



**Academy of Excellence in Teaching and Learning  
University of Maryland**

**2016 Student Essay Contest**

Have you had learning experiences at the University of Maryland that were memorable and meaningful, as well as challenging, inspirational, and creative? If so, we would like to hear from you about them. In an essay of no more than 1,000 words sharing the learning experience that you had.

3<sup>rd</sup> place award

**Nicole Coletti**

I thought that I knew how to write a research paper.

It seemed so simple, really. Pick a topic, scour the internet for information, and pull out some choice quotations. Synthesize them into five, ten, twenty pages of information and analysis, and hit submit. It wasn't the easiest or most enjoyable of tasks, but it was something that, as a senior Communications and Government and Politics double major, I thought I was fairly good at.

When I entered Rhetoric of Black America in the fall of 2015, I didn't know yet just how many of my assumptions were about to be challenged. I enrolled in the class hoping to expand my knowledge of rhetoric beyond the classic American speakers: Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, and Martin Luther King Jr. The syllabus looked promising, if fairly standard. Every week we studied several speeches and letters from black authors, culminating in a final research paper.

Like every professor before her, my rhetoric teacher assured us that we couldn't write our papers the night before they were due. As always, people in the class smiled because they thought they knew better. My professor told us she had broken down the paper into smaller segments, and these segments would be due throughout the semester. She encouraged us to challenge ourselves and choose a rhetor who was not well known or well studied. That was the beginning of the most challenging and rewarding paper of my academic career.

For my paper, I chose to write about a woman named Sarah Parker Remond. Remond was a free black woman who had the distinction of being one of the only black female abolitionist speakers before the Civil War. Finding American society hostile to her message and her race, she sailed to Britain, where she was well received and lauded for her public speaking skills. I thought she was interesting, but would not have given her much thought until December if my professor hadn't set the due dates for the pieces of the paper.

My professor eased us into the paper by asking first for the historical context surrounding our speeches. The assignments gradually became more specific, so we could build upon the research we had already done. Before this, I had tried to research everything at once, so my papers felt jumbled and disorganized. I began to think of writing the paper as a tiered cake. Like the cake, I realized I couldn't simply try to make all of the layers at once. I had to build one at a time, each on top of the other, or the cake would crumble. The analysis was the frosting that bound all the layers up and made them cohesive, instead of haphazardly linked together.

I was not only writing an objectively better paper, but I was immersing myself in Sarah Parker Remond's world and becoming a better student of rhetoric because of it. When I came across a letter she had written to a friend, expressing her fear that she would never be free of the racial prejudice that dogged her with every step, my heart ached for her. The glowing reviews in British newspapers that spoke of her captivating voice and passion for her people made me proud of a woman that I would never have the chance to know. As I wrote about the subtle ways she manipulated her audience into accepting her arguments even though she was a female speaker in a time unkind to them, I was impressed with her rhetorical skill and her commitment to her cause.

By the time I finally submitted the paper, I knew I would never write the same way again. The paper had ceased to become a simple pathway to a grade. Somehow, the grade was no longer the overarching goal. I had done more than produce a competent paper. I had brought a woman's speech and her life onto paper and I had shared her story. This, to me, exemplifies how much I have learned. We all sit and take notes and pass exams, but true learning doesn't come from being able to regurgitate concepts from class. True learning is taking the skills that you have learned and drawing conclusions, making connections, and creating art, music, writing that you have never done before. It's pushing yourself past the facts to ask, "Why?" and

answering those questions with your own analysis. I am thankful for that rhetoric class and my professor for giving me the tools I needed to take that extra step.