Toward Graduate-Level Writing Instruction

Calling for an explicit commitment to graduate-level writing instruction in English studies, the authors describe a critical writing workshop that serves this purpose. The aim of the course is to create a formal curricular space through which students can brainstorm, create, and sustain a wide variety of critical writing projects.

Acts of writing are both marginalized and privatized in the graduate classroom; literary texts are given precedence over the texts that the students themselves compose, and even in courses where theory is made part of the interpretive context, such theories are not translated into a comparable theory or pedagogy of writing.

—Patricia Sullivan, “Writing in the Graduate Curriculum: Literary Criticism as Composition”

Writing and talking, talking about writing, brought me into a literary circle, a community of passionate burgeoning scholars, in a way that my literature and theory courses did not, and perhaps cannot.

—Rachel, PhD student in early modern literature, 2007

When I was in my first year of PhD work, I wrote an essay draft for the graduate writing workshop that serves as this essay’s inspiration. I had just read Foucault’s The Archaeology of Knowledge and was attempting to write a paper that explored feminist concepts of voice through a Foucauldian framework. Early on in the paper I posed two questions: “Who are the authoritative speakers..."
about voice in composition studies? How do the enunciative modalities of authoritative speakers insure the perpetuation of masculinized composing metaphors as a means of conceptualizing voice?” These questions appeared in the introduction and were supposed to provide direction to the paper. My professor underlined them and wrote, “You lose the reader with terms that are not immediately explained.” From a reader’s perspective, she is right, but what might not be clear is that I failed to unpack the terms not because I thought it unnecessary, but because I did not yet know how to do so. In effect, I was not borrowing from Foucault to make my case as much as I was outright lifting his language in a vain hope to legitimize my project.

My draft reveals the formation of a critical writing subject who is an outsider to scholarly conversations. My effort to fold Foucault’s language into my project was an attempt to act like an insider. (Fittingly, my professor noted in her end comment that my use of Foucault was largely “cosmetic.”) I wanted to show that I recognized an “authoritative” voice when I heard one (Foucault’s), even if I did not yet know exactly how to use that voice in my own project. Foucault, for me, was the theorist du jour. Yet, despite these problems, productive change was afoot: I was beginning to envision myself writing for readers, beyond those in the room, who have a stake in my ideas. And my writerly identity was in process, actively being shaped and redrawn by new rhetorical moves I was learning as both reader and writer.

What has become clear to me since then is that critical writing is intertwined with performances of professional identity, voice, and persona—performances that, happily, can be studied and practiced. To that end, I propose that one intuitive place to locate such study and practice is in English graduate curricula. This essay calls for an explicit commitment to graduate-level writing instruction in English studies that goes beyond incorporating drafts, peer reviews, and workshops into seminars and entails more than extracurricular writing workshops to supplement course work. My push here is for a graduate writing course—required or not, depending on local circumstances—the aim of which is to create space, community, and rhetorical awareness/flexibility necessary to brainstorm, create, and sustain a wide variety of critical writing projects.1
In addition to serving the pragmatic goal of improving student writing (a claim to which I circle back in the final section), “comp for grad students,” as the course is unofficially called in my department, can demystify scholarship, put its creation within reach, vividly foreground the amount of time and dedication necessary to accomplish it, and nurture a relation to text production that relies on something other than individual fortitude and talent, generating a healthier affect around graduate writing practices. It’s no secret that graduate students (much like faculty) regularly encounter academic writing as an emotionally fraught, privately experienced hardship. When I was a student in that workshop, the participants—some of whom specialized in literature or critical theory; others in rhetoric and composition—cried regularly in or after class, so overwhelmed were we by all that we had to know in order to create writing that made a contribution, no matter how minor, or just made sense. When I taught a version of this course for the first time, two accomplished, well-respected graduate students in our program wept when asked to introduce themselves and narrate their writing processes to the class. Rachel, whose words serve as an epigraph above, was one of those students. She later wrote in her course reflection about that day: “Our methods and processes varied, but all of us were overwhelmed, somewhat directionless, and ignorant of where to begin a process, let alone what our process was. We all felt we were expected to learn to write critically through osmosis, by reading and discussing critical secondary readings in our literature courses and literary and critical theory in our theory courses.” I’m not suggesting that comp for grad students will stop the crying, but I am saying that the pain so many of us experience need not be private, shameful, or an indicator of unfitness for graduate school. A curricular space devoted to critical writing represents one effective counternarrative to such ideas while also serving intellectual and professional goals.

