# Reflective Orientations and Genre Navigation in Dissertation Writing: Insights from Seven Years of Doctoral Writing Retreats

Kathryn Baillargeon

Writing Program, University of California, Santa Barbara | US

Abstract: Doctoral dissertation writing is a demanding process requiring writers to navigate complex rhetorical, disciplinary, and institutional expectations. This study examines how doctoral writers perceive and handle these challenges. More than 1000 reflections were collected from 278 participants across seven years of dissertation writing retreats. Through their reflections, writers articulate how they negotiate the dissertation's distinctive parameters, particularly in adapting writing practices to new rhetorical contexts, managing complex research tasks, and developing sustained project timelines. Participants' reflections also illustrate three distinct approaches to managing writing tasks: strategic problem-solving, affirmative progress recognition, and responsive integration of both approaches. Writers demonstrating a responsive approach, combining practical solutions with positive self-acknowledgment, showed enhanced goal completion compared to those employing strategic approaches alone. This research extends current theoretical frameworks of genre use by considering the relationship between metacognitive problem-solving and positive affect during dissertation drafting. Data suggest that successful genre navigation of dissertations often depends on writers' ability to develop compensatory mechanisms when faced with the tacit or occluded nature of the dissertation expectations. These findings contribute to writing theory by exploring how writers manage complex genres and offer principles for structuring doctoral writing support.

Keywords: dissertation writing, genre knowledge, metacognition, doctoral education, writing retreats

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Contact: Kathryn Baillargeon, UCSB Writing Program, South Hall, University of California, Santa Barbara, CA 93106 | USA - Baillargeon@ucsb.edu

## 1. Introduction

In the early part of the millennium, graduate education was called out as experiencing a "hidden crisis" of doctoral attrition (Lovitts & Nelson, 2000), with the doctoral journey characterized as a "perilous passage" (Weidman et al., 2001) due in part to students entering their programs lacking a clear understanding of the demands and complexities of doctoral study (Golde & Dore, 2001). Shortly thereafter, the Council of Graduate Schools in the United States published the results of their PhD Completion Project showing an overall approximate attrition rate of 50% (Denecke et al., 2009). Though time to degree has declined between 2002-2022 by 1-2.5 years depending on the field (NCSES), estimates of doctoral attrition rates across all disciplines have remained relatively stagnant at the 30-50% mark (Castelló et al., 2017; Glorieux et al., 2024; Hasgall et al., 2019; Rigler et al., 2017). In response to these trends, research on doctoral writing has grown significantly, with increasing attention to the subjective experiences of dissertation writers, including the emotional, cognitive, and relational dimensions of their writing processes (e.g. Castelló, Iñesta, et al., 2017; Castelló & Sala-Bubaré, 2023; Corcelles-Seuba et al., 2023; Gimenez et al., 2024; Madden et al., 2020; Sala-Bubaré & Castelló, 2017). This study builds on that foundation by contributing large-scale, U.S.-based data on how nearly 300 doctoral writers describe their micro-level, day-to-day experiences navigating the dissertation writing process. While similar research has been conducted in other national contexts, this study's scale and focus on the U.S. doctoral system adds comparative dimension to international conversations about doctoral writing and may illuminate both universal and context-specific aspects of dissertation writing challenges.

### 1.1 The Problem of the Dissertation

The doctoral dissertation (or thesis in some contexts) typically represents an extended, independent research study designed to demonstrate the student's disciplinary expertise and original scholarly contribution. While dissertation structures and conventions vary internationally and across disciplines, the dissertation broadly functions as the culminating requirement of doctoral education (Casanave, 2019), marking the transition from student to independent scholar. Yet, this seemingly straightforward purpose conceals a far more complex communicative challenge. The following paragraphs examine how the dissertation's troublesome nature is constructed through multiple intersecting factors including its genre and writing practices, institutional and supervisorial contexts, and student writing experiences.

#### Genre

This study draws on the North American tradition of Rhetorical Genre Studies, where genre is understood as a social action (Bazerman, 1994; Devitt, 2010; Miller, 1984). Given that doctoral writing is a culturally embedded, disciplinary, and epistemologically fraught endeavor, writers can face acute challenges navigating these situated rhetorical practices (Burford et al., 2021b,

2021a; Doody, 2024; Starke-Meyerring, 2011). One particularly salient contributor to stressors around doctoral writing is that the dissertation itself defies easy categorization. Often described as a multi-genre (Paré et al., 2009), it serves many purposes, has many audiences, and operates in many different rhetorical situations. Drawing on the concept of genre networks (Spinuzzi, 2004), or interconnected genres that mediate intricate activity systems, the dissertation's multifaceted nature becomes even more apparent: it simultaneously performs multiple, sometimes contradictory social actions, including expert demonstration, scholarly contribution, institutional compliance, professional credential, and personal identity work. These competing functions can foment tension and ambiguity around expectations, an uncertainty that is further intensified by local institutional practices, advisor-student dynamics, and broader (sub)disciplinary cultures (Casanave, 2019; Hyland, 2004; M. A. Maher et al., 2014; Simpson, 2012).

## Supervisorial and Structural Contexts

Expectations around the dissertation can extend beyond mere ambiguity into occlusion (Autry & Carter, 2015) in that the actual forms and content are not often explicitly described, in part because supervisors themselves may struggle to articulate disciplinary norms (Bazerman, 2009; Brooks-Gillies et al., 2020; Madden et al., 2020; Starke-Meyerring, 2014). Even for those disciplines who offer dissertation-by-publication, the framing language can pose issues in terms of easily drawing upon past writing experience (Guerin, 2016). What counts as an acceptable dissertation, and what is understood as "normal" for dissertation writing, varies dramatically across contexts, creating a tension between the dissertation's global status as a universal credential and its situated, socially-constructed nature within its academic community (French, 2016).

Doctoral writing is also embedded within institutional structures that shape student experiences and opportunities in consequential ways. Several studies have examined how writing support, or its absence, is structurally organized within graduate institutions, with gaps in resources and coordination (Carter, 2011; Casanave & Li, 2008; Lawrence & Zawacki, 2019; Simpson, 2012; Sundstrom, 2014). Other work has focused on the broader systemic pressures doctoral writers face, including those that indirectly influence their writing practices by framing which forms of scholarly labor are valued or discouraged (Badenhorst & Guerin, 2016; Glorieux et al., 2024; Paré, 2019). As these elements manifest differently across institutional and cultural contexts, doctoral students' writing perceptions and senses of support highlight the need for policies that are locally responsive and globally informed and attend to the supervisor-student dyadic relationship (Caffarella & Barnett, 2000; Carter & Kumar, 2017; Castelló, McAlpine, et al., 2021; M. A. Maher et al., 2014; Simpson et al., 2016). Institutional and supervisory contexts, then, function both to enable or constrain writing development and to signal which writing trajectories are legitimate.

## Doctoral Writing Experiences

The substantial variation in how writers navigate the often "unmapped" and "perilous" doctoral journey has been covered extensively elsewhere (Badenhorst & Guerin, 2016; Burford et al., 2021b; Calle-Arango & Ávila Reyes, 2023). Contributing to this variation, individual research writing perceptions appear significantly influenced by research conditions and social support networks, with studies revealing common challenges and culturally-specific barriers to writing development as a doctoral student (Campos Oaxaca, 2025; Petrić & Castelló, 2025; Sala-Bubaré et al., 2018). Within these conditions, writers can develop distinct profiles or identities around writing that reflect both their evolving self-conceptions and their positioning within academic communities (Burgess & Ivanič, 2010; Castelló, 2022; Castelló, Sala-Bubaré, et al., 2021; Jensen & Nordentoft, 2022; Mendoza et al., 2022). Though some of the research here has examined these "writerly profiles" in other postsecondary and research settings, the point stands that writing identity and development are socially mediated and highly context-dependent, offering useful points of connection for understanding doctoral writers and how they might approach the dissertation as a writing task.

Yet, writing identity alone does not capture the full complexity and myriad issues writers encounter within dissertation work. Doctoral writing challenges can occur in terms of how the student learns to both participate in their field and wield the project management practices typical of a longer-term writing endeavor (Calle-Arango & Ávila Reyes, 2023; Gimenez et al., 2024; Negretti et al., 2023; Starke-Meyerring, 2011; Tremblay-Wragg et al., 2022). Writers also must understand when to seek help, how to interpret conflicting supervisor advice, and how to calibrate their progress and self-efficacy (Castelló, McAlpine, et al., 2021; Elliot, 2022; McAlpine et al., 2009; Starke-Meyerring, 2011; Vincent, Tremblay-Wragg, Déri, et al., 2023). More recently, research has aimed to take a deeper look at dissertation writers and early career researchers by attending to both what the writers report as well as what they actually produce in natural settings (Castelló & Sala-Bubaré, 2023; Negretti, 2021; Sala-Bubaré et al., 2021).

