



Navigating the MA **Writing Workshop**



Series Overview

This interactive online writing workshop is designed to help students develop an individualized plan for understanding graduate school more generally and graduate writing more specifically. This workshop is designed for students in both the early and latter years of their master's degree.

This 3-hour workshop will concentrate on understanding the transition to graduate school, navigating master's degree coursework and graduation options (thesis, exams, portfolios, etc.), locating and using professional and personal support resources, and writing for both the degree and future job. Participants will create academic timelines for their master's work (coursework, conference presentations, internships, etc.) at MSU and discuss technologies and habits that can help them stay on task. Participants will also discuss how to manage the stress that often pervades the life of master's students and how to select and work with a committee.

The workshop will end with participants exploring and sharing their current writing practices, writing and revision strategies, and strategies for overcoming writer's block and procrastination. Facilitators will help guide discussions on adopting and maintaining productive practices to help maintain focus on academic and professional goals in times when we are collectively working through collective and personal trauma and systemic violence.

Sponsored by The Graduate School and The Writing Center.

Expectations of Graduate School

Many students apply to graduate school without fully understanding how it differs from undergraduate school. The main differences between undergraduate and graduate school range from learning, coursework and research expectations, to interpersonal relationships and levels of stress. This interactive workshop will provide you with valuable strategies to help you make a smooth transition from undergraduate to graduate school, and from graduate school to the workplace. Below is an exercise to visualize these differences.

Differences between Undergrad and Graduate School

One of the best ways to be successful as you begin graduate school is to understand the differences between undergraduate and graduate school.

In the following table, note some of the differences you've already observed between undergraduate and graduate school. Feel free to talk with your group during this activity.

| Undergraduate | Graduate School |
|----------------------|----------------------|
| Empty for filling in | Empty for filling in |
| Empty for filling in | Empty for filling in |
| Empty for filling in | Empty for filling in |
| Empty for filling in | Empty for filling in |
| Empty for filling in | Empty for filling in |
| Empty for filling in | Empty for filling in |

It's important to remember that graduate school is an intricate web of resources and socialization. What's more, it's important to keep in mind that graduate coursework is only one part of graduate school, and that networking (e.g., at conferences, in internships/externships, and so on), socializing, and balancing other life commitments are part of your responsibilities as well. Simply put, graduate school is a lot like a full-time job.

Your MA Timeline

As Master's degree students, there is a lot we have to keep track of every day. It is quite easy to forget about programmatic requirements, to spend more years than necessary taking courses because of all the interesting classes that are offered, and to be surprised by deadlines. One way to help alleviate some of these surprises is to have our degrees mapped out clearly. While we each might have our own goals, there are some things that we just have to do, those marks of progression through the degree that our individual programs, departments, colleges, and the university require. Below is an example of one way to organize requirements on a timeline in a table form.

Plan of Study

Here's a template you may want to use to map out your PhD timeline. You can add columns for additional years. **Degree progress** refers to what classes you'll take, your exams, proposal, and dissertation timelines. **Assistantships, internships, and fellowships** refers to what jobs, internships, funding, roles, and teaching or research you want to have during your study. The **research pipeline** refers to what projects you want to have moving. The pipeline usually consists of conference proposals, researching, presenting research at a conference, having an article draft, submitting drafts, and revising drafts for re-submission. Finally, **service** refers to unpaid work you do for professional development in your department, campus, and discipline.

| Semester | Fall Year 1 | Spring Year 1 | Fall Year 2 | Spring Year 2 |
|---|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| Degree Progress | Empty for filling in |
| Assistantships, Internships, & Fellowships | Empty for filling in |
| Research Pipeline | Empty for filling in |
| Service | Empty for filling in |

We want you to create your own timeline. You can choose the organizational method we've used as an example, or develop one of your own. In order to complete your timeline, you will probably need to find some specific information.

Take this time right now to find your graduate program's handbook online. Based on the information in your handbook, look for when you will need to complete the following and fill it into the chart below:

- Forming a committee
- Submitting any annual reports
- Applying for additional funding, like travel funding, research grants, or completion fellowships
- Finishing coursework
- Preparing for comps
- Submitting your dissertation proposal
- Collecting research
- Storing and cataloging data
- Drafting each thesis chapter
- Meeting with the committee on each thesis chapter
- Defending the thesis

When faced with multiple tasks that are a part of academic work, it's important to prioritize and recognize that we often plan to accomplish more than we are actually able to do. In addition, large goals may require that you set frequent smaller deadlines on your path to the long-term completion deadline. Consider how you might do this as you expand and add detail to your timeline.

