



# How Mindsets Shape Response and Learning Transfer: A Case of Two Graduate Writers

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This article expands composition research on response by examining how Dweck's theory of mindsets impacts graduate writers' ability to process critical and praise-oriented teacher response, apply critical and praise-oriented teacher response in revision, and ultimately, develop as learners and transfer knowledge from these experiences. We conducted this examination through in-depth case studies of two writers over a six-year period that spanned undergraduate and graduate education. The case studies included interviews, teacher response, and writing to develop thick descriptions of graduate writers' experiences. We demonstrate how students' mindsets intersect with processing and applying both critical and praise-oriented response throughout their academic careers, which ultimately helps or hinders opportunities for learning transfer and writing development. The implications of this work apply to how teachers respond to writing and how they teach graduate students about processing and applying teacher comments.

*Keywords:* transfer, response, advanced writers, graduate writers, case study, longitudinal research, graduate writers

The following is an excerpt of an exchange between Dana and Alice, a first-year graduate student:

DANA: I want to talk about this professor from last year. How did that end up resolving? And how do you think about it now?

ALICE: Well, the next semester was really hard for me writing-wise. I actually had a couple of breakdowns, thought to myself that I was no good, that I couldn't do it after the professor said I didn't have graduate level writing. . . . I was stressed out. It was bad. So, I actually printed out a picture of his face, and I used my paintball gun and then shot at his face. It really got to me what he said. And I was struggling with my writing. And then once I kind of let it go, I realized I am a good writer because I have a 4.0 overall GPA.

This excerpt is Alice's reaction to teacher response during her first semester of graduate school when she felt her instructor was "too critical" of her writing. The professor's critical comments impacted Alice so much that she avoided difficult revisions on her writing and made a major career trajectory shift, changing the concentration in her master's program to avoid the professor's future courses and critical comments. However, Alice processed praise comments in more productive ways that contributed to her growth as a student and counselor. How do we help students like Alice succeed? How do we understand how students process comments? What impact might these kinds of comments have on writing development and learning transfer? As we will demonstrate through two case studies over six years, we believe answering these questions is a matter of better understanding student mindsets toward writing and learning.

The purpose of this study is to examine how Dweck's theory of mindsets impacts two graduate writers' ability to process both critical and praise-oriented teacher response, engage with those responses in revision, and develop as learners and transfer knowledge from these experiences. Through in-depth case studies of two writers over a six-year period that spanned undergraduate and graduate education, we examined these two students' writing experiences. The case studies included interviews,

teacher response, and writing samples to develop thick descriptions of their experiences. We demonstrate how growth and fixed mindsets intersect with processing and applying both critical and praise-oriented response throughout their academic careers, which ultimately helped or hindered opportunities for learning transfer and writing development over time. The implications of this work apply to how teachers respond to writing in college-level classes and specifically how to work with advanced and graduate students with praise and critical responses.

### **Mindsets Theory**

Carol Dweck's (2006) theory posits that people often inhabit one of two mindsets: growth or fixed. Fixed-mindset individuals believe their intelligence or skills are unchangeable. Furthermore, fixed-mindset individuals have difficulty managing struggle and failure because they assume this failure is a challenge to their self-identity and intelligence. A growth-mindset individual believes skills and intelligence are malleable and cultivated through hard work; this belief encourages students to work harder to succeed and learn from failure. Dweck (2006) demonstrated that growth-mindset individuals often have more accurate understandings of their skills and abilities, while fixed-mindset individuals may overestimate their ability to perform in specific situations. Mindsets, therefore, extend theories of intelligence, such as Myers–Briggs type theory, and suggest that the key for success is not based so much on what kind of intelligence an individual has but rather whether or not intelligence can be developed.

Mindsets impact literacy learning and academic success. Blackwell et al. (2007) found that mindsets strongly determined academic achievement and success in middle school students. Growth-mindset students excelled at testing in this study, while fixed-mindset students remained unwilling to study more or try new test-taking strategies. Specific to writing contexts, Limpo and Alves (2014) found that in K–12 classrooms, growth-mindset students produced longer and higher quality texts (measured via fully developing papers based on writing guidelines) than fixed-mindset students.

Mindsets are more nuanced than simply “fixed” or “growth”; rather, they can be domain specific. That is, a student might have a growth mindset about writing but a fixed mindset about mathematics, and these

mindsets may even shift given the specific task. For example, students may have a fixed mindset about grammar and a growth mindset about revision because of previous writing experiences. Ryan and Mercer (2012) suggested that different language-learning activities could be tied to various mindsets. Finally, we note that like many other dispositions (Driscoll & Wells, 2012), mindsets are likely unconscious or semi-conscious, that is, they are driving behaviors that shape activity and long-term development.

