[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.

Hi everyone, Lily, Madison, and I sat down over Zoom back in winter to talk about their writing experiences and practices. They're both in the process of finishing their dissertations in anthropology and history, respectively, and as later stage graduate students, it was great to get their takes on time management, responsibility in writing, and that ever-present specter of critique.

Without further ado, here are Lily and Madison:

Lily Shapiro (LS; 01:13):

Hi, I'm Lily Shapiro. Thanks for having me on. So, I am a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Anthropology. I study medical anthropology and my dissertation research is about workplace accidents and the reconstructive plastic surgeries that occur in their wake, which I conducted in south India in Tamil Nadu. So, that project looks at sort of questions of work, care, and the body. And I am in the process of writing it up. So, I'm post-field, research is all conducted, and, uh, just working on writing it up. So, I also have a Master's in public health that I did at the University of Washington. So, I spent a little bit of time on south campus with a different style of writing, a different sort of methodology and approach to

scholarship and knowledge. So, um, yeah, those are the hats that I wear. I lived in Seattle on and off for about 10 years. I have two little kids. I don't know, that's me.

My pronouns are she and her, too.

Madison Heslop (MH; 02:16):

My name is Madison Heslop. My pronouns are she/her and I am a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of History, where my primary field is in the north American West. And I in particular specialized in the history of the Pacific Northwest between the 1890s and the 1930s, where I work on the connected histories of Seattle, Washington, and Vancouver, British Columbia, focused on the site of the urban waterfront. And my work deals a lot with questions of mobility and belonging, because I have myself moved a great deal. I have lived in, at this point, four different countries and more than a dozen different states, I believe. So, um, [chuckles] wide ranging, uh, background coming into my work.

LS (02:59):

Well, Madison, how do you -- how would you describe yourself as a writer?

MH (03:04):

I was very much a reader before I was ever interested in writing, and I think that's why I ended up in the field that I'm in and what I enjoy about writing is in fact, the fact that I was a very much a voracious reader as a child. And I think I actually entered history as a field in particular because my history courses challenged me as a reader in ways that my other classes did not. And so I tend to approach my writing as someone who... is writing things that I would like to read about, and also thinking about how I, I tend to structure my writing based on what is it that I think that, if I were going to be reading something of this nature, what would I need to know first and how would I like it to be presented to me? And so when it comes to my dissertation, my chapters are structured in such a way that you get all the big background context information first, and then I can get into the details, um, introducing kind of characters of historical figures and places, um, in ways that I can kind of try to pull threads

throughout and create a kind of overarching story arc for, you know, what is actually very much a nonfiction [chuckles] uh, academic attitude toward writing a book. But nevertheless, I want people to enjoy reading it, at some point when it gets published.

Lily, how would you describe yourself as a writer?

LS (04:32):

Well, that sounds like a really smart approach, I think. Something I tell my students a lot is to sort of like keep the audience, keep the reader in mind and thinking about what they need to know. I would say that I... I also grew up, um, reading a lot and I think it's also what I tell my students to become better writers. Reading a wide range of things is the thing that I find most helpful, so that it makes a lot of sense to me. As a writer myself -- and maybe this is odd -- I enjoy the editing phase of writing quite a bit. And it's taken me a long time, I think, to figure that out, to figure out that I didn't need to sort of write things perfectly from the get-go. And now I'm much more comfortable sitting down writing three pages of garbage, knowing that it's going to be garbage while I'm writing it, and then on page three, realizing, oh, yes, this is sort of what I was trying to say and I can kind of get into it here, and then going back and editing heavily. So yeah, I mean, I do write, but I think that my writing -- and my thoughts as well -- become better and more, uh, articulate in the editing process, especially. Yeah. What about your writing process? Do you start from an outline? Do you start just free-writing?

MH (05:42):

I outline heavily. This is partially kind of a strategy I adopted as an undergraduate student because, like many high schoolers, I was a real procrastinator. And so one of the ways that I learned to kind of, you know, encourage myself to actually start my work earlier rather than leaving it to the last minute was, you know, learning to outline. And I outline and they tend to be quite detailed so that by the time that I get to the rough draft, I am essentially almost copying and pasting things from my outline into a document. Um, and this in part helps me to make sure that my writing's well organized and that I'm not going off on unnecessary tangents and making sure that everything's coming back ultimately to my main thesis, because I did

in the past have a problem where I would get comments on papers saying, you know, "this is very interesting, I'm not sure how it's relevant." And so I, I tend to outline quite heavily. And this is also partially because unlike you, Lily, I really hate editing my own work.

