



Hope St. John (HS):

Hello, and welcome back. I'm Hope and this is *Write for You*, the podcast from the University of Washington's Odegaard Writing and Research Center about graduate writing, how it happens, and what comes next. Together, in open dialogue, we talk with graduate and postgraduate writers about how writing and revision is practiced. Peaks, valleys, and everything else along the way. Listen in as we talk tips, strategies, and clarifying moments, and maybe you'll even find something that sounds right for you.

On today's episode, we'll be talking with Sarah and Maria. We Zoomed in for this conversation, so you may hear a little evidence of that in our recording, but hopefully we're all used to that by now. Sarah and Maria got their Ph.D.s in 2020 and 2019, respectively. Now, with the benefit of a few years out of graduate school, they reflect on writing both within and beyond the scope of the dissertation. It's an engaging and insightful conversation, so without further ado, here they are.

Maria C. Taylor (MCT):

I am Maria Taylor, Maria C. Taylor, because there are some other Maria Taylors out there. I am currently a lecturer in the College of Built Environments, teaching in Urban Planning and Landscape Architecture here at the University of Washington. I did a master's degree here, but I finished my Ph.D. three years ago at the University of Michigan in architectural history and theory. That's my primary mode of writing and area of research.

Sarah Faulkner (SF):

I'm Sarah Faulkner, I'm in the English department here at UW and I finished my Ph.D. in 2020 and have been staying on as part-time faculty for the last two years. My field is 18th-19th century. I work with women's fiction. I do Jane Austen, Mary Shelley, and I work with the

historical novel as well. Yeah. I'm working full time right now, outside of UW, as well as teaching and really trying to get back onto my writing project. I'm excited to talk about it.

MCT:

And for the purposes of introductions, I use she/her pronouns.

SF:

Oh, sorry. Yes.

MCT:

My name is spelled with no H at the end, but pronounced like rye bread or Mariah Carey, if that helps anybody.

SF:

Yeah, absolutely.

MCT:

Sarah, would you to describe how you describe your writing habit?

SF:

In describing my writing habits, I immediately want to go into my bad habits, but I feel like I gravitate towards longer writing sessions. I want to plan long chunks of time in which I can write. I really find that I am writing more consistently and getting more done if I'm working within those smaller, two-hours-every-day-style of writing.

Routines, I definitely have routines. I feel like I'm very ritualistic about writing both academic writing and then also creative writing. I've been working on a novel over the last two years and I feel like my processes for both of those have started to blend of I'm very specific sometimes about even what I'm wearing, or I make sure I have my cup of tea next to me. I have to have my certain playlist on and those things really help me get into the creative mood of writing. I think we can talk about this more later, but they can also sometimes feel like if I'm at a cafe and I have an hour, I can be like, "Oh, I could write, but I don't have my perfect tea."

I think sometimes I get a little too ritualistic about it, but I think in general, I always just kind of try and start with a word vomit to kick it all off just to get the juices flowing. I really try to not edit while I'm writing. Yeah. I mean, there's so much to talk about, but I

feel like that's generally how I get started, is with a brainstorming session.

MCT:

Yeah. I guess we could also talk about what kind of writing projects, because writing on a creative, like, "I'm starting something new," is so different than – I'm currently trying to take a chapter of my dissertation that then lived for a while in conference papers and lived as a draft for a chapter for an edited volume. Now it's going to be a article in a special issue, hopefully. Trying to take all these other drafts of things and then revive them and rework them for this new audience or new format is different type of writing practice.

SF:

Oh yeah. The revision process is so different because I feel like I am immediately overwhelmed taking something like a chapter and trying to rework with it. That's something I would like to get better at, is opening up a big document like that and not immediately just being like, "Oh my gosh, I have to completely rehaul this." How to approach it piece by piece.

MCT:

I'd say, I guess my writing habits, I used to have those big chunks of time and want to like, "Okay, this is my writing day. I'm going to be in this zone for the next four hours." Definitely the combination of having a family, working from home during the pandemic and now teaching full time has really pushed me to like it's just not possible to write that way unless I really start at 9:00 PM every night and work till midnight, which if I do that more than once a week, I'm a wreck. I'm not in my 20s anymore. I can't do that.

I have found... And this is in part, the National Center for Faculty Development and Diversity or Diversity and Development, the NCFDD has influenced me. They emphasize writing just small amounts of time, but regularly rather than waiting for the huge chunks to magically appear.

SF:

Yeah. What was that organization again? I haven't heard of it.

MCT:

It was something someone recommended to me, the University of Washington has a membership, an institutional membership. We can log in and they have webinars and they have forums and they have boot camps that they do. I have tried to do the like every morning, even if it's just 30 minutes or 40 minutes and it pushes you to break down those big projects into like, "Okay, what's the first step? What's one thing I can do?"

Maybe I can't re-envision the entire scope of the argument, but I can send those five emails about the image permissions that I need. It moves the writing along, even though that's not writing exactly.