Beyond these practical challenges, writing high-stakes projects like theses and dissertations is also an emotionally charged activity. Emotions, from anxiety and self-doubt to confidence and satisfaction, are deeply entwined with writing perceptions and can influence persistence in the face of those more negative emotions (Burford, 2017; Doroholschi & Solli, 2025; Jahić Jašić & Pavlović, 2025; Vincent et al., 2024; Weise & Castelló, 2025). Personal wellbeing is another aspect of the dissertation process (Barry et al., 2018; Cotterall, 2013; Evans et al., 2018; Stubb et al., 2012; Sverdlik et al., 2018; Vincent, Tremblay-Wragg, & Plante, 2023) and some studies have emphasized the role of socially-shared regulation and collaborative reflection as a means of navigating complexity (Badenhorst, 2021; Castelló et al., 2010; Vincent, Tremblay-Wragg, Déri, et al., 2023).

Taken together, doctoral writing is not only an intellectual task but also a socially situated and emotionally charged practice. It requires tacit learning, emotional regulation, and reflective engagement as writers respond to ambiguity, navigate evolving academic identities, and manage the demands of this singular, long-term writing project.

### The Dissertation as Multi-Everything

Having examined the dissertation through the lenses of genre, institutional structures, supervision, and writer experience, it seems the dissertation is more than a multi-genre: it is a multi-everything, a colloquial term often deployed to represent a process that must be all things to all people or constituencies. Its function is highly stable—credentialing, boundary-setting, discipline-entering—while its forms are highly malleable and its multiple social actions described above contribute further layers of expectation and challenge. This conceptualization of the dissertation extends beyond Paré et al.'s (2009) multi-genre notion by foregrounding the broader ecosystem of roles it plays. Indeed, its persistence as a genre may lie in this very adaptability: the dissertation can be refigured to fit evolving knowledge-making practices while still performing the same social work.

To understand how this multi-everything is navigated in practice, especially in light of the tacit/occluded expectations, it is useful to attend to how doctoral writers describe their experiences writing the dissertation. These accounts shed light on how writers internalize multiple audiences, negotiate the multitude of purposes and exigencies, and respond to the layered demands of dissertation writing.

## 1.2 Reflection, metacognition, and novel writing situations

While genre knowledge, supervisory input, and institutional support are all important scaffolds, they do not fully explain how doctoral writers manage the uncertainty and cognitive demands of drafting the dissertation. What likely fills this explanatory gap are the writer's internal resources, namely their capacities for reflection and metacognition, as they confront unfamiliar rhetorical challenges. These reflective and metacognitive practices play a role in helping writers navigate novel and complex writing situations and the following section explores how doctoral writers wield these practices to develop strategic approaches to the dissertation, particularly when traditional genre exemplars and instruction may be insufficient.

### Reflection and metacognition

Seeking to access the most honest and unbiased expressions of doctoral writing experiences might be akin to searching for a needle in a haystack; yet while reflections written during a dissertation writing retreat do have some issues with regard to potential bias and the general performativity of the situation, these informal, somewhat retrospective tasks written at the end of each retreat day are fairly close to a natural dissertation writing setting. Reflections also merit attention by creating a space where students can unpack their experiences each day during a writing retreat: it helps them understand their learning, how they learned it and how they might continue to learn more (Yancey, 2016, p. 8). Moreso, these reflective practices, as shaped by learned dispositions such as problem-exploring and metacognition, play a critical role in how writers adapt to complex tasks (Bromley & Schonberg, 2016; Driscoll & Powell, 2016; Driscoll & Wells, 2012; Wardle, 2012).

For doctoral writers, reflections and the participants' reported metacognitive activity therein can document a growing understanding of the dissertation genre. Metacognition, or thinking about thinking, has been well established across writing studies and related disciplines as a facilitator of learning transfer, self-regulated learning, and writing development (Gorzelsky et al., 2016; Halpern, 1998; Moshman, 2018; Schraw, 1994; Teng et al., 2022). Flavell (1979) conceived of metacognition as tracing two specific mechanisms: knowledge and regulation. Metacognitive knowledge, in particular, is significant for genre and disciplinarity because it informs writer's choices about their writing tasks—choices that are driven by an unfolding understanding of their discipline's shared values, practices, and ways of knowing (Negretti & McGrath, 2018). Metacognitive knowledge and regulation's connections to genre and transfer of knowledge have been extensively summarized elsewhere (Driscoll et al., 2020; McGrath et al., 2019; Negretti, 2021), including how conditional metacognitive knowledge, especially, plays a role in how writers can draw upon and apply extant genre awareness and genre-specific knowledge to novel writing situations. It must be noted, though, that the study of metacognition in academia has resulted in a somewhat problematic proliferation of definitions and taxonomies (Azevedo, 2020). One example is how writing studies and higher education disciplines handle the intersections between reflection and metacognition differently (Taczak & Robertson, 2017).

Even so, the writing studies metacognition taxonomy developed by Gorzelsky et al. (2016) establishes useful parameters for tracing how participants report their metacognitive activity in written reflections. They describe both knowledge and regulation in their taxonomy, where writers exhibit knowledge—of themselves as writers, of the writing task at hand, or of a strategy they could take in order to meet their communicative needs—and writers regulate by planning, monitoring, controlling, and evaluating themselves while undertaking a writing task. Reflections written during a dissertation writing retreat, then, indicate how doctoral writers subjectively describe and report their experiences and whether they are knowing or regulating themselves, potentially pointing to ways they navigate the multi-everything dissertation genre, at the very least within the context of the retreat.

## Novel writing situations

While there are a few different ways of understanding how writers approach novel writing situations, there are specific mechanisms that enable the process. Theoretically, when faced with a new genre, a writer will draw upon their genre-specific knowledge to approach the writing situation, which includes understanding the array of strategies available to them to perform the genre (Tardy et al., 2020). Knowing when and why to apply particular strategies, conditional knowledge, plays an important role in genre acquisition (Negretti, 2021; Veenman et al., 2006). This conditional knowledge is wielded as part of recontextualization, a process by which writers adapt prior genre knowledge to each new genre performance (Tardy et al., 2020). Recontextualization requires metacognitive understanding and control of a rhetorical situation in addition to the aforementioned cognizance of both past relevant genre experiences and potentially applicable strategies (Driscoll et al., 2020; Roderick, 2019). Once

a writer has successfully navigated a similar situation, the entire process requires less metacognitive monitoring and self-regulation.

How might this process work, though, with a multi-everything genre like the dissertation? Confirming or applying conditional knowledge may be complicated by a lack of clearly relevant prior writing experiences and exemplars. In the Tardy et al. (2020) example, the recontextualized conditional knowledge was a successful prior conference proposal submission, but for a somewhat different audience. Unlike the dissertation, a conference proposal has familiar precedents, more stable formal expectations, and lower stakes. A writer can encounter an overload of successful conference proposal exemplars just by visiting past conference programs, whereas a dissertation writer has few exemplars, and even those that do exist are past successful examples of a dynamic genre, meaning there are no guarantees for current success. This same dynamism affects the dissertation expectations, which may not even be clearly communicated with the writer. Finally, the comparatively lower stakes and the brevity of the proposal significantly reduce the writer's cognitive load of genre negotiation, unlike the same writer's potential difficulty of accommodating all the competing social actions that make dissertations so unwieldy. For these reasons, conference proposals and the closer approximation of the rhetorical situation facilitate developing conditional knowledge while reducing the self-regulation required for recontextualization in ways the dissertation does not. With limited models, inconsistent feedback cycles, and high stakes, doctoral writers may struggle to form repertoires and strategies that reflect both their prior understanding and their emergent grasp of the dissertation and their disciplinary conventions (Bazerman, 2018).

Thus, faced with undermined conditional knowledge in terms of past writing experiences, doctoral writers contend with yet another troublesome aspect: tacit or occluded expectations. While strategies and conditional knowledge might typically evolve through a complex interplay that includes supervisor feedback to validate genre understanding and disciplinary writing approaches, the effectiveness of the feedback heavily depends on how explicitly the advisor conveys disciplinary norms—a not-uncommon lacuna—or even offers feedback at all in the worst cases. Left with few options, many student writers essentially attempt different strategies until one appears to effectively capture their point (Roderick, 2019; Starke-Meyerring, 2011). These solution-seeking approaches are characterized by testing multiple strategies, adjusting based on available feedback, and developing contextual awareness of what works in specific situations. For dissertation writers, this solution-seeking process can become central to their writing experience as they navigate the dissertation's unique demands and, due to undermined conditional knowledge, essentially recontextualize in the dark.

