Accountability in the Writing Center: Graduate Writing Consultants' Perspectives

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I first encountered the term 'accountability' in my work as an academic coach and a writing consultant in graduate school. As an academic coach, I held one-to-one appointments with undergraduate students to discuss academic practices such as making study plans for final exams. For writing consulting, I sat down with graduate students to go over, for example, course assignments or dissertation chapters. At that time, I thought accountability referred to the ability to persist and power through whatever one needs to do in action. Practices such as starting a project early and breaking down the project into small, actionable tasks were what I would typically recommend.

Although I did not set out to study accountability in my dissertation, it emerged as one of the themes in the findings. My dissertation focused on the reflective experiences of graduate writing consultants (GWCs) as writers and consultants in a research-intensive, private university in the U.S. I wanted to see how their positionality and experiences as both writers and consultants overlapped. Specifically, I wanted to understand GWCs' perspectives on writing and connect these perspectives to their approach to talking about writing with other graduate students during writing center consultations. For this article, I will describe GWCs' accountability-related writing practices and identify writing consultations as a potential site for accountability. My research questions are: what accountability-related writing practices did GWCs engage in? Based on GWCs' perspectives, how can writing consultation provide accountability for graduate students?

In the literature, research related to writing and accountability tends to focus on writing groups or writing accountability groups (e.g., Bourgault et al.). Some were hosted by writing centers (Wilder) while others may be hosted by departments within the institution (Skarupski and Foucher) or a group of likeminded writers (Bell and Hewerdine). These studies argue that frequent, purposeful gathering (i.e., writing groups) helps hold writers accountable in the writing process and allows them to write more (Scott et al.). However, in these studies, what accountability means in writing has not been well defined. Borrowing from the field of public administration, which defines accountability as "being called to account for one's actions" (Mulgan 555), my working definition is the ability to commit to writing with consistent time and effort. This definition makes clear that the writer accepts responsibility and takes ownership of the process. For example, creating a plan for a writing project and following it through is an example of accountability because it demonstrates the writer taking ownership of their process.

In what follows, I first define what I mean by accountability in writing and share the study context and methods, followed by participant information. Then, I report my findings on accountability in two parts, starting with the accountability-related practices GWCs identified and moving into how writing consultations function as a potential site for accountability. I conclude with implications for future research and writing centers.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.37514/WLN-J.2025.49.3.03

STUDY METHODS AND CONTEXT

My study took place at the University of Rochester, a private, R1 institution in the northeast United States. The University of Rochester has a writing center (Site 1) that serves the entire university and a separate graduate writing service that resides in the graduate school of education (Site 2). Both writing centers staff GWCs. Using purposeful sampling (Creswell and Poth), I recruited study participants from both sites after obtaining approval from the Research Subject Review Board in November 2020. For Site 1, I asked the administrative staff to forward my invitation email with the information sheet attached to all the GWCs. For Site 2, I sent the invitation with the information sheet as a group email to my colleagues since, as a fellow consultant, I already had access. For those who were interested, I then scheduled a one-to-one meeting to discuss the goals of the study, the data I intended to collect, and the logistics of data collection. In those meetings, I also responded to questions and concerns before obtaining consent to participate in my study. By mid-January 2021, I had six participants in total (three per site). Overall, my selection criteria were that they had been working at least for a year as a GWC and they would still be working as a GWC during my data collection period in spring 2021.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I collected data completely on Zoom from February 2021 to May 2021. Data sources included observations of one-to-one consultation sessions and two types of interviews (semi-structured interviews and session debriefs). Because my focus was entirely on the GWCs, I did not interview any of the writers. The small portion of data from the writers were only collected as field notes through session observations. In the two rounds of semi-structured interviews, I asked GWCs about their writing experiences, whereas in session debriefs, I asked them about their thoughts on the sessions and the writers' experiences.

After I completed the first round of interviews in early February 2021, I started observing immediately. Incorporating observations helped strengthen my findings through triangulation of data (Creswell and Creswell) because literature on tutors' experiences tends to depend solely on the tutors' perspectives (DeFeo and Caparas; Hughes et al.). I observed as long as my own schedule allowed until I had reached a point of saturation (Charmaz) in the initial data analysis of my observational field notes. In other words, I stopped observing when I began to identify repetitive codes from the data. Then I scheduled a debrief with my participants to talk about the observed sessions. The number of observations with each participant ranged from one to five due to logistics and availability. Between late April 2021 and mid-May 2021, I conducted the second round of interviews, which allowed me to probe more regarding my participants' experiences with writing and consulting.