SF:

I definitely need to transition into that. I've also been working full-time and teaching and I think in many ways, because during my dissertation work I was teaching, but I could take those long chunks of time. My work is incredibly archive based and so a lot of my time was parsing through archival material or actually traveling to archives. I think I felt like my work was on a very... It's not that it was on a big scale, but that it just took big chunks of time.

I'd spend the whole day in the library because I had a four-week fellowship at this library. I had to go and spend a whole day. I think now that I have other responsibilities that take up the 9:00 to 5:00, it definitely is the question of, when do I do it? Do I do 6:00 to 8:00 or do I do 9:00 to midnight like you're saying? I think that's been a big part of my postgrad life, is trying to not only figure out where to fit it in, but I think also if I want to fit it in.

Right now I look at my week sometimes and I'm like, "I could spend two evenings this week working on my writing or I could relax after my days." I think it would be better for me of having like... I always tell myself I'm going to do a writing happy hour. If I'm working from home, I'm normally done by 4:00, right? I'm rarely working actually until 5:00. So it's like what if I just made 4:00 to 5:00 each day my writing happy hour and that was the only thing I did during that one hour?

Because yeah, I definitely need that structure, but if I can't have the freedom myself to work all day, I need very closed structure like that.

MCT:

That makes me think of the question about routines. I don't have a set place or a set... Yes, I love my favorite tea, but for so much of this time period, the last few years, if I leave my office, then my children see me, so I can't go get tea. I can't go do those things. I have to stay in that room for better or worse, so it's very calendar-based, I'd say is what I use the routine of let me check my timeline of when do I need to have this draft out? Then what are the stages? Like, if I've got three weeks until that deadline, what's my target for this week? Then I look at that and say, "Okay. If that's my target for this week, what do I need to do today or what did I get done yesterday?" Sort of moving through, so it's like a routine of cross-referencing. Sounds terrible but I guess it's more fun if you have a fancy notebook because then you can cross-reference in something satisfying.

SF:

I am a big fan of the fancy notebook. I feel like I definitely try to #romanticize. I feel like the way everyone talks about romanticizing your life right now, it's like I definitely with writing will approach it, I guess, with the excitement that I actually bring to my work. I do feel like in times does correlate even just where I'm sitting if there's clutter on my desk, I am definitely one of those people that feels like starting is always the hardest part, I think for most people.

I have an easier time starting if I have a clear space in front of me, but I also have learned that if I just start, see and that's why I kind of do the word vomit. Even if I just start typing, "There's clutter, I can tell my dishes aren't washed. I don't want to be sitting here writing." Just getting it going when you can't have that has been something that I've tried to get better at.

I mean, so much of writing is willpower rather than any special writing knowledge or technique. I think that's been a big part of it lately, is just finding the will to start in whatever conditions that you have that morning or that night.

MCT:

Yeah. I think I do the same thing of I can do all those other things. I can go check that email or make the tea or do my laundry but first I have to write for 10 minutes. Setting a timer and just saying, "Whatever, I can do it in 10 minutes, but first I need to do this." Then usually finding by the time I get to minute eight or nine or 15, I'm in

it. Then I keep going and then the other trick is actually stopping when you say you will, so that you don't run into the next time thing of like, "Oh, now I need to be working on grading."

I guess my bad habit is sometimes dwelling too long of like I'm enjoying writing on paper with my silly pen. Then I stretch that out rather than saying, "Okay. Now it's time to just move on to the next section or move on and send it out for review." So, finishing projects. That's more where my energy is. I want a secret to how to finish a project rather than how to start it.

SF:

Yeah. How often do you work with pen and paper versus your laptop?

MCT:

The early stages, I like pen and paper because it lets me be messy and layer on top and slows down – because I can type faster than I can write. Then I have to actually be thinking while I'm writing instead of typing without thinking about it. Then, well, what I like to do is to draft in pen, type it into the computer, add to it a bit, print it out, mark it up and then retype it, or add it back in.

That switching from one mode to the other gets me unstuck or switching to a new notebook or a new format of paper or switching from Scrivener to a Word document helps me see things a little bit different perspective, I guess... which done to excess probably is also a crutch or a bad habit.

SF:

Yeah. No, it sounds like a great habit. I truly think one of the reasons I haven't been writing as much lately is because my full-time job is on a computer and grading is on a computer. I'm like, "There is no way that after hours and hours and hours of computer work, I am going to voluntarily sit down at my computer again." I think that's been part of it. I need to be better about printing things off.

I don't have a printer at home and all the time, I'm like, "I bet I'd get more done if I had a printer at home rather than relying on my office printer." I think too, especially during the summer, I'm like, "I don't want to be inside on my laptop. I want to be outside and yeah, even just printing off a draft and taking it to the lake and, again, romanticizing it in a way. Just making it so it doesn't feel like you are chained to your desk and to your laptop is really smart and I might have to try that.