Research on mindsets and writing in college contexts is still developing. Palmquist and Young (1992) explored the notion of “giftedness” in first-year composition (FYC) classrooms, a closely related concept to mindsets. Giftedness, like mindsets, has two sides: Some writers believe that writing is a “gift” they were born with and cannot change while others believe that writing is something that could be learned. In a dissertation, Schubert (2017), explored student mindsets in an embedded writing tutors’ program with college engineering courses. Her intervention had writing tutors offer engineering classes individual tutorial support and a 30-minute presentation of mindsets. She found that while growth and fixed mindsets were salient in her participants, students could hold competing value systems (e.g., a student could have a growth mindset but show moments of fixed mindsets). Schubert described how one participant had a growth mindset until they received a poor grade on an assignment. Then they started to believe they couldn’t develop their skills further. Further, in a case study, Knutson (2019) discovered that fixed-mindset students dismissed writing instruction, which as Knutson argues, could include teacher feedback. Knutson studied one student over multiple years who had a fixed mindset and did not develop substantially from instruction nor feedback.

Mindsets, therefore, are perspectives on how we grow and improve our intelligence and skills and may be responsible, in part, for long-term learning and writing development. If, as Sommers (2012) has suggested in previous work on response, the ultimate goal of responding to student writing is to develop writers, and writing is cognitive in nature, then it is imperative that compositionists understand how students’ mindsets might impact teacher response. Further, Sommers (2006) and Anson (2012) both call for closer attention to how teacher response impacts writing development, which we address in this article.

## Literature on Mindsets, Critical Comments, and Responding to Student Writing

A recent dissertation highlights the role of mindsets in response. Powell (2018) studied FYC students and how mindsets impacted their ability to process and revise based on teacher response. Powell utilized case studies that collected teacher comments, student think-alouds with those comments, and examined drafts before and after teacher comments. Like Schubert (2017), Powell noted that students sometimes demonstrated growth mindsets and sometimes displayed fixed mindsets. However, students did tend to lean toward one mindset over the other, so they fell along a continuum from “very growth” to “fixed.” Students with very growth mindsets revised more than students with fixed mindsets. Beyond this dissertation, mindset theory has not been explored in response literature.

The topic of critical comments and praise comments is closely tied to mindset theory, since critical comments may challenge fixed-mindset students, like Alice. Previous response research has examined praise comments and found that FYC students reacted and applied praise comments effectively (Daiker, 1989; Smith, 1989; Treglia, 2008). In relation to theories of intelligence and response, Callahan (2000) discovered that English education students whose Myers–Briggs personality type matched that of their teacher typically reacted to their teachers comments on their reflective writing in productive ways—they welcomed the feedback and used it to deepen their reflective practice. Further, in terms of applying teacher response to revision, a number of studies exist spanning multiple groups with both critical and praise-oriented feedback. Many studies found mixed results, suggesting that FYC students sometimes revised and sometimes did not. Students who did not revise had a lack of understanding, experienced emotional reactions to the feedback, or did not implement feedback because the comments were delivered on the final paper and not on a draft (Treglia, 2009; Silva, 2012; Wingard & Geosits, 2014; Shvidko, 2015). Furthermore, mixed results existed in second-language (L2) writing studies done on student revision based on teacher response (Ferris, 1997; Paulus, 1998; Lee & Schallet, 2008; Christiansen & Bloch, 2016). Lindenmann et al. (2018) found that sometimes students did not revise because they viewed

teacher feedback as a directive rather than a heuristic to their development. This lack of consensus leaves room for further exploration.

While it is encouraging to see a number of studies on response and revision, to date, no study has tried to examine the ways that students react to both critical and praise-oriented comments over the course of multiple years. While Callahan's (2000) study draws on the Myers–Briggs test of intelligence, it does not address different kinds of comments. Knutson's (2019) case study and Powell's (2018) dissertation both indicated the usefulness of mindset theory in understanding writing development. Given these studies, a longitudinal investigation into mindset theory and response may offer rich insights into the relationships among mindsets, response, and learning development. Mindsets are a potentially useful framework for response because they may help explain some of the lack of consistency across research on processing and applying feedback; a student's ability to process and then apply feedback may be based on their mindset. Further, the previous research was primarily done with undergraduate students, and to date, we know little about how graduate students process teacher response and revise. Recent work published in the *Journal of Response to Writing* has begun to explore how graduate students process response by examining peer review in graduate courses (Mangelsdorf & Ruecker, 2018). The present work seeks to contribute to understandings of how graduate students' mindsets impact how they might process, apply, and transfer knowledge gained from both critical and praise-oriented teacher written response.

