

PART 1: “Read and write like a grad student” OR ‘Inside’ the Institution: Graduate Writing Courses and Programs

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I entered my Ph.D. program in Rhetoric and Writing at Michigan State University with a BA and MA in English Language Arts for Secondary Education. While I certainly had some experience with grad school expectations, my education had been largely practical. So my first semester at MSU felt a bit like a punch in the gut. My very first class was History of Rhetoric, a traditionally brutal course, heavy with theory, reading, and writing. We were intensely challenged in new and uncomfortable ways. Yet I didn’t feel that I had much guidance for how to face the challenges set before me. I was being asked to do “Ph.D. grad student” work without knowing what that even meant.

That same semester I was required to take a Research Colloquium course, which had the fairly broad aim to introduce us to the program and the discipline. The course met its aim, I suppose, but it felt like the right information at the wrong time. I couldn’t think about comp exam procedures or how the different narratives of our discipline overlapped while I was struggling to get through each week. I wanted more guidance, but I didn’t know how to, or even if I should, ask for it. My classmates and I were encouraged to seek peer support, to work together, to struggle together. For History of Rhetoric, a few of us did that for a few weeks. The lack of structure led the group to, basically, fade away.

I eventually learned how to read and write like a graduate student, but I’m not sure I could explain what that entails: How well-equipped am I, even now in my fifth year as faculty, to teach someone what it means? What, exactly, does “graduate-level reading and writing” look like? Clear, structured, focused instruction on the ways I needed to examine and develop texts might have helped me answer these questions—and might have prevented a lot of stress and struggle.

Because in-class, curricular instruction is the first and most powerful aspect of a graduate student’s education, that is where we start our collection. The following three chapters all describe institutional programming, beginning with a survey of graduate writing courses, moving into descriptions of specific graduate writing courses at two different institutions, and ending with a multivocal discussion of structured academic professionalization.