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Leading a Horse to Water: Writing Workshops for Engineering Graduate Students

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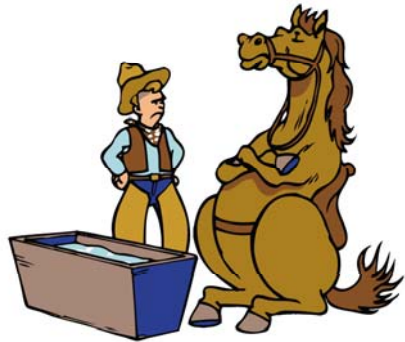
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Leading a Horse to Water: Writing Workshops for Engineering Graduate Students

A workshop series sponsored by the Howard R. Hughes College of Engineering of the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV) seeks to dispel the myth that engineers cannot be good writers.



FOT986167 - You Can Take A Horse To Water ... © 2016 MILES KELLY / fotoLibra

OBJECTIVE

Quite content to describe the world in terms of mathematical formulas, the stereotypical engineer will go to great lengths to avoid writing.

However, engineers must communicate, not only with engineers outside of their specialty but also with non-engineers. These communications might require the use of text and figures to supplement data tables and formulas. These communications might even require a literature review to demonstrate knowledge of the field.

To address these challenges, the Howard R. Hughes College of Engineering at UNLV began in 2011 to provide a series of optional workshops on technical writing for engineering graduate students.

Currently, this workshop series addresses a variety of topics. Even so, the series has a consistent theme: making the students aware that they are joining in a conversation memorialized in the scholarly and technical literature. They are entering the dialogue of their scientific community.

METHODS

The workshops are designed by the Technical Writer for the graduate students of UNLV's College of Engineering. UNLV's STEM Librarian is deeply embedded in the design, delivery, and assessment of several of these workshops.

Over time, other UNLV experts have been added to the design and instruction team. In each workshop, the instructors share their varied experiences in scholarly publishing and consulting with the students to illustrate concepts and best practices.

Based upon formal and informal feedback from students and faculty, the content and learning activities are updated each semester, and the workshop topics expanded.



Susan Wainscott, MLIS, and Julie A. Longo, MSE

OUTCOMES

Each year the number of workshops offered has increased, as has overall attendance. New topics have been added each year. One topic, Grants, has been moved to a workshop series provided by the Office of Sponsored Projects, and is no longer part of the College's workshop series. Past and present workshop topics are described briefly below, roughly in the sequence they would be offered across an academic year.

Introduction: An overview of resources and services available to graduate students including the workshops, libraries, tutoring and writing center.

Lit. Review: How to search, evaluate, store, and incorporate information sources into the literature review section of a manuscript.

Use of Sources: Comparison of reference management tools, discussion of citation ethics, and practice in paraphrasing.

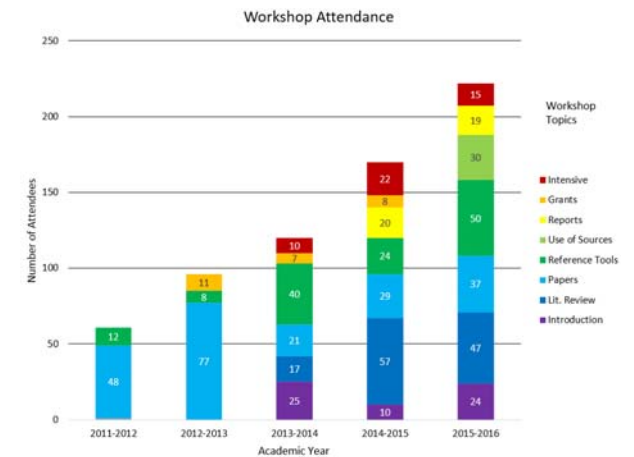
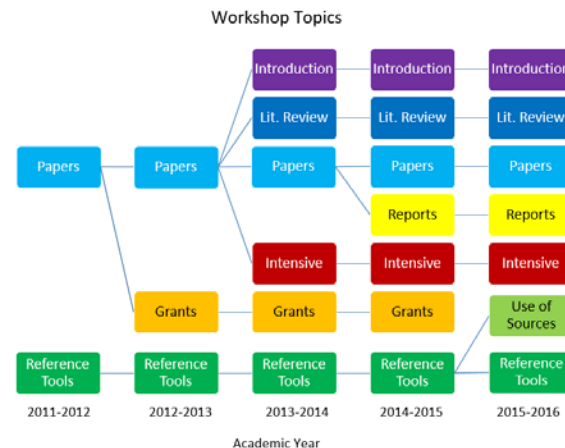
Reference Tools: Instruction on use of a particular reference management software tool.

Papers: Organization, writing, and editing of manuscripts. Focus has evolved from general writing tips to address journal articles and conference papers.

Grants: Locating, selecting, and preparing applications for funding. Included project management tips to ensure timely submission.

Reports: Audience identification, organization, writing, and editing of technical reports for grant agencies. Includes tips for creating a style guide.

Intensive: Invitation-only opportunity to receive one-on-one consultations from a variety of campus experts on a student's writing project.



Currently, students from all four engineering departments in the College – Mechanical, Electrical and Computer Engineering, Computer Science, and Civil / Environmental / Construction – as well as other academic units on campus regularly participate in these workshops. Some workshops (Lit. Review, Reports, and Papers) now have registration wait lists. The Lit. Review workshop is now offered twice per year. Some students repeat workshops when the material is more timely for their projects or when they wish to achieve greater levels of expertise.

FUTURE PLANS

An additional partnership with UNLV's Writing Center is being pursued, and additional workshop topics and enhancements are being considered. Additional formal assessment is being considered for future publications.

Based upon this experience, In 2015-2016 the authors worked with the Associate Dean for Research, Graduate Studies & Computing in the College of Engineering to design a standalone Ethics Workshop for graduate students that focuses on research and publishing ethics. Preliminary assessment results from the Ethics Workshop will be presented at the 2016 American Society for Engineering Education on June 28, 11:30 – 1:00 PM, in Exhibit Hall F.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to acknowledge Dr. Mohamed Trabia, Associate Dean of Research, Graduate Studies & Computing, for his vision in establishing this type of program for the engineering graduate students at UNLV. We also wish to thank the many people across UNLV who have helped develop this technical writing workshop series. We especially thank Katherine Keller for her graphics expertise and advice.