



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 Runhua, a first year PhD student with a wealth of graduate writing and professional writing experience who shares with us her practical approach to making peace with imperfection and why her writing is the dog's pajamas. I'll let her introduce herself and tell you more.

Runhua (R): Hi, I'm Runhua. I'm a first year PhD student in Information Science. I use pronouns she/her. I'm very interested in video games and knowledge organization.

HS: Fantastic. So I know that you have a really interesting background when it comes to writing and that you also happen to be an international student as well. To get us started, I'm wondering if you could share a little bit about your experience navigating the expectations of writing within the context of an American graduate school.

R: That's a very hard question. That's a very hard question because I don't really know if I'm the perfect person to answer this question because previously, I already spent a few years in another English-speaking country, so I sort of have had this kind of training, and I worked as a journalist writing in English, so I suppose I might not be the perfect person to answer the question, but I think maybe one common issue some international students would have is sometimes you don't really understand the expectations for what you should write and how you should understand the writing.

HS: Right. Yeah, I think that's a great point of entry to talk through in terms of how previous experiences can indirectly serve as preparation for graduate work, whether that's prior study, professional experiences or anything else.

R: Yeah. I mentioned that the difficulty in understanding the expectation of writing and also what you write. I'm also still experiencing this kind of difficulty and I believe, not just international students, but also, like, graduate students or even undergraduate students who are new to some disciplines or who don't really have that much confidence when writing about certain domain or subjects. You might also encounter this kind of hardship because sometimes when you talk to your professors or your mentors, when you ask them for some comments, they could be, I'm not going to say, like, harsh, but they could be very straightforward. At that moment, you could be like, "Oh, I don't really know what I'm doing here. Do they think I'm not writing a good paper or something?"

At that moment, do not always assume that there will be a transparency of this, you know, communication. Ask them and try, you know, to invite them to clarify, "Are you referring to my language? Are you referring to the contribution to the discipline? Are you referring to my citation or my, you know, analysis of the literature? Are you referring even to, like, some approaches that I'm doing here?" So do not take these, you know, types of comments very personally. Ask them to clarify because sometimes these comments, they're not just, you know, harsh comments on you, it's actually reflection of people's expectation of all the writings that touch on the domain or the subject matter. So it's not just, you know, targeting you. I feel like sometimes people will be kind of intimidated by this kind of, you know, very harsh and straightforward questions and they will stop asking for further elaboration, and that kind of prevents them from progressing or prevent them from understanding what's really not perceived as right in this kind of, you know, communication or feedback. I feel like that's something many people are still encountering at the moment. It doesn't matter if you're an international student or if you're not.

HS: Yeah, absolutely. And then, since we've already veered into this arena, as someone who is multilingual, is that something that ever factors into your writing process? And if so, in what ways?

R: That's another very good question. Because sometimes I feel like it could be a double-edged sword. Sometimes being multilingual would really help you understand, you know, different people's understandings or different perceptions of even just one term. If you do, like, discourse analysis or even knowledge organization, or if you do human-computer interaction, being multilingual would really help you understand or facilitate people's understandings.

But I would also say that, sometimes, being multilingual would really complex your research, because you would fall into the rabbit hole of being multilingual and, you know, being aware of too many layers of meanings of just one simple term. So that's always the question. So I struggle a lot, I would say.

I don't think I have any practical way to really save myself from the rabbit hole because somehow I perceive it as my advantage. So I think one strategy to really balance the advantage and disadvantage of being multilingual. I'll be try to be very clear about the expectations of the writing. Say, if you were to do a research paper on someone from the Global South's understanding of certain technology and the research would be conducted in one of the non-English languages that you're familiar with. So you should know first what a domain knowledge is. So expectation of this research. What kind of knowledge gap you would like to address. And then, the feasibility of doing the research. And then also, the participants of the research, because I assume that by doing that research you'll be dealing with some human subjects, say, like, you know, adults or even children. Get to know their language levels and how you would be able to communicate with them for the purpose of the research. And then, finally, try to understand, like, what you will be able to include in that paper. So be very careful about what you can do and what you should do. So that's my strategy. It's just like being very practical.

But if you were not doing this in your research preparation stage, you could just let yourself be confused and let yourself explore the rabbit hole. So just when you're not writing, let yourself explore the rabbit hole, but when you do the writing, always know the expectation and try to set up very practical goal so that you will not be trapped in the rabbit hole. So that's my very naive strategy, because I really cannot come up with something better.