[Lily chuckles]

MH (06:39):

I don't mind editing other people's it's -- I don't like to come back to my own work too many times. I get very tired of it. And so, um, making sure that everything is very well planned from the start means that I don't have to... do all the same kinds of very substantial revisions on my work. I still have to revise it several times, but you know, usually at least the first draft is something that I am willing to show other people, so that when I make edits, it's based on other people's feedback and not simply my own kind of despair.

LS (07:10):

Mhm. Do you find, and this is a -- I don't know -- a question that I have about my own work, especially with the dissertation, do you find that your ability to sort of, like, contain the data and keep it coherent and in an outline and to not go off on tangent is easier or more difficult in different projects?

MH (07:31):

Yeah. I mean, it's certainly project-dependent. Even within the one dissertation project, there's lots of different moving parts, and so some parts it's easier to make sure that I'm staying on task and not others. And it certainly -- actually part of what has made me even more careful about staying on task is that I now have less time to simply sit and write than I used to. I now, you know, usually try to set aside about one hour every morning, almost always the same hour -- usually start at nine and I write until about 10 -- either writing or doing some sort of work on my dissertation. Ideally I do more than that in a day, but often that's simply all that I can manage to do between my other responsibilities as an instructor or, you know, other volunteer work or department business that I'm dealing with. And so it's, you know, increasingly important for me that, you know, I need to finish the dissertation. I need to fulfill my other

responsibilities. And so I need to make sure that all of my writing is to serve a purpose. Um, but you know, if I end up going off on tangents or find something very interesting, I am not precious about my writing. I'm willing to cut things, but if I think it's a really promising idea, I'll set it aside and say, you know, "This is for a future article." Or maybe this will be a different project in the future.

What's your writing process? And I assume it's probably changed due to time management.

LS (08:57):

Yes.

[Laughs]

Yeah.

[Laughs]

Yes. Um, I... It has changed a lot and I think what you just sort of said about not being precious about it is something that I finally have arrived at. I think that for a long time -- I think throughout undergrad and for the first sort of half of graduate school -- was very attached to my writing, and, and I think that's part of why it's taken me some time to realize that lots of the stuff that I write just has to end up -- I put it in a different document instead of throwing it away, but it's essentially throwing it away. Um, and I think not being too attached to it, being willing to sort of cut things that don't make sense or that don't serve the purpose of what you're writing -- you know, you can set them in different documents to come back to later or whatever -- but not getting too attached to them is something that I have worked on and I feel like now, I... I don't know if I've just been doing it for so long that I just want it to be over [laughs] or if it's a kind of maturation that I'm able to just be like, "This sentence, although it's pretty, it doesn't serve, so I'm going to put it somewhere else."

But I think as far as process goes and time management, those are definitely challenges, they're definitely challenges that have, uh, increased since having kids. And in some ways -- I think overall it's certainly harder, but it is also a focusing exercise, you know, instead of being like, "Oh, I'll just stay up until two in the morning or I'll work on this for eight hours tomorrow." I'm like, "Well, I have 45 minutes right now. What can I -- what can I do?"

And so, part of what I do -- and this is a strategy that I developed when I was writing my exams -- is I try, when I'm in a good writing rhythm -- which is not always, and which has been certainly fragmented and more difficult given the last eight or nine months -- but when I'm in a good rhythm, what I do is I set out three big goals for the week. I have, you know, pretty markers or whatever. I write them down. And then I write three goals for each day of the week that have to do with breaking down this big, kind of nebulous project that is a dissertation into something more discrete, that can be accomplished instead of just being like, "write chapter four." So I pick three big goals, I pick three goals for each day, and that helps A), because I don't have to spend, like you said, if you have an hour of time, you can't spend 45 minutes trying to figure out what it is you're supposed to be working on, or sort of settling in. So that helps me kind of get started on something right away. It helps me know what I'm going to be working on so I can kind of have to think about it while I'm getting ready to sit down. And then it also -- the thing that I really like, and a thing I think graduate students in particular, and undergraduates, too, maybe struggle with is knowing when you're done working. When I've gotten to those three things I've done for the day, I can stop. I don't have to, like, go back to it after dinner or be working while I'm trying to put the kids to bed. It's a nice way for me to be like, "Well, my work day is now over and I'm not gonna think about it until tomorrow." And then I'll work on these other tasks. And I think that kind of time management, sort of carving out some balance, is also really important.

