



Hope St. John: [00:00:00]

Hi all, I'm Hope and this Write for You, a podcast from the University of Washington's Odegaard Writing and Research Center where we talk about writing and how it happens in a collaborative space and open dialogue. Together with a host of fellow graduate students, we'll explore the writing process that was an ideal, but as it is actually practiced by our fellow intrepid writers – with pen scratching, keys, clacking and whatever else gets the words on the page. Consider me your disembodied writing buddy.

Hello again! On this episode, I'm pleased to bring you a conversation with Caroline Harvey and Aaron Zhao. Aaron, Caroline, and I met up and recorded virtually, so you may hear some audio glitches here and there. At the moment, Caroline and Aaron are both finishing up their master's theses. We're going to hear more about that in a minute, before we do, let's hear a little bit more about what they do.

Caroline Harvey: [00:01:00]

Hi, my name is Caroline. I'm a second-year master's student in the Art History Department. My subfield is 17th and 18th century Western European sculpture. My thesis is on receptions, displays, and replications of antiquity in the Grand Tour. I'm hoping to finish my thesis this quarter, so this is a very relevant conversation to be having.

Aaron Zhao: [00:01:28]

My name is Aaron and I'm in the, uh, China Studies Program at the Jackson School of International Studies. My main focus is Chinese history, early medieval and actually it goes a little into the classical era. I'm also in the process of writing my thesis this quarter. My thesis is on the concept of martial spirit in the Han dynasty and I have another piece of writing. That's what I tell them. Ongoing project that I've been working on, that's on ethnic cultural identities of people in early China.

HS: [00:02:08]

Very cool. Now let's hear some more about how they write those theses.

CH: [00:02:15]

This is a doozy. What is your writing process like?

AZ: [00:02:22]

My writing actually, I guess, involves more reading than writing itself, I guess. I think it involves like two parts of writing. One is the research part, which is also of course reading, but more reading the primary sources, classical texts, and so on. The other part is also writing – uh, reading – but it's more reading secondary scholarships, which I think is a little time consuming because it's both limited, but also unlimited. On one side, it's limited because there's limited resources in terms of, you know, old texts. It's not like the modern period where you just have like a huge archives of everything you can find. It's more like, “Okay, here is what do we have available in the early period,” so you kind of have make use of the limited resources. But in terms of the secondary, um, scholarship, it's difficult to find the exact topic you are interested in. So, people might have written on other things that touch upon the topic that you are interested in, but it's not necessarily exactly the same thing. But for the same reason the whole body of secondary literature can be, like, so vast, because sometimes you just want to maybe, like, read one piece of idea in, you know, like, a huge tome, which like 90% of that might not be relevant. But you know, you just want that little piece of idea, but you still – you don't really want to miss out by not reading, so letting yourself also stop reading then. I mean the writing is still there, but I think you're more in control what you are going. So that's a little ...

CH: [00:04:18]

Yeah, I feel you on the primary sources, or lack of, and just having to write, like, “Well I don't know. No one knows because we don't have documentation for this.” I think most art historians study, like, modern or contemporary art. Um, and I'm very jealous of them sometimes.

But do you prefer the research process over the writing process or vice versa?

AZ: [00:04:47]

I know. Depends on, like, in which stage of that, because I do enjoy reading. That's like the primary reason that I actually got into studying history. So, that enjoyable part is – but at the same time I also think you're more in control of the writing process. So, you decide where you want to go yourself.

CH: [00:05:11]

Yeah, I think I find the writing, er – research process much more fun than the writing process. I struggle a lot with my writing process, and I think I've developed it more in like the last quarter and a half, because it's never been like an organized thing. I have colleagues who tend to write in very linear fashions and you know, they write this paragraph and then they write that paragraph, and I do not write like that, and it's always hard for me to visualize what my end product is going to look like, which is why I have Post-Its all over my wall right now. So, I think the writing process for me is – it's always about trying to decide when my research process is done. I mean, not that one has to end before the other, but it's silly to start writing if you haven't done enough research, because then it's all going to be very incomplete and you always have to go back to the research and then you stop the writing and then you forget where you were in your writing. Yeah. So, I'm disorganized, is my writing process.

AZ: [00:06:14]

I think that's... that's also something that I struggle with because you know, when we're reading sometimes, you kind of like a react to the idea and you get this, you know, this new inspiration and you think of something and that's all good. And then when it comes to actually writing down, I dunno, like I'm sort of like obsessed with organizing my writing, like, perfectly – or not perfectly, but to some extent, then move on to the next. So, that sometimes can be, like, really painful because I don't want to, like, move on, until I get the previous part, like, at least somewhat done. But then, it's probably not feasible at times. I think it's probably, like, better, if you can just, you know, like jot down something here and then come back later or whatnot. But it's just that, I don't know...