Finally, sustained solution-seeking, especially in the absence of confirmation, likely requires substantial motivation on the writer's part so as not to simply give up. A writer's willingness and motivation to persist through challenges and setbacks, a form of self-regulation, is directly influenced by the affective dimensions of the writing process (Cotterall, 2013; Driscoll & Powell, 2016; du Boulay et al., 2010; Efklides, 2006; Kurtyka, 2015; Williams, 2019). This relationship between metacognition, affect, and motivation may be of higher

significance for dissertation writers, who must sustain motivation across extended timeframes with limited external structure (Stubb et al., 2012). The specific mechanisms through which doctoral writers integrate affective and strategic responses to writing challenges, however, merit further attention.

### 1.3 This study

This study extends prior research by examining a larger population to track the breadth and depth of doctoral writing experiences, observations, and struggles that writers encountered in the self-defined "middle stages" of their dissertation process. Data stem from seven years of dissertation writing retreat participants' daily reflections (n=278 participants). I ask two research questions:

1. What writing experiences do doctoral students reflect on, and what metacognition do they report about these experiences, during a dissertation writing retreat?
2. What does the relationship between participants' writing experiences and their reported metacognitive activity reveal about the ways that they manage their writing tasks, including if they meet their self-defined writing goals?

## 2. Methods

### 2.1 Context and Participants

The study context was a large "very high research activity" university in the Western United States. The institution offers over 50 master's and doctoral programs across the academic disciplines. Subjects involved in this IRB-approved study (n=278) were participants in a 4-day dissertation writing retreat. All participants were full-time doctoral students in the ABD stage of the dissertation process and had to apply and be accepted to the program. Data stem from 14 retreats, from 2017-2023, with 2 offerings per summer and 20-30 participants per retreat. This was an opt-in program, in that it's not required to participate, and the participants were from all disciplines across the university.

Table 1 illustrates the metadisciplines—humanities (Hum), social sciences (SS), natural sciences (NS), and formal/applied sciences(FAS)—represented in each of the 14 writing retreats. Humanities study human culture, expression, and meaning through critical interpretation in fields such as literature, philosophy, and the arts. Social sciences apply systematic, often empirical methods to examine human behavior, relationships, and institutions, such as sociology, psychology, anthropology, and political science. Natural sciences use empirical observation and experimentation to understand the physical world, including chemistry, biology, and earth sciences. Formal/applied sciences encompass both formal systems like mathematics and computer science and the applied sciences, including all engineering disciplines.

Table 1. Participant Metadisciplines by Retreat Offering

| Offering | Hum | SS | NS | FAS |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| J2017 | 4 | 10 | 1 | 1 |
| S2017 | 8 | 6 | 3 | 1 |
| J2018 | 8 | 7 | 2 | 2 |
| S2018 | 6 | 7 | 3 | 2 |
| J2019 | 5 | 5 | 6 | 2 |
| S2019 | 4 | 4 | 6 | 3 |
| J2020 | 8 | 7 | 4 | 1 |
| S2020 | 9 | 7 | 1 | 2 |
| J2021 | 12 | 8 | 3 | 3 |
| S2021 | 6 | 4 | 5 | 1 |
| J2022 | 7 | 12 | 7 | 2 |
| S2022 | 6 | 8 | 4 | 0 |
| J2023 | 8 | 10 | 5 | 4 |
| S2023 | 5 | 7 | 4 | 2 |

*Note.* Distribution of 278 doctoral participants across four metadisciplinary categories over 14 dissertation writing retreats from 2017-2023. Each retreat accommodated 20-30 participants and the metadisciplines are, in order, humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, and formal/applied sciences.

## 2.2 Procedure

The daily reflections were written as the last item of the day during the dissertation writing retreats, with half of the programs in person during 2017-2019 and 2023B and half offered remotely during 2020-2023A.

At the end of each writing day, participants gathered in the same room, physically or via Zoom depending on the program. They completed a "daily writing tracker" document, the same each day of the retreat, consisting of two questions: first, it asked participants to log whether or not they met their goals; second, it asked participants to complete a "freewrite." Instructions included that they would be timed for 5 minutes and prompted ~

"Freewrite for the prescribed time on how things went: what did you get done? what worked? What could be better? What have you learned—about your topic, your chapter, your data, yourself as a writer or a worker, etc.?"

On the first day of the writing retreat, the facilitator described what is a reflection or freewrite—writing without stopping to think or worrying about editing—and also explained the benefits of metacognition and its import in writing studies pedagogy. After completion of the freewrite time, subjects uploaded their completed writing logs and reflections to a folder on Box, a cloud storage and file-sharing platform compliant with IRB protocols, shared only with the researcher before going home or logging off for the day. This study has a full consent waiver.

## 2.3 Data Coding

The researcher and a research assistant anonymized the reflections, removing names and any identifying information. Redacted information would sometimes be replaced with a more general word, so a specific monograph title in the reflection would be replaced with "[the book]." Participants missing more than one reflection day were excluded from the study (32 participants total). Anonymized reflections were then saved, with participants numbered from 1-278 and a notation of their metadiscipline and the month and year of their participation (for example: 92 SS J19). The researcher then segmented the reflections into sentences prior to coding (n=8692). Sentences were selected as the unit of segmentation to best preserve participants' intended meaning while still enabling a detailed line-by-line analysis for two reasons. First, reflective writing often features complex sentence structures that intentionally connect ideas through coordination and subordination; thus, the sentence segmentation prioritizes cognitively complete expressions. Second, after prior experience with this data using t-unit (i.e. minimal terminable syntactic units consisting of a main clause with any subordinate clauses) segmentation, the researcher found that it at times artificially fragmented expressions at points that disrupted thematic interpretation. After segmentation, the data were transferred to Excel for coding (Geisler & Swarts, 2019). Coding occurred in two distinct processes for each schema (see Appendices A and B).

### Writing Experiences coding

To understand participants' experiences in the writing retreat and what they were reflective about, the verbal data was coded in two cycles, first using Initial Coding (Charmaz, 2014) then Pattern Coding (Miles et al., 2014). To create the coding schema inductively, the researcher first excerpted 10% of the segmented data and read and coded the data using the Initial Coding method, which allowed the researcher flexibility and openness to both processes as well as properties and dimensions (Saldaña, 2021). Codes were applied with mutual exclusivity: only one code could be applied per sentence (Geisler & Swarts, 2019, p. 12). Mutually exclusive coding was adopted to enhance analytical clarity by requiring the identification of a single, most salient theme per sentence, thus supporting a focused interpretation and preserving the integrity of emerging patterns (cf Geisler & Swarts, 2019, pp. 118–119). To ensure reliability and further hone the coding schema, a second coder/research assistant read and coded the same excerpt. Both coders discussed discrepancies in interpretations, and the researcher subsequently adjusted the code

definitions as needed, resolving any temptations to double code (Geisler & Swarts, 2019, p. 118). All codes emerged from patterns in the reflections (Appendix A comprises a full coding glossary). On the third instance, the second coder achieved 96% reliability with a Cohen's kappa of 94.5%. With the second cycle coding, the researcher reviewed initial codes and grouped them into five categories: conditions, writing, task-management, time-management, and externals. For the categories, the second coder again achieved a 96% reliability and a Cohen's kappa of 95.5% with a different set of excerpts.

### Metacognition coding

The metacognition coding process to identify reported metacognitive knowledge or metacognitive regulation adapted the extant writing studies taxonomy for metacognition found in Gorzelsky et al. (2016). The researcher limited the metacognition codes to only the knowledge and regulation aspects of the taxonomy after an initial review of the verbal data (see Appendix B for coding glossary). Deductive coding was mutually exclusive here, too. Both coders again discussed interpretive discrepancies; once the definitions were clarified the codebook updated, and intercoder reliability reached an acceptable percentage (100% simple agreement on the third attempt/sampling), the second phase of coding was initiated using the same process. For the subcoding, interrater reliability was tested separately for the knowledge and regulation subcodes. Knowledge subcode reliability reached 96% simple agreement with a Cohen's Kappa of 95.1%; regulation subcode reliability reached 95% simple agreement with a Cohen's Kappa of 94.4%.

## 2.4 Data analysis

The goal of data analysis was to understand both what the writers described about their writing session experiences and how the relationship between the writing experiences and their reported metacognitive activity revealed the ways that dissertators manage their writing exigencies. These exigencies—the underlying reason or need that motivates them to write, which together with the social, rhetorical, or practical demands of their writing context, informs the choices they make—were examined in relation to whether they met their daily writing goals. The Statistical Package of Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to conduct descriptive statistical analysis, specifically the frequency distributions and cross-tabulations with chi-square analysis, to systematically examine the distribution and relational patterns of codes across both coding schemas.

### Identifying Approaches and Orientations to Writing Exigencies

Identifying the different approaches to writing exigencies among the participants was not included in the research questions but emerged as a significant finding during exploratory analysis. First, the researcher wanted to investigate which Writing Experiences subcodes appeared together most often on any given writing day of the retreat. Excel was used to identify the frequency of each Writing Experiences subcode by day. The CORREL function

yielded a correlation matrix, which the researcher compared to the crosstabulation report created by SPSS to determine what Writing Experiences subcodes appeared most often with specific Metacognition subcodes. Three profiles emerged, seen in Table 2: affirming, strategic, and responsive approaches.

