



Hope St. John (HS):

Hello! And welcome back to Write for You, the Odegaard Writing and Research Center's podcast on graduate writing. I'm Hope, your disembodied writing buddy and host. Sit in with me as I virtually connect with current and former graduate writers from across the University of Washington to learn more about their writing processes, experiences, and how writing gets done. Who knows, maybe you'll even find something that sounds right for you.

On this episode, we'll hear from Andrew, a doctoral candidate and administrator at the Harry Bridges Center for Labor Studies. Reflecting on his graduate career, Andrew talks with us about navigating a changing writing process and the richness of editorial feedback. I'll let him introduce himself and tell you more about it.

Andrew Hedden (AH):

Hello, my name is Andrew Hedden. I use he/him pronouns. I am a doctoral student in the Department of History at the University of Washington. My project is on the city of Seattle in the 1970s and how the economy changed, how it led to the city that we know of today, which is dominated by skilled professionals and is characterized by these huge inequalities. And so, I look back at the '70s in Seattle and I try to pinpoint, what were some of those pivotal moments that brought the city to what we have today. And I do that primarily by trying to situate Seattle within a much bigger picture. It's not just about local history, but it's also about what's going on in the global economy. And in my day job, I'm an associate director of the Harry Bridges Center for Labor Studies. So that's what I'm working on right now. Those are the big picture things.

HS:

That's great. So then, to get us started, I would love to ask you about your experiences and background as a writer. Could you tell us a bit about that?

AH:

Well, growing up, I always loved to write. I loved doing reports and essays for school, and throughout high school and into college. I loved to write. Wrote letters to the editor, would write essays that would get published in local newspapers, and that was something I thought I always loved to do. And then I got to graduate school and there is a whole nother gear of writing in graduate school that I had to learn to adjust to. So I have lots to share with you about that and different strategies that I've tried to use. But writing always seemed to come natural to me until it didn't, and then I've had to learn new ways of doing it.

HS:

Yeah. Could you tell us a bit more about what that other gear of writing is that you found when you went to grad school?

AH:

Sure. So I've been in my program for 10 years, almost a decade of my life, and the time that I've had available to write has really changed over those 10 years. I have two kids now that I didn't have when I started, and my energy level is not what it was. I'm approaching 40 and I started my program when I was not yet 30, and so I had different energy and different time available to write. And so, I could approach writing in graduate school if it was a paper or an essay or writing responses, I could just stay up all night and knock something out.

Can't do that anymore. If I do that now, it wipes me out for a week at least. It's just really hard to pull all-nighters anymore. And so I've had to learn to write in small pieces and to make specific time in my day to write. And I can't write after putting my kids to bed anymore. That's just not something I can do. I don't have the energy. And so, a challenge has been trying to find new ways to write as I've gotten older.

The other challenge has been the size of writing projects. So in my day job, I write a lot of copy for publicity, for websites, for newsletters, and that all comes really easy to me. And that writing always has to be concise. You want as small word count as possible so you don't take up a lot of space. Graduate school is the complete opposite. You have to write a dissertation that at the end of it's

probably going to be approaching 70,000 words, and you can't sit down and write that in one night. You have to come up with a regular writing schedule. You have to have self-discipline in order to write. And writing a dissertation is a marathon, it's not a footrace. Oh my gosh, that's so true. So writing has been a completely different experience in graduate school, both because of things in my personal life, but also because the scale of writing projects is so different.

HS:

Yeah, that's really interesting. One of the questions that I often have for dissertation writers especially is about how you work with and get your head around something as expansive as a dissertation. Do you have any tips or insights on how to cope with or manage that?

AH:

Well, I'm still coping. I feel like whenever I finish up one thing and take a break, it always feels like I'm starting anew. I mean, there's no single practice I've found that I've been able to stick with, and it seems like I just have to adapt to the time of year or whatever else is going on in my life.

But there are some things that I picked up early on in graduate school that I'm really thankful for. There's a whole side to research that requires organization of information, and one of the first things I was told when I started graduate school was find yourself a citation manager. And so, I quickly adopted the Zotero Citation Manager program, and that has become a huge lifeline for me. I use that to organize all my notes and all my citations, and I've done research that I input into that program that I then would return to for years later in order to write. And that has been very helpful. So, having some place to collect all that information and a place to organize it so that you can revisit it when you can have the time to pick up your writing project again, that has been invaluable.

