



Hope St. John (HS): Hello, and welcome back to Season Five of *Write for You*, the Odegaard Writing & Research Center's podcast on how writing gets done. I'm Hope, your disembodied writing buddy and your faithful host for this season. Listen in as I chat with graduate writers from across the University of Washington about the writing process, strategies and experiences. Who knows, maybe you'll even find something that sounds right for you.

On this episode, we'll hear from Jenna, a master's student in the midst of writing her final thesis. Together we'll talk about the tips, strategies and habits that have helped her and where she's hoping her writing takes her next. I'll let her introduce herself and tell you more.

Jenna (J): Hi, my name is Jenna. I'm a second year master's student in the College of Education, specifically curriculum and instruction at the University of Washington Seattle. I use she and her pronouns. I was born in South Korea, but I have been living abroad ever since I was eight. I lived in the Philippines, Malaysia, Canada. Now I'm in the U.S. for my master's program. I actually graduated with an undergrad degree in international study, but I have been working as a part-time job as a teacher in private academies in Korea, which kind of piqued my interest in changing my major into education. My research interests includes immigration, multicultural education in Asian population, and also cultural integration. I'm also planning to apply for doctoral program in international education in two years, hopefully, if I get in. Besides that, I love traveling, shopping, and cooking.

HS: Awesome.

So to get us started, I wanted to ask about your relationship with writing. Do you consider yourself a writer?

J: I think it's both yes or no. So I think if other people saw my work and assignments, they would probably believe that I'm a writer, because as a education major, we do get to write a lot of formal and informal papers. By informal paper, I mean that we do upload weekly short paragraph discussion on campus, and that discussion is basically about our personal thoughts slash reflection, a little bit of critique of specific articles that professors assign every week. When it comes to formal paper, our midterm and final papers are mostly written and delivered as presentation and written format, which is essay.

So I do think that I write a lot, and also I'm currently working on my thesis because I'm graduating next quarter. But I do think that for me, there is still a lot of improvement when it comes to academic writing. Because although I think I've fluent enough in English speaking, I do feel sometimes a little bit of pressure to write fancy writing because of the fact that I'm a grad student. But I do think that I have high

expectation. But yeah, so I sometimes think I'm a good writer, but there's sometimes that I do not think that I am a writer enough.

HS: Yeah. So I'm curious, how did you go about learning the ins and outs of graduate writing? How did you pick those skills up?

J: To answer that question, I don't think I learned graduate writing specifically in grad school because I do think that writing is constant and gradual practice and efforts that I have to put in. I spent a lot of times in countries where English is spoken, so I do think that I learned to speak and write in English at a very young age compared to other Asian or Korean students. So I do think that my environment and my educational background kind of naturally taught me how to write formally. Also, I did receive a lot of extensive academic text writing instruction for SAT, TOEFL or SAT Subject from private tutoring and academies, because I also had to apply to us higher ed and higher ed in Canada. So I also prepare for those. So I did receive a lot of useful tips and personal advice to improve my writing.

Also, although I received my undergrad degree from a university in Korea, my major was entirely taught and instructed all in English. So all professors taught their subject in English. So that means all of the assignments in writing also had to be in English as well. So I kind of had to force myself to follow specific styles that the professor preferred and try to write in a very structured format. But I mean, I must admit that after moving to the U.S., my academic writing has improved significantly because, I don't know, I feel like the writing U.S. graduate school requires is more another level, and they kind of require to think more and reflect more critically. So yeah, I think that's why my writing has improved greatly. Yeah.

HS: So you mentioned that you benefited from getting tips and guidance throughout your writing journey. Could you share some of those things that you found particularly useful?

J: I think that editing is very crucial. That's one of the tips that one of my SAT tutors taught me. She was my SAT tutor slash my Grade 12 English assignment kind of helper. Because when I was in also high school, we tend to kind of rush our assignments. So we try to complete entire writing process in a very short period of time, right? Now, because I'm a grad level, I do think that editing is very important for correcting minor and major mistakes and errors. Because I know that mistakes will always appear in the paper no matter what. Right? No matter what, it's going to show up. Also, I do think that while editing, you'll probably also come up with the better ideas even more. So that was one of the very useful tips that I got from my SAT tutor back in high school. Yeah.

