



## ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS FOR A FUTURE IN FLUX: RETHINKING GRADUATE PROGRAMS IN WRITING STUDIES

**WRITTEN BY:**  
**KATELYN STARK**

Industry Professional Writer with a  
Ph.D. in Rhetoric and Composition  
from Florida State University, 2021.

**IMAGE OF:**  
**KATHI YANCEY + KATELYN STARK**

Photo by Max Flugrath. Tallahassee,  
Florida, 2021

# Q FOR QUESTION

**“THERE ARE MULTIPLE HISTORIES OF THE FIELD, THERE ARE MULTIPLE THEORIES ABOUT HOW PEOPLE DEVELOP, AND TO THE EXTENT THAT WE UNDERSTAND THAT, WE ARE BETTER AS RESEARCHERS.”**

**- YANCEY, Q FOR QUESTION INTERVIEW.**



Canva Pro Graphic Image

---

## ABSTRACT

In an increasingly dynamic and interdisciplinary professional landscape, traditional graduate programs in Writing Studies risk limiting students to a narrow set of career pathways, often centered exclusively within academia. This chapter section, “Essential Questions for a Future in Flux: Rethinking Graduate Programs in Writing Studies,” explores the need for a fundamental rethinking of graduate education to encompass diverse professional opportunities.

Drawing on both personal experience and the insights of Kathleen Blake Yancey’s work on writing transfer, this section examines the untapped potential of Ph.D. and M.A. programs to prepare students for roles in industries where writing expertise and rhetorical knowledge are highly valued.

By asking critical questions about the evolving needs of writing students, faculty, and industry professionals, the section advocates for a graduate curriculum that encourages transferable skills, situates theoretical knowledge within practical contexts, and provides pathways to sustainable careers beyond academia.

It argues for a re-envisioned approach to Writing Studies—one that fosters reciprocal relationships with industry professionals, integrates experiential learning, and actively supports students interested in professional writing careers. By addressing these essential questions, Writing Studies can cultivate adaptable graduates equipped to navigate and shape a future in flux.

WHAT QUESTIONS ARE WE POSING WITHIN OUR PROFESSIONAL CONTEXTS THAT REFLECT THE BROADER CONCERNS OF OUR FIELD? **WHAT QUESTIONS SHOULD WE BE ASKING?** HOW HAVE THE QUESTIONS WE DEVELOP SHAPED OUR PROFESSIONAL PRACTICES, AND WHICH QUESTIONS CONTINUE TO CHALLENGE US WITHIN THOSE SPACES?

