

***AW purpose:*** Graduate students stated AW is accomplished for a particular purpose. Some of these were to fulfill a master’s degree or Ph.D., to attend conferences, and/or to publish academic papers. Hence, AW serves not only as a medium of evaluation and completion of degree; it can also be seen as a form of exposing and validating ones’ knowledge in regards to a scholarly matter.

***AW setting:*** Graduate students situate the completion of AW in a location pertaining to a university or institute. Therefore, these graduate students carry out AW in a higher education setting since it is there where they encounter a particular purpose within the degree desired which is required by a particular audience. When explaining AW and its components, one graduate student expressed: “... not the language we currently use outside a classroom or the academic community”.

***AW skills:*** Graduate students identified necessary skills to accomplish successful academic writing. They also recognized AW is guided by a set of regulations such as formatting, grammar, word choice, and other components related to research which contribute in a great way to the fulfillment of this type of writing.

Despite the semester in which these graduate students were enrolled in, they identified these four conventions as essential when explaining what they understood by AW. 1<sup>st</sup> semester graduate students attempted not only to state what they understood by AW, but also to mention what elements were essential to carry out a successful academic writing. The results suggested these graduate students have a general idea of what is AW tempered by their undergraduate experiences when completing their bachelor's degree. On the other hand, 3<sup>rd</sup> semester graduate students have a more clear notion of what AW entails since they have been working with this type of writing when completing their bachelor's degree and then in their current master's degree, making them aware of the differences they might encounter in the AW among degrees.

### **Conclusion for research question #2**

**What perception do graduate students have about their AW?** The main purpose of this research was to explore the perception of graduate students' AW at the master's level. When addressing graduate students, it was important to consider the wide variety of students at the master's level and how this aspect might impact perceptions regarding to AW. Therefore, among other factors such as ethnicity, education background, and previous experiences, what was taken into consideration for the scope of this study was the semester in which these students were enrolled in the MAEE program and what was their perception when entering the program during their 1<sup>st</sup> semester in comparison to their development throughout their 3<sup>rd</sup> semester or more.

***First semester graduate students:*** The results presented these incoming graduate students confident about their writing, still they recognized they could do better in some areas resulting in opportunity for improvements. No specific details were given in regarding to what areas in their AW could have been improved; this lack of details could be that graduate students were in an exploratory phase when it came to academic writing at the master's level.

*Third semester and more graduate students:* The results presented more details; many of them recognized their AW as “proficient & good” and also as a skill which required improvement. They specified how the academic field at the graduate level is very strict and that factor increased their awareness of areas that could be improved. Because of the experience they have had in the MAEE program, they were open to comparing and contrasting their AW back when they were 1<sup>st</sup> semester graduate students to this point. All of these students perceived their AW as more polished because of all the practice they have been doing throughout the semesters. Still, certain concerns were clear when stating the requirement of guidelines to carry out AW, how they needed to improve certain areas of AW to meet expectations, the struggle of presenting papers at conferences, and how improving AW is a constant situation.

When comparing both 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> semester graduate students population, one can notice a clear difference regarding perceptions. While 1<sup>st</sup> semester graduate students considered their academic writing “good” with opportunity for improvement, 3<sup>rd</sup> semester graduate students not only rated their writing between “proficient and good” but they were opened to share what areas in AW improved, what could be improved, and specific concerns in regards to their performance. The difference among perceptions may account to the fact that these students belonged to different stages of the MAEE program, resulting in writing experiences that may have defined their way of perceiving their own writing; for example, when they prepared to teach MLA format in their courses.

### **Conclusion for research question #3**

**What skills and competencies professors expect from a graduate student?** When evaluating AW from the point of view of professors, it was essential to tap on what skills and competencies these expected to later compare this point of view to what they have encountered while teaching graduate students. While skills and competencies are expected overall at the

graduate level, the answers to this question varied according to professors and the experiences they have had while teaching a course and/or belonging to a graduate student committees. This research question asked what skills and competencies professors expected in general to explore if AW played a major role in regarding to expectations. When it came to skills and competencies, these professors addressed the importance of graduate students mastering what was referred in chapter four as *Academic Communication, Research Skills, and Intersecting Skills* (p. 65).

***Academic Communication:*** As stated, this category was adopted from the Graduate Program Handbook since it states all the skills graduate students should eventually master at the MAEE program. Professors clearly indicated graduate students should master the skills of reading, writing, listening, speaking, and language in order to be successful in the graduate program. Still, these skills are expected to be complemented with graduate level expectations such as articulating arguments through the writing of thesis statements, to enter into written and oral conversations in which they analyze readings, to listen to opinions and take a position on it while stating them, to engage in the writing process while completing written assignments and so on. As stated by one participant, “I think while listening and reading all of these are super key, if they (graduate students) can’t put that into good writing, they are going to have a very difficult time at succeeding”. Therefore, not only professors expect the mastery of these skills, but also for graduate students to be able to intertwine these skills among them in order to reach a higher level of performance.