HS: I agree. Editing is such an important part of the writing process. Speaking of that, I would love to hear more about what your writing process looks like, what it's like when you sit down to write.

J: I think because right now I literally write almost every day, because I'm working on my thesis paper, so I try to be very patient because I'm not a super fast writer. So for me, it takes some time to gather ideas so that I can create that ideas into a more structured format. But again, I do think that writing is a very gradual process, especially when it comes to writing a long paper, like thesis, right? So once I have my ideas and know what I'm writing about, I tend to write pretty quickly and format it as an essay.

So what I do is I always create a word document, not to start writing in a paragraph format, but rather I just sit down and then reread the instruction or the topics that I always get, and then I try to jot down any ideas. It does not have to be super relevant to the topics, but I just try to come up with anything that I want to include in the essay for a few days. So that way I don't have to stress myself out trying to finish it within a day and try to focus on gathering good ideas. It's more like step-by-step process, right?

HS: Yeah. So you mentioned that you're writing every day. Do you have a specific writing habit or structure that you like to follow?

J: I think that depends what my writing, to be honest. Right now, I'm currently working on the thesis proposal. I already finished that – actually, I'm just working on the revision for my thesis proposal. So there are different sections like lit review, there's data collection, there's methods, site participants, right? So in that case, I try to limit myself, like, "I'm going to finish this part within today." I feel like consistent is very important. So I try to finish one category a day if possible, or two. But when it comes to other academic papers, or for example, annotated bibliography, I don't have limit. I try to be a little bit more flexible to myself. But for me right now, thesis is my priority to be honest. So I do let myself be choosing how much I should write a day.

HS: Do you ever find it hard to make the time to sit down and write? Or is that something that's very easy for you?

J: Oh, it is really hard. Because currently I do a lot of stuff. I am taking two classes, and one of the classes is sociology, which is not my major class. So that class is a little bit intense when it comes to readings. It's a little challenging for me. Also, I work as an SAT prep tutor a lot, and I also volunteer a lot too for teaching immigrants English. So definitely I do not have time to solely focus on my thesis writing. So hopefully I can do that next quarter because I'm not taking any classes next quarter. But for now, to be honest, it's really hard for me to finish the goal that I want to write a day, but I try my best to finish it though. Yeah.

HS: Yeah. No, I think that that's one of the great challenges of writing in graduate school. There's so much to do and there's limited time in the day to do it all.

J: Yeah.

HS: So talking about the thesis, I know that different programs have different requirements of what a thesis is and does at the master's level. Could you tell us a little bit more about the thesis that you're working on?

J: So as I mentioned before, my research interest is about immigration schooling. I was thinking about what to write for a long time, because I always knew that I was interested in culture and immigration a little bit, but I was not really that interested in terms of U.S. context. I wanted to focus my topic based on the Korean context. So that's why I chose to write about cultural integration for multicultural students in Korea, because right now, because of K-pop and Korean culture, there are a lot of increase in multicultural students in Korea. That includes a lot of Southeast Asian students like Philippines, Vietnamese, Indonesian, Thai people, or Chinese. They come to work in Korea. But because our country was historically very homogeneous society, we're not used to those multicultural education. So a lot of

Southeast Asian students in Korea, they face racism – discrimination – a lot. They are kind of secluded in our society.

So that's why my thesis is about how to integrate them in Korean public middle school and afterschool programs, because realistically, it is hard for Korean middle school to implement multicultural education in regular curriculum because our country has put emphasis heavily on traditional academic subject like English, math, Korean, history. That's why I want to be a little more realistic thinking that what could happen if multicultural education is highlighted in afterschool programs. It's also related to one of my research question. There is professional development session about multicultural education, but it's very formal support owned by I think government. But what I hear is that it's, like, lecture based. There's not anything like interaction or socialization. It's more like passive way of, you know, listening to a video of how to make the learning environment more diverse and included.

So using that, I also want to make sure that educators kind of know how to properly integrate, you know, their knowledge into their practice. So that's what my thesis is about.

