

Where angels fear to tread? The art librarian as MFA thesis ‘midwife’

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As any art librarian who works with MFA students can attest, many artists loathe writing. It’s unsurprising, then, that the thesis paper is one of the most stressful, angst-ridden experiences in an art graduate student’s career. This paper explores a possible new role for the art librarian as an editor and writing coach – a ‘midwife’ for students working through the thesis writing process. The author shares information on establishing this role and offers guidance for colleagues who may wish to try similar efforts at their institutions.

Background

In the US, many MFA programs culminate in two capstones: a final exhibition and some form of writing in which the degree-seeking student discusses and documents their work. Indeed, nearly all of *US news & world report’s* top ten MFA programs¹ include these two components as degree requirements. The first of these requirements, the exhibition, is an artistic challenge for which art schools prepare students. Artistic talent is nurtured and refined through two or more years of coursework, mentoring, and studio critique. What is less clear is how schools prepare MFA students for the written requirement. Looking through the curriculum websites for these same top-tier programs, one does not see courses that directly instruct students how to research and write *as artists*. Although most programs require several semesters of art history coursework, the research and writing competencies necessary for completing an art history term paper do not adequately translate into strategies MFA students can use when they turn a critical eye inward to examine and discuss their own work and ideas in thesis papers or other capstone writing projects. Art education teaches students how to communicate their ideas effectively through visual (and related) means but is less robust in teaching them how to communicate their ideas in writing.

Sources for writing self-help, which could provide guidance to an art MFA student embarking upon the thesis-writing process, are also thin on the ground. This kind of material does exist: a quick WorldCat search reveals scores of ‘how to write a thesis style books, but these overwhelmingly target graduate students in the sciences and social sciences. There are even some publications that target MFA students, but only those enrolled in creative writing programs. Books about art writing exist as well, of course, but these mainly provide guidance in the professional types of writing artists commonly engage in, such as crafting artist’s statements, writing critiques, and applying for grants. Analytical writing at the level required for a thesis paper is largely ignored.²

‘What about writing centers?’ one may be tempted to ask, ‘Can’t they help these poor students?’ It’s difficult to generalize about writing centers: writing centers employ a diverse range of service models and the body of literature on the subject is too vast to synthesize here. However, certain assumptions feel safe to make. First, because undergraduates constitute the bulk of the student body at most colleges and universities, writing centers are geared toward helping those students and are less focused on helping graduate students. Not only do graduate

1. ‘Best Graduate Fine Arts Programs,’ *US news & world report*, 2020, <https://www.usnews.com/best-graduate-schools/top-fine-arts-schools/fine-arts-rankings>. NOTE: The author in no way endorses the *US News & World Report* criteria and ranking system, which has been the subject of much debate and scrutiny. Its use here was simply to gather a list of ten well-respected MFA programs for the purposes of determining the extent to which programs require students to complete a significant writing project as part of the graduation requirements.

2. One of the most helpful ‘writing for artists’ books I have found, *Writing for visual thinkers: A guide for artists and designers* by Andrea Marks, only mentions the word ‘thesis’ twice—both times in a brief one-paragraph explanation of what a research essay is.

students make up a smaller proportion of a typical campus student body, they *theoretically* already possess the academic ‘chops’ required to succeed in their graduate programs, since they applied and were selected for admittance by the faculty. Furthermore, because writing centers serve such a wide array of clientele, helping struggling writers from all areas and disciplines from physics to gender studies, it’s unreasonable to believe they would be equipped to deal with the highly specialized needs of a niche population like art MFA students producing capstone/thesis writing projects. Writing centers (or similar services) located at specialized art and design schools are, one hopes, better prepared to help their graduate populations. Finally, feelings of anxiety and Imposter Syndrome prevent many graduate students—from all disciplines—from seeking assistance at a campus writing center—but more on this particular problem in the next section.

Thesis = Nemesis?