MCT:

Yeah. I mean this morning it was also, there was that beautiful day, and I was sitting outside and where I was sitting, that café table was very shiny. The glare of my laptop just wouldn't have worked very well and so having a piece of paper and a pen. I think I do that a lot in terms of routines is trying to switch different modes, which also means that my writing projects tend to live in this weird, distributed place.

They exist in many versions and many formats all at once. Then I try to consolidate them towards the end.

SF:

You said you used Scrivener.

MCT:

Yes.

SF:

Which is something that I've picked up for my novel and have been really enjoying it for novel writing. But I tried to transfer all of my dissertation work into Scrivener and very quickly was like, "I can't." I feel like I need to start a new project in Scrivener. Trying to transfer all my notes and reorganize them, I really struggled with it. Have you enjoyed it for academic work?

MCT:

I came in midway through the dissertation, and it was useful for some of that consolidation. I work with some archival, but also a lot of published texts that are architects talking to each other, urban planning textbooks or handbooks, but it's in Russian primarily and so there's a translation phase of my research writing process. When I'm looking at the original, if it's clear enough copy to print out, I'll print it out, mark it up and then type in the notes of what my margin comments were. Then the document online has the English translation or the quotes, paraphrases. I've got little symbols I use to mark that. Scrivener was useful to keep multiple things loosely arranged so I could move them around. Because that was something that was part of my going from research to the finished dissertation is figuring out the structure of the piece, like thematic versus chronological wasn't an obvious choice. Figuring out how to make that work. I ended up moving around a lot of things and then

restructuring the chapters and splitting things in half and redoing them. Scrivener was good for that.

Then at some point I couldn't deal with Scrivener anymore because of formatting. I needed footnotes, I needed very specific things. I needed block quotes to stay block quotes. Then I moved back into Word and used that. Then I was using EndNote to keep track of citations and that worked okay. Also, there's weird things with Scrivener and EndNote and Word on Mac not always playing together very well or at least they used to. It's possible there's new and better versions and I just have an old version of a lot of software.

SF:

Me too.

MCT:

Let's see. Best piece of writing advice?

SF:

Yeah.

MCT:

The NCFDD, I find it's a little trite, the whole "write every day," but it is useful. Right now, I had a very busy quarter. I was teaching two classes, one of them on short notice and one of them I had taught before, one I hadn't. So I haven't written much at all for the last two and a half months. Feeling that like, "Oh, I have to remember where everything was or I have to remember what was my question? What was I working on? What was the direction I wanted this bit to go?" That takes a lot of time. Even if it was just 20 minutes a day when I was on the bus home, just writing one paragraph – I didn't do it – but that would've been nice. The best advice is to aim for that, even if you don't get there, to try for a regular writing practice rather than occasional binges.

SF:

Definitely. I think probably the best piece of advice that circulates a lot is a good dissertation is a done dissertation. I mean, one of my faculty members when I was struggling to just get things on paper, rather than floating in my mind and in my archival work really recommended that as you're saying every day, but if you can try and make it the same time so that you're not always struggling to fit it in,

so it feels more like an organic part of your day rather than stolen time from other parts of your day. I think that's something that I would like to work on.

I feel like it wasn't necessarily advice that someone gave me, but one of the things I have learned lately is how to try and make the other parts of my day less taxing or relax when I'm actually meant to relax so that I actually have energy to write whether it is in that moment, at the end of the day or yeah, on the bus ride home.

I feel like I've definitely noticed if I'm not checking my email, if I'm not on social media during lunch breaks, if I'm not constantly trying to cram my brain with input – or output – it'll be easier for me to write. And sometimes I know I'm tricking my brain, so I'll resist it. It'll be like, "How about you only do 10 minutes?" It's like, "No, because then I know I'm going to do an hour."

But I have had times where I've just stopped after 10 minutes and the 10 minutes have just been like I didn't really get anything done, but it was always like, "Okay, at least I tried." That's been a big part of it for me, but yeah, I think it really is just that daily hammering away. I remember my professor saying, "If you write two hours every day..." This is when I was dissertating so that's my focus. "If you write two hours a day, it will get done. It can't not get done if you're writing two hours a day." Because at that point I was just going around in circles, just being like, "I have ideas and they're just spinning. They're not moving forward towards a draft or anything like that."

It's like if you have to spin cycle for a while, that is also part of the writing process. It's a very necessary part of their process. But recognizing that – it's what I try to tell my own students when they come to me and they're like, "I just can't come up with a claim." I'm like, "Well, that's good. If you could immediately come up with your claim, it's not a very good claim." I think a lot of writing is just trying to stay confident in yourself and not totally throw in the towel.

I remember seeing a tweet on academic Twitter that I really enjoyed of trying to not let your emotional reaction to each day's work affect you or affect whether or not you think you belong or you have a career. I feel like I would get to that spot. I'd have a tough day of writing and start to feel those like, "This is worthless. This will never go anywhere. I'm clearly just not cut out for this."

