

Writing as a Humanities Ph.D. Student: Discovering the Writer in You, Exploring New Venues, and Rebuffing Criticisms

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Abstract:

Humanities graduate students often receive conflicting information about what, where, and how to publish. While publishing can be a stressful process, there are many opportunities for humanities graduate students to succeed. To be successful as a writer, though, graduate students must develop confidence, explore new avenues for publishing, and steel themselves against the inevitable deluge of criticism from reviewers, graduate colleagues, and even faculty in one's department. To do that, I present several ways graduate students can become professional, scholarly writers, different avenues in which to publish, ways to develop one's writing style and experience, and some advice on enduring criticism, which is unavoidable in scholarly life. This article argues that graduate students should publish and that with enough time and patience, the process can be rewarding and enjoyable.

Keywords: Graduate writing, Humanities Ph.D., anxiety, professionalization, graduate student

Writing as a graduate student can be a daunting task (Bloom, 1981). Graduate students may be seeking research jobs, teaching jobs, or work in the private or non-profit sector, all of which will require writing in graduate school, and much of which will require attempting to publish that work. Even well-trained Ph.D. students from great masters programs might have relied on advisers, the proverbial riding on the coattails, for sound writing. Some masters programs have relatively little writing instruction and others have non-thesis options. And while it may be easy to assume that all "legitimate" Ph.D. students, of course, had ample instruction in writing and that no "real" Ph.D. student would ever be admitted to an above average Ph.D. program without having completed a thesis, scholars across the humanities and social sciences know that entering Ph.D. students have diverse experiences in writing, and some of those experiences are either pedagogically lacking or non-existent (see Bloom, 1981). Furthermore, writing may be particularly difficult for those students who come from the professional world or have taken several years off between school. These barriers are of course the tip of the iceberg as there are a host of anxiety-provoking issues related to graduate study (Daly and Miller, 1975; Daly, 1985; Woodrow, 2011).

Sometimes the problem is advisors and professors more than students or previous programs (Bloom, 1981). Ph.D. students might have advisors or mentors that write less now or perhaps publish mostly invited essays that often undergo lower, if any, standards of peer-review. Professors might focus on content and not form in seminar classes. Some students may be taught writing by professors who are themselves bad or reluctant writers. And, yet other times, professors may be so slow in getting revisions back, or fail to get them back to students, that students do not know what to fix in their writing. All of these situations make writing difficult in graduate school. As a result, graduate students may not be able to write at the appropriate level, in style and substance, to produce work sufficiently robust to publish in peer-reviewed publications (Gray and Drew, 2008). And, that can be discouraging, creating a self-doubt cycle that hurts a graduate student's ability to ever be published.

I offer several suggestions for developing as a professional writer (attending university workshops, reading about writing, forming writing groups), time management (identifying where seminar papers might fit in disciplinary journals, spending time on citations on the front end, and reducing fear of rejection), trying new publishing avenues (op-ed writing, book reviews, department or disciplinary newsletters, and blogging) to improve writing and editing and get acclimated to the publishing world. These practices can foster an ethic of writing among graduate students that they will need no matter where they seek employment.

I also respond to common criticisms to my suggestions (graduate students don't know enough to write book reviews, there's no time to write or read outside of a Ph.D. program, graduate school is too competitive to work with fellow graduate students, etc.). While academia trades in pessimism (there are no jobs, there's no time to write, teaching prevents me from writing), enabling students to succeed in writing and publishing can help build their self-esteem through the job search process and during the rigorous later stages of graduate programs, as well as prepare them for successful academic careers.

Work on writing

It is difficult to be excited about writing, let alone good at it, if graduate students don't work on writing. Working on writing can be difficult because graduate students are often expected to teach, help with a professor's research, participate in light service activities, attend class, and have time for self-care. It is often hard to fit writing in, but one of the best ways to do it is to work on writing even if it does not produce tangible graduate student writing.

Graduate students should study good writing. This means reading about authors who write and who write about writing. In an area of self-help books, many with little evidence to support their claims, graduate students may bristle at this idea. After all, all one needs to do is take the time to write. But, writing is rarely that easy, days are busy, and try as they might, graduate students are not always disciplined. Writing is not a natural talent that one either has or does not. The best writers work on their craft. Read the *Journal of Scholarly Publishing* and interviews with authors and

thinkers you enjoy. Sometimes learning that other writers struggle with writer's block or family distractions can help position graduate student writers in a more thoughtful, realistic writing milieu. Learn what motivated writers and what writers do. This process helps the graduate student locate themselves in the subject position of writer.