CH: [00:07:07]

Yeah, you're just, you're describing my writing process right now, where like I'm just like, "I know I want to write a paragraph about this," and then I write a sentence of it and then I walk away from it. There are many times when like some of my colleagues in my office – I'll be frustrated with, like, a paper that I'm writing, and they'll be like, "Well, let me see what you have so far," and I'm like, "No! You would not understand it. It's pure gibberish." So, I think, like, the writing process for me is slightly disorganized and the editing process is far more important and, like, where I bring everything together, where I find those random sentences that I wrote down and like try to fit it in somewhere... which has not been the best and has led me to some late nights writing for, like, courses. Obviously, my thesis, I've been – that I've been working on for about a year, which is always weird to think about. So that's my writing process. It's getting slightly better now that I don't have to do coursework because I can focus just on my thesis and set a schedule for it, instead of having to be like, "Oh crap, I have this deadline," and then forgetting about my thesis for like two, three weeks.

AZ: [00:08:26]

Yeah, that's, that's pretty much what I'm doing right now. Just focusing on that. No other coursework.

CH: [00:08:31]

Done with coursework!

HS: [00:08:33]

You mentioned that you've gotten a little bit more organized within the last quarter and a half. Can you talk a little bit about that?

CH: [00:08:42]

So, when I was in Rome, I was doing a lot of research and writing there and I think like setting clear goals, like, with my thesis advisor – like my main advisor – she was there while I was there as well. So, I was able to have a lot of close interactions with her, and also we would discuss topics that I wanted to focus on. And so, she sort of got me into focusing on, you know, like section by section rather than, you know, just write the whole thing. And so, she would have me say, you

know, like “Write me just a summary of this.” And then that can turn into a section, even if I don't know how it will fit into like my larger thesis, but that it'll eventually turn into something that I can plug into my thesis.

Yeah. So that was really helpful. Since we've been in this pandemic situation, I have had to become even more creative because I am not a work-from-home kind of gal. Library or office is always where I work best. You know, home has too many distractions for me, but we don't have a choice right now. So, I think setting very small goals has been helpful. Like I have like word count goals that I try to meet. So, like, I think today it was like 500? And I'll say on my calendar, you know, like, “Write 500 words on this section.” Just to, like, keep writing and get it down on the page. And then the next day I'll write like, you know, 500 words on a different section or if I want to, I can come back to that same section. So, I think really just being able to focus on my thesis and not having coursework and then also setting those achievable goals. So far, it's been working a little bit. I think...

Aaron, how has the work-from-home situation been for you?

AZ: [00:10:33]

It's really bad. I don't know, I just don't feel like doing anything at home. There's too much distraction, you know, like, “Maybe let me get this food, so I can wait,” you know, or whatnot. I don't know. There's like a lot of other things to do. Like the table is dirty, let me just...

CH: [00:10:54]

The, like, productive procrastination. I feel like I've been doing that with the class that I'm teaching for. I feel like I've been using it as a distraction. I mean, obviously, it's my job and I have to do it, but I definitely spend more time on it than I'm supposed to, or at least then I'm being paid for.

AZ: [00:11:12]

I was actually thinking, when you were talking about how you set a goal, like 500 words, I was thinking that maybe that's something I need to force myself to do as well because otherwise I just procrastinate... forever.

CH: [00:11:28]

Yeah. And I think that I've gotten into the habit of texting people when I, like, achieve my – I've never been like a “goals” kind of person, um, but now I'm turning into one. So, like texting one of my art history colleagues, you know, that I, like, met my goal today and then, then I encourages them to be like, “Oh, this is what I'm going to do today.” And they'll text me when they're done with that and everyone gets a nice thumbs up when they've accomplished their writing goals. So, I feel like that's been... like, accountability has been helpful. I think that's what I like about working in the office or working in the library is, like, other people around me are being productive and therefore I have to be, too.

AZ: [00:12:06]

Yeah. I think it happens, especially for me, when reading, because then my thoughts just like, I dunno, like, somewhere like totally irrelevant. Like, “This is interesting. Okay.” Just thinking on that, you know, that idea or something. And that's totally irrelevant to the project I was supposed to be working on. So, it happens a lot. Um...