Just remembering like, "Nope, okay. That's how today is going. Tomorrow at 8:00 AM or 4:00 PM, I will be back here and we'll see how tomorrow goes." It is a very fraught emotional process.

MCT:

Yeah. Two things came to mind, you were saying about the best dissertation is a done dissertation and applying that across the board of things don't have to be perfect. They just need to be done. Saying like, "Okay. I only have 15 minutes. What can I plausibly finish? What can I get done in that time that I have?" Because it feels so good to check something off even if it's not perfect.

It's like, "Oh, but at least it's like I sent that email. Maybe my wording could have been better, but it's done. It's sent. Now I can hear back from that editor next week." Then the other thought of it is so emotionally fraught, especially when we are also isolated, and the job market is so lousy, and the pressure on everybody... writing groups or having a writing buddy was both crucial to finishing my dissertation.

Then, since then making it something that feels like, "Oh, yeah, everybody has these struggles. It's because we're doing something that's hard or doing something that takes thought and energy and challenging ourselves." That's been, I guess, a good habit or a good grounding practice of having not just deadlines, but having camaraderie, having people that I do it with.

SF:

I had two incredible colleagues in English that I finished our dissertation together or for the most part. Yeah. Like you're saying it was so nice. Sometimes it would just be we'd text each other, "Let's write for an hour." A lot of times we'd meet up at Third Place and get coffees and actually physically write and then debrief. The Graduate Student Senate also had a writing group that we would do every Monday for four hours. We'd provide the coffee, but it involved the check-ins of like, where are you? That really did help.

I feel like that's definitely something I have felt post-Ph.D. of my colleagues are still my very close friends, but we're all in different careers, different paths. I think trying to find that sense of being willing to reach out again to people and say, "Hey, do you want to put something on the books?" Or at least do a weekly check-in to say, "What progress have you made?" I think that would really help. Also, I've seen the more international writing things that people organize

on Twitter. At least in my field, people will say, "Hey, I'm the only person working on this at my university. Is anybody else working on it? Do you want to swap works in progress?"

Those are all things that I feel like are in the back of my mind as things I could tap into over this summer. All the jokes on Twitter of like, "I'm already behind on my summer writing." I think everybody's trying to find those solidarity and yeah, like you said, camaraderie and accountability groups.

MCT:

Right. Of course, because University of Washington has the quarter system, some people have been on break and writing for a month already.

SF:

Oh, I know.

MCT:

There was a writing group that I did where it's more like everybody checks in. You say, "Okay, here's what I'm going to write on." Then more Pomodoro method of let's do a 25-minute session or let's do a 40-minute session and then check back in and there's small talk, not about the writing necessarily. Then it's just sort of everybody's working on their stuff in parallel, but at least we're all there together. That's more accountability.

Then Hope's writing group has been good also. Then I had a separate actual "let's swap chapters book proposals working on things." That was people who aren't in my field, but I know from a former funding, fellowship thing. The idea was to have an outside set of eyes or couple of different perspectives on our things and each month somebody would present. That was a deadline, but a friendly one.

The friendly, critical perspective was very helpful. I guess that's the audience sometimes of who am I writing for? Starting with friends and people who want me to succeed and then ranging to strangers in terms of conferences or other.

SF:

Yeah. I'm glad that this question was brought up because I do think that's part of my problem, is that right now I don't feel like I have

anybody I'm writing for. I think with the pandemic and finishing the Ph.D., I'm not sending my work to my faculty anymore, and I haven't been to a conference partly due to the pandemic, but partly because I started a full-time job and just wasn't submitting abstracts. It does feel like it's in a vacuum.

I know I get things done when I have a conference paper to write. I think that might be part of my plan, is actually looking at, "Okay, what could I feasibly do for conferences?" And using that as a kick-starter to getting back into it. I do a lot of public-facing work and I've definitely been more engaged this summer in writing for public-facing magazines and online publications like *Slate*. I think that has felt like the easier way to get back into my writing, is to have an audience that feels more real in my head.

I think it would be really nice to reconnect with colleagues to have that sense of who could actually be energized by my work? I had a really good writing group. My full-time job is at another university, and we had a faculty writing group where we did the *How to Write Your Article in 12 Weeks* book. I feel like frequently what I want is a step-by-step manual. That was fantastic to have. I didn't utilize it fully because I was also working full time, but that's something I've considered doing this summer. It has a daily checklist of like, "Here's what you do today. Here's what you do tomorrow." That can be really helpful for a starting point for getting unstuck.

I also really am very energized by hearing what other people are working on. I think that is part of it of one of my colleagues in history was talking about the use of telegrams in the Civil War. I mean, something so different than what I did, but just getting to listen to his work I found my own wheels turning. I think just trying to reengage, not only with the scholarly publications that are getting mailed to me still, but also just trying to find new ways to hear what people are working on and trying to rejoin that community rather than kind of feeling... Not like I left it, but just it hasn't felt as energizing being away from it.

