



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.

Welcome to our very first episode of Write for You. For our first discussion, I'll be talking with Hollis Miller. Per usual, this episode puts two writers in conversation with one another to talk about their writing practice and process. However, today will also be a little bit different because this time I'm stepping out from behind my metaphorical desk to talk with Hollis myself. Before we get into that, let us introduce ourselves. Hollis and I are both fifth-year doctoral students in UW's Department of Anthropology. I'll let Hollis tell you a little bit more about what she does.

Hollis Miller: [00:01:10]

Hi, I'm Hollis Miller. I'm a graduate student in anthropology at the University of Washington and uh, I specifically work in archeology. I do research in Alaska studying, um, Russian colonialism and Russian native Alaskan interactions. And worked in writing centers both here at the University of Washington and when I was in college.

HS: [00:01:33]

As for me, I am a sociocultural anthropologist studying photographic practice in China specifically in relation to the built environment, urban narrative, and sociospatial negotiations of place. I'm also happily working at the Odegaard Writing and Research Center here in Seattle as a graduate student coordinator.

Now that you know a little bit more about us, let's get on with the show.

What's your writing process like?

HM: [00:02:04]

So when I start writing, um, my first step is usually just to throw a bunch of ideas down on the page and like a bulleted list just to -- like what are, once I thought of a topic that I want to write about, what are my first thoughts about that? Um, and that eventually develops into paragraphs that have more, you know, oomph and substance to them. Then just, you know, a one sentence idea that I can come up with initially. Um, and I oftentimes have trouble with, like, drafting and so I have no problem doing outlines, but then have difficulty doing multiple drafts of paragraphs, 'cause I'm kind of a perfectionist and I, I want things to like come out right the first time when I put them into a full paragraph form. Um, but what helps with that then is just forcing myself to share a draft with other people, uh, in order to get feedback, and then I'm usually more receptive to changing certain things. And as, as I've gotten, um, further on in my graduate program, I've actually found myself being less resistant, uh, to revision and multiple drafts than I have in the past.

HS: [00:003:17]

That's really interesting. I wish I could be the kind of writer that does, like, bulleted lists and outlines and that is very much not how I do things. I just kind of word vomit. Usually go onto a piece of paper. Like I can't -- I have a real problem like starting drafts on my computer. I don't know if it's like the fear of the page or if it's just like I don't -- I don't know. It helps me to kind of write it out first and then start. Instead of then revising it on paper. The revision process happens in the typing... and then I get a thing. And oftentimes I let that thing just like sit there for a while.

HM: [00:04:01]

Yeah, no, that's, that's a good point. I think a lot of times for me as well, getting those first initial ideas down, I need to let them sit there for a couple of days before I can come back and really turned it into something more fleshed out.

HS: [00:04:15]

Are you a procrastinator at all or do you tend to plan?

HM: [00:04:19]

Uh, I'm what I'd like to say is a healthy mix of both. It really depends on what it is that I'm writing. When I'm working on blog posts and other things I'm sort of electing to write outside of, like, the structure of my graduate program, I'm more likely to go ahead and do those things in, you know, when they occur to me as opposed to writing that's required or writing that's encouraged or is sort of part of graduate life that, um, I feel much more resistance to doing that. It is, perhaps not a good sign.

HS: [00:04:54]

Yeah, no, obligatory writing is kind of a buzzkill. Yeah. How would you describe yourself as a writer?

HM: [00:05:01]

Uh, I don't know. I... I do feel like that sort of perfectionist, um, sense is something that has stuck with me for a long time and I had trouble sort of taking advice for a while which, again, I hope breaking through that a little bit now.

HS: [00:05:23]

Yeah, perfection in writing I think is... is hard. Like, if you're building a piece of furniture, eventually you get a chair or something and it's a chair, like, you did it. And you can refine it, um, and you can sand it and sort of finish it, but eventually, like, you have the finished thing and I think that writing is much less straightforward. Like, there's no real clear sense of when it's the final thing, you can just sort of endlessly revise it. And so it's very hard, like, to call it done and feel like it's, it's perfect. I'm more so just call it done when I'm against the deadline or when I'm just tired.

