



HGSE Writing Center and Communications Lab

Peer-to-Peer Learning Community Initiatives

Annual Report 2021

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION ON THIS REPORT:

Simone Fried, Lead TF, HGSE Writing Center

Dylan Lukes, TF, HGSE Communications Lab

MG Prezioso, TF, HGSE Communications Lab

Ning Zou, Associate Director for Student Academic Services and Learning Design | Research Librarian
617.495.1465

<https://communicate.gse.harvard.edu/>

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HGSE Writing Center

Highlights

Along with the rest of the university, the Writing Center operated virtually in AY20-21 due to COVID-19, and saw significantly more traffic. Likely due to the challenges facing students in navigating HGSE from a distance, our TFs conducted **40% more consultations than the prior year**, 758 in total. For the first time, we conducted targeted outreach to the Ed.L.D. program during orientation and saw a corresponding increase, holding 85 appointments with Ed.L.D. students this year compared to 12 last year.

In addition to our core model of one-on-one writing coaching, we offered the following:

- Published two online modules for all students, sent out during orientation: *Using Evidence in Academic Writing*, which addresses paraphrasing and writing with academic evidence; and *Using APA Style: Citing and Referencing*.
- Created and launched *Introduction to Academic Writing*, an asynchronous Canvas course broadly addressing all aspects of the writing process including critical reading, interpreting prompts, writing for different genres, structure, and organization, using evidence, analysis, and citation. TFs staffed six Q&A sessions to support students working through the course.
- Designed and delivered *Revising and Editing Your Academic Writing*, a webinar that particularly focuses on wording, style, grammar, and mechanics, both as a live webinar with student questions and as a recorded presentation.
- Created a resource library of downloadable handouts based on the above workshops for student and professor use.
- Worked with the Student Services office to provide drop-in informal writing support at twelve meetings of the Gutman accountability groups.

Our Mission

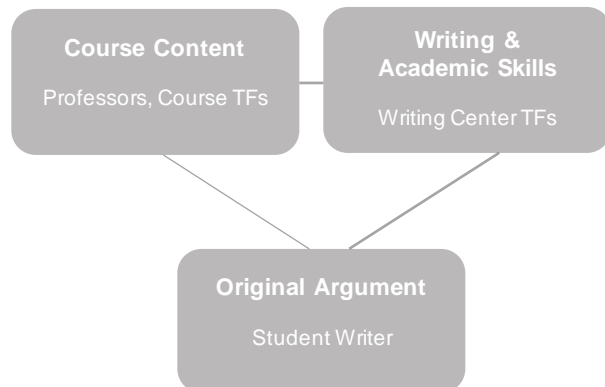
- Provide personalized writing support to all HGSE students with quality one-on-one appointments at any stage of the writing process.
- Strengthen writing instruction and education at HGSE through other forms such as workshops, online tutorials, discussions, and panels, or support groups.

- Collaborate with other offices on campus (Communications Lab, Research Librarians, OSA, Teaching and Learning Lab, Academic Affairs, etc.) to help students navigate the HGSE support network, and to design programs that meet evolving student needs.

What We Believe

- Our approach is generalist and interdisciplinary; all of our TFs are capable of adding value to all students' papers regardless of their own specialization within education research.
- We may offer critique, ask for evidence, or question an interpretation, but we are not ultimately responsible for content. The course teaching team is expert on the material; the student is the authority on their own argument, ideas, and analysis; and the writing TF focuses on the craft of academic writing. We take care not to become collaborators or allow our own content knowledge to supplant the student's.
- Writing is vulnerable, and as peer tutors, we provide a safe, non-evaluative space for HGSE students. We support students who may feel more comfortable with us than with a professor or course TF.
- We advance students' academic writing skills through course assignments. While this includes language mechanics and style, we are not an editing service, nor do we have a curriculum. Our service is not designed to offer a comprehensive foundation in academic writing, but rather to improve writing through collaborative editing.