Managing Non-Academic/Academic Realities

Graduate school is a challenge for everyone. However, if you are a member of a non-dominant social group, things can be even more challenging. Facing systemic racism, sexism, classism, ableism, ageism, misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, exclusionary practices, and a host of other obstacles inherent to participation in [white, settler-colonialist institutions](#) can affect your studies as well as your wellbeing.

We have begun to compile a list of preliminary resources for social and emotional support if you experience any of the above. Most importantly, these resources are meant to point you to safer spaces, spaces of strength and care for their members—places to encounter joy and build resistance:

- Black, Indigenous, and People of Color
 - [Multicultural Student Associations](#)
 - [Mosaic](#)
 - [Inclusion and Intercultural Initiatives](#)
 - [Lansing Association for Human Rights](#)
 - [Office for International Students and Scholars](#)
 - [Office of Cultural and Academic Transitions](#)
 - [Division of Student Affairs & Services Culture & Identity Offices](#)
 - [Office of Institutional Equity](#)
- Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Asexual+
 - MSU [Gender and Sexuality Center](#)
 - [SALUS Center](#)
 - [Lansing Association for Human Rights](#)
 - [Queering Medicine](#)
 - [Transgender Michigan](#)
 - [Affirmations](#)
 - [Women*s Student Services](#)
- Personal Health
 - [Olin Health Center](#)
 - [Graduate Student Life and Wellness](#)
 - [Health4U Program](#)
 - [Sparrow Hospital](#)
 - [McLaren Hospital](#)
 - [Ingham County Health Department](#)
 - [Medical Leave](#)
 - [Planned Parenthood- Lansing](#)
 - [Queering Medicine](#)
 - [Lansing Area AIDS Network](#)
- Mental Health
 - MSU [Counseling and Psychiatry Services](#)
 - MSU [Employee Assistance Program](#)
 - [National Alliance on Mental Illness- Lansing](#)

- Housing and Food Security
 - [On-Campus Housing](#)
 - [Off Campus Housing](#)
 - [Moving to MI Resources](#)
 - [MSU Food Bank](#)
 - [Greater Lansing Food Bank](#)
 - [Ingham Homeless Services](#)
- Graduate and General Student Resources
 - [Graduate Employees Union](#)
 - [Teaching Support](#)
 - [Anti-Discrimination Protections](#)
 - [East Lansing Community Information](#)
 - [Council of Graduate Students](#)
 - [The Graduate School](#)
 - Graduate Student [Life and Wellness](#)
 - [Spouse and Family Resources](#) and [Student Parent Resource Center](#)
 - [Student Legal Services](#)
 - [Graduate Funding Opportunities](#)
 - [English Language Center](#)
 - [Office of the University Ombudsperson](#)
 - [Resource Center for Persons with Disabilities](#)
- Sexual Harassment and Violence
 - [MSU Center for Survivors](#)
 - [MSU Safe Place](#)
 - MSU [Office of Institutional Equity](#)
 - MSU [Prevention, Outreach, and Education](#)
 - MSU [Title IX Office](#)
 - [Women*s Student Services](#)
 - [Capital Area Response Effort](#)

Normalizing Experiences and Examining Your Strengths

Grad school is difficult. It's full of a balancing act of obligations and responsibilities to yourself and others. Depending on your environment and your positionalities, grad school can be even more difficult because of systemic, institutional, and interpersonal oppression and harm.

It's very normal to struggle in your time in your program. You're surrounded by peers who learn and grow as you are as well as experts in your field, which makes it really hard to see your own strengths and talents as you're growing and learning to. A common result of this is "imposter syndrome," which is where "high-achieving, often minoritized individuals constantly doubt that they are deserving of their successes."

Even if you yourself don't believe it today, we at the Writing Center know you are deserving of your successes. You are talented, and you deserve to be in a graduate program. Many times, language surrounding our work and performance sometimes gets framed as a [deficit model](#).

Throughout this workshop, we will be [self-reflecting and using reflective practices](#). . These practices enable us to understand ourselves through our emotions and experiences. Doing this allows us to improve our future behaviors, thinking, and emotions.

Therefore, in rejection of the deficit model, we are going to reframe our thinking about ourselves to reflect on our strengths. Reflect on the following:

- What skills, expertise, knowledge, and/or experiences do you bring to your program? To your field? To your assistantship/other work?
- What skills, expertise, knowledge, and/or experiences do you want to continue to cultivate during grad school? After grad school?

Procrastination and Stress

Fighting Procrastination

Through self-reflection, we are going to think about how we procrastinate. Think about deadlines: Do they help your production or does the stress of them hinder your progress? Do you rely on others to set deadlines or do you set them for yourselves? How might you use deadlines to help you fight against procrastination?

Are there any patterns you can recognize? Below, list your procrastination “methods:” the things you do or use that keep you from being as productive as you could.