I don't know, now I'm rambling, but I think there's a, um... I think it's a Haruki Murakami book about writing. What I Talk about When I talk about... Writing? Or is it *What I Talk about When I Talk about Running*? I can't remember. It's about running and writing. So, Haruki Murakami is this Japanese novelist. And he also runs a lot of marathons. Anyway, it's a great book about writing. Um, and one of the things that he writes in it that stood out to me is that, just like with running, you can't write until you're exhausted every day, because you won't be able to sit down again the next day. You have to stop writing when it's still fun. You have to stop running before you're in pain or injured, because otherwise you won't be able to get up the next day and sort

of put your running shoes on or sit back down. So I think that's something I try to keep in mind, too.

MH (12:37):

It seems natural to then ask you, what's one thing that you found especially challenging about writing in graduate school?

LS (12:43):

What is one thing? I mean, I think time management is difficult. I think being in a community and a cohort of people who are all really talented writers and really sort of smart, bright people is great, if you can get past the kind of self-doubt [chuckles] that that engenders, you know? And then I think being willing to show people stuff that's rough, getting to read other people's work before it's polished, is helpful to get over that particular hurdle. And part of what some of my courses in graduate school have done has been to try to pull the curtain back a little bit. But a lot of what you read is these books and articles and stuff that are so polished, because they have been edited and revised over a period of probably years. And it's difficult sometimes to see that those start as, uh, much more unpolished drafts.

So, I think being a little bit okay with writing stuff that's rough, with having people read stuff that's rough, that's something that I have worked on. And I also think in anthropology -- I don't know what it's like in history -- in anthropology, we are sort of moving out of -- and have been moving over the course of my time in graduate school -- have been moving out of a kind of real heavy reliance on jargon and impenetrable writing as a sort of hallmark of... scholarship. And I think that anthropologists are by and large pretty done with that. And then I think as a graduate student, um, learning to read that sort of thing, but also trying to find my own voice that maybe is not that jargony and realizing that that can also be a sort of... form of scholarship too, is something that I -- that I work on.

And I like what you said a lot about thinking about who is your reader, what do they need to know? And how can you explain it to them clearly, I think is something I work on. Yeah.

And what about you? What is one thing that you found challenging?

MH (14:38):

I guess for me, the biggest challenge is simply the size of the dissertation. Not simply in terms of page counts, but, um, the length of time of the project.

LS (14:48):

Right.

MH (14:48):

People come up with metaphors for thinking the dissertation, oh, the dissertations of marathon, you know, it's like, you know, having a baby, it's a relationship. I don't know that any of those metaphors necessarily work in particular for me, but the dissertation is an extremely long-term project that you have to then manage as we were talking about in small chunks and in, you know, short bursts over time, which is not the way that I like to do things. I like to sit down and work on something for, you know, several hours. Like block out, you know, a whole week to just work on one thing and that's simply not possible. Um, and it works differently in different fields, but a history dissertation often takes about four years to research and write.

Um, because ultimately what we're doing at the end is writing and trying to publish an entire book.

LS (15:32):

Right.

MH (15:34):

That's not necessarily a requirement, but that is kind of the standard of how it works.

[Chuckles]

And it takes a lot of writing over a long period of time. And so, you know, I addressed that challenge by learning new ways to sit down and use my writing process. You know, one hour each day, rather than when I kept trying to use my preferred method, which was like, "Oh, Tuesday, I'm going to sit down and write a whole day." I would get to Tuesday and there would be other things that I needed to do

and so I couldn't sit down and write the whole thing. And so I wasn't getting any writing done.

And also, you know, breaking down the dissertation into smaller pieces, and in particular, even breaking down the chapters into smaller pieces. You were talking about how you lay out three tasks for yourself for a day of writing. And so I also come up with kind of checklists where, you know, it's like, "I'm going to write 300 pages today. I'm gonna write one page."

LS (16:24):

You mean 300 words?

MH (16:24):

Oh, yeah, sorry, not 300 pages.

[Both laugh]

MH (16:26):

300 words, you know, which is about a page of material. Um, I don't think my whole dissertation will be more than 300 pages, if that. So, you know, setting manageable goals. And even at the very least, it gives you a sense of accomplishment when you reach those. And if you surpass them, fantastic. You know, if I reached those 300 words with 20 minutes left of my hour, great, I'll keep going. Or, you know, if I hit that hour and I still don't have 300 words, it's not worth beating myself up for. If I've got extra time, you know, later in the day, I can come back and do that. And either way, I've got something done.