Table 2. Approach to Writing Exigencies and Applicable Codes

| Approach | Writing Experience Code | Metacognition Code |
|---|---|---|
| Strategic | Writing/goal setting | Knowledge/strategy |
| | Writing/revision/editing | Regulation/planning |
| | Writing/specific strategies | Regulation/control |
| Affirming | Conditions/motivation | Regulation/evaluating |
| | Writing/specific strategies | Regulation/monitoring |
| Responsive | Both approaches evident | |

*Note.* Approaches to writing exigencies identified from participant reflections, with associated Writing Experience and Metacognition codes. A strategic approach was marked by emphasis on goal setting, revision, and specific strategies, alongside planning or control. An affirming approach centered on motivation and self-monitoring or evaluation. A responsive approach integrated both strategy and affirmation.

### Goal-meeting report analysis

The approaches were then considered with the participant goal-tracking data. To track goal-meeting reports, the researcher logged what each participant wrote about their daily goals on the "daily writing tracker." "Yes," "no," and "mostly" answers were logged exactly as written. If a participant wrote "sort of" or another equivalent expression, the researcher logged a "no" response for their goal-meeting. If the participant-writer noted that they changed their goals and had met their new goals, then the response was categorized as "shifted yes."

## 3. Findings

This study examined the reflections written by dissertation writing retreat participants at the end of each writing day to understand what they are thinking, doing, and needing as writers. Tracing the subjective writing experiences and self-reported metacognitive activity revealed how they manage writing tasks when navigating the multi-everything dissertation.

### 3.1 Research Question 1: Writing Experiences

The first question asked what writing experiences doctoral students described and how participants reported metacognitive activity when participating in a dissertation writing retreat.

Table 3. Distribution of Writing Experiences Themes

| | Frequency | Percent | Participants |
|---|---|---|---|
| Writing | 4264 | 49.1 | 278 |
| Reporting | 1052 | 12.1 | 224 |
| Goal setting | 797 | 9.2 | 214 |
| Specific strategies | 761 | 8.8 | 216 |
| Accountability | 682 | 7.8 | 207 |
| Revision | 518 | 6.0 | 172 |
| Future | 439 | 5.1 | 196 |
| Conditions | 2424 | 27.9 | 270 |
| Effects | 1150 | 13.2 | 224 |
| Motivation | 708 | 8.1 | 210 |
| Focus | 562 | 6.5 | 221 |
| Time | 739 | 8.5 | 239 |
| Procrastination | 295 | 3.4 | 143 |
| How much is best | 290 | 3.3 | 144 |
| Too long overall | 154 | 1.8 | 94 |
| Task | 652 | 7.5 | 200 |
| Prioritizing | 243 | 2.8 | 125 |
| Not knowing | 211 | 2.4 | 91 |
| Moving between | 195 | 2.2 | 105 |
| Externals | 558 | 6.4 | 177 |
| Work-life balance | 216 | 2.5 | 104 |
| Pre-existing | 213 | 2.5 | 82 |
| Advisor | 108 | 1.2 | 65 |

*Note.* Frequency distribution of Writing Experience themes coded from 8,692 participant reflection sentences during dissertation writing retreats (*n* = 278 participants). Frequencies and percentages indicate the relative prominence of each theme in the dataset, while the participant column shows the number of unique individuals who reported each theme. Writing and Conditions dominated participant reflections, indicating primary focus on writing processes and environmental/motivational factors.

Data in Table 3 show that participants described experiences related to both Writing and Conditions coding categories, by a wide margin. Within the subcodes, conditions/effects, writing/goal setting, and writing/specific strategies saw high occurrences both as percentages

of total sentences and number of participants who indicated them at least once, after writing/reporting. These writers focused on their writing, especially goal setting and specific strategies, and the conditions that affected their experiences in the writing sessions, with effects most represented.

## Metacognition

Table 4. Distribution of Metacognition Codes

| | Frequency | Percent | Participants |
|---|---|---|---|
| Regulation | 5267 | 60.6 | 278 |
| Monitoring | 3459 | 39.8 | 278 |
| Planning | 1043 | 12.0 | 240 |
| Control | 519 | 6.0 | 197 |
| Evaluating | 192 | 2.2 | 113 |
| Knowledge | 3333 | 38.3 | 274 |
| Self | 1623 | 18.7 | 261 |
| Task | 1083 | 12.5 | 242 |
| Strategy | 578 | 6.7 | 205 |

*Note.* Frequency distribution of reported metacognitive activity in 8,692 coded sentences, following an adapted version of Gorzelsky et al.'s (2016) taxonomy. Regulation codes accounted for 60% of instances, with monitoring most frequent, while knowledge codes accounted for 38%, most often self-knowledge. Frequencies, percentages, and participant counts indicate both incidence and breadth across the sample.

For how participants report metacognitive activity about their writing experiences, depicted in Table 4, the study traced two dimensions of metacognition: knowledge, or knowing about themselves as writers, about the task at hand, or about the potential strategies for accomplishing their goals; and regulation, or actions taken towards planning, monitoring, controlling, or evaluating their writing. The two highest code incidences were regulation/monitoring and knowledge/self, followed by regulation/planning and knowledge/task. This indicates that participants overall reported actively monitoring themselves in these reflections in addition to carefully planning their next steps for the dissertation while using their knowledge of themselves as writers and the task at hand.

## Relationship between Writing Experiences and Metacognition

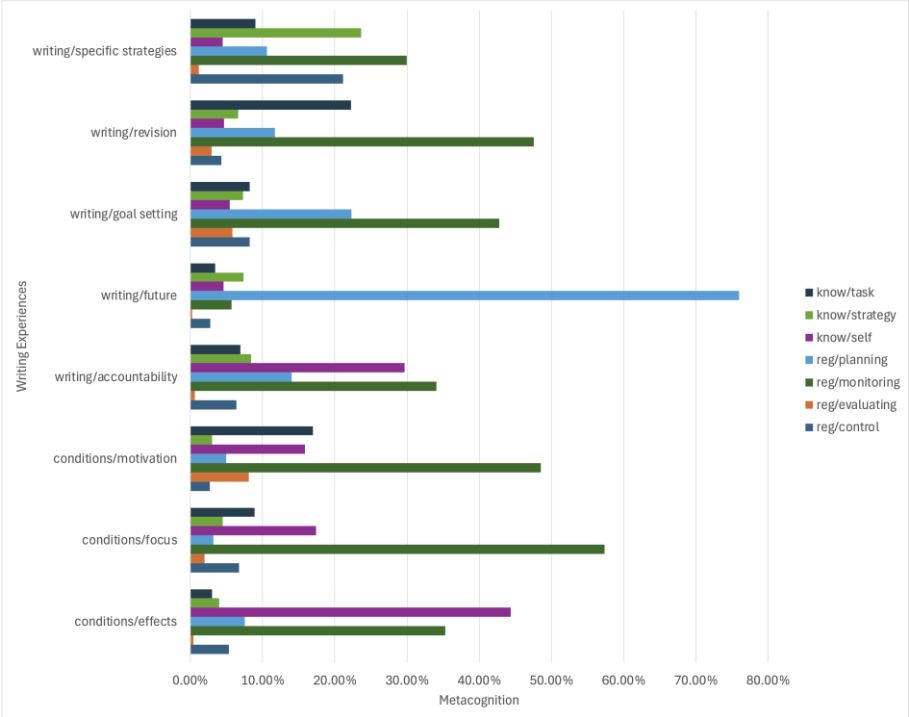


*Figure 1*: Writing Experiences and Metacognition Codes Coincidence

*Note.* Relationship between Writing Experience and Metacognition codes, showing co-occurrence patterns in participants' reflections. Writing/future often coincided with regulation/planning, and writing/goal setting also frequently aligned with planning. Conditions/focus and conditions/motivation were most often linked with regulation/monitoring. The figure illustrates how different types of writing experiences correspond with specific reported metacognitive processes, supporting the identification of three distinct writing approaches (strategic, affirming, and responsive).

Crosstabulation of the top eight Writing Experiences subcodes and all Metacognition subcodes, in Figure 1, represents more fully the relationship between what participants are reporting they are metacognitive about as well as the types of metacognition. One striking relationship is that writing/future and regulation/planning are significantly aligned, as is to a much lesser extent writing/goal setting and regulation/planning. Drilling down to the middle percentages, though, regulation/planning appears with writing/accountability in 14% of all accountability-coded sentences. In terms of regulation/monitoring, the experiences participants most often report monitoring metacognitively are conditions/focus (48%) and conditions/motivation (43%). Finally, the regulation/control code, indicating when a participant reports having taken an action in response to previous monitoring (either on a

previous day or earlier in the current day's reflection), co-occurs most often with writing/specific strategies (21%).

