

# WORD

FALL 2025

## FALL 2025: CONFERENCES

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## Director's Notes

First, I want to congratulate our Fall 2025 graduates: **Lydia Hadfield, M.S.**, **Thea Ringer, M.S.**, & **Jasmin Thames, M.S.** PRWR would also like to congratulate **Professor Jeannie Vanasco** on her new memoir, *A Silent Treatment*, published by Tin House Books in September.

The theme for Fall semester's Words issue is "conferences."

- On November 15th, 2025 Baltimore Writers' Conference took place to great success: around 115 attendees came to the 16 sessions. See this year's [program](#). Thanks to **Professors Jeannie Vanasco** and **Geoff Becker** for organizing the event and connecting the Baltimore writing community.
- We had a record number of conference presentations this past year, stemming from coursework research and G.I.V.E. partnership projects. (cont.)



In October, **Shelby Cole**, **Findley Holland**, **Rob Konger**, **Gianna Espinoza**, **Drs. Carrie Grant** and **Zosha Stuckey** presented at the Conference on Community Writing in Detroit. In June, **Margaret Bates** presented at the International Association of Romantic Fiction. In July, **Rob Konger** presented at the International Writing Across the Curriculum conference in Denver, and alumna **Elizabeth Eakes, M.S.'25**, **Lydia Hadfield**, and **Dr. Sarah Gunning** presented at the International Conference on Professional Communication in Sønderborg, Denmark.

This fall, we launched the 15-credit Communicating Complex Information graduate certificate, which will bring the field of technical communication to scientists, technologists, and professionals around Baltimore who want to strengthen their writing and information design skills. The program welcomes its first students in Spring 2026.

– **Dr. Sarah Gunning**

## The '25 Baltimore Writers' Conference

by Dr. Gunning

The 2025 Baltimore Writers' Conference returned on Saturday November 15 in the College of Liberal Arts. The conference hosted 16 panels, generative sessions, quick critiques, and craft talks across four time sessions. Keynote and 2024 Guggenheim fellow Sonia Shah opened the sessions by noting the power of rhetoric: "Our writing: the act of relating to our audience, is kryptonite to an authoritarian regime." As rhetoricians, it is our job to create those connections, which enhance solidarity.

I attended talks by Michelle Orange & Sarah Perry, **Prof. Geoff Becker**, and **Prof. Elizabeth DeMeo**. In *Refining Your Nonfiction Book Concept*, Sarah and Michelle discussed "the wedding guest problem" within memoir: deciding what to include vs what to leave out (and deciding how you organize it). Sometimes you just have to *essay it all out* to know what you are writing about: what is interesting is not the obvious lists of *things that happened* (though you've got to write it to get it out of its own way). Instead, identify what is the real story behind what you are getting at.



*"It was my first time attending, and I really enjoyed it. Every session gave me good information and/or techniques I can apply to my writing. In particular, the one on How to Know When Your Manuscript is Ready for an Agent with Barbara Jones provided immediately actionable tips. I used them to refine and revise my two classes' final assignments."*

—**Megan Bradshaw**



**Prof. Geoff Becker's** Craft Talk in Fiction discussed knowing what you know (and don't know). Like Sonia Shah, he echoed the importance of rhetoric: "it's about what is interesting [to] the reader -- not to the writer. Autobiography can get in your way: it can be dangerously close to therapy." However, Geoff suggested keeping an eye out for "diamonds in your own backyard." Learn how to inspire yourself: be open to surprise. Don't "know" your character too well: let your characters take a life on their own. Your allegiance is not to the truth. The creative process can be a bit like lucid dreaming. Who you are in real life comes out in your writing, too. Where is your antenna up? Pay attention to the little things, and save them for later.

**Prof. Elizabeth DeMeo**, teaching PRWR 653 *Writing the Novel* this coming Spring, provided insight to the publishing industry from her time as an editor at Tin House Books. Just as in technical writing, your novel's first page must be the strongest. Editors are reading it to put it down: reading until they find a chance to say *No*. She offered encouragement to writers who receive "not right now, but..." letters. She noted that editors are sincere about the changes they'd like to see in those manuscripts, and writers should take those letters as a sign of encouragement: no one has time to write letters like that if they don't mean it. DeMeo walked attendees through the book acquisition process, shedding light on strategies editors use to help guide their writers through the editing and revision processes.