Therefore, our goal is to explore how mindsets may impact student writers' processing of teacher response—both critical and praise-oriented comments, the students' application of response via revision, and what they transfer from those comments. We offer case studies of two student writers that spanned six years of undergraduate and graduate education. First, we demonstrate their mindsets as a relatively stable and enduring disposition. Then, we examine how both participants handled praise and critical comments in their graduate study. Finally, we discuss implications teacher response might have on students' ability to transfer their writing knowledge.

## Methods

In response to previous literature, we devised three primary research questions:

1. What impact do mindsets have on writers' processing of critical or praise comments on their writing?
2. How do mindsets facilitate or hinder writers' ability to revise after receiving critical or praise-oriented written comments?
3. What impact do mindsets have on how writers engage in learning transfer from teacher comments?

The data we present in our results are one part of Dana's longitudinal, mixed-methods study on writing development and learning transfer at a public research university in a Midwest suburban area. Participants were recruited via email from 25 sections of FYC. One student was randomly selected from each of the 25 sections; 18 agreed to participate in Year 1 (Y1); attrition and loss of life reduced the participants to 13 students for the remainder of the study. Participants<sup>1</sup> were interviewed at the beginning of their second semester and then interviewed a minimum of once a year until after they graduated. Ninety-seven interviews and 272 samples of student writing are included in the broader study.

Semistructured interviews lasted one hour and included questions about literacy practices, learning to write, disciplinary writing, writing transfer, and writing epistemology as well as questions surrounding two writing samples that students brought to each interview. Students were asked to bring a "difficult" piece of writing to the interview and an "easy" piece of writing. During the second half of the interview, students talked through each piece of writing. When possible, students were also asked to bring instructor comments to these interviews. Follow-up interviews in subsequent years asked students the same questions for comparison; additionally, students were asked questions about the previous year's interview and how in-progress experiences resolved.

To analyze our data, we used a multi-level, grounded coding strategy, described by Saldaña (2009). Both authors independently engaged in first-round open-coding of student interviews and identified that "struggle with

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1. Participants (five males, eight females) represented the following ethnicities: Hispanic (1), second-generation, Finnish (1), 1.5-generation Russian (1), and Caucasian (12).

writing” was a salient theme for all students in regard to faculty response. A comprehensive search of literature in composition and developmental psychology at this stage of the study revealed mindset theory, which fit the data perfectly because mindsets appeared tied to how participants reacted to comments. With mindsets as a salient feature for student writing and feedback, we then identified mindsets in each of our student writers and then collaboratively coded (Smagorinsky, 2008) key moments of mindsets and faculty feedback present in the interviews. From this analysis, we selected two case studies that illustrated issues present in the larger dataset and ones that allowed us to compare students with different mindsets.

### **Case Study Analysis**

We selected two cases based on their comparability: Both students were high-achieving undergraduate writers, both came from similar socio-economic backgrounds and attended the same undergraduate institution, and both entered graduate study in master’s programs within one year of baccalaureate graduation. Furthermore, both experienced moments in their undergraduate and graduate writing development where their previous writing knowledge and abilities were demonstrated to be insufficient because of faculty written response on their writing. As we will illustrate, both of these writers demonstrated “strong” mindsets that were stable over a period of time. As we will also indicate, these mindsets played a considerable role in how these students processed and applied praise and critical teacher response.

We explore these case studies through descriptions of student experiences—as shared through interviews—an analysis of faculty response and student revisions, and their future writing experiences. To describe the faculty response present, we used Wingard and Geosits’s (2014) taxonomy to divide faculty response into two categories: surface (grammar, mechanics, and punctuation) and substantive (argument, organization, etc.). We chose this taxonomy for three reasons: It offered a way to categorize and compare both comments and revisions, it is current, and it was used in both an FYC context and a Writing Across the Curriculum context, making it the most appropriate for our longitudinal study where student writing samples were cross-disciplinary and varied.



### *Limitations*

We recognize this data came from a single study with students at multiple institutions; therefore, our goal is not to generalize but to provide two cases for how specific students' mindsets may interact with faculty response and to contribute to ongoing discussions of what factors influence students' processing of teacher response, subsequent revision, and long-term transfer. Further, we recognize the bias inherent in self-reported data, which makes up half of this study's dataset. To address this, we used a combination of self-reported interview data with direct student writing and faculty written response; this combination helped us reduce, but not eliminate, bias. Lastly, the two participants were both White women, though the broader study included some racial and ethnic diversity.

### **Results**

In this study, our two student writers were Alice and Abby. We will begin with a description of their experiences, histories, and how mindsets about writing and learning shaped their writerly development as undergraduate and graduate students. We detail this information to demonstrate that, for at least these two students, their mindset toward writing is a relatively stable and persistent feature in their writerly development over their educational careers. After this description, we then shift to specific, comparable undergraduate and graduate writing experiences to demonstrate how mindsets played a pivotal role in their ability to process critical and praise-oriented response, engage in revision processes, and engage in learning transfer.

