

**Writing Development Initiative: Final Report 2017**  
**GGR277: Social Research Methods**  
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**What did you do?**

The WDI design for GGR277 in 2016 focused on an iterative writing process in which students drafted portions of a research project (e.g. questions, methods, results, discussion) through mini-writing assignments, received formative feedback from their Teaching Assistants both verbally and in written form, and then integrated their five mini-writing assignments into a final report. This was an adjustment from the previous year when students completed two distinct research projects rather than build and revise one project. In this year's design, students were able to practice writing both interview and survey questions earlier in the semester and then choose to conduct research using one of these two research methods based on their area of interest and the strength of their questions. During the initial phase of question writing, students workshopped their questions in small groups during tutorial with formative feedback from their TA's. This feedback was facilitated by having two TA's in the room for each tutorial to ensure that all groups got personalized feedback. In general, the application of the WDI in this course was consistent with the original proposal.

**How did it work (objective)?**

The relevant course-level learning objectives for this course focus on choosing appropriate research methods for specific research questions, identifying ethical issues and limitations in research designs, and determining appropriate ways to communicate research findings. The writing assignments for this course deconstruct a research report into small pieces and then rebuild it into the final assignment. Jessica Carlos (a TA who helped me with this redesign) and I did moderated-marking training with the other TAs to ensure consistency across all of the assignments. Given this attempt at consistency, I offer preliminary interpretations of the variations between assignment averages for students. The first mini-assignment was focused on question writing (for both a strong research question and for survey and interview questions). Students scored relatively high on this assignment (73%) which I attribute to the fact that it was based on group work with significant amounts of TA feedback for a small amount of writing. The second mini-assignment required students to find appropriate academic sources and integrate them into a short introduction to their study. The marks for this assignment were lower (67%) which is not surprising as it was not only the first time that students were writing individually but they were also expected to do proper in-text citation. TAs noted that some students struggled on this assignment if they were still struggling to find a focus for their overall research project. The level of writing, therefore, reflected clarity of concept as well as technical ability. The averages for the next three writing assignments (ethics, results, and discussion) each improved incrementally (respectively 68%, 71%, and 73%). Although we do not have specific evidence for these trends, the TAs and I discussed these trends and we suggest that it is related to a combination of students improving clarity of research projects as well as the incorporation of feedback from earlier assignments. The average for the final assignment (75%) was higher than either of the research reports the previous year which had averages of 66% and 67%. Although I cannot ensure that the marking across years was consistent, it does appear that there was an improvement in writing with this new design.

[Note: Assignment averages are a very blunt tool for assessing writing. I look forward to working with the RGASC next year to design better evaluation processes.]

### **How did it work (subjective)?**

Much of the WDI project for this course was focused on the relationship between the students and the TA's, both during tutorials and via written feedback on assignments. Therefore, while I focused on a quantitative assessment of student writing in the last section, in this section I defer to TA and student comments regarding their assessment of those relationships. It is difficult to disaggregate the effect of having two TA's in each tutorial from the other potential influences on student writing such as assignment design and feedback processes, but I believe it is worthwhile noting student and TA comments on their interactions. The following were comments from the Student Online Course Evaluations regarding the availability of assistance to support learning in the course:

- "I like that there are 2TA in one tutorial"
- "was able to get feedback quickly which was helpful since there were two TA's who were approachable."
- "TAs are fantastic"
- "the fact that these tutorials had more than one TA during the same hour meant that more help was offered along with more ideas and assistance for our mini assignments and the overall project."
- "Tutorials and teaching assistants really helped me understand key concepts."

There were a few students who were not satisfied with support provided by the TAs; they mostly critiqued them for not responding to emails in a timely manner (although others commented on how quickly they responded).

The TA's themselves found that having two in each tutorial was generally very helpful. I asked them to keep a log of reflections after each set of tutorials. The following comments are from those logs:

- "I found it really useful to have two TAs that checked in with the groups. This actually meant that they could get feedback twice as we worked our way round the groups - giving a first round of feedback before the next TA reached them about 5 minutes later to see whether their ideas had progressed and to give more direction. I felt that each student got the attention they deserved."
- "With having more time to speak to each group, I believe the quality of my interactions with students allows for improved work among the students. Especially when it comes to writing survey questions, having two TAs in the room allowed me to look at each survey question presented and discuss how the questions could be improved. Without a second TA in the tutorial, I do not feel the students would benefit from a quick interaction."
- "Having two TAs in the room, again, allowed for specific feedback to each group in addressing how research risk and group vulnerability may relate to their research topic."