But then, back to the format of the thesis, so we do have introduction, and then we do have, like, purpose of study, and then we have lit review. And lit review, we write a lot, I think. And then we move on to methods and then site participant selection, and then we write conclusion. For me, I wrote 15 pages-ish besides citations and cover page. But yeah, so that's, like, a basic structure. And then I know that most education major, they tend to write like 25 to less than, like, 40 pages in general. But again, it depends on your topic. Yeah.

HS: So you're primarily working on this thesis project at the moment. Do you have a sense of audience for your work yet? I know you mentioned that you're interested in promoting inclusion in the Korean middle school context. Do you see your primary audience as being those instructors that are working in that setting. Or policymakers? I'm just really curious about who you see the audience being and how you are addressing that.

J: I think realistically, like, considering, like, the Korean education system, it is really hard to make my audience the policymakers, because Korean curriculum, including, like, textbook and teaching pedagogy is very old-fashioned. So that being said, I don't think realistically it is possible to radically change, you know, entire thing. I don't expect the educators to change entire curriculum. That's honestly impossible. And also, for them, their goal is to make Korean students get high grades so that they could apply to better high school, ultimately leading to applying to better universities, that also leads to getting good jobs. So that's all kind of connected.

So again, like, diversity, inclusion, aren't really a common concept for them, to be honest. So that's why my audience is teachers, and I wish that they could at least ... include some of the multicultural practices in terms of their curriculum, you know. They should also adhere to what national curriculum should be like, but also just adding more some of the practices for more welcoming environment for Southeast Asian students in particular.

HS: Right. So a little earlier you mentioned how important editing is for you. Can you talk us through your revision process?

J: Mm-hm. I think for me, I tend to think of three main thing when it comes to the editing process. So I try to look at, like, overall structure. I don't know if I learned this through test prep, but I always try to

follow a very logical structure with a clear thesis, body paragraph, and a conclusion. It just add ons to a more strong argument of the paper. So that's the first step that I always check when it comes to editing.

And I think also, I used to get this feedback a lot, sometimes my flow of the essay is not clear enough. So that's why I try to fix a lot, um, review – I review transition between a different paragraph and sections to make sure that my ideas are, like, smooth, you know? I try to use a lot of, like, transition words and phrases to connect. I think until now, I still have to improve on this because I do get this feedback still for my thesis proposal that I wrote. So that's a second step that I always consider when it comes to editing.

And then, third step is, uh, very minor mistake like grammar and punctuation, because I don't know, maybe this is all related to my educational background because I don't know if this is specifically targeted to Korean students, but Korean students really check for grammatical, minor mistakes, like subject-verb agreement, like tense consistency and pronouns usage. Right? That's a very simple mistake, so you have to fix that. So I also check to make sure that, you know, my punctuation, like commas, period, semicolons are correctly written to ensure that it's, like, clear and correct enough. So that's the last step that I always consider for my editing. Yeah.

HS: So I often hear writing talked about through metaphor, and so I'm curious: If you were to describe your writing process that way, what metaphor would you use to describe it?

J: Um... I am only talking about my writing this quarter. I do think that my writing process is like roller coaster because... like, in terms of simple personal reflection and writing about our experiences, I do write very quickly and very specifically without overthinking the ideas. But again, because I'm working on my thesis, it is a little bit of a challenge, because I feel like I cannot see the outcome within a short period of time, right? You need patience for that. It's a long process. And, also because I'm taking courses and writing at the same time, it's a little bit more slower. So I feel like I'm not sure sometimes if I'm doing this right... And again, there are a lot of different steps that have to be taken before we begin writing a actual thesis, right? And I am in the process of collecting data for my thesis, but because I'm writing in Korean context, it's a little bit more challenging to choose which participants to interview because of the time differences and location, you know, stuff like that. But I do feel like when I submit my thesis, I'll feel so, like, accomplished and fulfilled. So I think there are definitely, like, ups and downs when it comes to my writing process.

HS: I really like the metaphor of the roller coaster. I've never heard that one before. I really like it. I'm wondering... like, so you mentioned that sometimes there's the sort of question of, like, "Am I doing this right? How do you deal with that uncertainty?"

