

The Bachelor of Arts in Professional and Technical Writing Major at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock: A Reflection on the Program

Rhonda L. Thomas, University of Arkansas at Little Rock

BACKSTORY

There was a time, not too long ago, that if you were to ask me what it is that I *do*, I would fumble through my thoughts and locate the nearest job title – like *secretary* or *assistant*, hoping one of these would serve as a suitable conversation-stopper. If I was feeling particularly anxious about having to answer this question (which was often the case), I might place *executive* in front of the title. Not that there is anything demeaning about these roles; it's simply that I knew, as I was giving my answer, I was so much more than the titles suggest or the images I feared they conjured up – images of note-taking, coffee-making, plant-watering, appointment-setting, errand-running, and the like. I knew when I filled these roles, I did a great deal of decision-making, information-managing, and document-designing. And I knew that the bulk of what I did was write for others in a way that made them come across as the switched-on people they were.

But, a job title alone does not make what I *do* evident, even to me. It never occurred to me to describe myself as a writer. Thinking about it now, if I would have offered that I was a writer, I believe I would have anticipated one of two responses. There would be the unspoken response: *A writer? So what. We all write. Are you serious?* And then there would be the further-examination-and-demand-for-explanation response: *Oh yeah? What do you write? Or worse, what have you written?*

Yes, even to me, writing was *just writing*; a simple word describing a simple act, filed right up there with typing or word processing. The *job* was the job. Writing was not the job. I actually did think that way.

STUMBLING TOWARDS PERFECTION

About a year and a half ago I began making plans to finish my degree – something I'd started nearly three decades earlier. I am a first-generation high school graduate. So many people in my family were unable to finish high school, much less attend college. Setting out on this road, I was determined to break this pattern. As the years passed, however, I was at a point where I'd settle for an Associate's degree: I was ready to feel something tangible in my hand for all my years of trying.

Running in tandem with my latest effort to finish a degree, was a growing interest in history, born out of my interest in family history and a desire to write about families in an engaging way. I entertained the idea that if I could make it past the Associate's degree, I might pursue a Bachelor's in history. Living too far away from a university to attend traditional classes, I searched the Internet for an online history program. I didn't have much luck. The University of Arkansas in Fayetteville had a number of interesting history courses, but very few I wanted to take were offered online and, of course, there was no fully online path to getting a history degree.

I continued to search. I could never recount the exact parameters I entered into the search box, but my searching brought me to the University of Arkansas at Little Rock's [Rhetoric and Writing](#) homepage. I clicked the 'Online' link and began reading about the *Bachelor of Arts in Professional and Technical Writing* (PTW) major. The list of core classes and electives pushed all my buttons.

But Rhonda, I thought, you started out looking for an online history major.

My brain quickly reshuffled my thought processes to reflect the fact that history was an *interest*, right alongside genealogy, gardening, music, or any number of subjects. *Writing*, I told myself, will allow me to communicate my unique point of view (or that of someone else who I might be writing for) on *any* subject. It was a no-brainer to change from history to writing. I made contact with Dr. Heidi Skurat Harris, Associate Professor of Rhetoric and Writing, who gave me a rundown of the program: Her enthusiasm for the topic was immediate and obvious.

After my conversation with Dr. Harris ended, I sat and reflected on the program and what we talked about. I knew as I sat there pondering, this was one of life's turning points. In the space of a few moments, I felt a paradigm shift occurring in the way I think about what it is that I *do*. I knew this program was exactly what I needed and I could see clearly, for the first time, what it *is* that I do: I write. In those few moments it also became evident to me what I lacked in my writing: direction, purpose, tools in a toolbox; ownership of my craft. I could see that this program would give me all of these. It gave me these and so much more.

EXPERIENCING THE PROGRAM

When I'm starting out with a new topic, I'm a connect-the-dots learner: I need to understand why something is the way it is, at a sufficiently fundamental level, before I take on what comes next. For this reason, I love the way the PTW program is designed. It starts out with a "gateway course,"¹ and core classes; for example, research, persuasive writing, technical writing, and editing. These core courses introduced me to new topics and prepared me for higher level courses.

