



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 Sue, a PhD candidate in the Department of History who talks us through a creative approach to writing academically and why writing is like pottery. I'll let her introduce herself and tell you more.

Sue (S): Hi, I'm Sue. I'm a fourth year PhD candidate in History Department. My dissertation focuses on history of borderlands in Southwest China viewed through the lenses of environment, affect, and emotion.

HS: Fantastic. So to get us started, I wonder if you could tell us a little bit about your writing process. How would you describe it?

S: So my writing process for my academic work is usually started with me reading secondary sources and then I take notes. Maybe I spend 50% of time just collecting sources and taking notes of the sources, one sources lead to another, and then I go through all the notes and begin to distill some of the bigger themes and then concretize it into an argument. And then, you know, I use the distilled materials as building blocks and then begin to write the rest of the paper.

I think, um, during undergrad, usually the professor will say that usually I want to write the body of the paper and then you write argument. But now, I think on the graduate level it becomes so difficult to just confine the topic to one argument because we have so many other sources to write. So I insert that procedure of writing argument right after I collected all the notes and distill the themes. And then I also try to write half an hour every day. Just on anything, just keep the momentum going. And if it happens to be that I have a writing assignment, I would just write on that assignment. If not, I just write something else. But I think that really helped me.

HS: Awesome. So you specified their academic writing. Do you find yourself doing other kinds of writing?

S: Currently, I don't actually have a lot of time to write other forms of writing, but I do keep a diary, every day and I try to just... keep writing a diary every day. It could just be a sentence, but just have that. It's actually pretty fun to read some of the diaries I've written years ago, but it was a slightly different process.

HS: Yeah. I think that's really interesting. First of all, because I think it can be challenging to keep a diary at least personally. But more than that, it reminds me of something from the first season. Caroline, who was one of the guests that we had on, talked about some advice that she had gotten from her advisor about basically keeping process notes about your research and your thinking. And I thought that that was particularly interesting because it's kind of a cross between field notes and a diary. So I wonder, do you find that that kind of personal writing that you're doing has any carryover or influence on the kind of academic or professional writing that you do?

S: Yeah. I think writing always leads to thinking. So it's a way of just practicing expressing opinions. So I think that that's definitely helpful. But on the other hand, I think my personal diaries are really a place for me to have some freedom of really sloppy writing. So sometimes I don't write full sentences or I just write words. Sometimes I don't even try to write sentences, just like some keywords or making into a poem because, like, that's how you write poems. You don't write complete sentences.

And, like, I got suggestions on our archival research. We like to write a summary of what we look at every day and, like, what are we planning on looking at next day, and what insight did we get like any interesting source, like a small summary for everyday archival findings. So, that is something I found actually pretty useful. Also, it's a way to set a target for what I should do the next day. And usually I do finish those targets. But without that, sometimes when I forgot to write the targets, I do find, like, I actually don't know how to plan my archival schedule that day, just because sometimes there's unlimited number of archives that you could be looking at. So I think having that I think makes the research more effective.

HS: Hm. Yeah. I didn't know that the summarizing of daily work was something that was common practice.

So picking up on something you said earlier about different types of writing and different genres of writing, I wonder if you could talk a little bit about the extent to which you see your work as public- or academy-facing and how you go about potentially writing for different audiences?

S: Oh, that's a good question. I think even before we talk about the really public facing, like, for readers who are not in academia or outside the field, I think the first audience we usually get are our advisors, or cohort, or just our friends. And then I think that's the first step to make a work readable is by asking them to review our work and maybe through presentations in conferences, just trying to present orally our research instead of converting it from article to a presentation, sometimes that clarifies a lot of the very entangled thoughts in our writings.

And then after – I think some articles stay in the academia. They cannot get to you oversimplified. But this reminds me that probably a year ago, some of my history friends, we went to a concert. Oh, actually it's punk music concert. And in that venue they had a lot of zines and just started reading those zines. And we begin to have, like, our own zine workshop writing about our historical research. So instead of writing other topic, we just make any, like, research topic into the zine format. The zine only has eight pages, and you have the first page as a cover and last page as a, like, reference page. So you only have six page to explain everything you want to say. And that actually is a pretty fun practice of trying to strategize what to be included on what page and how to design those pages. So that I think is the more, like, public-facing scholarship that we've been doing.

HS: I love the idea of putting your research into a zine format. I think that's really fun and interesting. Do you find that you think about writing as a creative practice or do you tend to think of it as a different kind of process?

S: I think definitely, like, our academic writing is a creative process. Creative writing. Because it's hard to really express everything that we wanted to say in a single paper, and it has a lot of constraints, but those constraints also compel us to be more creative. And also, there are so many different ways of arriving at the same argument, but how to deliver that, that has a lot to do with your style and how you want people to understand your topic.

