



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 Lizzy, a PhD candidate in archeology who talks with us about getting organized, thinking about audience, and confronting the blank page. I'll let her introduce herself and tell you more.

Lizzy (L): Hi, everyone. I'm Lizzy. I'm a PhD student here in the Archeology Program, and before that, I did my master's in museology – museum studies – here at UDub. My work in and out of grad school has related to the National Park Service and different archeology museums and archives programs, and for my grad project, I'm working with the Confederated Tribes at Grand Ronde on a traditional cultural landscape.

HS: Fantastic.

So, to get us started, I was wondering if you could take us through your writing process. What does that look like for you?

L: Yes. Well, I unfortunately have bad habits. So my writing process typically involves coming up on a deadline, and then usually, my "pretending to work, but not actually working" is downloading a thousand PDFs from the library website and doing a million keyword searches that are vaguely related to my subject. Then, once I have that chunk, I'm like, "Oh, look at all this research I did," but it, of course, is just the beginning. Then, I have to start siphoning through things, actually seeing what's relevant to my topic or what I'm trying to do, and then from there, start sketching out notes and how those different authors, different sources connect with what I'm hoping to say or maybe they reveal a different theme that I need to say.

So it starts with source material, I get a structure in my head, maybe sketched out in a Word document, and then oftentimes, very close to the deadline, I sit down and start writing, and begin cranking things out. It's definitely a process of thinking on the fly as opposed to what I would like it to be, which is much more reflective, and digesting the literature, and then engaging with the scholarship, and that sort of idealized practice. But I think my writing in reality is a lot quicker and dirtier than maybe it should be.

HS: Yeah. I think we all wish that our writing process was a little bit tidier, but as you know, the realities of managing that writing process is often not super well-suited to actualizing that particular ideal. So you

mentioned as part of your writing process, you download a lot of PDFs, and then you make notes on those as a way of transitioning yourself into writing. Do you have a system of organizing that? Is it something that is structured, or is that something that you just start?

L: So it took me far too long into being a graduate student before I finally did get a system, and I'm obsessed with Zotero, which is a citation management software. It's free. That's part of, I think, why I like doing that research and why it's like work that's not actually work. Because you can download the citation along with the PDF, and it's almost like having an iTunes library that I could play with and make sure the metadata is all perfect for all my sources. But what that does is I have a personal database now, and I have forced myself into a structure where if I read an article, I create a Word document for running notes, and I'll often structure it with the bullet points of how the article has sections like intro, blah blah section, or whatever, and then fill that out as much or as little as I need to.

Then, I can save that into Zotero. So I actually have my PDFs and my writing notes in the same place because there have been times where I get assigned something to read in class, and I'm like, "I know I have read this before," and I can't, for the life of me, on any Google Drive or any hard drive, find my notes or the PDF that I had marked up. So this is my practical way of trying to get my act together, and it has helped me at least in the past couple of years.

HS: Awesome. Yeah. I think that those practical in-between steps are really important, and I know for me, I've found that writing my notes out longhand in a notebook really helps me to process that information or material. But the obvious downside there is that you can't search what you've written. You just have to flick through on memory to try to find whatever you're looking for.

L: I actually hand-wrote all my essays in college, and I loved it. It was such a visceral process to pull together all this material, and I wish I wrote more now, but it really is that control-find that has made me a slave to the keyboard.

HS: Actually, this segues nicely into another question that I had for you specifically about drafting. So once you get to that place where you have ideas, how do you then take them from this hazy, nebulous form into something like the final form?

L: Yeah. That's a good question, and it's something... So I'm a teaching assistant for American Indian Studies, and I've done it for archeology. So I'm often looking at other people's writing. I think one of the ultimate challenges for undergrads and everyone, really, is figuring out how to organize your thoughts so that you can actually communicate because oftentimes you might read something and say like, "Okay. I think this is what they're trying to tell me," and it's just because thinking in your own head and translating that onto the page so that someone else can consume it is so challenging.

