

# Sweetland

GAYLE MORRIS SWEETLAND WRITING CENTER

1139 Angell Hall  
764-0429  
SWCinfo@  
umich.edu  
<http://www.lsa.umich.edu/swc>

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## Dissertation Writing Project

by Ejner J. Jensen

### *Writing Workshop by appointment*

#### *Winter 2002*

Monday  
9 a.m. - 5 p.m.  
Tuesday  
9 a.m. - 5 p.m.  
Wednesday  
9 a.m. - 12:30 p.m.  
2:30-5 p.m.  
Thursday  
9 a.m. - 5 p.m.  
Friday  
9 a.m. - 5 p.m.

### *Peer Tutors*

Sunday-Thursday  
7 p.m. - 11 p.m.  
444C Mason Hall

### *Multi-Literacy Center*

11 a.m. - 4 p.m.  
Monday - Friday  
*by appointment*

### *Evening Hours*

Mary Markley Library  
Tuesdays 8-11 p.m.

### *Online Writing and Learning (OWL)*

<http://www.lsa.umich.edu/swc/helpowl.html>

Over the course of Fall Term 2001, members of the Sweetland Seminar began investigating how the various programs of the Rackham School of Graduate Studies prepare their students for the writing of the dissertation. This study was designed to complement another activity in the SWC, directed by Helen Fox, which is studying graduate students' perceptions of their needs for writing instruction and other forms of support as they move through their graduate preparation and on to the writing of the dissertation. Both projects address similar questions: what are the barriers to timely completion of the dissertation, and how can the University create programs that will remove the barriers or make them less formidable? The stakes in this matter are high. Students who fail to complete the dissertation sacrifice both their personal investment in graduate training and the institution's considerable financial and human investment in their careers. Moreover, in today's job market, slow progress toward the degree may be as damaging as not completing the dissertation; colleges and universities are more likely to hire those candidates whose records evidence steady and fairly rapid productivity.

What follows is a preliminary report on some of the programs now in effect in a few selected departments. From these, we have tried to adduce the principles that seem to have dictated their design; our goal is to create an account of best practices and an understanding of the conditions that promote success at the dissertation stage. Armed with this knowledge, we hope to move next to a grant proposal for a program or a set of programs that might be administered jointly by Rackham and the SWC. That, of course, is another step. Here our intention is merely to assemble information and set down some preliminary guidelines.

One element that seems fundamental to oversight and support of progress at the

dissertation level is some form of time-keeping or calendar surveillance. Every dissertation writer has probably grown weary at the reiteration of the question, "How's your dissertation coming?" as it is directed by well-meaning colleagues, interested faculty, concerned parents and friends, and even rivalrous fellow students. But an argument can be made for the utility of that question if it is part of a work plan. The student, his or her mentors, and the department's graduate chair all have a stake in knowing the answer. Moreover, each of them can use that information to intervene in the process: the student by shifting pace or by urging the advisor to return a recently-submitted chapter; the advisor by asking for samples of recent work or by taking a more active role in the student's efforts to clarify issues or get help from others on the committee; and the graduate chair by making sure that both the student and the supervising faculty keep working at a steady pace.

In some programs, the work of the dissertation receives focused attention from the onset of a student's graduate career. In courses designed to be introductions to graduate studies, what some call tools-and-methods courses, beginning students are acquainted with the standard practices of the discipline. Methods and approaches, forms of discourse, basic research tools—all these find their way into the kit that each student will carry along through his or her career. In such courses, which function as something like a short-term apprenticeship, the student experiments with these materials (and may even master their use) as part of the process of discovering an area of specialization and then, in due course, identifying a dissertation topic. For example, the Interdisciplinary Program in Anthropology and History offers a two-term course (Winter and Fall) that brings together students completing their course work and students returning from field work. In the Winter Term members of the first group do extensive reading in theory and anthropological/historical monographs and follow that with independent research in the summer. They are joined in the Fall Term by returning students, and together they spend the

term sharing work and discussing ongoing projects. This arrangement provides a helpful mix of advanced students, those at the threshold of independent work, and experienced researchers (the two professors who co-teach the course). Other departments might find this a workable model, especially in fields in which interdisciplinary work is the norm.