Although I am not new to writing, prior to this program I was new to the idea of writing as a career. Dr. George Jensen's gateway course, *Introduction to Professional and Technical Writing* (RHET 3322), introduced me to the major and became the roadmap I used to navigate the program. This course provided me with information about the program's curriculum and potential writing careers. One important message the course delivered was that I have to be proactive about my ongoing education in order to keep myself marketable and prepared for the workplace.² The final project required by the major – an online portfolio – was also explained.

I used to think of myself as someone who had an affinity for research. I still believe I do, but having since taken Dr. Melvin Beaver's *Introduction to Research*, I now understand better the important role research plays in writing. This course truly exercised my critical thinking skills and helped me develop effective methods for evaluating empirical, interpretive, and critical research. I gained practice developing arguments grounded in research. While topic and audience dictate the depth of research required, in almost all cases, I have come to recognize how research exponentially improves my writing. I finished Dr. Beaver's course knowing I had improved as a researcher and a critical consumer of research published in various kinds of scholarly journals.

Dr. Beaver's *Persuasive Writing* (RHET 3315) was a course I was hungry for and didn't even know it. Looking back, I can see the distance I've traveled: I began the course with little knowledge of the subject and ended it with, what I believe to be, a solid understanding of its foundational concepts: I now understand what a rhetorical situation is and can conceptualize the framework within which it sits.

Early on in the course I was introduced to the concepts of exigency and audience. I came to appreciate the fundamental fact – surprisingly easy to overlook – that I write and speak to an audience, *always*; so understanding exigency and audience is critical to developing effective persuasive writing skills. I left the course with a working method for identifying a rhetorical situation and a working method for creating effective arguments.

After taking Tammy Scaife's *Editing for Usage, Style, and Clarity* (RHET 3301) I feel more in command of my prose. I have a renewed understanding of the fundamentals of written language; more importantly, I am more deliberate about what I'm doing when I'm in editing and proofreading mode. The class armed me with a number of useful editing and proofreading techniques and I gained experience editing my prose to establish a clear purpose.

I felt my editing class linked up nicely with Dr. Caleb James's *Technical Writing* class (RHET 3326). In *Technical Writing*, I learned not only about the theory and practice of technical communication, but several reusable strategies for creating professional documents – both individually and collaboratively. I also gained practical experience composing different kinds of technical documents. Like many of the courses on the program, *Technical Writing* emphasized the fundamental need to identify my audience and understand my purpose in order to select the appropriate composing technology to deliver my message.

During the summer semester I completed Dr. Karen Kuralt's *Document Design* (RHET 4305). I've always enjoyed designing documents, but as with other areas of writing, I lacked the formal training required to make specific and deliberate design choices, or to defend my choices; for example choice of typeface, color scheme, and layout. I thoroughly enjoyed reading the document and website design research on how people read. Along with knowledge I gleaned from the research, the class provided me with a useful set of document design tools and techniques and also an opportunity to apply what I'd learned to [a range of documents](#).

In *Document Design* I also gained experience working with images; locating appropriate images and incorporating those images in a way that gives a document more visual appeal. The process of selecting and incorporating images links to concepts learned in *Persuasive Writing*, in that images also serve as rhetorical strategies to persuade and influence an audience.

During the summer semester I also completed Dr. Gregory Graham's *Nonfiction* (RHET 3317) and Dr. Londie Martin's *Digital Nonfiction* (RHET 4347). In both classes I worked on a series of nonfiction writings – writings whose ideas lived in my mind and personal journals for way too long. Having successfully navigated the previous core coursework, I felt ready to bring some of my ideas to life: both *Nonfiction* and *Digital Nonfiction* gave me the opportunity to do so. In *Nonfiction*, I was also able to apply research skills I acquired in *Introduction to Research* and revision techniques I learned in *Editing for Usage, Style and Clarity*.

In the fall I completed Dr. George Jensen's *The Personal Essay* (RHET 4317) alongside Dr. Heidi Skurat Harris's *Research in Nonfiction* (RHET 4347). As with Dr. Beaver's *Introduction to Research*, *Research in Nonfiction* shone a spotlight on the fact that very little writing can take place without some level of research: Even when the bulk of discoveries made are not directly

included in what I write, the research provides an authority that impacts *how* I write and the voice and style I use. Without a doubt, my writing is richer and more engaging for having done the research.