#### **“You Feel Vulnerable”: Alice’s Fixed Mindset About Writing**

Throughout the study, Alice displayed a fixed mindset toward writing. In many cases, she marks her educational writing experiences through embarrassment of her “struggles.” In her first-year interview, Alice indicated that instead of taking advanced placement (AP) English, she took “regular English” to avoid “being overwhelmed with stuff,” and therefore she embraced comfortable writing tasks and avoided challenging ones. While Alice articulated aspects of writing that she excelled at, she also claimed that she would never be good at some aspects of writing and could not learn them. In Year 2, Alice’s fixed mindset began to impact her success in disciplinary writing. She struggled in a sophomore-level psychology research

methods course and first attributed the struggle to the course being “too difficult” and the instructor “not being available.” But when asked if she sought further help, Alice stated:

It makes me feel stupid when I ask for help. I don't like asking questions in class because I feel everyone else can understand, and I'm the only one who does not. I have that psychological thing going on everywhere. You feel vulnerable. It's like you don't get what's going on; that puts you in a vulnerable position and asking for help makes you kind of dumb here, and I never like being in that position.

Alice avoided help-seeking that might have aided her in overcoming the struggles to learn and write about research methods. She viewed help-seeking as a sign of weakness and vulnerability rather than as a trait found in successful people. Her perspective on help-seeking was directly tied to a fixed mindset.

Evidence of Alice's fixed mindset toward writing continued throughout her undergraduate college career. For example, in Year 3, Alice had extreme difficulty with writing a psychology research article, which included receiving critical feedback from her professor. She tried to “purge” this idea from her mind, and she shut herself off from learning. This was a common pattern for Alice: She learned material in an earlier course that would be directly applicable in a later course (even with similar genres and activities), but rather than engage with that knowledge, she “decided to forget about it.” We saw this pattern in a psychology research methods article, a subsequent feminist research methods course, and her research article writing for multiple advanced psychology courses during her undergraduate career.

Alice describes her relationship with writing and the differences between she and her girlfriend:

I feel like I'm a decent writer; it's just, I'm one of those people who would sit there for 10 minutes, and I have to think about how everything's going to play out. And then I start to type, and then I kind of edit it as I go and stuff. It's just a long process for me. Whereas, like, my girlfriend is like an awesome writer and, and she's dyslexic, too. . . . And she can sit down, and she's just, like, na-na-na-na-na-na, and

I'm like, how did you just crank that out in, like, an hour? That would have taken me, like, two to three hours, you know? So, it's a little frustrating that it takes me longer than I feel like the average person.

Dweck (2006) noted that those with fixed mindsets may view being good at something as being effortless or as a result of a “natural gift” one possesses, a perspective we see reflected in Alice’s statement. Alice believed she would never grow in certain areas of writing, partly because of her dyslexia, but also partly because she believes, “[That’s] just how I am.” Unfortunately, Alice missed a number of key moments to learn and grow as a writer because of her aversion to difficult writing tasks. When Alice did thrive in writing experiences, she reported that it was with comfortable writing tasks supported by nurturing and approachable instructors, which we will discuss in depth later on. She enjoyed these tasks because she could prove her skills and abilities in a supportive environment.

### **“Bring It On”: Abby’s Growth Mindset About Writing**

In her first-year interview, Abby, an undergraduate biochemistry major, described “liking to write,” especially enjoying “research writing,” because it “helps me learn new things.” Abby reported struggling with several aspects of research writing, including conciseness, source use, documentation, and formatting. Despite these struggles, Abby saw herself continually improving as she “gets more practice.” Abby welcomed professor feedback because it helped improve her writing. Here, we saw many characteristics of a growth mindset in her first-year interview: Abby believed she could succeed and improve, she saw herself improving over time, and she regularly sought help, even from those instructors who had offered her “tough” written response in the past. Furthermore, Abby welcomed challenges and saw them as a necessary part of learning and growing.

As Abby continued in her undergraduate degree, she generally performed well in her writing but not without substantial challenges. In Year 3, she received a D on an autobiographical piece for an upper division, honors course taught by a tough professor—the first D she had ever gotten. Abby discussed this poor grade:

And you know, she tore it up. She wrote a lot of notes. . . . I think I tried to write things so perfectly or try to use different words and sometimes it just doesn't work out. So that was a major problem. . . . I had to work really hard and spend hours on these papers to do well.

Abby learned from teacher response that her autobiographical writing suffered from poor stylistic choices, organizational issues, and a lack of flow. Abby's teacher allowed each student to revise one writing assignment throughout the semester for a better grade. Abby remained positive during the experience and rewrote the assignment. Rather than attribute her failures to her teachers' dislike of her—as Alice did in similar circumstances—she welcomed the challenge and was motivated to revise. Each year afterward, Abby pointed to this challenging writing experience as a key moment that taught her much about writing, which she was able to transfer. In Year 6 of the study, Abby sought this same professor's advice on graduate applications. Lastly, Abby developed strong confidence from this experience and thought she “improved” and was a “good writer.”