***Research Skills:*** Professors expect graduate students to be experienced on what was categorized in chapter four as *research skills*. These skills were identified as essential when it came to doing research for academic purposes in the classroom setting or for the completion of the master’s degree. Data revealed that while teaching a course, many professors required a writing workload that involved prior research, resulting in professors expecting graduate students

to at least be familiar with the research process. An example of a scenario would be graduate students searching for reliable sources such as the library database, in order to write an annotated bibliography, which would contribute to a possible study of interest. These skills were linked to a possible outline one might follow when completing a study for the purpose of this project which were referred to in chapter four as Introduction/Justification, Literature Review, Methodology, and Analysis.

Finally, *Intersecting Skills* was the last category to emerge referring to the combination of Academic Communication and Research Skills. Professors expected graduate students to be proficient when it comes to Academic communication to later combine with Research Skills resulting in the completion of certain tasks required at the graduate level.

#### **Conclusion for research question #4**

**Is the academic writing performed by graduate students aligned with skills and competencies expected by professors?** After analyzing the data obtained from graduate students and professors, various categories emerged providing an idea of whether or not the AW of graduate students were aligned with what professors expected from them. Then again, it is vital to restate these results are representing a specific sample of the population under study at this particular point in time.

The outcome from the professors' interviews showed the skills expected at the graduate level which were classified as academic communication, research skills, and intersecting skills. Along with these skills, other expectations such as student/professor mentoring, performance according to degree (in this case, the MAEE program) and knowledge related to the previously mentioned skills, were constantly addressed. It is important to recognize that professors acknowledged graduate students' overall performance and presented awareness of the SLA community the MAEE program entails, as well as the variety of writing proficiency such

program holds. Still, various concerns involving the academic writing of graduate students were constantly pointed out.

The difficulty and lack of basic skills concerning academic writing in particular, led professors to anticipate the fact that graduate students needed guidance. A professor voiced this concern when claiming that “graduate students in our department are extremely hungry for help and guidance and conversations ...” This statement can be connected to the expectation of professors contemplating a student/professor mentoring which could ease graduate students’ difficulties in the academic field.

Professors revealed in items #1 and #2 which expectations they had regarding skills and competencies which were classified as student/professor mentoring, performance according to degree, and knowledge/performance of academic skills. Still, professors reported, more as a concern, the fact that graduate students were not complying many times with the expectations mentioned beforehand. As a consequence, the concern of *frustration and insecurity* on behalf of professors surfaced. The following quotes not only exemplify the concern of a professor regarding skills, but the concern of the impact these may have on graduate students: “... we get really irritated when we are [*sic*] they are writing about some content and they can’t express it because they don’t have the skills of writing”, and “Because sometimes we are our own enemy sometimes and we are like ‘ay’ I can’t finish this paper; I don’t know how to do it, and they you give up on it or you don’t communicate with the professor ...”.

Consequently, determining if the academic writing of the graduate students is aligned with the expectations of professors can be situated in a gray area since professors clearly acknowledge graduate students performance; still they also stated various concerns pertaining to expectations not being fulfilled to the most. Therefore, it is hard to reach a yes or no answer to

this question since each professor holds their own expectation defined by factors such as their teaching philosophy or the focus of their area of specialization.

### **Conclusion for research question #5**

**What areas of graduate students' academic writing can be improved?** This research question could be answered by both populations, i.e., graduate students and professors. First, both graduate students population (1<sup>st</sup> semester and 3<sup>rd</sup> semester or more) identified opportunity for improvements when it came to academic writing, yet surprisingly the vast majority did not specify what areas of AW could have been improved. Only one graduate student mentioned how grammar needed to be improved, specifically singular, plurals, and word choices.

On the contrary, professors identified more areas which could be improved. The following were:

1. In depth analysis and writing
2. Organized sentence and argument structure.
3. Familiarization with the academic writing to be pursued. An example might be not only knowing what is an annotated bibliography, but to also learn what is its purpose and how to produce it correctly.
4. Being able to express into written form discussed content.

When analyzing answers from both populations it shows that graduate students perhaps are still discovering who they are as writers and what areas they need to polish in order to comply with AW conventions, considering that writing is a process in which one grows with experience. On the other hand, professors stated many expectations when it came to AW; however the areas identified might be the ones they encounter the most while working with graduate students.