HS: I mean, I think that that is the trap that a lot of us fall into in graduate study, is the fact that there's a tendency to want to dig in every time you find something that is really interesting or compelling. And so, I think that this idea of navigating the rabbit hole in different ways is useful and I think speaks to some of the realities of not only being in graduate school, but also just being a curious person who also has to accomplish things.

So with that in mind, perhaps now would be a good time to ask about your general process as a writer. What does that look like for you?

R: Oh, that's a great question. So I think I don't usually give myself some very concrete writing plans, because I know some of my friends, they are very organized, so they have that timeline for their writing like when I should do the preparation, do the literature review, and then, when I should sit and write. I don't have that type of plan because ... I think it just doesn't work for me.

So for me, firstly, I would like to know the expectation of the writing. So if you told me, "Runhua, write a summary of our short interview for this podcast," I would like to ask you, "So, Hope, what's the purpose of writing that? What do you expect?" Maybe you would say, "I just want to have something and then maybe publish on Writing Center's website." And then, I would need to know what's the purpose of this hosting? Are you trying to make some marketing material for the Writing Center, with this podcast? Or you just want to use this specific episode as one of the cases that you would like to include in a collection of writings that you have for the Writing Center? So I need to know the purpose.

And then, by knowing the purpose of the writing and expectation of writing, I will also be able to know my audience. I think that's a very important factor you need to consider when you write. So assume that you've told me that this writing from me will be posted on the website. So I know that it's facing the public, so it's actually for everyone, so then I will know what kind of language I need to use.

And then also, since I know it's a website article, I also know how long the essay or the paper I need to write, and I will also know where I will be able to find references. I could browse your website and see all the articles, so I will know the potential template for this type of writing and all the topics that people have covered.

So I think knowing your expectation and knowing the expectation of a writing would always be very useful. And there are so many types of information and factors that you need to consider before you start to write.

And then, I think another approach that I would recommend: always give yourself enough time if you have time. If you tell me, "The deadline's tomorrow," I don't think I have many choices, I just need to sit down and write and make sure that I give you the paper or the essay by tomorrow. But if you do have one week, do some, like, very general planning.

So after you understand your expectations, try to give yourself a very rough outline for what you need to write. So first I might say, "Oh, so the first paragraph I'm going to say, 'I met with Hope today' and a brief introduction of this podcast and also you and myself. And then, this following paragraph, I might mention some of the topics, so interesting points that we talk about." And then, I might come up with a very short conclusion or even a joke to close this writing because it's facing the public, so I don't really want to make it very serious. So that would be my very general approach, very general structure for this writing.

And since you know that you still have time to think about the interesting points, do I want to just include the points? Do I want to add something that I have not talked about in this episode? So give yourself a notebook and always bring it with you so you can always put down your, you know, unique or very special ideas. So always give yourself some time. I think that's my very general approach.

So basically, know your expectations and give yourself time. And also, try to think about what you want to write and come up with as many ideas as possible. And then, according to the structure and the expectation or the requirements, try to come up and decide what final factors or final elements you want to put in writing. Just do not always try to write everything just before the deadline, that will be very, very hard.

HS: Yeah, no, I think that's really sound advice, having the awareness of expectations and also that key aspect of time.

So you mentioned being aware of expectations and how integral that is to your approach to writing. Is that something that you have always tended towards or is that something that has emerged out of your work as a professional in journalism?

R: Oh, that's definitely something I learned from my previous job. So I became a journalist after I finished my first master's in anthropology. So I also kind of define myself as an anthropologist by training. And then, when I was writing my first reports, I used some very big words, like jargons, because I still had this kind of thought that I needed to write something that's beautiful and I wanted to be, like, you know, professional.

But then, my editors told me, you don't need to do that because when you do real-time news, if you're not doing feature stories, it's always about, you know, convey your idea in a clear and precise and accurate way and just give people the core information that they need. So I was kind of shocked because that was very different from what I used to do. I didn't have any professional or systematic training in journalism. I could do good interviews, I guess that's why they hired me, but I didn't know much about writing as a journalist, so that was news to me at that time. Yeah.

HS: I think that's interesting. When I talk to other graduate students, I sometimes hear about the difficulty that comes from confronting the desire that we sometimes have to want things to be beautiful or perfectly written, and also the need to actually finish things and put things down or put things out. And so, I'm curious if you have any suggestions or tips on how to be happy with your writing when it comes time for it to be done, but it's not necessarily what you would consider to be perfect or beautiful yet.