In Year 4 of the study, Abby took a biochemistry course where she wrote a research article for the first time. Despite a lack of writing instruction or faculty support, Abby sought sample articles from the PubMed database to learn the “moves” for this new genre. Abby experienced difficulty in writing about her experiments in a clear, concise way and with complete and cohesive sentences and paragraphs. She spent a great deal of time revising the research article and reported the challenge as “the one I kind of wanted, was looking forward to, you know. Bring it on!” This perspective demonstrated a growth mindset toward writing and a willingness to seek more challenging tasks to learn. Overall, Abby's growth mindset helped her welcome challenges and transfer what she learned.

Our data suggest that Alice and Abby show a general mindset towards writing—growth (Abby) and fixed (Alice). We note that these writers' mindsets appear to be long-term, developmental, and stable traits across all of the years in the study—even when they moved into new disciplines, new genres, or graduate-level writing. While both Alice and Abby grew and developed as writers throughout the six years of the study, we saw many comparable situations where Alice's fixed mindset limited her potential for growth, inhibited her ability to transfer previous learning, and limited her

writerly development, while Abby's mindset helped facilitate her growth and success as writer. We turn now to examine how Alice and Abby process and apply comments.

### **Praise, Mindsets, and Written Response**

While Alice struggled with critical teacher response, praised comments help her as a writer. In her first-year interview, she discussed her freshman composition teacher as a "fair grader and very nice person." When asked why, Alice explained that "he interacts with you in an encouraging way" and "his feedback supports [her]." Alice reported that she does well in this class and "gets an A." Furthermore, Alice returned to the example of this professor several times throughout the study, because she liked how he "supports [her] and makes [her] feel confident when [she doesn't] know something." Alice indicated that she wished other professors would do the same. While Alice did not provide us with this professor's feedback, she did, after several years in the study, point toward his comments as the ones that she processed and applied effectively.

During her first-year interview, Abby mentioned five times that she received feedback on her writing. One of those five times was a praise comment telling Abby she developed an "excellent paper." Abby liked to hear "something good" about her writing, but she spent much more time in that and other interviews describing comments that helped her improve. Like Alice, Abby reported being able to process these praise comments well.

### **Criticism, Mindsets, and Written Response for Alice and Abby**

While both Alice and Abby could productively process and apply praise-oriented comments on their writing, this same productive processing did not take place when they received critical comments. Alice and Abby both enrolled in graduate school at the same time (at different institutions): Alice in a master's degree in counseling psychology and Abby in a master's degree in epidemiology. In their first semester of graduate school, both students were required to engage in a complex task during an introductory graduate-level course at their respective institutions: compose a scientific literature review. Both reported earning poor grades and receiving harsh feedback, and both reported considerable struggle with the task.

We now examine the specific papers they shared during their interviews in graduate school, both of which included instructor feedback, as well as the revisions they made. Table 1 compares the teachers' comments on these two papers and their grades on the assignment.

**Table 1**

*Comparison of Teachers' Comments and Paper Grades*

Student	Paper Length (words)	Number of Comments			Grades	
		Marginal Comments	End Comments	In-text Modeling Edits	Draft	Final
Alice	3,686	13	1	11	N/A	3.1 (B-)
Abby	3,038	25	1	0	2.0 (C)	3.4 (B+)

As Table 1 indicates, Alice and Abby's professors responded with nearly the same amount of comments: 25 for Alice and 26 for Abby. In the case of Alice, the professor used a modeling strategy—which he explicitly noted in marginal comments—to help her with academic genre conventions; he edited directly within the text 11 times and offered 13 marginal comments. In the case of Abby, the professor offered 25 marginal comments.

Further, the comments were quite comparable. Using Wingard and Geosits's (2014) taxonomy for instructor comments, 100% of Abby's comments are higher order comments, and 93% of Alice's comments are higher order. Table 2 highlights the frequency of the particular comments; note that many comments fit more than one category.

