



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

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

Hello and welcome back! Today, I'm excited to bring to you a conversation with two new friends of the show, doctoral candidate Yoli Ngandali and master's student Glenys Ong Echavarrí. This was recorded in April via Zoom in the midst of public health lockdown, so you may hear a bit of background noise from time to time, although in different programs, Yoli and Glenys both share a commitment to public-facing scholarship. So, I'm excited to have them both on to talk about their experience writing both within and beyond the confines of academia. Here are Yoli and Glenys to introduce themselves.

Yoli Ngandali: [00:01:11]

Hi, my name is Yoli Ngandali. I am a fifth-year PhD student in archeology.

Glenys Ong Echavarri: [00:01:19]

Hi, I'm Glenys. I am a first-year museology student and I also work at the Burke Museum in the archeology department.

HS: [00:01:30]

So excited to have them both on. Without further ado, let's dive in.

GOE: [00:01:36]

Yoli, what is your writing process like?

YN: [00:01:40]

Thank you for asking that. Um, this has changed over time. I um, starting off as an undergrad, I – a lot of my writing process was, um, procrastination. A lot of my writing process was trying to get a draft out as soon as possible, but as I came into graduate school, I definitely started doing a lot more drafts. So, first draft was never the best draft and being able to move through many different iterations of a project. My writing process also includes doing more outlines and really breaking them down, breaking down each section into different parts. And then, um, also a free writing. So, when I'm getting kind of stuck on a certain thing, I definitely do a lot of free writing. All of this happens over several days. I try not to procrastinate as much as... as I can and move forward into doing things in smaller chunks and that really helps to get some, some new ideas flowing through. What about you? What's your writing process like?

GOE: [00:02:48]

Yeah, like you could change a lot over time. I think when I was in, I guess it comes out of high school, I would, I was very used to writing everything at once at a set point in time and kind of in a really linear way because essays were exams, we had to sit down and just do exactly that. But in college, it was a lot more, you know, having a plan out and stuff and I wasn't used to that and I thought that that was the best way for me to work would be to just sit down and write everything in the way that I originally wanted to structure it and kind of just everything coming out at once and that just really wasn't sustainable. And like you, as time has gone by, I've learned the value of outlines and I'm still not good at drafts. In my mind, I'm always like, "I'm just going to write this once and it'll be perfect." But that's never the case. I'm very bad at asking for feedback on my writing. I try not to do it even though I should, but yeah, I think definitely outlines have been my friend and I think I've learned a lot more about, like you said, free-writing, which I call "word vomiting," but free-writing sounds better. But yeah, and then kind of learning that writing can be restructured, and ideas can be moved around. I kind of just sort of cobble things together and as I write I realized there might be a better way to place things, like introduce an idea earlier or regroup it or something. So it's definitely gone from, like, a more sort of one directional flow to like, okay, write different parts and then see what you can make.

YN: [00:04:31]

I agree. When I'm taking notes, I definitely take notes on themes and then they go into the outline based on those themes and then to actually create a draft, I kind of put those transitional themes together to create that first draft. A lot of those notes, like I said, do come from that, that free-write. And so, I definitely have to take on to that next draft or else it won't make that much sense cause a lot of my free-writing is just speaking out loud and just trying to get words on paper.

GOE: [00:05:05]

Yeah, I definitely do the same where I kind of just like, okay, these are the main ideas I'm going to tackle and I'm going to write them down because I don't want to forget any of them and make sure that I hit all of these different points, and then trying to find the best order in which to do things and group things together as arguments and then going from there.

YN: [00:05:25]

Yeah, I agree. And I feel pretty good about that. I mean, I've also noticed that... I write best at night, so my writing process is definitely, um, at home at night. I don't necessarily like to go to coffee shops to write or anything like that. I like to be comfy either in my office or in my bed. And that usually happens in the, in the dead of night.

GOE: [00:05:49]

Yeah. I find that I write best on deadlines, which is terrible, and I should not do that and I'm trying to move away from that, but definitely I am a procrastinator. I need to feel the pressure. And I wish I wasn't that way and I think I'm going to try and train better habits, but yeah. I, I am just naturally more productive later in the day as well. And at night, I think. But maybe because at that same time I feel that pressure being like I should really be going to bed. So, the middle of the night kind of serves that function of deadline for me.