LS (17:00):

Mhm.

MH (17:00):

And so finding a balance between the way that I prefer to work and simply the fact that a dissertation is kind of a project of long-term investment and endurance has been probably my biggest challenge about writing in graduate school.

LS (17:13):

Yeah. Yeah. I think that really resonates. And I think, too, the sort of idea that... you know, setting aside the time, dedicating that time and realizing that you can't wait forever to sort of be in the perfect headspace with the perfect cup of coffee and a light shining in at the right angle. Those things, you know, as much as I would like to be able to do that, you have to sort of take the time that you can and kind of learn or train yourself to focus, even if, you know, everything's not kind of lining up. And I think that's part of why I kind of chunk it out because if I don't feel then, like I can produce 300 words, I can instead, you know, update some statistics on labor laws or whatever. Like, there are other kinds of tasks I can swap around to, which I think is nice about the dissertation and also, as you said, one of the challenges. That it is this big thing -- and it's part of why I asked at the beginning, if you felt like sort of the outlining helped you not feel too pulled around. Like, I feel pretty pulled around still, even though I'm kind of approaching the end of the dissertation, while I'm writing I feel like the data has a lot of force and I don't necessarily -- I don't know. It's hard to organize it and make it do what I wanted to do.

MH (18:20):

Yeah. And that gets into kind of methodological questions as well as writing process. Is -- are you coming to the data with very specific questions or are you more interested in seeing what the data starts showing and kind of building your questions from there?

LS (18:34):

Right.

MH (18:34):

Um, and I think many successful projects use a combination of those two things.

LS (18:38):

Yeah, absolutely.

HS (18:39):

I think that this brings up kind of an interesting question for both of you in terms of thinking about that... data or the material that you're

coming into the dissertation with and how that informs your -- your writing in general, but also your writing process and sort of how you're engaging with it.

LS (18:58):

Yes. So I have, feels like a lot of data from about 15 months of field work, largely in the form at this point of interview transcripts and field notes from observations. So, you know, anthropologists do this in lots of different ways and a quibble I have with my discipline is that they tend to be a little coy about the methods, particularly sort of the analysis phase of how that happens and what that looks like. There aren't a lot of... kind of handbooks of how to code your research or do those sorts of things that other qualitative fields tend towards. So a lot of that is stuff that I pieced together here and there. So I did kind of a rough code of my data for themes. I sketched out how I wanted the dissertation to go. And since my research is about accidents and injuries and recovery, it lends itself towards a kind of chronological structure.

And so, right now, the form of it roughly tells the story of an accident, but looking at it from all these different angles. But -- so even though I have the codes, I have quotes pulled out, I have an outline -- I do find myself bouncing back and forth, especially when I get a little stuck writing, to the interviews themselves, to the field notes themselves and sort of going back to them, which I think is a good thing and a bad thing. I don't [chuckles] I don't know. It -- it definitely helps me to get unstuck, but I'm not sure it helps me to sort of stay focused, if that makes sense. Like, there was a lot of rich data in the interviews and so the kind of coded stuff is a little more pared down. And by going back to the interviews, I both get a reminder of the richness, but I also get pulled in different directions and on tangents. So I do find it difficult. It does feel like I'm struggling to sort of let the data speak for itself. And I think I tend towards -- you know, I have a few specific questions that I ask of the data and then I mostly want the data to speak for itself. I want people's voices to speak for themselves and for them to be understandable in the final project, or recognizable, sort of, to themselves. But there's a tension between wanting the data to feel like an authentic -- whatever that might mean -- representation of

what people told me and what I saw, while also realizing that whatever I do, it is a representation, right? It's always my own kind of take, the way that I'm packaging this. So owning that, on the one hand, and also wanting to kind of, not just sort of honor the people who spoke to me and took time and the stories that they told me, but to sort of let the conclusions and the theories of people themselves drive the theoretical force of my dissertation as well. So I don't know, I feel like this is a fairly accurate kind of [laughs] back and forth, um, of how it feels to work with the data, because it does feel like I know I have to do the work of containing and packaging it and that that is what I'm doing, but I also feel really pulled around by the data a lot of the time. And I also want to feel pulled around by the data a lot of the time. I don't know. I imagine it's maybe similar with history. It feels like historians I speak to are always, like, "It turns out you have to just keep going further back in time." So I don't know if you get pulled chronologically backwards or forwards, I guess, too.