### **Agreements between graduate students' and professors' perceptions**

After transcribing, coding, and analyzing interviews for all three populations, several agreements across various themes emerged. It is imperative to point out, these alignments and overlapping themes do not represent the general standing point of graduate students and professors of UPRM. Instead, they represent the group and perceptions of graduate students' AW with the expectations of professors under the scope of this study at this particular point in time

***Expectations according to degree:*** Four out of six professors stated they expected graduate students' performance regarding AW to be at a level with the degree they were pursuing. The following quotes by professors supports the beliefs that graduate students need to be capable of producing work expected at the masters level:

“I assume, I make the assumption that they have a writing level that will allow them to be able to do the kind of work that is expected of them in a graduate program ...”

“... I would expect at least that the work is clean, free of grammatical errors, that there are things like structure, verb agreement, those things that we will basically would request of students in 3101, 3102 or in an intermediate level course ... of course in a more advanced level because we are talking about graduate students so that's the least I would expect”

“... That's one of the main issues that I think is important when you join a graduate program is to be able to provide evidence for your point of view, but to be able to cite properly, to be able to articulate and answer questions based on evidence mostly at the graduate level because that is what I believe a bachelor's degree prepares you ...”

“I think all skills are extremely important but if they want to survive in graduate school, they need to be good writers, that is so important I mean just because you are expected, like the question before, you are expected a certain quality ...”

On the other hand, two out of six graduate students from 3<sup>rd</sup> semester or more recognized they are expected a writing level that aligns to the degree being pursued. The following quotes explain how this expectation can add pressure to their performance in AW.

“I know I can do good writing, but I know the academic field is very “exigente” ...”

“... the experience of having to learn how to do more kinds of research and write a kind of a higher level than what was expected has improved my writing immensely.

***Students’ need regarding to guidelines and guidance:*** A professor stated how graduate students are constantly seeking to understand what is required from them in order for them to comply with the requirements while another professor detailed how graduate students are in need of help and guidance. On the other hand, two graduate students supported these professors’ statements when expressing the need of guidance and guidelines to accomplish the workload expected from them.

“... graduate students in our department are extremely hungry for help and guidance and conversations ...”

“... students are always looking for what is it that you want, what do you want for me in order to do well in this class, and sometimes they struggle when you don’t give them all the guidelines ...”

“A whole paper without guidelines, I don’t think so”

“I’m very structured so I need to know what is expected from me, and know how I would be graded in order to know what I need to compose”

***Writing as a process:*** Graduate students were aware of writing being a skill that could be improved and how they have seen this belief portrayed throughout the semesters. When rating their writing in item #1, none of the six graduate students rated their writing as *excellent* but all followed by giving an explanation on how there are always opportunities for improvements.

“... even though I am very confident of my academic writing, I still see some areas of improvement”

“... much better just because I’ve gotten a lot more practice”, “I have a lot of experience with writing but I always know I can do better”

“Right now after taking a lot of workshops I think is much better (academic writing)”

“I took several writing courses in my undergraduate and also practicing for my thesis and my independent research I think that has also helped me polish my writing”

“I am always trying to find out what I have improved and try to improve what I haven’t improved”

Likewise, professors stressed the importance of understanding the writing process and how this process is an on-going skill to be developed. Professors not only addressed this manner regarding graduate students, they expressed how they have also applied this understanding to their professional development.

“... I do believe that all research and writing is collaborative and that research and writing are fluid, that are always moving and if I publish something one day, two weeks later I can see how it can be different and better”

“To me, writing is more of a process, I think they (graduate students) are capable of produce work”, “... writing is something that we grow, even as we continue to grow as processors, teachers, writers”.

In general, these were the most significant themes in which graduate students and professors overlapped or supported each other in their interviews. It is important to highlight that neither graduate students nor professors, under no circumstances, were exposed to each other’s interview responses. Therefore, these congruencies across themes emerged naturally.

## **Overall conclusions**

When analyzing this study as a whole and tying the research questions to the complete discussion, this may offer insights on what was found; it is important to understand the emerging categories and themes across populations and the reasons why they were used. It is evident the perception of academic writing each population holds is defined by their experiences in the process, either being a graduate student or a professor. First semester graduate students are shaping their understanding of AW and 3<sup>rd</sup> semester and more, are more aware and open to recognizing this skill is composed of a set of components which take time, practice, and effort to develop. Professors on the other hand, are at a higher level representing authority and as masters in their area of specialization. This leads towards higher expectations from graduate students and how these expectations may or may not be aligned is a constant struggle. Not only graduate students are expected to have academic communication skills, they are also expected to be familiar with research skills and to be able to combine both in order to reach the desired results. Hence, the emerging categories and themes not only reveal perceptions of academic writing, but an overall view on how AW is composed by factors which represent a set of conventions that need mastering in order to comply with the expectations of a graduate program. Consequently, graduates students need guidance and coaching when it comes to their academic writing before, during, and after for them to grow progressively as writers and professionals.

