

# Revising Personal Statements After Attending the Writer's Workshop

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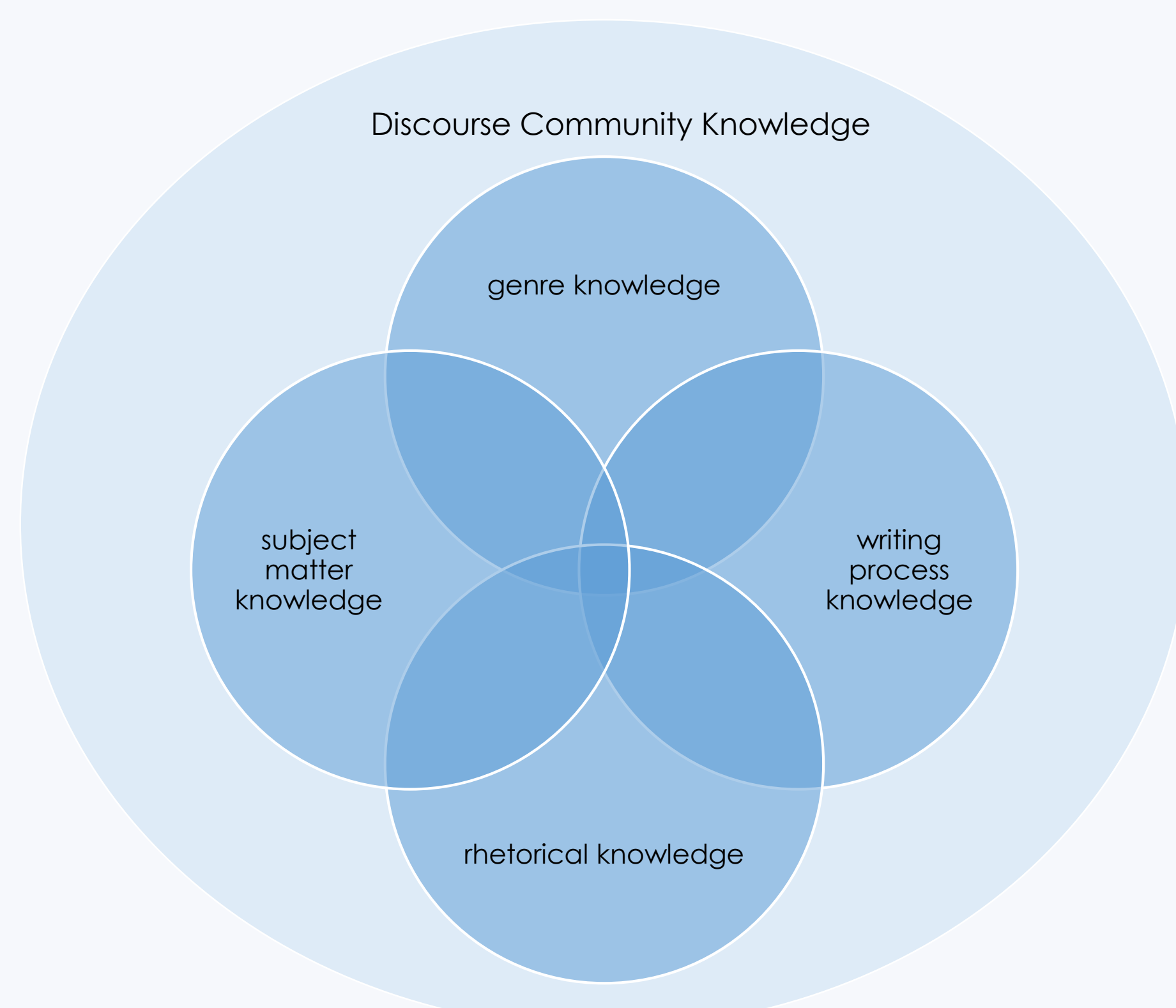
## Introduction

The Writers Workshop is a service offered to all UIUC students, staff, and faculty. Its main goal is to create a better writer through individual tutoring sessions for the multiple genres of writing in the college setting. One of the genres seen most often is the personal statement.

Personal statements are a unique genre of writing. They require writers to share about themselves, but also about the position they are applying for. Skills used to write personal statements are needed for the rest of a student's life. Many students struggle in writing personal statements because they are different from any other writing genre and are rarely taught explicitly. How is it possible then to tutor students in such a way that they can not only learn such skills, but also transfer them to other writings, i.e. research papers, etc.? The purpose of my research is to find how writers use their experience from the Writers Workshop to revise their personal statements. This research will strive to see how students take concepts from the Workshop and apply them to make themselves a better writer.