But on the other side, actually making the time to sit down and write. Because of a busy work schedule, family schedule, that's been an enormous challenge. And the times that I've been most successful at writing have been when I came up with some sort of regular scheduled structure that I'm writing on a regular basis, and the times that I've been most successful at that, I've been using skills that I picked up from a program I did early in my dissertation writing, called the Write Now program with the National Center for Faculty

Development and Diversity, or NCFDD. You can learn more about it at Facultydiversity.org.

And they have a program called Write Now, where you enroll for 12 weeks, and each day you are inputting information about what is my writing goal this week? What's my word count? And then they have check-ins on a regular basis over the weeks where you kind of discuss, am I meeting my goals? Do I need to adjust my targets? And that sort of thing.

So I did that right at the very beginning of my dissertation writing, and I felt like that gave me some tools that when I've actually properly used them, I've been the most productive. It's been a struggle sometimes to sit down and actually implement those things, not being enrolled in it. But there are some things that I learned from that that I'm happy to share.

HS:

Yeah.

AH:

The one thing that I do is I keep a log of my writing, and it's just a spreadsheet. The Write Now program had a whole platform that you could use, but I just use a Google Doc, and I would just open a spreadsheet, and I have a little column for the date, a column for what my goals are for that day's writing, and then a column for how it went when it's over. And then I also have a column for word count. And I always have a word count goal with each day, and I'll write out a note to myself, or I'll try to write a note to myself, this is what I'm going to do to today, and then I can evaluate it when I'm done with the time that I've got.

And I say, it's a struggle to do this because sometimes I forget to input in my log that I'm going to write, and sometimes I lose track of my goal and I'll get distracted on something else. I'll go down a research rabbit hole and not come out until my writing time is done. So it's a real struggle, but when I've actually had the self-discipline to use it to track my writing and everything, that's when I've been most successful. And it usually takes a week or two before it really takes off, where I'm finally getting into it and doing it. And then I can look back at my progress and see what I've done, and that always feels really good, because it doesn't feel good while I'm doing it.

HS:

I think that's a very relatable experience, particularly for those of us in grad school. Continuing to think about process, you've outlined for us some of your tips and strategies for structuring your writing practice, but what does a typical writing session look like for you?

AH:

Well, like I shared, my schedule is tough to work writing in, and I have to block my calendar out or set aside a time in advance that I'm going to sit down and write. If I ever go into a day saying, oh, I'm going to write when some free time comes today, it never happens. Something else always comes up. So I have to make the time to do it in advance.

And today was a good example. I've taken off a couple of weeks of work to focus on my dissertation, and today I was returning to work. I have some end of academic year things I need to wrap up at the Harry Bridges Center. But I've been doing a good job writing and I need to keep that momentum, so this morning I woke up very early. I woke up an hour before my kids get up, they get up at 7:00 AM I woke up at a quarter to 6:00, and I woke up fed the cat, poured myself some coffee and went straight to the computer and sat down and decided to write.

And I had about an hour, and I only wrote about 250 words, and I was a little disappointed because I was kind of fiddling with paragraphs that I'd already written rather than writing out something new. But looking back on it, there was an insight or two, or something I picked up while I was doing that.

And so, it was successful, to the degree that I got some new material down and I thought through some things that I've been writing. And it's not a disappointment if I can return tomorrow and do the same thing, because for a project like a dissertation, as long as the word count is increasing every time I sit down and do it, it's successful.

So after an hour, I had to step away and get my kids ready for school, but that's what I hope I'll be doing tomorrow too. Of course, it means I have to go to bed much earlier than I usually do, or else I'm going to have no brain capacity tomorrow morning when I wake up.

But that's advice I've gotten from other students too, who have finished projects of this size, is doing it daily will make you more productive, even if it's 30 minutes daily, because it'll give you continuity over the days. You can't forget what you're doing and you can't fall behind if you're doing it every day. If you try to do it all in one day and then step away for a week or two, the time it takes you to remember what it is that you're doing, to revisit your notes and to jump back in can really be damaging to productivity. So that's what writing looked like for me today, and hopefully that's what it's going to look like tomorrow.

HS:

Yeah. So you mentioned that you've been in graduate school for coming up on 10 years now, which is a significant chunk of time. And of course, things change over time, whether that's a project, whether that's us, our lives, what have you. So I'm wondering if you could talk a bit about how you have negotiated and navigated those pivotal moments or moments of change as you've moved toward this end goal of completing your dissertation.