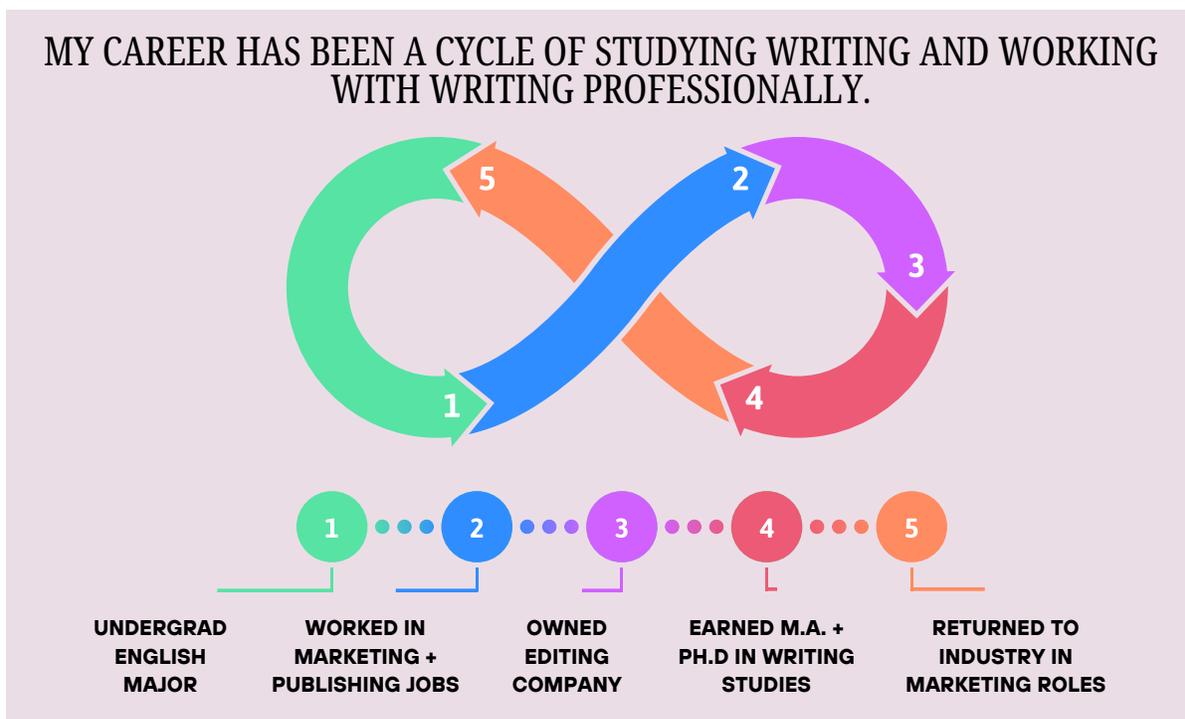
- COLLABORATING AUTHORS BRAINSTORMING QUESTIONS, 2023

**I am Katelyn Stark, one of the final mentees of Kathleen Blake Yancey, and I bring to this chapter a unique perspective shaped by her mentorship and my experiences bridging academia and industry.**

The image accompanying this piece—a picture of Kathi and me at my cohort’s graduation celebration—represents a pivotal moment. Taken shortly after defending my dissertation, this photo marks my transition from the academic track to a career in industry writing, a path I embarked upon just seven days after my dissertation defense, amid the career disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This career shift, though unplanned, presented an opportunity to apply my knowledge of writing transfer in ways I hadn’t anticipated.

My career path reflects a cycle of learning and application: from my early aspirations in commercial publishing to my doctoral studies under Kathi’s guidance at Florida State University, where I sought to deepen my understanding of writing development and knowledge transfer. Now, in my role as a marketing director for a medical cannabis company, I draw daily upon the rhetorical and theoretical insights gained at FSU, even as I navigate new contexts and challenges.



For five years, I was privileged to engage with Kathi on the complexities of writing, knowledge transfer, and curriculum design.

Kathleen Blake Yancey's work emphasizes the importance of preparing writing students, including graduate students like myself, to transfer their knowledge and skills from academic settings to new, unfamiliar contexts. But the question I pose here extends beyond the scope of Yancey's curriculum research.

Rather than questioning the viability of Yancey's pedagogical framework, which I know to be effective, I invite the field to consider two larger, future-oriented questions that could fundamentally shape our graduate programs and disciplinary identity:

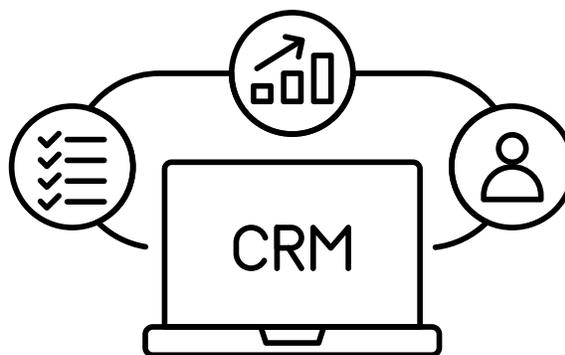
**How can graduate programs in Writing Studies open pathways that prepare students—at both the M.A. and Ph.D. levels—for robust career opportunities in both academia and industry?**

**How might researchers, faculty, and graduate students collaborate with, learn alongside, and study adult professional writers actively engaged in industry settings?**

These questions arise from my own experience of moving seamlessly into an industry role, where I now thrive. I find fulfillment in my work, which is financially stable, highly creative, and deeply informed by my doctoral studies.

Yet, I recognize that such transitions are often seen as atypical or secondary within our field. I aim to challenge that perspective, suggesting instead:

Writing Studies as a discipline has much to gain by preparing future scholars for diverse career trajectories that include both academia and industry.