Turning to metacognitive knowledge codes, the highest correspondence here was with writing experiences related to conditions/effects of writing. Metacognitive knowledge about the dissertation task at hand co-occurs with writing/revision (22%) and conditions/motivation (17%) as a higher percentage than with writing/specific strategies (9% of the total specific strategies-coded items). Knowledge of the task is, on its face, similar to writing/specific strategies in that understanding what is required to undertake a task is an important facet of making choices about what to say and how to say it—essentially, responding to a writing exigency. The data show, however, that reports of task knowledge corresponded far more often with revision, or what they were thinking about changing, and motivation, or their ability to inspire themselves to work. Another aspect of metacognitive knowledge, strategy awareness, is also tied to knowing how to respond to a writing exigency as the writer here weighs different options for moving forward with their writing; knowledge/strategy co-occurred most often with writing/specific strategies and to a smaller extent writing/accountability.

On the whole, the data indicate that participants largely focus on writing and conditions-related experiences in their reflections and that the kinds of metacognition they report most often are monitoring, planning, knowing themselves as writers, or knowing the task at hand.

### 3.2 Research Question 2: writing experiences, metacognition, and goal setting

The second research question asked what does the relationship between participants' reported metacognition and their subjective writing experiences within the retreat reveal about the ways they manage their writing tasks, including if they met their self-defined writing goals? It should be noted here that the analysis is largely dependent on how participants chose to articulate their thinking. As such, the findings are necessarily more interpretive, drawn from patterns in how writers described planning, monitoring, or evaluating their progress throughout the retreat.

#### Managing the writing task: 3 approaches

In analyzing the data, there were three ways in which participants navigated a writing exigency in their reflections: strategic (n=121), affirming (n=8), and responsive (n=148). Note that these approaches could be an objective experience with their dissertation task or one that is subjectively positive or negative; additionally, these approaches occurred both continuously, within a single day, and discontinuously, or across more than one day.

A participant was considered to take a strategic approach when they described how they metacognitively strategized, planned, or controlled their thoughts pertaining to goal setting, revision, or specific strategies work. Nearly half, or 121 of 278 participants, had a strategic approach alone.

Examples of strategic approach sentences, labeled as [writing experiences] {metacognition}:

- "I'm thinking that if I get stuck, I should just write whatever is coming to my mind, even if it's informal." 24.1 [specific strategies] {planning}
- "We talked about writing as I go in my work so like doing an end of day writing dump after a coding session so that I don't forget what I did that day and move the needle bit by bit." 120.2 [specific strategies] {strategy}
- "At this point I feel invested in all of the quotes so it's hard to cut any (which I guess is the point of revising and getting other people's feedback so for now I think I'm just going to put as much as possible in there and I can cut later." 165.1 [revision] {control}
- "I usually have these task lists, but the one I made today was much more specific, which helped." 231.1 [goal setting] {strategy}

Those who demonstrated an affirming approach in the face of a writing exigency reported metacognitively monitoring and evaluating their motivations and the specific strategies they undertook within a writing session: they were giving themselves kudos in these sentences. Only 3% of participants, 8 of 278, displayed positive affect alone.

Examples of affirming approach sentences:

- "I got a rough draft, I got a rough draft! La la la LA la! Hum hum hum HUM huuuummmmmmm!" 55.2 [motivation] {evaluating}
- "But I still managed to write around 700 words, so not exactly the full 1000 word plan, but better than 0 (at this point I am celebrating any small victory)." 116.4 [motivation] {evaluating}
- "Wow – I honestly had a 'above and beyond' kind of day!" 117.2 [motivation] {monitoring}
- "So far im pretty jazzed with the process and wishing I could get this level of outside structure everyday, lol." 183.1 [motivation] {monitoring}
- "oh and one more thing – I think I did a good job writing concisely!" 219.2 [specific strategies] {monitoring}

Finally, 53% of participants (148 of 278) reported both approaches, sometimes even in one day, with an interplay between looking at the positive side of their writing experiences while also considering solutions and options for managing their writing tasks.

Example of a responsive approach reflection, combining strategy and affirmation (labels appear before the applicable sentence):

Participant 253.1, entire day's reflection

[NC] Negative Concern
[RF] Reframing
[AA] Affirming Approach
[ST] Strategic Approach

- "Things went well. The goals were small, so I feel I achieved more. Which feels great[NC]. I feel a little more centered and with direction, but there's been a lot of anxiety coming up wrt writing/framing. [RF] But I think I'm making a good choice with the new framing.
- What else. [NC] There has been some procrastination though. I think I was feeling overwhelmed looking for relevant references and trying to make sense of everything that was coming up.
- [AA+RF] But overall, I'm happy with the end result today.
- Now that I have started working directly on the dissertation template, it feels "more real" (and I managed to get myself out of code rabbit holes pretty successfully, woohoo!). The lunch walk was great. [ST] I need to do that tomorrow. [ST] I think I need to break my 2h session down again.
- I can't sit still for that long. [ST] So, I might do 50 min chunks with a 10 min break**.** What could be better? Not sure. I just need to get a little more motivation back. [NC] I was just dreading sitting to write… [RF] Maybe it'll be a little easier tomorrow."

After their initial commentary reported monitoring how things went in alignment with their goals for the day, this reflection turned to discussing the anxiety the writer was having about "framing." Each time they mention some sort of troublesome tendency (marked [NC]), with anxiety about framing, with procrastination, or overwhelm, the subsequent or nearby sentence offers some sort of positive self-encouragement (marked [RF]). Framing anxiety led to "But I think I'm making a good choice"; procrastination and overwhelm led to "I'm happy with the end result today"; and needing to get some motivation and not dread sitting down to write led to "maybe it'll be easier tomorrow." This writer is clearly providing themselves with encouragement via their positive affect (labeled [AA]) even as they also identify solutions to some of their writing issues, like thinking about breaks for Day 2 of the retreat and how long their writing sessions should be (labeled [ST]).

## Metacognition and the Solutions Orientation

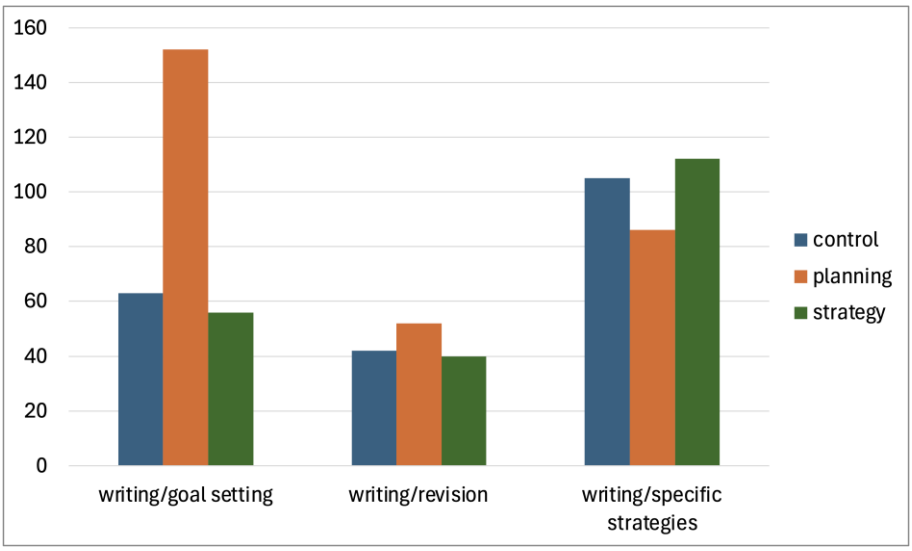


*Figure 2*: Solutions Orientation: Common Code Co-Occurrence Patterns

*Note.* Visualization of frequent code combinations characterizing the Solutions Orientation identified in 97% of participants (269/278). Goal-setting writing experiences most often co-occurred with planning metacognition, while specific strategies and revision co-occurred more equally with either strategy knowledge (considering options) or regulation/control (implementing response to previous monitoring).

The strategic and responsive approaches account together for 97% (269 of 278) of the participants, indicating that on at least one retreat day most writers took what I call a Solutions Orientation, alone or in tandem with positive affect. In terms of the types of solutions, goal-setting writing experiences (see Figure 2) most often appeared with reported planning metacognition, meaning that the writers were identifying a particular idea for solving a writing exigency that they intended to attempt the next retreat writing day. Specific strategies, however, presented more often with knowledge/strategy or regulation/control: these indicate that the writer was describing and weighing different potential solutions for their writing tasks either without choosing one (more musingly with knowledge/strategy) *or* that this weighing was in direct response to monitoring they'd performed earlier in that day's reflection.

### Writing Approaches and Goal-Meeting Correlations

To assess how the three different approaches materially affected the retreat participants' writing day, if at all, the Writing Approach was compared to the writer's daily assessments of their goal setting—i.e. whether or not they reported meeting their writing goals.