**Table 2***Frequency of Teachers' Comments by Type*

Type of Comment	Operationalized Definition	Frequency	
		Alice	Abby
Language choice and use	Using language/vocabulary that is not appropriate for the genre conventions and discourse community	69%	35%
Academic written conventions	Addressing conventions for academic writing (organization, signposting)	62%	15%
Evidence-supported claims	Providing scholarly evidence to support claims (or noting a lack thereof)	35%	23%
Precision and clarity	Using language specifically and precisely to ensure accurate meaning	62%	62%
Subject area knowledge	Knowledge of the subject matter, including insider knowledge	23%	73%
Rhetorical knowledge	Audience awareness, purpose, context	85%	85%
Praise	Compliments word choice, source choice, rhetorical moves, etc.	7%	11%
This is not graduate-level writing	Direct feedback that student is not writing at the level necessary for graduate work	7%	7%

Alice and Abby received feedback that is common for new graduate writers as they work to master unknown academic language conventions, disciplinary genres, and complex subject-matter knowledge. For example, Alice wrote in her paper, “Proper psychoanalysis is based on Freud’s original counseling style.” Her instructor responded by highlighting the word “proper” and commented, “Not academic language; there are multiple definitions of what is ‘proper.’” Alice received the following end comment: “Your writing is extremely informal and imprecise—not graduate level.

You seem to understand the theory, but you don't present it in an authoritative way.”

Likewise, Abby wrote in her paper, “Furthermore, diabetes is an agent causing CHD because high levels of sugar in the blood lead to plaque buildup, blocking the arteries.” Her faculty member highlighted “arteries” and wrote, “In many of these pathophysiologic descriptions, the wording is too simplified. Reads like something for lay people from a website, rather than scientific information.” Later, Abby’s professor wrote, “You might be surprised to see how hard it has been to demonstrate a clear relationship between ‘stress’ and CHD. You need to think more critically, and not just accept assertions made.” The feedback on both literature reviews was quite comparable: it was direct, offered limited praise, and offered disciplinary insider commentary as well as emphasized the higher expectations for graduate-level writing. However, the way Alice and Abby processed teacher response and engaged in revision radically differed.

### **Processing Teacher Response and Revisions**

Alice experienced distress after reading teacher response on her assignment. She explained:

Oh God, it was horrible. I literally broke down crying for this paper. . . . I told my girlfriend, it's horrible, he's going to rip it apart, and I'm going to get a horrible grade, and I'm not going to do well in grad school because of this; my GPA is going to be shit. I just freaked out. . . . And I'm like, I really have never worked so hard on a paper in my whole life, and I still think it's crap.

Because Alice has a fixed mindset, the comments weren't just about her writing, they're viewed as personal: critiquing her competency and her ability to be successful in graduate school. In other interviews, Alice attributed the essay's problems to the professor and how “rude” he was rather than to her own writerly performance or lack of disciplinary knowledge. In fact, Alice's processing of this teacher response continued throughout her master's degree and into her first year as a professional.

Alice recognized her professor was attempting to help her with the essay but acknowledged that his tactics did not work for her. She said:



I think he really wanted to kind of frighten me into straightening up some things that I wasn't good at, but I think his tactic with a person, like me, backfired because it just shut me down. I can't learn if you're criticizing me. I need a little bit more support and a little bit more empathy for me to learn, especially when I'm insecure about something. . . .

The words “support” and “empathy” relate to the way she described her FYC teacher in Year 1. Alice reported that did not do much to revise her paper and instead “shut down.” Her reaction to her professor's response was reflected in her revisions; she only made minor and surface-level revisions. The following semester, Alice experienced very low self-efficacy, no motivation to continue in graduate school, and duress, all of which led her to eventually rectify the situation by shooting paintballs at a photo of her professor. In sum, faculty response that was critical of her writing radically disrupted Alice's ability to transfer her learning, develop as a writer, and master disciplinary content.

Abby experienced a very different kind of reaction to critical instructor response. In discussing faculty response, she said:

I think what's happening is that, basically, not to say that in undergrad that professors aren't honest. . . . But I do think maybe some professors do give you a little bit more slack in undergrad. . . . But in grad school, I find that nobody is trying to be mean or harsh. But they're very critical, and they're very honest in what they have to say in order to critique your paper to make it better. . . . [U]ltimately, everyone just says, if you write a grant proposal . . . or are trying to defend your thesis, it needs to be a very well-written paper. If they kind of just give you a slap on the wrist for some of the same errors that you've been continuing to make, that doesn't really help you.

Abby recognized that response connected to the genres and expectations of disciplinary writing, thus helping her improve. She described her revisions of the literature review as follows (which we confirmed with a comparison of her draft and revision):

I literally wrote, re-wrote the whole thing. Like I said, there were some things I did copy and paste; there were some sentences I kept that I

really liked. There was a lot about the first paper that was good. It just wasn't specific enough. I need to incorporate all these new references. How many references did I have for this? It jumped to what I had, 30, maybe; I had seven at first.

Abby made substantive revisions, which assisted in developing the disciplinary and genre awareness she needed for successful graduate writing.

We will also note here the role of disciplinary awareness and entering a profession. Abby recognized that her professor wasn't being "mean" but rather helping improve her writing, so she could be successful in other disciplinary genres, like grant proposals. Alice, on the other hand, processed the critical-oriented teacher comments as very personal and did not connect it to disciplinary learning.