Talk with people in your department about writing. Ask: Who do you think writes well in this discipline? What fiction do you read? What was the hardest thing for you to overcome as a scholarly writer? How have you improved as a writer? These questions will encourage graduate students to think about becoming not just writers, but better writers.

Graduate students should also take advantage of on-campus and off-campus resources. Mullen (2006) described the process of becoming an academic writer as one of joining a culture, and that can be difficult to do without the training and tools. If there is a graduate student writing center or center for research and learning, then visiting these places might very well connect the graduate student with better writing resources. Graduate students might attend job talks or form writing groups to get a better sense of how others convey ideas. Writing for class and attending pro-seminars might not be enough. Think about reaching out to someone not in one's own department as a writing partner or for help editing. This kind of experience can not only improve writing and confidence in one's own department but also help graduate students understand that other students in other disciplines are going through the same difficulties.

One might also work with other writers at other schools or in the community, utilizing websites like MeetUp and Facebook to connect with people who care about writing. Often times graduate students have a poor understanding of what their college or university offers because of the demands of being in a specific department. That should not prevent the thoughtful graduate student from reaching out to others on- and off-campus for support.

The point is simple: get better at writing by studying and practicing writing. Just as one wouldn't assume they'd get better at free throw shooting by playing in a basketball game or better at knitting by visiting craft stores, one shouldn't assume they'll get better at writing by being in graduate school or by simply drudging through class writing. There's no shame in skill or process development, particularly if it empowers struggling writers to be less worried about writing and quicker to approach writing projects with vigor and passion (see Harris, 2006).

Time management

Time management isn't simply about finding time to write. Many writing manuals will urge writers to set aside time each day to write, and that's certainly not bad advice, but there are so many other time-saving ideas in the writing process that can help make graduate students become better writers.

These ideas include identifying where seminar papers might fit in disciplinary journals early in the writing process, spending time on citations on the front end of the writing process, and

reducing fear of rejection. These rarely discussed ideas, or rarely fostered ideas, promise to make graduate students better, more confident writers, no matter when they write.

The first idea requires work but promises big rewards. Aim high for journals, but don't send every article to the top journal in one's field or to journals for which one's work is a bad fit. Every paper scholars produce is not of the same quality. That is okay! Many of us can point to scholars who have produced magisterial work in our respective fields but also delivered some less than stellar entries into our academic communities. Scholars have fine careers working in second-tier journals. Graduate students who are realistic about their work can be more positive about their writing if they decrease chances for rejection. Of course, one's employability is often improved by top journal placements, but if graduate students want to work with heavier teaching loads or at less prestigious schools for any number of reasons, then publishing in the top journals might not matter. If one's career goals are centered on teaching, then one should not worry about writing and placement as much because that writing is less important to one's career. In the current academic environment, quantity should not be discounted for quality. Many scholars will be better served by producing more work even if it is in lesser tier journals. No matter what one's scholarly goals, one can save much time by aiming for likely placements as opposed to going through several months or years of the peer review process in multiple journals all the while experiencing self-doubt. Put in the work necessary to understand the complexities of journal publishing to best help your confidence and career (Stoilescu and McDougall, 2010).

Citations are one of the main reasons the writing process can bog down. In a footnote-heavy discipline like law or history, footnotes might take longer than the article proper. But, a wise graduate student works on citations early so the writing process does not end in a grinding confusion of minutia and computer file- and note-checking. Of course, some scholars love citations. But, the most efficient way to finish an article is to not end a writing session without putting in the proper citations. This also gives the writer something that looks more like the finished product and, as a result, may provide a confidence boost at the end of a session. Do not save the worst stuff for the end because one may risk disincentivizing writing.

Start thinking about rejection early. It happens to everyone. Rather than always thinking positively, start thinking about the likelihood of rejection. Become comfortable with it. Scholars are rejected regularly. Novelists too. John Grisham and Steven King had trouble at the beginning and now they sell every idea they put to paper. Most graduate students have been rejected by other graduate programs, undergraduate sororities or teams, and potential significant others. And, they survived. Those rejections might sting, they might hurt an awful lot, but graduate students can build on their experiences to gain a little perspective on life. A rejected article will happen, and graduate students will survive. Timothy S. Rich (2013, 379) puts it this way: "With a thick skin and an appreciation for the standards of publication, graduate students can certainly find outlets for their work". Rather than having one's positive thinking dashed, develop the wherewithal to deal with negative news. A strong commitment to persevering will be a much more enabling force than

constant feel-good-ery. Use previous rejections as evidence that these rejections will be tolerable and that one can come out the other end stronger and smarter than before. It might seem hard, but it will make graduate students more resilient writers less likely to be thrown off course during the latter half of the writing process. It will also save valuable time by allowing graduate students to not wallow in despair upon rejection.