CH: [00:12:33]

Yeah, no, I get that. Where like, you can go down, like, a rabbit hole of unproductive reading. It's interesting. It's always very interesting. You're like, “Oh wow, I never knew that.” And then you're like, “Wait a second, I just wasted two hours.”

AZ: [00:12:47]

Yeah.

CH: [00:12:48]

Okay. What is the second question? How would you describe yourself as writer?

Disorganized.

Um, I don't know how to expand on that. How would you describe yourself as writer? And I'll think about it.

AZ: [00:13:04]

I think I have... like, personally, I think I have changed a lot, because I was not an academic previously, so I was pretty much in business school and working and then I decided, "No, let me like come back and study what I love." So previously, I was like, anything that I wrote was – you know, like, in business writing, it's more like a template. It's just follow the exact format. And the firm would provide you with the template in case you're getting into legal issues or what not. So, you just follow the exact same format. It's just like providing the information that's relevant to your case, but like the whole thing is basically a template. It's just, like, a filling in blanks. And even if you're writing like a report, it's just highly structured in a specific way. So, I was in auditing, so you just have to write in that exact same way, so... which is very different, of course, then, like, what I'm doing right now. So, I don't know. I don't know like how to describe myself as writer because that process has been really different.

CH: [00:14:15]

Yeah. And I mean, even as someone who, like, I did art history for my bachelor's degree as well, I've definitely changed a lot as a writer and evolved. And the source of that would probably be, you know, my advisor, my colleagues. We're extremely close in my office, which is why I miss it so much. So, I think it's even for someone who comes from a writing background, I – God, like, I was always the person who was up late at night writing my papers at the last second, um... No shame. And I mean, luckily, I was good at that, so I would still get good grades. So, then that didn't discourage me from writing things up the last minute. Oh, you know...

When you were in your undergrad, did you, like, major in business?

AZ: [00:15:02]

Yeah. I was an accounting major.

CH: [00:15:04]

Oh, ok. So how would you approach like writing courses that you had to take when you were an undergrad versus now?

AZ: [00:15:11]

Um... well, I still had to take regular English classes and so on. There's, you know, like your regular writing. Uh, I think like one of the most important things I learned in my undergrad, was this English class I take, where the professor allowed us to revise our writing as many times as you want. So, you could, like, submit your writing – the draft – to the professor and he would actually grade it and provide feedback. And then, I mean, it's up to you if you are okay with the grade and that's your final grade, like halfway through the quarter. But if you're not satisfied you are allowed to revise it and resubmit the draft as many times as you want, as long as it's before the deadline. And because I was so obsessed with getting a good grade, I think that quarter I revised it, like, five times or so? So, actually I revise, like, until I eventually got an A in that class. And I think that actually taught me a lot about writing in general, because at the time I just thought, “I came to the US to study, you know, like, English isn't my native language.” You would think that, “Oh yeah, it's okay if I don't do as well as the others. Maybe it's just natural for them to be good writers in their native language,” and so on. You would think so, and then, it will be wrong. You know, it takes effort and... First of all, you can do it, but you need to, you know, like, put in a lot of effort, you have to, like, revise. Like, you know, your first draft isn't going to be great. So, I don't know. It's just that perspective. You know, you just learn that you can do it, but that you have to put in effort.

CH: [00:17:12]

Yeah. That's very generous of that professor. I...

AZ: [00:17:17]

That's the only ever time that I had that thing.

CH: [00:17:23]

Okay, so next one. What is one thing you struggle with or wish you did better?

I'm terrible at titling things, which I know doesn't seem like a big deal. But, when you're submitting things to, like, a conference or to publish one day, you know, like, marketing in a way, matters and it has to be a catchy title and I am terrible at that. I think, like, I have sections right now for my thesis and it's just like, “17th Century Context,” “18th

Century Context,” “19th Century Context,” “Poetry.” Like, they're very descriptive. I obviously want to change them one day; I have no idea what I'm going to change them to... Um, yeah, I think I wish I knew how to market my writing better.

AZ: [00:18:11]

Yeah, I think I can relate to that as well. I think there's always this thing – you want to have a good hook in the beginning, and I'm not consistent with that. Like, sometimes I have like a really clever idea that I think, “Wow, that's, that's so clever.” Like, I'm even like impressed by myself. Like, how come I can get, such a smart idea to put in my introduction, but next time I can't get anything? And that's frustrating and even depressing, because you want to match that level, but you couldn't later on. So it's like, “Oh no, I can never, like, come up with something as interesting” or as, you know...

