[Intro music]

Hope St. John (HS; 00:08):

Hello everyone, and welcome back to Write for You, the podcast from the University of Washington's Odegaard Writing & Research Center where we talk about writing and how it happens. I'm Hope your host and disembodied writing buddy, and together with the band of fellow graduate students we'll explore the writing processes and experiences of actual graduate writers in their own words. Listen, in, as we talk about the ups, the downs, and the practices that help these writers get words on the page. Maybe you'll even find something that sounds right for you.

Today we'll be kicking things off with Karen and Elyse, two Master's students from the iSchool and College of Arts and Sciences, respectively. It was a great chat, and I loved hearing their perspectives on grappling with perfectionism, pressure, and reflecting on one's own writing.

As with all of our episodes this season, this session was recorded remotely, so you might hear the occasional blip here and there in the background.

Now, without further ado, let's hear from Karen and Elyse.

Karen Wang (KW; 01:13):

I'm Karen Wang. I use she/her pronouns and I'm a Master's of Library and Information Science candidate in the iSchool here at the University of Washington. I also work as a research, uh, and learning services specialist at Suzzallo/Allen libraries. And my primary interests currently are in supporting student success, especially for marginalized students and students seeking mental health resources.

Elyse Klein (EK; 01:43):

I'm Elyse Klein. I use pronouns she/her. I'm in the second year of the MATESOL program. That's a Master's in teaching English to speakers of other languages, which falls under the field of applied linguistics. I'm also interested in socio-linguistics. Um, I'm interested in multilingualism, second language acquisition, and how societies influenced the way we speak.

[Brief musical interlude]

KW (02:14):

So, Elyse, how would you describe yourself as a writer?

EK (02:19):

I would say I'm very organized, structured, methodical, and a bit of a perfectionist. How about you, Karen?

KW (02:28):

Yeah, I [chuckles] I feel very seen by each of those adjectives you just used. I'm really a fan of the, like, outline and, like, doing a lot of pre-writing before I actually write. Is that also what your process is?

EK (02:42):

Yeah, my writing process is -- most of the work is before I even start writing. So, all of the research -- I'll take research notes and make an annotated bibliography, and then I'll make an outline, and then I'll plug in the quotes and information I want to use from my annotated bibliography into my outline. And then that can take a long time. I think sometimes just coming up with the topic and my ideas -- that takes the longest time. And then, by the time I actually write, I pretty much know what I'm going to say. And usually I have to do it almost all at once. Even if it's like 15 to 20 pages, I have to spend a good chunk of time on it because when I'm interrupted, then it takes me a while to get back into the content. And so I need to be immersed in it for a long period of time. And then kind of just, like, write it all. As much as I can at once without too many breaks.

What's your process like, Karen?

KW (03:49):

Yeah... I think I do most of the heavy lifting during that initial, um, outlining. So, kind of like you, by the time I'm writing, most of that is just filling in the, like, transitions, honestly, between the points in my outline. The outline is really where I start developing my thesis and, like, supporting arguments. And I'll just put in little, kind of command-y sounding sentences that are like, "go find, you know, evidence of this claim." And that's, yeah, I think where most of the thinking is happening. And I think that's because my brain just works in a way that's very, like, associative. So I think because of that, my outlines are really useful just to, like, let me know that it is going somewhere, but also just to, like, have a structure, because I think my writing does tend to be a little bit more -- almost stream of conscious-y sometimes, um... Which can be fun, but in an academic context can be a little challenging, especially if I'm writing something that's to a rubric, you know? But yeah, I think that's pretty much stayed the same. I really kind of developed that in -- I want to say, like, high school -- and it hasn't really evolved over time. How about you, where did you get your process from?

EK (05:11):

I've always been really organized with having to do things in order. Now, do you write an order, like, your introduction and then the body paragraphs and then the conclusion, or would you ever write the conclusion before?