MH (22:19):

Yeah. In fact, a good example of that is I kind of came across this thing that I was very interested that's occurring in the 1910s in Vancouver. And, as it turns out, in order to actually talk about where this issue comes from, I had to go back and read scholarship on the Middle Ages.

[Both laugh]

MH (22:33):

Because that's what happens when you're talking about legal codes. These things have very long histories. But in terms of research and translating research processes into writing processes, history as a discipline is mostly, though certainly not exclusively, qualitative archival research. And some of my work has been quantitative, which is kind of unusual for, uh, most historians, but it's in part because I incorporate digital humanities methods into my work. I've created a database out of materials and run quantitative analysis on some of that. But that is certainly not the rule. It's more that historians sometimes arrive at quantitative conclusions based entirely on kind of more qualitative engagements with sources where, you know, you look at enough materials and you kind of build impressions. Actually,

even in my case, the qualitative analysis I did was really just confirming the impressions I already had from reading all these materials.

Yeah. And so, like I was saying, you either tend to go into an archive with very specific questions and you ask the materials to be pulled that you expect are specifically relevant to that, or you can go in and you say, "This collection is interesting to me. I would to look at it and see what questions are rise as I'm going through it." Because history is a very messy discipline. I try to explain it to my students sometimes. In some ways you're following kind of the scientific method of, you know, testing a hypothesis and your results need to be reproducible, but there's absolutely no control variable. Your working only with materials that already exist, that people recorded for reasons that are not related to what we're doing, and often that information is vastly under-complete. And sometimes it's illegible.

[Lily laughs]

MH (24:16):

So, historians are ultimately -- and I think this is actually really true of all scholarship, but is especially obvious in history -- where every work of history writing is a story that's being told. It's factually based, it should be reproducible, everything is cited and the evidence is all there, but in order to make sense of something, you have to leave some materials out and you have to draw connections between things. And so, each history book, each history article is one of many, many different stories that could be told about this particular thing. And for me, part of my interest in the work that I do -- and this comes from, like I was talking about, being a reader before I was a writer -- I'm very interested in the stories that people have told historically about the places that I study. And so it's fairly easy for me to think critically about the sources that I'm working with. What are the stories that these particular people are presenting? Why are they presenting it in this way? You know, what are their motivations? What's the context that they're working in? And all of these things going into it, to then thinking about what's my goal? What are the stories that I'm telling? What am I leaving out? And why am I doing all of those things? Sometimes it's simply a matter of personal interest, sometimes it's because I simply don't have the sources or

expertise to be able to talk about certain subjects. And sometimes the answers are disciplinary or they come down to time or restrictions of the institution of the university.

LS (25:43):

Mhm.

MH (25:43):

Lily, so what experiences commitments to audience or scholarly orientations -- on the topic of the institution -- have influenced your approach to writing?

LS (25:55):

So, I think that many social sciences, and anthropology in particular, for the last, what, 30 or 40 years? Has been really grappling with what it means to represent another person, another community, what it means to sort of do this kind of scholarship. And I think, exactly what you're saying, thinking about how we think critically about our own representations and the work that they do in the world. And thinking critically about the way that, that is true of all science, you know, whether or not it's kind of soft or hard, right? So I think that I was certainly trained to approach the writing process itself with a critical eye and the research itself, too, right? In terms of designing a study and the methodology that you choose and the way that you work with a community as being really important and foundational to the production of knowledge and to the eventual writing process. So, that said, you know, I don't have illusions, I guess, that my dissertation specifically, or necessarily this project, is going to have huge, far reaching effects. I think and hope that my sort of presence in the field was, I dunno, a source for good for the people that I worked with. So I feel a great deal of commitment to them -- the people I work with, the patients I spoke to who had been injured, the doctors who were really generous with their time and space and let me kind of wander around the hospital for months. So I think about them a lot while I'm writing. And I try to kind of make, like I said, a faithful representation of what they told me. Um, I use pseudonyms, you know, I told everybody I would use pseudonyms, but I want them to be recognizable to themselves. I want the stories

that I tell to be legible to the people. So, certainly I have a commitment to sharing the work. I mean, many of the people, many of the patients that I spoke with don't read English. So the question of how I can make this scholarship more useful publicly is one I continue to think with and think about as I go about writing. And I am in touch with and worked with labor rights organizations and stuff like that in the place where I did my fieldwork. So I think there are different ways to... acknowledge that commitment, ah, or that debt. Um, yeah. What about you?

