



Hope St. John (HS):

Hi there! Welcome back to Season Six of *Write for You*, the Odegaard Writing and Research Center's podcast on the process and practice of writing. I'm Hope, your host, fellow writer, and disembodied writing buddy. Come along with me as I chat with graduate writers from across the University of Washington campus about their strategies, motivations, and approach to writing within graduate school and beyond.

On this episode, we'll hear from Alyssa, a doctoral candidate in biology who joins us from her fieldsite to talk about writing across genres, collaboration, and embracing what works for you. I'll let her introduce yourself and tell us more.

Alyssa Sargent (AS):

Hi, my name is Alyssa Sargent. I use she/her pronouns, and I'm a fifth year PhD candidate in the biology department here at U-Dub. So I specifically work with hummingbirds, so I'm in the behavioral ecophysics lab and what we work on is nectar feeding birds. So right now I'm actually currently in the field in Colombia, in South America, and I am studying hummingbirds down here. We're using a lot of fun technologies to better understand their behavior and get an idea of what their daily lives are like, which are actually quite mysterious, believe it or not.

HS:

Fabulous.

So, I think a good place for us to start is what is writing to you?

AS:

That's a great question. Oh man, writing is everything to me, actually. I grew up so immersed in books and my whole life was just wanting to escape into those books and oh my God, I really loved reading and honestly, I felt like real life was boring because I didn't have magical powers or I couldn't do anything that was exciting and I wasn't really going on adventures or anything. But the writing for me was so powerful, just reading what other people had written and that really spurred me to want to write, myself. So I actually didn't ever plan on being a biologist, my goal was always to become an author and to just publish books and have that be my career, and that's still a little side project that I've got going on, but my primary focus now is biology.

But yeah, I think that writing is really just such a powerful tool to express yourself but also communicate anything. Because there's so many kinds of writing, we have the scientific writing that a lot of us have to do, which is much more rigid. It's not quite as creative, but at the same time it is this really powerful tool for letting other scientists know what you've been doing and trying to move the field, whatever it is that you're studying forward in a really impactful way, as much as you can. So I think we have that kind of

writing. We have grant writing, which is also really fun. I really enjoy grant writing because you get to be super creative and you get to talk about all the things that you want to do.

And I don't know, with the manuscript writing, sometimes I feel like, well, these are all the things that we did and all the things that went wrong and all the ways that we had to struggle. But with grant writing, it's this clean slate and you can say, "This is all the stuff we're going to do and it's going to be amazing." There's just so many various forms of writing that we can do even as graduate students in other fields. So I think it's great both for professional purposes, but also just for personal purposes as well. Yeah, I love writing and honestly, it is one of the great joys of my life. Yeah.

HS:

That's amazing.

It's interesting to hear you talk about the grant writing in particular. As you were speaking I was taken back to this grant writing class that I took where the instructor was like, "When you're writing a grant, you're writing fiction."

AS:

Right.

HS:

I don't know, I find that sentiment resonant in terms of what you were saying.

AS:

Yeah, absolutely. I totally agree. In a way, it is fiction, right? Because none of it has happened yet and you are being very idealistic about what you're going to achieve. But at the same time, the best grant writing I find is really so rooted in all of these sources and all the things that people have done before. So I think it's a bit of both. On the one hand we say, okay, these are all the amazing projects that we're working on that are coming up. We have all of these cool ideas that you can be a part of, right? You're trying to convince this person that whatever you're going to do is going to be worth their time and their investment, and that is a really challenging thing to do well sometimes, but there is the side that's just super exciting because it is like a blank slate. You have the whole world at your fingertips, the limit is your imagination, and you can pitch anything for a grant as long as it seems grounded and realistic and feasible.

HS:

Hearing you talk about the different kinds of writing, I'm wondering how easy was it to find your footing in terms of academic or scientific contexts?