KW (05:27):

Yeah... You know, I think I used to experiment a little bit more, but for now I've kind of solidified to, like, actually starting with the middle. So, I like to have all of my, I guess, filling fleshed out and then the conclusion and introduction kind of mirror each other, um... And it really is, you know, the summary or synthesis of what that middle bit was. But yeah, I think another thing that you said earlier was you really need to be immersed in your subject and, like, kind of just crank it out once you start it. And I think that is something that has changed for me a little bit, because during undergrad, I was just a student and now in grad school, I, like, have a bunch of other commitments and it's a lot more... encouraging of multitasking,

which I think is kind of the bane of my existence. I really don't like to multitask. So, I think, like, even though my inclination is to immerse and, like, crank things out, sometimes I just, like, have to do it in fits and starts. And, I don't know, that has been a challenge for me personally, but I think again, like, as long as I sit down and get the outline done in one go, I can pretty much chunk up the rest of it. But yeah, usually it ends up being that, start with the middle and then go from there.

EK (06:59):

I think that's good starting in the middle because then you can make your introduction based on that. For me -- well, my process is similar to what it has always been, but is becoming more structured. I've added in doing the annotated bibliographies and just kind of better outlines. And that was just learning how to research better that I've learned in grad school. I like that a lot of my professors will have us submit certain parts of our paper, like our annotated bibliography, prompting us to do the paper in these stages. So that really helps. I'm curious what your drafts are like, because for me, I feel like -- not that my writing is perfect -- but I don't feel like I ever have, like, a messy first draft and it almost wished that I could be more okay with it being a messy process, because I feel like it would be nice to just get it all out there. But instead I'm, I work kind of slowly. But I understand what you mean about it being difficult with balancing work and classes, and then, like, finding time to write when you only have two- or three-hour chunk of time and then you're trying to get into the content again, remember where you were trying to go with your ideas.

KW (08:25):

Yeah. I think I'm actually pretty similar to you where, again, it's like, not that I'm perfect, but rather that I'm a perfectionist. So, I think a lot of the revision is happening as I work alone, I guess. And by the time I get to the peer review, it tends to be a little... less fruitful, I think. And I think part of that's just because the structure of -- or maybe, like, just how we do the peer review? Like, the big one always happens at the end once you have a product. And I really think for me, revision and peer review is something that needs to be more throughout the whole process, which, yeah, it's something that I'm

really good at doing by myself. I still need a lot more internal motivation to, like, share something with other people before I feel like it's at that really good place, because I think because of how peer review is traditionally done, I now kind of have this construct where I'm used to peer review feeling really, like, affirming and people telling me, "I really don't have any comments." And that has kind of even, like, harmed me in a way, because now I kind of feel a little protective of my stuff and that compounded with the perfectionist thing means that I'm not very likely to share something that I feel is a little bit more raw or, like, has that more, like, drafty feel to it. So, I think that's just something I personally need to tend to. Um, and I think perfectionism -- there's just so many things that make perfectionism, like, the standard. And I really think lately, especially in grad school, I'm, I'm starting to, like... recognize it more, acknowledge how it's shaped me in many ways besides writing, and kind of address it a little bit and be more vulnerable or, like, open to asking for help and critique. But yeah, it's really... it's really hard. So, um, I think that's probably the biggest thing that's changed with my drafts. But yeah, I agree, it's really hard.

EK (10:45):

Yeah. I can understand that. I... I do feel a little bit nervous about people reading my work when it's not as perfect as I would like it to be. So sometimes, when I have a deadline and I have a peer review and I'm not quite ready, it's not perfect yet, it's kind of hard to share that.

HS (11:07):

If I can interject here, I think that this would be a great place to ask you both what you are writing.