This was just a small sample of the panels held this year. Aspects of attending the BWC reminded me of the essay **Rob Konger** writes about the intersecting, overlapping fields of creative and technical writing: *Who is my audience? What is this paragraph doing? How does my content hold weight?* There is a reason our Professional Writing program is founded on rhetoric.

Hope to see you again in November 2026.

*"My favorite conference session was Working With an Editor with Elizabeth DeMeo...She gave us helpful tips including: make your first 20% of your manuscript the strongest, make a website if you're published, and ask journals you'll be published in if they could post an excerpt of your work (if they do that sort of thing).*

*"One of my most memorable moments was buying books with friends after a session. We had just left the memoir panel with Sarah Perry, Hyeseung Song, and Jeannie Vanasco. After hearing them talk about their memoirs, we had to buy them afterwards—especially since my love for memoir has really grown over this past year.*

*"I'm so glad I ended up attending this conference! I almost didn't since it's a crazy time in the semester and I knew that week was going to be busy...I got to meet up with classmates and professors which was already so fun—but even better I got to meet amazing authors and got put on to some new reads. I truly had such a blast!"*

—**Gianna Espinoza**



I'd learned an immense amount from our collaboration. Together, we made it from Towson, Maryland to Sonderborg, Denmark to discuss PRWR. It was a privilege to share ideas with an international community of scholars who likewise value writing as an educational imperative, essential critical thinking process, and irreplaceable workplace skill.

Our paper was an experience report on an oral, rhetoric-focused PRWR mid-point portfolio defense. Elizabeth had pilot tested the new model in Dr. Gunning's PRWR 691 *Research Methods in Professional Writing* course. I'd been one of the classmates in Elizabeth's audience. We all contributed our thoughts about the experience, submitted the paper, and crossed our fingers. ProComm accepted our report.

At IEEE ProComm, accepted authors presented a 15 minute synopsis of their paper, then the audience and presenters engaged in Q&A-style dialogue, moderated by an off-deck researcher. The structure was not unlike PRWR's mid-point oral portfolio defense! I didn't anticipate how informative and genuinely conversational ProComm Q&As could be. The best sessions were like thought-provoking, concentrated mini-classes. (Cont.)

## Notes from Denmark

By Lydia Hadfield

Outside Syddansk Universitet, (the University of Southern Denmark), boats sailed past the concrete seawall of the campus grounds and into the Nordic July wind of Sønderborg Bay. Inside the University, **Dr. Gunning**, recent alumna **Elizabeth Eakes**, and I presented our experience report, *Making meaning through oral portfolio defenses: a pilot project* at the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers International Conference on Professional Communication (IEEE ProComm).

The classroom hushed. Researchers awakened screens or flipped to a fresh page to take notes and quietly enlivened the room with their listening. I took a breath and allowed a little pride to anchor my clearance sale heels firmly to the floor. To arrive in that moment, Dr. Gunning, Elizabeth and I had researched, tested, reflected, written, and revised for nearly a year; we'd applied for travel authorization and reimbursement, composed our presentation, and rehearsed our spiels.

## Lydia's favorite sessions

- "Visual Representations of Body Diversity in Technical Documentation: Toward a LEGO Friends Case Study," by C. Saalmueller.
- "Lost in Translation: Unveiling Structural Injustice in Algorithmic Language Technologies," Part I and II, by I. Dorpenyo and A. Pestova. They cite the late, great PRWR professor **Dr. Halcyon Lawrence**.



(Cont.) During the conference, attendees could access presenters' papers. Afterwards, ProComm published the research online. Citations and abstracts are free to the public. To read the full papers, one must pay a fee, attain IEEE membership, or bypass the paywall with a University library permission key. Better yet: TU students and faculty can request the article through Cook Library's Interlibrary Loan. Cook's ILL will have it for you by email in a few days.

## Grantwriting in Valued Environments (G.I.V.E.) Goes to Detroit

By Robin Konger

My drive started at 5 in the morning, after picking up my team members, coworkers, and friends –fellow PRWR graduate students **Gianna Espionza**, **Shelby Cole**, and **Findley Holland** – to present as a panel at the Conference for Community Writing on the work we have done as interns and graduate assistants. A straight drive from Towson University to Detroit, Michigan is about 10 hours by car and around 2 hours by plane. We received a text from our professors, **Dr. Carrie Grant** and **Dr. Zosha Stuckey**, wishing us well on our journey as they boarded.