AS:

Oh, it was not easy. Like I said, I really love writing, but that type of writing did not come naturally to me or easily, we could say. I have written many failed grant proposals, I have more failed grant proposals than successful ones. And the scientific manuscript writing side of things is challenging for me as well. I

think what is challenging about it to me is that you can't be super expressive when it comes to writing about the work that you've done, and I think it took me a long time to just realize that, okay, this is a very different style of writing. I'm writing for a very different audience, the audience is always the key. How do you appeal to the language, but also the interest and the needs of this particular group of whoever it is that you're writing for?

So in particular, with the grant writing, I found that I really struggled for a long time just to figure out, okay, this is how you write a proposal that is going to appeal to someone. I think I found that I was super overambitious in a lot of my early proposals. I would try to say, "I'm going to do all of these things. I'm going to do so many things", and it was just not feasible, and that was something that I was really struggling with for a long time. So I think I learned how to say, okay, let's focus on some really core goals and let's flesh those out as much as possible. That ended up working out pretty well for me, but it did take a while to get there.

HS:

Yeah. I think that one of the challenges of writing well is being able to revise effectively.

AS:

Yeah. I think it's also very much a writer-based thing, right? Because for me, I'm a bit OCD about my writing. I'm a bit obsessive-compulsive with the way that I write things. I'll workshop a sentence so many times before I feel like, okay, this is a good first draft. So I'm not much of a person who will write a first draft and say, "Okay, I'm going to get a first draft out there", and once that's done, I will go through and I will heavily revise. Normally, my approach is so overly meticulous, editing as I go that by the time I finished a draft, it's more or less a final draft for me actually. But that process is very iterative for me.

I will rewrite a sentence maybe 20 times sometimes before I feel happy with it as a first draft. And maybe that's not the most comforting advice as somebody who's maybe trying to figure out more about writing. But I think that the point is that it really depends on the person so much. I know some people who are really good at banging out a first draft super quick, and then they go back and they revise it several times and the product ends up being awesome. But that is not the method that I take so much, and I think that that's really useful for people to know because just because one thing works for somebody doesn't mean it'll work for you and vice versa, and that's okay. There's no one right way to approach writing. But yeah, I will say that revision is huge no matter how you're doing it.

If you don't revise things, yeah, it's just very unlikely that the product that you come up with is going to be the best that it can be. And I will say the revision that you get from other people I found has been so helpful, especially for grant writing, because there's just things that they seem so basic to you as somebody who's so knowledgeable in your field. Either they seem basic to you or you just forget about it entirely because in your head it just makes sense and everybody will know it. But I think for that in particular, that's where feedback can play a big role in just helping to shape the storytelling or just make sure that things are really clear for the audience. You can refine and figure out, yeah, okay, what is the best possible story that I can tell with this proposal?

HS:

Yeah, so one thing that occurred to me as you were talking about getting input is I am an anthropologist, specifically a cultural anthropologist, and a lot of the material that we produce tends to be single author.

And I know that in many of the sciences that is not the way of things. And so I'm wondering how do you negotiate those multiple voices as you're writing?

AS:

That's a great question, and I think that that is multifaceted in the way that that can play out as well. So for me, I would say that in the sciences generally, yes, it takes a village. It's not just one person doing a research project, it almost never is. So I think to answer your question, I think it depends on every author's style and preference. So I know that there are a lot of people who will try to write papers where they will assign different authors different sections to write, and then the lead author, their job will be once they've written whatever it is that they have to write themselves, and then everybody else has written their piece, their job will be to go through all of that writing and to try to make it sound cohesive. Because like you were saying, navigating those different voices is challenging because you have so many people with different styles and different idiosyncrasies, so you have to deal with all of those things. So I think that can be really challenging, and that is not something that I personally prefer to approach a paper as.

I think what I see is much more common in the sciences, but what we often do, at least in my lab or people that I know is the lead author will generally take up the bulk of writing the paper, that will be a big task of theirs. And then your job after that is to solicit feedback from all of your co-authors and you say, "Okay, this is what I have. I'd love for you to go through this paper and let me know what you think. Give me feedback. Tell me where I can improve. Did I miss any details from the study that maybe you can help me pick up the slack for?" So I think that's a method that works better for me, but that's just because in my opinion, it's actually a little bit easier to come up with a final product that feels cohesive rather than having people submitting different chunks of the same manuscript, and then I try to go through and adjust the flow. So I think, yeah, again, it's another thing of just kept to personal preference.