KW (11:16):

Yeah. So I guess currently my writing is for the most part anchored either work or school. So for school, my program is mostly paper-based, like, we really love an essay. But to go back to your point about being concise, a lot of them are really about synthesizing a lot, being concise, and library and information science is a very interdisciplinary field, but a lot of my peers do come from an English

background. So, there's a lot of textual analysis, but also, like, we're learning how to pull out emergent themes by looking across a huge corpus, basically, from different fields. So there's a lot of research papers, I would say. Also though, a lot of reflections, which I thought was kind of interesting, um... If I were to talk about my personal writing, 2020 was, like, the year that I started journaling and that was, yeah, like a reflective practice. And, I just remember when I was younger, I, like, hated journaling because it seemed really boring. Like, I remember sometimes my entries would just be like, "Today was boring." Um, and then I would give up after like 10 pages of a new notebook. But now journaling as an adult, I'm kind of seeing it more as a way to, like, process. So it's not so much summarizing the events of a day, but it's more, like, talking to myself and listening to myself and that's been really beneficial in my personal life. But also, I think seeing it in some of my classes, too, is really cool because I think there's just, like, a different type of thinking that's activated when you try to, like, bring what you're learning into, like, your personal frame of mind.

And then for work, most of my writing is with an instructional focus. So, I write some modules for Canvas. For the most part, I'm helping teach library research workshops for English 131. So, I think that's intro to composition classes. And those are pretty short pieces that are to-the-point and introduce concepts, um, so, I think those are a lot more straightforward. But yeah, those are the main types of writing that I've been doing. How about you, Elyse?

EK (13:42):

Well, the last paper I did was, um, for socio-linguistics last quarter. I did a paper on code switching tendencies between, um, early bilinguals and late bilinguals. So people who, um, learn their second language later in life. The paper that I'm working on this quarter, I'm co-writing with someone else in my cohort, and this will be the first time that I'm writing with someone else. Um, but I'm really excited about this because with my past papers, she and I have bounced ideas back and forth and we'll peer edit each other's papers, so I know that we're going to work well together. So we want to look at maybe how people might adapt their pedagogical practices, depending on the cultural context that they're in. And hoping that

this can help teachers who are considering teaching abroad and to reflect on the, the ways that teaching practices might need to be adapted for the culture.

HS (14:43):

Gotcha.

EK (14:45):

And what experiences or commitments to audience or scholarly orientations have influenced your approach to writing?

KW (14:54):

Um, well, I'll admit that for the most part, my writing so far has been for class. So, my main audiences, I would say, have just been instructors and fellow students. That being said, though, I got a Bachelor of Science in ecology and a Bachelor of Arts in creative writing. And both of those had very different writing traditions. So, with creative writing, it was really... my classes were workshops. So, we brought our creative, works, our poetry, our short stories to, like, these round tables where everyone would have printouts of your work and have marked it up, and it was a very, like, open, not hierarchical setting. Versus in my like science classes, it was the teacher at the front, something with some really big words is projected on the screen, and all of us are, you know, in a big lecture hall, basically. And I think the contrast between those two made me kind of resent [chuckles] academic writing and, like, scholarly articles, because it was just so inaccessible. And I was, you know, being a perfectionist, I was a 4.0 student all of undergrad. And, like, I knew the, the words, the language, and the jargon that was being used in those articles, but I still hated reading, like, journals, Nature, Science, all of those were just... so exhausting for me. And, I just started to think about, like, how it must really suck for, you know, everyone else in the class, too. And like, especially folks that this is their first time approaching this. I'm really happy now, uh, with my workshops that I teach for University of Washington Libraries that we focus a lot on, like, breaking down the difference between a scholarly and popular piece of writing, what the different parts are, and what sorts of information you can find in each of those. And that's something we're, we're

teaching freshmen. So I think that really shaped me thinking about scholarly orientation.

So, I think nowadays beyond resenting that kind of hard-to-approach style of academic writing, I'm getting a lot more readings from professors that are still published and peer reviewed and to that standard of research excellence, but that are a lot more transparent about either critiquing the traditions that they came from. So, for example, I'm reading a lot about archives that are really challenging, like, that assumption that archivists who collect things and record them for history are really neutral or, like, non-biased and objective. They're really starting to think about, you know, why that's a very naive assumption and a very harmful assumption, especially for folks that aren't being archived or are being archived without having a voice in that process. So, I think maybe I'm backpedaling a little bit of my hatred, I guess, of academic writing, um, and I'm seeing examples now where audience is really being expanded or, like, thought of in a more inclusive way. And, you know, with a lot of thinking about more accessibility in terms of scholarly writing. I'm really, like, enthused to see those efforts taking off. So yeah, I think that's my kind of long ramble about what I think about when considering audience.