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-

Now, based on the above, what can you do to combat those patterns? Brainstorm below:

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Dealing with Stress

What causes the most stress in your life? Below list your personal stress factors:

-
-
-
-
-

Based on the above, what can you do to cope with them? Here are some ideas as a starting place:

- [Michigan State offers free counseling](#) to students.

- Find ways to make progress—even tackling a small task can help you feel good. Any accomplishments should be viewed as positive; let it represent progress.
- Increase your competency in other areas that could be contributing to your stress (e.g. computer competency, teaching strategies).
- Find/schedule time to enjoy activities not related to your academic work. Even consider interacting with people outside your program who share some of these interests.
- Exercise regularly and try relaxation techniques (meditation, yoga, etc.).
- Be sure to get enough sleep as the effects of sleep loss can harm you both in the short term and the long term.

Strategies for Facing and Working Through Obstacles

Sometimes, though, we cannot just rely on what we are good at to make up for where we struggle. We need to learn new strategies to work through obstacles. Some common obstacles for graduate students are establishing systems of organization, managing and using technologies, facing limited resources of time and money, fighting procrastination, dealing with stress, and developing a supportive community.

We are going to discuss these obstacles as a group and share strategies for working through them. Below, we have provided some tips of our own, but before you look through them, we are going to discuss some of the strategies you have all developed. We encourage you to note any useful ideas as they are presented by your fellow workshop attendees.

Establishing Systems of Organization

Based on our conversations, take note of useful strategies and tools for organizing your research, your teaching, and your other responsibilities. Here are some tips:

- Set up a filing system to organize your materials—don't discard anything.
- Set up a calendar system with major deadlines visible and clearly spelled out. Although you will rarely meet the originally established deadlines in an exact fashion and must revise them (for various reasons), a master time plan may help you avoid the “no-end-in-sight” syndrome so common to the PhD student. Start researching topics early and everywhere: keep an investigator's journal where you jot down notes, ideas, thoughts, etc.

Set up a log to chart your hourly/daily progress. This could be a running time sheet of hours spent in the office, library, field, etc. Such a log is important in its own right as a motivator and will play a part when you periodically review your progress, or have to rebudget your time in light of outside demands or new phases of your work.

Managing and Using Technologies

The following are several computer-based organizational tools. In your groups, choose one to examine. Play with the technology a bit. When we come back together as a full group, we will ask you to share your opinions about the tools. Here are some general suggestions:

- In addition to establishing “physical” or “material” organizational systems, establishing and maintaining a simple and organized computer file system is incredibly important with so many digital notes, handouts, presentations, readings, and written texts living in our computers. Clearly and specifically name and date your files and folders.
- Save each revision to a text with the day’s date added so you don’t lose your previous versions.
- Apply for fellowships—not only are these opportunities for money and research experience, but the application process itself usually asks you to write personal research statements. Reflecting on your work in these statements can be reassuring and productive for future work.
- Develop daily and weekly task lists in which you identify the tasks that *need* to get done, that *should* get done, and that you *want* to get done. Don’t limit these to work tasks, but include other daily activities such as chores, errands, lunches, and fun.
- Rethink your conceptions of time. Consider breaking your day up into small pieces of time and dedicate those pieces to the work activities you need to finish and the other time requirements of your day, leaving a few blocks open for yourself.

Analog Technology

- [Passion Planner](#): A premium planner that provides daily, weekly and yearly modules for planning and reflection
- [Plum Paper Planners](#): One of several sites that allows you to customize, adapt and create a planner that works best for you.
- [Black Girl, Lost Keys](#): A Black, neurodivergent woman who seeks to educate and empower others through knowledge and tools.

Citation Management

- [Endnote](#): Bibliographic software you can purchase, though free trials are available. You can use EndNote to search online bibliographic databases, organize references, images and PDFs in any language, and create bibliographies and figure lists.
- [Mendeley](#): A research tool helps you organize research and collaborate. It is a tool specifically made for academics to coordinate with one another and to keep track of their own research projects.
- [Zotero](#): A free bibliographic tool. It helps you keep track of what you’ve read and what you want to read. You can tag books and articles, attach notes and other documents, and link to websites.

Study and Research Programs

- [DropBox](#): Free and paid versions are available, with varying options. Dropbox allows you to sync your files online and across your computers automatically, to share files, to back up your files online, and to store files on its server.
- [Evernote](#): Evernote is a note-taking system. You can save links to websites and screen captures and write notes.
- [OneNote](#): A Microsoft Office software component that is included with some of the Office Suites. It allows you to capture text, images, as well as video and audio notes. Users can share 'notebooks' with other OneNote users, which allows simultaneous taking and editing of notes with people in other locations. You can view and edit notes from virtually any computer with an Internet connection or a Windows phone.