AH:

Well, I'm not there yet. I've got one last chapter to write. I can't look back yet at a moment and say, okay, this was the moment where I knew it was going to get done, because it's not done yet. But the thing that has allowed me to finish as much as I have to this date has been compromise. It's been compromise with what I've produced, and realizing it's not going to be perfect, and that once this is done, there will be a whole other process of revision, of editing. It could be even significant.

If the dissertation becomes something I want to publish as a book or an article, it's going to go through so many rounds of editing, whether that's the structure of what I'm writing, moving pieces of it around, to rewriting small sentences so that there's more clarity. I've been through a few processes with editors for published pieces, and those experiences make me feel so much better about having something rough to begin with, because even when you think you have something really polished, an editor will often come back and say, "Actually, you need to completely rewrite this whole introduction. It just does not make sense." And you thought that you had it down, you thought you had it all written, you thought it looked good, and the editor's telling you, "No, it's not."

And so, you do the best you can for the first draft through. But if something is inelegant or awkward, if the evidence isn't there yet, there'll be opportunities in the future, or you have to count on opportunities in the future to make up for those shortcomings, and you need to finish the whole project and not aim for perfection. You'll probably always be upset with something that you did or did not do. So I really struggle with that too, compromise. Compromise with what you've got and don't take it for granted. Be happy that you produced something.

HS:

Yeah, that struggle with perfection is something that I hear about from a lot of graduate writers, along with this idea of an inner critic that a lot of us have. And so I'm wondering, do you have an inner critic? And if so, how do you deal with that?

AH:

Absolutely. I mean, the biggest hang-up I think I have in writing, the big project where you write something that you then pick up again the next day, is reading through your previous paragraphs and fiddling. I mean, if I'm not careful, that will become my whole writing day, just be working and reworking some sentence that I think doesn't work. And that wastes what I don't have, which is time.

And I think this is where writing becomes a process of dialogue with others, not just your eventual readers, but with your editors and the people who are going to be reviewing it before it goes out to a broader public. You really have to depend on them, and that's the way that, I guess, I quiet my own inner critic. I'm still very critical of what I've written, but there is a time and a place to revisit those critiques and to fix and fiddle. And on a big project, if you don't have your eye on the bigger goal, then you'll just be wasting time.

Now, for smaller things, smaller essays and stuff like that, when you've got something on a much smaller scale to put out, then it's okay to listen to those voices sometimes. But you really have to be in touch with yourself and your capacities, I guess. I can't do it with a cup of coffee all night at the computer anymore. I did that once upon a time. And for those who are young enough to be able to do that, don't take that for granted. But I think for most people, there comes a time where that's just not possible anymore.

HS:

Yeah, I think that's very true. One of the things that I've enjoyed hearing about in our discussion so far is about your approach to writing, which is very much as a process, and I'm wondering if as you're working through that process, are you thinking about a desired or ideal outcome? And if so, how does that inform your process along the way?

AH:

Well, one of the things I've struggled in graduate school is resigning myself to the fact often you have to write to the purpose, and a dissertation, I mean, if you're being honest with yourself, a dissertation in its dissertation form is not going to be widely read. Your committee's going to read it. Maybe somebody who is into your topic will be intrigued by your title and will find it in the library on ProQuest or something. But there's not a wider public going to be reading it, and so readability is not always the number one goal.

You're not writing to relate to a broader audience. You're writing to specialists, and you have to come to terms with that. It means that you might be prioritizing analysis over story. When I first started graduate school, I would always begin a historical essay or something with story and was scene setting and trying to provide more color, because that's what I enjoy when I read, is people who can set a scene and do that.

But that's not what drives a dissertation. A dissertation is all about argument, and it's about arguing in dialogue with other scholars who've written about the same things you have. And for the most part, that doesn't demand writing skills that move people's emotions or set a scene or draw them in. It's more cold and analytic. And there are some people who are gifted and can really do both of those things at the same time, move people and be analytic. But I think both are different types of writing skills.

And eventually when my dissertation becomes a public product of some sort, I'd love it to be a book someday. When I'm rewriting and editing for that, I'll be focused more on story. I'll be worried about, can this relate to a general audience? But for now, especially when I need to get it done, the focus becomes really analytic and it becomes, what's my argument, what's my evidence, and structuring it that way. So instead of a paragraph devoted to just describing a

scene, describing a person's personality and these historical actors that I'm writing about, I really have to write about very specific things, like what is it I'm arguing? That has to be first.