What about you, Elyse?

EK (18:33):

I can relate, too. Like when I started grad school feeling like the scholarly articles were inaccessible. I was having a really hard time at first. And eventually, I just got better at reading them, but I do want my writing to be interesting and accessible. I also... I guess I've developed some of my own writing just from kind of imitating the authors that I do like. And I also like to keep things simple. So, I've read lots of articles and books where I thought, "That could have been half the number of pages and they could have said the same thing." So I really try not to be too redundant and to be more to-the-point. But I think right now, I'm, I'm mostly imitating other scholars in my field and putting a little bit of my voice in. But I think, like, when we're new to this, at first, we learn through imitation and then eventually figure out how to be in the field, but then make it our own and become a unique writer. So I'm still working on that.

Karen, what is one thing you've found especially challenging about writing in graduate school?

KW (19:56):

Wow. What a question. Um... I think the most challenging thing about writing in grad school -- besides the main challenge, I think, of grad school, which is where to put your time and where your time will be most beneficial -- has been kind of the sensation that, uh... I guess it's a brand of imposter syndrome, right? I think the stakes are a lot higher in grad school. I think like when you were an undergrad -- there's definitely the possibility of getting published and like, it's kind of framed as you're going above and beyond if you're an undergrad, who's working with a PI that's going to get published -- but I think, like, in grad school, there's just so many, like, professional associations, so many journals that just seem a lot closer because maybe in grad school you're, like, noticing over and over again, like, these are the top journals in my profession. And I think it's more and more common for peers to be, um, to be working on something that's going to be published or to be, like, really involved with the professional association -- which isn't a bad thing -- but I think one of the residuals of that is that there can be, like, a lot of pressure or, like, a feeling that you need to be working on something that's gonna, like, blow everyone out of the water, or, like, be to that caliber. And I think that, like, persona or, like, that mindset rather, can lead to a spiral with that perfectionism that we already started with, right? Like, no one is standing over me and saying like, "You must publish." But yeah, it seems like it's more of an expectation now than before. And especially, like, I don't even really have any intentions to go into, um, making publishing my life, but, like, you know, a lot of people do. And like, I think that's one of the challenges I had, especially when I was on that track to being an ecologist was just the, like, politics and, like, drama, I guess, behind publication. And again, now that, like, a lot of folks have brought up inequities and, like, challenges with getting published and who gets published and why, um... I think those conversations are really good and, like, in a direction that I'm happy to hear about. But yeah, that initially is kind of what turned me off to... to pursuing higher ed. So I think that's been a challenge for me, but how about you, Elyse?

EK (22:34):

Yeah. I agree with a lot of that. I think for me, it's these 10-week quarters. Like, you start a new class, maybe with a new area of the field that you're still learning about, but then within like two or three weeks, you have to come up with a topic for the term paper that you're going to write. And it's hard 'cause I also agree there's some pressure, like, I want to come up with something that's novel and I would like to get published, but I'm also learning what's in the field, what's out there already, and so I've accepted that maybe I'm not going to come out with any novel studies right now, but I'm going to practice doing research, 'm going to learn through the process of writing, and I'm going to demonstrate my ability to do research and write, even if it's something that someone else has already studied before.

KW (23:34):

Yeah. I really like that. Like, learning through writing. 'Cause, yeah, that was kind of one of my old advisors hot takes, I guess, is that to succeed in grad school, you don't necessarily have to be, like, smart. People with Ph.D.s aren't necessarily smart. They are, but that's not what gets them through. It's more that they, like, are hard-working and that they stick with it and they're willing to be aware that they're learning and like sit with that process of learning and that it's gonna take awhile before they, you know, are the top of their field. So I think, yeah, that's a really valuable lesson to learn for sure.