Time and Task Management

- [Airtable](#): A spreadsheet-database hybrid which allows for great functionality, sorting, and views compared to Excel or Google Sheets. Can be used for project management.
- [ATracker](#): A time tracker that allows the user to enter tasks, categories and activities in order to track daily, weekly and monthly time use. Provides pie chart graphs for visual clarity. Better to pay for the pro version.
- [Forest](#): App that encourages you to put your phone down and focus on tasks. Get rewarded by building a forest.
- [Habitica](#): An app that boasts a way to "gamify" your life. Build avatars, get rewards for tasks completed and organize your life.
- [Notion](#): Workspace builder that can manage projects and texts
- [Pomodoro](#): Technique that challenges you to complete timed productivity and builds in brief breaks.

Writing Style, Reading, and Diagnostics

- [750 Words](#): Writing practice app that works by engaging a social community and challenges you to write 750 words every day. Helps with goal setting and consistency.
- [Beeline Reader](#): Online tool to make screen reading easier on your eyes.
- [Hemingway Editor](#): Online tool to help analyze your prose and edit for clarity and concision.

Self-Care

- [Insight Timer](#): Meditation app complete with guided meditations of varying lengths and themes, talks by meditation teachers, a timer to meditate by and a social media component to encourage your practice.
- [Sanvello](#): App that helps the user track emotion and stress levels and find better coping mechanisms for emotional challenges. Aimed at stress reduction.

- [Stop, Breathe, & Think](#): Helps bring mindfulness to your daily life through guided meditations and reflective tools.

Activity

- Do you work with any other tools that you'd like to recommend to other workshop participants? Please share them with us.
- In groups, select to either:
 - find a resource, app, or tool that isn't on our list and present it to the full group: What does it do? What is it for? What are its strengths and limitations? Why would it be useful for you?
 - Or, look at a resource on the list that you're not familiar with and present it to the full group: What does it do? What is it for? What are its strengths and limitations? Why would it be useful for you?

Reflecting on Your Writing Processes

What kind of writing do you do for your degree program?

What kind of writing do you do outside of school?

What kind of writing do you expect to do as part of your career after you obtain your MA?

Exploring your Writing Processes

The French word for rough draft is *brouillon*, which is derived from a verb meaning “to place in disorder, to scramble.” This messiness is an integral part of writing, but in English, we have no equivalent for *brouillon*. Rough draft, instead, suggests something that must be polished and smoothed, not something deliberately scrambled. Similarly, the word *outline*, which is frequently used when discussing writing, suggests an inert structure, a clear plan. The way we usually talk about writing in the US makes it seem like a very orderly and straightforward process instead of the messy, recursive, knowledge-making process that it usually is.

A Model of the Writing Process We're Familiar With:

1. Choose a topic
2. Narrow your topic
3. Write a thesis
4. Make an outline
5. Write a draft
6. Revise
7. Edit

A More Realistic Model of Writing Processes:

- Start with a problem or a question
- Explore the problem through research, freewriting, and discussion
- Take time away from the problem
- Explore some more
- Write a complete draft using exploratory writing and research
- Reformulate/revise writing by thinking through the problem again and considering audience more than before
- Polish and edit for unity, coherence, and structure

Writing is hard to talk about realistically in a step-by-step way because so many steps are repeated throughout the composing (this is what it means when people say writing is recursive) and every piece of writing is different, requiring different kinds of repetition. Writing processes are difficult to represent in alphabetic text, which often works in a linear way.

On a separate sheet of paper, write about, map, and/or draw your typical writing process for writing a paper for this workshop. What do you do? What kinds of activities not typically considered “writing” are part of your process?

Once you've completed your map, share it with your small group. Note how your approaches to writing are similar and different.

- Why do you think these differences exist?
- Will you consider adapting your approach to include some of the processes mentioned by others? Which ones?

Writer's Block

Writer's block has plagued us all at one point or another. It can be debilitating. Reflect on the following questions:

- What do you think are the causes of writer's block?
- What strategies have you used in the past to keep yourself writing?
- What is the minimum number of minutes you are willing to commit to working on a daily (or every other day) basis?
- How have or will you motivate yourself, or reward yourself, when you reach your daily or weekly writing goal?
- How have you reached your writing deadlines?