MCT:

Yeah. I mean, I miss having a lecture series, attending something, hearing other people ask questions, hearing them think through the material. I'm hoping to get more of that in the next few years, because that is the conversational aspect of writing for me. I'm curious, so you said you are writing a lot, but it's not your work... Writing as a practice, I try to tell the students in my classes, whether

you're writing for a client or for a journal article or something, there's skills that transfer or there's ways to go about it that transfer. It caught my ear when you said that.

SF:

Yeah, definitely. I feel like right now I have parallel projects running with my writing, my own writing. I feel like that's also part of it. I remember going to a professional development talk in academia and it was like, "You need to pick three things to focus on for your entire year and that's it." I was like, "Oh no, I have three things for this week."

But I think that is part of it is like, "Ooh, I have an hour to write. Should I try and get this article published? Should I try and send this article out to *Slate*? Should I work on my creative writing? Should I be developing prompts?" I think that I know how to scaffold and reverse engineer a course like if I have these three goals, I am very good at saying, "What are the steps I need to take in order to take students through these steps?"

I know that's what I need to do for my own writing of like, "Okay, if this is my goal, on September 1st, I want to send this article out." I know I have the ability to do that reverse scaffolding, but I think I definitely just have some resistance to it right now.

MCT:

Yeah. I try to have goals versus tasks. Like this writing project that I'm working on right now, I guess if I had to name what I'm working on, it would be there's the book that needs to get moved along and has been languishing. There's a specific article that has a deadline and has an audience and has a draft, but it needs to be reworked to fit being an article rather than being a chapter and an edited volume. That's a theme. And then there's a secondary project that if I put in a new conference paper proposal, it's going to relate to that theme. I see it as part of the same little sphere of research or sphere of work, because sometimes it changes from the outside. It's not always me saying, "Oh, I'm going to do it this way." Instead, it's like, oh, suddenly the editors are saying, "Let's do it this way instead."

SF:

Yeah.

HS:

I'm wondering if you could say a little bit more about how you both manage that process, when there's an external pressure or an external force asking you to make changes, how you negotiate that, how you reconcile that?

SF:

Like feedback or like here's your deadline, go, or both?

HS:

Both.

SF:

Okay.

I really liked receiving feedback. I was very lucky to have really prompt and really strong feedback from my advisor during my dissertation. It always felt like a new launching point. In my own classes, I give my students deadlines, but I try to tell them, I'm like, "This is the deadline at which I will give you feedback on where you are." I think they're so like, "Turn the paper in. It has to be good or it has to be perfect." It's like, no, if you're actually engaging in the process of research, me telling you June 10th isn't going to make sure you are done or not done by June 10th. It's like give it to me when you've gone as far as you can with our outside work.

I really did enjoy that process during my dissertation of feeling like, "Okay, here's where I am. I'm kind of stuck." I mean, you want it to be good. You don't want your advisor to be like, "Oh, dear."

I really, really enjoyed having those moments specifically with comments on the document of saying, "Okay." I would always within my own document reply, if it was Microsoft comments and pretty much word vomit like, "Okay, I could move this here. I could do that."

I really enjoyed the feedback and I felt like with my dissertation, I did actually take more ownership over my work than I was used to doing. There were some suggestions that I did feel like I was like, "I hear that. I don't want to do that." It definitely felt very empowering to have that sense of, "We are now in conversation about this work." Rather than this more undergraduate and high school thing of like, "I hope my teacher gives me a good grade."

I think that's when I felt the most as if you are doing a Ph.D. to join the rank of faculty is like, "Okay, you are now becoming faculty's

colleagues and they're trying to help you be the most successful contributor to the conversation you can be." I really was lucky that I had comments that always were situated as how can we ensure that this is the best contribution?

In terms of deadlines, I am a major procrastinator. I need a deadline and I think that's why this summer for me, I'm actually looking forward to, because I have nary a deadline in sight. This is my most open summer I've ever had since I started grad school. I'm like, "Okay, I would like to develop more of an intrinsic writing process." Maybe look for a couple of things like conference proposals or things that I could submit to, but almost like what you were saying Maria, like a soft deadline. If I don't apply to that conference, it's okay. I don't need to beat myself up. Where during the Ph.D., I definitely had a lot of anxiety about hitting deadlines, applying for things – if I don't get this conference proposal in, it's going to have huge ramifications where I think in some ways the pandemic kind of put that into better perspective for me of like if I don't apply for the conference this year, it doesn't mean my career is now over.

But I definitely feel like I like having an external structure, whether that's just getting some thoughts from a friend or having a deadline, I'm not as intrinsically motivated with writing as I would like to be at least in my current working condition. I'm hoping I can change that this summer.

MCT:

I recently got some advice, a forwarded link to an article online that we've all heard before, this idea that projects take as long as you give them. Your work is going to take as long as you give it. The flip side of that is always double your estimate of how long you think something is going to take. This person was writing saying, "We've all crammed something in at the last minute and then wrapped it up and sent it off."