Data analysis began after I completed transcribing the first round of interviews. I analyzed the data, adopting Johnny Saldaña's first and second cycles of coding. In the first cycle of coding, the majority of my codes were taken verbatim to honor my participants' voice. To transition into the second cycle of coding, I merged or re-coded with repeated and/or similar codes. For the second cycle of coding, I used focused coding by comparing the codes from the first cycle and compressing the number of codes within the same data source. I then specifically focused on how codes from observational field notes converged or diverged with those from the two rounds of interviews. Next, I examined the convergence and divergence with codes from the session debriefs. By merging codes across from data sources, I finalized my categories and generated themes. Additionally, I kept writing analytic memos consistently during data collection and analysis (Charmaz; Saldaña).

In this article, three of my participants—Bill, Eliot, and Elizabeth (pseudonyms)—will be the focus because compared to other participants, accountability was a much more salient theme with

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them, based on my data analysis. In spring 2021, they were at different points in pursuing a PhD in English: Bill was about to graduate in a few months; Eliot was working on his dissertation proposal; and Elizabeth was in preparation for her doctoral candidacy examination. All of them had been working at Site 1 for three years or more.

GWCS' ACCOUNTABILITY-RELATED WRITING PRACTICES

Bill, Eliot, and Elizabeth reported several practices that I characterized as practices related to accountability: 1) breaking down a writing project into short-term goals to guide execution, 2) being persistent about writing by doing it regularly, and 3) making use of writing groups.

Both Bill and Elliot emphasized putting consistent effort into writing. For example, Bill reported that he always broke down writing projects into short-term tasks, which enabled him to manage the workload and meet the deadline. I relate Bill's practice to accountability because it indicated his personal effort and commitment to complete on time. For example, he tackled the seminar papers by dividing them into a few weeks' work:

> Through my coursework, I'd try to have a draft by Thanksgiving. At that point I can take basically seven to nine days and each day I'd have a daily editing task. ... The process of doing that so many times, you know when looking through which sort of editing to put on. (Bill, Interview 1)

Bill said that he approached the seminar papers methodically with daily tasks. Evidently, Bill employed a similar approach for working on his dissertation, which he described as "the long form of going about it daily" (Interview 1).

Like Bill, Eliot stated that holding himself accountable meant being persistent about daily writing: "My relationship with writing is everyday an attempt to hold myself to a higher level of you still need to write even if you don't feel what you're producing is great" (Interview 1). Eliot emphasized setting aside negative feelings toward his draft and engaging in the action part of writing. The mention of "everyday" suggested Eliot's need to work on writing regularly, rather than sporadically (i.e., his prior practice). He explained, "I often revert to the write-a-great-deal-in-a-short-timeframe, which I don't like. I'm trying to train myself out of that and write more diligently and write every day" (Eliot, Interview 1). Moreover, Eliot stated that prolific writers often had good habits, including writing regularly: "I think a lot of the people who publish the most are just the most effective. I don't know whether it's because they don't feel a resistance to writing or because they're just very good at overcoming it. But they write regularly" (Interview 2). What Bill and Eliot shared suggests that writing regularly helped them write more and stay on task, which is consistent with findings from research on writing groups (Bell and Hewerdine; Skarupski and Foucher). For instance, Kimberly Skarupski and Kharma Foucher's 10-week Writing Accountability Group helped faculty participants develop better writing habits such as writing frequently in shorter sessions. Those habits allowed them to write and build writing time into their schedules amid multiple commitments.

Furthermore, both Elizabeth and Eliot reported that participating in writing groups helped them write and share progress and challenges in a social setting with like-minded peers. For instance, Elizabeth stated that participating in the writing group helped her commit to writing: "Up until the pandemic happened, I had a writing group and we met every week. ... It helped to hold me accountable" (Interview 2). Meanwhile, the writing group resembled Elizabeth's view of writing: "Even though we oftentimes are [writing] by ourselves, it's meant to be shared with other people" (Interview 2). To Elizabeth, writing groups—writing together and reading each other's writing—made writing social. Similarly, Scott et al. found that participating in a Facebook writing

accountability group offered writers a sense of community that they were not alone in writing the dissertation.