Rachel’s comment underscores an important and simple point: writing critically, writing toward the production of scholarship, can and should be taught. Of course, it’s not news to say that writing can be taught at the undergraduate level; this claim is the very basis and divine hope of FYC (first-year composition) programs across the nation. Recent moves to transform FYC into a writing about writing course suggest that, in addition to teaching skills, we have a body of knowledge to teach (i.e., rhetoric, genre, discourse community). In her call for developing undergraduate composition majors, Kathleen Yancey argues that writing should be extended both horizontally and vertically throughout the curriculum, filling the “glaringly empty spot between first-year composi-
Writing should be approached as content knowledge in English graduate programs; it should be taught, and not just to students in rhetoric and composition.

advancing knowledge, implies a progressive, reconstructive impulse—a commitment to reviewing, assessing, and critiquing extant conditions, theories, beliefs, practices, and assumptions in light of potentialities as yet untapped.

Goals of critical writing include building on others’ ideas as well as challenging and recasting those ideas for different purposes and contexts. This is no small achievement, as Jesseca, a PhD candidate in creative writing, reminded me in her final reflection. Before she could change her composing habits, she had to “recognize the paralysis, the inner critic who stifled first drafts, and [her] tendency toward the entropy of procrastination rather than face the terror of generating and clarifying an idea.” My understanding of critical writing pedagogy permits this kind of vulnerability and makes room for wonder, the opening of oneself to new questions and curiosities that emerge during researching, writing, and dialoging with others. Wonder, and the wanderings it sometimes elicits, seem to me a crucial aspect of critical inquiry, understanding inquiry as a process of asking questions for which one does not have ready answers—a hermeneutical endeavor that requires considerable practice as writer and attentiveness as reader.

In what follows, I outline some previous efforts to foreground graduate writing instruction and then describe the graduate writing workshop that I designed and teach semi-annually. The final section considers rewards and challenges integral to the course, including how to approach student writing projects that fall outside one’s expertise, as so many do when I teach the course in a program best known for its PhD in creative writing. In an effort to construct a multivoiced account of the need for graduate writing instruction and the difference it makes, the essay includes commentary by Allison Carr, who enrolled in my spring 2008 course when she was a master’s student in the
literature program (she is now a doctoral student in composition and rhetoric). Allison’s remarks, which consist of writing completed during the course and some written a year later, appear in text boxes throughout the essay. Her writing is sometimes in direct dialogue with my ideas and other times operates as an open-ended reflection on issues relevant to graduate student writers.

**Graduate Writing Instruction: A Pragmatic, Not Esoteric, History**

Graduate writing instruction has at least one storied history. Lisa Mastrangelo’s “Listening in the Silences for Fred Newton Scott” details graduate writing courses taught by Scott at the University of Michigan between 1890 and 1926 when he directed the country’s sole graduate program in rhetoric. One such course, Rhetoric 9/10, was conducted as a “seminary,” which Scott describes as a format in which students were “divided into small sections for the presentation of theses and reports for extempore discussion and conference” (qtd. in Mastrangelo 13). Another of Scott’s graduate courses, Rhetoric 23/24: Seminary in Advanced Composition, emphasized peer workshopping. The course description in 1908–09 specified that Rhetoric 23/24 was designed for advanced students who are “in the habit of writing, but who desire personal criticism and direction” (14). Emphasis was on “discussion of the manuscripts submitted for correction” with time for “the essentials of English Composition and the principles of criticism and revision” (4). Mastrangelo notes that Rhetoric 23/24 “offered an important place for the graduate students to practice being writers in the truest sense of the word. Indeed, when Scott left on sabbatical in the winter of 1923–24, students formed their own Graduate Writers Club to replace the seminary, since it was not taught in Scott’s absence” (15). By making writing central to his graduate courses, along with discussion, peer work, and rhetorical study, Scott successfully helped students develop writerly “‘independence and courage’” to counteract what he described as their tendency to “‘stand amazed and helpless before the confident opinions, the
surprising generalizations, the swift and easy deductions of the scholar” (qtd. in Mastrangelo 23). Scott’s course established an ambitious model for graduate writing instruction. Unfortunately, it has not been widely emulated or adapted within English graduate programs.

Efforts to authorize writing instruction for graduate study, however, did not end with Scott. Nearly fifty years after the appearance of Rhetoric 23/24, a Conference on College Composition and Communication resolution placed graduate writing instruction on the discipline’s professional agenda:

After discussion, members of the workshop agreed on the following resolution:
That the profession become more involved in teaching composition as a discipline on the graduate level, to help graduate students improve their writing, to send them out of the university with respect for and skill in writing, to increase respect for good writing in the community, to give composition a greater presence in the university as a whole, and to improve relations between the English department and other departments by removing the aura of the esoteric in the teaching of expository writing. (“Focused”)

Generated in a 1973 CCCC workshop, this resolution was published in a now defunct section of College Composition and Communication entitled “Workshop Reports.” The report identifies graduate course work as “appropriate for instruction in composition” and deems such instruction valuable for “both English majors and non-English majors” (“Focused” 328). A graduate writing course taught by one of the workshop participants, Herman Struck of Michigan State College (now Michigan State University), was upheld as a possible model. In his “non-credit, non-fee course,” which, we are told, was not advertised but was always over-enrolled, the instructor evaluated students’ writing samples and then met individually with each student to talk over strengths and weaknesses. The whole group met for one two-hour session per week for six weeks (328). The course philosophy was summarized as follows: “Approach is pragmatic, not esoteric: it attempts to make clear the specific competent features of an expository style, applicable to students in all areas of study” (328). In addition to course work, the report includes general
suggestions for equipping graduate students with composition knowledge, which they note should involve “training in grammar,” group work “to make composition a community activity,” and “individual tutorial work with a freshman throughout his freshman English courses” (328).