HS:

That makes complete sense. And I also think that you raise a good point here, which is that it's important to be able to approach the dissertation for what it is, which is a very specific kind of writing and document. That said, I know that the dissertation is often not the only piece of writing that graduate students might be working on, and a bit earlier you mentioned that you regularly write shorter things for the Harry Bridges Center as part of your role there. So I'm wondering if you could talk a bit about what you see as the similarities or differences in writing across those genres and forms of specialist-oriented long form work and public facing short form work. And then, as a kind of related question, I'm also interested to hear if any of the material that you've put together for your dissertation has found an outlet in some of those kinds of more public-facing pieces.

AH:

The writing that I'm best at, and I think the writing that everyone is best at, is the writing that they do most often, and in my job, I'm writing articles for newsletters, I'm writing descriptions of people's research grants, and it's for websites, it's for a newsletter that has very limited space on the page. The more text you add to a newsletter, the less likely somebody is going to read it. You want something that's attractive, that has a lot of visuals, and that's short and to the point. And I do that on a daily basis. I mean, it's part of my job here, and so that is what I'm most confident in. I could sit down and knock out articles for a newsletter day in and day out because that's what I've been doing for 15 years now at the Harry Bridges Center, and I'm very confident in that.

So it's so funny, when I sit down to write a dissertation and I'm just frozen as a writer. It's like, I write all day long in my day job, so why can't I write and articulate in the same way in the dissertation? And I think that's where becoming a regular writer or having a regular writing schedule for the dissertation makes it so much easier, because then that becomes the regular thing that I'm writing. And if I'm writing a chapter, it's much easier to write by the end of it than it is the beginning, because you just get into a routine and it's just, it's a muscle. Writing is a muscle that you have to exercise, and it's not

just one muscle, it's many muscles, and you have to focus on one or the other.

So that is one of the things I've learned writing in general, either from my day job or in school. And there are times I've had the opportunities to share the work that I'm doing for graduate school with a wider audience. I've written editorials. There's a local newspaper called Real Change that I've written for. There's a column in the Washington Post that's for academic historians to write editorials. I've written for that. I also had the opportunity to write an interpretive essay about a film that was made in Seattle called Streetwise. It's about homeless youth in the early 1980s, and it was released on DVD, and through some personal connections, I was asked to write an essay for this DVD release. And so, I wrote an essay about the film, which overlaps a bit with what I'm studying for my history PhD.

So I've had those opportunities to write, and the thing that I've really learned in those experiences has been how much the editor brings to the process, because when I'm writing for the newsletters in my day job or writing for our website, I'm usually the last person to see it before it gets published. But when you're writing for a publication with a separate editor, they give you so much feedback about this makes sense, or this introduction works, or things like that. And that has been so invaluable and something that gives me more confidence as a writer, because I know I have somebody to work with in dialogue.

So for people who do want to develop their writing, I really encourage them to seek public outlets, particularly those that have an editor that you can work with, because you learn so much about the process of writing, and the feedback you can get is just invaluable.

HS:

What have some of those really valuable pieces of feedback been for you?

AH:

I think the most invaluable feedback I get from editors is usually two things. It's the clarity of your piece. So you write a sentence that you think is stating exactly what you mean, and somebody reads it and tells you, "This doesn't make sense," or "What does this mean?"

Elaborate here." When you write, you know what you're saying in your head, but that's not always what you're putting down on paper. And so, an editor can help you identify those areas where you wrote half the thought, but you didn't put the full thought there. Or maybe you wanted to state this thing but you didn't have the confidence to do it, and the editor can say, "Well, this is what you are saying. You should say it."

So they can be encouraging and helping you to just say what it is you want to say and be clear in what you're saying. That can mean edits on a close level, specific sentences, and it can also mean just the structure of your article. So where are you leading your reader through the piece that you're writing? So editors have been able to give me feedback on those things that's been very helpful.

And then, the other bit is, an editor helps you write to a specific audience. They know what their publication needs, they know what their readers are looking for, and they can then help you fill out those spaces where you aren't speaking to their readers or you aren't sharing enough information. It's not a critique of you as a writer if an editor comes back and says, "You need to say more about this," or "You need to do some more research and share more about that." What the editor's doing it is connecting you more with the publication that they know better than you do because they're working on it constantly and you're working on it just for this one piece.