R: I think it's closely related to your proper understanding of the expectations of the writing. So let's say if you are working for an international news agency, you need to know what the agency's about. Are they specializing in international news or business reporting or industry magazines or even, like, publications? Your focus would be very different. So firstly, understand your audience and understand the expectations. If you were to write for, say, CNN's or even Bloomberg's realtime news reports or business news, you maybe only have 200 words to play with, or even 100 words. So within that 100 words, you need to use elegant and concise language to convey the idea and give all the necessary information. But if you were to write a feature, or even if you want to do a documentary and you're

writing a script for the documentary, that would be a different story. So I would say always know the expectations.

And also, try to accept that perfection is actually sometimes very contextual. So do not push yourself too hard. Before you write, do some, like, self-care and kind of have a very short discussion with yourself and ask yourself, what do I want from this piece of writing? Do I want it to be my new masterpiece or do I want to aim for publication or do I want to send this to someone to get their approval? So what is the expectation from others and what is my expectation of this writing?

So I think I don't aim for perfection because I only need to progress, I only need to see the progress. But if you always aim for perfection, aim for something that's too ideal and you wouldn't be able to do it, you'll feel very sad. If you think about this, I believe that people all have their favorite authors or authors that they like, just pick up some of your favorite author's works and do some Google research and see what critics say about their writings. Know that even those very successful writers, even those writers or legendary writers, critics would also critique their writings. And no one's writing and no one's works will be perfect.

You can say that, "I think this is my new masterpiece and I love this so much," but do not aim for perfection because it's not there. Try to give yourself some care. I know it's very, very hard, but in short, try to give yourself some time and give yourself some grace. It's not always there, perfection.

So it's a very sad fact, sometimes, because I feel like I still have the dream of writing something that's perfect, but I know it's not possible, so in my writing, I just try to be as practical as possible because I know most of the writings I do at the moment, they have purposes and they have requirements, and I just need to meet the requirements, and then I will be fine. You have to learn to compromise with what you have and with what you want to do. I think that's something very sad to some extent.

HS: Maybe. But I also definitely think that there's something to be said for a practical approach. To me, I think it comes down to the question of what is the primary purpose of the writing? Is it primarily aesthetic or is it primarily communicative? And I think that as long as we're writing with the intent to share specific ideas, those practical concerns are always going to be part of that. At least for me.

But you mentioned that one way of getting yourself out of that headspace of expecting perfection can be to read the critical reviews of authors that you really like or enjoy. And so, I'm curious if you have any favorite authors and if you have been influenced at all by reading their work or the criticism of it.

R: Oh, that's a very hard question because I feel like I don't really have a favorite author. Because my understanding of writing is slightly different. I think I'm more interested in how people address certain complicated issues, and I don't really always pay attention to any particular author or what they do. I'm open to different authors and different opinions. And sometimes, I feel like some even anonymous authors or writers on Reddit or even some social media platforms, they do great, you know, works and even just one or two sentences and even in the caption for some memes, and they're fantastic, like, I got a lot of inspirations from them. So I would say it's very hard to say, like, who's your favorite author.

And another issue I see here is that it's very hard to define what an author is or what a writer is, if you think about the advancement of technology and how people participate in writing and creating. So the concept or the changes in our understandings or even, like, our perceptions of those concepts can really change how you approach writing and how you see yourself write.

HS: Yeah. Yeah. I think you raise a really great point with that, not only in terms of how the conceptualization of a writer is changing, but also in the acknowledgement that what a writer is and who a writer is a question that, on the surface, seems really simple, but is, in fact, a very complex and complicated question. And so, with that in mind, I wonder, do you think of yourself as a writer? And if not, how do you think of yourself?

R: I don't think of myself as a writer, I think I'm someone who's still learning how to write.

HS: I feel like that's a widely shared sentiment among graduate writers.

R: Yeah. And I think another, like, two points that I want to address regarding the writer, like, identifications that, so firstly, I think I'm still learning. By writer, I do expect a sense of professionalism. So you have to write well if you want to, you know, identify yourself as a writer. Or you see writing as a very serious practice you would like to do, not maybe for the rest of your life, but you would like to do very often. I don't think I'm that devoted, and I don't really think I would take writing as a vocation. So at the moment, writing is a means of communication and also a tool that I need to use to convey my research ideas. I like writing, but I'm just think I'm not loyal or good enough to be considered a writer. So I guess that's my reasons for not identifying myself as a writer. Yeah.

HS: So you mentioned a bit earlier carrying around a notebook, do you find that writing in that way is particularly useful for you?

R: Well, I think it depends. If you ask me to write a whole paper on my notepad, I don't think I can do it now because too used to using the computer to write my paper, but in terms of the notepad, I still feel like a very small planner or a very small, you know, notebook would be very perfect because sometimes you just don't know when some very interesting, like, comments or very interesting, like, chats you have heard will be useful.