Not only did these students' mindsets impact the immediate writing situation and the quality and amount of revisions made, these mindsets appeared to have long-term developmental consequences. As the opening quotation described, Alice's processing of response affected her ability to develop as a graduate writer in her other classes the following term, leading to her paintball resolution. Further, since her freshman year, Alice indicated her strong interest in family counseling as a specialization, but after her negative experience, she dropped that specialization to avoid taking further classes with the professor, who taught multiple courses within that specialization. Instead, she picked a different track in the counseling program that was less aligned with her career goals. After the paintball activity at the end of her second semester of her master's program, she reaffirmed her abilities (i.e., she was capable because she had a 4.0 GPA), continued to write throughout the program, and graduated a year later.

Abby used the written teacher response from her first semester of graduate study as a growing experience, offering evidence of direct learning transfer. By "direct transfer," we mean that Abby reported transferring something that she learned from teacher response into another context. We saw that she transferred what she has learned to the writing she completed in subsequent courses and the writing she did outside of her program. In her second semester of graduate school, Abby reported "thinking like a scientist" when writing, adopted the identity of a science scholar, and pursued a doctorate degree.

## Discussion

In this case study, we see a clear interaction between the student mindset and how the student handles comparable teacher response in graduate school. Teacher response—even on a single assignment—has the potential to considerably and positively shape a student’s writerly development, as we see from the examples of Abby’s “D” in her undergraduate career and her experiences with teacher response in her first semester of graduate school. However, students perceived teacher response in very different ways, as Alice’s case demonstrates. Our data suggests students’ mindsets toward writing have considerable impact on how students process and apply response.

Overall, Alice and Abby handled similar, critical teacher response in very different ways. Alice shut down, took it personally, did not view a disciplinary connection, hardly revised her work, and ultimately decided to fundamentally change her career plans to avoid the professor in question. It was not that Alice had not learned anything or transferred anything during the duration of the six years of this study—she still experienced major shifts in her writerly development. Alice’s development only happened in supportive, nurturing, and scaffolded situations. It was in these comfortable situations that Alice grew: She got a good grade in those classes, she wanted to improve her writing, and she even described herself as a “good writer” in Year 1 and Year 6 when she received praise comments. However, throughout the duration of the study, Alice’s fixed mindset interfered with Alice making productive use of challenging opportunities to grow as a writer—opportunities that could have substantially impacted the quality of her writing, her engagement with epistemological foundations in her discipline, and her growing professionalism. In the end, Alice graduated and was successfully employed in a career. But we wonder about the many missed opportunities for Alice along the way.

Abby seemed to thrive in challenging situations and appreciated critical teacher response. She returned to these difficult situations repeatedly when she reflected upon earlier writing experiences and discussed her own learning transfer and writerly growth. Because of Abby’s growth mindset, she saw teacher response as a way to grow and improve. Abby

could engage in learning transfer by receiving any type of response—critical comments that were harsh or blunt or praise-oriented comments that were supportive and nurturing—whereas, as stated earlier, Alice needed to be praised and supported in teacher response to engage in transfer. For Abby, the full range of her educational experiences with faculty feedback were open to her. For Alice, a large segment of challenging experiences were purged from her mind, and likely, these experiences could have led to growth. Overall, Abby understood a lesson that Alice failed to see: The teacher response was focused on helping the graduate student learn how to write more clearly as disciplinary insiders.

### **Facilitating Response and Learning Development for Graduate Writers**

Alice and Abby's cases have illustrated three key principles for supporting advanced academic writers: (a) acknowledging role of teacher response in disciplinary socialization, (b) learning how graduate students process response, and (c) shaping growth mindsets through teacher response. We now consider each of these in turn.

#### *Acknowledging the Role of Response as Disciplinary Socialization and Professional Practice*

Disciplinary socialization is the process through which students learn the discipline's core practices, communication methods, epistemologies, methods of producing knowledge, and genres (Wenger, 1998; Ding, 2008). As these cases demonstrate, disciplinary socialization is inherent in the teacher response that our advanced undergraduate- and graduate-level writers received. However, this role was not made explicit to students, which is a common problem (Wenger, 1998; Sterponi, 2012). Alice believed that the feedback was directed at her as a writer rather than helping shape her as a future professional, even when the feedback was clearly oriented in that direction. Abby appeared to understand this.