Tips for Overcoming Writer's Block

- Figure out the time and place that allows for the least disturbance for writing and allows you to be the most productive.
- You may want to give yourself time for a mental transition into writing from other tasks—think of it as warming up your brain before you begin.
- Park on a downhill slope: finish your work knowing where to begin next time; this may allow you to get back to work with less apprehension.
- Begin anywhere: Start writing at whatever point you want. If you want to begin in the middle, fine. Leave the introduction or first section until later.
- Talk about the paper: Talk to someone about your ideas. Talking will help you crystallize your thoughts into words or help you explain an idea in the simplest terms.
- Record the paper: Talk into an audio recorder (imagining a particular audience, if that helps). Then, transcribe the recorder material, and you'll at least have some ideas down on paper to work with and move around.
- Write through the confusion: Try freewriting about the thoughts, feelings, or ideas that are causing you confusion. By writing through your "block," you may notice that writing is easier and ideas or questions become clearer as you write.
- Change the audience: Imagine you are writing to a friend, a parent, a person who disagrees with you, or someone who's new to the subject. This can help you make your ideas clearer or make you feel more comfortable and help you write more easily.

General Strategies for the Writing Process

In this section, we will provide common tips for various parts of the writing process.

Brainstorming and Organizing

There are various types of [graphic organizers](#) that you can use. Here are some ideas:

- Venn Diagrams are great for comparing and contrasting and for seeing details that can be synthesized. They could certainly be useful in figuring out how to organize something like a literature review. Venn Diagrams are easy to create on PowerPoint, though this program does not allow for much complexity. However, Venn Diagrams are not the best diagramming tools for multi-layered, complex situations.
- Clusters can be used as an initial brainstorming technique to not only generate ideas and connections but to also see what might be the most viable focus for a project. Clusters can be quite messy, and another organizational technique is generally used after a writer has worked through completing a cluster.
- [Mind Maps](#) are fairly detailed and complex maps that can display connections between ideas as well as sub-content. Mind Maps, as originally conceptualized, are more artistic than most other visual graphic organizers for brainstorming maps. They are generally used to help students remember concepts and visually present information (such as from readings).
- Schematics are generally used to display processes, such as the process of a factory production line, or the design of a circuit or machine. However, researchers and writers can use schematics to display processes observed (human interactions, movements, etc.) or how any “mechanisms” observed function.
- Situational Maps are maps that look to visually represent an entire research situation, considering human actors, non-human actors, and discursive (language-based) actors. Situational maps were developed by Adele Clarke and are discussed in detail in her book, *Situational Analysis: Grounded Theory after the Postmodern Turn*. Mapping software like Bubbl.us and VUE are great for creating complex situational maps.

Research and Drafting

- Keeping an investigator’s notebook: Don’t wait to start writing until you’ve finished your research/reading. Set aside a notebook in which you record your questions, ideas, notes, and concerns as they arise. Research, especially for

the dissertation, is not just taking in ideas or facts; it involves engaging with information. Since you can't expect to hold all of your ideas and thoughts in your head as you go, write them down.

- Begin with writing for yourself: Explore your ideas and begin writing a draft for you. This draft is a place for you to make your ideas tangible on the page. Write uncensored. Work through ideas as you go. This is a first step—just getting your ideas on a page—and you do not have to show it to anyone, which alleviates any pressure or expectation of a polished writing project.
- Start by writing down your ideas; don't stop to correct or find the right word. Just get all your ideas down on paper in any order you can, and don't worry about editing. Some folks call this “blahing on the page.”
- Outline the chapter or section with major ideas, writing out each section as research comes in, and then read it over. Later you can move sections around as needed and eventually blend in changes.

Revision

Revision is an inevitable part of the dissertation writing process. Revision is usually discussed as a specific stage of the writing process that takes place after initial drafting during which the writer rearranges text, expands ideas, and edits errors. Since writing is recursive, revision happens throughout the writing process until the document is considered “finished.”

Revision is recognizing what is and isn't working and making changes as your project grows. Take a moment and think about where you are at with your project. Consider what changes you might need to make to :

- **Methodological choices** are the decision you make as a research, given your question(s), method(s), goals, and positionalities
- **Conceptual frameworks** are the theories, ideas, and conversations that underpin the project
- **Diction and terminology** are the words and phrases used to position the project's key ideas
- **Writing processes and practices** are the methods and patterns you are using as you work on the project

Next, you'll want to shape your writing into a complete draft for others to read. There are various ways to approach reworking a draft:

- Create an outline of your ideas as you read through your writing. You can sum up each paragraph in the margin, write down questions, or categorize ideas. This is sometimes called a reverse outline.

- As you read the draft, look it over to see how your argument and ideas fit together, and move sections around thematically. You can cut up pages on your printed draft if necessary, or highlight sections that are similar.
- Briefly sum up your ideas after each section (“What am I really trying to say in this argument/chapter/section?”) to articulate what you are trying to do in different sections. This can be like freewriting about each section to determine what you’re trying to say, and it can help you gain clarity.
- Do what works for you. Don’t try to force yourself into someone else’s method. Consider what has worked for you in the past, and adopt methods only if they fit your style. Remember, don’t get overwhelmed by working through an initial draft, break it into chunks to make it manageable.