Very little research has yet been done on the skills needs to effectively write and revise personal statements, but some has been done on how writers learn to transfer skills among different writing situations. According to Bransford et al. (2000), transfer of skills is one of the most important aspects of creating a well-rounded writer. "Transfer allows the student to apply what was learned in new situations and to learn related information more quickly." The ability to transfer knowledge begins with a concrete and conceptual understanding of one type of structure. Once the student grasps how to write a certain structure (i.e. personal statement) they are able to transfer that knowledge to other writings. Having a grasp on how to revise their personal statements on their own will allow them to use these same skills for future narratives and for other writing topic revisions.

Transfer requires the writer to draw on the metacognitive skills of discourse community knowledge, genre knowledge, writing process knowledge, subject matter knowledge, and rhetorical knowledge (Beaufort, 2007). To become the best writer possible one must use all five knowledge domains in each writing situation, such as the personal statement.



Conceptual Model: Expert Writers Draw on Five Knowledge Domains (Beaufort, 2007)

## Aims

To help students develop conceptual understanding about how to write personal statements

To find applicable strategies that students can apply to different writing scenarios

To help tutors better understand writers' revision processes after a session

## Methods

This was an IRB-approved qualitative study that drew on 2 20-minute, semi-structured interviews.

### Participants

- undergraduate students who brought in a personal statement
  - 1 male and 1 female
  - both attended the Workshop previously
  - Architecture and Pre-Medical students
  - applying to Research Assistant position and Teacher Assistant position
- no restriction on ethnicity, country of origin, first language

### Procedures

- Questions asked
  - Have you written a personal statement before?
  - What were you writing a narrative for?
  - Did you use prior experiences to help write your statement?
  - Is the writing process for the narrative similar to academic papers?
  - How did you apply tutor suggestions to your revisions?
  - Describe your revision process.
  - Do you think you are going to write more personal statements for your career?
  - Will you use the information you have learned in the future?
  - Did the tutor give you next steps at the end of the session? If so what were they?

### Data Analysis

To analyze the data I listened to each recording multiple times, made note of common themes, and read through responses multiple times.

## Results

In interviewing two students I found that the knowledge learned from the session depends on the needs of the student. Each participant took away similar, but also different techniques to help with future writings including: how to transfer skills learned to academic writings, how to expand ideas, and how to organize their statement for the greatest impact on a reader.

### Susan (pseudonym)

#### Skills learned for the narrative

- Re-phrasing of important ideas
- Deleting un-necessary ideas
- Elaborating ideas

#### General skills learned

- Reading aloud
- Deleting un-necessary ideas
- Elaborating ideas

*"Where I had a sentence or two I took it and added a paragraph or so."*

### Jim (pseudonym)

#### Skills learned for the narrative

- Writing effective summary introductions and conclusions
- Asking specific questions for revisions
- Correct logic

#### General skills learned

- Brainstorming
- Researching ideas that are relevant

*"When I was writing the statement I was focusing on how I could become a good TA--what my strengths were. When talking with the tutor she said think about what TA the school would want. She changed my perspective of what to include in the narrative."*

### Similarities between both...

#### Skills learned for the narrative

- Adding more detail
- Organization of ideas
- Audience awareness

#### General skills learned

- Being clear and concise
- Revision strategies
- Time for revisions

## Discussion

The data from this study both corroborates and extends previous research on the transfer of learning between different writing situations. The skills these participants learned from the tutoring session applied not only to their revisions of their personal statements, but to other genres of writings as well.

However, I also found that students struggled in writing this particular genre. Although they were able to draw on some skills from previous writings, the statement is unique in the fact that it is about the writer. The narrative aspect creates confusion in how the paper should be structured and what the content should be. The tutors helped these two students greatly in understanding what the personal statement genre is and how to respond to it by working with the student individually and addressing concerns they had about their statement (specifically those listed in the results).

Another implication the study found is that tutors should remind writers that revisions take time. In both interviews I found that the writer did not allow themselves much time to revise their paper before it was due.

## Conclusions

There still needs to be more research done on the idea of transferring of knowledge between academic papers and personal statements. Students are able to use the knowledge learned from revising of their personal statements to write and revise other writings. The next steps for continuing this research would be to interview more people who bring in personal statements or to possibly conduct a survey study to gain insight into broader patterns on this topic.

## Acknowledgements

Writer's Workshop at the University of Illinois

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Bransford, J., Brown, A., & Cocking, R. (2000). Learning: From speculation to science. *How people learn: Brain, mind, experience and school: Expanded edition*. Washington D.C.: National Academies Press.

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