So there is a way that if you know it's going to be only this much time, you just change what your expectations are and you say, "Okay, this is my deadline and whatever I get done by that point, I send off." I've been trying to do that rather than procrastinating. Lowering my expectations of, "I need to be working on it, but maybe it won't get all the way to what I imagine, but at least I'll have started already." Because certain things – I do have that feeling right now, that I either need to get an article in a peer-review journal, get my book proposal accepted, do these things, otherwise, I'm going to end

up with different life pattern, different career, and I'm not quite ready to give up on that yet, wanting the research that I've done to go out into the world and have a life beyond my laptop. Those are the motivations of something needs to get out there.

I've gotten better at quick turnaround for an abstract or a proposal of like, okay, it's not my best ever, but at least it's out there. Let them decide. Let them figure out if they want it or not. In part – because during the dissertation, I was two weeks before the filing deadline and there were some personal things going on and I wrote to one of my advisors, I was like, "I don't think I can make it. I need to take that extra semester."

She said, "No, you are so close. You need to just finish, you need to do this." That was a hard deadline and that was very useful. Like, yes, there's a typo on page 234, but that's the nature of a dissertation and it's okay. It's that balance between some things take the time they need, as you were saying about cycling through and exploring options and finding a new way to think about it. Then sometimes you do have to just buckle down and finish it.

SF:

Hammer it out.

MCT:

Yeah.

SF:

Yeah. I'm completely with you there. It felt like such a different process between working on the dissertation and then I wrote the introduction for edition of *Frankenstein*, which, I mean, that was one of my dreams when I wanted to become a literature scholar was to get to write the introduction to a book. I got this offer. It was 2020 and I had like three months maybe. I was like, "I can do it." I'm like, "Okay, it's a 4,000 word essay. I can do that in three months." And I should have quadrupled the time I thought it would take between research and writing. Also, I ended up taking up a care position in my family I of course, was not expecting. Then the pandemic was the pandemic and I started a full-time job. I ended up finishing... I'll never forget this. I ended up finishing this introduction during the wildfires of 2020 when it was complete smoke outside and the sun was orange. I went to a retreat and I just sat there and wrote, and it was so interesting because it was such a different writing process. It

was the like, "I have to get this to my editor." I asked for an extension, she said, "You can have an extra day." It was like, "Okay, I have to get this in." I feel like it's the procrastinator's dream and also their curse of like, "Now I know I can do it. I did get it cranked out."

At the same time, it very much felt like the difference between trying to, like you said, accept what can I say in this timeframe? I'm happy with the essay that I wrote, but I definitely will always read that essay within the context of some of the deepest pessimism I've ever experienced in my life. In many ways *Frankenstein's* the perfect book. I'm glad I was writing an introduction to *Frankenstein* and not to *Pride and Prejudice* during that time because it at least felt fitting.

But that was a good lesson for me to say that like, "Okay, yes, this is being published. Yes, it has my name on it. Yes, my friends and family are buying it." I wanted it to be perfect, but I don't even know what that would've looked like. I don't know if I would've ever sent it to my editor if they hadn't been like, "We need it tomorrow, you have to give it to us." I think it's a good lesson of there is no perfect with writing. A good introduction is a done introduction.

MCT:

I do have another example. Again, it's the conversation with the editors getting back to Hope's question about external impetus. I had a short piece that was accepted. The proposal was accepted. It was going to be a thousand-word essay in a round table, a number of us all in a journal together. I gave them my initial draft and it was too long and they said, "Okay. Cut it down."

Then in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, I had very strong feelings about what was going on in the world that then I was trying to fold into this piece of writing. The second draft I sent to them had a lot of strong statements, more than I had in the first draft, and they didn't love it. They said, "This is really different than your first version. We liked that better. This feels too experimental. This feels not like the journal."

To sit with that and to separate my emotional, like, I need to express what I think of the world versus what kind of writing piece is this right now, right here. I guess I had three or four people that I sent it to and I was like, "Am I off the rocker? Is this fair or should I be submitting this piece somewhere else instead?" Just talking it through with people who were friends and colleagues or who I felt got where I was coming from, that then I eventually talked myself back into a place of saying, "I can meet them halfway. I can find a

compromise for this piece of writing that is satisfying to the editors and satisfying to me." Because it felt like some of the revisions they made, some of the suggestions were like, "No, that was my favorite bit, or that was the important part." Then eventually after a week of being very emotionally unsettled, I was able to get back to it and send them a third draft that they were quite happy with.

I'm going to look for a new place for those other parts of it that came up. Maybe it's a conference paper, maybe it's a different format or a different journal, but it took a little conversation with people and a little patience with myself to get back to where I could revise it and not feel like it was a terrible betrayal of what I'd been trying to say.

SF:

Right. Right. I think that stepping away and then coming back, that's why I would really to cut some of my procrastination habits because that ability to walk away and then come back with fresh eyes is so important.

