



Ask Academic Abby about BSW What's bugging you right now? Send details with [Abby Submission Form](#) to have your question answered.

**Dearest Academic Abby,**

**I am an MA student and new to the field of religious studies (I hold a BS). I am overwhelmed and frustrated by the demanding writing standards in the field and find myself at a loss and in the dark most of the time. English is my second language and the combination of reading and writing is beginning to be disheartening. Other than annoying my professors with this matter, what other resources or suggestions would you advise me to pursue in order to improve my writing for this field specifically?**

**Signed,  
Losing Hope**

Dear Losing Hope,

You are right to be concerned about the importance of reading and writing for the field of religious studies. Kudos for taking steps to address your lack of preparation so that you can excel in your MA program. There are many excellent references for things like grammar, which will be helpful to you as a non-native speaker (and reader and writer) of English. One standard work is Kate Turabian's *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*,

*Seventh Edition: Chicago Style for Students and Researchers*

(University of Chicago Press, 2007). Another good choice is Jay Silverman, Elaine Hughes, and Diana Roberts Weinbroer's

*Rules of Thumb: A Guide for Writers*

(4th edition, McGraw-Hill Companies, 1998). But as a first step for writing in the humanities and social sciences, you may find Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein's guide

*"They Say / I Say": The Moves that Matter in Persuasive Writing*

(2nd edition, Norton, W. W. & Company, Inc., 2010) a good place to start both for understanding readings that are assigned to you and in crafting your own papers. Another great reference for writing is William Zinsser's

*On Writing Well: The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction*

(HarperCollins Publishers, 2006).

As for not bothering your professors with your concerns, that is precisely what you should do as it is part of their job. They will have noticed your difficulties with writing and will appreciate your taking steps to improve your skills. You can ask whether they are willing to discuss paper outlines with you or read drafts of your papers and make suggestions.

You should also find out whether your university has a writing center where help is available to students. Many universities have these centers where students can bring drafts of papers or talk through conceptualizing them. Writing center staff members can help you with individual assignments and, in doing so, teach you how to approach the process.

Good luck,  
Abby

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**Dear Academic Abby,**

**I am beginning my second year as an adjunct instructor of ethics at a small, private — but not religious — college. Last year I covered gay marriage as one of six current ethical**

issues in American life. I hold in-class debates on the issues, assigning students to the “pro” or “con” side, so that many students have to take positions that they do not personally hold. Due to a student complaint, I have been asked to remove this lesson from my curriculum because “gay marriage should not be a debatable issue.”

I feel censored for several obvious reasons, but my tenuous position as a semester-to-semester professor does not leave me confident to oppose the dean. I have discussed with my program director that I am an enormous advocate for gay rights and that I personally agree with gay marriage; but it nevertheless remains a current ethical issue in America — hence the forty-five states that do not allow gay marriage — and should therefore be discussed in class if we want to change people’s minds.

Additionally, I feel the classroom is a safe environment to discuss differences, and at this particular school the male student body is not necessarily tolerant of different sexualities. Studies show that individuals who personally know a gay person will tend to favor gay rights, but the suppression of such a topic is only driving the issue underground, and has been the cause of at least one student leaving the school on account of his sexuality.

What can I do to keep the gay rights conversation alive, without violating the dean’s wishes?

**Signed - An Activist without a Platform**

Dear Activist without a Platform,

First of all, let me affirm your view that the classroom is precisely the right environment to address controversial issues and that it is absolutely appropriate to ask students to debate the question of gay marriage. I agree that debates are an excellent way to get students to open up to positions that challenge their previously-held beliefs. It has been my experience that students are more willing to do this when they feel that a variety of perspectives are being presented.

That said, as an adjunct — and especially a relatively new adjunct — you are certainly in a very vulnerable position. It seems as if your dean is more concerned with avoiding complaints than with defending values fundamental to education. You mentioned that you spoke with your program director — a wise move. What was her/his response? Perhaps, if the program director thinks your argument makes sense, the next step would be to have a conversation with the dean to see what was in his or her mind and to share your own point of view in a nonconfrontational way.

You will want to weigh carefully the dangers and possible benefits of speaking with the dean. If you decide to do so, it might be useful to frame your argument for using same-sex marriage as one of your case studies in a way that highlights your educational rationale rather than activist objectives. You might emphasize the importance of using a contentious topic about which there are widely diverging basic assumptions as a way of teaching students that differences of opinion can be approached in a rational, empathetic, and above all informed way. You also could share the AAUP report on “[Freedom in the Classroom](#)”, but be aware that it might well cost you your job. Do you want to continue teaching at this institution? How difficult would it be to find another adjunct position?

There are possibly extra-curricular ways that you could keep the conversation alive without violating the dean’s wishes. Are there student clubs, for example, that might sponsor a speaker or a conversation? Is there a club on LGBT issues? Are there students interested in starting one? Might your department be willing to invite someone to speak? Of course, you need to decide whether, as someone who is probably being underpaid to teach a particular course or courses, you want to be involved in activities outside the classroom. There is nothing shameful about seeking other forums to express your activism than the one in which you’re trying to earn a living.

In short, there is no easy answer to the question you raise, but there are avenues to explore. Good luck to you.