Compounding the lack of preparedness, many MFA students experience a sense of dread, bordering on anxiety, at the prospect of writing a sustained examination of their work. These feelings are hardly unique to MFA students. There is an entire body of literature on the phenomenon of graduate student anxiety, and Imposter Syndrome is such a widespread problem that the GradSchool Reddit site lists ‘No posts about Imposter Syndrome’ as one of its community-governing rules³—surely because those discussions would completely swamp the site if they were allowed. Less common, however, is research specifically about art graduate students and writing. Literature searches on this topic mostly result in articles about *creative writing* MFA students. A handful of articles have been published, however, that study and summarize this unique population’s prevailing attitudes towards writing, mostly written by researchers in the UK, where practice-based art PhD programs have existed for many years.

One early study was written by Jacquelyn Collinson in 2005. Collinson wrote about the identity conflicts commonly experienced by artists new to the academic pursuits of research and writing. Her article, ‘Artistry and analysis: Student experiences of UK practice-based doctorates in Art and Design,’ provides insight gleaned from interviews with 50 art and design students located at 25 different UK institutions. Across all the people she interviewed, Collinson found that ‘students held primarily to a sense of the creative self, which was of paramount importance to them. This was articulated via self-categorizations such as: artist, photographer, ceramicist, designer, and so on.’⁴

Collinson observed that problems arose when these artists, who confessed to relying heavily on intuition and emotion in their creative work,⁵ were suddenly required to switch gears and generate analytical research and writing. Because they did not conceive of themselves as researchers and writers, the students experienced confusion and frustration. She writes, ‘Holding these conceptions of identity, students then encounter with some shock the new domain of research.’⁶ This identity crisis tainted the students’ view of research and writing; they perceived it ‘as fundamentally detrimental to their creative activity and consequently to their creative selves.’⁷

Collinson identifies another fear related, but not identical to, the identity issue. In writing about their work, students must ‘portray analytically the process of their making, and to situate it within broader academic contexts.’⁸ In other words, they have to (metaphorically, idiomatically) show how the sausage gets made. The students viewed explaining their artmaking processes as a risk-filled endeavor, one that would expose their ‘routines of creativity.’⁹ Analyzing their ideas and creative processes through research and writing, Collinson wrote, threatened to erase the art-making magic; it imperiled students’ creativity: ‘The prized qualities of intuition, openness and spontaneity might be constrained, distorted, desiccated by this new found power [of analytical thinking].’¹⁰

UK art educator Rebekka Kill found that these beliefs begin to take root early in an artist’s academic career. In her 2006 article, ‘Coming in from the cold: Imperialist legacies and tactical criticalities,’ Kill interviewed undergraduate art students to gauge their perceptions about research and writing. She discovered feelings of unease and distaste as well as an oppositional attitude toward writing that echoes Collinson’s findings. The students in Kill’s study described writing as ‘homogenising... An alien presence... an element that *should* be resisted.’¹¹ Because Kill’s essay focused on undergraduate art students, it provides insight into how early these attitudes begin to foment within the artist’s psyche.

3. ‘r/GradSchool rules,’ *r/GradSchool Reddit*, <https://www.reddit.com/r/GradSchool/>, accessed June 13, 2022.

4. Jacquelyn Allen Collinson, ‘Artistry and analysis: Student experiences of UK practice-based doctorates in art and design,’ *International journal of qualitative studies in education* 18, no. 6 (2005): 716, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518390500298196>.

5. *Ibid.*, 717.

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Ibid.*, 718.

8. *Ibid.*, 719.

9. *Ibid.*, 720.

10. *Ibid.*

11. Rebekka Kill, ‘Coming in from the cold: Imperialist legacies and tactical criticalities,’ *International journal of art & design education* 25, no. 3 (2006): 314, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1476-8070.2006.00497.x>.