## **Pedagogical implications**

Besides exploring academic writing at the graduate level with the purpose of reaching categories and themes that might indicate the position of graduate students and professors, the main goal of this study was to assess the current needs of graduate students. Therefore, the findings of this study intend to serve as a venue which may improve academic writing overall. Pedagogical implications can be applied in two ways: Short term and long term.

**Short term:** Academic writing at the graduate level can be addressed through the incorporation of writing workshops and the creation of an academic writing course. These two options require the learning of graduate students' needs in the field of AW.

- Academic writing workshops: These workshops can be offered according to the expectations of a graduate program while complementing it with the needs of graduate students in the field of writing. For example, a workshop addressing the development of proposals, ranging from a thesis proposal, conference proposal, grant proposal, course proposals, among others, can take place while stating the differences between these and taking into consideration aspects such as audience and purpose. Another workshop can point out the differences between writing format according to their area of specialization. For example, English might use APA (American Psychological Association) or Modern Language Association (MLA) formatting. Hence, a workshop pointing out the differences between APA and MLA regarding style, mechanics, and formatting can take place for the benefit of graduate students. One last suggestion for a workshop might be on curriculum vitae (CV). This workshop can teach the following components of a CV: Difference between a CV from a resume, parts of a CV, formatting of a CV, and organization. A CV serves as a professional profile, therefore this is a writing every student should master. Although workshops may be an ongoing assessment, it is important to have graduate students understand the importance of attending these workshops since many times these workshops are taken for granted due the lack of time and/or organization.
- Academic writing course: When consulting the literature, Didia Delyser encouraged the "... the creation of a culture of writing in the class" in order to "encourage others to develop similar courses" (2003). Following the recommendations of Delyser, the creation of a writing course that would prepare graduate students for the academic writing they

could encounter at the graduate level is strongly recommended. This course can be created based on the premise of what academic writing is used to assess students in a graduate program. Consequently, the structure of the course can be designed aiming towards the learning, understanding, and creation of different academic writings. For example, learning what is an annotated bibliography, understanding the purpose of this type of writing and when it is relevant to use, and how to develop it according to different writing styles. These three components will guide the mastering of academic writing with the main purpose of having students familiarize themselves with the academic writing expected at the graduate level beforehand, resulting beneficial to graduate students and professors as well.

*Long term:* It was inevitable to seek how academic writing can be impacted beforehand. It is then where the Department of Education of Puerto Rico (DEPR) plays a major role in writing. The latest version of the English Program Core Standards of the DEPR (2014) builds upon the standards of Listening, Speaking, Reading, Writing, and Language. These standards are complemented with College and Career Readiness (CCR) while establishing learning goals that will “help ensure that students meet social, academic, college, and work expectations, prepared to succeed in a global economy and society, and are provided with rigorous content and application of higher knowledge thinking” (2014, p. ix).

When focusing on the standard of writing, it is important to point out that most of the expectations presented in the Core Standards and CCR of the DEPR are aligned with the findings that graduate students are expected at the graduate level; some of these are taking positions and defending points of view, the use of the writing process, supporting analysis, and conduct research. Therefore, the DEPR presents how these expectations should be addressed starting in

Kindergarden up to 12<sup>th</sup> grade, resulting in a well prepared student, ready to pursue either a college degree or a career.

The results of the incorporation of the CCR expectations might possibly be seen in approximately ten years due to how recent these Core Standards are (2014). If followed adequately with well trained teachers and all the necessary resources to accomplish the teaching of writing complemented with the CCR expectations, it is of great hope that students entering college or pursuing a career may be better skilled when it comes to writing than our current population.

### **Suggestions for future research**

Upon analyzing the data and writing up the results, several concerns or ideas regarding future research came up. For example, a case study of one graduate student across three semesters can take place in order to track the progression of their academic writing. Various factors such as previous education, graduate courses taken during the semesters under study, workshops attended, and the feedback received from professors and peers can be considered when evaluating the development of this graduate student.

Another study can be one with an ethnographic focus on graduate students' background and how it might determine if certain aspects determine the quality of the AW performed at the graduate level. These aspects might be previous writing skills, ethnicity, English proficiency level, bachelor's specialization or even middle to high school English education.

This qualitative study is designed so as to develop future quantitative studies which may indicate, in a more specific manner, what academic writings are frequently required at the graduate level and how many graduate students possess the skills and competencies required to carry them out successfully. It may offer insights on what areas of AW should be addressed for the benefit of the population under study at the moment.