Area of Expertise during a Writing Center Appointment



Our Team

- Our staff are senior HGSE doctoral students in their dissertation phase. Nine work primarily as tutors, while one coordinates and oversees the program in conjunction with the Association Director for Student Academic Services and Learning Design in Gutman Library.
- All took HGSE courses as students and later worked in other course TF positions, making them intimately familiar with both faculty expectations and the student experience.
- Writing TFs have also served on academic editorial boards, coached thesis writers, tutored writing at both HGSE and other institutions, and taught secondary English. Several have published in academic journals or for professional organizations.
- Our TFs include international students, U.S. students from multilingual homes, scholars of language and literacy, and other backgrounds that contribute diverse perspectives on writing instruction.
- At the beginning of the year, TFs participate in a half-day training on inclusive pedagogy, common scenarios, and strategies for supporting HGSE students. Collectively, our staff

represent many years of experience, which they use to tailor each conference to the student's goals and concerns.

Student Feedback¹

- The TF really pushed my thinking and helped me re-structure my essay in such a way that helped me better communicate my message. I came into the session confused and wary about the assignment, and I left the session excited and confident!
- I really appreciated the insightful feedback... The TF's comments were clearly explained and the organization points he included were extremely helpful. I will be able to use this feedback in subsequent papers. I can't think of anything that would improve it except having more time. Thank you for offering this service! I don't know what I would do without it!
- The TF spent about 10 minutes reading it then gave me feedback to take my draft from evidence-heavy to have more of a balance of statements/ideas + evidence. The zoomed-out insights she provided were really necessary as I reworked for my remaining drafts, because I found myself too deep into my writing to have that kind of clarity/overall view. All around it was fantastic.
- My TF was AMAZING! She was a caring, helpful and knowledgeable guide as I processed my thoughts verbally and in writing. Her keen eye for structure, coherence and flow helped me to think about how I was presenting my ideas and how I could be more precise and succinct. I can go on and on about her compassion, non-judgmental and gentle way of supporting me.

On the Horizon – Our Future & Your Support

Next year, our plans for the center include:

- Work with the summer How People Learn course to support for this year's masters students
- Return to the on-campus/hybrid model along with the rest of HGSE for fall semester.
- Implement and support students in navigating Achieve English, an online adaptive tool that students can use to self-diagnose and improve their English writing skills
- Expand our drop-in writing support
- Revise the *Using Evidence in Academic Writing* tutorial to include more self-checks and respond to needs identified by the Student Success team
- Improve the accessibility of our post-consultation feedback survey for students
- Continue to offer 1:1 writing tutoring, workshops, and other opportunities for students to refine their writing skills.

¹ Comments pulled from student feedback, a total of 150 1:1 appointment feedback received for AY 20-21.

HGSE Communications Lab

Our Mission

The HGSE Communications Lab, founded in Fall 2019, is an educational program within the Harvard Graduate School of Education. We exist to cultivate and sharpen HGSE master's and doctoral students' oral, written, and visual communication skills, emphasizing academic and professional presentations, posters, and career readiness. Our core offerings include a series of workshops and webinars, in addition to one-on-one and small group appointments. Throughout the academic year, we strive to equip HGSE students with communication skills essential for both academic and career success in the 21st century.

Our program is collaborative, leveraging and connecting students to the rich set of cross-discipline educational resources at HGSE. We partner with other organizations on campus (e.g., Writing Center, Research Librarians, Office of Students Affairs, Teacher and Learning Lab, and Academic Affairs) to help students navigate the HGSE support network and to design new communications-based programming to meet evolving student needs inside and outside the classroom.