Table 5. Goal-Meeting Outcomes by Writing Approach

| Goal Met | Responsive | Strategic | Affirming |
|---|---|---|---|
| Yes | 340 | 213 | 18 |
| Shifted Yes | 23 | 16 | 4 |
| Mostly | 73 | 67 | 3 |
| No | 139 | 151 | 3 |
| Total | 575 | 447 | 28 |

*Note.* Cross-tabulation of daily goal-achievement reports with Writing Approach categories from 278 participants. "Yes" indicates full goal completion; "Shifted Yes" represents modified goals that were subsequently met; "Mostly" indicates partial completion; "No" represents unmet goals. Responsive approach writers (n=148) showed highest correlation to goal completion, while strategic approach writers (n=121) showed higher variability. Chi-square analysis revealed significant association between writing approach and goal achievement, $X2\ (6, N = 1050) = 26.53$, $p < .01$.

Those with the responsive and affirming approaches were more likely to have reported fully meeting their goals, as can be seen on Tables 5 and 6. Strategic approach writers were less likely to have reported fully meeting their goals every day of the retreat and had much higher incidences of either "mostly" meeting their planned goals or not having met their goals at all. A chi-square test of independence for all retreat days compiled showed significant association between Writing Approach and whether participants met their daily writing goals, $X2\ (6, N = 1050) = 26.53$, $p < .01$. Table 6 represents groupings of yes/shifted yes goal assessment and no/mostly no assessment results.

Table 6. Goal-Achievement Success Rates by Writing Approach

| Goal Met | Responsive | Strategic | Affirming |
|---|---|---|---|
| Yes | 63.1% | 51.2% | 78.6% |
| No | 36.9% | 48.8% | 21.4% |

*Note.* Simplified analysis of goal achievement combining "Yes" and "Shifted Yes" responses versus "No" and "Mostly" responses across writing approaches. Responsive approach saw a 63.1% full success rate compared to 51.2% for strategic approach and 78.6% for affirming approach. The high success rate for

the affirming approach should be interpreted cautiously given the small sample size (*n*=8, 3% of participants).

Responsive approach writers demonstrated through all days a markedly higher proportion for having met their daily writing goals, along with the positive affect-only writers. The strategic approach has its successes, but this approach also shows a far higher propensity than the other approaches to not meet writing goals, an important distinction in terms of understanding the ways that writers navigate occluded multi-genre situations.

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1 Research Questions

This study investigated how doctoral writers described their experiences during sustained drafting time and traced patterns in how they managed writing tasks during the retreat. The first research question focused on what kinds of writing-related experiences and metacognition writers reported; the second explored whether the relationship between their reported metacognition and writing experiences could yield insight into how participants manage writing tasks.

For the first research question, participants emphasized aspects of their writing process—setting realistic goals, keeping themselves accountable, developing and attempting specific strategies, and planning for future writing—and the conditions of writing, including motivation, focus, and environment. Metacognitively, writers primarily reported that they monitored progress, expressed self-knowledge, and regulated their thinking through planning for the future. The findings here confirm and build upon what others have reported regarding concerns about writing (Cahusac De Caux, 2021; Cotterall, 2011; Gimenez et al., 2024; Odena & Burgess, 2017) and what self-awareness the doctoral writers exhibit (Beaufort, 2007) when working through the dissertation task as a whole.

Analysis related to the second research question showed writers identified successful strategies or developed solutions to address challenges, often in tandem with evaluating their writing experiences. Within these reflective practices based in observable behavioral patterns, as opposed to enduring writerly dispositions, three distinctive profiles emerged: responsive (n=148), strategic (n=121), and affirming (n=8). When correlated with goal achievement, the responsive approach suggested the strongest association with success (63%), followed by the affirming approach (79%, though with limited representation at 3% of the participants), while the strategic approach indicated lower success rates (51%). Writers who combined practical solutions with positive self-acknowledgement seemed to demonstrate enhanced goal completion, extending previous research on doctoral writing challenges (Carter et al., 2020; Gimenez et al., 2024; González-Ocampo & Castelló, 2018; Odena & Burgess, 2017; Paré, 2011; Shen et al., 2024). Notably, a Solutions Orientation, whether alone or in combination with positive affect, was present in most participants (269/278), indicating how they approach their

dissertation writing tasks within the retreat, and potentially a marker for how they manage the genre in general.

### 4.2 Solutions Orientation and the Dissertation Genre

The Solutions Orientation identified in this study advances prior work on metacognitive problem-solving in graduate writing. Previous research (e.g. Roderick, 2019) documented solution-seeking as an episodic feature of graduate proposal writing, but the current study suggests that such a stance can also function as a sustained, compensatory mechanism across multiple writing retreat days, if not across the entire extended timeline of dissertation writing. This persistent "strategic experimentation"—ongoing strategy development, testing, and refinement in response to the dissertation's unique demands—expands Gorzelsky et al.'s (2016) metacognitive framework beyond constructive metacognition as cross-task reflection to encompass a more dynamic, iterative process specifically adapted to the dissertation's multi-everything nature. Such persistent problem-solving orientations, particularly if carried beyond the retreat context, could help compensate for the limited genre awareness and feedback available to dissertation writers. Essentially, these writers' abilities to develop and experiment with different solutions to a dissertation task, especially early in the process, could be key to gradually building an understanding of what exactly the dissertation is.

The significance of this Solutions Orientation becomes clearer when considered alongside the frameworks discussed earlier regarding genre recontextualization and the development of conditional knowledge. As Tardy et al. (2020) and others explain, genre use depends on writers' ability to recontextualize prior knowledge and strategies into new rhetorical situations. Yet, the dissertation as an occluded multi-everything genre disrupts this process. It lacks formal stability, varies across disciplines and institutions, and carries high epistemic stakes, often with tacit expectations that resist codification (Carter et al., 2021; González-Ocampo & Castelló, 2018; Paré, 2011). Writers may intuit that the dissertation patently differs from proximate genres (seminar papers, conference proposals, journal articles) but cannot always articulate how. The absence of clear genre models, compounded by the irregular or vague feedback from supervisors, undermines the formation of conditional knowledge, or knowing when and how to apply a given strategy (Negretti, 2021; Veenman et al., 2006). Knowing how to use a tool differs from knowing what tool is best to use at a given time. For example, a dissertator may exhibit excellent strategy knowledge of how to create detailed outlines, but without conditional knowledge, they might waste time creating and continually revising said elaborate outline, resulting in quite the procrastination mechanism.

Since dissertation writers often have little genre instruction and direction and since feedback on the efficacy of their attempted strategies can pose troublesome in terms of content or timeliness (Can & Walker, 2011; Carter & Kumar, 2017), developing conditional knowledge is unlikely to be a simple matter. Although these writers can rehearse the performance, approximate the moves, and innovate within the form, their genre knowledge only begins to stabilize once the supervisor or committee validates it. Thus, these feedback mechanisms are specifically fraught for the dissertation, where the supervisor's judgment

plays a pivotal role in defining success. Without the validation for their conditional knowledge, writers must recontextualize in the dark.

The Solutions Orientation in this study's findings thus plays a dual role in this landscape: it supports the development of conditional knowledge and potentially represents how dissertators actively mediate between multiple genre systems (Spinuzzi, 2003)—the published scholarship they're reading, the feedback they've received, and the reflective practices through which they develop disciplinary identity. Over time, with perhaps significant (and frustrating) trial and error, and with ongoing interactions with mentors and peers and other disciplinary practitioners, these writers are able to gradually build the genre-specific and conditional knowledge necessary to navigate the dissertation as a situated, high-stakes genre system.

### 4.3 Positive Affect and the Dissertation Genre

There is a second prong to dissertation writer's experiences of drafting during a writing retreat: the affective side, with positive self-affirmation. While the Solutions Orientation appears important for developing strategies and conditional knowledge, the data suggest that the affective dimension reported by those with the most effective goal-meeting behaviors could reflect the motivation writers need to continue their drafting processes. This correlation may explain why participants who self-reported the responsive approach also reported higher goal-meeting success than using strategy alone.

Research has shown that metacognition and affect relate to motivation, or how an individual engages in tasks. While there are three components to motivation (Pintrich, 2003), I focus here on the third: affect. Emotions, feelings, and moods play an important role in motivation, though motivation itself should be understood as a dynamic process that can fluctuate based on internal states, external feedback, and task characteristics rather than as a static trait (du Boulay et al., 2010). Dissertation writers in this study—self-selected participants in a writing retreat—exhibited positive affect in the reflections' affirming and responsive approaches, where they celebrated themselves meeting or exceeding their goals, congratulated themselves on a task well done, or offered themselves encouragement after a bad day. In the responsive approach specifically, the self-affirming language often followed reportage, neutral or negative, signaling a turn in the self-described mood of the reflection and potentially demonstrating the dynamism of the motivational process.