I do, I think I used to write a lot more in coffee shops and places like that, but I found that I need silence, like absolute silence. But I do like being around other people. In my undergrad, that was a – one of the libraries had an absolute quiet room and you could sit in there and there'll be a bunch of people and you not supposed to make any noises. That didn't stop some people from answering phone calls in the absolute quiet room, but that was a good space for me. But I think I need variety because I've gone from there to like a kind of more cafe

like environment to having to write by myself in my room at home. I don't know if one of them works better for me than the other.

YN: [00:07:13]

Yeah, I tried to a few different things, and with the cafe environment I found that actually editing is a little bit easier for me. Rather than the starting a new process or starting a new writing, um, uh, piece, it's more...it's more in the editing process once things have already been written. And then if I print it out and actually go through and do a lot of the copy editing, that happens more likely at the, at a coffee shop then, um, at home. Yeah. So how would you describe yourself as a writer?

GOE: [00:07:45]

The first thing I wrote here was, "I've had better days." But basically, I think -- I'm not sure if this is true and I don't often go back to read old papers -- um, but I, I think I used to write stronger papers maybe, but definitely my writing used to be less readable. Um, and there has been a big change, I think mostly because I didn't grow up in the US and I was very used to writing to... my instructors were all like old British men and then coming to the US and submitting papers, I found like the American style was kind of different. Um, and then I took a gap year in the middle of college and that also made me change my approach. So, I would say it's been a change and I think I write a lot more for readability now. I think now my biggest priorities are usually to be able to summarize and to allow my readers to follow the ideas easily. What about you?

YN: [00:08:48]

Yeah, so for me it's a learning and relearning process. Um, very similar to you, it's always -- there's always been changes in, in the writing process and the way that I am a writer. So, when I first started, I, I really enjoyed writing from a creative writing type of process, like through high school, and then into the beginning of college was all in creative writing. I never really had a foundation in any sort of research writing. And then, then learning in, um, early college years to do more technical writings, 'cause I come from a more animation background and a lot of computer technical writing. So then relearning from creative writing into technical writing, and then now in grad school learning, um, academic writing processes. And so it's always been, this ... this new learning and relearning every single time. And so these are

some things that I'm still working on, you know, to this day and really finding my voice. And I, I don't know if I found it just yet, but I feel like every draft and everything that I do comes a little bit closer to what that looks like.

GOE: [00:09:58]

Yeah, I'm glad you brought up different styles of writing or writing for different purposes. I did take like a creative writing class my last semester in undergrad and it was really fun. Um, I haven't done anything like that since. But, um, my version I guess of technical writing is writing for the museum context. And I've been doing a lot of that recently where, you know, it's really important to document everything, every single thing you've done. Um, so that collection the staff in the future, 10 years, 50 years, whatever, and know what you did and why and the reasoning behind certain decisions. It's very important to have all of that written down. And I try to do that in kind of a clear, systematic way and not be too descriptive or narrative or anything like that, just so that it will translate well in the future.

Um, so I think that kind of technical writing has made me, um -- yeah, has made me more aware of readability. I think it has actually changed the way I take field notes in archeology, you know, working from the collections perspective. When I was a field school student learning how to do archeology, to dig, you know, it was, we were told to write notes, but I didn't really know what to write down. Um, and then it was really only, as you know, working in a museum, I realized, "Oh, this is the type of information that's needed for, for the future." So definitely one area in which my writing has changed, sort of having new considerations.

YN: [00:11:37]

And it's definitely that audience. Like, who are you writing for? And so, you know, with those field notes you're writing for future researchers and you're writing for future scholars. And um, right now a lot of the things that I'm writing for are grant agencies and um, just trying to out what are the ways that they would like me to kind of shift my, my topic into ... into what fits for their particular, uh, guidelines. And so that's something that I'm still working through on how to do that for these different contexts, whether it be National Science Foundation or, um, National Geographic, they all have different, you know, ideas of what that looks like, and so, um, being able to reorient my research design and my research topic towards that or whatever I'm writing for

is really important. And then being able to translate that into a more public-facing way of, um, explaining my work.

HS: [00:12:37]

It would be interesting to hear you both talk a little bit more about how you do that.

GOE: [00:12:44]

Um, yeah. My job, without going too much into the details about it, is really having to translate a lot of technical, really specific data up to people who don't have a lot of time/attention to be reading, you know, like a 20-page report or something. People just don't have the time to do that. So, what I do is kind of pretend that I'm someone who knows nothing about the topic. Would they be able to follow everything that I've introduced? Like new ideas? Would they be able to understand it? And then occasionally I will get Mikhail to read it and tell me if he understands what I'm trying to get at. Um, because it is difficult to really remove yourself and be like, "Is this understandable to somebody who has no context or background about it?"