Abby

Dear Academic Abby,

I am nearing the point in my doctoral education at which I will need to begin the job search. In some ways, I am very excited. However, I have one pressing concern. I am a lesbian, and my partner and I have recently married.

Up to this point, I have never disclosed anything about my personal life to anyone in my academic department. As of now, I do not plan on being “out” during my job search, especially since my academic work does not involve LGBT issues. However, I am concerned that once I find a job, the need to be out in my new academic community will be more pressing — especially since my partner and I intend to have a child within the next few years, and it will be difficult to hide an entire family from my colleagues. Could you offer me any advice on being an out lesbian within the religion academy? How concerned should I be about the potential effect of being more open about my sexual orientation once I find a job?

Signed - Concerned Scholar, Wife, and Mother-to-be

Dear Concerned,

Congratulations on your recent marriage. Especially since you make clear that you are not generally out in your academic life, you are probably correct that it makes sense not to come out at a job interview unless you receive clear signals that it is fine. But being out once you have a job is a different matter. You don't say anything about your graduate program or the kind of job you are looking for. If you are seeking work at a conservative Christian institution, you may have to remain closeted. But at any liberal seminary, most secular institutions, and probably many Catholic colleges and universities (though certainly not all), being out in itself is unlikely to be a problem. (This is not to say that people who write on LGBTIQ issues or who are gay activists do not face repercussions.) Indeed, once you are hired, colleagues may well want to get to know you as a person. Informal gatherings can be important to institutional socialization, and people who aren't forthcoming about their families can appear “uncollegial.” (See Stacey Floyd-Thomas's article on the problems surrounding collegiality in the [October 2009 RSN](#).)

As you interview for jobs, you will want to look carefully at the options open to you, weighing the

need to have a job with the desire to be out and comfortable. Would you want to be at an institution where you can't be out? Do you need to temporarily take a job at a place where you can't be out while hoping for a job where you can be out? As you speak informally with students and faculty members at different institutions, what sense do you get of the diversity of the campuses and of the norms and expectations concerning sexuality and family life? It would be helpful to contact LGBT centers or organizations at the schools you are considering to discuss the environment for LGBT people and to get the names of queer faculty members with whom you might speak. Stress the need for anonymity as you talk with such people.

There are also a couple of legal issues that it's important to be aware of. As you undoubtedly know, your marriage is not recognized by most states or by the federal government. That means that, unless you find a job in one of the few states that recognizes gay marriage, your partner would not necessarily be eligible for health and other benefits. If you are depending on your job for health coverage, you will need to check out whether any institution you are considering has domestic partner benefits. Sometimes you can find such information on a school's website. You can also do a bit of advance digging by calling the Human Resources office without mentioning your name and saying that you are thinking of applying for a position (no need to say in what) and would like to know if they have domestic partner benefits. You can also raise the question with Human Resources after you are offered a job and before you decide to accept it. Moreover, even if a state and institution recognizes your marriage, you will still have to pay federal taxes on any benefits given your partner. Thus Human Resources at least will need to know of your situation.

Best of luck with job search.

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**Dear Academic Abby,**

**Graduate guides often advise students to start early in “networking” and “getting involved” in professional organizations. How and where do you do this? What’s the point of networking anyway? And how are students supposed to have time for this extracurricular activity in the midst of demanding graduate programs?**

**Signed, Overworked and Underpaid**

Dear Overworked and Underpaid,

In my view, an MA student needs to focus on courses, preparation for exams, and perhaps a Master's thesis. Sometimes MA students are ready and willing to submit papers for conferences, but most are not, and really at this stage it is not necessary. I do think MA students should talk with professors about which conferences they attend, and should get in the habit of checking conference websites, reading calls for papers, and even attending association annual meetings, if possible.

PhD students really do need to begin submitting paper proposals, attending conferences, and networking, because at this stage the job market is palpably looming. Conference participation and networking are ways of establishing yourself as a serious thinker and gaining the friends and peers who will help you throughout your career. There are many graduate student conferences every year, many of which will be relatively local for you; these are great for introducing you to conference culture, and for meeting colleagues at or near your own level of intellectual development. But I also encourage you to take the plunge into the national conferences that best platform the kind of research you are preparing yourself to do. Again, I suggest you choose conferences in consultation with professors you respect.

Why network? Because this is how you will meet other established and new professors in your fields of study, as well as other graduate students like yourself. Networking is not some abstract "good" in and of itself, but refers to the vibrant, strenuous, and inspiring relationships we have with other intellectuals who are interested in the kinds of things we are interested in. Sometimes the overlapping interest is directly tied to the books we hope to write; other times, the overlap lies more in our shared concerns about gender or race, or in shared administrative obligations, such as developing undergraduate curricula, departmental policies, or the like. The academy, like our seminar classrooms, operates through dialogue, and through the push-pull between interest and need. Networking is, in a sense, developing your own ongoing "seminar of the academy."

Finding the time for conferences and networking is difficult. But, then, juggling the multiple demands of academic life will always be difficult. In part, your ability and desire to attend conferences should align with your career goals. For some teaching positions the institution will expect you to be active professionally; figuring out how to juggle this expectation in graduate school will thus serve you well in obtaining such a position. For other teaching careers, institutions will praise you for attending conferences, but will not necessarily expect it, and for

still others the institutions will discourage you from spending your time in that way.

Let your own career goals help you decide how to parse your time, then.

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