Additionally, here are some general tips for reworking your draft:

- Look for materials that stand out as interesting.
- Look for questions that pop up as you read.
- Read and mark themes by color, number, letter, etc.
- Read through and put a check by something that seems (very) right, or (very) wrong.
- Cut out, but save, the paragraphs that have interesting ideas but don’t belong in that chapter. Put them in a specific file or section “to be used later” and hold on to them.
- Identify what you need or where you are struggling and ask someone else to work with you on these concerns. The Writing Center can be helpful here, as can friends, family, and colleagues. Visit writing.msu.edu to make an appointment at the Writing Center.

Continuing Revision for the Reader’s Draft

After you’ve gone through the draft that you write for yourself, you’ll want to start working toward a draft for other readers. Here are some tips to keep in mind as you’re working on this draft.

- Don’t be afraid to remove or scrap work. This means that if it doesn’t make sense or work, throw it out or revise completely. Remember, there is always more than one way to say something. You can always save the revision as a new draft so you can go back to the “darlings” if you want to revive them.
- Keep it brief and use short paragraphs; break down elaborate or complex ideas or thoughts into manageable chunks. Aim for simplicity the first time around.
- Don’t try to adopt a completely new “dissertation writing” (or other project) voice. Be yourself.

- Establishing and going back to key words can help keep your argument consistent.
- Give yourself some time to rework sections as needed. Take some time off in order to look at your writing with fresh eyes.
- Try chopping off first sentences or opening paragraphs. Sometimes your opening words are just your warm-up—what you really mean to say may take several pages to emerge.
- Back everything up, at least twice in different locations. Be sure to save your work on both a hard drive and a portable storage device (flash drive, CD-R, external hard drive, etc.). Consider keeping copies of drafts and disks in a safety deposit box or at a friend or relative's house. The idea is to keep these copies in a separate building in case of a fire or other disaster. You may also want to keep your work on your AFS space through MSU or another online location such as with Drop Box or in your email account.
- Keep copies of old drafts so that if you lose your most recent copy, you will have a fairly recent version to revise.

Revision resources

- Your advisor and committee members: be clear with them about which point they wish to see your drafts and revisions, and what they expect from your revisions.
- [The Writing Center](#): outside readers for help with all revising tasks.
- [Graduate Writing Groups](#): start your own group or join an existing group of peer editors.
- A fellow doctoral candidate: trade work with other students in order to give each other feedback as you proceed.

Working with an Academic Community

While this workshop and The Graduate School provide many resources, advice, and information, you should also check and engage with your department and program, which will be very useful in navigating your degree. Try to attend as many department events, social gatherings, and other meetings as possible in order to develop relationships, ask questions, and obtain information. And, of course, you should ask your mentor/advisor many questions.

Advisors, committee members, other faculty, and colleagues are a major influence on our levels of stress and our capacity for success, depending on how supportive they are. Therefore, we are going to spend the rest of our workshop talking about working with members of our academic committees, especially advisors and committees. Keep in mind that “non-academic” relationships are important to your academic success too; see the appendix for strategies and suggestions for interacting with people outside your academic community.

Developing a Supportive Community

When we think about the MA journey, you will need support across a variety of realms. In this, you may wish to complete a [mentor map](#) to discuss who can support you in different areas. To define some of the terms on the linked mentor map,

- **Professional Development** refers to opportunities to enhance your research, connections, and skills. Internal professional development includes organizations and people at Michigan State and your department. External professional development includes local, regional, national, and international connections.
- **Accountability for what really matters** are the people who will remind you who you are, why you are doing what you’re doing, and remind you to maintain your values and morals.
- **Intellectual community readers** are people that can give supportive and generative feedback at different stages of the writing process.

In addition to the mentor mapping, here are some tips:

- Maintain your relationships with family and friends. They can be an invaluable source of support and help you maintain your perspective on life outside of academia.
- Consider how choices in topic might separate you from your partner or family and discuss these lifestyle changes with them. Talk about the expectations

you have for your partner, children, and your family, and talk about the expectations they have of you.

- Think about whether there are ways to include your family/friends in your work.
- Join or develop working groups with other students—theory groups, research groups, study groups, and writing groups can be intellectually stimulating and supportive spaces.

Choosing an Advisor

For most MA students, our advisors function as our academic mentors. Temporary advisors are, believe it or not, only meant to be temporary! Many grads begin working with a temporary advisor and invite that person to become his or her permanent advisor. However, the point of having a temporary advisor is to help you get started in your program and you shouldn't feel guilty about choosing a permanent advisor later on. It may feel awkward to end this relationship, but most temporary advisors expect it to happen and you should feel free to choose an advisor that suits you best.