J: Um... I'm, like, one of the worst – I'm not really good at managing my stress, but whenever I'm, like, overwhelmed and too, like, stressed about the thesis writing, I just stop and then just work on something else, or I just talk to my friends to vent my stress out, you know? I feel like the more I think about it, the more I get more stressed, right? So I just shut down computer and then just do nothing. Or just talk to my friends and then just, you know, like, talk about it and release my stress. But I don't think I am a good person when it comes to managing, you know, my stress regarding thesis.

HS: I mean, I think that that's honestly pretty relatable because writing is a stressful thing. And that's something that I hear from a lot of writers, and a question that I hear a lot from writers is, how do you

deal with that stress? How do you make sure that writing is a sustainable process for you and not one that leads you toward burnout? Because this process is hard and it requires a lot. And so I think that it's great to be able to turn off the laptop and walk away for a while.

J: Yeah. But I mean, for me, even if I shut down my laptop, I still keep thinking what to write in my brain. So, I don't think it's that effective. But I have a few friends that I always talk to whenever I'm, like, stressed, I don't know, because of her personality – like, calm and reserved personality – she knows how to, like, calm me down emotionally. So I always call her, and then she always kind of, like, encourages me saying that, "You're doing a good job, you're making a progress." So I think having a person who can support you, that – that's a good way, you know. That's a good solution, I think.

HS: Gotcha. I'm curious, so in those moments when the laptop is closed, but you're continuing to think, do you ever find that you have these kind of "lightbulb moments"?

J: I think right now I don't have any, like, lightbulb moments because... I don't know, because this is my first time writing thesis. And I always get advice from my advisor saying that the more narrower the topic is, the better the thesis would be, right? But I feel like for me until now – like, I do know what I want to write, but it's more like I do want to cover different fields of topics. So I'm not sure until now whether my topic is very specific enough to make my thesis stronger. So I have, like, a lot of thoughts going on, "I want to do this, I want to cover that." So that's why I don't have any, like, good ideas because I just have, like, so many thoughts going on in my mind. You know what I mean?

HS: Yeah. No, it can definitely be tricky when you're in the thick of it.

J: Yeah. I guess after writing thesis, I will get a better sense of writing more formal paper in the future, like dissertation. Right? It's just one of the pre-step, I think, for master thesis especially. Yeah.

HS: Yeah. I think that speaks to something that you brought up a little earlier, which is the process of writing and the process of building those writing skills. It's not something that you just kind of learn how to do, and then that's it. Writing is something that you work and build and refine over time.

J: Exactly, yeah. Mm-hm.

HS: So as we wrap up, I wanted to bring us back to this topic of advice, and to ask you if you have any advice that you'd like to pass on to fellow writers.

J: Yeah.

I have two personal tips. So the first is use formal languages. I don't know if this might be applicable to, like, undergrad or grad students, because for me right now currently, I'm not only an SAT tutor, but I also help secondary school students with their English assignments. And I recognize that whenever I see my students – when it comes to writing assignments, I mean – they tend to use colloquial language in their assignments. I feel like they're just texting with their friends. So I think it's really important that, try to use a more formal language throughout the paper consistently.

And, the second advice would be, be concise. This is very relatable to my personal experience, because when I was younger, I thought that writing in long sentences was very fancy, you know. I feel like if you

write long sentences, it kind of proves that you have a lot of ideas, you're trying to add more details by expanding it longer. But ever since I moved to Canada for my secondary school, a lot of my English teacher kind of advised me, saying that in academic writing, you should not be writing, like, long sentences, you know, try to keep your ideas very clear and concise. But it's a little ironic because when I read a lot of scholarly articles. Even, like, classes that I'm taking right now, a lot of articles, they tend to write with very long sentences, like, some sentences like five sentences long. But besides that, whenever I write, I try to do my best to structure my essay very clearly by being concise with my main focal points in that sentence. So yeah, these are the two advice that I wanted to provide. Yeah.

HS: Yeah. No, I think that advice, particularly around being concise, is very relevant and is also something that is easier said than done.

J: Right. Exactly. Yeah.

HS: And there you have it.

Thanks for listening to this episode of Write for You, and a big thanks again to all of our wonderful guests. On behalf of the Odegaard Writing & 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 Odegaard Writing & Research Center, happy writing.

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