HM: [00:06:04]

Yes. Writing is never done, it's only due as they say.

HS: [00:06:07]

Sage words.

HM: [00:06:09]

Yeah, I think that was on the wall of, like, my middle school English class...

HS: [00:06:12]

I love it.

And what's one thing you struggle with? I think we kind of started to hear a little bit.

HM: [00:06:20]

Yes. Um, yeah, definitely doing multiple iterations of something. Um, and this is something that, you know, as, as a student in high school, in college, I kind of just got written off as not really getting as much engagement from professors or peers because they're just like, "It's good." You know, I had, you know... ability to write something decent and so there didn't need to be much discussion about it. And so it wasn't until I actually became a writing tutor in my later years of undergraduate, um, that I began to actually learn how do you talk about writing and not just, you know, "just do what you're doing," is what sort of the advice I've gotten before. Um, and so I think now that I feel more comfortable talking about my process, talking about what I'm working on with the ideas I'm wrestling with, that that makes, um, the, the struggle with perfectionism a lot easier to deal with. And, you know, just go and chat with a colleague, chat with my advisor, even go talk to someone in the Writing Center, even as I have been in the writing centers, um, myself in and out, um, as a tutor. And so, I think that conversational element and realizing that writing doesn't just happen in isolation in your own brain, but that a lot of times it comes out of conversations you have in real life with other people.

HS: [00:07:46]

Yeah, I think that's very true. Uh, talking to other people is great... Um, and I certainly have tended to be a bit of a reckless when I write, I just sort of... want to be alone and, and make the thing. And then I reemerge and it's a little bit of a Rumpelstiltskin, kind of... uh, except much less profitable.

HM: [00:08:11]

Yes.

HS: [00:08:12]

Let's see, what is one experience that is influenced how you approach writing?

HM: [00:08:18]

So, I think the most sort of impactful writing advice that I received in undergrad, um, I was in like a first-year writing seminar and the teacher – or the professor – of that class and on my – when she was discussing my final draft with me for like the final paper I was writing about, um, Carly Simon and like the sexual revolution in the seventies and eighties. And she told me that I needed to take more risks in my writing. And for that, uh, I, I mean I take that to mean to not be afraid to put your ideas out there, even if they seem more radical or if you haven't seen them elsewhere before. Um, but also to not be afraid to write something different from what you're normally comfortable writing about. Not just how – not just what the topics you write about, but like the style in which you're writing.

Um, I think, you know, being in the, in Writing Center now as a graduate student and seeing a lot of undergraduate writing, it's really hard for people to escape like this five-paragraph essay mindset. And so I think that same advice in terms of taking more risks is not just about, you know, in an academic setting, this is a space for you to actually explore ideas that may be intellectually risky or maybe risky just because... they're new. Um, but it's also a space to explore... you know, who you are as a writer and you know, different styles that you can use. Um, beyond just an expository essay or an argumentative essay. What – how are ways to bring narrative or even fictional elements or poetry or other things into academic writing, um, in ways that are really, you know, powerful and more interesting than just sort of your typical high school five paragraph essay?

HS: [00:10:17]

I really love the... the idea of risky writing. Like, I think that that's such an interesting and powerful idea.

I was fortunate in undergrad to have people that were working with me who were able to give me feedback, um, pretty... pretty consistently. A lot of it was sort of, uh, "It's good, it looks good." But I appreciated having people around me that would also push a little bit. And I remember I had this one, uh, professor that I worked with a lot and I was doing independent study with her and I had finished this paper. It was like 25 pages and I had finished it and I felt good about it, sent it to her, and then we met about it and I was like, "She's gonna tell me it's done. It's going to be great." And she came in – well, I came into this meeting and she was like, "You got to reorganize this whole thing." And it was so hard to hear. And fortunately, I think if I hadn't known her as well as I did at that point, I would have been really crushed and just like, "I can't, I'm out." Um, but because... because I respected her input a lot, I was able to kind of swallow my pride and do what it is that she was asking. And I think that that was really informative for me in that I think that there are many ways that you can go about writing a paper and it's never a bad thing to get the input of someone else who's coming at it from a different perspective, whether that's different sort of disciplinarily or whether that's different in terms of expertise or skillset. It was really interesting to see the differences in sort of approaching the material. It's been useful to think about. Like, there's always multiple ways to present these ideas and it's worth exploring. And I think it maybe that comes back to this idea of risk and taking risks because if you don't take any risks in your writing, you get really bogged down in sort of this formulaic approach.