This resolution expresses, on one hand, a concern for students’ writing competency (“help graduate students improve their writing”) and, on the other, self-consciousness about the image and status of composition studies (“give composition a greater presence in the university as a whole”). The association of writing with pragmatic, specific tasks distances it from larger rhetorical problems familiar to advanced writers: How do I situate my argument in a larger context? How do I show indebtedness while also developing an original line of thought? How do I conceptualize and articulate a problem or question of significance and relevance to a disciplinary conversation? In that 1973 workshop, such questions might very well have been considered esoteric; the conceptual work of how to frame, sustain, and organize a scholarly argument was less the point than was writing competency and disciplinary identity.

Remarkably, thirty-five years later, conceptual questions for advanced writers more or less continue to occupy the place of the esoteric, especially if we take esoteric to mean that which is “[d]esigned for, or appropriate to, an inner circle of advanced or privileged disciples; communicated to, or intelligible by, the initiated exclusively” (“Esoteric”). In her 1991 essay, “Writing in the Graduate Curriculum: Literary Criticism as
Composition,” Patricia Sullivan revealed the esoteric quality of graduate writing instruction. She interrogated the disconnect between theories of writing—largely shaped by process models of composing—and teaching practices, characterized by a product-centered view of writing. Sullivan argues “for a reconceptualization of the nature and role of writing in the graduate curriculum” (285), and though she focuses on literature classrooms, her conclusions are applicable to courses across English, with creative writing workshops notable exceptions. Not surprisingly, she finds that in the graduate classes she examined, reading closely, critically, and voluminously was privileged by instructors. She reports, “In some courses, professors acknowledged that a particular critical approach would make a difference in the way students read a particular text or set of texts, but no suggestion was made that such an approach might similarly influence the students’ writing—the shape, voice, argument, or style of their discourse” (287). The marginalized location of student writing, Sullivan argues, reflects a systemic problem within English graduate programs, namely the failure to acknowledge that graduate education should prepare critical writers for the profession. Graduate students are very often expected to compose a final project that is then “evaluated according to how well it approximates an ideal, but apparently unteachable, text” (288).

Since 1991 a number of texts offering useful advice on how and why to write for publication and on the politics of academic publishing have appeared (i.e., Casanave and Vandrick; Kirsch; Olson and Taylor; Vandenberg). However, both kinds of texts advance a largely product-centered approach in which writing is not the problem; the problem is what to do with writing once it has been produced, or understanding how writing signifies politically within....
I can’t remember ever learning to write a critical essay. How do I know how to do the things I do? I remember bite-sized lessons—the preferred metaphor for supporting quotations in my 9th-grade Catholic school English class was to wrap them “like baby Jesus,” and my college papers are littered with big red X’s through introductory paragraphs, always overlong and showy. But how have I learned voice, style, argument?

The obvious answer—the one I would give my own students if they were asking me the same question—is that I’ve learned by reading. But I am not satisfied with that answer. Because the kind of writing I have written as a graduate student is not the kind of writing I’m reading. I read scholarship that is innovative and surprising, work that expands my perspective and work that I admire. And though my writing at times approaches innovation and surprise, I am not always sure how I have achieved that effect and how I can replicate it. More often, my writing feels tired, overwrought, self-conscious.

Where did I learn to be boring? How can I unlearn it?
Critical Writing Workshop: Description and Commentary

Students seem to think that faculty know how to write academic pieces and that it’s easy for them. I’m not sure about the rest of the professoriate, but I sweat blood over a piece.

—Stuart Brown, quoted in Duane Roen, "Revising for Publication"

First emptiness, then terror, at last one word, then a few words, a paragraph, a page, finally a draft that can be revised.