Another article about UK-based art and design PhD programs was published in 2007 in *Studies in art education*. In this article, author John Hockey studied writing anxiety using population sampling methods similar to Collinson's. Interviews with 50 practice-based art PhD students and 50 supervisors at 25 UK institutions give evidence to support what many art librarians intuitively perceive through years of experience working with MFA students. Namely, Hockey, like Collinson, observed that students perceived analytical writing as a threat to their artistic identity. Discussing their work 'was seen to have the potential to reduce or eradicate their creative powers. Students were then fearful that their involvement in this objective dimension would impair, curtail, or even freeze their capacity to create subjectively.'¹² In short, he found that students viewed writing as so threatening to their creative abilities that they feared no longer being able to produce art, and therefore no longer being artists. Hockey partially attributes these fears to the aforementioned problem of insufficient writing skills and lack of writing support: 'The vast majority of students had little experience of academic writing... Their writing skills were then not developed.'¹³

Finally, Linda Epps and Carolyn Mamchur's 2009 article 'Artful language: Academic writing for the art student' builds on and helpfully summarizes the previous research. The authors also identify two root causes of MFA students' writing anxiety. First, they touch upon the identity problem, as previously described by Collinson, Kill, and Hockey, wherein the student artist perceives analytical writing as an existential threat to their creativity. Second, they explain how artists often perceive writing as both foreign and unimportant, going so far as to suggest that these perceptions are embedded within the discipline itself, woven into its very fabric. 'Substantive writing is unfamiliar territory for most practice-based artists... Historically there seems to be a tacit understanding upheld by instructors and students alike, that writing is marginal, in addition to, the art.'¹⁴ Epps and Mamchur, together with the authors previously discussed, all point to a fear of writing that is so widespread among art students that it seems *cultural*.

Confronted with all this research, one quickly sees the inherent conflict within graduate-level studio art education. Institutions require students to produce academic or analytical writing about their own work, yet there is insufficient support and training. This lack of preparation stokes the pre-existing, culturally embedded fears and anxieties that art students bring to the writing process. The result is a stressful, angst-ridden experience that arrives at the end of the graduate program, the same period in which they are attempting to create a body of work that launches them as professional artists.

Complicating Factors

A series of other factors further complicate and exacerbate this conflict. Given the general trend in higher education of increasing adjunct labor and decreasing numbers of tenure-track faculty,¹⁵ it's no surprise that graduate faculty are spread more thinly than ever. They do not have the time to give students intensive writing assistance *and* provide them with the wisdom they need to successfully produce their artwork. At research institutions in particular, art faculty are expected to obtain grants and fellowships that boost the university's research profile. These demands are, of course, in addition to already-heavy faculty workloads consisting of teaching courses, doing service work, and producing their own artwork. Even if they had the time to help students with their thesis papers, many art professors share their students' jaundiced view of writing, as noted by Epps and Mamchur.

A final factor is the outcome of a relatively recent development in the world of library science. In the pre-internet era, graduate student theses and dissertations were printed, bound, and stored in the college or university library's collection. Obtaining one of these items was a rather cumbersome and expensive process: a researcher either had to visit the institution's library and make a photocopy or pay a hefty reproduction fee to have a copy sent to them. With the advent of online institutional repositories, however, many colleges and universities now make student work accessible to anyone with an internet connection. Although this new level of access is a boon for researchers, it brings a higher level of public scrutiny to graduate students' writing. In the past, when few people could gain access to an artist's MFA thesis, lackluster writing skills might go unnoticed. Today, however, curators, galleryists, grant agencies, and potential employers can find and download an artist's graduate thesis by simply Googling their name. A poorly written thesis paper can potentially harm an artist's future career and is a liability that will live forever online.

12. John Hockey, 'United Kingdom art and design practice-based PhDs: Evidence from students and their supervisors,' *Studies in art education* 48, no. 2 (Winter 2007): 164, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00393541.2007.11650097>.

13. *Ibid.*, 165.

14. Linda Epps and Carolyn Mamchur, 'Artful language: Academic writing for the art student,' *International journal of art & design education* 28, no. 3 (October 2009): 270, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1476-8070.2009.01622.x>.

15. Jordan Weissmann, 'The ever-shrinking role of tenured college professors (in 1 chart),' *The Atlantic*, April 10, 2013, <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2013/04/the-ever-shrinking-role-of-tenured-college-professors-in-1-chart/274849/>.

Call the Midwife

Using a framework helpfully suggested in Barbara Bolt’s essay ‘Finding my voice (s) in the creative arts thesis,’ I will now switch from using the academic third-person style of writing to using the less-formal first-person style. My reasons for doing so are twofold: first, as Bolt points out, it is more appropriate (and less cumbersome) to convey a personal narrative for the purposes of reflective analysis using the first-person voice.¹⁶ Second, I hope that the students with whom I work will read this article someday and see that scholarly writing doesn’t have to be boring, impersonal, convoluted, and buttoned-up—all the adjectives they rebel against in their own writing.