Eliot also mentioned the value of writing groups for being accountable. He reported that attending writing groups was helpful for writing more:

> That process of committing to a certain amount of time, writing, setting goals and talking with other people about their projects—that has been incredibly useful, incredibly important. ... If I had been doing that, ... I would have written a lot more than I already have. (Eliot, Interview 2)

As described earlier, Eliot tried to switch his practice to writing regularly in order to write more. Participating in the writing group helped him write frequently and more importantly, allowed him to commit to writing surrounded by other committed writers. Both Elizabeth's and Eliot's experiences suggested "a sense of social responsibility" (301) that Deborah E. Tyndall et al.'s writing group allowed its members to develop. Likewise, Tiffany Kinney et al. emphasized that in their self-directed writing group, the motivational support members gave to one another helped writers stay committed to writing.

WRITING CONSULTATIONS FOR ACCOUNTABILITY

My participants shared practices for holding themselves accountable in writing, which had similarities with what the literature has discussed on accountability in writing. Their perspectives also suggest that writing consultations are a potential site for accountability in the writing process. My data show that during the session, participants spent most of the time focusing on a writing project, which usually fell anywhere between an idea in conception or a soon-to-be-submitted draft. From the writers' point of view, the working together part, whether it was working on the writing in real time, or discussing the project and/or the process, echoed the social aspect of a writing group (Scott el al.; Skarupski and Foucher). For instance, in Eliot's session, the consultee shared their screen with Eliot and made edits as they reviewed the dissertation chapter line-by-line. In other words, the consultee utilized the session to make progress on her writing in the company of a GWC.

Indeed, writing consultations offered writers a definite space and/or time to think about and discuss writing, as Elizabeth described: "It's just like having that routine time where we meet and talk" (Session Debrief 2). This resonates with the writing-related interaction in writing groups (e.g., Tyndall et al.). For example, one of Bill's sessions was about drafting a cover letter for a research fund application. As Bill was wrapping up the session, he checked in with the writer to see how she was feeling, asking, "Do you feel like you have a way forward?", to which the writer responded, "Yeah, even the verbal talk helps me" (Field Notes, 04-14-2021). Therefore, the session allowed the writer to discuss the cover letter with a peer and helped her move forward with the writing.

More importantly, when the writer continued meeting with the tutor on a weekly basis, those sessions could help them stay on task, as Bill described:

> Graduate students who may not feel the strongest writers are probably sometimes more successful than others… So they make weekly appointments with the writing center to get things on track or to execute a deadline. ... They're going to have a weekly appointment every week until they get that done. (Interview 2)

Bill noted that attending a series of writing consultations was a feasible way for writers to hold themselves accountable in meeting deadlines. To elaborate, each session served as a checkpoint

for writers to review and reflect on their progress, receive feedback, and set goals that they would like to accomplish before the next session. When writers worked on their own between sessions, working toward specific short-term goals based on the last session helped them stay on top of writing. Therefore, writing consultations, when intentionally scheduled on a regular basis, share similar characteristics with my participants' accountability-related practices, which can help writers stay on task and write more.

IMPLICATIONS

I have found that my participant GWCs employed accountability-related writing practices for their own writing. I have also drawn connections between the GWCs' practices and what writing consultations can offer. Reflecting on my findings, I wonder if the issue with accountability is related to the pressure to produce writing with noticeable progress (i.e., how much is written) and result (i.e., "get that done," in Bill's words). In the literature, while some studies suggested that utilizing writing consultations helps writers to move forward with their writing (e.g., Natalie DeCheck), what writing consultations can do for writers in terms of accountability has not been much explored. Hence, my study offers preliminary findings that support the idea that writing consultations can be a critical site for accountability in writers' process. Since my sample was small, I recommend that writing centers continue examining accountability in order to theorize it in the context of writing. Future research, for example, can include perspectives on accountability from both GWCs and the graduate students with whom they meet. Additionally, writing centers that serve graduate students may highlight accountability when publicizing writing consultations to those writers.

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