—Donald Murray, The Craft of Revision

In my workshop, formally titled Critical Writing in English Studies, students read rhetorical theory to develop a vocabulary and conceptual framework for critical writing. Readings change regularly but have included work by Kenneth Burke (terministic screens; tropes; dramatism); Lloyd Bitzer, Richard Vatz, Barbara Biesecker, and Jenny Edbauer (rhetorical situation); Linda Hutcheon (irony); George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (metaphor and embodied knowing); Martha Kolln (rhetorical grammar); J. L. Austin and Judith Butler (performativity); Elizabeth Bruss and Michel Foucault (theories of discourse); Hans Gadamer (rhetoric of questions); Joseph Harris (rhetoric of writing); and Amy Devitt and Anis Bawarshi (genre theory). The course asks students to view writing as a central tool for creating, distributing, expanding, and challenging academic knowledge and then to apply what they have learned by developing and completing their own writing projects, focused on any area of scholarship within English studies (more on this point in the final section). Students do not revise an already existing paper for this class because I want them to start fresh. This way, we move together from idea to proposal to drafts to complete paper. Also, because our collective thinking about writing and rhetoric is shaped by the readings as well as by our conversations, a prior version of a paper would likely emerge from an intellectual and critical space detached from the one we create together.

Taught in a ten-week quarter system, we spend the first five weeks reading rhetorical theory to develop an understanding of how elements like situation, exigency, audience, tropes, genre, voice, and inquiry form a writer’s project. We also read with an eye toward how the writers we’re studying make arguments, work with other texts, craft voice, organize complex material, write introductions, employ sections, and so forth. Because the readings privilege a rhetorical and performative view of language, students’ projects in some way focus on how a text, or set of texts, does something and the resulting effects. This focus creates the possibility for a wide range of writing projects. For example, in the
most recent class, student projects included an exploration of public texts and citizen identity, a study of the relationship between yoga and writing pedagogy, a reconsideration of *Tom Jones* through the lens of genre theory, a rhetorical analysis of Affrilachian poetry, and an analysis of popular forms of irony, particularly in relation to *The Colbert Report*.

Also during the first five weeks, prior to drafting final projects, students complete several short, directed writing assignments aimed at sharpening rhetorical skills. For example, students read Joseph Harris’s *Rewriting: How to Do Things with Texts*, in which he outlines five overlapping rhetorical moves central to critical writing, and then analyze a piece of writing using Harris as a guide. The analysis requires students to write two to three pages in which they identify how an author makes use of other texts. The purpose of this assignment is to develop rhetorical understanding of how other texts function in critical writing and to connect this use to genre expectations. We might, for instance, use other voices to affirm a position, establish context, identify problems or oversights, expand ideas already in circulation, or build a case for a broad-based argument.

Whatever the use, working with other texts calls forth tensions between self and other, the central drama of critical writing. This drama certainly played out in my voice-paper where I overly identified with the other (Foucault) and consequently attempted to conceal my lack of fluency, submerging my identity within an already established power discourse. My former student Rachel comments directly on this issue when she writes that graduate students “undervalu[e] our own knowledge and insights because we feel overshadowed by those arguments which pre-exist our scholarship and are still being developed by those ‘iconic’ theorists.”

The dialectic between self and other, a subject discussed in the workshop, raises fundamental questions about how to position oneself in relation to other writers and thinkers without repudiating, merging with, or ingratiating oneself to them. Issues of affection and antagonism are relevant here, questions of how much we want to reveal about our relationship to a text, theory, or writer. Do we want

In a writing exercise for Laura’s class, I was surprised to discover that many of my sentences were between 50–90 words long. (They were, I wish to note, grammatically correct.) Long sentences built large paragraphs. Of this trend, I noted,

> I write long sentences in an effort to fill space, to own the page, to refuse anyone else entry. This is probably about confidence and self-preservation, about appropriating accepted discourse, and about trying to fill pages as quickly as possible. This is probably not the best habit to foster, particularly in the case of refusing others’ entry. Don’t I want my readers to engage with my text? If I write differently, do I risk allowing too much intellectual space in which to disagree?
readers to see our admiration, our real feeling for another writer? Would this corrupt critical analysis, make it suspect, transform it into a form of idolatry? In contrast, when is explicit antagonism appropriate, too emboldened, an embarrassment? As writers, do we thrive on rejection of the other, on companionship and hopes of common cause, or some relationship in between? Such questions might not be in the forefront when we write, but I would argue that they are part of the psycho-drama that informs how we construct and conduct ourselves as writers working with others’ ideas and words. After all, we are creating relationships through writing, a complicated effort in any context. My goal is to heighten students’ awareness of what’s involved when working with others’ words as a way to make meaning and initiate inquiry, develop writerly identity and affectively position ourselves, and adhere to, or break from, genre conventions.

Building on this idea, students write a short paper that grows out of our readings about genre. The analysis focuses on their own enactment of genre in a critical paper written within the last two years, focusing specifically on how they do genre in that paper and how genre does them. Our readings by Amy Devitt, Anis Bawarshi, and Judith Butler suggest that genre has both conservative tendencies that forestall innovation and creative potential for new knowledge building and creative acts. This assignment asks students to examine their performance within a particular genre in order to make explicit their implicit knowledge of genre conventions, to emphasize the performance aspect of writing within a genre, to highlight matters of style and voice in relation to genre, and to consider genre as both enabling and constraining. Also, though, I want students to understand the centrality of genre to participation in a rhetorical community (such as the many specialized communities within English Studies).