Before we make advisor choices, it is important to think about what we consider a good mentor to be. From the list below, add what you think is missing. From that, choose what you think is the top three most important qualities you have listed.

- Someone interested in and competent to advise on your topic;
- Someone with reasonable expectations for what you will accomplish;
- Someone reliable (ie. Will give comments within a reasonable time)
- Someone accessible for feedback and consistent with advice
- Someone with personal integrity;
- Someone interested in your success;
- Someone with the ability to responsibly chair the committee;
- Someone willing to be a mentor during and beyond graduate school;
- Someone respected by other faculty;
- Someone you generally get along with and enjoy being around.
- Fill in:
- Fill in:

A successful relationship with a mentor/advisor also places responsibility on the mentee/student. Now develop a list of the qualities and responsibilities of a good mentee. Again, choose the top three qualities to share with the full group.

It is unlikely that one person can meet all of your needs. That's where your committee comes in. If you have the power to select your committee members, it will be important when you select them to think about who will "fill in the blanks" left by your advisor.

If you have already established a committee, below list your members and their best mentoring qualities. Are you getting what you need from them? If not, do you have the power to make changes?

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If you have not chosen a committee, are there any people in your department you are thinking about including? Who are they, and what needs do you think they each will meet? If you don't yet have committee members in mind, list the qualities you will most need from your future committee members.

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Whether or not you have chosen your committee, can change your committee, or have chosen the best possible faculty members to support you and your work, you will still face challenges in working with these people. It is important for you to anticipate these challenges and how you would deal with them. Here are some tips:

- Consider working with your committee to establish realistic responsibilities for both you and the various members.
- Keep an open mind and encourage their suggestions and comments; feedback is important—let your committee know how they are doing.
- Early on, think about creating, along with your committee, a meeting schedule and stick to it.
- Sometimes, planning around times when everyone cannot meet is easier than trying to find the "one time" that everyone can.
- Consider clearly establishing at what point in the development of the drafts they will be given to the various committee members and agree on a response time. Solicit specific responses from individual members based on their strengths and your needs in order to assure timely and relevant responses from them.

- Take responsibility for communicating with members; do it regularly and build a positive relationship with them. Think about sending regular progress reports to them discussing coursework and research.
- This report should be a regular habit. For instance, submit a monthly report to the entire committee and be clear on what revisions you have accomplished and still need to do. It could also be a forum to resolve difficulties you may encounter.

Activity

The following challenges are fairly common problems or are serious issues. In your groups, **choose one** problem to discuss and try to come up with ways to deal with or work through it. Think about the resources available to you, both personal and external. We will ask you to present your solutions to the entire group.

- If you are not in agreement with a member?
- If you need additional support?
- If a member is not accessible enough?
- If feedback on your work is slow in coming?
- If members are not getting along?
- If your relationship with your advisor becomes problematic?
- If you begin to wonder whose work this really is?
- If a committee member moves/retires/dies?

Based on your conversation, if you could give one piece of advice to other MA students choosing or working with committee members, what would it be? Here are some of our suggestions:

- Recognize that your advisor and your committee want to see you succeed (despite the feelings we might sometimes have to the contrary!). Keep these thoughts in mind when working out conflicts with your committee.
- If you disagree, keep lines of communication open. Both you and your advisor need to articulate your positions to eliminate misunderstandings. If you still can't agree (and the situation becomes insurmountable), perhaps you need to reconsider the membership of your committee. Remember, articulate your concerns early on in the process.
- If a member is inaccessible or unavailable, make sure that you are being very clear as to when you need them and how to reach them.
- If feedback is slow in coming (e.g., if it takes weeks or months to get work back), talk with the member and find out why the agreed upon time frame is not being adhered to. Make your advisor aware of the situation. If a resolution cannot be reached, you need to deal with it by channeling your energy and

emotions back into your writing, finding outlets for stress, or finding an outside reader.

- If your relationship with your advisor becomes problematic—depending upon the nature of the situation—seek out the counsel of a responsible person. In most circumstances the graduate chair of your department is the best first step.
- If you begin to question whether the dissertation is your work or the committee's, be aware that it is a joint venture; you and your committee. However, you still should feel a strong sense of ownership in the work.

Master's Degree Components

All Master's degree students are required to complete something that signifies the completion of their degree. Some Master's students take comprehensive (or exit) exams or write a thesis, while others compile a degree portfolio or fulfill internship/externship requirements. You may also do some combinations of these requirements. These processes and documents are different for every degree program.

Use the information below and your graduate handbook to help you develop a plan for approaching and/or completing your comprehensive exams, and/or your thesis, and/or your portfolio and/or your internship or externship requirements.