EK (24:16):

I completely agree that, like, people with PhDs aren't necessarily the smartest people. I realized that, 'cause I just... I thought, like, things don't come to me right away. I don't feel like school is necessarily natural for me. But what I realized was I don't have to be the smartest person in the room. I just have to be someone who's gonna work hard. And another thing that has helped is asking for help along the way, using the resources that are around me, the people who are around me, and that's really helped me become a better writer. Which leads me to wonder, what is something that has helped you become a better or more confident writer?

KW (25:03):

Something that's helped me become a more confident writer, I would say, is just being aware that there's spaces outside of assignments and out of very official channels where I can write and still, like, connect with mostly my peers or like newer professionals in my field. So, I'm thinking specifically of blogs and even, like, Twitter. So, I guess maybe, like, challenging that assumption that, like, everything that will benefit my career will be this specific brand of academic writing, when a lot of what I'm learning is from pretty informal blog posts where people are just telling it like it is, or, like, tweets where people are just really rapidly connecting. But also these connections that they're making are between, like, ideas and papers that are just so, like, unexpected that I'm learning a lot from that.

And I think it's that cliche, right, of a question is more valuable than an answer. But, like, also just asking questions has been really helpful. I feel like when I ask more questions before I start writing, that usually means that whatever I write is going to be a lot more interesting than if I just jumped straight into it without exploring more. And part of that is, yeah -- another cliche, I guess -- that the more you read, the better your writing will be. And again, I'm not just reading scholarly journals cover to cover, but, like, reading for fun is something I recently rediscovered, um. Because I realized that, like, in all of my college education, I kind of only read when it was required for class. And I think that was really detrimental because, yeah, I feel like reading, it kind of, like, feeds your writing muscle and it's really important to just... take that time to, like, seek out something that maybe you wouldn't have gotten otherwise. And a lot of that, at least for me with my associative brain thinking, does eventually come around. So, like, books that I'm reading about philosophy or, like, an autobiography -- that will actually come into my papers and my discussion posts or whatever. So yeah, those are some things that are really helped.

Um, what's helped you become a better, more confident writer, Elyse?

EK (27:35):

Well, this question is interesting for me because I used to not be a confident writer at all. It was like something that I defined myself as,

as, like, being a poor writer. I just thought I wasn't good at it, I thought I didn't like it. And I kind of always been interested in getting a Ph.D., which I'm still hoping to pursue, but I thought that I couldn't because I'm not a good writer and I don't like writing. So I have to think back to, like, why I thought that for so long, because I've come to realize that it's not true. But I think part of it was that I grew up in France to American parents, and so I kind of went back and forth between English and French education. And when I was in English education, I was in, like, remedial English courses. And then in college I had to take -- I don't know what they call it -- but some sort of remedial English class. I don't know. It was discouraging. And so I just thought, "Ah, that's not my thing." But I think that part of it was that I was being forced to write about things that I wasn't interested in. And now that I can write about things that I'm interested in, I'm enjoying it a lot more.

And I've also realized that we can grow, we can learn. So I think when I said, like, I'm a bad writer, that was me putting myself in this hole, but when we have this growth mindset, then we know that we can learn, we can get better. I also have worked as a personal trainer, and so that has given me this mindset that we can grow because not everyone is, you know, able to, like, lift heavy weights on day one, they're going to learn, they're going to grow. And so I think that's helped me with my mindset for when it comes to writing.

And then also teaching has helped me become a better writer. I used to teach high school French, and then I also teach English as a second language. And recently, last quarter I taught English 102, which is in the AEP program. So it's the essentials of college reading and writing. And so, I've been teaching students how to write and also trying to motivate them, tell them, like, they can do it, they can learn, they can do anything. And it took me a while to tell myself those same things. But I've been getting good feedback from my peers and from my professors on my writing, and that's really increased my confidence and I know that I can always improve. So yeah, that's my story about becoming more confident as a writer.

KW (30:30):

Nice. I guess a good segue now is to go into what tips do you have or encouragements you have for other graduate writers?

EK (30:42):

I think, based on my experience, it would be to not label yourself as, you know, not being good at writing, but to have an "I can" attitude. Like, I can do it, I can learn, I can grow as a writer. And also, I would say reach out to people around you. Ask your professors for help, your peers, and just be patient, too, because you can get better at it.