A participant's reported positive orientation toward their daily dissertation task might extend beyond simple emotions or feelings to encompass cognitive processes that are also embodied and relational (Leander & Ehret, 2019; Williams, 2019). As part of understanding affect beyond cognition, it can be described as a force that compels movement, not solely a physical act, to include the flow of ideas and the processes of becoming, shaping how we engage with the world, in part via writing (Hemmings, 2005; Micciche, 2006; Palmer, 2023; Weise & Castelló, 2025). This force can "stick" to objects, influencing how we perceive and evaluate them (Ahmed, 2010; Kurtyka, 2015). Sticky dissertation experiences, from anxiety to

pride, arise from within the person and the interaction between the writer and the task, shaped by their past experiences (or lack thereof).

Evidence of sticky dissertation experiences may be seen in this study via the success rate among participants employing the affirming approach (79%, albeit from a small part of the sample). Were this to be further confirmed through continued data collection, this finding would build upon existing research on emotions in writing (Cotterall, 2013; Williams, 2019) and writer resilience and wellbeing (Barry et al., 2018; Evans et al., 2018) by suggesting that positive affect may function as a strategy that facilitates goal achievement. The combination of affirmation with solution-seeking behaviors in the responsive approach appears quite effective, echoing du Boulay et al.'s (2010) conceptualization that affect and metacognition significantly influence each other and motivation in the learning process. Here, the findings suggest an integrated relationship where affective regulation and metacognitive strategy development mutually reinforce each other.

The integrated relationship is of particular note because the participants' affirming, positive affect statements act as a hinge between neutral or negative experiences and planning language. One pattern emerges from these hinge moments as potential evidence of how writers "settle in" with this particular genre (Kurtyka, 2015) and shift focus to reframe their negativity (Driscoll & Powell, 2016). Reflections of this kind suggest that the dissertator seems to be purposefully choosing to make drafting more comfortable for themselves—essentially communicating "this happened, it's okay, and here is what I will try tomorrow"—allowing the motivational and drafting cycle to continue. This cycle ultimately enables writers to shape their understanding of the dissertation genre through sustained engagement rather than abandonment when faced with the challenges inherent in navigating occluded expectations and limited feedback.

### 4.4 A Model for Using the Dissertation Genre

While existing theoretical frameworks effectively address aspects of genre use and its connections to metacognition and genre-specific knowledge (Gorzelsky et al., 2016; Negretti & McGrath, 2018; Tardy et al., 2020), they have not fully attended to the strategies writers employ when struggling with dissertation-specific genre knowledge acquisition. The framework proposed here (Figure 3) extends these existing models in three key ways: first, by integrating both solutions-oriented and affective pathways into a single model of genre navigation; second, by explicitly acknowledging the conditional nature of feedback in dissertation contexts; and third, by identifying compensatory mechanisms writers employ when feedback is limited or delayed.

Within the framework, multiple components interact to facilitate dissertation genre use through both the solutions oriented and affective pathways, and call attention to a critical tension in the drafting process: that feedback, particularly from the supervisor, is foundational to building conditional knowledge, and obtaining the feedback is intermittent and sometimes troublesome. At the same time, in aiming to capture this process, the model admittedly

reduces the inherent complexities and instead serves as a primarily heuristic device, as opposed to a comprehensive representation.

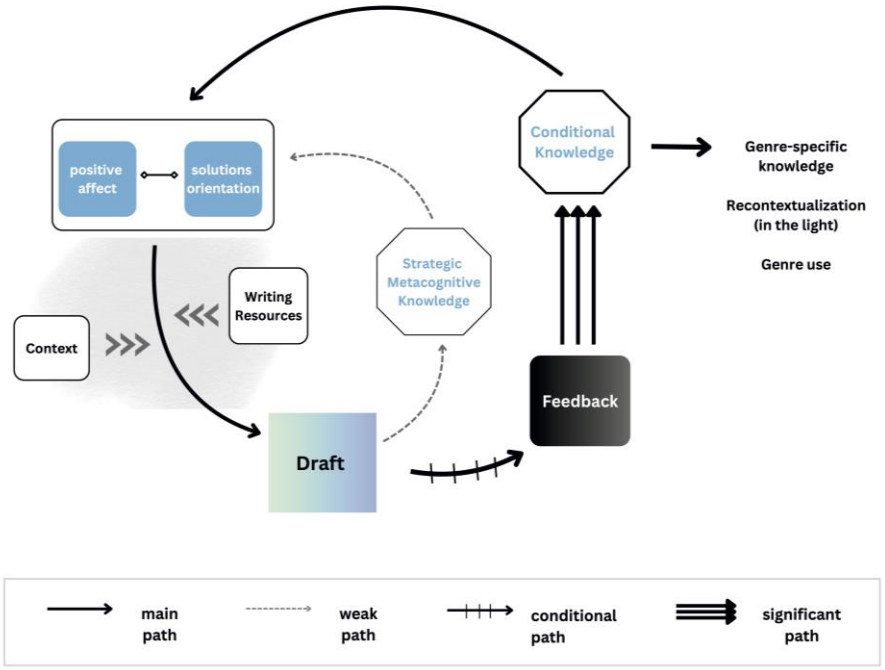


*Figure 3*: Process Model for Developing Genre-Specific Knowledge in Dissertation Writing

*Note*. Heuristic process model of genre knowledge development during dissertation writing. Solid arrows represent optimal pathways with reliable feedback; dotted lines indicate compensatory mechanisms when feedback is limited or delayed. The model shows how writers integrate a Solutions Orientation and/or positive affect with contextual understanding and writing resources to produce drafts, which ideally receive timely and helpful feedback (triple arrows indicate the importance of this pathway) to build conditional knowledge. When feedback is unavailable, represented by the flagged arrow, writers travel a different pathway where they must rely on sustained strategic experimentation and motivation to continue progress.

The first trajectory, indicated by the solid arrow, demonstrates how writers use their positive affect and/or Solutions Orientations, along with an integration of contextual understanding and writing resources, to develop a draft. "Context" in this model is used broadly here to encapsulate and generalize the situated nature of dissertation writing, including their department, university, (sub)disciplinary norms, power dynamics, and so on. Writing

resources, which also mediate how the writer uses their solutions and/or affective approach to create a draft, include past academic writing the dissertator draws upon. Once the writer has some drafted language, however, pathways can diverge.

When following the solid arrows, the model elaborates how the draft receives feedback—used broadly here to include that from supervisors, peers, or other participation in the discipline; the triple arrows in this part of the pathway indicate both the multiple means of feedback *and* its significance in the development of genre-specific knowledge. With feedback, confirmation that their attempted strategies were successful or ineffective, the writer incrementally builds conditional knowledge. From there, the dissertator can build genre-specific knowledge tied to the dissertation, which they then recontextualize—in the light this time because of the building conditional knowledge—for future tasks to eventually complete the project and fully participate in their field. Alternatively, the dissertator may also continue cycling through drafting and re-drafting, with their position in the writing process determining how they further develop conditional knowledge via the iterative process involving feedback.

Realistically, the nature of the feedback processes during the dissertation are unlikely to massively change anytime soon (Lundell & Beach, 2003): it would require institutional and cultural changes that are glacially slow to implement, as evidenced by the gradual improvement in doctoral attrition rates. This model acknowledges the situation, so the solid arrow from the draft to feedback is flagged to reflect that it travels through what Gonzàlez-Ocampo and Castelló (2018) characterize as a conditional pathway, where feedback is neither guaranteed nor consistently available.

While awaiting feedback, whether due to an incomplete draft or supervisor delays, the writer can either languish, procrastinating on the dissertation tasks, or continue drafting as best they can. This latter process is shown via the dotted lighter lines from the draft to the strategic metacognitive knowledge and back to the writing approaches, indicating the weaker aspects of this process: writers cannot yet truly know when and why to use a strategy until it has been confirmed. To facilitate movement from the initial draft—to re-attempt a draft or to tackle a new part of the dissertation—requires motivation and resilience to continue developing and deploying strategies, a sustained emotional investment. As a further implicit aspect of managing emotions and the writing task, the motivated individual can leverage metacognition to monitor their understanding, adjust strategies, and maintain effort (du Boulay et al., 2010), even potentially reinterpreting negative affective experiences. An individual can encounter a difficulty with their writing, or even a frustration in the face of little feedback, but metacognitive awareness allows them to recognize the feelings as signals to adjust their strategies as opposed to simply finding the obstacles insurmountable (Efklides, 2006).

Note that this heuristic does not include a pathway directly from the draft to conditional knowledge. The dissertation's dynamism largely precludes exemplar analysis, and the attendant transfer of strategies to one's own draft, thereby rendering that particular pathway quite weak. These writers primarily develop conditional knowledge via the iterative process involving feedback.