[Both laugh]

MH (28:13):

So, um, I mean, I already talked for a little bit about the idea of a commitment to an audience in terms of presenting things in a particular order. A lot of that is actually, you know, kind of future considerations for eventually the book manuscript, which is not my problem right now. Right now, my problem is simply writing the dissertation. But in terms of other commitments and scholarly orientations, you were talking about your obligations to, you know, the people involved in your studies and your research. Everybody who is involved in my work is dead.

[Chuckles]

Long dead, in fact, even though, you know, a hundred years ago, is not really quite such the distant past. But historians do frequently have these debates as, you know, what are our responsibilities to the dead? What are maybe things that we, we should talk about, or maybe shouldn't? How do we use these materials? I actually tend to approach more of the question of what are my responsibilities to the still living people who could be impacted by the work that I'm doing, even though, like I said, I'm working all on dead people. But you know, their descendants are still around. People who belong to those same communities are still around. And... a lot of this kind of comes from the ways that my work overlaps with Indigenous studies, which is very much driven by the current needs of Indigenous peoples and ensuring that your work, at the very least, doesn't cause any harm to people. And ideally, for me at least, advances, you know, issues and debates around equity and justice. Um, and so one of the ways that I am doing this is that a lot of my dissertation has ended up being

oriented around how settler colonialism as a structure functioned and continues to function in the urban Pacific Northwest.

Now, the critique of settler colonialism as a theory is that it puts usually white settlers at the center of the story. And that is, in a way, kind of reinforcing the very structures of settler colonialism that you're trying to critique. And so I continue to very much try to base a lot of my methods and theory in Indigenous studies, in order to kind of... offset the settler colonial focus of my work and make sure that I'm prioritizing the voices and needs of Indigenous communities -- even though they are not the main figures in the work that I'm doing -- and try to make sure that I'm addressing how Indigenous communities in Seattle and Vancouver were kind of influenced by these particular histories that I'm talking about in the past and what it means for them in the present.

LS (30:58):

Mhm. Mhm.

MH (30:58):

And that's -- I've been focusing on Indigenous communities, but those are far from the only people that I'm talking about. Usually the people I'm talking about in my dissertation are people who are disenfranchised in other ways. You know, these are not problems that exist only in the past. We have to think about, you know, how to be compassionate toward people who are, you know, maybe no longer with us as a way of thinking about how does this work influence people who are still around today.

LS (31:23):

Mhm. Mhm.

HS (31:27):

I think we've started to get at it in a couple of different places, but finding one's writerly voice? What is that process looked like for you and has your writing voice changed a lot over the course of your dissertation or graduate student life, or has it been sort of a fairly consistent thing?

MH (31:47):

Honestly, I think my writerly voice throughout graduate school has been pretty consistent. And my writing tends to be fairly straight forward, but also, I at least hope that there's kind of a sense of humor that tends to run through things. I think a lot of scholars have this; this is why we have so many puns and alliteration in article titles, that sort of thing. I... I do like to read widely and that experience of reading and knowing exactly what I like most -- you know, not just the scholarship, but also the fiction that I read -- has meant that my writerly voice kind of developed relatively early on and I've merely been refining and improving that process so that I can arrive at a similar product at an earlier point, rather than having to go through quite so much revision and agonizing in order to reach that kind of period. For example, I may up getting rid of it, but I have a chapter that's all about policing the Vancouver waterfront. And I also happen to enjoy old detective fiction. And so I thought it would be funny to name each of the subsections in that chapter after detective novels. And so, you know, most of the people reading that wouldn't know that, but it's this kind of like humorous little thing that I've put in that's a very personal touch. And I'm kind of waiting to see what my committee thinks [laughs] before I decide whether or not to leave that in. Um, but I mean, it's a very serious subject and I don't want to treat it lightly, but I don't necessarily think that means that there can't be, like, a little bit of humor in the ways that we read about things.