## **Limitation of the study**

**Sample size:** The main limitation of this study was the sample size due to the fact of this study being qualitative. As stated at the beginning, this study was an exploratory research which intended to create the grounded theory to build upon and expand on AW taking into consideration emerging themes and concerns. Consequently, generalization does not apply to the MAEE program since these results do not represent the UPRM graduate community or that of any other campus. With the grounded theory developed in this study, a quantitative study can be conducted using a larger sample size that may account a broader perception on academic writing. It is strongly recommended that future studies take into consideration a larger sample of graduate students who may depict a more general or different perception of academic writing. This could be accomplished by using the results from this qualitative research for the development of instruments that would allow researching the AW of graduate students at a larger scale from a quantitative paradigm.

**Interview pilots:** Although the researcher's graduate committee collaborated with the researcher while validating the interview questions, the process of piloting these with several graduate students or professors before conducting the official interviews was not carried out. This aspect might have possibly affected the interpretation of the questions, limiting potential or more elaborated answers. Therefore, in future research, interview questions should be piloted with graduate students and professors who comply with the requirements to participate in the study, yet who will not participate in the research project to identify any flaws and gaps these interview questions might have, beforehand.

**Follow up questions and member checking:** One major limitation of this study was not incorporating follow up questions or member checking after the interviews. When creating the original interview questions, the original items were considered specific enough, therefore

additional questions were not envisioned or requested when filling out the IRB form in August 2015. Later, while conducting the interviews the researcher noticed that many graduate students' answers were not elaborated enough and many lacked clarification. Hence, if follow-up questions and member checking were incorporated, the results could have been more specific without guiding the participants in any direction.

**Background information of graduate students and professors:** the requirements for this research were limited to the participants being graduate students in the MAEE program or being a professor who taught in the MAEE program or belonged to graduate student committees. However, aspects such as ethnicity, educational background, and prior teaching experiences, could have offered a precise understanding or insight of why academic writing was perceived the way it was on behalf of the population under study.

### **Final thoughts**

This research project was triggered by a personal concern when it came to academic writing skills and performance. Struggling over the fact of not complying with established expectations and haunted to a point where something had to be done, as time passed, what was considered simply a personal concern was expressed by other graduate students who were not receiving enough quality feedback because their AW did not meet the imposed academic standards. Exploring perceptions of AW seemed the appropriate way to address this issue which not only affects graduates students, but professors and faculty members as well.

Previous research on academic writing and the interviews conducted to accomplish this study showed that a “personal issue” was in fact a public concern in many universities worldwide, not only UPRM. That said, I hope this study will contribute or trigger research which will aide in new ways to approach graduate students' academic writing at several levels. This would allow visualizing academic writing as a skill to be transitioned from rather than imposed

on for the completion of a degree or as a medium of evaluation. For example, if AW is addressed at the secondary level, then first year undergraduate students will come in with a broader and better understanding of academic writing which they can develop through their bachelors' degree. After several semesters they can focus on the areas they need to improve on rather than invest time trying to learn the conventions.

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# Appendices

## Appendix A: CITI Certification

### COLLABORATIVE INSTITUTIONAL TRAINING INITIATIVE (CITI PROGRAM) COURSEWORK REQUIREMENTS REPORT\*

\* NOTE: Scores on this Requirements Report reflect quiz completions at the time all requirements for the course were met. See list below for details. See separate Transcript Report for more recent quiz scores, including those on optional (supplemental) course elements.

- Name: Glory Soto [REDACTED]
- Email: glory.soto@upr.edu
- Institution Affiliation: University of Puerto Rico Mayaguez (UPRM) [REDACTED]
- Institution Unit: English
- Phone: [REDACTED]

- Curriculum Group: Students conducting no more than minimal risk research
- Course Learner Group: Students - Class projects
- Stage: Stage 1 - Basic Course
- Description: This course is appropriate for students doing class projects that qualify as "No More Than Minimal Risk" human subjects research.

- Report ID: [REDACTED]
- Completion Date: 09/09/2014
- Expiration Date: 09/08/2017
- Minimum Passing: 80
- Reported Score\*: 89

REQUIRED AND ELECTIVE MODULES ONLY	DATE COMPLETED	SCORE
Belmont Report and CITI Course Introduction	09/06/14	3/3 (100%)
Students in Research	09/08/14	8/10 (80%)
I Have Agreed to be an IRB Community Member. Now What?	09/09/14	5/5 (100%)
University of Puerto Rico Mayaguez (UPRM)	09/09/14	No Quiz

For this Report to be valid, the learner identified above must have had a valid affiliation with the CITI Program subscribing institution identified above or have been a paid Independent Learner.