HS: Yeah. When you talk about carrying around a notebook and writing down those interesting things that you might be seeing or overhearing, that feels very much to me like the practice of taking field notes or of being in the field as an anthropologist. Is that something that you brought out of your experience and training as an anthropologist, or is that something that comes from a different place?

R: Oh, I didn't really fully recognize the importance of taking notes until I, you know, got into this PhD or my previous workplace because for people who deal with like human subjects and also social sciences or even topics that really involve the analysis of the society or even some critical perspectives looking at today's issues, you always want to get empirical evidence or empirical inspirations. If you look at like the University of Washington's databases, you see a lot of databases and there are hundreds of millions of publications, but you know that life is always bigger than, you know, what you see in those papers.

So where do you get inspirations? How do you get to know the real life? You don't just work on them by browse those papers or taking notes of those very serious, like, literary or scholarly discussion, you go into the field and listen to what people talk about. Say, if you are working on something about children and AI, you could read papers from very prestigious conferences or journals, but imagine on the light rail, you hear someone talking about children and AI, and a child asks her mom to buy her a robot or some robot-shaped toy, and then the mom says, "Oh, I think that's kind of old school. I would like to get you some AI or AI-empowered toy." So that's actually something very interesting.

If you think about toy as something that you need to fulfill your needs of play or playing, does that mean that there should be a hierarchy of the types of play or the materials or the forms of the toys that you need for your child or your children? So this is actually something very interesting. So you don't always get that kind of conversation or even evidence or even empirical studies from papers. So it's always useful to pay attention to what's around you or even put down questions.

And I feel like when you're doing a graduate degree, sometimes you say, "I don't really know how to find new ideas. So where do I get the research ideas? So how do I come up with research gap?" The thing is, if you're dealing with human subjects, if you're dealing with something about the society, just always pay attention to what's around you, because the school and the academia is actually just like the iceberg beyond the surface of the ocean, just a very small portion of the real world.

If research on the society or some social issues or even humanities issues, if they really focus on the real world and they want to address some real world issues, then you know you always need to go back to the real world. And how do you go back? You know, you live in the real world, you just need to pay attention and try to take notes of them and ask questions. That would also be a great accumulation for your potential research questions I would say.

HS: Yeah. I am admittedly a little bit biased, but I tend to agree. And I think that your example really illustrates how intertwined the academic and the everyday are and how they can inform one another in really interesting ways if they're allowed to intersect and overlap. So I'm curious, have you found any unexpected influences that have sort of transferred either from your academic work into the everyday or the everyday into your academic work?

R: I do. I think information verification is always very important because I was a reporter, so sometimes, before you report on something, you get, like, clues or you see something on the social media and then you decide to dig deeper and you start to approach sources and require, you know, extra information or explanation from the parties involved. And I feel like when you do research, it's always very good to know the sources of your data and the sources of the comments, and even, like, theories and sayings or even seemingly obvious evidence. That would be very, very important. And sometimes, by digging deeper, you'll see something very unexpected. So you always need to know the limitations of your data, and you always need to be very clear about your subjects and all the, like, constraints and the context for the data and all the materials you collect. I think that's something I've learned from both the training of anthropology and also my previous job as a journalist.

And I also feel it's very important because today we deal with misinformation and even though we have deep fakes and the technology is just crazy. So I think it's not just useful in writing research papers, so doing this graduate degree, it's also very useful when you deal with real life examples.

HS: Yeah. So one of the things that I've been asking people this season is to describe their writing process through metaphor, and so I would like to pose that to you as well. If you had to describe either your writing or your writing process with a metaphor, how would you describe it?

R: Oh, that's a very hard question. Hm. So I want to briefly talk about the question from the perspective of an international student first. So I think one issue is that, sometimes, you know, people who are not very familiar with English or who are not very familiar with this American context might not really know the meaning of metaphor. They might not know metaphors that they could use. So this kind of limitation

is also something we would encounter when we write things, even for PhD students or even very experienced professors, they don't know anything about a domain, so sometimes they feel like, "Something is there, but it's so hard. I know I have some great ideas, but I just do not know how to crystallize them and really to express them."

But I think I do have one metaphor. I would like to use dog's pajamas to describe my aim of writing, not my writing, because there is a story behind my choice of a metaphor. So I'm taking a knowledge organization course. And then, one day, there was an assignment on some of the metaphors or the idioms in English, and there was this one: cat's pajamas. And I was very curious, so I asked some of my friends, "Why not dog's pajamas or birds pajamas or even, like, elephants pajamas because you have elephants in the room and as strong as a horse? So why this animal?" Because I know that as an anthropologist you're always very interested in metaphors and symbols, you know, identifiers and all those very interesting, you know, concepts. And people told me, "I don't know, it's just cat's pajamas."

