

4 Big Tips Preceding That 4.0:

Practical Info for Anyone Considering a Graduate Writing Degree Program

by Paula Neves

Does the continually lackluster economy have you seriously considering investing those severance funds in a graduate writing program to upgrade or augment your skills, or simply to pursue a lifelong writing dream (yes, some of us still dream!) and earn a nifty credential in the process? Identifying the right program to suit your needs can be a daunting prospect, particularly if you've been out of school for a while and have forgotten that the wheels of academia, unlike those of business and industry that just ran you over, often turn like those on an oxcart stuck in the mud. Here are four big tips to help you find that program worth tossing your tassel over.

1. Take a deep breath and honestly assess your writing needs.

If you are at the point in your life where you have the opportunity or necessity to expand your writing horizons, make sure you are comfortable with exactly the kind of writing that will be—technical, creative, or somewhere in between. Be certain also that you want to satisfy these needs through a *graduate* program as opposed to a certificate or other option. The last several years have seen an explosion of writing programs of all kinds, from purely creative MFAs to generalized MAs which combine traditional literary, business, and creative writing courses, to specialized business and/or technical writing MSs. If you've always wanted to write the great American novel and aren't so interested in exploring an editorial career in a pharmaceutical, bio-tech or technology field, even if it pays better and you think you should do it, then an MS in Technical Communications is probably not for you. If you think in terms of "shoulds" then you probably shouldn't. By the same token, if you have an aptitude for writing, and a technical or scientific background to boot, but no secret desire to pursue a Pulitzer then an MA or MS in business or technical scribing may just give you another leg up.

2. Once you know what you want to write, find programs!

Maybe in your illustrious undergraduate days you successfully passed that non-credit course called "Avoiding the Library," but now there's no way to forgo doing what

that experience would have taught you: Research. The Internet's www and search engines may have trumped Dewey's decimals in making this task more attractive, but don't underestimate the value of other time-honored methods of digging. Like gossip. Ok, I'm kidding. But actually, talking to others (aka *networking*) is an invaluable supplement to all the perusing of websites, academic catalogues, and listings of the best graduate and professional programs, right up to the point of your admission and beyond. In the meantime, here are some specific dig points:

- Investigate, if you are currently employed, whether your company has an onsite program. It might not lead to a degree in writing, but you might pick up several writing courses and use leads you get from their instructors to find a degree program.

Take advantage of your alumnus status at your undergraduate alma mater and use its resources. Don't rule it out as your educational sequel.

- Talk to professors you had, or send inquiries to those you didn't. Even if you're not too keen on returning to the site of your youthful education, these people went to different schools for their own advanced degrees and might know a good program at one of them. Contact your alma mater's graduate program administrators, too. Get your alumni card and visit (preferably in person, but at least virtually) the graduate office for its catalogues and brochures. You might even want to actually...*visit the library!*
- Talk to people in your workshops, writing groups, or professional associations. Use their resources, such as the STC and other websites.
- Look for potential programs and contact information in the pages of professional writing magazines.
- Search online. Go to schools' websites directly or use search engines. My search on key words "graduate technical writing programs" turned up this nice starter site:
http://www.gradschools.com/listings/distance/ProWriting_distance.html

- Peruse web and hardcover versions of “Best Graduate Schools” guides.
- Tell everyone you know of your intentions to go back to school. You never know who has information or a connection.

3. *After research, narrow your focus*

Now, believe it or not, you’re in the home stretch. Once you’ve isolated three or four programs that fit your needs for prestige; budget; time constraints (i.e. onsite or low residency?); writing habits; and lifestyle (i.e. fitting school into family, work, etc.), the research and networking should also become more directed. To wit:

- Attend Open Houses
- Contact Graduate Program Directors and ask to meet and interview them. Remember, in essence, you will be paying them, and they know it, or should. Ask questions about requirements, such as entrance tests, portfolios, letters of reference, etc., even if you’ve already reviewed this information in the catalogues. If a program appeals to you for other reasons but is fledgling or has limited courses, ask the graduate director if you can get credit for undergraduate classes or if there is a cross credit program with other institutions (for example, Rutgers Newark has such an agreement with NJIT). Though these are at the individual instructors’ discretion, they all go through the program director, anyway.
- Concurrently, contact Graduate Admissions about its requirements and how its and the writing programs’ requirements should be combined in an application packet. Though redundant, the advantage is that it gets you noticed even before you send the application.
- Contact both the program and Admissions a few times for follow-up (preferably through E-mail so you have a record) and they will start to remember you—whether for being a serious candidate or a great big pain, the point is they will recognize you.
- Contact several professors or instructors. Briefly explain who you are and your intentions. Ask if you might sit in on their classes. Talk to current

students or graduates about their experience of the program.

- Find out about the administrative snags and supports. These include: computer and other communication processes and needs (whether for distance learning or onsite, you will be doing a lot of E-mail and web browsing so make sure you have access).

Consider deadlines, parking, non-tuition fees, ID’s, facilities, extracurricular support, grad student associations, etc. Negotiating these can take up as much if not more time than your actual classes, so arm yourself with information.

- Find out if you can begin taking courses as a non-matriculated student. This allows you to build up some credits to transfer to a graduate program while buying time to get the formal application components in place. It also lets you “test drive” the program and do a little more networking while you’re at it. Before you enroll as a non-matric, you might want to see if the credits will transfer to another school should you decide not to stay there.

4. *Get ready, set, apply!*

If you’ve done most of the legwork up to this point, formal application to your choices should be relatively painless. The biggest hurdles may be taking the GRE (www.gre.org), if the program(s) requires it, and writing the personal statement—which should be concisely representative of you, your interests and your writing style, not a humdrum showcase of how you can explain “Why I want to apply to a graduate writing program” (unless, of course, the program asks for that). Purdue University has a good personal statement pointers website at http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/pw/p_perstate.html.

If you have already begun taking courses as a non-matric, you might be able to fill out an application reactivation form, which, for that school at least, will carry over most of your pertinent information and possibly the fee as well. Check with the institution.

Ok, so what are you waiting for? Apply!