Overall, TA's felt that students were given better support due to having two TAs in each tutorial. Through the logs, however, we were able to identify specific tutorial sessions that did not require two TA's such as library-based searches for academic literature and the mid-term review.

## What have you learned? and What would you change?

I am interested in running this project again and therefore find that it is easier to address the final two questions (in the heading) together as the lessons learned inform my proposed changes. The following are the three main lessons learned and related suggested changes that inform my revised approach:

- 1) *Two TA's in tutorial:* In general, I found that this was a very successful initiative. Not only did students receive more feedback and support in their writing, TA's also developed a sense of community through this process. There was a lot of communication between TA's (and sometimes with me) regarding tutorial design, response to student comments, and best practices. The TA's took significant initiative in this course to ensure students received the best support possible.
  - a. If the WDI is willing to support this initiative, I would like to continue this practice of having two TA's in tutorials. However, thanks to the feedback from TA's, I have identified one tutorial session (for mid-term review) that does not require two TA's (I also dropped the library-focused tutorial). I request to have two TA's in nine weeks of tutorials (the other weeks can be covered by one TA and thus my regular TA allotment.
- 2) *Iterative writing process:* There was a problem with the writing structure this year - students did not have a clear understanding of their research projects during the initial stages of their writing, yet we were asking them to write sections of a final report as if they had a strong sense of the full project. While this was partially productive in a 'writing to learn' framework, it appeared many students tried to guess what was required for them for each mini-assignment rather than reflect on how it fit into the larger project.
  - a. In order to address the lack of reflection in last year's assignment design, I propose to make the initial writing assignments for next year explicitly reflective in nature. For example, after drafting a research question during tutorial related to student experiences at UTM, students will be asked to write a reflection on how their own experiences influenced their choice of research focus. TA's will then give 'feed-forward' responses to these reflections by highlighting how these reflections could inform a discussion on positionality and/or limitations in a research proposal.
- 3) *Final assignment:* The overarching research project worked very well for students who were invested in the course. However, many students struggled in the design stages and rushed the actual research and writing at the end.
  - a. To address this (and in appreciation of the fact that this is a second year course), I am scaling back the expectations for the assignment to include more writing and less individual research. Students will workshop various research methods in lecture and in tutorials, but their writing will transition from reflective writing in the beginning of the semester to the development of a formal research proposal at the end of the semester.
  - b. I also request a few hours for a TA to design proposal examples that represent both A level and C level work to help guide students in their understanding of the research proposal genre.

Revised Course Outline:

| Week | Tutorial Focus   | Assignment Due   |
|------|--|--|
| 1    | N/A  |  |
| 2    | Observation activity and associated research question                          | Reflection on the processes of designing a research question from a set of observations  |
| 3    | Propose research questions for final research proposal                         | Reflection on how student's experiences influence design of research question  |
| 4    | Group work identifying ethical issues related to proposed research questions   | Reflection on ethical implications of research question with specific focus on: respect for persons, welfare, justice.                                 |
| 5    | Mid-term Review  |  |
| 6    | 2 <sup>nd</sup> observation activity – comparison of notes between individuals | Reflection on researcher effect – what were the similarities and differences between your notes and those of others observing the same thing?          |
| 7    | Mock-Interviews  | Reflection on interviewing – what did you learn about the process? What would recommendations would you give to others doing interviews in the future? |
| 8    | Transcription activity   | Proposal Draft Due   |
| 9    | Coding exercise  | Reflection on coding process and analysis of qualitative research  |
| 10   | Peer-Review of Proposal  | Reflection on what was useful from feedback session.   |
| 11   | Office Hours   |  |
| 12   | Office Hours   | Final Proposal Due   |

Revised Budget

| <b>Additional TA Duties</b>  | <b>Hours</b>    |
|--|-----------------|
| RGASC Writing TA Training Program (for 2 TAs)  | 24 hours        |
| Additional TA support in tutorials<br>(4 hours per 9 weeks of active tutorial)   | 36 hours        |
| Marking drafts of 4 reflections<br>(assignments not covered by pre-WDI TA hour allocation)<br>(80 reflections x 5 minutes) x 4 | 27 hours        |
| Sample proposal development  | 10 hours        |
| <b>Total Request</b>   | <b>97 hours</b> |