Mentoring programs, some of which are in place at the start of a student's career, are available in a number of departments. In the Psychology Department, mentoring is available across the whole range of departmental areas (seven or eight in all); and while the success of the mentoring program varies from area to area, the students themselves in a recent survey indicated that the advising system and the presence of a first-year advisor was of key importance to them. In the Department of Economics, first-year students are matched with two mentors, a faculty member and an advanced graduate student. The Department of Political Science offers research group seminars (RSGS) to its incoming students. Each seminar meets weekly over lunch, with faculty presenting current research projects and discussing such matters as the project's genesis, sources of funding, appropriate methodology, and associated problems and obstacles. Students participate by asking questions and providing suggestions and constructive criticism. Students in the RSGS benefit from the sense of belonging that the seminars generate and they are exposed to a wide variety of faculty, research methods, and topics. Women's Studies has developed a program in which advanced students present their work to first- and second-year students in the joint WS programs (including History, English, and Psychology). These relatively informal sessions provide occasions for presenters (and their audiences) to think about issues like audience, purpose, central assumptions—matters of key importance to writing at any level.

Several departments offer courses in which writing itself is the major subject. The History of Art pro-seminar, for example, provides instruction in writing that covers a variety of modes: the abstract, book reviews, literature reviews ("state of the question" papers), grant proposals, exhibition reviews. One aim of asking for writing over such a range of topics and materials is to socialize students into the department and its discipline. In Romance Languages, students have profited from informal workshops on writing practices; the department also offers an "introduction to graduate studies" course in which writing is a significant focus. While the issue of preparation for scholarly writing is a general one, in Romance Languages (and presumably in other language departments as well) the issue is complicated by the nature of the students' undergraduate work. Many of the papers they write as undergraduates will be in the subject language, which means that they will have had little experience in writing upper-level papers in English, the usual language for the dissertation. In other language departments, where there are many non-native speakers of English, this issue is further compounded. In the Department of Linguistics, the focus on writing for a professional audience appears most markedly in the preparation of the qualifying research paper (QRP), completion of which allows students to advance to

candidacy. The department views this paper as a key factor in smoothing students' transition from being course-takers (knowledge consumers) to being researchers (knowledge producers).

Programs and Departments across the College manage this transition differently. For students in the sciences, it may have taken place in the undergraduate years if they had extensive laboratory experience. In any event, for most of them knowledge production is part of their experience from the earliest stages of their graduate programs. For students in the humanities, the transition may come much later in their experience, and this may be one factor that makes the dissertation seem such a daunting and nearly unmanageable task. A kind of middle ground exists in the Department of Political Science, where faculty-student research partnerships are a common experience of many students. These collaborations, which may arise in a variety of ways, offer a powerful and effective form of professional socialization. Working closely with professors, students gather essential research experience (including the acquisition of statistical and technological skills), accumulate data that may be central to their dissertation projects, and begin to establish their scholarly reputations through co-authorship.

It seems clear, even from this brief account, that there exists across the departments of the College a variety of programs and practices designed to assist students as they move toward and through the writing of the dissertation. At a basic level, all such activities have as a major aim socialization into the professional practices of an academic research community. As we think about the conditions likely to promote the success of these activities, the following come to mind:

- Frequent opportunities for writing
- Early familiarity with the discipline's common genres
- Clarity about audience and purpose
- Informal settings or small course sizes
- Peer as well as faculty participation and interaction
- Early and continued involvement in such settings
- Participation of students at every level
- Incentives for participation of both faculty and students
- Accountability—registers of progress

While there are problems that remain unaddressed in this account—the issue of intellectual authority, for example—enough has been said to provide rough guidelines for a variety of possible dissertation writing programs. In the next while, we hope to provide details of a program we are now designing at the SWC and find ways to implement it at the University of Michigan. If you have ideas about how such a program might work or if you are interested in discussing its creation, please be in touch with Ejner Jensen at the Sweetland Writing Center (phone 763-0967, e-mail [ejjensen@umich.edu](mailto:ejjensen@umich.edu)).