

Doctoral writing classes work, randomised trial finds

First randomised controlled trials of doctoral writing classes find major improvements in researcher confidence and study habits

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Doctoral writing classes significantly reduce feelings of anxiety among PhD candidates about receiving negative feedback or rejection while also improving research habits, a new study says.

Scholars who undertook a three-hour writing workshop twice a week for five weeks were also much less likely to suffer from writer's block or complain they lacked inspiration, according to what US researchers say is the first ever randomised controlled trial to examine the impact of doctoral writing training.



Source: istock

In the study, published in *Innovative Higher Education*, academics at the Irvine and San Diego campuses of the University of California recruited 35 PhD candidates across the social sciences, humanities and education, all of whom were offered 30 hours of writing classes. Half initially served as a control group while, of the 32 who completed the course, half were also offered follow-up support from academic mentors for an additional five weeks.

The sessions began with a 30-minute “quiet writing” period and included sections on positive psychology, research planning, time management and maintaining well-being. Participants were asked about their feelings throughout the programme and PhD candidates – particularly those who had follow-up mentoring – felt much more positive about their studies and ability to write by the end of the lessons, compared with the control group.

Lead author Barbara Sarnecka, professor of cognitive sciences at the [University of California, Irvine](#), said she hoped that the study would provide much-needed evidence for the importance of this type of training, the value of which was largely based on “anecdotal evidence”.

“This is all fine and interesting, but it’s still just impressions and stories – nothing is actually measured, no data are collected in any kind of rigorous or systematic way, and there are no falsifiable hypotheses,” Professor Sarnecka said.

Those who completed the course also approached writing in a different way, the study explains: when asked what the minimum time needed for useful writing was prior to the course, PhDs replied 42 minutes on average, but that fell to 17 minutes by the end. However, the study found only weak evidence that the classes increased the amount that a student wrote, and no evidence that the quality of their writing improved.

Professor Sarnecka hoped that the study could debunk the misconception that “writing the dissertation happens separately from the other parts of the research. Many people imagine that ‘doing the research’ – designing studies, collecting data – is different from ‘writing it up’. But you write at every stage of the process, to figure out what you think.”

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