I think with my drafting process, really hard thing is being wedded to the way that I wrote something initially, and I have to give it time, and then come back and say like, "You know what? This section doesn't do anything for me. I'm either going to get rid of it or move it somewhere else," and it's a lot of almost treating my essay as discrete blocks that I can move around each other, and then figure out how to connect them so they're not just disparate chunks to move through, but figuring out like, "How can I structure all this stuff I want to say to keep the reader focused and to say something that's actually persuasive?"

HS: Yeah. I think one of the challenging things about writing in graduate school is that there are all of these implicit, but enduring, genre expectations that we are expected to replicate. What's your experience been like navigating those expectations within your field?

L: Yeah. I was talking with Dr. Dian Million in the American Indian Studies program here at UDub last year, and she was making the point that we are in disciplines, and they discipline us on how to think and how to write. She blows my mind all the time, but that really blew my mind, just thinking about how I'm part of a tradition, I'm trying to do my own thing and express myself, but I'm also trying to be recognized, and I'm trying to be accepted. It's like this weird tension of conformity and creativity.

I think particularly in this moment in my dissertation process, I have been doing all this background, all this writing and research on a particular methodology, and then the tribal partner we're working with wants to do a different kind of project which... It's an awesome project, but I'm having to engage with a totally different section of archeology, and it's one where like, "Ooh, the writing is very sterile and dense, and I need to read it so that I can engage with it, and I will have to write to that kind of audience." I just think it's a really weird position. You're being trained to think for yourself, but then you're also being trained to be accountable for worse or for better with the rest of the academy, and so it's a hard thing.

HS: Yeah. So have you done much writing outside of an academic context?

L: So most of the writing that I've done in a professional setting is kind of related, like I will be working on some kind of museum exhibit tech, or something about an archeological report, or a history statement for archives, but the expectation there is totally different. You don't get all the time in the world to do this. You have a timeline and a deadline. You got to crank it out. It's just a really different mindset, and I'm writing more for the audience who's going to be non-experts trying to understand something versus in academia where it's like you're the expert, and you're supposed to talk to the experts.

HS: Yeah. And so beyond time constraints, do you feel like there's a significant difference in the way you write for professional or academic contexts?

L: Yeah. I definitely think the difference of audience is so profound when I'm in a professional setting versus an academic one, especially too when you're working in context with a community who has historically been mined for information, then excluded from the knowledge production process, and then doesn't even see the final product. So it's an odd place to be in. I'm researching all these theories and how do I apply these to the specific case that I'm working on, and then sometimes I'll get a reality check of like, "If the auntie that showed me such and such thing at Grand Ronde, if I read this to her or if she encountered this, would it make any sense at all, or would I just come across as a pompous academic using long words, and then making meaning where I'm inventing it rather than feeling what's really there?"

So I think the big difference is academia lets you... not write in an echo chamber, but write into a chamber of people that are really differently-minded than the actual world outside of the campus. That is true whether I'm working for the National Park Service and writing a little informational panel that's meant to be accessible to any age group, or educational background, or whoever audience member encounters it, versus the kinds of things I think my advisors want me to do.

HS: How do you balance the desire to have your work be relevant to those different audiences?

L: I think it's really a question of producing more. So you get your chops, and do the academic-y thing, and write to that audience. But then, it's almost like that self-imposed accountability is like, "Okay, but then I'm also going to write something that even if it's not published on a website like Sapiens, or The Medium, or something like that, would be consumable by a non-expert audience.

I don't want to knock too much academic theory because there is a lot of theory that I find really interesting and a lot of ways of considering what we're doing and what the implications are that I find really fascinating and want to write about myself, but I think too, if you're going to have the privilege of getting to work with a community and use their interest in a subject to drive your work forward, you need to have that balance of producing additional writing that speaks more outside the halls of academia.

HS: Yeah. One of the things I hear increasingly discussed is the extent to which work is public or academy-facing. Do those kinds of considerations factor into your writing at all?

L: Something that I think about when I'm writing is my family, and I am extremely fortunate. My dad also had a PhD. He's a biologist and has always stayed in tune with the latest issue of Nature and Science. So he always had opinions about the things that I'm most interested in, and oftentimes, as I have grown up, my opinions and his clash. So something I'm thinking of in terms of audience is that challenge of I'm writing for someone who maybe doesn't buy in to what I think is most important or what I think is worthwhile, and so how do I make sure that I fortify my work so that someone can't just dismiss it? So thanks, Dad, for being that driving force for me.