CITI Program  
Email: [citisupport@miami.edu](mailto:citisupport@miami.edu)  
Phone: 305-243-7970  
Web: <https://www.citi-program.org>

Collaborative Institutional  
Training Initiative

## Appendix B: IRB Approval



**Institutional Review Board**  
**CPSHI/IRB 00002053**  
University of Puerto Rico – Mayagüez Campus  
Dean of Academic Affairs  
Call Box 9000  
Mayagüez, PR 00681-9000



September 29, 2015

Glory Soto Gonzalez  
English Department  
RUM

Dear Mrs. Soto:

As a member of the Institutional Review Board of the University of Puerto Rico - Mayagüez Campus, I have considered the Review Application for your project titled *Exploring academic writing at the Master's level: Perceptions of graduate students and professors*. (Protocol num. 20150910). After an evaluation of your protocol, I have determined that your research qualifies as a minimal risk and qualifies, under Category 7 of 45.CFR.46.110, for an expedited review process. For this reason, we are happy to approve your project effective today and expiring September 28, 2016. If your project will extend beyond this date, we ask that you submit an application of extension no later than one month before your approval expires. We also remind you that a progress report must be submitted to the IRB office one month before your approval expires.

Remember that any modifications or amendments to the approved protocol or its methodology must be reviewed and approved by the IRB before they are implemented. The IRB must be informed immediately if an adverse event or unexpected problem arises related to the risk to human subjects. The IRB must likewise be notified immediately if any breach of confidentiality occurs.

I attach the consent form with the seal of approval of the Committee. We would appreciate use these documents to the corresponding steps of their research.

We appreciate your commitment to uphold the highest standards of human research protections and remain.

Sincerely,

Dr. Rafael A. Boglio Martínez  
President, Institutional Review Board (IRB)  
University of Puerto Rico,  
Mayagüez Campus  
Office: Celis 108  
Tel.: (787) 832-4040 Ext. 6277  
Web Page: <http://www.uprm.edu/cpshi/>

## Appendix C: IRB Modification

October 30, 2015

Dr. Rafael A. Boglio  
President, Institutional Review Board (IRB)  
University of Puerto Rico  
Mayaguez Campus

Dear Dr. Boglio

Thank you for the feedback provided to the IRB approval of my project: Exploring academic writing at the Master's level: Perceptions of graduate students and professors.

After testing how the data will be collected through Survey Monkey (as you suggested), I realized not being able to identify who was answering the survey would in fact not allow me to contact the potential participants for this study. Therefore, I informed my advisor about the situation and changed how the survey will be sent.

My advisor recommended instead of sending a mass email with the link of the survey, an email will be sent directly through Survey Monkey. This will allow me to track the survey respondents and contact them. In order to achieve this, my adviser will request from the English Department director two lists: One with the emails of graduate students and the other with the emails of graduate professors.

According to the IRB letter approval "Any modifications or amendments to the approved protocol or its methodology must be reviewed and approved by the IRB before they are implemented". Therefore, I hereby request the IRB to review and consider this modification on the methodology for the data collection protocol.

I appreciate your time and consideration to this matter.

Sincerely,

Glory J. Soto  
Graduate Student  
English Department

## Appendix D: IRB Modification Approval



Comité para la Protección de los Seres Humanos en la Investigación  
CPSHI/IRB 00002053  
Universidad de Puerto Rico – Recinto Universitario de Mayagüez  
Decanato de Asuntos Académicos  
Call Box 9000  
Mayagüez, PR 00681-9000



November 5, 2015

Glory Soto Gonzalez  
English Department  
RUM

Dear Mrs. Soto:

As Director of the Institutional Review Board of the University of Puerto Rico - Mayagüez Campus, I have considered your request for modification for the project titled *Exploring academic writing at the Master's level: Perceptions of graduate students and professors* (Protocol num. 20150910). After evaluating the modifications to the recruitment process, I have determined that they do not alter the criteria that led to the original approval. The modifications do not impose any additional risk to participants nor do they alter the guarantees of anonymity and confidentiality. For these reasons, your original approval stands.

We remind you that any modifications or amendments to the approved protocol or its methodology must be reviewed and approved by the IRB before they are implemented, except in cases where the change is necessary to reduce or eliminate a potential risk for participants. The IRB must be informed immediately if an adverse event or unexpected problem arises related to the risk to human subjects. The IRB must likewise be notified immediately if any breach of confidentiality occurs.

Sincerely,

Dr. Rafael A. Boglio Martínez  
President  
CPSHI/IRB  
UPR - RUM

## Appendix E: Consent Form

University of Puerto Rico  
Mayagüez Campus  
College of Arts and Sciences  
Department of English  
REQUEST FOR CONSENT

My name is Glory J. Soto González and I am pursuing my masters in English Education at the University of Puerto Rico, Mayaguez Campus. I am interested in exploring graduate students' and professors' perception of academic writing.

