Book review
The Hitchhiker's Guide to Writing Research:
A Festschrift for Steve Graham

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"Far out in the uncharted backwaters of the unfashionable end of the Western Spiral arm of the Galaxy lies a small unregarded [field known as Writing Studies]" (p. 5). So begins, with a slight edit on my part, Douglas Adams's book, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, the popular science fiction novel *and* the central conceptual referent on which the 2023 edited collection *The Hitchhiker's Guide to Writing Research: A Festschrift for Steve Graham* is based. The relative insignificance of the earth and humanity (and by extension, our field) serves as an instructive counterpoint through which to understand both books, not only as a reminder of our infinitesimally nugatory place in the cosmos but so too the delicate positionality of Writing Studies within the broader constellations of literacy, the humanities, and the social sciences of which it is only one celestial body. Much as in Adams's book, Liu, Hebert, and Alves have composed a volume which guides the reader through an incognitably expansive galaxy—in this case, the oeuvre of the eminent literacy and writing researcher Steve Graham—in order to confront how much we've come to know about writing studies by way of how much there is yet to be known.

Organization

The organization of the volume is surprisingly clean. After the editor's preface, the book begins with 31 pages(!) of personal reflections from Graham's colleagues and former students. Then, in **Part I**, Graham's wife, Dr. Karen Harris, reflects on how she met Steve and their work and lives together over the ensuing forty plus years. **Part II** is dedicated to **writing theories and models**, while Part III focuses on writing instruction in schools. In Part IV, the volume pivots to writing instruction for students with learning disabilities before Part V centers on teacher practice and professional development. Part VI concentrates on writing practices by adult learners before the Epilogue presents a review of meta-analyses in Writing Studies with special attention to those conducted by Graham.

Of the twenty chapters from Part II onward, thirteen are empirical research with data collected from students and/or teachers (n= range from 7 to 191), three focus on the theoretical, and three are research reviews. This organizational method effectively separates the personal from the professional, and the 20 or so research-based chapters demonstrate an impressive array of different research all based on or related to Graham's work wherein the occasional humorous personal anecdote serves to accentuate the uniqueness of the volume while not impeding the very serious work taking place across these chapters.

Part II begins with a chapter from the eminent cognitive theorist of writing, John Hayes, in which he presents a process model that explores how writers convey their emotions through word choice. Hayes contends that the connection of this model to Graham's work is that "the model proposed here is teachable [and] could be taught as part of SRSD" in order to encourage writers' awareness of their options for expressing degrees of emotion and meaning (p. 13). Then, Clarence Ng and Peter Renshaw reconceptualize the personal and social dimensions of Steve Graham's writer(s)-within-writing (WWC) model using Vygotsky's concept of *perezhivanie*. And the third paper, authored by A. Angelique Aitken, further develops the WWC model by providing a motivational perspective ala the work of Albert Bandura. These chapters together serve as a prescient reminder that theoretical models are essential to writing researchers because they simplify the complex findings of empirical and experimental research in ways which can inform instructional practices, facilitate communication within the field, and guide future research.

Part III focuses on various topics related to **writing instruction at different school levels** and begins with a chapter by Jill Fitzgerald, Jackie Eunjung Relyea, Jeff Elmore, and James S. Kim in which they explore the extent to which first-grade children use academic vocabulary in their writing, finding that the inclusion of academic words is associated with composition words which are more phonologically unique and semantically challenging. In chapter six, Amy Gillespie Rouse, Ashley Sandoval, and Murphy K. Young investigate students' understanding of the writing process and the

application of writing for diverse purposes in STEM subjects. Amanda L. Lindner, Kausalai Wijekumar, and Debra McKeown, in chapter seven, analyze spelling errors among fifth-grade students in the United States. Next, Michel Fayol, Bernard Slusarczyk, Virginia Berninger, and Pascal Bressoux examine the relationship between French spelling and written compositions both within and across different grade levels, finding that text length, text quality and total spelling errors are "significantly correlated longitudinally across grade levels" and that lexical, not morphological errors, hold the most predictive power (131). Finally, in chapter nine, Bruce Saddler situates sentence combining within the writing process.

Saddlers chapter in particular highlights the clear reciprocity between the largely quantitative and linguistic research in Part III and the theoretical modeling in Part II. Understanding the linguistic features of student writing allows researchers to develop more effective theoretical models, while increased predictive power enhances the ability to address student writing issues proactively, leading to improved instructional strategies and by extension better student outcomes. This type of reciprocity is the hallmark of good scientific inquiry, and reading these two sections back-to-back makes clear the theory-to-practice impasse and situates Graham's work as bridging that gap in multiple important ways while also highlighting the issues common to the teaching of writing across international contexts.