---

When asking questions as graduate students and researchers,

***"IT'S UNWISE TO SAY, 'THAT'S TOO IDEAL, I WON'T THINK IN THOSE TERMS.'" - YANCEY, Q FOR QUESTION INTERVIEW.***

---

## I FIND FULFILLMENT IN MY WORK, WHICH IS FINANCIALLY STABLE, HIGHLY CREATIVE, AND DEEPLY INFORMED BY MY DOCTORAL STUDIES.

My current role in digital marketing illustrates the relevance of rhetorical and genre knowledge in industry settings.

At my company, I've led efforts to reframe our approach to Customer Relationship Management (CRM), building a communications strategy that encompasses digital channels, including email, SMS, and app notifications.

Recently, I trained other regional marketing leaders in these strategies, an exercise that underscored a critical reality: **professional writers are not, by default, writing theory experts.**

To communicate these rhetorical strategies effectively, I needed to simplify the theories, define key terms, and collaboratively develop a shared framework with my team. This experience reminds us that while we may possess deep rhetorical expertise, **successful application often requires translation and adaptation for diverse, non-academic audiences.**

Recently, I trained other regional marketing leaders in these strategies, an exercise that underscored a critical reality: **professional writers are not, by default, writing theory experts.**

To communicate these rhetorical strategies effectively, I needed to simplify the theories, define key terms, and collaboratively develop a shared framework with my team. This experience reminds us that while we may possess deep rhetorical expertise, **successful application often requires translation and adaptation for diverse, non-academic audiences.**

This reflection is not merely personal but points to a larger challenge for our field. As we celebrate our disciplinary knowledge, we must also confront the reality that Writing Studies remains a relatively small field, one that risks isolating itself if it does not actively seek to bridge the academic and industry worlds.

**Without a shift towards supporting students interested in both scholarly and professional writing careers, we risk perpetuating cycles of limited job opportunities and economic instability for future generations of writing scholars.**



Canva Pro Graphic Image

## AS KATHLEEN BLAKE YANCEY TAUGHT ME, WE MUST REMAIN EVER CURIOUS, OPEN TO LEARNING FROM ALL WRITERS, IN ALL SETTINGS.

We need graduate programs that are attractive to students interested in both academic and industry-focused writing careers. By expanding our curricula to address these dual goals, we can cultivate graduates who are not only well-versed in writing theory but also equipped to thrive in professional contexts. Such programs could integrate internships, field experiences, and other professional development opportunities, offering students practical exposure and preparing them for diverse roles.

Imagine a re-envisioned graduate program, one that invites professional writers to deepen their expertise in theory while gaining practical skills transferrable to industry. By cultivating a space where theory and practice intersect, our programs could draw in students from more fields like editing, writing, and media, helping them see the value of an advanced degree in Writing Studies for both academic and professional pathways.

In advocating for this shift, I do not propose a separation but rather an extension. Let us invite industry professionals into our Ph.D. programs and, in doing so, prepare them to contribute actively to the ongoing study and practice of writing. This approach mirrors that of many business schools, where industry experience and research coexist, leading to mutually beneficial outcomes for both graduates and institutions.

Furthermore, I urge Writing Studies to expand its research focus to include adult professional writers across various industry roles. My work, grounded in daily rhetorical tasks and genre blending, serves as one of many examples of the ways in which writing theory can inform professional practice. Yet, I want to know more: *are the approaches I've implemented truly effective? Are there broader insights that could enhance my team's writing practices?* These are questions that only a robust partnership between academic researchers and industry writers can answer.

In closing, I extend an invitation to my colleagues in Writing Studies: let us study the work of industry writers who respond to evolving rhetorical situations, compose across genres, and adapt writing strategies to meet diverse audience needs. By doing so, we can enrich our understanding of writing in action and ensure that our field remains responsive to the dynamic needs of both academic and professional contexts.

It is time to embrace a broader, more inclusive vision for Writing Studies—one that recognizes the value of preparing graduates for impactful careers both within and beyond the academy.