I would like to interview you (3 to 6 questions) either as: 1<sup>st</sup> semester student, 3<sup>rd</sup> semester or more student, or professor. This will take no more than thirty (30) minutes of your time. I am inviting you to become a part of the study. Your participation is completely voluntary, that means you are not forced to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate now and later change your mind, there is no problem. You are free to leave the study at any time without penalty. This research implies “no more than minimal risk”. Therefore if you choose to participate, the possibility of being harmed is unlikely. Long term benefits of this study could be to discover what common concerns graduate students may have regarding academic writing and to provide the foundations to develop workshops and/or courses which may aim directly to graduate students writing needs at the institutional level.

You do not need to identify yourself. Participants will use a pseudonym in the interview, since I am categorizing you according to your academic level and gathering all the information provided in your interview along with all the other participants' interviews. To ensure the quality of the information provided, interviews will be recorded. Please notify if you agree or do not agree on being audio-taped. Only the investigator will have access to these documents and/or audiotapes. At the end of the investigation, once the thesis is handed in, the data will be shredded to ensure the confidentiality and privacy of the participants.

My phone number is [REDACTED]; and my email is glory.soto@upr.edu. You can contact me if you have any questions about this study or if you want to know the results of the study. You will be given a copy of this form for your files. You may also contact “Comité para la Protección de los Seres Humanos en la Investigación” (CPSHI) at (787) 832-4040, ext. 6277 or email them [cpsHIRUM@uprm.edu](mailto:cpsHIRUM@uprm.edu) for more information.

Thank you, Glory J. Soto Gonzalez

Yes, I agree to participate by my own will.       Yes, I agree to be audio-taped.  
 No, I do not agree to be audio-taped.

No, I do not agree to participate by my own will.

Signature of participant: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of researcher: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix F: Research recruitment via email

glory.soto@upr.edu via surveymonkey.com <member@surveymonkey.com> [Unsubscribe](#)  
to me

11/8/15 ☆

### Perceptions of Academic Writing at the Graduate Level

My name is Glory J. Soto and I am pursuing my Masters of Arts in English Education (MAEE) at the University of Puerto Rico, Mayaguez Campus. I am interested in exploring graduate students' perception of academic writing.

If you are an MAEE graduate student in your first or third semester or above, your opinion matters.

I would immensely appreciate if you take time for your busy and hectic schedule to answer some questions regarding academic writing.

For now, this [survey](#) will help me identify the potential participants for this research.

Thanks for your time.

[Begin Survey](#)

glory.soto@upr.edu via surveymonkey.com <member@surveymonkey.com> [Unsubscribe](#)  
to me

11/12/15 ☆

### Perceptions of Academic Writing at the Graduate Level

My name is Glory J. Soto and I am pursuing my Masters of Arts in English Education (MAEE) at the University of Puerto Rico, Mayaguez Campus.

I am interested in exploring graduate students' and professors' perception of academic writing. If you are a professor who teaches in the MAEE program, your opinion is valuable.

I would immensely appreciate if you take time for your busy and hectic schedule to answer some questions regarding academic writing.

For now, this [survey](#) will help me identify the potential participants for this research.

Thanks for your time.

[Begin Survey](#)

## Appendix G: Research recruitment via Survey Monkey

### Perceptions of Academic Writing at the Graduate Level

Greetings.

I would like to interview you (3 to 6 questions) either as a 1st semester graduate student or 3rd semester and above graduate student. This will take no more than thirty (30) minutes of your time. I am inviting you to become a part of the study.

You do not need to identify yourself, you will use a pseudonym in the interview, since I am categorizing you according to your academic level and gathering all the information provided in your interview along with all the other participants' interviews.

If you decide to participate now and later change your mind, there is no problem. You are free to leave the study at any time without penalty.

My email is glory.soto@upr.edu. You can contact me if you have any questions about this study.

#### 1. Would you like to participate of this research?

- Yes  
 No

Done

### Perceptions of Academic Writing at the Graduate Level (Professors)

Greetings.

I would like to interview you (3 to 6 questions) as a professor who teaches in the MAEE program. This will take no more than thirty (30) minutes of your time. I am inviting you to become a part of the study.

You do not need to identify yourself, you will use a pseudonym in the interview, since I am categorizing you according to your academic level and gathering all the information provided in your interview along with all the other participants' interviews.

If you decide to participate now and later change your mind, there is no problem. You are free to leave the study at any time without penalty.

My email is glory.soto@upr.edu. You can contact me if you have any questions about this study.

#### 1. Would you like to participate of this research?

- Yes  
 No

Done





## Appendix J: Academic writing samples

Academic Writing Sample #1: \_\_\_\_\_  
from Purdue Owl

Ehrenreich, B. (2001). *Nickel and dimed: On (not) getting by in America*. New York: Henry Holt and Company.