HS:

Do you think that that preference for having a base draft and then soliciting input has anything to do with your interest in storytelling and way of thinking?

AS:

Yes, I definitely think so. Yes. I think for me, the answer that I have is in two parts. A, I have a really hard time editing other people's writing the same way that I edit my own writing, because I am really harsh on my own writing and I'm very particular about things. So I'll re-workshop things endlessly until I feel this is a good draft and I feel happy about it. And I don't feel necessarily as comfortable doing that with other people's writing because you don't want to step on somebody's toes or completely re-workshop something that they also worked really hard on. So I think that's a big part of it for me.

But the other part is like you were saying, yes, I think that it's much easier for me to feel the story and to see the entire arc of it, if we're treating it like a story arc, it's much easier for me to visualize that all in my own head and to bring that to life than by trying to Frankenstein all of these other chunks together from other people. And I think, again, that is just the way that I prefer to write. For me, I can A, be a little bit kinder to my co-authors by not asking them to write something that I'm going to be really picky about, and B, I get to feel the full creative control over the ultimate manuscript.

HS:

Yeah, that makes sense. So do you tend to approach writing as a practice or product-oriented endeavor?

AS:

I think some of both, yeah. For me, as I was saying, it's a very iterative process, so it's a very long, long road for me when I'm writing something, I really do have to lock in and focus really well, and it will take me a long time. I'm a very slow writer. But at the same time, it is very product focused and product oriented, because producing manuscripts is such a huge part of academia, and so there is this culture that is pushing constantly for products and for the creation of different papers or proposals or outreach initiatives and things like that. So I think it's hard to escape the sense that there is this looming need for products all the time. So I think there's some of both there, because at the end of the day, yes, it is a process that you're working through and however you might do that, but what is going to be looming over you all that time is going to be the need for that final draft, whatever it is. So I think, yeah, it's both.

HS:

Yeah. I think that that does speak to the reality of being a graduate student, because if you don't produce, you don't get the degree.

AS:

Right, absolutely. It's maybe not the most fun way of looking at it, right? But you're right, it is the reality, that that is the expectation and moving on to whatever it is that you're going to do after graduate school, if you don't have those products, then it's hard to show what you've learned or what you're taking away from your degree.

HS:

Yeah. So bearing all of that in mind, how do you write?

AS:

Yeah, that's a great question. I wouldn't say that I have the most structured approach. I am very particular about the way that I write, but also I don't draft things, like I was saying, and I have a very intensive approach to creating a first draft that is more or less final pending edits from co-authors or colleagues or whoever it might be that I'm looking for advice from. And the other side of it is, yeah, I don't write outlines either, usually. So for me, having an outline can feel a bit restrictive because I really like to feel the story come to life as I go through and begin writing. Sometimes you can surprise yourself with where the story's going to go, and you don't necessarily know that before you begin. So the outline doesn't always even work for me when I do try to use it.

So yeah, I think for me, it's hard to say because really my strategy and my approach is I say, okay, I'm going to sit down and I'm going to write this thing pretty much start to finish. I don't go out of order usually, it depends of course, what kind of manuscript you're writing, for instance. But in science, we would have your abstract, your introduction, your methods, results and discussion and maybe conclusion at the end. And I'll sit down and I will write every sentence chronologically in terms of the

order, and I will create my draft that way. And then that way you really do feel the flow as it's intended, right? Because if you're writing things out of order, even in your head, it can get a little bit jumbled sometimes. So for me, that's the way that I do it. And maybe that doesn't work for everyone, but for me, that's something that I like to do.

HS:

So, are you a person that likes to do a little bit every day, or are you a person that likes to be able to have a long chunk that's just devoted to writing?

AS:

That's a great question. For me, because I'm such a slow writer, I rarely can do the, okay, I'm going to sit down for 20 minutes and write a couple sentences kind of thing. I really generally sit down for hours at a time, and I will work on, sometimes it's just a couple sentences. Other times I'll be working on a couple paragraphs, it just depends how you're feeling in the day and where your head space is at and if you're fully concentrating. And there's a lot of external factors as well that are playing into the speed at which I'm getting things done.