HM: [00:12:30]

Yeah. And then you might not end up actually saying anything that people want to read.

HS: [00:12:35]

Which is a problem.

HM: [00:12:37]

Yeah. And I think that that story also points to like getting multiple perspectives on, on a piece. Uh, that you're working on allows you to more establish yourself as an author as well, to get to then hear all this advice, take it in, and then decide what do you as the author actually want to do with that, to change this piece. You can revise it in a way that makes the most sense to you as opposed to just, "Oh, well, so-and-so said this was bad and so I have to change it." Especially if

you're getting multiple people's opinions, you know, it's... writing is a – is a personal and subjective thing and so being able to maintain your, your power of choice over what actually comes out of your writing, I think is a good thing to take out of that.

HS: [00:13:20]

Yeah, for sure. And I think like personally, having also worked in a writing center context, I think that that's one of the things that I really try to impress on the people that... that come to see me in that role is that there are structures, there are guidelines, but ultimately you have a lot of choice. It's your work, they're your ideas, and you can make those choices and do them in a strategic way to make... make a point. Um, and I think that that's ultimately what it's all about. And sometimes the most interesting papers are the ones that sort of go out there on a limb a little bit as opposed to sort of being really rigid, like, "I will do it this way."

HM: [00:14:05]

Yeah, for sure.

HS: [00:14:07]

What's something that you've learned about writing that you wish more people knew? And this can be, like, in a classroom, this can be in your own experience. However you want.

HM: [00:14:16]

That's difficult. I mean, all these questions are difficult. It's difficult to talk about writing and writing process, at least I think. Even being in a writing center, it's so much easier to work with something when you've got a piece in front of you. But like writing in general, as we said, it's so, it's so subjective. It's so personal. Um, and maybe that's the thing that more people, especially people...students in university in college, that I wish more people would know is that this is about, you know, writing for class for instance, is not just for the instructor. You're not just writing for the instructor you're writing for you when you're writing for whatever other imagined audience that you can see for your work. And good instructors will write assignments that give that audience to you so that you know who you're writing towards. But I think even if it's not given to you that finding an audience for your work such that there are stakes associated with it is really important. Because if

there's no stakes associated with writing, unless it's a diary or you know something that's really just for you in your own thoughts writing that's meant to be read by someone other than you, even if ultimately only your professor or your TA is going to read it, ends up being kind of lackluster. I don't know. I feel like most writing is meant to be read. And so if, if it's not written with an audience in mind, then you know, something is missing.

HS: [00:15:41]

How do you think about audience in your own work as you're writing in various different formats?

HM: [00:15:48]

Yeah, so right now mostly my writing is either for blog posts, which are – I intend for the public. Um, but most, especially for the community that I work with, which was a native Alaskan community in the Gulf of Alaska. And so I write the blog posts or I write on Facebook as a way to keep people there informed about what I'm doing with my research since I'm doing research with them, but also with the materials, uh, belongings of their ancestors. And so I want to make sure that that connection and sort of that line of communication remains open even when I'm not there in community. Um, and so those posts are really geared towards that audience. But I think in gearing it towards that audience, the posts are hopefully interesting to just any general audience in terms of understanding, um, what I'm doing in terms of archeological analysis, how am I excavating things, how do I – how am I thinking about the interpretation of these materials? Um, so there's that side and then the other side, um, is much more academic writing, writing for grant proposals, so writing, um, towards a very academic community has a specific set of expectations around how things are supposed to look and the organization of what a grant is, what kind of questions you're supposed to answer in that. Um, and so that's much more, uh, structured and honestly are much less fun to write.

HS: [00:17:23]

I don't really know how to answer for these questions. I think that's why I wrote it.