YN: [00:13:32]

Yeah, I agree. I felt like you said that really nicely. Um, being able to figure out like a...a strategy for time and you know, level of reading and then just commitment to that, especially in a social media context and um, different types of blog posts. Those are the types of strategies that we use as well. And just being able to say that even if you do not have a background in archeology or a background in whatever we're talking about at that time, just you'll be able to engage with the content... And I find it very interesting to see how many more people actually do engage, once you either, you know, add more images, bring that language, um, like get the jargon out of your, um, work and... and just summarize in a way that says like, "Why does this matter?" I think that that's really helpful and important.

GOE: [0014:28]

Yeah, I think a lot about tone. Um, because your tone, you know, for your writing where the professor is your audience versus a work email where it's a colleague, or your counterpart in another museum or organization, or you know, social media, you're going to take to totally different tones to those different styles of communication, levels of

communication. Um, and this comes in – I was thinking the last time I thought about this really in depth was um, writing exhibit labels. So, do you want to right at the point where you know, a grade school kid can follow along? Do you want to use academic level writing, academic level terms, in exhibit labels and then get, you know, have an explanation and a different definition somewhere else? I think it's very healthy to have kind of have that mental exercise and really consider if you're doing all this research, does it matter if it's not accessible to other people? And then I think ... a big thing that's really helpful mean writing is how to distill it and come up with a good summary so that, you know, your work or whatever your message is... is usable and digestible. I try to do that.

YH: [0015:45]

Well said.

GOE: [00:15:46]

Um, so what is one thing you struggle with or wish you did better?

YN: [00:15:48]

Oh, that's a really good question. I think that kind of ties into what I was saying before about learning and relearning different styles. And so right now what I am struggling with is, um, writing for academic audiences. Being able to really bring forward a lot of the, um, the grammar and structure of how, um, academics write. And especially, you know, um, since I am writing grants right now, to be able to write to get that, to get that money. So, um, being able to go through that has been a challenge. And so, um, mostly what I, like I said, I start with the free-write, move into the outline, and then from there really start to build that structure of the whole and just making sure that I have enough time to do all of that. And so, um, again, that kind of comes into the whole procrastination thing. And so, being able to really plan out ahead as much as possible is something that I need to keep on working with and keep on, um, making deadlines for myself.

GOE: [00:16:57]

Yeah, I have similar thoughts. I think, um ... I would just wish I started earlier. Just at all times, I should have started earlier. I think the mistake I made for the first assignment that I turned in for graduate school is that, you know, because I'm at a position in my career, in my

life, where I'm more grounded in the material and I'm more knowledgeable about the field. I was like, "Oh, okay, I know what I'm going to write. I know how I'm going to structure this. I know my argument's going to be, so it won't take me that long to write it down." And then of course when I started writing it, I realized that, you know, my argument was changing, I needed to restructure things or take it from a different angle, or actually one component of it didn't work at all. So, had I started earlier, I would have figured all that out first. So, kind of not relying on what's in your head and realizing that it doesn't – it's not anything until you put it to paper or, you know, a Word document.

YN: [0017:57]

Yeah. And being... and being realistic with yourself on how long it actually takes. So I, you know, even if you do block out a certain amount of time and say, "Okay, well the introduction is actually only going to take me an hour," well actually it'll probably be closer to three or more, you know. So those are -- just being very aware of how long things actually take.

GOE: [00:18:19]

Yeah. And I think not relying on how long it took me to do a similar thing earlier because I'll end up being like, "Well, I ... only took me, like, a couple of hours to do that the last time." But I forget that it was because I was, like, totally stressed and it was not a good work environment and really, I do need more time. But in my mind, I'm like, "I only needed a couple hours the last time."

YN: [0018:42]

Yup. We're still working on it even though we've been doing this for so long. Still working on it.

But, um, kind of moving into the next question, though, you know, what has influenced this and my approach to writing and has helped quite a lot for me has been the uh, National Center for Faculty Development and Diversity. Um, this has been a really great resource that is available to, um, University of Washington students and it's just a really, uh, great program that helps you really become aware of those internal and external barriers to writing and really sets forward a... a really great structure to be able to break down some of those different barriers. I mean, a lot of what we had already talked about,

you know, what are those internal barriers to procrastination? What are the external barriers to actually being in, you know, being focused and ready to write? And they really – I feel like they did a really great job of being able to break those down into manageable chunks. And so, using those resources and using, you know, the resources of my friends, my cohort in my department, and other writing groups, that's really been helpful for me to actually structure my day-to-day, you know, or weekly writing goals and stuff like that. What about you? How did you change your approaches to writing over time?