What We Believe

- We are generalists who embrace an interdisciplinary approach. All our CommLab TFs, independent of their expertise as education researchers, can add value to the CommLab through content creation and direct support of every HGSE student's communication needs.
- We provide constructive criticism, positive feedback, suggest frameworks, and define action steps, but we are not responsible for created content. The course teaching team is expert on the material; the student is expert on their argument, ideas, and analysis; the CommLab TF is an expert on oral, written, or visual communication skills. We take care not to become collaborators or allow our content expertise to supplant that of the students.
- We are peer tutors who provide a welcoming, safe and non-evaluative space for HGSE students to practice and improve their oral, written, and visual communication skills.
- We are responsible for meeting students where they are, listening to their needs, and aligning our support to their communication tasks and deadlines.
- We focus on the craft and technique of oral, written, and visual communication. While our assistance is varied and dynamic across multiple mediums, we are not an end-to-end service offering. We do not create from start to finish a student's or group's final deliverable, including oral scripts, presentation slides, posters, and pitches.
- We direct students to other HGSE academic supports and resources as needed.

Quick Facts (2020-2021)

- 2 CommLab TFs
- 81 Consultations, 2.5 times more than the prior year
- 16 Workshops & Webinars
- Provided doctoral students with consultations on doctoral defenses
- Coached Ed.L.D. students on their Capstone presentations
- Offered coaching sessions for the HGSE commencement student speaker
- Implemented online exit surveys to collect student feedback on consultations

Our Team

- Our team is composed of advanced HGSE doctoral students in their dissertation phase. The team's two TFs are responsible for creating all HGSE CommLab programming materials, hosting CommLab workshops/webinars, and holding private one-on-one or small group appointments. We are led by Ning Zou, the Associate Director for Student Academic Services & Learning Design, who manages our week-to-week operations and strategic planning.
- All CommLab TFs have participated both as students and TFs for numerous HGSE courses resulting in familiarity with the HGSE student experience and a firm understanding of course expectations. CommLab TF's experiences as students and TFs help the CommLab identify and strategically target courses with oral, written, or visual communication deliverables.
- Our CommLab TFs have coached Ph.D. and Ed.L.D. Candidates on their defenses and have advised academic and non-academic clients on oral, written, or visual communication skills. CommLab TFs have featured their academic work at leading education policy journals and university colloquiums, including *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, *EdWorkingPapers* at Annenberg Institute at Brown University, HGSE EPPE Doctoral Colloquium, HGSE HDLT Doctoral Colloquium, HGSE Measurement Lab, and HGSE Literacy Lab. Our TFs have also featured their work in *Research Minutes*, an award-winning education research and policy podcast from The Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE) at The University of Pennsylvania, and *The Boston Globe*.
- Some of our TFs received professional training on oral, written, and visual communication skills during their time as a management consultant. Another TF spent time training staff for presentations at an investment management firm.
- Our team collectively houses professionals with many years of experience preparing and providing professional-grade oral, written, and visual communication deliverables. Our team's set of rich experiences and communication-based expertise makes our lab home for student-centered, career-facing, quality programming that meets the diverse communication needs of the HGSE community.

What Students Experience

Our dual offerings of webinars and private one-on-one or small group appointments give students a diverse set of programming they can choose from to best meet their needs. Our webinars provide broad exposure to introductory communication skills and frameworks in an approachable, welcoming environment where HGSE students can meet and interact with their peers. These sessions serve to shore up the foundation of HGSE students' oral, written, and visual communication skills and act as a launching pad for students to explore more advanced topics in one-on-one or small group appointments. Relative to our webinar offerings, our private appointments provide greater flexibility to adapt and differentiate our support to meet the individualized needs of HGSE's diverse student community.

In 2020-2021, all CommLab TFs were advanced HGSE doctoral students. Collectively, they represent many years of professional teaching and communication experience, which they use to both curate workshop programming and tailor appointments to each student's goals and

concerns. The following profiles and quotes draw on real student experiences to represent some common ways students use our services.

Ed.D. Candidate @ HGSE

Student 1

"Thank you tremendously for helping with my PPT! Your constructive feedback not only made a great difference on the visual design but also helped me present with more clear and coherent logics. Greatly appreciated!"