So those are the two things that I felt have been really helpful, encouragement to write what you mean or be more clear in your arguments, and then the assistance to help write to a specific audience, whatever's most appropriate for the publication.

HS:

Yeah, I think that's a really great perspective in terms of thinking about writing for an audience and the benefit of having people help you figure out how best to do that. Are there any other insights or maybe pieces of advice that you think might be useful for other graduate writers to hear?

AH:

Well, if someone was asking me advice for graduate school and writing, my first piece of advice would be find a system to manage

information from the very beginning, and that is really invaluable. Having a place where you've organized all your thoughts, all your sources, something that you can manage that isn't a mess, that when you need that note that you made to yourself, you're going to know where to find it. That has been really, really important to me, because time will pass. You put something down, you stop writing about a specific topic, or you take a break from writing something, but you need to come back to it at some point. To me, that sometimes it's been four or five years between when I've researched something and when it's time to write about it, and knowing that I could go back and find what I'd prepared five years before was invaluable. That's the biggest piece of advice I have for anybody, is just you've got to have a system.

For me, I think I was fortunate that the first software that I used, the Zotero program, really worked for me. It really made a lot of sense, and I've been using that for 10 years now. But there are lots of different management systems or citation managers, and some people I'm sure have to experiment with different systems before they find the one that works for them, but you got to have one, because you got to be able to manage and track information for a big project. So that's my first piece of advice.

For the actual writing process, I think my advice would be to experiment and to identify what seems to work the best for you, and then to stick with that until it doesn't work anymore, and don't be afraid to pivot. Once upon a time, I could do the all-nighter and knock something out, but as I've gotten older and I have new obligations, that's just not possible anymore, so I've had to try to develop new systems of writing and to continue to work at it.

I don't feel satisfied as a writer. In fact, if you ask me, "Do you consider yourself a writer?" I'd hesitate. I write hundreds of thousands of words a year, either in work or for school or whatever, but I still don't feel like a writer. I mean, it still feels like a real load sometimes. And learning to come to terms with that is important. As long as I'm okay with not being perfect, I'm not going to quit, and that's after 10 years, I have to finish. I'm not going to spend 10 years on something and then not finish it up.

HS:

That is entirely understandable. I think it's really interesting that you bring up the idea of a management system, and particularly how

integral that's been for you. Do you find that you're more of a digital writer, or do you also like to write by hand sometimes?

AH:

I am primarily digital. If I'm using pen and paper, it's because I'm on the bus. In fact, I think I use pen and paper more than the average graduate student, because throughout graduate school, I was showing up with my book, with my paper notes that I'd written while on the train or something, and everybody's showing up, popping over their laptops, and I'm always the only one there with the analog pen and paper.

But when it comes to actually sitting down to write, and it's all digital. If I do use pen and paper, it's usually to outline or to set myself some goals for the day. But as I'm writing something out, I do a lot of delete and rewrite. I'm not somebody who just sits down and it flows out. I'll write something and fiddle with it almost immediately.

HS:

Yeah. So for this stage, you're mostly digital, but sometimes analog if you're in transit or something like that. Is that fairly common for you to have ideas in the midst of doing something else? Or do you tend to be someone who can very clearly separate your thinking on your dissertation from the thinking that you're doing or the activities that you're doing in other facets of your life?

AH:

Absolutely. And they tend to be conceptual, like, oh, here's how I'm going to frame this, or here's how this argument connects to another argument. I don't suddenly think of some evidence that I've forgotten or something like that. That's usually something I find when I'm sitting down and working through my notes. But a conceptual idea, or this is how I should phrase this, those are things that come to me at the weirdest times. Brushing my teeth, that's a big one. Brushing my teeth, thinking of what I've written that day and realizing, oh, this is how I could phrase this, or this is what I connect this to.

And so, I will send myself little notes. I usually send a text message to my email, saying this is something to pick up and put into your outline for the next time you write. And I've read other people's

descriptions of their writing process, and it sounds like a pretty common thing. I know that some writers will carry a little notebook with them and scribble little thoughts that they have throughout the day, and I guess I do a version of that.

HS:

And there you have it. Thanks again for listening to this episode of Write for You, and a big thank you to our lovely guest. 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 depts.washington.edu/owrcweb. In the meantime, for myself and all of us at the OWRC, happy writing.

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