In this book of nonfiction based on the journalist's experiential research, Ehrenreich attempts to ascertain whether it is currently possible for an individual to live on a minimum-wage in America. Taking jobs as a waitress, a maid in a cleaning service, and a Walmart sales employee, the author summarizes and reflects on her work, her relationships with fellow workers, and her financial struggles in each situation.

An experienced journalist, Ehrenreich is aware of the limitations of her experiment and the ethical implications of her experiential research tactics and reflects on these issues in the text. The author is forthcoming about her methods and supplements her experiences with scholarly research on her places of employment, the economy, and the rising cost of living in America. Ehrenreich's project is timely, descriptive, and well-researched.

Academic Writing Sample #2: \_\_\_\_\_  
from Purdue Owl

"Blueprint Lays Out Clear Path for Climate Action." *Environmental Defense Fund*. Environmental Defense Fund, 8 May 2007. Web. 24 May 2009.

Clinton, Bill. Interview by Andrew C. Revkin. "Clinton on Climate Change." *New York Times*. New York Times, May 2007. Web. 25 May 2009.

Dean, Cornelia. "Executive on a Mission: Saving the Planet." *New York Times*. New York Times, 22 May 2007. Web. 25 May 2009.

Ebert, Roger. "An Inconvenient Truth." Rev. of *An Inconvenient Truth*, dir. Davis Guggenheim. *rogerebert.com*. Sun-Times News Group, 2 June 2006. Web. 24 May 2009.

*GlobalWarming.org*. Cooler Heads Coalition, 2007. Web. 24 May 2009.

Gowdy, John. "Avoiding Self-organized Extinction: Toward a Co-evolutionary Economics of Sustainability." *International Journal of Sustainable Development and World Ecology* 14.1 (2007): 27-36. Print.

*An Inconvenient Truth*. Dir. Davis Guggenheim. Perf. Al Gore, Billy West. Paramount, 2006. DVD.

Leroux, Marcel. *Global Warming: Myth Or Reality?: The Erring Ways of Climatology*. New York: Springer, 2005. Print.

Milken, Michael, Gary Becker, Myron Scholes, and Daniel Kahneman. "On Global Warming and Financial Imbalances." *New Perspectives Quarterly* 23.4 (2006): 63. Print.

Nordhaus, William D. "After Kyoto: Alternative Mechanisms to Control Global Warming." *American Economic Review* 96.2 (2006): 31-34. Print.

---. "Global Warming Economics." *Science* 9 Nov. 2001: 1283-84. *Science Online*. Web. 24 May 2009.

## Family Communication

There are no set rules that families obey concerning family communication because of the complex nature associated with this type of communication. By examining two communication theories, one can help identify family communication within a CODA's environment. Koerner and Fitzpatrick (2002) developed a model of family communication by analyzing relational schemas. Through these analyzations, they created a general theory of family communication that addresses families who have a high degree of "conversation orientation." These types of families created environments where the families communicated openly and freely about any topic. This type of open communication then led to high family satisfaction within these families. This theory discusses how each family creates the environment around them, and the family members themselves defined the satisfaction of the relationships in the family. In addition, this theory aids the idea that each family situation is unique, and it is the responsibility of the family members to define how and what type of communication will be used in the family unit.

In addition to a satisfying environment, the Circumplex Model of Marital and Family Systems identifies three other factors in creating satisfying family relationships. Olson (2000) used conceptual clustering to create this model when researching the relationships. Pertaining to family relationships, cohesions, flexibility, and communication are the key variables to creating a balanced family. One can describe a balanced family as healthy, happy, and satisfied with their relationship to others in the family. Communication is a pertinent variable in this theory because without proper communication, cohesions and flexibility would not exist. Without communication, a family would not be able to reach the

balanced level in the model. Thus, families need to be allowed to express to one another about their ideas and opinions.

Academic Writing Sample #4: \_\_\_\_\_  
from The Writing Center at the University of Wisconsin

"The Commemoration and Memorialization of the American Revolution"

Benjamin Herman and Jean Lee (Mentor), History

This project involves discovering how the American Revolution was remembered during the nineteenth century. The goal is to show that the American Revolution was memorialized by the actions of the United States government during the 1800s. This has been done by examining events such as the Supreme Court cases of John Marshall and the Nullification Crisis. Upon examination of these events, it becomes clear that John Marshall and John Calhoun (creator of the Doctrine of Nullification) attempted to use the American Revolution to bolster their claims by citing speeches from Founding Fathers. Through showing that the American Revolution lives on in memory, this research highlights the importance of the revolution in shaping the actions of the United States government.

Academic Writing Sample #5: \_\_\_\_\_  
from Purdue Owl

According to Jones (1998), "Students often had difficulty using MLA style, especially when it was their first time" (p. 199).