In addition to these shorter pieces, students write and receive group feedback on a proposal that becomes the basis for the final paper. Well before we’ve begun workshopping, we articulate our collectively-arrived-at expectations for critical writing (these emerge from writing and discussion rather than predetermine it), practice responding to writing in process, and become invested in the diverse projects that inevitably begin to take shape. This is one central way that community forms among class members; the proposal stage is the beginning of the group’s investment in one another’s projects. During the class, students write and talk about their projects from the conceptualization stage through drafting and revising; thus, they develop informed, involved
relationships with one another’s work that allow for commentary with a history. For instance, during discussion of writing, the exclusive focus of the last five weeks, students often make comments like the following: “I thought this point was clearer in your proposal,” “This section clarifies our confusions in the previous draft,” or “I’m still wondering when you’ll get back to the idea we discussed last week.”

Involvement with one another’s work also benefits the respondents, as they learn how to talk about writing in process (something that definitely transfers to teaching), how to address writing problems productively, and how to be attentive readers and listeners. Community does not simply form because we are in a course together, though. It is facilitated by a teaching stance that I call a pedagogy of wonder and by structured assignments. Regarding my teaching stance, even before we get to the workshops, I guide our discussions toward surprising details, what we’re learning, and how an issue or concept is made to seem unassailable. In doing so, my intent is to encourage openness and discourage too quick presumptions or too easy assimilation of new ideas into what’s already known, a move that dismisses finer distinctions and serious differences in favor of being oriented. Practicing wonder requires caring for what’s being said with the intent to learn (in contrast to reading for confirmation of what is presumed, or reading strategically in support of an already formulated idea). Sara Ahmed’s description of wonder is relevant here: “[W]onder is a passion that motivates the desire to keep looking; it keeps alive the possibility of freshness” (Cultural 180). In her discussion of feminist wonder, Ahmed points out that wonder exceeds its philosophical associations with “the sublime and the sacred” (180), becoming a source for feminist critical work. “What is striking about feminist wonder,” she writes, “is that the critical gaze is not simply directed outside; rather feminist wonder becomes wonder about the very forms of feminism that have emerged here or there” (182). How things have come to be the way they are—that is the territory of critical wonder. Using this idea as my point of orientation in the voice-paper, I might have more attentively read what compositionists were saying about voice in order to examine critically its “made” quality (how voice came to be conceived a certain way).
The affective stance that I promote as a teacher prioritizes connection, engagement, and openness as expressions of rigor that are rewarding and difficult to embody. We work toward this learning model in a fairly structured way. In preparation for workshops, I divide students into two groups and, for the first round of workshops, task group A with sending two- or three-page drafts to the whole class via email in advance of our meeting. Students can submit any section of their paper for which they would like feedback; they include a note with the drafts, telling us how they envision the section working in the overall paper and identifying areas of most concern for them. These details direct our feedback and provide us with an orientation to the evolving projects. We all read these drafts, but each student in group B is responsible for writing a feedback letter and leading discussion on one of the drafts from group A (the groups reverse roles the following week; each group ultimately submits two working drafts).

In a class capped at thirteen students, we typically discuss at least six papers in one workshop session during a class of two hours and forty-five minutes. We prioritize our comments by focusing on what seems important in a draft, keeping in mind that what’s before us is not finished but very much “in the midst,” as one of my favorite poetry professors used to say. Making the task manageable, not comprehensive, is our goal—after all, we’re responding to working drafts—as is providing generous, supportive, and critical readings of what’s working and what’s not, and to offer feedback that anticipates the paper’s next installment.

The student writer whose paper is on deck takes notes and, following

"Dear Workshoppers: This is more or less how I see this taking shape. It will likely take me a few stumbling paragraphs to really enter the project, but for all their awkwardness, the ideas presented here are what I hope to run with, albeit in a more refined nature. So as far as commentary, I’m concerned primarily with clarity of ideas, logic of organization, and portions of analysis that require more or less explication. Oh. And Wow. It gets freakishly hyper-aware towards the end . . . you can see where I hit the wall. My working title: ‘One of These Things Just Doesn’t Belong Here: Blah Blah Blah Anzaldúa Blah Blah Genre.’ Thanks for reading, I love you.”