HM: [00:17:25]

Didn't you write the questions? Oh, that's right. You wrote the questions.

HS: [00:17:28]

I wrote the questions, but I think, like, some of these are questions that I want the answer to more so than I feel able to answer it. One thing I wish that people knew... is that it's okay if writing takes time. I think that often there's this sort of sense that if you don't immediately know what you're going to do with something with a paper or with an article that you're not ready or it's not going to happen. And I think that, you know, good writing takes time and... especially in this sort of academic space, but in other spaces as well... these are hard questions. These are difficult topics and so it's fine if you're not like the Christopher Hitchens type that's able to just write out a draft and it's done and like ready to go to press. Um, and I struggle with this a lot too because I am not the sort to have patience. I have very little patience for basically everything. Um, and so it's very tricky for me to, like, make allowances for myself in my own writing to be like, you know, it's okay if today it all comes out terrible because at least reflexively I try to remind myself, at least there was some processing. Like, there was some cogitation, something happened, even if it was not usable happenings.

HM: [00:18:56]

Yeah...Yeah. Writing for thinking, not just writing for writing. Yeah. And I think that's – I think that's a really important point and something, something else that, yeah, more people should, you know, not have the vision that writers are just, like... can sit down and are a machine that, like, just pushes out these pages and pages, um, but that it happens in small increments. You know, the best writers like write for, like, at least –what, like, 30 minutes or an hour every day? I don't do that. I should but I don't.

HS: [00:19:25]

But yeah, I think that doesn't, that doesn't mean it's not sound advice. I think you would – we would all probably be better writers if we carved out the 30 minutes or an hour or to... to do that work. Um, I just have not reached that point yet...

HM: [00:19:42]

And I'm not one of those people that can, like, get up at six and do my writing time, like, right then and go on with the rest of my day. That sounds awful to me. Not a morning person.

HS: [00:19:50]

No. I... I admire the morning people of this world. I don't share their affinity.

Okay. So, last question, sort of similar to where we just were, um, but what is one tip or encouragement that you'd like to offer?

HM: [00:20:10]

Don't give up. Even if you get bad feedback – feedback that feels like it's bad for you. Sometimes you can get like legitimately bad feedback, like, the person did not know what they were doing or they were, their head was somewhere else when they were reading your work. Um, but feedback that is critical, that forces you to rethink something you did. I mean, when I get that I gotta, you know, put it away again for a couple of days and then come back to it when I'm feeling perhaps less teary about it, uh, depending on what it is. So, you know, just keep... keep working on something even after receiving, you know, feedback that asks you to make a lot of changes. And I think that goes back to like writing is never done, it's only due. Um, but also the idea of like writing for thinking. You haven't wasted your time in writing something down. Um, even if that sentence or that paragraph doesn't make it into the final thing that you put off for a publication or you publish on your blog or whatever it is, um, because it's all part of you developing your thoughts and actually going through the process of figuring out what is the important thing you want to say.

And editing is important because, um, some people – and all of us, really, have ... there's some things that we might want to say that no one else has an interest in hearing.

HS: [00:21:34]

That's very true. Um, yeah, I think in a similar vein for me, I – and I'm very guilty of this, which is why I bring it up – but I think it's important to not be too precious with your writing. And I've definitely done that, or I've been really super committed to, like, a sentence that I thought

was really well crafted but that didn't belong, just didn't make sense or just belong in that position. Um, and it's, it's hard. It's hard for me at times to be like, "Okay, you gotta go," and breaking it up and taking it apart. Or like sections that I've written that maybe don't make sense anymore, but it's sort of like, "But I... I spent all this time writing you, like, why can't you just live happily with your other sections?" And the answer to that is it doesn't work.

HM: [00:22:30]

I know that is heartbreaking when it happens.

HS: [00:22:33]

So, yeah, it's, it's so hard. And I definitely retrospectively can think about times where I was not willing to cut that sentence, that paragraph, whatever. And the writing was sort of weird and... and stilted because of it. And I think learning to not be so precious can help a lot.

HS: [00:23:00]

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](https://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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