Comprehensive Exams

1. Find out how many components your comprehensive exam has. Do you take more than one exam? Will the exam(s) take place in a specific location? How much time do you have to complete the writing? Will the exam be long-or short-essay questions? Will you be responsible for writing your own exam questions? Is there an oral component to the exam?
2. When do students usually take their comprehensive exams? Many programs have students taking their exams in the first or second semester of their final year. Make sure you know what is expected and that you are on track.

Thesis

1. Find out the processes and structures for theses in your discipline. Do you need to write and defend a thesis prospectus/proposal? How are theses in your discipline structured? How many chapters do they have? Consider reviewing completed theses by checking them out from the library and seeing their content and structure.
2. When do students usually begin their thesis? How long will you have to complete your thesis? How might this affect the research methodologies you would like to employ?
3. Use this information to develop a timeline and plan to approach your topic selection, proposal/prospectus writing, and thesis writing with confidence. If need be, refer to the timeline activity earlier in this workshop.

Portfolio

1. What kind of relevant materials should you include in your portfolio (coursework documents, conference presentations, consultations or collaborations with community partners, course evaluations, syllabi, and

instructional materials)? How long should it be? Is there an oral component to the portfolio?

2. Will you include an overview essay that provides evidence of reasoning about and reflection on how your program has affected your research, teaching, and professional goals?
3. Who will you submit your portfolio to? Often, your committee members and your graduate program secretary will need a copy of your portfolio.

Internships & Externships

1. What are the specific requirements put forth by your department or program for meeting internship or externship requirements that fulfill graduation?
2. Are you required to find your own internship, or will you be placed by your program? Are you able to have an internship counted that isn't mandated by your program?
3. Will you also be enrolled in coursework while you are completing your internship or externship?
4. Will you include an overview/reflective essay that provides evidence of reasoning about and reflection on how your internship/externship has affected your research, teaching, and professional goals?
5. What is required of you for the people at your internship/externship (e.g., a short memo explaining what you did and what you learned while completing your internship or externship)?

After the Master's Degree

Some of you may be in a Master's degree program that is designed to be the stopping point in your education. In the United States, this degree is called a terminal degree. A terminal degree is the highest degree in a given field of study or academic discipline. The phrase "terminal" is used more frequently in the United States, than it is outside of North America.

To explain further, a terminal master's degree means that once you've completed the requirements for the degree, the assumption is that you're done with school. Some non-terminal master's degrees are more like a checkpoint along the way to a more advanced degree (i.e., the doctorate). Terminal master's degrees often do not lead to admission into a doctoral program.

Take the next few minutes to figure out if your degree is terminal or not. Look in your department or program's handbook for definitive information about the kind of degree program you're part of.

Is a PhD right for me?

One of the more difficult decisions you'll make as a Master's student is whether or not to continue your education at the doctoral level. Deciding to pursue a doctorate is no easy or small decision; a PhD is a big commitment, and one that may or may not be right for you. There are many things to consider when making this decision, which we will discuss in our small and large groups.

Making the Decision

Discuss some of the important considerations when deciding to pursue a doctorate. When you've finished, we will share these points with the larger group.

It's important to keep in mind that there's no one right way to make this decision, or to know whether pursuing a PhD is right for you, but researching other student experiences is a great way to begin.

Interdisciplinary Opportunities

It's important to keep in mind during your Master's program that there may be many possibilities for interdisciplinary work (depending on your department and program). When we talk about interdisciplinary work, we mean there are options for you to work with others both inside and outside of your field or discipline, and both in academia and the surrounding community. The hardest part, as some of you might already know, is knowing how to find this work.

Here are just a few ways in which to explore options for interdisciplinary work:

- Internships or jobs, either on or off campus
- Attending campus events outside of your department (speakers, symposiums, etc.)
- Choosing a committee member from another discipline
- Getting involved with graduate student groups (COGS, Graduate Student Life and Wellness, your own department and program)
- Graduate writing groups with the Writing Center (or on your own)
- Volunteering (in campus departments/labs; with faculty; with off-campus offices)

Job Search

Once you've finished your Master's degree, you may want to find a job (if you decide against furthering your education at the doctoral level). The process of finding a job can often be overwhelming. But this can be mitigated by preparing yourself before you graduate, particularly in the fall of your last year or in the beginning of your last year. There are many things to consider when looking for a job, which we will discuss in our small and large groups.

Preparing for Your Job Search

We will discuss some of the important considerations when finding a job. When you've finished, we will share these points with the larger group. Some questions may help think through these considerations:

- What kinds of jobs does your discipline value?
- What strengths would you bring to those kinds of jobs?
- What kinds of job(s) do you want?

It's important to keep in mind that there's no one right way to find a job, but researching other student experiences is a great way to begin. You should also talk to your advisor.