“I know we’ve praised you for your ability to inject your personality in your critical writing and I still enjoy it, but at times it borders on snarky and this becomes distracting. I’ve marked the two places in the text where this sticks out (‘egos’ and ‘Harold Bloom’ both on p4). I think you generally do a really nice job of tempering your witticisms with your more ‘critical’ voice, which is something I admire about your writing, and these are just two places where I think it gets a little bit away from you.”
traditional creative writing workshop practice, has an opportunity to ask follow-up questions or make comments to clarify a point when discussion comes to an end. I have found that this approach works best because otherwise writers spend too much time and energy defending their choices and too little time listening to the group. The writer’s comments can detract from the goal of learning how readers right there in the room engage with and interpret the text over which the writer has labored. To engender an organic yet on-point discussion, readers must be empowered to offer assessments and impressions and then respond to one another as we collectively work through the text. And writers must learn how to be careful listeners, a practice that will help tremendously as the stakes increase—for example, when writing a dissertation or receiving reader reports about an essay submitted for publication. We have to be able to suspend our own attachment to the writing long enough to hear and be responsible to what others make of it. These goals are met unevenly, as in any class. I attribute any successes to the communal aspect of the course. That is, learning how to deliver and receive feedback is enabled by the fact that students are doing so in a community where we’ve established trust. It should be noted that trust does not imply harmonious consensus or lax standards (without fail, class commentary indicates the need for more revision of every draft we review). We certainly disagree with one another and experience tense moments from time to time, but this is as it should be—dissensus is an important component of critical work and good preparation for what one is likely to encounter on the conference circuit, during job talks, and in reader reports.

During the workshop portion of the class, in addition to reading and responding to classmates’ drafts, students also read chapters from Martha Kolln’s *Rhetorical Grammar* and apply her ideas to passages from their own writing. These applications are posted on a course blog where we all read and post comments. Students reproduce a sentence or passage from their drafts, revise the sentence using strategies described in the assigned chapter, and then write brief commentary about the resulting effects and insights gained. The assignment encourages students to experiment with new structures, trying rhetorical features outside their regular repertoire. In Katie’s example, she takes direction from Kolln’s observation that “the sentence that ends with a long string of prepositional phrases often loses its focus” (153) and excerpts the following example of the “proliferating prepositional phrase” from her own work:

*I have learned that badness is just part of my process, and I love the badness for helping me get to better-ness. If I want to accomplish anything, I have to allow myself to have bad ideas, to write bad sentences, to make bad claims. Badness, I think, is my first language. The fun is in the process of sorting it out, translating, recomposing in a more artful language others can understand and appreciate.*
“Walker’s poem, in its dual reliance on a collective Appalachian identity and a rejection of racial limits on that identity, relies on both a collective conception of Appalachian identity and a disruption of that concept.” In her reflection, Katie notes that “Kolln suggests we pay close attention to which words/phrases are stressed in order to better understand what information is extraneous,” and applies this advice to eliminate the repetition of of in her sample text. Isolating each problematic phrase, Katie begins by creating stronger verb constructions:

A rejection of racial limits . . . rejects racial limits
A collective conception of Appalachian identity . . . relies on the idea that Appalachian identity is collective and singular
A disruption of that concept . . . disrupts that concept

Working with these changes, Katie’s new sentence reads as follows: “Walker’s poem simultaneously reinforces and rejects the idea that Appalachian identity is collective and singular.”

In some ways, I think this series of assignments was the most rewarding because the rhetorical effects are so much more immediate than when working through revisions of a sustained argument or analysis. The grammar exercises allow students to play with language, opening up their writing to themselves in interesting ways, making it malleable. These supporting assignments help to develop a habit of attentiveness to how writing is constructed at the sentence level both in others’ and one’s own work. More generally, these exercises are like stretching before a workout; short, focused, and exploratory, they provide a warm-up to writing and a practice space that targets specific rhetorical features of a text.

Such exercises are undervalued in graduate education where writing is almost always evaluated in terms of what Ruth Ray calls “the coherent display of established knowledge rather than the messy process of knowledge making” (149). Ray advocates integrating personal writing in graduate classes so that students might work toward “integrating personal, local, and global knowledge and gradually develop the ability and confidence to adopt the researcher’s rhetorical stance” (152). I like the spirit of Ray’s comments in that I believe graduate student writers, like writers of all sorts, should be sanctioned to write in various modes and registers for a range of purposes (not always and only to

There are times when all the exercise feels excessive, when I decide to skip the training runs and run a race, even if I know I am not ready. I am not always successful, but each attempt teaches me how to be smarter and more effectual about the training, about the tuning up and stretching out.
make an argument, to present a “coherent display,” to be evaluated, etc.). The first part of my course attempts to do just that while recognizing that facility as a critical writer is cumulative, involving, as Ray notes, gradual development.

As is probably obvious, the form of the course is not particularly unique; it operates very similarly to a creative writing workshop. What’s unique is that this is a graduate course on critical writing, and that its benefits are often less tangible than the important practical goal of becoming rhetorically flexible, self-directed writers. There is also tremendous affective value, as Tara, a PhD candidate in literature, explained in her final reflection:

Yes, I have more skills and knowledge to apply to such writing, revision, and paring down, but the greatest gift of that class was the confidence with which I am able to use those skills. If “the greatest gift” sounds like a cliché, which I naturally avoid in scholarly writing, it is only because it is difficult to express in any new words how crucial the sense of authority that I now possess is to my role as a scholar in a community of scholars. . . . All the theories in the world . . . don’t matter if the student scholar can’t articulate them in a way that joins with the conversation in any significant way.