MCT:

It's like knowing when is the moment to shift from idea generation and floating and exploring and playing to be like, "Okay, I have to close some of those doors. I can't keep all of them open. I'm going to just pick one and go for it." That moment of decision is different than procrastinating of, "I know what I need to do, but I'm going to do it later."

I guess that's also kind of, when I get stuck or find myself in a rut, to switch either to talk to somebody new about it, to write about it in a new format or sometimes literally a new piece of paper, a different shape of paper. Use a crayon instead of a pen. Use a different word program on my computer instead of whatever I had been doing. I use my whiteboard sometimes, one of those really big whiteboards on the wall and then take a picture of it.

SF:

That's really smart. I should do that. What I would always do during my dissertation is I would write a freak-out email to my advisor, and I would just be like, "I'm trying to work through chapter two and here's the problem." Just totally freak out. In the process of trying to explain it to her of what I was trying to do and why it wasn't working by the end of the email, I would be like, "Okay, I figured something out."

Then I would click delete, and I would very rarely send those to her. It was that process of trying to not think of writing as, what am I trying to say? But how am I communicating what I'm trying to say? Or how do I get this down on paper so that someone else could read it? That's what I need for my thought process, is just the idea of, okay, I'm not trying to think about what I'm thinking. I'm trying to explain to someone else what I'm thinking and that clarifies it for me.

That's why I always tell my students, I'm like, "Even if you feel like you don't need help, just come and speak about the ideas." I use the voice memo on my phone or the dictation tools on my phone or laptop a lot. That way I can pace and actually word vomit and just talk to myself about what I'm trying to do.

Advice to other writers, weird things trigger breakthroughs. The biggest dissertation breakthrough I ever had weirdly enough, my dad bought a two-foot motorcycle and was like, "Do you want to go on a motorcycle ride?"

I was a little like, "I don't know..." But I was like, "Sure, let's go." It was a four-hour motorcycle ride and I sat there and I swear, I rethought my entire dissertation and there was something about not being able to do anything. I couldn't write. I couldn't speak. But I could think. I think also that process of moving, I always got the advice during my dissertation of wake up and walk for an hour and think, and then come home and write.

Last summer I went paddle boarding almost every day. I live right by a lake. That's also when I've had most of my ideas for writing. I've just done, like, if I need to think through something, I cannot have access to any electronic device. I can't have my phone. I can't even have my headphones when I'm on the water. I think being completely disconnected and just sitting with my mind and knowing I can't go write something down, that's when I've had my true writing breakthroughs.

I'm very glad that it's summer and I can hopefully be out on the water again because sometimes I want to be in the Suzzallo Library feeling very academic, but if I'm stuck in a rut, I definitely need to be as far away from my technology as I can be.

MCT:

Yeah. That was something in writing, both when I was doing my qualifying exams and then when I was doing my master's thesis way

back when, when I knew I needed to just really get something done and sustain an intense amount of work for a period of time, I did set a timer and I think I would write or I'd edit or I'd do something for 50 minutes. Then I had a 10-minute walk.

I would go, and it was just the same five blocks, but I would take a different route through those five blocks and did that. Then came back down, sat down for another hour and a half wrote and then did another 10-minute walk. I had to walk, and I had to do the writing, and that let me maintain that level of intensity and finish it and get it submitted.

When I'm in a rut, sometimes yeah, taking a walk, I've definitely called myself and left a voicemail. Or, this is from a long time ago when I was doing creative writing workshops, they said get a big piece of paper or something different and a crayon or something and like, "The thing I'm trying to say is," and then fill the rest of that blank, which might be from Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird*.

SF:

I did that with my students literally last week. I had them switch from, "my topic is," or "I'm thinking about," I had them switch from "I'm thinking about" to "my point is, what I'm trying to say is." I saw earlier, what's one piece of literature that changed your perspective? I mean, *Bird by Bird*, for sure. I was given "Shitty First Drafts" as a, "You should teach this to your comp students." I was like, "Oh, I love this essay. I'm going to teach it."

Then I picked up *Bird by Bird* and have since given it to many of my writerly friends. I think that was one of the first pieces I ever read that made writing approachable and made it so that it wasn't like you're either a genius and you have it or you don't have it and you shouldn't try. I really appreciated *Bird by Bird*.

MCT:

That's great. It's fun that we have the same point of reference.

There was also John McPhee, so going back a generation or two in terms of writing inspiration had a series of essays in *The New Yorker* about writing as craft. One was about revisions and editing and one was about deciding what the structure of a piece should be.

Because sometimes I find the difference between fiction and non-fiction, it does make a difference in terms of I can't just sit and do free writing for 45 minutes because at some point I am making

stuff up, and as a historian, there's a limited amount of making stuff up that's okay versus "I can write about things." And I guess I outline a lot. That's where the creativity or the choices come into it of like, how do I tell this story? What is the sequence of introductions, of connections, of relating bits to other bits? I like to do that generally off the computer and sometimes with squiggles and diagrams and Post-it notes that I can move around rather than in a really strict outline or text-based format.