1

Overview

- Seeking to gain feedback and practice their dissertation defense
- Repeat attendee with multiple one-on-one appointments through the 2020-21 academic year
- Learned about offerings through an email on Ph.D. student list-serv

2

Goals

- Receive feedback on the delivery and content of their presentation
- Receive feedback on their slide design, both overall theming and individual slide figures
- Brainstorming session for slide creation and design

3

Results

- Through the one-on-one consultation, the student was able to see areas that could be cut from their presentation and pinpoint areas where more time was required
- Improved .pptx figure designs and slide layout and new custom-made slides
- Feedback helped the student create a more professional .pptx deck that they were proud of

Ed.L.D. Candidates @ HGSE

Student 1

“I met with [TF name] last October in preparation for a five-minute talk focused on my core values. [TF name] helped me practice my presentation several times during our call and provided feedback that helped strengthen my message. I will definitely reach out to the CommLab for support with future speaking assignments.”

1

Overview

- Seeking to gain feedback and practice their “core-values” in-class presentation
- First-time attendee with limited to no knowledge of HGSE CommLab services
- Learned about offerings through word-of-mouth from Ed.D. colleagues

2

Goals

- Receive feedback on their presentation slides, but more importantly, on their delivery
- Practice presentation multiple times and ensure it came in under the allotted time

3

Results

- Student's confidence grew throughout the one-on-one appointment and by the end of the session, improved to a level that properly reflected their well-polished final product
- This was a timed-presentation with rigidly enforced restrictions. The student was initially nervous about accomplishing their presentation goals while still coming in under time. After multiple dry-runs and minor tweaks, the student was all set and ready to present in front of their peers

Student 2

“I was so nervous about my defense and [TF name] calmed those nerves by helping me create a skeleton and storyline. I was then able to fill in the details and felt confident telling and owning my story. Thanks for the support [TF name]!”

1

Overview

- Seeking feedback on their Ed.L.D. capstone defense
- First time attendee, but previous experience working with CommLab TF in different context
- Learned about offerings through word-of-mouth and HGSE CommLab promotions

2

Goals

- Receive feedback on how to structure their presentation and choose/order content
- Walk away from session with a clear outline of their slide deck and a strategy for tackling their presentation.

3

Results

- This student had an excellent understanding of their content, but was in the initial stages of their .pptx presentation, with limited to no slides created. By the end of the session, the student had a clear deck outline and a solid high-level strategy for the presentation layout
- The session helped assuage some anxieties the student had about their upcoming Ed.L.D. capstone defense and provided a safe collaborative peer-to-peer space conducive for brainstorming and a free-flowing exchange of ideas

Ed.M. Candidate @ HGSE

Student 1

“Always great to get your feedback. The board loved the one-pager!”

1

Overview

- Ed.M. – School Leadership program
- Seeking feedback on their promotion material and client elevator pitch
- This student was a repeat attendee throughout the 2020-21 academic year and was initially connect to our services via marketing materials from the first weeks of the Fall 2020 term

2

Goals

- Receive feedback on a their one-page “theory of action” model
- Receive feedback on their pitch deck
- Walk away from session with confidence that their one-pager and pitch deck was ready for their non-profit board of directors and future clients

3

Results

- This student developed a great working-relationship and rapport with CommLab TFs and consistently scheduled appointments with the team throughout the 2020-21 academic year
- By the May 2021, the student had a full-blown client-facing pitch deck they felt confident sharing with their board of directors and future clients

Student 2

"[TF name] was beyond my expectations. Knowledgeable, respectful, guided me without doing it for me so I can learn the process and become independent. [TF name] had the best disposition!"

1

Overview

- Ed.M. – Human Development & Psychology
- Seeking feedback PowerPoint storyboarding and creating topic sentences
- Referred the HGSE CommLab by the HGSE Writing Center and learned of our service offerings from the library resources presentation in orientation week

2

Goals

- Receive feedback on PowerPoint storyboarding and slide topic sentences
- To walk away from the session with a few basic tools to help them create better PowerPoint slides
- To learn how to create targeted and informative topic sentences

3

Results

- While this student was not a repeat-attende, their experience with the CommLab TF in their one-on-one appointment was excellent and they walked away from the session with newfound confidence and some basic PowerPoint tips to help them tackle their upcoming presentation.