We suggest that faculty, especially in introductory disciplinary courses and in introductory courses in graduate school, make students aware that effectively processing and engaging with response is essential to professional disciplinary practices. Advanced graduate students receive response primarily in two ways: (a) through peer review on manuscripts

for publication and (b) through committee response on thesis/dissertation drafts. Dana—who teaches masters- and doctoral-level writing, pedagogy, and research methods courses—teaches graduate students how to engage with response in several ways. First, she engages students in a discussion about the role of response as a professional activity by discussing the response she has received in her professional life, sharing that navigating response and engaging in revision are normal and regular parts of her professional practice. She models how to manage and understand response by sharing blind peer reviews of her recent article submissions, including rejected articles, and methods of creating revision plans based on this form of response. Throughout the term, students develop their own peer-response skills: They complete a blind peer review for another class member, create revision plans where they navigate response and multiple points of view, and reflect on their own relationship with revision. In these discussions, Dana is careful to model a growth mindset for students by positively framing typical activities within the review process, such as engaging in revision to improve an author's voice and research, seeking a new venue after rejection, persevering through academic publishing, and seeing response as a chance to grow.

### *Learning How Graduate Students Process Response*

We would add to the first principle by stating that another way to support advanced academic writers is to engage them in conversations about how they best process feedback. While we cannot shield these students from the harsh criticism they will undoubtedly receive during the academic publishing process, while writing theses and dissertations, and through generally engaging in the work of the discipline, we can assist these students in understanding the nature of professional feedback and how to successfully navigate it, as we described in the discussion of the first principle. In our classes, we can become cognizant of the comments that we give our students. During these conversations, we can help them develop deeper understandings of how they process and apply comments, the role of their emotions, and strategies for moving past emotion and into revision. Roger suggests that we ask questions such as the following: How does a critical comment affect you? Do you need encouragement from your professor? What kinds of feedback help you best learn? If you

get critical feedback, how can you make the best of it and learn/improve as a writer? Furthermore, one regular practice Dana teaches her students is that after they read feedback, they should allow it to “sit” for a few days until the initial emotional response lessens. Then they can return to the feedback from a more logical place and start working through it systematically, monitoring their reactions and trying to see the feedback as an objective way to help improve the manuscript.

### *Cultivating Growth Mindsets Through Effective Praise and Growth Comments*

As discussed in the literature review, response research suggests that praise and positive criticism motivates students to revise and learn. In this study, Alice productively processed and applied praise; therefore, we suggest using praise-oriented response with graduate writers. However, mindset theory and developmental psychology suggests that not all praise is productive. Kamins and Dweck (1998) found that praise should focus on process, such as, “You have put some good effort into describing this theory; now apply that elsewhere.” They found that process-oriented response led students to develop better strategies for completing a task, managing struggle, and cultivating a growth mindset.

While Kamins and Dweck (1998) focused on elementary students, we believe that the concept of “praising the process” could be adapted for writers of all levels and may be particularly useful for advanced academic writers when facing large numbers of critical comments. Praising the process means acknowledging the effort students make in producing a piece of writing. However, this could also mean encouraging them to apply something they have done well. We examine a comment Alice received and how it might be revised to focus on praising the process and tying it to disciplinary socialization:

- Original comment: “You handle the theory well.”
- Revised comment: “Excellent application of Freud’s theory. I note that this is improved from your earlier draft. I can recognize the time you have spent learning this theory and revising this manuscript. Because application of theory is a key part of writing in psychology, you’ll want to do this in your future writing.”

In our revised comment, the instructor acknowledged the student's process, shared the importance of this work for disciplinary activity, and encouraged the application of that process to other contexts.

Additionally, even critical comments have the opportunity to be structured in a growth-oriented way. Roger does this in his classrooms through a "sandwich" technique of comments. The comments begin with the positive: "While you have developed a solid introduction. . . ." Then he moves to criticism: "Your argument doesn't stand out to me yet: What does your audience need to know?" Then he ends with encouragement that asserts the student can improve: "Keep revising; you can improve this writing to be clearer and more well developed!" The critical comments are placed in between growth-oriented praise. This feedback is framed constructively, suggests the writer can improve, and mirrors the type of response that Alice reports has "empathy" and "encouragement."

### Conclusion

As this piece has described, what shapes how a writer responds to faculty response is not just the knowledge, skills, and ability that they bring to a writing situation but their mindset and how they approach critical comments. Future work should explore mindsets and response more fully: How, and at what point in their development, are student mindsets toward response and writing initially shaped? How does identity and previous experiences impact student mindsets? What are the long-term implications of mindsets and response working in tandem with student writers? Because successfully navigating response will help students of all disciplines develop as professionals, these questions are vital towards student success. Ultimately, mindsets not only help all students learn but also account for the different ways that our students consider growing their intelligence and skills. Dweck (2010) found that when traditionally underprivileged students are taught to approach their learning via a growth mindset, they tend to perform higher on learning assessments such as standardized tests. While writing at a graduate level is certainly different than a standardized test, we believe this research, coupled with the understanding that students with various mindsets process and apply teacher response on their writing differently, will help graduate professors become stronger teachers of writing across disciplines. In the end,

grasping how mindsets play a role in response may be a powerful way to help us make our feedback equitable for all.



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