SF:

That's what I figured out on the motorcycle ride was my dissertation felt like an amorphous blob. I had chapters in my proposal, but they were all interconnected. Things I was trying to keep separate, I realized I couldn't tell these stories separately, but I could not figure out for the life of me how to tell them in three chapters, where did one start? Where did one begin?

I think I had done so much of that work on my laptop with the text and the archival material and getting the chance to step away and think more about, how do I tell the story?

I do think it's actually one of the things I'm most proud of in my dissertation was coming up with what I thought was a creative way to tell a story that felt just like a big pool of information, right? How can I draw a narrative from this when it all seems to be in the same realm? Yeah. That was definitely a good part of my process.

Do you have a piece of... Oh, I think we're both going for it. Yeah, yeah, yeah. A piece of advice?

MCT:

I mean, I think the advice of continuing to read. Don't stop reading, even if at some point you stop folding it into the dissertation because a first version has to go out the door. Even if it's like, "Yes, the second version will be the book and then the third version will be something else." Being done feels really good. That's been something that I wish I'd known or been able to hold in my thoughts earlier, just how good it feels to send something off and be done with it, even if that's not great.

Even if I can see that it could be better because I think about that sometimes that if I couldn't imagine it being better, if I was like, "No, this is as good as it gets." That would feel like a limit in my imagination. It doesn't have to be all the things because it's impossible to achieve all the perfection in one... I'm not going to

close the field of my study just by writing something so amazing. That's not the point. The point is to get it out there and have the conversation and have it be shared and talked about and have someone push back at me. I

think if I had one piece of advice, I wish I'd kept better notes as I read. Again, not perfect notes, not trying to annotate everything, but I do wish I had a slightly better index of like I know I saw something somewhere, but where was it? That takes a lot of time to go back and be like, "Okay, who was it that was writing about this?"

I do find my memory is pretty good. Like when I print out something and then rediscover my first version of notes on it, I've often highlighted the exact same things. I've made the same comments in the margin, so that's not changing, but just remembering, where was it that I saw that? A little bit more organization, not trying to be perfect, not trying to create my own archive, I just need to have a system.

Then also being okay to recognize that the system changes sometimes. What your practice is, will shift based on what you need. How I go about writing one thing, it probably won't last, so it doesn't have to be the be-all end-all of annotation systems because it just needs to be good enough for now.

SF:

Yeah. I think for me, I think a lot of my advice that I would actually give a grad student in my department we've talked about, right? Like find your people, set up writing accountability, if you can. I think realizing all the things that aren't writing that are writing, right? Like, whether it's labeling the photos you took at the archive with your 15 minutes that day, or – one of my most useful things I did was have a giant document that I just called "major connections." It was pretty much my synthesis document of when I would read a new academic piece I would take the quotes that felt really important and I'd put them in a category that I'd already created, "public/private divide," something like that. That's where I'd start when I would get stuck, I'd know like, okay, in this chapter, I need to talk about this novel's relationship with the public and how it facilitated that.

When I wouldn't really know where to start going back and seeing like, "Okay, well here is what these eight different scholars had to say about it. How is what I'm saying fitting into what they're saying?" It helped me remember that technically I'm writing because I'm contributing to that conversation rather than just I'm stuck. I

don't know what to say. Still to this day, when I need to feel inspired or if I do see a conference proposal and I'm like, "What do I have?"

I go back to that document, because that felt like one of the most scholarly things that I did was just create what felt like a cheat sheet to my field. I started it in my comp. I need to add to it. Now I'm realizing, I'm like, "Ooh, the last two years I haven't been adding to it." That's understandable. I can forgive myself for that.

MCT:

Yeah. I found in terms of advice and meaningful writing help, something I read that helped me, *How to Write a Thesis* by Umberto Eco.

SF:

Ooh, I have not read that, but I've heard of it.

MCT:

Yeah. It finally got translated into English in 2014,2015. What I liked is that it's not about the latest software package, and it's not about how to use this or that. He talks about writing the thesis that is possible for you. That was very useful advice of like if all you have available is a local library and it has this kind of section, you write based on what you have accessible. That it can still be a thesis, or it can still be a dissertation that way.

That was useful for me for grad school and then now thinking about, what does it mean to write about Soviet urbanism and architecture? If I probably can't go to any of those archives or those cities or talk to those people in the next 10 years, if ever, we'll see what happens.

That was a book that I found very useful in terms of just seeing someone's practice and seeing their advice and seeing their regrets, because we often have to do something and then be dissatisfied with it because we learned something in the process. It's not that there's some magic method out there that nobody regretted once they knew it. Everyone always has a research like, "Oh, it didn't quite fit or I followed this path for a bit and then it didn't work out." You're not worrying about regretting stuff.

SF:

Yeah.

HS:

There you have it. Thanks for listening to this episode of Write for You. 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 faculty, students, and staff, you can find us online at depts.washington.edu/owrc. In the meantime, for myself and everyone at the OWRC, happy writing.

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