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PREVIEW

GRADUATE STUDY IN ENGLISH:
A STUDENT HANDBOOK

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GRADUATE STUDY IN ENGLISH:

A STUDENT HANDBOOK

by

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ORIGIN OF THE PROJECT

The idea for writing this handbook first came to my mind during the spring semester of 1983. I discovered during a casual mid-class break that two graduate literature majors, both of whom had been studying in the department for over two semesters, were not aware of the Professional Writing and Rhetoric option. They told me that they might have majored in PWR had they known this option was available to them. The blame for this ignorance lies in one of two places: with the students themselves, for not closely reading the Graduate Studies Catalog; or with the Graduate Advisor, because it is this person's responsibility to advise each student of his or her options. Regardless, I realized that if these students did not appreciate the options available in UTEP's Graduate English programs, then surely others must have the same lack of information. Since I was in search of a project

for my PWR Writing Practicum, I thought that a handbook for students describing all the programs would be a worthwhile endeavor. I approached David Schwalm with the idea, and was given encouragement by him. He thought the project would be even more useful to the department if it were done on the word processor so that amendments could be easily made if any changes in a program were to take place. This is because the word processor makes it easy to delete words or sections and to make insertions without retyping the rest of the text.

NEED FOR THE HANDBOOK

I became aware of more specific needs for this handbook when I sent out questionnaires to undergraduate and graduate English majors in the fall of 1983. From these questionnaires, I discovered that most students do not understand or are not aware of many requirements and procedures, ranging from the prerequisites for admission to the gamut of graduation procedures and time limits. I determined two problems: one, that much of the information in the Graduate Studies Catalog gets "buried in print" in the midst of all the other information about unrelated courses of study; and two, that much of the information graduate students need about a specific course of study is not even included in the Catalog. The responses I collected in the questionnaires gave me the foundation for my project by showing me just what I needed to include in the handbook.

INTENDED AUDIENCE

The intended audience for this project is threefold. First, I am addressing people who are either finishing their bachelor's degree or who already have their bachelor's and are contemplating going to graduate school to study for a Master's degree in English. I discovered in the early stages of this project, when I was gathering all the information I could get my hands on, that the English Department does not have an adequate brochure to give to these interested persons, or to send to those people who write from outside the city or state inquiring about the graduate programs. I thought that such a handbook would serve well as a public relations tool for the department. For these people, the information about application procedures will be useful, as will be the information on the different degree options. The second audience I am addressing, and the one I feel the greatest kinship with, is the graduate student already enrolled in one of the programs of study but who has a wide range of questions about completing a degree plan and the graduation process. These students provided me with the most specific questions on the forms I sent to them, since they are close enough to the program to know the most pertinent questions to ask. I am hoping that both the undergraduate and graduate English advisors will keep this handbook available to any student who is interested in learning more about the graduate English programs at UTEP. And the last and perhaps the most important audience I am writing this handbook for are my "contractors," David Schwalm and Larry Johnson. My responsibility was to make sure that I tailored this handbook to meet the demands and specifications they gave me. In essence, they were my employers and it was my task to produce the document they asked me to write.

FORMAT AND ARRANGEMENT

My prime considerations for putting this handbook together were its format and arrangement. I needed to present the information in such a way as to lend itself to easy readability, so that the information did not again get "buried in print." With the format, I highlighted the main headings on each page to make them stand out, I separated the main paragraphs so that one was easily distinguishable from the next, and I designed each page so that the information was not crowded. Also, I maintained blocks of information rather than allowing them to be divided at the end of a page to continue on the next page, by moving the entire block to the following page so as to present it in one place, unseparated. I ran the title of an ongoing section at the foot of the page in boldface to serve as a guide. I opted for the footings as opposed to the headings, because headings sometimes compete with other boldfaced words on a page. In order to make this handbook cost effective for the department when it is copied, I typed each line at twelve characters per inch instead of the standard ten characters per inch. This allowed me to type more information on each page, which saves paper. I also left a wider than normal left margin so that no words will be chopped off when it is bound or stapled.

With the arrangement, I ordered the contents of the handbook to follow the sequence of steps that a student must follow, from application and admissions, to choosing a degree plan and following all the academic regulations and procedures, and finally through the thesis project and oral examination. I've also included all the forms that students will have to contend with, to familiarize them with the forms, and to provide additional information that is not included in the

handbook itself. Each time I rewrote a draft of this project after I had all the information in place, I rewrote it to restructure the format and to rearrange the order of the various sections. It took numerous drafts before I arrived at the most effective way of organizing and arranging each page and each section.