And the other experience I had with creative writing is when I was in college, I took a screenwriting class and then later on I signed up to be in the Dramatist Guild America or Dramatist Guild.

So I also signed up for a really short-term screenwriting class through the Dramatist Guild. And in that workshop I really learned a lot of how to show and not tell. I think that is a rule that is pretty applicable to academic writing, although a lot of times we are asked to have some clarity by just telling, but at the end of the day, whether a piece is convincing or not is by how much it shows that the argument is valid.

And the other thing is that our instructor asked everyone to give their scripts to the other people to read.

So it allowed us to hear how our scripts sound through other people's voices. And this is, like, a really cringe-inducing and also making us really self-conscious. But it also just forced us to really see our work as not just a work that is going to be read only through ourselves, but also through others, so that, like, the other people's rendition of the work makes me realize what I'm trying to convey and how there are some, like, differences of understanding that might be induced because of my writing. So that was pretty helpful.

And also at the end, I got a suggestion that my style, it's not necessarily natural, but something really unique and I should really keep that style and that really made me want to own my voice at that moment. And it's not necessarily that I don't want to improve anymore and I won't take any suggestion given to me, but it gives me more tools to, like, strike a balance in writing, like, keep the format, keep the clarity, but also have my own voice in my writing. So that is another thing I think is pretty true for dissertation or academic writing. We want to be within a certain framework of writing things, but also we don't want to submit ourselves to the tyranny of these, like, really formulaic standards of how to write an argument, how you write a body paragraphs. I think in the end we should go past that and have a moment, have a space for our self-expression in our writing.

HS: Yeah. So thinking about finding that balance and bringing one's own style and voice into the writing, do you have a favorite piece that you've written so far?

S: The favorite piece is always the next piece. Yeah, I guess – I like some of my piece, but I think right now I'm still waiting for the best piece to appear. To be made.

HS: Do you think that there will ever be a best piece, or do you think that that's something that is always sort of on the horizon?

S: I think it's always on the horizon, but also sometimes it's hard to compare. Sometimes I'd like the piece better just because I like the topic that I'm writing better. So I think it's probably good to always think the best piece is going to be the next piece. So I won't feel that I've plateaued or I peaked at a certain point, but there's always something to look forward to.

HS: That's understandable.

So speaking of what's next and looking forward, one thing that I think can be challenging in graduate school is focusing in your curiosity, or inquiring mind, onto a single focal point. I'm wondering, do you deal with those sorts of struggles around focusing in? And if so, how do you deal with them?

S: Yeah, definitely. So this is one of my biggest issues is that I have a lot of thread that I want to follow in one piece, but then it gets really messy at the end. And then it's hard to keep my articles or my chapter within the required word limit. And the most direct way that helped me was just put things in the footnote, just try to really center on something that's the most important, the most compelling argument, and put the other branches in footnote.

But sometimes that doesn't actually solve the problem. So the other way that helped me was actually, again, to convert the writing into a presentation with PowerPoint. Just sometimes by just practicing, presenting a piece helped me to think about, "Oh, actually I think this makes more sense than the other thread." And, "Okay. This is a little bit off topic." And that's a way that helped me to narrow down on a more concretized and clear line of argument. But I would say that I'm actually not very good at that, but that's some of the tools that I found helpful.

HS: Did you come to that realization about making PowerPoints and about thinking through things as a presentation organically, or was that something that was advised or recommended to you?

S: Mm. I guess it's both. So because during conferences we had to present our paper – sometimes it's not even paper, just a presentation. So that process really forced me to do this a lot. And the others, during our prospectus class, we were asked to present our prospectus so we have a written prospectus and we also had a presentation. So that is also this format of having two versions of the same topic. And of course writing and presentation are very different, but I think by doing both, it's mutually instrumental to improve the clarity of the message in each format.

HS: That makes sense. I think it's really interesting throughout the conversation that we've had, there seems to be a real kind of partnership between the written and the spoken for you, which I think is really valuable and is also something that I don't see coming through as frequently when we talk about the practices of writing. And bearing that in mind, I'm really curious about how you learned or got comfortable with the disciplinary aspects of graduate writing.

S: Oh, I just fumbled through. I had, like, some amazing advisors and also great cohort members that really helped me to find my style. And actually, it's really just about writing a lot that helped me to get better at writing. I got some other suggestions on reading a lot and reading writers that you like and imitate their style or absorb their styles. That has been a useful advice as well, but I think it still has this conversion process of reading something that you like and write something that you like.

So I think really writing, and for me, taking research seminars, writing research papers, that is really the most important, structured way of helping me to get better at writing.