HS: Yeah. I think that's a really interesting way of thinking about being in conversation. I know one of the questions that I sometimes get from my advisors when I'm working on a piece is, "Who are you in conversation with within the field?" I think that the example you've shared offers another compelling framing of that question of being in conversation, particularly with an audience that isn't necessarily in the "field" and that isn't necessarily predisposed to buying into what you're putting forward.

L: Yeah. I mean, I feel that even... I'm in a tiny subsection of anthropology, and I feel that in our department, so just being ready to defend why this is important, and valid, and worth taking up their space in this meeting.

HS: Yeah. I think that having a real sense of the significance or the relevance of one's work can be really grounding. I don't know if that's something that you share, but maybe you can speak to that a little bit.

L: Yeah. That's a really great point because something that I hit a wall with in graduate school and with writing is when you just feel like you are adrift in the ocean, you're on your own here, everything is hard, you're supposed to be on a self-driven path, and it's like, "What am I doing, and where am I going? Does

anyone know? Am I just screaming into the void?" And not just thinking about being back in Grand Ronde – I'm from Oregon originally, and so being in place, physically, you're grounded, of course, because you're on the ground, but it's just such a reality check and this awakening moment to be like, "Oh, these are the real people who want this project done, and are living in a community, and welcoming me into it. Okay. My work is for them. This can drive me forward," and those issues of like, "Is this rigorous enough, or do I incorporate enough prestigious theories from enough hallowed authors or whatever it is?" That goes away, and you're like, "No. I'm doing the work. I know how to do this. There's more than one way to do it." Yeah. I really think that thinking about your real audience and specific people that you want to talk to and be in conversation with as you're writing is really helpful.

HS: Do you have a favorite thing that you like to write or a favorite piece that you've written that you feel like really speaks to you as a writer or a researcher?

L: Yeah. That's a great question. I wish I had some cool, interesting collection of short stories I could tell you about, but I think honestly, the piece of writing I'm most proud of is... For the comprehensive exam in my PhD program, we have to write three essays, about 20 pages each. One on theory, one on method, and one on ethics. These papers were a horrible, scary thing that was looming over us, and so it was really satisfying to get them done to better or worse quality, but the theory paper was the first one I started on and the one I worked the hardest on, and it was so awful and difficult. I was reading theory on Indigenous feminisms which is often published in other disciplines – so talking about how different disciplines have different styles of writing that you're trying to comprehend and have different reference points that they bring in that you don't know – so it was so hard to get going.

Somehow, I hit this tipping point where I was like, "Oh, this connects to this person," and I got to this place where I could put these authors in conversation with each other, and then put myself in there too, and see how I can pull this into my discipline. For me, it felt like I was doing the academic thing. I was doing what people who get published do, and so that was the first little like, "Ooh, I can level up. I can do this." So it might not be the most thrilling thing, like a 20-page research paper, blah, but for me, it was so satisfying to... It's like when you're learning to tie your shoes, and you finally do it right yourself, and you're just like, "Heck, yeah, I did that."

HS: Yeah. No. I think that that's a really fun example, and I agree that those are some of those really exciting moments, both as a graduate student and as a writer, when you're like, "Oh, I can do this." It's a really great feeling.

L: Truly.

HS: So, changing gears a little bit. One of the things that I've been really enjoying this season is listening to how people describe their writing process, particularly using metaphor. I'm curious. Is there a metaphor that you feel like really illustrates your writing process or your writing experiences?

L: Well, the first thing that comes to mind is when a dog wants to sit down, and it goes, and then it walks in a circle, and then it goes a little elsewhere and walks around in a whole bunch of circles, and you're like, "Just sit down," and then it does it some more, and then finally sits down. I feel like that is my writing process. I'm circling around, trying to figure out what I'm doing and how to do it, and then every now and then, I successfully sit down and use those skills that I think I have through the fortune of

learning and practice, and remembering that I do have those skills and actually, that I do know how to sit and lie down comfortably like a dog and write this paper.