GOE: [00:20:12]

Um, I think I still build a lot ... or really draw from a foundation that I got before college. So in secondary school in Singapore, which would be like junior high I guess, or high school in the US we had -- and I don't know if this is a common exercise in English classes in the US -- but we would often get like a passage that you have to turn into like a sentence, maybe, like, sometimes, like, a five-word phrase or something like that. And I think that exercise makes you really think about the utility of every word, every sentence, and what the main ideas are. And then you slowly pare it down to something that summarizes the whole passage. And I think just that exercise, having to do that and having a teacher who was really good at helping us identify and develop those skills, I think has actually served me well even today. And yeah, having that foundational skill is good.

And anybody can do that, you know, outside of a class you can just go to an article, any piece of writing and try to find, you know, what parts of it are just like evidence or examples, and what's the topic statement. I think that's just a really good skill to have. And even though you're editing someone else's writing, I feel like it makes you a stronger writer.

YN: [00:21:28]

Yeah, that's a really great thing to do just because I -- I've done that with abstracts and being able to take what the author is trying to say within the article and breaking that down into something smaller, and so when I'm creating like an annotated bibliography that's very similar to what you're saying there, but I never got that in a secondary school or in any sort of, um, high school experience. So, that would be really great to have that foundation there. And yeah, I'm still learning how to do that, but that's a really great skill to keep on trying with.

GOE: [00:22:02]

Yeah. I think reading other people's writing and being critical of it, so, like having to edit other people's work, helps me as a writer.

YN: [00:22:13]

Trying to think here. One of the things that I would like to work on, and I've seen this happen, um, is being able to do that “write 30 minutes every day” or, you know, working on a certain thing every day. I am not there yet. I have done certain, like, spurts of that before. But um, that is something that I know definitely does work. You know, when you're working on a particular topic and writing just a small little bit every single day, it really becomes, um, so much better by the end. But creating a practice of that has been, um, really hard to do and I would love to keep on trying with that. We've tried that in different writing courses for me, and through, um, the NCFDD materials as well. They have like a two-week bootcamp where you write every single day and it's definitely helpful. It's just being able to keep that ... to keep that practice going every... every day.

GOE: [00:22:15]

Yeah. I've never tried that writing for half an hour every day. I think I'm very bad at sticking to like small windows of time because when I do get started on something, I'm the kind of person who likes to hang onto it and just like do that until I stop being productive or it stops being interesting to me. So, I think if I had tried that, I imagined that I would either, like, write for 10 minutes and, like, I'm not getting anything out of this, or end up writing for like two or three hours. Uh, so I dunno, maybe I should try that. I don't... I don't if it will work for me. But do you find that it works for different people regardless of their working style and writing style?

YN: [00:23:52]

Right. Um, you know, I think it... I think it doesn't work for everybody. I don't think that it's something that will, you know, if you stick to it, you're just going to be a writing superstar, writing, you know, 30 minutes a day. I think that it definitely has a lot to do with your, you know, internal and external factors and writing styles and stuff like that. But if you are, you know, struggling with anything, I feel like that might be a good way to change it up if... if you feel like changing it up. But also, most of the time is just being really, um, aware of, you

know, what are those different things that are... are good for you and not so great for you when it time to sit down and write

GOE: [00:24:32]

Yeah. I was just thinking that, you know, even if I, someone would try that and it really didn't work out for them, then that would at least create an awareness of what working style is the most productive for that person. So, maybe an exercise like that. It sounds like it would be useful for anybody to at least try and then either it becomes part of your habits or it shows you what your actual habits are.

YN: [00:24:56]

Yup. Mostly just being aware of what works and doesn't work, you know. Um, and then sticking with that if, if... if it does work, stick with it.

GOE: [0025:07]

Yeah.

YN: [00:25:08]

So Glenys, what is something that you've learned about writing that you wish more people knew?

GOE: [00:25:13]

Um, I think it's -- I think it's pretty common where people try to write, you know, the ideal sentence in their head right away. Um, it's definitely a journey that I had where I was like, well, you know, like I said earlier, I want to write in a linear way. I want the sentences to come out the way I structure them. I want them to emerge, fully formed. Um, which I think most people realize is not sustainable. And I definitely have found that, you know, I ended up losing ideas when I try to do that. So, I think what we both do, where we free-write, is a good strategy. And I think it's something to think about earlier. I think as an undergraduate, if I had started out that way, that might've been better for me. And then, I think what I wish everyone knew was kind of, just think about readability more and really keep your reader in mind. Don't use 20 words if you can use five words. What about you?