***Driving to Detroit  
took around 10  
hours, through  
multiple states.***

We shared a Spotify playlist, snacks, plenty of banter, and plenty of car games as we made our way through Pennsylvania, Ohio (“The Heart of It All”), and finally, Michigan. We made it in pretty good time, arriving around 3 p.m. – and two of us attended class that evening, through Zoom!

We had been invited to present at Wayne State University on the history of all the work we've done as a part of G.I.V.E. (Grantwriting In Valued Environments), especially with partner NeTIA (Northeast Towson Improvement Association), to publicize the story of Historic East Towson. This has included StoryMapping, collecting oral histories, the creation of a Wikipedia page, a coffee table book, and a digital archive. It's work we're all very proud of, and that energy helped propel us through the long drive and long nights.

For some of us, it was our first real conference experience as a graduate student. But, it can also be very exciting! An academic conference can end up being so much more than just something for your resume. I'll remember watching *Twilight* on the second night, karaoke blasting downstairs and coming through the class Zoom call, just as much as any keynote presentation. Sharing this space and panel as a team rather than individually allowed us all to grow, and even begin to plan for future conference events together.

**We're always aiming higher!**



# CONFERENCE TIPS FROM PRESENTERS

## OPTIMIZE YOUR TRIP

From **Rob**

- **Try not to freak out!** Plenty of first-time conference goers will feel intense imposter syndrome, like they don't belong there. Remember that you've made it this far for a reason: acceptance to a conference means your work is already considered incredibly valuable, even before you present.
- **Research the speakers and see if there's any overlap between your own research or interests and theirs.** You can find new colleagues pretty quickly; everyone loves to speak about shared interests.
- **Understand the different kinds of conference presentations.** When going to a workshop or a roundtable, you're going to be expected to talk and work on something with others. At a keynote presentation, you're not expected to talk at all.
- **Look up the conference location and explore the nearby area.** Most will be situated in a city or a college town, meaning there'll be some cool spots to explore! Visiting a cool landmark, bar, coffee shop, museum, trail, etc., can help make the conference more than just an academic affair, but an amazing travel story.
- **Make sure to get the free food available.** Most conferences will offer attendees plenty of food and snacks throughout the day. I drink a lot of coffee over a conference weekend, because it's free and it keeps my energy up.

## NETWORKING

From **Dr. Gunning**

- **Plan out your sessions before you arrive.** This will help make the days seem less overwhelming. Highlight the ones you want to attend in advance.
- **Split up sessions if you are attending with a colleague,** go to different sessions so you can report back to each other next time you catch up.
- **Bring a notebook & pen for taking notes,** connecting the dots across ideas. I always find new papers I want to read, or connect with research I wasn't yet aware of.
- **Go to lunch/dinner with a stranger.** I aim to make 1 new academic friend at every conference I attend. Next time, it will be nice to see more familiar faces. Introvert goals :)
- **Introduce yourself to scholars when you recognize their names.** It's nice meeting "your homework" in person, finding out they are real people.
- **Consider cross-institutional collaborations.** A diverse range of viewpoints and study populations strengthen research studies.
- **Use this time to research possible PhD programs** if you meet graduate student attendees. Ask what they like about their program, and what research specializations are represented in their department.

## Romance, Pop Culture & Research

***What are some of the differences between presenting online versus in-person?***

By Robin Konger

Second-year PRWR student **Margaret Bates** presented at two conferences over the summer of 2025. In April, they went to the Pop Culture Association Conference in New Orleans, and in June to the International Association of Romantic Fiction in Mexico City, which they participated virtually.

**Dr. Gunning** introduced them to the International Association of Romance Fiction conference. In Fall 2024, Margaret took PRWR 691 *Research Methods in Professional Writing*, completing qualitative and quantitative research on how readers interact with and choose romance novels. For the Pop Culture Association, Margaret pitched how *Beauty and the Beast* relates to disability studies, and how it can perpetuate harmful stereotypes.