I feel like I aim to dig deeper and try to review some questions that people would take for granted. So I would just, like, use the perceived forever enemy of cats: dogs. So I would like to see my writing become this kind of, "Oh, dog's pajamas," this kind of, you know, surprise. I don't know if that's a good metaphor or not, but that's just my aim. I get so obsessed with this dog's pajamas, this kind of alternative creation. Because I think if you do some Google research, you will know the meaning behind, but I haven't tried that. But it's always very interesting to me because if you talk to people and ask them, "Why cat? Why cat's pajamas?" Many people will say, "I don't know," so what's behind this? "I don't know." So I think that's my aim of writing.

HS: So recognizing that some listeners might not be familiar with that phrase, can you tell us what "cat's pajamas" means?

R: Oh, so it's actually something so exceptionally excellent; person or thing. I would say. Because I remember that's actually the definition I found from a dictionary when I first heard about the phrase and I was like, "What's the relationship?" And people told me, "We don't know. It's just the phrase's been there for so many years and we just use it." Well, to me, that could be a potential, like, research question if you can find something that people have always been using, but people have been taking for granted, that could be a very good, you know, research gap. So I always want to address these issues. And I just found that there is even a fashion company or some, like, fashion enterprise called The Cat's Pajamas. So you see, it's everywhere. So why not dog's pajamas?

HS: Yeah, I think it's really interesting and fun to play with those kinds of what ifs.

R: Thanks.

HS: So to bring us to a close, I wanted to return to the topic of influences and advice. And I'm curious, what's the most valuable piece of advice you've ever gotten about writing? Or to put it slightly differently, what's a piece of advice that you think would be valuable for other graduate writers to hear?

R: I think the best tip that I have ever received is don't stop writing. Always practice.

I think the advice I would like to give to other writers or my peers at U-Dub is be brave and always be ready to face even harsh comments. Because sometimes, if you don't really have the confidence or if

you question yourself too much, you don't want to write. Then you'll be afraid of writing. When you have that kind of feeling, just have a very brief conversation with yourself. "What is my fear here? Am I really afraid of writing or am I afraid of the judgment of writing? Or am I afraid of receiving a grade or some comments, you know, from some professionals on my writing?" So be very clear about your hesitation, your concerns, and also your fear, because... if you don't solve them, you will not be able to progress and you'll not be able to continue writing. Even if you write, you will be forcing yourself to do something that you are not enjoying doing. So just be brave.

And also, give yourself some time and even some space to communicate with those who do the grading or who are mentoring you, and try to invite them to clarify their expectations. Because I'm working with some professors from the Information School, and when I got some very straightforward and, you know, seemingly harsh comments from them, I invited them to elaborate on their, not, like, harshness, but those comments. And they explained to me in the end that, "Runhua, I don't really mean to be harsh, but I just want to really tell you what's wrong with this paper or this piece of work. Because if you submitted that to a journal or a conference, the reviewers could be even harsher and you'll be very sad."

And it was the last sentence that, "you will be very sad," that really changed my understanding of their comments, you know, at that moment. So they were actually trying to give me those, like, pills that would be very hard to swallow now because they didn't want me to face the harsh comments from even strangers, because I know my professors, and I know my collaborators very well, and they're all fantastic and amazing people, so I will not take it very personally even when they give me very, I will not say harsh, but very critical and very constructive comments.

So, always be aware that comments, they're just the reflection of people's expectation about your writing, but not the expectation of you as a person. So in this domain, when you write about those subject matters, you need to meet those expectations, but it does not mean that you're a bad writer because everyone's learning. And if you think about this PhD progress, it's always about... you know, endless knowledge, and no one can understand everything in this world. So it's a marathon and it's always something that you need to spend a lot of time and effort to even get some very superficial understanding of.

So just give yourself some grace and give yourself some care, and also time. And be aware that just be brave. The comments can be very useful. Don't be afraid. I would say that's actually very important because I've seen so many people in my previous degrees and even some I know who are doing PhDs in this school put off by those comments and feeling like, "Oh, I don't think I'm very worthy. I don't think I'm writing good stuff. What do I do? I avoid talking to my, you know, mentors, or even Writing Center mentors, and even writing teachers or my peers." Don't do that. Try to understand the comments can be useful. Just focus on the writing, do not always focus on the personal issues, and don't always assume your personal value to the writings.

HS: I think that's excellent advice.

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.

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