LS (33:32):

Yeah. I think that one thing I would say is, as you're sort of looking for kind of what structure and style feels both right for you personally and matches the kind of content, um, one thing you can do is look at a book that you sort of find admirable or enjoy reading, or that treats with a similar topic and kind of, um, take a few pages of one of the chapters and write them -- or sort of rewrite them with your own material. Right? And so, you know, don't plagiarize or copy them, but sort of, you know, I think we think of things like the writerly voice as this kind of mystical, magical process, but something like that can help you think about it in a more concrete way and sort of like in this paragraph, what really specifically is the author doing? With this first

sentence, what is the point that they're trying to make and how does the second sentence sort of build on that? And what is the length of the second sentence relative to the first sentence? And sort of, can you emulate that in your own writing? And do you hate it? Or [chuckles] does it feel good? And so I think definitely that can be really helpful. And learning to play around with your writing and to try different things on for size, I think that can be really helpful and that's certainly been helpful for me.

And I would also say that I think that my own writing voice, it also tends to be pretty straightforward. And I think it's changed over the course of graduate school, as I have become more comfortable just eschewing, um, [laughs] kind of the jargon heavy stuff that I am often reading. And sort of reading it and being like, "I understand the point of this, but there's no reason that the sentence had to be written like that. And I don't have to write my sentences like that in order for them to be academic." So I think I've tried to move away from too much jargon. It creeps in, obviously, and some of it I think you need, but I try to be a little more straightforward about those kinds of things. And then I think, too, sort of thinking about what kind of voice fits with the topic. And since a lot of what I'm dealing with in my dissertation is fairly heavy and can sometimes be graphic, this is a thing I still am working on with my committee and with my writing group -- sort of how to describe things, how to remain faithful to the way that things were described to me without either being sort of so dry or, um, veering into titillating, right? And so, I'm certainly on the drier end of the spectrum right now. Um, and so I think it depends to kind of what you're representing, and since part of what I'm representing -- part of the story I'm telling -- is about violence, thinking about how to represent that in a way that remains true to questions of justice is tricky. And relates then to sort of, how do we tell those stories? You know, and then I think part of the way that I work on it in the dissertation is to acknowledge the graphicness up front and say that, you know, it's graphic and I don't want it to be titillating, but it's also the cost of capitalism. This is what this looks like. So, you know, and there are lots of anthropologists obviously who have written about and continue to write about violence. So, I draw on them, too, for inspiration. And I also draw on the tone in which these stories were told to me for a sort of guide to that voice.

MH (36:43):

Returning to what you were saying about kind of copying sentence by sentence, writing that you admire. I think that's also a really good way for, um, people to learn different genres of, um, scholarly writing.

LS (36:58):

Mhm. Yeah.

LS (36:59):

What is something that has helped you become a better or more confident writer?

MH (37:04):

So, you were talking a little bit earlier about the ordeal of showing rough work to other people. And I had a very... in some ways, a very bad experience that was also a good experience several years ago that has, uh, ultimately, I think been this kind of.. tipping point for me as a more confident writer, which was as a Master's student, I was not here at the University of Washington, I was at the University of Edinburgh. I presented a paper that I had written to a writing workshop that the history department there hosted. And the conclusion of the whole writing workshop, which I was this little Master's student -- it was mostly, like, tenured scholars, some Ph.D. students -- the conclusion of the workshop as a whole was that I was completely wrong.

[Lily laughs]

MH (37:53):

And in fact should have concluded the opposite thing that I did.

[Lily laughs]

MH (37:56):

Which is kind of the worst-case scenario for a student. You come in and they're like, "Oh, you're totally wrong." They were very nice about it and had a lot of advice about how I might go about rewriting what I'd done, and so, you know, it definitely could have been worse. Um, but that happened to me and I survived it. And so now I am not

worried at all about showing my work to other people because I've already had people telling me, "Oh no, you're totally wrong." And I'm fine. And so I can -- this comes back to not being precious about my writing. I'm not necessarily worried too much about being wrong because that's why we show our work to other. That's why we undergo things like peer review, is to make sure that we are actually able to support the arguments or theses that we're presenting. And so it's not necessarily a bad thing to be wrong because you can always correct it afterward. So that's a rather dramatic story is ultimately about simply learning confidence through critique, which I think a lot of, particularly new, graduate students very much fear critique as being kind of a personal criticism. And it's not, it can be a form of respect that you're engaging with somebody's work as worthy of remark and of critique. Yeah.

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

LS (39:16):

I mean, lots of things have helped me become a better writer, certainly the generosity of my peers and mentors reading my stuff. And letting me read their stuff has been enormously helpful as has, you know, just trying to read. And trying to read things for pleasure, not always only scholarly stuff. I try and I don't always succeed to read novels in the evening, to kind of get back to the question of scholarly jargon and how we write in the way that, that reflects different commitments to different audiences. Trying to sort of remember what... what it is to read and write things that are pleasant to read.