Another student, Jesseca, commented on the emotional work engendered by the class, writing, “I suspect any instructor planning such a course would be wise to consider the ways that emotions underwrite graduate writing.” She began her discussion by revisiting the first day of class when she announced that “when I write everyone will see how stupid I am” and then “nearly broke into tears during the round of introductions.” Crucial to students’ developing confidence and a sense of belonging in a supportive community is the workshop environment. Everyone shares writing throughout the course, most of which is in process, and everyone talks, listens, reads, writes.

**Reflections and Future Study**

Rachel, whose words appear at the beginning of this essay, contends that “English graduate programs offer a slew of creative writing workshops for creative writers: fiction, poetry, non-fiction, but a workshop in critical writing is an anomaly. This is a fault. Writing is process, regardless of whether one identifies more with critical or creative writing.” Divergent treatments of writing at the
graduate level expose problematic issues for both graduate students and the field of rhetoric and composition. For one, students are deprived of a formal, for-credit communal space where writers study the rhetoric of writing and test ideas and styles while also learning how to develop a scholarly subjectivity, a sense of themselves as contributors to given discourse communities. For another, the absence of direct writing instruction for graduate students reinforces misperceptions that writing competency amounts to a set of static skills learned once and for all. Compositionists have sought to counter this faulty assumption, arguing convincingly that writing competency is recursive and relative to genre conventions and discourse community knowledge (i.e., Beaufort; Downs and Wardle; Russell; Wardle). Yet this thinking has not significantly affected graduate education. Because students do not typically arrive in graduate programs knowing the significance of genre and discourse features specific to an area of study, we do them a disservice when we fail to provide formal study of the intellectual, rhetorical work required to write for specialized contexts and purposes. In the graduate workshop, participants are armed not with a universal toolkit for writing in the diverse field of English but instead with a set of adaptable rhetorical principles usable for different purposes, audiences, genres, and rhetorical constraints. Students are able to witness and experience how ideas coalesce over time through rewriting and in dynamic relation both to research and ongoing, focused feedback from interested, informed readers.

Student success beyond the workshop demonstrates the practical relevance and value of the course. To my knowledge, at least ten students (from a total of three sections) have delivered conference papers based on their work in the class, representing the following broad areas of study: contemporary, early modern, and ethnic literatures; creative writing; and public rhetoric and composition pedagogy. Three students received “revise and resubmit” notices from national, peer-reviewed journals, and two students have had work accepted for publication. In the latter category, one essay, which examines the grotesque as trope in the work of three Korean feminist poets, is forthcoming in

**My writing changed when I learned to look at it rhetorically, but not for the reasons one might think. What was significant wasn’t the recognition of patterns or habits and their rhetorical strengths or weaknesses, but rather, in order to undertake that analysis, I had to look at my writing as something worth analyzing, as an object worthy of study. When I began to think of my writing as something other than a transaction between teacher and student, I began to give the craft the attention it deserved. That move was just as much a move of affect as it was of rhetoric. To look at my writing as worthy, I had to consider myself worthy.**
As is apparent from this list of accomplishments, students’ areas of study differ substantially, and of note, most do not specialize in my area of expertise, rhetoric and composition (until recently, our department did not offer a doctoral focus in this area). Students who enroll in the graduate workshop are master’s or doctoral students working in literature, theory, creative writing, professional writing, or, more recently, rhetoric and composition. Because the program already includes a significant number of required courses, the critical writing workshop is not a required class for any area of study in my department, yet enrollment has reached maximum capacity (thirteen students) each time it’s been offered. Students regularly note in their evaluations that the course should be required because, for many, it’s pivotal to their acculturation into the discipline, providing a set of moves for making scholarship, a model for developing community and confidence, and, quite simply, a space where critical writing is front and center for ten weeks.

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Learning how to write right is hard. It requires reconceptualizing our roles as individuals, as scholars, and as members of a scholarly collective. Then comes the enactment, the performance. Once I figure out all the things I want to change, I must figure out how to effect that change. I must be willing to try and fail and try again. What was that great Samuel Beckett line? “Try again; fail better.” But I content myself with this knowledge: one day soon, I will master one small task. And one day soon after that, I will master another small task. Each time, my writing will get better. Each time, I will get better.
sion across English subfields and so fails to acknowledge different rhetorical moves valued and expected across areas of study. While these issues have not been sticking points for my colleagues, students, or me, they certainly deserve systematic attention. Toward this end, in the future I hope to conduct a study of the course and its effects. Such a project will include analysis of student writing before, during, and after the course, student assessments of their own progress, input from faculty across English subfields, as well as a thorough review of course outcomes and their viability.