YN: [00:26:17]

Yeah, I agree. I feel like for the longest time I thought that, you know, when you see something written, that that was just how they wrote it. No. There were so many drafts involved. There was a lot of time involved. They asked other people to read the drafts. Um, and so that would be, is something that when you see writing in any sort of publication, whether if it's in a journal or online, most of the time they are pretty heavily edited and somebody – and somebody else's eyes looked at that and said, “This makes sense,” or “it does not make sense.” And so, um, something that I wish that I knew, you know, from the get-go is that, you know, drafts, drafts, drafts. And so that's something that I'm continuing to work with and, and becoming, um, less self-conscious about other people reading those drafts because that's how you make things better.

GOE: [00:27:09]

I need to learn that lesson. I don't -- really don't get feedback on drafts very often. I'm still at that point where I'm like, “I'll write it and I'll read through it myself a couple of times and then I'll turn it in.” But I am, yeah, I hate reading people's comments about my writing, and I need to get a lot better at it. But yeah, even, I mean, when I get comments back from instructors, I, like, never want to open the document. Even when you know, Khail sitting next to me, I'm like, “Don't. Don't look.” Um, but yeah, I think... So, that's a lesson that I need to learn from you.

YN: [00:27:46]

Well, no, I'm still... I'm still learning and this is still new territory to me. And I wish I would have known it sooner that I could work in and, um, process this. But yeah, I definitely am, you know, part of more writing groups and it has turned writing into a little bit more of a social activity rather than an individual activity, and that's helped a lot.

GOE: [00:28:11]

You know, I thought that getting comments and stuff back on your writing was something that was really only going to happen in school, like undergraduate or graduate, or whatever. But I... In my job, I've definitely gotten, you know, written reports or letters, emails, whatever, and then gotten comments back from either my boss, or my boss's boss, or boss's boss's boss. And it's been equally difficult to get that

critique. But then also really helpful because again, like getting that new set of eyes, someone who doesn't know every minute detail of what you're doing. Getting those comments is helpful. It's difficult, but it's... it's always helpful.

YN: [00:28:50]

I agree.

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

GOE: [00:28:56]

Um, writing is hard. Um, I feel like that really embodies the struggle. But I, I -- yeah, I dunno. I think my... my favorite piece of advice or tip to give is what I said earlier about, um, learning to summarize and learning to edit other people's writing. I just have found it as a really good skill to have.

YN: [00:29:19]

And for me I would say try to figure out what gets you into that flow state. What makes you excited to write? What time of the day works best for you? What is your learning -- what is your writing environment? And then being able to ask for help if you need it. And so, um, just being a little bit more self-aware with what works and what doesn't work. And if you find, you know, three things that...that work really well that'll really help you get into that flow state and write. And um, really move forward with a lot of these internal blocks.

GOE: [00:29:55]

Yeah, I think... I feel like a lot of us are perfectionists, or at least I am. And I think that's pretty common in the museum field of wanting to be kind of neurotic about everything. But letting go of that idea of having perfect writing, especially in the first draft will help you get into the flow. Like you said, just kind of accepting what you have right now and learning that you can work on it and make it better.

HS: [00:30:19]

That's great.

YN: [00:30:20]

I'm really glad that I'm not necessarily writing term papers anymore. I know that has nothing to do with anything, but I was thinking about... I was thinking about that and the types of writing that I do now in graduate school and now that I'm in the PhD candidate kind of sector of my graduate degree that, you know, term papers aren't necessarily a thing and the different writing has changed over time. And I'm... I'm glad to be able to write things for myself and for what I'm very interested in. So, I'm thankful for that.

GOE: [00:30:54]

Yeah, I think so too. I think in coming to graduate school and realizing that I'm writing papers about things that are actually more relevant to my life, and my interests, and my career. Not that I wasn't interested in the classes I took as an undergraduate, but you know, writing a 12-page paper about like Japanese history or something wasn't necessarily something very useful for me long-term, um, even though I did get knowledge out of that. Whereas now everything I write pretty much has to do with my career goals or career interests and that has been... it's made me take, I think, a whole new perspective on writing because suddenly... it's suddenly it's useful. That sounds bad, but it's more specialized. So...

YN: [00:31:38]

In your own life and you know how you can bring that knowledge forward into other aspects of your life and other people's lives.

Yeah, you are so right. Writing is hard, um, but it doesn't have to be.

HS: [00:32:00]

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

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

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