HS: I like that. I like it a lot, actually. I really enjoy the image of this circling dog, and it reminds me of those snow dogs that circle around and curl up as a way of keeping warm when they're out there in the wintery elements. It takes them a long time to situate, but once they do, they're in this effective, efficient little form, and it's like, "Well, that's what you have to do to get there and to keep yourself warm and sustained, then, maybe you just got to walk around in circles for a bit."

L: Yeah. Absolutely. Step in the mushy snow, get your ears full of snow, but finally, you find that groove.

HS: So you've talked a little bit about your writing process and about writing volume as a way of ensuring that you're able to connect with the multiple audiences that you have commitments to in one way or another. So how do you sustain yourself as a writer? Do you have specific techniques or strategies that you employ?

L: Yeah. This is an interesting question and something that is definitely an ongoing learning process for me. This year in particular, I've been a part of a praxis writing group, so people that are in Indigenous studies and interested in the same areas of theory have gotten together. Theoretically, it's a writing group. We meet for a two-hour window, and people can drop in, and there's food, which literally sustains us. But I think the thing that recharges me in those moments is people are sharing about what they're doing about their classes, about the things that are interesting to them, and I am able to be there while people are sharing the key things that they have encountered with peers that are looking for ways to think through this new thing in their own discipline.

It's so uplifting and cool to be a part of, and really satisfying too when you're like, "Oh, I have some piece of knowledge I can actually put to use to help someone else," or, "I can crowdsource here where I'm hitting a wall." It's one of those great moments for me where instead of "the fear of comparison kills your joy," instead, it's like, "Here are amazing people doing this work, and I can do it too," and they're giving me that boost of confidence through their own commitment and creativity.

HS: Sounds fantastic. Do you feel like you have any kind of Achilles heel when it comes to writing, or is that not something you really deal with?

L: Yeah. I think my Achilles heel is a blank page, especially I think I stumble at the beginning of the process. So having a totally blank document, having to start somewhere is the hardest thing for me. I was trying to reflect on my writing practice before we had this conversation, and I realized that I hadn't thought about how much that is a psychological block for me. I noticed that what I'll do is copying the Canvas prompt or putting in a bullet point list like... It's not a real outline, but I just have some kind of text up at the top is so helpful for me to just be like, "Okay. Well, now, I'm halfway down the page, so I'm ready to go." I'm like, "I'm into it."

I think another thing too is it cripples me when I have to create the introduction or create a really powerful conclusion that really hits home my points, and so I often leave those things to the absolute end. I know some other faculty will say like, "Oh, no, just do the introduction. Just write the abstract to the paper you haven't written." I find that so hard to do, and I'd much rather barf out, "Here's a big section of stuff I want to do. Here's another section. Here's another section," and then use that to go

backward, and go forward, and create that. "What am I going to tell you here, and why does it matter?" Yeah. If I can't do little tricks to get around that, I have so many blank documents on my desktop, and they're just graveyards of me being intimidated and unable to crack into that blank space.

HS: So intros and abstracts are not the place that it works best for you to start. Do you like to title before you write things, or do you write the thing, and then title it?

L: That is such an interesting question. I think I've definitely thought of things and been like, "That would be a great title for an article." I also have seen in classes where I'm being a teaching assistant and students have to pitch their final project or something, and they'll have a wacky title about something, and then they'll go into the body of their project proposal, and it's a really sound proposal, but the title had absolutely nothing to do with it. So I almost think the title, at least initially, can be a space of throwing an idea out there of what you think you want to talk about, and then getting something on the page. It can be like, "Oh, okay. I have a concept," and then I can start scaffolding off that. But what I will say is that I tried really hard in my master's program not to have a pun, colon, a real title. Not that there's anything wrong with that. There's some amazing punny titles out there, but it was too much stress to try to be funny and creative, and also write a master's thesis.

HS: That's very fair. It's funny, actually. I was recently trying to come up with a title for something, and I did exactly the thing that you described. It's referential punny title, colon, actual serious title. I don't know. I think that it's an occupational hazard, or maybe it's habit more than a hazard.

L: Yeah.

HS: So, switching gears a little bit. One of the ways that I like to wrap up these chats is by asking about advice. Do you have any pieces of advice that have been particularly influential for you?