Part IV, focused on **writing instruction for students with learning disabilities**, begins with a chapter from Linda H. Mason and Jenna Basile in which they conduct a systematic review of empirical research on summary and quick writing instruction by assessing its effectiveness and treatment acceptability for students with high-incidence disabilities. In chapter eleven, Sharlene A. Kiuhara, Joel R. Levin, Malynda Tolbert, Megan Erickson, and Kenny Kruse develop a mathematics writing-to-learn intervention based on the six stages of Self-Regulated Strategy Development (SRSD) in order to evaluate its impact on students' with math learning disabilities understanding of fractions, argumentative writing, and mathematical reasoning. Naomi Weintraub, in chapter twelve, explores the prevalence of handwriting difficulties among higher-education students, finding that "most [students] (62.1%) has poor legibility but not poor speed" and that working memory predicted both (p. 221). Finally, in chapter thirteen, Amber B. Ray reviews studies employing SRSD to teach writing to secondary students with and at risk for learning disabilities. Ray's results demonstrate that the most commonly used writing outcome measures were quality, elements, and length, and that SRSD can enhance the writing skills of students with and at-risk for learning disabilities. Together, these chapters show how writing researchers at all levels should take heed of research on students with learning disabilities because it can help to identify and address the specific challenges these students face, and because understanding these challenges can allow researchers to develop targeted interventions and strategies that improve writing outcomes for all students, including those with unique learning needs.

In **Part V**, the chapters collectively address critical aspects of **teacher practice and professional development in writing instruction**. The section begins with a chapter by Erin FitzPatrick, Debra McKeown, Megan C. Brown, and Nicole Patton-Terry, which recounts a five-school study that faced challenges during implementation, leading to a focused professional development initiative for teachers in an urban elementary school which emphasized evidence-based writing strategies. Following this chapter, Alyson A. Collins, Stephen Ciullo, and Micheal P. Sandbank employ Generalizability Theory in chapter fifteen to evaluate the reliability of an observation tool designed to measure writing instruction in upper elementary classrooms in order to reveal the significant variance among teachers' instructional practices. In chapter sixteen, Gary A. Troia explores the interconnectedness of teachers' preparation, perceived competence, knowledge, and writing ability, illustrating how these factors influence instructional practices and the quality of writing instruction. Finally, in chapter seventeen, Tien Ping Hsiang presents qualitative insights from a study in Macao, China, detailing how local cultural and institutional factors shape reading and writing instruction in the primary grades. Together, these chapters offer a comprehensive look at some of the intercultural barriers to facilitating effective writing instruction, and collectively emphasize the need for targeted and contextualized professional development.

In **Part VI**, three chapters focus on **writing practices among adult learners**, including chapter eighteen by Charles A. MacArthur, in which he reviews recent research on reforming community college developmental writing programs. Chapter nineteen, by Teresa Jacques, Ana P. Azzam, Francisca Costa, and Rui A. Alves, explores how manipulating disclosure topics and pronoun perspectives in expressive writing tasks affects the linguistic and emotional content produced by undergraduates. Finally, chapter twenty, by Xinghua Liu and Xuan Jiang, takes a Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) approach in order to analyze the written feedback exchanged between Chinese and American university students participating in a telecollaborative peer feedback project. The final part of the book contains a single chapter by Tanya Santangelo, Michael Hebert, and Pamela Shanahan Bazis, in which they "review Graham's systematic reviews and place them within the context of a scoping review of all of the other systematic reviews of writing research" (p. 395). The "grouping" of these chapters across the seven parts of the volume is sensible and easy to follow, with each part bringing to bear new theories, data sources, and analytic techniques within the context of ongoing disciplinary conversations regarding composition theory, pedagogy, teaching and learning across and within grade levels.

The volume makes clear Graham's impact through metrics like citations and h-indexes, but one of my questions while reading through the volume centered on which of Graham's works were most cited *by the chapters in this specific volume* (See Table 1).

Chapters in this volume cited an average of seven Graham studies per chapter, with only one chapter not citing any of his works (Jeffrey et al.). More interesting, however, is that, while there are, rather unsurprisingly, three meta-analyses in the top five, the

most cited study in the volume is relatively recent (2018) and focused on building a theoretical model of writing. It is surprising that Steve Graham's "Writer(s)-Within-Community" model is more cited in this volume than his empirical meta-analyses because theoretical modeling, while crucial, typically garners less attention compared to the practical, evidence-based findings of meta-analyses.