Margaret wasn't nervous for the presentation, having presented in-class and at other conferences. They feel pretty secure about their abilities – even though they noted that, “I can talk too fast, sometimes!” Presenting through Zoom, they were able to participate in the International Association of Romantic Fiction conference without dealing with the hassle of travel. However, they say students should be aware that tech isn't always the most reliable. That afternoon of their presentation, Margaret dealt with a thunderstorm, and even had the power go out during their presentation. Luckily, Margaret was able to finish after the power came back ten minutes later. Margaret notes that if you communicate any issues beforehand, the audience will be understanding.

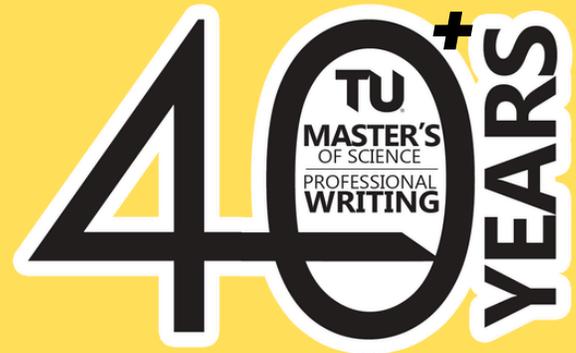
### **PRESENTING ADVICE**

From **Margaret Bates**

- **Practice your presentation.** Through practice you build up your confidence, and can work on your cadence and timing so that everyone can understand you.
- **Time yourself with your slides.** Having one minute per slide is a good rule to remember. You don't want to speed through your presentation.
- **Respect everyone's time.** By going over your allotted time, you will interrupt another person's presentation, and may even interrupt your audience's time. Hence, the importance of practice.
- **Remember, people can read your paper after the presentation.** You don't have to include everything from your original study. Focus instead on the biggest takeaways for your audience.

## NEW STUDENT PROFILES

Fall '25 saw the arrival of many new students to the PRWR Program: here are a few of our writers



*"It surprised me how much I loved teaching. I really liked seeing a student have something 'click.'"*



### Juliana Belt

Interview by Lydia Hadfield

**Juliana Belt** wants to learn what "effective" teaching means to her. She enrolled in PRWR's Teaching Writing track inspired by her experience as an undergraduate Writing Fellow at Towson University.

She appreciates how PRWR classes challenge her to read and write outside her comfort zones. She comes to the program with experience in proposal writing for her job at a landscaping company. Juliana is also no stranger to creative workshops. She writes screenplays and earned a B.A. in Electronic Media and Film from Towson.

Juliana writes while listening to music or a TV show. *Criminal Minds* is a go-to. She prefers Green Day as a soundtrack for personal creative writing and Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* or Bach's Cello suites for schoolwork.

She recommends the satirical telenovela series, *Jane the Virgin*. Juliana found it immensely satisfying the way the shows' writers wrapped up every subplot in the series.

## Kaylee Ray-Williams

Interview by Lydia Hadfield

**Kaylee Ray-Williams** is excited to develop her career. She looks forward to compiling a well-rounded writing portfolio during her time in PRWR. "I don't envision myself in just one place, I envision myself in lots of places," she says. Writing for museum exhibits remains a strong interest for her. Kaylee worked as an exhibition researcher and curator during her undergraduate career at Goucher College.

Kaylee prefers handwriting on paper to typing on a computer. When typing first drafts, Kaylee feels more likely to interrupt the flow of her thoughts with premature self-editing. When writing by hand, "I don't see my mistakes, so I don't stop!" She says.

She recommends *The Silence* by Zadie Smith. Kaylee read Smith's short story in **Prof. Geoff Becker's** PRWR 651 *Writing Short Fiction* class this semester.

Kaylee enjoys writing on trains. During Amtrak trips to visit her friends in upstate New York, Kaylee realized, "I like looking out of a window and I like moving while writing." Kaylee is game to try writing on the bus next. She's relishing her first PRWR semester. Kaylee says, "It's so refreshing to be in a space where everyone wants to be there. You have to be dedicated. It motivates me."



## Deanna Niles-McConnell

Interview by Robin Konger

**Deanna Niles McConnell** is ready for her second act in teaching writing. She previously worked as the director of a non-profit homeschooling program working with more than 40 families. She became an instructor for her own children, who needed support in reading and writing, and hopes to bring that empathy and instruction to all her other students.