These time-saving techniques can reduce the psychic jolts common to many writers who have not thought critically about writing and time. Smarter writers plan thoroughly and use their time wisely because well-used time is success enabling. Rather than fearing rejection, become comfortable with it even while you try to reduce its likelihood. The more graduate students can accept rejection, the more they'll free themselves to write better.

Trying new publishing avenues

Increasingly academics are asked to make their work intelligible to the public. Rather than debating the merit of this idea, it makes more sense to acknowledge that scholars and students alike may be asked to communicate their ideas to a wider audience. But Ph.D. students may feel pressure to only work in one media or to only contribute to peer-reviewed journals. Narrowing one's focus neither builds confidence nor helps Ph.D. students express themselves confidently to the public. There are, however, options for Ph.D. students to get their feet wet by publishing in non-traditional venues.

First, publishing is as much about confidence as it is about skill and knowledge. The best-published authors are not necessarily the smartest, the hardest working, or the most novel. Most scholars know of a workhorse who publishes time and time again but never seems to publish anything particularly significant. Likewise, many of us know someone who can barely communicate over email or interpersonally, but seems to produce strong academic writing. The reason authors succeed is that they have confidence. They are confident that their work will find a home, that rejection is not a personal condemnation, and that writing makes them better thinkers, teachers, and members of academic communities.

Yet, how can graduate students develop confidence in the competitive and arguably high-stakes world of academia? One simple approach beyond the idealistic "write X words every day" advice that graduate students receive is to write smaller projects that one can place so that one develops a style and the production habits necessary to bolster one's confidence for bigger projects. If one's going to write 500 words per day, why not make them publishable as a book review or an op-ed? Seeing one's name in print always provides a boost, so graduate students would be advised to not discount the importance of smaller publishable projects in bolstering their confidence.

Second, pay (almost) no mind to the critics. Of course, everyone has a writing strategy and an idea about the best publishing venues. Not every scholar's strategy or preferred journal is another scholar's preference. Graduate students risk criticism blocking their writing altogether rather than shaping it positively. Do not write book reviews at the expense of turning your prospectus in on

time, but do write an op-ed after accomplishing a thorough literature review or editing a class paper to give you the boost necessary to commit, re-commit, and finish other projects.

Third, seriously consider book reviews as important graduate student work. The book review is ubiquitous in scholarly publishing. Book reviews in a discipline's top journal can be as significant, if not more so, as a lower placed peer-review article. But, graduate students often receive two criticisms from professors and graduate student mentors: 1) there's no benefit to reviewing books, and 2) you don't know enough to review books. Both of these criticisms miss the mark and deny the many benefits of publishing book reviews.

Some critics argue that book reviews do not matter in the scholarly enterprise. That is wrong for a number of reasons. Book reviews convey knowledge about advances in disciplines with which no one has time to keep up. It is impossible to read every new monograph, textbook, or popular press option. Book reviews help direct scholars' attention to the worthwhile, well-argued, and interesting (Gibbs, 2013; Lee et al., 2010). Book reviews also help connect reviewers to scholars, authors, and journal editors. A Ph.D. student might have little reason or chance to contact Professor X from Top University, but a query to that professor who also happens to serve as the book review editor for Second Tier Journal may open up networking opportunities. Furthermore, a good book review gets noticed. A graduate student who writes an engaging review or perhaps even a review essay might very well get more reads than someone who published a highly-specialized article even in the best journal. A good book review demonstrates critical reading and thinking, and a dedication to help other scholars do their hard work of scholarship.

Other critics argue that graduate students don't know enough about a discipline to write book reviews. This criticism seems reductive, essentializing, and to throw serious doubt on the early years of graduate study. Graduate students may be new to disciplines, but they also might have years of experience in the discipline from undergraduate and earlier graduate study along with professional experience in the subject matter. That experience matters and putting that to bear on a book review is valuable. Graduate students also learn how to construct sound arguments early on in the graduate school process. Even if a graduate student does not know the entire discipline in year one or two, they likely possess the skills necessary to weigh competing evidence, assess writing styles, and think through plot, narrative arc, and timing. A firm knowledge of how to make arguments can be just as helpful as subject level mastery in assessing a text. A poorly argued or written text is unlikely to make a good monograph even if the author has an encyclopedic knowledge of the subject matter. Graduate students should be comfortable engaging a text particularly as they hone their critical mind on grading student papers and tests.