Further, looking across the ten chapters in this volume which cite the WWC model, they are themselves mostly empirical, experimental studies. While Graham's modeling supports the further development of the WWC and other related models, it also informs a great deal of data-driven empirical, experimental work, further accentuating the theory-to-practice "bridge" so salient throughout the collection. This unique lattice work of 'theory feeding into empirical science and back again' is at once a testament to Graham's wide-ranging and in many ways unparalleled career as it is an instructive referent for writing researchers at all career stages seeking to coalesce their research interests through the development of theory. That Graham's WWC model emerged some forty-plus years into his career is similarly revealing as it underscores the necessity of extensive time and accumulated data to develop robust theoretical models. This long-term investment allows for a thorough understanding of complex phenomena such as writing, and the refinement of ideas based on comprehensive evidence and evolving research insights.

Table 1. Most cited Graham studies in the volume

Study	Times cited
Graham, S. (2018). The writer(s)-within-community model of writing. *Educational Psychologist, 53,* 258–279.	10
Graham, S., & Perrin, D. (2007). A meta-analysis of writing instruction for adolescent students. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 99*(3), 445–476	8
Graham, S., & Hebert, M. (2011). Writing-to-read: A meta-analysis of the impact of writing and writing instruction on reading. *Harvard Educational Review, 81,* 710–744.	6
Graham, S., Kiuhara, S., McKeown, D., & Harris, K. R. (2007). A meta-analysis of writing instruction for students in the elementary grades. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 99*(3), 445–476.	5
Graham, S., Harris, K. R., & Hebert, M. (2011). It is more than just the message: Presentation effects in scoring writing. *Focus on Exceptional Children, 44*(4), 1–12.	5

Implications

With very few exceptions, the chapters in this volume are all strong contributions. However, there are some especially notable chapters. For example, Chapter Sixteen, by Gary Troia, presents an interesting new small-scale study (n=41 fourth and fifth grade teachers) focused on "expanding our understanding of teacher characteristics that

impact writing instruction" (p. 295). Troia's findings suggest that "professional development and perceived competence for teaching writing have measurable effects at a macroscopic level—how often each week teachers spend on writing generally—but little effect at more granular levels of writing instruction, and that teacher knowledge and ability have a negligible impact" (p. 306). This is a notable finding not only because previous research has demonstrated that few teachers receive explicit preservice training in writing instruction (Troia & Graham, 2016), but also because no other study to date has investigated teachers' own writing abilities and its potential impacts on how they teach writing.

There are also two excellent chapters presenting new research on handwriting. In chapter 12, Naomi Weintraub investigates the different manifestations of handwriting difficulties (HD) within a sample (n=110) of higher ed students, finding that higher education students with handwriting difficulties are too heterogenous of a group to be studied without making distinctions between the many different types of HD (i.e. legibility, spelling, visual spatial motor organization). While in chapter 19, Teresa Jacques, Ana Azzam, Francisca Costa, and Rui Alves use Graham's WWC model to explore the influence of pronoun perspectives on expressive writing. The experimental group in this study were found to write using "a higher number of different function words and [with] higher lexical density" (357), suggesting that future research might benefit from analyzing the linguistic and emotional content used in expressive writing. By harkening to Graham's work on learning disabilities and the WWC model, respectively, these two studies push forward cutting-edge new research on handwriting with important implications for classroom teaching and learning.

However, the most notable study in the volume comes at the very end, when Tanya Santangelo, Pamela Shanahan Bazis, and longtime Graham collaborator Michael Hebert review Graham's systematic reviews of writing (which, remarkably, account for the analysis of results of more than 2900 studies), classifying them into three primary types: systematic reviews of instructional effectiveness, systematic reviews focused on group comparisons, and general non-systematic reviews. In the first category, there were twenty-four reviews examining the impact of educational practices on writing outcomes. Positive and statistically significant effect size of practices in these reviews ranged from .18 to 3.52, with Graham's own SRSD (unsurprisingly) identified as the most consistently effective approach. However, the authors also identified more than thirty other practices which were effective at improving student writing outcomes, including instruction in specific writing practices (i.e. process writing, sentence combining, spelling, handwriting), instructional approaches educators use when teaching writing (i.e. creating an engaged community of writers, integrating reading and writing, providing daily time to write), and assessing writing (i.e. student feedback, teaching students to evaluate their own and others writing). Given the weight of the data on which this analysis of analyses is based, there is a real force with which these results highlight that numerous teaching practices regarding writing *are effective across diverse populations and contexts.*