Until then, I want to note that students’ scholarly differences present some noteworthy benefits, including that both students and teacher develop intradisciplinary awareness of issues, approaches, value systems, and meaning-making processes across English. This aspect of the course offers practical and professional training for those who will join the professoriate and find themselves working with a group of faculty trained in vastly different areas, and for whom textual, conceptual, and theoretical frameworks diverge sometimes significantly. Collectively, class members are better able to provide informed feedback on both the rhetoric and content of the essays than I am individually. To ensure that projects are relevant to current developments in their respective fields, I encourage students to share proposals and drafts with faculty members in their area, and my impression is that most do so.

This leads to an unexpected benefit from my perspective: I have more collaborative encounters with faculty across areas as a result of my lack of content expertise in many areas about which students write. Students consult with faculty mentors as their papers develop, and in turn, a healthy exchange among faculty has emerged, opening spaces where we can have conversations about the diverse, often fragmented, quality of English studies. These conversations have indirectly influenced other initiatives. For instance, departmental thinking about how to teach a recently developed undergraduate class called Introduction to English Studies has shifted from an intro to lit approach to a more representative one that immerses students in different ways of knowing, writing, reading, conducting research, delivering knowledge, and framing objects of study. In a recent iteration of this course, a faculty member designed units on literary studies, journalism, professional writing, rhetoric and composition, creative writing, and cultural studies. Students read materials representing each area, and for their final project they worked in groups to interview faculty who specialize in a selected area and then developed presentations focused on the distinctness of each discourse community.
Other notable changes in our departmental writing culture include the following: a free-standing community of student writers has begun to organize quarterly writing workshops focused on a variety of writing components (paper proposals, introductions, literature reviews, etc.); graduate students in every concentration are submitting paper proposals to writing and rhetoric conferences with great success; and students are importing lessons from the graduate workshop to the undergraduate classes they teach (i.e., integrating more whole-class writing workshops in which student writing is the primary object of study). While the writing workshop is not the only source for these changes, it certainly has created momentum and affirmed already existing beliefs about the value of intradisciplinary connections for faculty development and student learning.

Although writing has principally denoted first-year required composition throughout composition’s history, this association is currently undergoing considerable revision. Writing instruction at the graduate level presents exciting possibilities for reimagining where and how writing can be taught. More ambitiously, it asserts a shift in the mission of English graduate programs by admitting that critical writing is not a mere extension of undergraduate writing practices, and is not best learned by tacit immersion.

Acknowledgments
Students who enrolled in the three sections of Critical Writing for English Studies helped me revise my thinking and the course in productive ways. I am especially grateful to those students who allowed me to use their words and first names in this article and to Allison for partnering with me on this project. I benefited from an early round of feedback from my (intradisciplinary) writing group members: Julia Carlson, Trish Henley, Lisa Meloncon, Jay Twomey, and Gary Weissman. In addition, I thank Carol Peterson Haviland, Robert Yagelski, and John Webster for
valuable (discordant!) feedback on earlier drafts and Kathleen Yancey for patience and clear-headed guidance throughout the revision process.

Notes

1. For the idea of this course, I am indebted to Lynn Worsham, whose graduate writing workshop I took in 1995 while a doctoral student at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee. The course described here is inspired by Worsham’s course, but the writing exercises and workshop approach differ substantially. Since writing in graduate school still predominantly means writing with alphabetic text, my focus here is on a fairly traditional construct of critical writing as a print-based form. I should note, though, that I am moved by the urgency of calls like Selfe’s and Yancey’s to expand concepts of writing and composing in light of multimodal literacies. In fact, such calls have significantly influenced my teaching practices in both undergraduate and graduate courses.

2. E. Shelley Reid’s recent CCC article, “Teaching Writing Teachers Writing,” addresses an important, related effort: teaching writing in the context of GTA training. As her bibliography demonstrates, there is a much more developed body of scholarship focused on this particular goal than on teaching writing and making it an object of study in English graduate curricula more broadly.

3. In the past, I’ve used the introduction to Sara Ahmed’s *Queer Phenomenology*, in which a narrative about writing tables is the centerpiece, and others’ words appear as if in dialogue with the narrative. Lynn Worsham’s “Writing against Writing” is another piece that works well for this assignment. Her use of sources contrasts significantly from Ahmed’s in that a primary goal of her essay is to identify and critique a problem in composition scholarship.

4. Butler’s essay is not explicitly about genre, but she develops an important analysis of performativity that has bearing on genres and their recurrent rhetorical actions.

5. See Miller for more on this idea.

6. Interestingly, creative writing has assumed considerable prominence within English studies and composition studies (see *Creative Writing*; Leahy; Mayers (Re)Writing Craft; Ritter and Vanderslice). Meanwhile, critical writing, which defines how we make knowledge in the field, is taken for granted despite its continued status as the coin of the realm.

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