PERSONAL ANALYSIS OF THE WRITING PROCESS

The writing process began for me at the end of the fall 1983 semester when I sent out questionnaires to twenty undergraduate and twenty graduate English majors. I received eleven undergraduate and fourteen graduate questionnaires back in response to my solicitation. In these, I asked for responses to questions about application procedures, courses, the various thesis projects, thesis committees, oral examinations, and the overall graduation process. I also asked how much information they wanted about the graduate faculty, and whether I should include a section on financial assistance. The responses to the questionnaires indicated that I needed to include as much information as possible, since these students were unclear about almost everything. I then made a list of the areas of information that I would have to cover.

The next step was to gather all the available information. I went to the Graduate School and picked up the newly printed Graduate Studies Catalog and also the application forms for graduate scholarships. Then I went to the Financial Aid Office and was given a brochure from them. I next retrieved material from David Schwalm dealing with Teaching Assistantships. I sat down with the Graduate Studies Catalog and circled all the sections that I needed to include from it,

and sketched out my first outline for the handbook.

What I did not fully appreciate at this time was that the Graduate Studies Catalog does not contain enough specific information about many things to be a thorough source of information for me. For instance, the Catalog stipulates that a student must present "a satisfactory score on the Graduate Record Exam" when applying to the Graduate School, but it does not say what that score must be. No where is it mentioned that a student's application materials will be acknowledged in writing, and that he or she may be accepted under one of three admission statuses and that two of the statuses require separate follow-up procedures. In the section on the graduate English programs, a sketchy description is given for each of the thesis projects which leaves the student with many unanswered questions. PWR students particularly are unsure of what is expected of them with the Writing Practicum, since this is a less conventional project than are the theses for Literature and Creative Writing students. Also, no information is given about the procedure one goes through in selecting a thesis committee and what the requirements are for the members of that committee. Clearly, the writers of the Catalog intended the individual departments to inform their students about such details, but this information is not collected and available to them. I was not able to obtain much of the information I needed until near the end of my project when the newly printed "Graduate Advisor's Handbook" was finally made available.

My next step was to learn how to type on a word processor. The word processing program that was available to me in the English Department is WordStar, which is a program that lends itself well to formatting and editing. WordStar provides a helpful self-tutorial book,

so I was able to learn the basic commands and functions at my own pace. Within a week and a half, I felt I had control of the various functions including how to set up files, how to establish the basic format of a page by setting margins, tabs, and line spacing, and how to delete or insert words. I also learned the different special effects functions, such as typing in boldface or underlining words. I appreciated this opportunity to learn this skill as a part of my practicum, because it is something most people have to take special classes for and pay fees that would strain a Teaching Assistant's salary to its breaking point.

Working with the word processor, or the WP as I came to affectionately call it, changed the way I perceived the printed page. What I noticed was that I no longer looked at a page as something immutable. I now see it as something that can be rearranged with the simple push of the right keys, how a margin can be bumped over or justified easily, or how words, sentences, and paragraphs can easily be moved or deleted. Another change I noticed was that my typing improved. I was able to type faster and make fewer mistakes. I think this is due to the fact that when I am writing on a typewriter, I feel more pressured because every key I press is being instantly committed to print. But with the WP, nothing must stay the way I've typed it until I run it through the printer. And even then I can go back to a page with some problems, and correct them without having to type the entire page over again. This takes the pressure off of the typing process.

One adjustment I had to make was that I had nothing tangible in my hands to look at while I was typing. All I could see of my typing was what the screen projected at a given time, which is about a third of a page. When you type on a word processor, the top portion of the screen vanishes into an invisible region in the machine. This gives you limited

perception while you are typing, which is unlike the typewriter where you can glance back to the top of a page or the previous page to see how you referred to something or how you worded it if you want to vary your phrasing. In order to "get my hands on" my typing then, and to assist me in the revising and reformatting stages, I followed this procedure: I would type a file, scan and edit it for obvious mistakes, print it, and then I would mark those parts with a pen that I would change when I went back to the WP.

David Schwalm was of great assistance to me in this process since he has extensive experience with word processors. He advised me to work with separate files, which meant that I wrote the handbook in several parts instead of as a whole piece. This made the information much easier to handle because I could work with a section at a time, and because each file was shorter, I could easily jump to the beginning and end of each file. Schwalm also suggested that I keep a back-up disk of everything I typed as a safety measure in case something horrific happened to my primary disk. I was more than happy to do this, since if anything should have happened to my magnetic copy, I would have seen my graduate career and the long hours of typing I did on my practicum vanish and slip away to the great disk graveyard in the sky.

After I felt that I had enough moxy on the WP to handle the task I had to tackle, I put together my first draft. I soon realized that my assumed competence was a bit premature, because I made several mistakes that caused me much time to correct. For instance, I thought I would delete a word and I would instead delete an entire line. Or I would enter a file and forget to set the margins at the right places before I would reform a paragraph, which created a mess that looked like a flourescent Scrabble game had been scattered on the screen. About this