The major assignment in Dr. George Jensen's *The Personal Essay* (RHET 4317) was a blast essay. It initially had a 750 word limit; however, throughout the semester I was introduced to different kinds of focused revision techniques which I applied to the essay to add depth and texture. I appreciate how some of these focused revision techniques link up with concepts taught in both *Research in Nonfiction* and *Introduction to Research*; specifically, using research to add historical and cultural context to a work, or to add texture and depth to a scene.

Alongside working on my personal essay, there were assigned readings from Phillip Lopate's anthology of influential essays, *The Art of the Personal Essay*³. I enjoyed applying a reading-as-a-writer approach when reading these essays, an approach discussed in both *The Personal Essay* and *Research for Nonfiction*. Lopate's is a hefty volume, and I know I will be dipping in and out of it for years to come.

As with all the program coursework, Dr. Barbara L'Eplattenier's *Writing For Business and Government* (RHET 4306) provided me with challenging assignments. I've left this course with a renewed confidence in my ability to write both collaboratively and individually for business, government, and nonprofit organizations. I gained valuable experience analyzing different kinds of documents, identifying audiences, and using professional writing for problem-solving. I'm proud of the quality of both [digital](#) and [print](#) documents I produced during this course.

FINAL, BUT NOT PASSING, THOUGHTS

Even with all the thoughts I've shared so far, there is still so much more I could say about this program. However, at some point I must end this essay. In my closing thoughts, I hope I can illuminate what I believe sets this program apart from other programs I've experienced. I begin with a question: How is it, that in just a few semesters my mind changed from thinking I'd never finish college (or, at the very least, thinking I'd have to settle for an Associate's degree) to considering applying for a Master's program? What changed my thinking?

I've always felt that the magic formula for success in education includes a student that wants to learn and a teacher that wants to teach: Both student and teacher must be willing participants. I've attended a number of universities and colleges in my time – on two continents – and I have never experienced this magic formula; not until, that is, I enrolled in the PTW program at UALR. So, what changed my thinking? It can only be the PTW instructors and a well-designed program.

What I believe is unique about this program is the collective commitment the instructors have to both the program and its students. I've never known a group of instructors to be so *present* and accessible. Beginning with my initial consultation with Dr. Harris and throughout the program, I've had the opportunity to work with instructors willing to give their time and that go beyond what I believe is traditionally expected of them; having encouraged me in different ways to believe in my work. I have experienced their commitment to my success and have also observed their commitment to fellow students.

As an example of instructor encouragement, several instructors sent out emails to students to encourage them to apply for scholarships. I was not aware of the scholarships and as a result of their emails I applied and received the Donna Barkan Jensen Writing About Families

Scholarship. Dr. Harris encouraged *Research for Nonfiction* students to apply for the [Signature Experience](#) grant. I applied and was awarded a grant which will allow me to work on a creative research project under the Dr. Harris's tutelage. In *Technical Writing*, Dr. Caleb James encouraged students to put their work forward for a writing award: I did, and was awarded the Rhetoric and Writing Department's 'Technical and Workplace Writing Award' for my paper, [Grant Writing: An Analysis of the Genre](#). Dr. Barbara L'Eplattenier is one of a number of instructors who encouraged students to submit their writing to Quills & Pixels: Dr. L'Eplattenier's enthusiasm prompted me to submit two of my [memoir essays](#); both of which were accepted and will be published in the magazine's upcoming edition.

I leave this program a very different person than when I started. I have confidence in my ability to write and produce professional documents with engaging content. I leave equipped with the tools of my trade and a desire to continually improve my writing.

It is a good feeling to know what it is that I do.

It is a good feeling to own it.

I feel confident in stating:

I am a professional writer.

I write.

¹ Barbara L'Eplattenier and George H. Jensen, "Reshaping the BA in Professional and Technical Writing at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock," in *Writing Majors: Eighteen Program Profiles*, DOI: 10.7330/9780874219722.c002, pp. 22-35.

² *Ibid.*, 24.

³ Phillip Lopate, *The Art of the Personal Essay: An Anthology from the Classical Era to the Present* (New York: Anchor Books, 1995).