The PRWR program was a perfect fit for Deanna, due to its flexibility in scheduling and choices for available classes. With a focus on teaching introductory composition courses, Deanna wants to connect with her students; she is looking forward to further classes in instruction and teaching, as well as PRWR 625 *Design, Layout & Production*.



## Deanna Niles McConnell (cont.)

Deanna has had to learn how to communicate with a variety of audiences. She previously studied Public Communications, which later informed her experience as the Director of a homeschooling non-profit. She's had to deal with a variety of situations: "Every time you think you've had the weirdest experience, something else happens!"

Deanna wants to convey to her students the importance of talking to their readers; to answer for their audience, "why should we care?"

Her favorite place is to write changes with the Baltimore weather. When the weather permits, she'll go outside on her screened porch. She also enjoys writing in her attic, which she has customized and transformed into a cozy writing space.

## G.I.V.E. Updates

**The Grantwriting In Valued Environments Project, or G.I.V.E.**, is always hard at work. Currently working with three local non-profits: Neighborhood Companions, Inc. (NCI), T.E.A.C.H. at the Great Blacks in Wax Museum and Justice Learning Center (NGBIWM), and the Northeast Towson Improvement Association (NeTIA), G.I.V.E. continues to write and track grant submissions, create social media posts and other online content, and more.

- The Baltimore Nonprofit Summit, hosted biannually, was held in May, 2025. That year's theme was Strengthening and Supporting Black and Minority-Led Organizations, and BTU invited funders, non-profit leaders, and G.I.V.E. to present in various panels. G.I.V.E. hosted a grants writing workshop titled Grants 360°.
- M.S. Students **Shelby Cole**, **Findley Holland**, and **Gianna Espinoza** have secured internships in industries such as medical writing, writing public policy, and digital archiving due to their work with G.I.V.E.

## The *CREATIVE* Side of Technical Writing

***“Why is there such a hard divide between the forms?”***

Op-Ed by **Robin Konger**

Visualize a painter. Do you see the stereotypical black beret, the splotted smock? It's a common, stereotypical symbol. I find myself thinking about the men who painted my family's house. Guys with overalls, big boots, large rollers, carrying a ladder over their shoulders. One focuses more on their own creative vision; the other works towards a client's wishes. Each may work by themselves or with multiple people to achieve a technical goal. But both these figures are painters, utilizing the exact same tools and skills.

The writing field, similarly, has its own idea of authors and creators, but also those who practice writing for more practical means. I've always identified as a technical writer, but I also like to say that I'm a student who's been all over the English department. I've studied Literature, Technical and Professional Communication – and of course, Creative Writing. Plenty of my own Technical Writing professors have their own backgrounds in these more creative ventures too.

Consider poetry: often either someone's beloved or most despised form. Poetry is often described as a form of math that comes with its own patterns, language, and meanings. I've never been good at math (a common English Department refrain), but I do still try to engage with poetry...There's something highly technical about distilling complex information into a single line with no additional explanation.

In my career, I've met just as many creative as I have technical writers. Plenty published authors out there have worked as technical writers or editors in some form or another.

It makes me question, why is there such a hard divide between the forms? Why are we so nervous when confronted with new forms? I remember feeling out of place in my literature and creative writing courses, and likewise, my creative writing colleagues have noted they felt “othered” in a technical/professional course.

Does a technical writer not have to consider the creative application of color when creating a graph? Does the creative writer not commit themselves to research as much as any academic would, to ensure their stories are as accurate as possible? We're very fortunate in the Professional Writing program at Towson, as I've jumped at the opportunity to continue my studies as a technical writer, all while also engaging in several creative writing courses.

I believe that to effectively communicate to wider audiences, we do need to understand technicalities, but we shouldn't discount how important creativity is to all writing professions. Document design and imaginative syntax can save even the worst kinds of reports, can convince people that something like a small insect deserves environmental protection. Training in both can only help improve our skills as creative communicators.

## What's Coming Next?

In Spring, our Professional Writing courses will include 2 Special Topics:

PRWR 670 *Special Topics: Writing with Ai* with **Dr. Harvey Lillywhite**, and

PRWR 670 *Special Topics: Memoir* with **Prof. Jeannie Vanasco**.

In April, we will welcome author **Chet'la Sebree** to campus for a reading and craft talk.

PRWR will also host a panel of PRWR & ENGL alumni to hear about the changing landscape of professional writing.

Stay tuned for more programming events.