L: That's a good question. I think as I developed as a writer up to the place where I am now, one of the hardest pieces of feedback I got was critiquing, trying to say things in more complex ways, like using a longer word or just crafting something so that you're packing a ton into it. In a way, I would do that as I've been developing as a writer as a way to be like, "Ooh, look. I can talk like these people talk." I really think it's a sign of good writing when you can cut all that stuff out of there. It doesn't make you smarter to use a complicated word, and it doesn't impress anyone if you write something that's like a paragraph along, and it's a single sentence, or something like that.

I also think that it's really a challenge to make your point as simply as possible, and it will be a gift to your readers so they don't have to sift through a lot of fluffy stuff to get to what you're actually trying to say. I remember when somebody probably used a red pen on a paper essay and told me to cut that out. I was just cut to the quick, like, "No. It's important to have a huge vocabulary, and it makes me sound scholarly." I think actually, that kind of stuff can distract from actually being a persuasive writer.

HS: Yeah. It actually reminds me of this idea that you can judge someone's understanding of the subject by their ability to explain it, particularly their ability to explain it to someone who doesn't have that depth of understanding that you might have. I think that what you've said speaks to that same sensibility of, "Can you distill the crux of this into something that is easily digestible and having that be the sign of deep understanding as opposed to the ability to throw around jargon?"

L: Yeah. Truly.

HS: So I've been asking a lot of questions, and I want to close with a final one which is just, is there anything that you wanted to talk about or that we haven't touched on yet that you think is particularly relevant or helpful?

L: Ooh, I didn't think of bringing any questions to the table. Let me think about that. One thing I have been reflecting on, and somebody called it to my attention this school year, and I can't remember the source, but they were making the point that in high school and as undergrads, you get rewarded for developing bad writing practices of like waiting to the deadline, and pulling an all-nighter, and writing a really thrown-together paper. Then, you get rewarded by passing, and it just reinforces that like, "Oh, writing, I can do the last minute," or writing is something that doesn't take a lot of thought and reflection, or it doesn't take multiple attempts at the same piece.

I think one of the hardest things in grad school is trying to pivot out of that practice. So, that, I think, would be something I'd share with early on grad students or undergrads that maybe want to come to grad school. It's like a different shift into really appreciating that writing is supposed to be an iterative process. You don't have to have 10 straight hours overnight and a bunch of Five-Hour Energy to get it done, and you'll end up with a better product too if you give yourself that time to even just sit with your own writing, let alone reflecting on research, which isn't to say I don't love a deadline. I need them, but yeah, I think it's too easy to get into that habit of you're sure to write something last minute, and it will be acceptable enough. I think that that's something people should think twice about.

HS: Yeah. No. I think that that's a really good advice.

L: I guess I do have a question for you though, if you have time.

HS: Yeah.

L: Have you updated your own writing process in the course of having these conversations?

HS: I mean, I think yes and no. I don't know that I've necessarily taken specific practices that people have discussed and then applied them to my writing process, but I do think that listening to these conversations and having these conversations has made me much more open to the variability within my own writing process. I think in the past, I've been constrained by the idea of, "I work well under such and such conditions, and if those are not the conditions, it's not going to work," or this idea that if you think about things enough, then eventually, they crystallize, and you're able to write out the perfect piece, or the perfect chapter, or whatever the case may be.

I think that hearing from other people has helped me to really take on board this idea of writing as a creative process. So when you create, you don't immediately jump to that, a final perfect iteration. I think an argument can be made that you never get to that perfect iteration. But in any case, I think that thinking about writing as a creative process has been really useful because it has allowed me to be much more comfortable with playing around with rough ideas. Maybe they're not going anywhere, but it's worth finding out. It's worth trying them out. Ultimately, very little in life is perfect, and I think that's also true of writing.

L: Yeah.

HS: So, ultimately, I think that one just has to make peace with the process and go for it. I think that that is something that listening to all of these conversations and listening to all of these writers has helped me embrace. So that is my long-winded answer.

L: Ugh, that is real.

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 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 Odegaard Writing and Research Center, happy writing.

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