Some professors say the most useless advice is, "This is all great. I like your writing." But this is not useful because everyone's writing might have some flaw, might be, you know, different to different people. So it's always good to receive advice and also give concrete advice. It doesn't have to be harsh, just it needs to carry some content. I think maybe by reading other people's work with the intention of giving some suggestions also help me with my own writing.

HS: When you get feedback, how do you process that input? Because it's not something that is necessarily easy to navigate, especially when you have multiple sources of feedback on a single piece of writing.

S: Yeah, definitely. When we get suggestions, they usually never agree 100% with each other. So I have to be, like, mediating through all these different suggestions. But I would pay attention to first the suggestion that do agree. And if more than two or three people were saying the same thing about the piece, then it's probably something that's worth considering revising. But the other thing is if there's no, like, approaching deadline, I would just put aside the piece for a while and read more sources and then I probably will come to understanding of which direction I should take with these suggestions.

Sometimes it's not because one suggestion is better than the other, it's conditioned by so many other factors like, "What's the context of this work? And sometimes who's your audience?" Maybe the people who are giving advice, they have their own background. So I think they just provide you with a toolkit of what you can use. But I think without new information coming in, like, without reading more sources, it's hard to decide which suggestion to take.

HS:

Speaking of continuing to read, I want to jump back to something that you said earlier about reading, writing that you enjoy. Are there any authors, whether in an academic space or in other spaces that you have found really resonated with you or impacted your approach?

S: Probably not consciously, but one of my favorite authors, his name is Alai. He's a Tibetan author and he writes fictions. He's the author of Red Poppies. And his style is very... integral. It's felt like there's no word that can be changed in his writing. There's no excess sentence. There's no superfluous words in his writing. Very airtight, but also it's flowing, it has a natural flow. And I really like his writing for that. And it's not that his writing on a topic that's full of nice things it's actually a story about violence and about historical trauma.

I don't think I can ever get to his level of writing, but I think it's really felt to me that this is one piece and it's hard to extract from the writing, what is the beginning? What is the end? And what is that? It's just a very perfect piece. But I would say I don't really like a lot of his other works, it's just that one book that I really like. So I think that happens sometimes. Some of the books I really liked by other people and some books are not necessarily the favorites.

HS: Hearing you talk about that, I was reminded of this thing called the Proust Questionnaire, which is a personality test type thing. And within it, it has these pairs of questions, things like what do you like most about yourself? What do you like most in others, that kind of thing. I find it something that is interesting to reflect with. So thinking about that, I want to pose to you this pair of questions around writing. What do you think you appreciate most in the writing of others, and what do you appreciate most in your own writing?

S: Yeah. I think I really like, and also dislike at the same time – again, this is paradoxical – when writers are writing a very integral part of their argument, the way they write, the way they structure outside the set pattern. And it's sometimes called radical writing. The writing itself, the style of itself is conveying a radical idea and I really appreciate when there are authors that dare to do that. And then what I – I wouldn't say dislike, but sometimes makes my life harder when there's a certain barrier between the idea that the author trying to emphasize and how I understand what is the central message. So I think sometimes I struggle with writing that sounds like it's taken for granted. And also I think same for me, sometimes I felt that I should write with more clarity, and I think because I really want other people to understand the significance of the argument that I'm making. But sometimes I also felt that going through all the familiar requirements is too explicit and not aesthetically pleasing. It's a little metaphorical, but sometimes I want to give it some ornaments to make it less explicit just, "Oh, this is a historical argument." There's nothing else in that. I want it to be something that's also worthy of reading as a piece of writing.

HS: Yeah. Talking about artistry and the desire to write in a way that is evocative for the reader. I'm curious about how you would describe your writing practice figuratively.

S: Yeah. I think the metaphor of making a pottery piece to be pretty relevant. For example, if I were to make a mug using clay, I need to know what a mug generally looks like and how other people think a mug usually looks like. So that's the philosophical idea of what a mug is supposed to look like. It's how academic writing should be like. And then you have the process of moulding it, structuring, and, like, think through all the different small steps that will take you to the point where you have a draft of generally mug-looking piece, and then you wait for it to dry and then you trim it.

So that's where you take out the small mistakes out, grammar mistakes and then style that you don't like. And then if you don't like it, sometimes it's easier just to smash it and start it all over again than try to trim to the point where you like it. Sometimes it's also true with writing. Sometimes it's easier if I just start over using the same materials and rewrite the piece. And writing is also a form of thinking, so by rewriting the piece, it helps me really get out of the dilemma, the box, the air-dried mug, that cannot be changed too much and start over again.