The benefits of reviewing books are many (Stoilescu and McDougall, 2010). One important benefit is that reviewers often receive the book free. Graduate student travel and professional development budgets are often low and graduate school even with a stipend or fellowship can be expensive. While full-time faculty may scoff at the idea, free books are helpful for students who might not otherwise be able to afford them. Book reviewers often have the option of selecting an

electronic or print copy, which accommodates research and reading preferences. Book reviewers also learn about new ideas in their field. Because book review editors prefer books published in the last two years, reviewing books can be an excellent way to stay abreast of new developments in one's field. Because journals often have relationships with publishers, a book reviewer may be able to get a copy quicker than if they asked for one themselves or if they waited for an examination or desk copy (and one can avoid the calls and emails from publisher representatives seeking information). Book reviews also help acquaint reviewers with a journal's style and scope. Graduate students may struggle deciphering themes from a journal's last few issues or the "Aim & Scope" description. Familiarizing oneself with style requirements, editors' correspondence standards, and production time when completing a book review can provide valuable insight for later work with that journal.

Book reviews are not the only shorter publishable work available for graduate students. Op-eds and blog posts also represent opportunities for graduate students to build confidence as well as connect them with exciting opportunities. Years ago, it might have been easy to laugh at someone claiming a blog post was scholarly work or that anyone read it, but those years are long gone. Blogs often have higher readerships than traditional print media and are increasingly well-regarded in scholarship. Blog posts vary from multi-mediated presentations to the heavily footnoted. Some blogs focus on disciplinary news while others are decidedly political. Either way, blogs are engaging forums for scholarly exchange. Beware the trolls, however. Graduate students will need to develop a thick skin as the Internet opens up writers to all sorts of mean-spirited, untruthful, and outlandish criticisms. Prepare for those opposed to your writing style, subject matter, political view, and even you personally to make their presence known. On the other hand, graduate students looking to connect with their supporters and opponents might find blogging engaging even with the occasional dose of vitriol. Op-eds also engage a broader public and may open doors for collaboration with community and opinion leaders. Graduate students interested in working with the local Kiwanis club, Chamber of Commerce, or La Raza organization might find that these organizations become more interested in partnerships once they get a sense of the student's commitment to local issues and the community. Op-eds also help graduate students connect research to the present-day political dramas unfolding. In the same way that the podcast *Backstory* connects history to current news, op-eds help connect writers to matters of local interest and may provide a forum for sharing expertise with the people who need it most. These smaller publishing opportunities offer significant benefits for graduate students and will assuredly boost the confidence of graduate students when their name appears in print or on the fourth screen.

Conclusion

These practices can foster an ethic of writing among graduate students that they will need no matter where they seek employment. Not many people are able to avoid writing. It comes up when writing reports for managers and writing grant proposals for nonprofit organizations. The more comfortable one is with writing, the more prepared one will be for writing success. Stoilescu

and McDougall (2010, 85) write, “Although intellectual and academic abilities are very important, we argue that these are not always enough to sustain writing.” These authors are correct, and their claim supports graduate students devoting time to writing and not simply to one’s subject matter.

Writing can be hard, but it is not impossible. Rather than holding oneself up to lofty ideals (write every day, publish in the top journals, don’t write for the popular press, and never be rejected), graduate students should accept that writing is difficult for even the best scholars and the most productive scholars. Study the craft, find allies, and be comfortable with bumps in the road. One doesn’t need to be perfect, lose connection with friends and family, or wait for some mythical blossoming of sublime writing. Rather, work hard and be humble. The best writers are always working on getting better and able to deal with failure. Teaching oneself these ideas early in the graduate school experience can make writing in and after graduate school enjoyable and successful. Things worth doing are worth working at and even your professors, mentors, and colleagues might not be giving you the best advice. Rest assured that many other graduate students struggle with the same issues; seek them out and don’t be ashamed to commiserate. While graduate school can be cut-throat, even hostile, many of your colleagues will appreciate your honesty and openness as you work together to deal with the tumult of scholarly writing.

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