Essentially, in order to move forward, writers must engage in extensive trial and error (Starke-Meyerring, 2011), requiring what Carter and Kumar (2017) describe as self-directed strategy development. This compensatory mechanism enables writers to maintain productivity despite the incomplete development of conditional knowledge and necessitates a greater reliance on both their knowledge of strategies and their motivation and resilience to continue, as evidenced by the findings in this study. With the two distinct pathways, this model captures both the systematic nature of dissertation writing development and the adaptive strategies these writers employ to overcome limitations on conditional knowledge imposed by feedback constraints.

### 4.5 Principles for Doctoral Writing

The model also indicates some potential principles to help ease doctoral writing experiences. Though this study examines doctoral writers at one institution, the patterns revealed in their writing approaches suggest broader implications that could apply elsewhere. The scholarly literature has long pointed to and emphasized the supervisor as enhancing doctoral support (Bearman et al., 2024; Casanave, 2019; M. Maher, 2014; Skov, 2021; Wang et al., 2024), but as noted above, a cultural change in advisor habits of that magnitude would occur, and is occurring, quite slowly. Meanwhile, a gap often remains between what supervisors can realistically provide and what writers require to sustain their progress.

I offer the following general principles that can be flexibly implemented across different institutional settings, with an acknowledgement that diverse contexts shape doctoral writers' experiences and assistance needs:

*Integrate reflection that acknowledges progress*. Writers gain momentum when they create space for recognizing their accomplishments, as this affirmative approach builds confidence.

*Support strategic experimentation alongside affective awareness*. Writers benefit from developing concrete strategies while acknowledging their emotional responses to writing, as the data imply writers who combined affirming self-talk with strategic planning showed a tendency toward higher goal achievement.

*Prioritize responsive approaches over prescriptive protocols*. Rather than prescribing fixed reflection frameworks that all writers must follow, support systems could help writers recognize their existing strengths and build personalized strategies from that foundation. Affirming what writers already do well—whether conscious or intuitive—then helping them experiment with new approaches would extend those strengths. This responsive approach then positions writers as experts on their own processes, encouraging sustainable self-directed strategies that adapt to their evolving project demands.

Building on these retreat-based insights, graduate student advisors/mentors and those who provide general doctoral writing support (cf. Badenhorst, 2023; Baillargeon, 2020) can similarly adapt their practices to reflect the importance of progress recognition—to helping writers build confidence and effective strategies.

### 4.6 Limitations

There are several limitations to this study. First, the data come from guided self-reflections written during a structured retreat, which, while temporally proximate to participants' writing, do not constitute entirely naturalistic accounts. Relatedly, participants self-selected by applying to the dissertation writing retreat, suggesting a level of motivation and investment in writing that may not reflect the broader graduate student population. The self-reported nature of the reflections further limits the findings, as participants' accounts of their writing time are shaped by subjective perception, memory, and possibly self-representation biases. Although the reflections were unguided by assessment or stakes, the prompts themselves may have introduced subtle framing effects. Another limitation is that RQ1, focused on writing strategies and progress, is more directly observable in the data than RQ2, which attends to affective and regulatory processes that may be less consistently articulated. Finally, because all data were collected at a single U.S. institution, findings should be understood as contextually grounded within the norms and expectations of U.S. graduate education, which may shape students' experiences of writing in ways that differ across institutional or international settings.

## 5. Conclusion

Navigating dissertation writing demands complex intellectual, rhetorical, and emotional capabilities from doctoral students. This study reveals how doctoral writers' writing experiences interweave with their reported metacognitive practices, illustrating key patterns in how they approach dissertation tasks in the retreat context. These patterns may also characterize dissertation writing more broadly. Identifying distinct writing approaches in the reflective practices provides insights into how writers develop and deploy strategies for managing their dissertation writing and their affective stances towards these tasks. Successful dissertation work in these instances might very well stem from the writers' ability to motivate and self-affirm, to generate text, and to ponder upon and wield actionable strategies until feedback validates a workable solution.

The findings carry implications for doctoral education and institutional initiatives. Evidence of goal achievement correlating with writers' combination of positive affect and solutions-oriented thinking aligns with offering mentorship and guidance that addresses both emotional and tactical aspects. Further, the prevalence of the Solutions Orientation across participants indicates that developing this capacity may be vital for dissertation success. From these insights, future research might explore these reflective orientations in more institutional settings, investigate the longitudinal development of conditional knowledge via positive affect and the Solutions Orientation, or explore the origins of doctoral writers' strategic approaches. Such research could further inform how institutions structure writing support, how advisors mentor doctoral writers, and how doctoral programs prepare students for the dissertation task.

## Author Note

The data that support this study's findings are available at https://osf.io/bjpvh/
I gratefully acknowledge Amena Haider for her careful assistance with intercoder reliability and data coding procedures.

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## Appendix A: Writing Experiences Coding Glossary

This is the coding glossary developed and tested during the course of this study for measuring dissertation writers' experiences writing the dissertation.

| Main Themes and Subthemes | Explanation When the Writers |
|---|---|
| **Externals** | Indicate an experience with something outside the retreat, but that still affects their writing. Can also include emotional and mental aspects in place before arriving at the retreat. |
| Work-life balance | Have trouble balancing dissertation work with other obligations (including family and teaching) |
| Advisor expectations or feedback | Indicate an experience with their advisor |
| Pre-existing emotions | Express an emotion or mental health-related statement that clearly pre-dates the retreat and affects their writing in the retreat. |
| **Time management** | Describe something about how they structure, assess, or handle the time they can or should be working on the dissertation. |
| Taking too long | Indicate a complaint or concern about the amount of time they have taken on a task or the dissertation overall |
| Procrastination | Mention anything about procrastination itself or perfectionism and writer's block |
| How much works best | Assess the amount of time that works best or not, the time of day that works best for them (or not), or even if writing every day would suffice. |
| **Task management** | Describe how they structure, assess, or handle the discrete items/writing sections/data management and the like that they can or should be working on for the dissertation. |
| Prioritizing tasks | Describe deciding which items to work on first or being unsure how to decide |

| | |
|---|---|
| Moving between activities | Discuss how they switch between writing, reading, data gathering, and data analysis, among other activities |
| Not knowing | Express not knowing how to approach some task related to the dissertation or not knowing how their work will be received by themselves, their advisor, or their discipline |
| **Conditions** | Mention general conditions of writing including motivation, focus, emotional aspects that occurred during the retreat, or items related to their writing context (including food, space, and light) |
| Motivation to work | Communicate something about whether or not they have the intrinsic drive to work on a dissertation task |
| Effects on writing | Note issues that affect their writing, including the writing space or if they are hungry or sleepy. |
| Focus | Describe lacking or having the ability to dedicate themselves to some aspect of the dissertation. Can be during the retreat or describe past instances. |
| **Writing** | Identify how they approach their writing day, writing block of time, or writing week. |
| Accountability | Reference extrinsic forces that encourage them to write. Can include having a schedule set for them in the retreat, being told where to be and what to do (i.e. when to have lunch), or seeing others writing in the same space. |
| Goal setting | Discuss how they approach setting goals or assess if they reached their goals. |
| Revision/editing | Note having to fix content or sentence-level issues in their dissertation writing. |
| Specific strategies | Describe a particular writing or drafting process or idea they enacted during the retreat usually, but not always, in response to a writing or content concern |

| | |
|---|---|
| Future | Discuss something about what they will do after the retreat |
| Reporting | List what they did or did not do during the retreat that day with no value statements |

## Appendix B: Metacognition Coding Glossary

This is the metacognition coding glossary, modifying that of Gorzelsky et al. (2016), which was used during the coding process.

| Main Themes and Subthemes | When the sentence expresses |
|---|---|
| **Knowledge** | An understanding of their experiences—knowing about their own writing and thinking more broadly. |
| Self | Knowledge of themselves as writers, including forms of writing they've (un)successfully used in the past, elements of writing they're comfortable with, and what environmental characteristics they find helpful or troublesome. |
| Task | An understanding of the good and bad of this particular project, its circumstances, or its context. Often focuses more on the writing process or some aspect of the writing or dissertation as opposed to a focus on themselves as writers. |
| Strategy | Knowledge of the different approaches they might effectively use to complete a project. Includes noting a potential strategy that they did not attempt to use. |
| **Regulation** | Actions they have taken, are taking, or will take, often as a result of the knowing/understanding expressed above. |
| Planning | Identification of a problem, analyzing it, and choosing a strategy to address it. Applies to actions they will be doing moving forward within the retreat or the near future. |
| Monitoring | An evaluation of their thinking or efforts towards their project. |
| Control | Choices the writer made and actions they took as a result of monitoring. |
| Evaluating | |

| | |
|---|---|
| Cognition | An assessment of the completed tasks for the day, and is couched in specifics of what was or was not accomplished.<br>Thinking alone and no meta-aspect. |