CH: [00:18:55]

You can't force creativity.

I, like, I cheat. I always just, like, find a fun quote from, like, a 16th century writer.

AZ: [00:19:03]

Yeah. I do that, too. Like, like I always resort to doing that, if I can find anything else.

CH: [00:19:09]

That's what the introduction to my thesis is right now!

Yeah. My titles to my papers always become insanely long and I'm, like, “No one is going to read this.” But then when it's too short, I'm just like, then it doesn't describe it well enough.

AZ: [00:19:28]

Yeah. Like, for my thesis, with this one section on the martial quality of female in Han Dynasty, I literally, like, quoted one of the passages I was using that's literally like this woman, like, violently murdering her enemy. I guess I just didn't know like how to start my section. So I just, like, quoted this.

CH: [00:19:51]

Yup. It's an easy tactic.

Okay. What is one experience that has influenced how you approach writing? One experience...

Well, I think, I think what's had the biggest influence on my writing process thus far... I don't know that I would say fair example to use, because it's not always accessible, but I think, you know, like, working within the context of what I'm studying was definitely pretty crucial to my writing process so far. And, you know, with the difference between the libraries there and the libraries, like, at UW like there's tons of people and lots of undergrads and yada, yada, yada. And then, you know, just getting to work with objects that I study, um, was pretty crucial. And I think it's just from like a motivation standpoint because, I mean, it's – you know, we're not writing novels here – but it is a sort of creative process in a way. And so I think that really, I guess, sparked some creativity that I don't know I would have achieved otherwise, especially because I study sculpture, so that needs to be interaction with in person because it's impossible to study it very thoroughly from a two-dimensional image. So, I think getting that opportunity was really crucial to my writing process.

I think there have definitely been classes that have in small ways like helped my writing, but I guess that always feels like a much slower process, in which I feel like I don't always realize the influence that has had until later. So, like, Hope and I know each other through this seminar that we took last Winter Quarter, and I think there was a lot in that class that like I... I didn't realize had influenced my writing until much later down the line. But I...I think in terms of like, uh, where I could see the change in my experience very quickly was definitely in Rome and that was my changing experience for a writer.

AZ: [00:21:55]

For me, I guess like the whole attending graduate school – the whole thing itself is a huge learning experience to me. I think I can totally, like, relate to you saying that, uh, academic writing, there's like certain things you have to follow. It's not like totally, uh, free style, but then it also involves creativity. It's not like every piece of the same. You still have to get, you know, that's creative part, but it's not like if you can just totally go wild. So yeah, it's kind of like getting to that balance. Like, to me it's been a totally, like, a new learning experience for me.

Like, I've always been, like, you know, finding that point of balance and so on. So...

CH: [00:22:43]

Yeah. That's definitely an important point that you bring up, is that you want to be writing about something that you like, obviously, and that inspires creativity, but then you also want to be writing something that other people want to read, eventually... You know, you want to be, like, relevant to the scholarship, which is hard.

Um, should we move on to the next question? What is something you've learned about writing that you wish more people knew?

Because of my TAs hip this quarter – and it is a writing class – I'm, like, tempted to answer this in that context. Like, what frustrates me most about teaching writing. And I mean, I think in art history I get really frustrated when people assume that I'm seeing the same thing you're seeing. And I guess you could say that about a lot of things, but there are a lot of assumptions, I feel, made in people's writing and we think, and I think it's not just at an undergraduate level, I – you know you can see it at a graduate or even like scholarly level – and I think a lot of maybe more confident writers, will assume that everyone's going to understand it. Because it's obvious. When in reality it's not. I think that's something I wish people would consider more particularly in art history is, like, don't assume that we're on the same page.

AZ: [00:24:09]

Yeah, I think I totally agree on that part. I think, I don't know, it's just... I wish we could always have the opportunity to, to share and discuss before the draft is done because sometimes you just... You would think that it's so obvious that you are getting your points across, but actually not. Not until, like, people actually read it. And, you know, I had that happen a few times when I thought I was saying this, based on that, but the people actually got totally different idea than what I was trying to say. I don't know. Like, just imagine if you never had that discussion. Then you probably are getting that idea like, totally wrong. That's not what you are trying to say.

CH: [00:25:00]

Yeah. I think any, anybody writing tends to get like stuck in their own head, so I think maybe sometimes people are a little reluctant to

share until they have like something more complete to share with people. You know? It's like in *Back to the Future* when um, what's-his-face, his dad like wouldn't let anyone read his writing. "Well, what if they don't like it?" Or, like, "What if people think I'm stupid?"