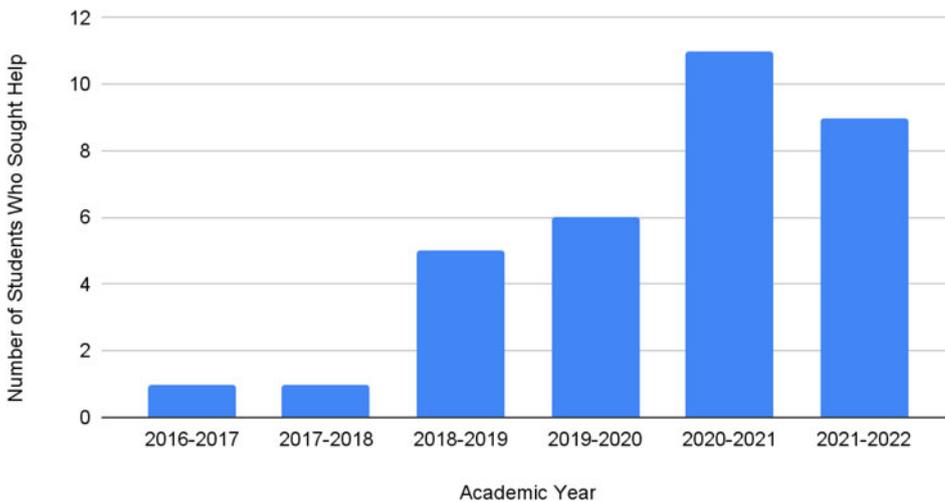
I began working with art MFA students in 2008, when I was hired as the Arts Librarian at Georgia State University in Atlanta, Georgia. Although I had been a professional librarian for six years and had been working with undergraduate art students for five of those years, I knew relatively little about graduate-level studio art education. My work history and educational background in studio art gave me some inkling about how my new clientele might feel about writing, but I didn’t realize just how deeply those anxieties run and how tightly they’re woven into the culture. Early on, I saw warning signs whenever I met with MFA students to help them with research papers for their required art history courses. These consultations revealed the exact problems identified by the authors discussed in the first half of this article: lack of training in writing and research and strong negative feelings associated with analytical writing.

I correctly surmised that these problems likely intensified as the students approached their final (thesis) year. Like many other institutions with MFA programs, Georgia State requires both a final exhibition and accompanying thesis paper. The thesis year is a pressure cooker: students must produce a major body of work, mount an exhibition of that work, and produce a well-written paper in which they analyze their work, research and explain their ideas, and discuss their work in relation to other artists—all within the span of two semesters. I assisted students however I could—helping them amass reading lists, teaching them how to properly cite things, and so forth—but students had to seek my help and not all of them took advantage of my services. In these one-off consultations, I was not able to provide them with the in-depth writing help they clearly needed. I was operating like an urgent care center, doling out assistance during moments of crisis, when what students really needed was sustained support throughout their thesis year. I needed to become a thesis midwife.¹⁷

In 2016, I made my willingness to assist students with their thesis writing more broadly and plainly known. Georgia State requires all third-year MFA students to enroll in a thesis writing class during the fall semester. So that fall, with the instructor’s approval, I dropped in on one class session early in the semester. I told the students that if they wanted help with their writing, I would provide editorial services if they sent me a draft far enough in advance of the submission deadline. That first year, only one student took me up on my offer, but I repeated my offer again each fall. Students I helped shared their positive experiences with their peers and eventually more and more students sought my help.

16. Barbara Bolt, ‘Finding my voice(s) in the creative arts thesis,’ in *Developing research writing*, ed. Susan Carter and Deborah Laurs (New York: Routledge, 2017), 144–150.

17. I am not the first person to equate librarians helping graduate students with the art of midwifery—nor, I’m sure, will I be the last. For a complete lineage, see Bernadette A. Lear’s article: ‘The Zen of serving on thesis committees: Being a midwife for new scholarship,’ *C&RL news* 60, no. 10 (November 2007): 632–635, <https://doi.org/10.5860/crln.68.10.7889>.



