



The Idea Factory: Learning to Think at MIT

By Pepper White

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This is a personal story of the educational process at one of the world's great technological universities. Pepper White entered MIT in 1981 and received his master's degree in mechanical engineering in 1984. His account of his experiences, written in diary form, offers insight into graduate school life in general -- including the loneliness and even desperation that can result from the intense pressure to succeed -- and the purposes of engineering education in particular. The first professor White met at MIT told him that it did not really matter what he learned there, but that MIT would teach him how to think. This, then, is the story of how one student learned how to think. There have of course been changes at MIT since 1984, but its essence is still the same. White has added a new preface and concluding chapter to this edition to bring the story of his continuing education up to date.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

"Getting an education at MIT is like getting a drink of water from a firehose," says one of White's fellow students in this grad school memoir. Test anxiety, lab-project drama and stylish prose propel White's recollections with enough force to make three years of engineering study compelling, even to readers committed to the liberal arts. The professors' egos, the career stakes and the quizzes are presented as powers more intense at MIT Engineering than elsewhere. But the author's deft personality sketches and diary-like accounts of encounters with even such stuff as "System Dynamics and Control Problems" yield a technical school analogue to Scott Turow's *One L*.

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From Kirkus Reviews

An informative and entertaining report on how a Johns Hopkins graduate faced the challenge of his young life when he embarked on a master's program in engineering at one of the toughest science schools on earth. Among the most intimidating credentials to go for in the field of technology are "MIT cubed"--a bachelor's, master's and doctoral degree from the venerable Massachusetts Institute of Technology. North Carolina native White, son of a musician and a writer and product of a "well-rounded" environmental-engineering and liberal-arts education at Johns Hopkins, would have been happy with MIT simple--a master's degree in engineering. But even that accomplishment seemed dauntingly unreachable as, on registration day, he traversed MIT's infinite corridor from Building 13 to Building 6, still expecting to learn that his admission to MIT's graduate school was the result of a clerical error. From his first days spent floundering through classroom lectures (it was several semesters before White learned what a scientific model is)--buddying up to millionaire professors who'd built companies around their patented inventions, attempting to solve technical conundrums and build miniature machines--to the final dash to the finish as other students fell victim to suicide and burnout, White struggled to maneuver through an intellectual boot camp while trying to maintain a modicum of emotional equilibrium. Here, he plays his advantage as a liberal-arts type who's a semi-outsider to full advantage as he searches for the meaning behind the madness. Despite his denunciations of MIT's merciless environment, his writing itself stands as a heartening example of MIT's broader aim--to teach its students how to think. Required reading for all college applicants with a yen for science. -- *Copyright ©1991, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.*

About the Author

Pepper White owns the consulting firm LCI Energy.

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Ross Turner:

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