It's worth recalling that Liu, Hebert, and Alves present the work of Steve Graham as seen through this edited collection as a guide to the galaxy of writing research. There is a moment in Adams's book when the characters marvel at the entry for planet earth in the actual *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (a fictional galactic encyclopedia), which reads simply, "mostly harmless." In the same way the earthlings in Adams's book marvel at the incomprehensibly oversimplified summary of their entire world, we might be tempted to dismiss the overall takeaways in this chapter which are drawn from Graham's meta-analyses. Few teachers of writing would be surprised to hear, for example, that teaching the writing process contributes positively to learning. The same goes for providing daily time to write, or student feedback, etc. Yet, the warrant here goes beyond mere common sense and teacher instinct; there is a *force* to what we know about teaching writing which is of value not only as a warrant to parents, administrators, and policymakers, but also as a gratifying reinforcement that teacher practice is central to effective learning.

That the review of studies in the second category of systematic review from this chapter (studies of writing on other academic outcomes) found that (a) asking students to write about their reading comprehension improved reading comprehension, (b) teaching students writing skills improved reading skills, and (c) having students write more often improved reading comprehension, further expands this vista of implications beyond the bounds of writing studies. Graham's work, his "guide" to our field, affirms and extends the central import of writing like a celestial body absorbing other satellites into its orbit, and writing is perhaps closer to the center of the galaxies of literacy and education than has heretofore been assumed.

Conclusion

The recent publication of other festschrifts dedicated to figures in our field (Hesse & Julier, 2023; Kelly et al. 2025; Rogers et al., 2023) merits a consideration of the genre in light of the volume currently under review. Festschrifts are scholarly collections of essays in honor of distinguished academics which typically commemorate their retirement or other significant career milestones. They are both scholarly compilations *and* ceremonial recognitions of a scholar's career and achievement, though each volume has its own respective shape with respect to this balance of the scholarly and honorary. In this regard, the current volume takes an interesting tact; it separates out the personal reflections *after* the preface but *before* the actual chapters. These personal reflections reveal (and jest about) many of Graham's personal idiosyncrasies: his penchant for giant flagons of iced tea with lots of lemons, stealing student pencils, and Chuck Taylor shoes. One wonders if these details matter, or might one day come to matter, in the same vein in which the details of prominent literary figure's lives bear on criticism and analysis of their work. In other words, what do these personal reflections contribute to our understanding of Steve Graham's *research*?

At the International Society for the Advancement of Writing Research's (ISAWR) Writing Research Across Borders (WRAB) Conference at the Norwegian University of

Science and Technology (NTNU) in Trondheim, Norway in February of 2023, I was able to sit in on the symposium dedicated to the publication of this volume. Hearing Skip MacArthur recite the poem included in the personal reflections in this volume, entitled "Signs of Steve," was moving; you could feel the mutual respect, camaraderie and intellectual activity shared between these two scholars in the words ("Fortunate I was to meet him when we were young scholars/To work together and learn from him for so many years."). More impressive, however, was the sheer number of Graham's former graduate students in attendance, most with university positions, all scholars in their own right. Perhaps one answer to why these personal reflections matter is found in how they signify the enormity of Graham's contributions to an entire generation of scholars, each now writing their own entries into the *Hitchhiker's Guide to Writing Studies*—both in the chapters in this volume and in their own ongoing research and teaching.

This personal anecdote isn't meant to amplify the honorifics so much as contextualize the legacy which this volume seeks to capture. Indeed, it is striking to realize how many of Graham's proteges come from and hold positions in Education and Educational Psychology. Of course Graham's own background is in Special Education, and both fields (Ed and Ed Psych) have a long and vaunted history of studying writing. Yet, in North America, where Steve hails from and has spent his entire career, the study of writing is arguably more embedded in Composition and Rhetoric. One is left to wonder, then, what a journal like *College Composition and Communication*, for example, with its more humanistic and qualitative leanings, would make of the work found in this volume. This isn't a critique of Graham's work nor of the Cs so much as a recognition that the universe—both celestially and compositionally—is comprised of many, many, many different galaxies, and that the work of any one scholar is at best partial. As a result, we will need many more scholars like Steve Graham to continue to explore the full panoply of writing studies, and beyond.

This volume is a useful resource for both newcomers to the field looking to understand the legacy of one of its most prominent figures and seasoned practitioners seeking to advance the borders of their own conception and understanding of the field. Scholars in Writing Studies, English Education, Composition and Rhetoric, Education, Linguistics, and Educational Psychology will find particular value in the innovative research designs, diverse perspectives and detailed analyses contained within this volume, all of which encourage readers to engage critically with different writing practices and in doing so expand their academic toolkit. To this end, this collection is especially useful for those interested in sociocognitive, quantitative approaches to writing research.

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