The chart above shows a big uptick in business between 2019 and 2021. When COVID-19 hit the United States in the spring of 2020 and everything shut down, our third-year graduate students, like their peers across the country, were unable to execute their final exhibitions. The thesis paper became the focus for many of them, as it represented the only tangible evidence of what their final body of work *would have been*. Simultaneously, with the library closed and all classes moved online, my workload changed considerably. Without desk shifts to staff, far fewer classes to teach, and a curtailment of research projects that would normally result in numerous student consultation sessions, I suddenly had the time to give students the in-depth assistance they sought. The jump in numbers between the 2019–2020 academic year and the 2020–2021 academic year is largely due to the six students I helped in the spring of 2020, who exhorted their junior colleagues to secure my assistance. In the 2020–2021 academic year, I edited all but three third-year students' thesis papers. That same year, I was invited to officially join two thesis committees.

Up until the fall of 2020, students had been sending me near-final drafts of their papers during the spring semester after their final exhibitions were over and often just a few weeks prior to the college's submission deadline. Given time constraints and the amount of work students had invested in their papers by that point, I could only provide meta-editing: suggesting swapping around a paragraph or two, telling them which citations to double-check, and pointing out places in which further detail would clarify their thinking. But in the fall of 2020, the thesis class instructor and I encouraged students to incorporate my assistance early in the writing process. I began seeing shorter pieces of writing earlier on, throughout the fall semester. Working with the students early in their writing process decreased my editing time and allowed for more iteration, which is the only reason I was able to help all eleven students that year.

The slight drop in numbers between 2020–2021 and 2021–2022 is a result of having assisted those eleven students. The changes we instituted in 2020–2021 made it clear that catching students early was the key to sustaining this service. In the fall of 2021, I became even more programmatically involved by sharing with the thesis class instructor the most common problems I saw in our students' theses. We turned these into mini-lessons that she incorporated at various points throughout the semester. Building upon this collaboration, in the fall of 2022, I will co-teach the thesis writing course and become fully integrated into the students' thesis writing process.

Throughout my work with students on their theses, I have been wary of overstepping my bounds and have kept my role to that of the midwife: assisting the doctor (i.e., the art faculty) but never infringing on their primary role. All of my editorial assistance comes with a strong reminder to students that they should check back with their thesis committees to confirm that the material I've helped them craft is proper and relevant. The midwife metaphor is also apt for this role because it implies non-judgmental support: during labor and delivery, the midwife sees the mother through pain, tears, and the unglamorous aspects of giving birth. I bring this same ethos to my interactions with MFA students. Because my help is not attached to their grade or other academic assessment, I am a safe harbor, someone with whom students can be honest about their writing anxieties and weaknesses.

Take-Aways

The need for this service is, I hope, clearly established by the literature summarized in the opening sections of this paper. I encourage anyone who's willing and able to offer a similar service at their own institutions. Although librarians aren't formally trained as writing tutors, we do have other areas of expertise that make us uniquely suited to helping art students with their theses. Many of us come to library science from liberal arts, art history, English, and history backgrounds; all of these disciplines are writing intensive. Then, in library school, we are trained to understand the structures and hierarchies of knowledge and to organize information along accessible lines of dissemination. Explaining complex concepts and processes is part-and-parcel of the librarian's job. This skillset is particularly invaluable to MFA students, who, in my experience, seldom lack for quantity or quality of ideas, but frequently struggle with organizing and clearly communicating those ideas in scaffolded, well-crafted language.