Yeah. So, I think maybe sharing is a good thing that I wish – I think people know that, but I feel like people are more reluctant to do it. Like, everyone knows that having someone edit your paper is good. But I think we all, like, are very protective of our writing. Especially like your thesis or like your dissertation. It's like your child!

Um... What is one tip or encouragement you'd like to offer?

Maybe my answer would be very similar to the last one. Because I think I'm the kind of person who tends to be very protective of my writing. Like, even with my colleagues that I share an office with, and talk to every single day, and text all the time. Like, I'm still like afraid to share things with them and it's not necessarily a perfectionist thing, but I guess it sort of relates to that paranoia of, like, not wanting someone to think lesser of you and like the point is, is that no one's going to. And that, for the most part, like, people always want to help. So, like, whenever colleagues of mine have asked, you know, "Oh, would you mind like looking at my paper," I'm always ecstatic to. And I don't know why, I have, like, the opposite reaction when they offer help to me. I'm like, "Oh my God, no." So, I don't know. I think asking for help is a tip that I would give...

AZ: [00:26:57]

Well, I guess, to me... I dunno, like, it's probably not very convincing, because I don't even do that myself, um is, yeah... just to revise over and over again. I think it's just, like, so important. I just... I procrastinate too much that I don't have time to do as much as I would have liked to. But... You should have to, like, get something done like early and then revise it. Like if I, I read now my past papers, even if it's totally done, you know, received a good grade and so on... If I go back and read, I'll find like so many problems that – in that paper. So yeah, it's just, do as many times as you could.

CH: [00:27:48]

This is – and I know this is a simple function that I never knew about – but the, like, the function in Word where, like, the computer will read it to you is something that really helps force me into working because

then I'm listening to it. And I'm not writing but, like, I hear like weird stuff and then I have to fix it because I hear it. In this pandemic, that's been a good way to force myself to start writing is being like, "Oh my God, that paragraph is terrible. I have to fix it now."

I don't know if I have any other tips... Post-Its are really great. I kept trying to put stuff on my computer, but you can very easily minimize screens and not open files, whatnot, but your Post-Its are always staring at you, reminding you what you haven't done.

HS: [00:28:39]

I, too, have Post-Its just out of frame.

CH: [00:28:45]

Love the Post-Its.

HS: [00:28:47]

Do you use your Post-Its mostly as a checklist, or are they more of, like, a brainstorming kind of note device?

CH: [00:28:55]

I've been using these ones as sort of like a makeshift calendar, although I do like the idea of sort of having an idea on the fly and writing it down and, like, smacking it on the wall. I think that's always really great for like visualizing because it's really hard to visualize a paper. You know, when you're an engineer, you're constantly drawing of diagrams and you know, you can kind of imagine what it's gonna look like when it's finished, but I'm, like, "I don't know this paper's going to look like when it's done. I don't even know what it looks like now." So, like I feel like visualization has been really helpful.

AZ: [00:29:25]

Yeah, I do that too, but the mostly just on paper. I think it helps organize ideas and even discover some new things.

CH: [00:29:36]

Yeah. I have a very messy notebook that, like, if I am out of ideas, I just will return to that.

AZ: [00:29:44]

I really wish there's something that could just jot down your thinking process automatically. Like, because, sometimes it's, you thought you had something, but then you couldn't really like, go back and find it.

CH: [00:29:57]

This is something that I don't actually consistently do, but it's something that my thesis advisor recommended, is that she writes a work log every single day. Kind of like a diary entry. And she just writes down, like, what she did that day and, like, where her research took her, where her writing took her and she was like, "Yeah, and, like, sometimes when I'm stuck I, like, go back and like, you know, see what I was thinking about, like, two weeks ago." So that's some advice to be able to, like, reference your thoughts -- or, like, maybe not your thoughts but like what your state of mind has been in the process.

HS: [00:30:33]

And there you have it. Thanks for listening to this episode of Write for You and a big thanks again to our guests. On behalf of the Odegaard Writing and Research Center, I hope that this has been informative, affirming, and maybe even inspiring. If you want to learn more about the OWRC, its programs, or services available to University of Washington students, faculty, and staff, you can find us online at our website. That's depts.washington.edu/owrc.

Be sure to tune in to our next episode, available now, where to talk to two more writers about their writing process and practice. In the meantime, for myself and all of us here at the OWRC, happy writing!

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