Sometimes it's definitely faster to do that, but just takes a bit of courage to do that. But once it's done, it's done. And usually I'm really thankful of myself of doing that.

HS: When you restart something, what does that look like for you? Do you tend to start a new document entirely or do you pick through the scraps of what you've already written?

S: Yeah, I usually start with a blank document and then I start to write either a paragraph that's in the middle or in the beginning paragraph. So that paragraph will be new. And then – so I usually have a parallel view of the old document and the new documents so I write and then look back to my older

document and see what I can take. And I usually don't start right away. Again, I put this piece aside for a period of time. So I probably have some new ideas of how to frame the old piece, and then I kind of transferred pieces from the old one to the new document. But having a bigger screen really helped with that.

HS: Yeah. At a process level, I'm curious, do you have any pieces of advice that you found particularly helpful or that you might recommend for other graduate writers?

S: Yeah. I would like to... There's one article that I think I've read so many times because it's being assigned numerous times when I'm doing my graduate study here, is this piece called How Writing Leads to Thinking by Lynn Hunt. I believe she's a modern European historian, but we've been assigned this piece so many times, and the one advice that stick in my mind is this rule called the Radish Rule. It's basically about how she observed how her grandmother used to grow these radishes in her garden. And her grandma will always ask people to tell her the number of radishes that are growing in her garden and the number of the radishes usually grow steadily over time.

And she said this is how she conceptualizes her writing is also these small radishes. You want it to accumulate steadily over time and then you can harvest them. Again, it's going back to the idea about momentum. And, you know, I think sometimes these radishes are not great and some not delicious, but you want to have a number of radishes that just you keep growing in your yard or garden.

So I think that's something that's pretty impactful message that I got from that piece. And the other piece I found pretty helpful was by Judith Butler and she was not actually giving the writing advice. This is in her new preface for the book, Gender Trouble, and she is talking about how people criticized her style of being too challenging and hard to understand. And she said that she understand that style is a really complicated terrain, but we should never think that grammar or style are politically neutral.

So I think that also goes back to the idea of – I think there's a certain tyranny of grammar and style that is implicit in our writing... curriculum? But I think most of the faculty or instructors that I had in grad school never said that We have to a hundred percent adhere to that role, and we should always find our own voice in our writing. And I think that's something that I think is really powerful and also hard sometimes. And also give me more confidence in my writing. And make me like writing as a practice more. Because we usually ask our advisors or scholars that we met question of, "So do you like writing and do you have any advice on writing?"

They're also like, "I hate writing." And that's usually the answer we got. But, you know – I don't know. It's just funny that how our relationship with writing is so complicated and so full of tensions.

HS: Yeah. No, it can definitely be a complicated dynamic.

Before I let you go, is there anything that you wanted to add to this discussion that we haven't touched on yet?

S: Umm... I think Murakami Haruki? I think in one of his books, he talk about how sometimes he writes in English and then translates it into Japanese, and that practice of translating between different languages helped him to achieve a certain style that he liked more than if he were to just write in Japanese only. And sometimes I think writing in different languages, even broken sentences, and then translate back to the target language that we are writing sometimes helps me to get over the writer's block. I haven't

been doing that for a long time, but I remember the time that I did use that technique, it was pretty successful.

HS:

Yeah. I think that's really fascinating. And I think it also speaks to how beneficial it can be to have multiple languages at your disposal that you can work across, and particularly how those different languages offer us different things depending on what we're trying to convey. It kind of reminds me of this recurring commentary that I hear sometimes of people saying, "Oh, I have a different voice or a different personality depending on which language I'm speaking." I'm curious, do you find that you have a different voice when you're using different languages, or do you feel like you have a thoroughly unified voice across those?

S: Mm. I think I definitely probably sound different if I'm talking different languages. But I think it has more to do with the context that we use the language in. I almost only write in English when it comes to academic writing, so that influences how I talk in English. But other languages, you know, there are different contexts of using that language and that influences style of that language. So I think it's not intrinsic. It's not a personality that's intrinsic to how we are attached differently to different language, but mostly contextual. And that is also dynamic. It could be changed in the future.

Like, if I'm reading more in Japanese or trying to write academic article in Japanese, then I probably would sound more academic in Japanese where – I've never written academic piece in Chinese. But if I had to do that, I might acquire a lot of the grammar and vocabulary that's needed to do that and write that piece, and I might start to sound like that. That's just a very contextual process.

HS: Yeah. That makes total sense.

And there you have it. Thanks for listening to this episode, 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.

Write for You is a podcast by the University of Washington's Odegaard Writing & Research Center. This episode was produced, edited, and hosted by me, Hope St. John with music by Scott Holmes and Unheard Music Concepts used under Creative Commons License.