Here are a few further lessons I've learned that others may wish to consider before offering similar writing services to MFA students:

1. Acknowledge their insecurities and anxieties. As discussed in the first part of this paper, writing anxiety is a common problem among art students, and is likely rooted in their sense of who they are as creative people.
2. Encourage them to think of research and writing as a beneficial part of their studio practice, not as an annoying hurdle they jump in order to graduate. I tell students that research helps them ask better questions, and writing helps them distill their ideas.
3. Remind them of what the thesis paper *is* and *is not*. Depending on what the guidelines are like at your institution, some or all of these may apply:
 - It IS a sustained self-examination of their work
 - It IS an opportunity to explain their ideas and the research that led to those ideas
 - It IS a professional document
 - It IS NOT an autobiography, a confessional, or a tell-all
 - It DOES incorporate research but...
 - It IS NOT a research paper
4. Help students get out of the weeds. Sometimes, a dam bursts and the words flood out. Students who previously professed a burning hatred for writing wind up with 80+ pages (without images) to wrangle, which is excessive, at least at my institution.

Questions

The research summarized in this article affirms what many art librarians know from years of experience working with graduate-level art students: writing can be a struggle. Offering to be a thesis ‘midwife’ affords art librarians a unique opportunity to provide a highly valued service that forges deep connections with art students and faculty. Response to this service at my institution has been overwhelmingly positive, to the extent that I have become increasingly enmeshed in the thesis writing process over the years. Yet, as with any new service, questions arise as I reflect on the past six years of offering thesis writing help.

Some questions are logistical in nature: can I continue to offer this service year after year, especially if the number of students in the MFA program grows? I am, like many of the folks reading this paper, a librarian to multiple programs: Art & Design, Film, Media & Theatre, and Music. There are many demands on my time. So far, I have been able to manage the workload by keeping this service relatively small: the total number of third-year MFA students in any academic year at my institution has always been below 20. Of that number, the students I helped were self-selected: because my assistance wasn’t mandatory, not all students availed themselves of it. Also, the deadlines I set meant that some students timed themselves out of accessing my help. A related question has to do with the other programs with which I work. I have limited my scope by only offering this service to art MFA students but is that line in the sand fair to students in other disciplines who might need my help? Word has spread to graduate students in the film and media program, and they occasionally ask me for help with their theses and dissertations, proving that it’s not *only* art students who need help with their capstone writing projects.

Other questions relate to art librarianship in general. I wonder whether this service model can work elsewhere and whether it is feasible at an institution with a larger program. How could it work—or, indeed, *would* it work—at a school with hundreds of students in each cohort, spread amongst a dozen or more art and design sub-disciplines? It’s possible that this service is already offered at other institutions, though literature searches revealed nothing upon this specific topic. I enthusiastically welcome input from colleagues who work or have worked with MFA students in a similar capacity. Finally, I question whether this role is one art librarians *ought* to adopt. Of course, we want to help students and hate to see them struggle, but by stepping in to help, am I applying a temporary fix to deeper labor problems caused by the ever-shrinking number of tenure-track faculty? Even worse, am I *enabling* these labor practices by softening their impact on students?

Conclusions

These questions can only be answered by testing this service at a variety of institutions and sharing our experiences with each other. As stated above, the library

literature is nearly silent on the idea of librarians (in any subject area) taking on the role of thesis midwife. The sole article I discovered, 'Thesis practicum and the librarian's role,' was published in *Journal of academic librarianship* in 1985. In this brief essay, librarian Bill Bailey notes two now-familiar refrains: graduate students' lack of preparation for their thesis work and their resulting anxiety. 'Active intervention by the librarian,' he asserts, 'can prevent much frustration,'¹⁸—proving that the idea of librarians helping with theses has been tried before and therefore is not entirely outlandish. Bailey stops short of suggesting librarians as writing support, however; he limits the librarian's role to that of research coach.

In this article I have summarized the background research the culture of writing anxiety that affects many of the thousands of students enrolled in MFA programs today. I have also described my own efforts to combat these negative feelings by supporting MFA students' research and writing in an in-depth, hands-on way. By talking about these issues and strategies within the professional literature, I hope to legitimize this role for other art librarians who see the same problems at their institutions but lack the institutional support to experiment with offering such a service. My story and suggestions may also encourage art librarians who want to offer these services but (rightly) worry about how to balance the workload. I look forward to the day when we can share our experiences and build collective wisdom on the best methods for empowering MFA students to be fearless researchers and writers.

18. Bill Bailey, 'Thesis practicum and the librarian's role,' *Journal of academic librarianship* 11, no. 2 (1985): 79.

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