[Chuckles]

So, um, lots of things have helped me become a better writer, but I do think that teaching students to write and working with undergraduate students in particular on their writing has been really helpful, 'cause one of the things that I see a lot and that I kind of push on with my undergraduate students is this sort of... a wariness of making an argument, and I think reflects a worry about being wrong. And so the response to that is to kind of hedge and not stake a claim. And kind of working with my students on learning A), how to make an effective argument and B), just to sort of let your own voice be in your writing and argue a point -- if it turns out that you're

wrong, it turns out that you're wrong and you know, someone will tell you

[Laughs]

Um, but as a writing strategy, claiming a stake the much more effective way, I think, and so I've tried to remind myself of that, too. So, yeah.

And I guess related to that, what's a tip, um, or some kind of encouragement you would have for other writers?

MH (40:50):

I guess my advice is to try a variety of strategies in both the writing and editing process and decide what works for you. And I often, I, you know, as it works out, I often employ a variety of different strategies, depending on which particular section of the work that I'm writing. I have had chapters where my editing process was printing everything out and cutting it all up into pieces and rearranging paragraphs on the floor.

LS (41:17):

I've done that.

MH (41:20):

Because my problem, in that case, was that I was not happy with the organization of the chapter. In other cases, I mean the chapter I'm working on right now, my writing process is quite different because I had a real over-abundance of sources on some of my other chapters. And this particular chapter, I'm writing it because it's connecting two different topics for which there are very few sources about either one. And so I have to... I wouldn't say that I'm working around the gaps or absences, but -- because part of what it means to work with these sources is to address why those gaps or absences are there in the archival collections. And so this particular chapter is a little bit, I guess you could call it a little more metatextual, because it's about trying to recover some of these histories in these lived experiences of the people I'm talking about, but also addressing what is it about both of these groups that they have in common and what, why, how has those things they have in common mean that they have largely been excluded from institutional archives?

LS (42:29):

Mhm. Mhm.

MH (42:30):

Um. And so, you know, different components of a project may require different approaches to writing and editing. And, you know, I've done some things where I was like, "Well, I'm never doing that again. That was totally unnecessary and didn't get me anywhere. And I didn't like doing it, but it was worth trying in the first place." And, you know, there are hundreds, probably thousands of articles online that all have writing advice. Either you can read lots of different books -- I've got a couple of different ones on my bookshelves that are, you know, different methods for writing and advice for writing -- and you ultimately have to figure out what's going to work for you because... you have to at some point finish the project, right?

So, uh, Lily, what's one tip or encouragement you have?

LS (43:12):

Uh, well, I really agree with that one. I think trying lots of different strategies. And, you know, there's not a silver bullet that works for everybody. One strategy is not better than any other, it's just whichever one helps you put words on the page. So yeah, I came up with the, like, three things a day, I don't know where, out of reading some [chuckles] -- some internet article, but it sort of clicked and worked for me. It may or may not work for you. And if you try it and you're like, "this is the stupidest thing," then that's fine. You can try something else. And so I think some people, um, outlining works really well for them. Other people need to just sit down and free-write. Some people need sort of concrete steps. Other people like to think about the broader project. So I think there are lots of different strategies that fit all those different writing types. And yeah, experimenting with what works for you -- even to sort of your point earlier with what time of day works best for you -- find an hour that's, you know, tends to be where your best or easiest and commit to kind of blocking that off. So I really agree with that piece of advice.

The only other thing I would add is something we've talked about throughout, which is share your work, be really open to critique, find people who will sort of A), read your work and offer you criticism.

Those people are the best, and I'm really grateful to all the editors I have in my life. And I also think, especially if you're working on a big project like a dissertation, having some kind of writing accountability buddy can be really helpful. Right now I have two friends who I check in with a couple of times a week, um -- and we have a little Google, Zoom thing, whatever -- and sort of set goals, commiserate about how poorly writing is going, and try to refocus on what we're working on for the next couple of days. And so, you know, it's a really big project, working on a dissertation. It can feel really nebulous a lot of the time, and it can feel really lonely. And so reaching out to people and forming a writing group or having people who you're checking in with who are working on a similar thing helps, at least helps me sort of stay focused and helps me feel like I'm not all alone floundering around. Yeah, so I think that's what I would say.

[Brief musical interlude]

HS (45:23):

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]

HS (45:55):

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 (46:22):

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[Outro music]