On the Horizon - Our Future & Your Support

This report marks the end of the second year of the recently refit HGSE CommLab. The 2020-21 academic year brought a variety of challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the campus-wide shift to online learning, but also a unique opportunity to make progress towards creating a home, regardless of a student's physical location, to HGSE master's and doctoral students for all their oral, written and visual communication needs. Building off last year, the CommLab continued to curate our in-house webinar content and repurpose the materials, where appropriate, to serve online audiences better. Even with the inability to work with students in person, CommLab TFs were still able to connect with Ed.L.D., Ed.D., and Ed.M. students in individualized one-on-one and small-group appointments meaningfully. While the pandemic was disruptive in many ways, students still turned to us for help and support, as witnessed from well-attended webinars and consistent (and growing!) bookings of one-on-one and small-group appointments. Finally, to improve access to our online resources and elevate our brand, the CommLab also developed the newly minted HGSE Writing Center and Communications Lab website, bringing both groups together in one unified domain that features easy-to-navigate webpages and streamlined service offerings. As we adjust to the potentialities of being asked to provide both online and in-person services next year, we remain poised to positively impact the student experience and provide a space that showcases the quality programming HGSE commits to providing our students along their graduate school journey.

That said, there is still work to be done to continue to improve and expand our offerings. These include the following action items:

Greater offerings

- Develop new workshop/webinar series based on curriculum needs
- Recommend relevant free/open source tutorials from Harvard Communication and beyond (e.g. LinkedIn Learning, MOOC, etc.)

More focused outreach and marketing

- Revisit the marketing plan
- Conduct more targeted program outreach activities

New TF training

- Generate appointment norms and policies/TF training materials

Appendix A: Writing Center Appointments by HGSE Program

HGSE Programs	# of Appointments
Human Development and Psychology	107
Language and Literacy	89
Education Policy and Management	88
Ed.L.D.	85
School Leadership	76
International Education Policy	71
Higher Education	66
Specialized Studies	58
Learning and Teaching	31
Prevention Science and Practice	26
Arts in Education	21
Ed.D./Ph.D.	17
Mind, Brain, and Education	13
Technology, Innovation, and Education	10
Total Count	758

Note: Includes all attended appointments Fall 2020–Spring 2021. Any cancellations were removed from data.

Appendix B: Writing Center Appointments by Topics

Topics	# of Appointments
Polished/near-final draft	329
Rough draft	291
Outline	84
Brainstorming	36
(blank)	16
Outline, Rough Draft	1
Rough Draft, Polished/near-final draft	1
Total Count	758

Note: Includes all attended appointments Fall 2020–Spring 2021. Any cancellations were removed from data.

Appendix C: Communications Lab Appointments by Program

HGSE Program	# of Appointments
Ed.L.D.	19
Ed.D./Ph.D.	12
School Leadership	10
Technology, Innovation, and Education	10
Learning and Teaching	8
Human Development and Psychology	7
Language and Literacy	3
Higher Education	3
International Education Policy	3
Prevention Science and Practice	2
Other Harvard	2
Education Policy and Management	2
Total Count	81

Note: Includes all attended appointments Fall 2020–Spring 2021. Any cancellations were removed from data.

Appendix D: Communications Lab Appointments by Topics

Appointment Topic	# of Appointments
Class Presentation	25
Captstone Defense	15
Slide Creation	15
Public Speaking	11
Elevator Pitch	6
Paper Presentation	4
Research Poster	4
HGSE Commencement Speech Prep	1
Total Count	81

Note: Includes all attended appointments Fall 2020–Spring 2021. Any cancellations were removed from data.