But yeah, when it comes to writing, I'm particularly intense and I will sit down for many hours and try to get a section done or whatever it is my goal is for the day, and sometimes I don't make it, and that's okay. You're not always going to reach your goals, and some days you're going to exceed your goals, and that's also okay. So yeah, I wouldn't say that I am doing things over a super long timeline usually. I'm more of a, okay, let's crack down and work on this in a week and get it done kind of approach. But yeah, again, not going to work for everyone.

HS:

Well, I think that people write in very different ways, and it's down to finding the method and the approach that works for you.

AS:

Absolutely. And I totally agree, and I think that that's a very important takeaway. And I think that you should never let anyone feel bad about the way that you approach writing because there's so much nuance involved that there's not even 10 right ways. There's infinite right ways to approach it and so I think that that's really important to keep in mind, especially as a graduate student who's trying to figure out how to write these sort of things for the first time. And it's really easy as a grad student to compare yourself to other grad students in your lab or in your cohort, or just maybe even grad students you're reading about in social media or on the news or something. Just because they do it a certain way doesn't mean that you have to do it that way. And yeah, I think that that should be what you take away from this conversation, if anything, that there's myriad ways to get this done and to be productive.

HS:

Yeah.

AS:

I will say, this is an aside, but I also have tried the Pomodoro method, so it's where you're working for a certain amount of time, and then you're taking a short break, and then you're working again for that same amount of time, and then you take a short break. And I think that that has worked pretty well for me, I do really enjoy that. I think for me though, it's hard for me to do that if I'm working alone. I think that if you're doing it in a writing group in particular, I think it's really helpful where you basically will sit down for maybe two hours or something with a couple of people in your cohort or in your department, and you have this Pomodoro technique and you're, okay, you're on for 20 minutes and then five minute break and so on for those two hours.

And it worked really well for us. I think I have a hard time being motivated to employ the Pomodoro method if I'm by myself. So maybe that's something worth keeping in mind for yourself as you're going on through your writing journey, trying to say, okay, well, I have a really hard time just sitting down and making myself write, but if I'm with somebody else who's also writing, that might help. For instance, if whatever department you're in, if you don't have a writing group, maybe you could try to create one. I think that that could be worth thinking about.

HS:

And I will add to that that the OWRC does have resources on how to develop your own writing group.

AS:

Great. That's excellent.

HS:

Yeah. So, one thing that I get asked a lot is, "What are the softwares? What are the apps that I can be using to write?" And I'm curious if you have any recommendations.

AS:

Yeah, I'm more of an old school writer. I've been using Google Docs since I was in middle school, I think, and I have continued to stay faithful to Google Docs. I really like it as a tool. I think I find that Google Docs is much nicer when you're working with collaborators because in particular, if you got a bunch of collaborators all working on the same document, if you can use something like Google Docs, that is really nice because everybody can see at the same time what other people are commenting, what other people are changing. So nobody is doing the same thing twice and reinventing the wheel.

So that's one approach that I feel very strongly, I really like Google Docs, but I know that SharePoint is another version that people like to use. Some people write their papers in R, like R Markdown. That's something that I don't do personally. But R Markdown, if you're writing code and you're a biologist in particular, that's an option. Scrivener is another option, but I haven't personally used it. But it's a nice way apparently, to organize all of your writing, but it's generally more used for book writing, but definitely something worth keeping in mind. Maybe it'd be useful for writing a dissertation or something where you've got multiple chapters and you're trying to put together all your references and stuff like that.

HS:

I appreciate that. So I'm wondering how you approach your personal writing and your academic writing. Are there differences in the way that you approach those two things?

AS:

That's a great question. Honestly, both of them require a lot of research on my end. So on the side, I'm writing a fantasy series with my cousin, which is going to have four books if we ever manage to get it off the ground. So for that, that actually requires a decent amount of research because I have characters who are smarter than me in certain areas, and all your characters have to feel really believable, and their worlds have to feel believable, so I'm constantly researching, but otherwise, it's all collaborative. So when I do my personal writing, I'm writing with my cousin, so that's a lot of fun. We get to brainstorm and bounce ideas off of each other and when I'm writing with my co-author, that's similar, I'm getting to brainstorm with my supervisor and all the people that I'm working with in the field, and I get to ask them for feedback.