What about you, Karen?

KW (31:11):

Yeah, I think definitely you said reframing writing as a space to grow, letting go of that perfectionist mindset, even though I know it's really hard. Um, this book that I really love called *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy* by Jenny O'Dell really has made me think about how a lot of the structures that are dominant in America really encourage perfectionism and kind of either you have it or you don't either, you can pull yourself up by the bootstraps or you can't mindset, and kind of rehabilitating that pretty cutthroat and, like, exploitative frame into thinking more about... Yeah, like, giving yourself the time and space to, like, process, to think, to question. And yeah, to ask for help. I think that's the, the hardest part sometimes. But once you do, it almost always is reaffirming and, like, helpful. So yeah, I really like everything you said. And I think... yeah, just, like, not feeling too fatalistic or extreme about any [chuckles] any sentence that you write, because even if you think it's perfect right now, probably years from now, you're going to look back and have like 10 different ways to improve or, like, build upon it. So, I think just knowing that that's natural and that it's going to make you is a really helpful way to proceed.

EK (32:42):

Speaking of that, how do you know when a paper is done?

[Karen chuckles]

EK (32:47):

Like, is it -- is it when the due date comes? Or if there was no due day, do you feel like you would always be working on it? Or how do you know when you're done?

KW (32:58):

Yeah. I think it depends. If my impetus for writing is an assignment, I think that generally means I don't care as much about it. Like, I know what it's going to lead to. It's going to be part of my grade. But if it's something that I'm doing for my own motivations or that I'm more passionate about, yeah, I think there are moments where I'm like, "This will never be ready." Like, I can never release this into the world. But then I kind of have to, you know, bring myself back to the ground and think about that metaphor, I guess, of how many spoons worth of energy you have. And like, I have a finite number of spoons and if I, you know, keep babying something and waiting for it to become its final transcendent state -- which probably never will happen -- it's probably going to, like, A), eat me alive, but also, like, because I'm not putting it out there, it's not going to get that conversation going, which I think most writing is kind of like an asynchronous conversation. And it gets better when people read it and have some sort of response to it. So, I think, yes, nothing's ever done-done, but at a certain point of, like, how much sleep I'm going to lose and, like, how much good this will do, I have to just release it out there.

How about you?

EK (34:29):

Well, the last paper I spent a lot of time on was the paper I did for socio-linguistics last quarter, which I used for Ph.D. applications. And so I really wanted it to be good. And so I did keep working on it for a while after I felt it was done. There were a couple of things that I changed... but then... It did get to a point where I thought, "Yeah, I'm done with this." But there's always that, like, uh, well, it can always be better. Beyond just getting a good grade on something, sometimes I think like, "Oh, I could, I could do more." But I guess when we're speaking, we just speak and we just let the words flow, but when we're writing, we do think a lot more about every little thing.

KW (35:14):

Yeah. I think that's.. I don't know, maybe, what marks you as someone who wants to be a scholar, right? Is that you're one of those

people that is compelled to keep improving on things that you've written before. And, like, that probably just means you'll continue doing experiments and, like, writing articles and have this as professional practice. But yeah, I think, you know, when I say you're going to look back at a sentence you wrote 10 years ago, I don't think most people have this one thing that they've written that they're, like, constantly chained to. It's kind of more like, that was the beginning and like things will follow it and improve and build upon that beginning thing. So, yeah.

[Brief musical interlude]

HS (36:03):

And there you have it. Thanks for listening to this episode of Write for You and a big thanks again to both of our guests. On behalf of the Odegaard Writing & Research Center, I hope 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 depts.washington.edu/owrc.

[Brief musical interlude]

Looking for more Write for You? Check out the rest of season two, out now, or listen back to our fabulous guests from the first season for more conversations about writing experience, process and practice. In the meantime, for myself and all of us at the OWRC, happy writing.

[Brief musical interlude]

HS (37:02):

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edited, and hosted by me, Hope St. John. Music by Scott Holmes and Unheard Music Concepts and used under Creative Commons license.

[Outro music]