So it's pretty similar. I don't feel that there are that many differences except maybe in how enthusiastic I feel for the writing maybe. The scientific writing feels a bit boring to me a lot of the times. It doesn't feel very exciting. It feels like, okay, this is just a task that I have to complete, and that's okay. Right? We're not going to love every part of our job or everything that we have to write all the time. But yeah, the more you can try to make it feel like a story, I think the easier it becomes to feel invested in what you're writing.

HS:

What would you say your goal is for your writing?

AS:

Well, it depends. It depends on what my writing is. So when it comes to academic writing, generally speaking, my goal, honestly is usually to help people who are starting out in their field. So I find that a lot of scientific writing is really esoteric. It's difficult to understand the exact methods that people were doing, or they have been entrenched in that field for so long that there's just things that are obvious to them that you have no understanding about. So I think that one of the big goals for my academic writing is really just, okay, well, let me write this paper for somebody who's getting into this field for the first time, who's just starting out in graduate school for instance, or is maybe an undergrad doing research and is just trying to crack their way into this world and doesn't really understand, okay, well, this is why you should use this particular statistical analysis, or this is the kind of technology that you should choose and why.

And I think that those are all just things that I personally struggled with a lot. And I think if I can help anyone just to have a better understanding of how to begin, I would be very happy with that. But when it comes to other kinds of writing, it's similar, but different, because when I'm writing a grant proposal, your goal, of course is to convince somebody, okay, well, this is worth funding and I have a good idea and I'm smart, you can trust me to do this well. So that would be the grant writing side of things. And then when it comes to the science communication side of things, I find that my goal generally speaking, is to just get people excited and to get people invested. Right now, it's a really hard time on many fronts, and it's easy to feel overwhelmed and to feel dejected about everything.

So I think that it's also really important to have people out there who are getting people excited about the things that we study as scientists and as academics, the things that we're working on. And trying to translate that for the layperson is really important. What is it that got you into this field in the first place? What made you so excited about it? And if you can convey that, I think you're on a really good path to getting somebody else invested in that topic as well, at least from a starting point, right? Because you can't assume that anyone is going to be an expert in what it is you work on or study. So yeah, just getting people that very base level of interest is critical.

HS:

Yeah. Is there anything that we haven't talked about already that you really want to make sure comes across or a point that you really want to make?

AS:

I would say that finding the style of writing that works for you too also takes a lot of time, and that's okay. It's a slow process, and eventually you'll figure out, okay, well, this is the writing that appeals to me the most. Maybe the scientific writing or the manuscript writing for peer review journals, maybe that is where you really excel. Maybe you'll find that you're more of a science communicator and you find that communicating more towards the average person is really interesting and fun. Yeah, there's so many possible varieties of writers out there, and I think the takeaway is really just there's no one right way to do anything when it comes to writing. Just keep at it, and you'll get there. Even for people who are skilled writers, they can struggle a lot. It can be really hard so don't let it discourage you.

And I know that's easier said than done, right? It just takes a lot of practice, and that's okay. And I think that another thing that's really useful to keep in mind is that just reading a lot can really help you get a feel for, okay, well, this is how other people have structured their writing, or this is the kind of verbiage that they used when they were describing this really complicated thing. Or this is how somebody explained their statistics, which can be, for some people, myself included, very confusing or challenging. So just exposing yourself to as much writing as possible, even if it's not related to science or whatever it is you study, that can still be very beneficial. You can improve and there's a lot of ways to do that just by practicing the writing, that's huge, but also exposing yourself to a lot of different authors and their own particular approaches. I think that that's really useful.

HS:

And there you have it.

Thank you for listening to this episode of *Write For You*, and thank you once again to all of our incredible guests. To learn more about the OWRC, its programs or services available to University of Washington students, faculty and staff, find us online at depts.washington.edu/owrcweb.

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