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 Gabrielle, a doctoral candidate from the Department of Human Centered Design and Engineering, who shares with us how she approaches writing as and with technology and the process of finding confidence in your work. I'll turn it over to her and let her tell us more.

Gabrielle Benabdallah (GB):

Hello, my name is Gabrielle Benabdallah. I am a PhD candidate in the Department of Human Centered Design and Engineering at the University of Washington. My pronouns are she/hers. My background is in comparative literature and textual studies in particular. I would say that my research interest that weaves these two things together, literature on the one hand, and textual studies in particular with human-computer interaction now is the material conditions of knowledge production with a focus on the technologies that enable knowledge production, starting with print technologies to now computers and machines and large language models, et cetera.

HS:

Wonderful.

I think that that's interesting to think about the technological in that slightly more expansive way. I'm really interested to get further into that and how that attentive awareness of technology informs maybe how you think about writing as a process that is technological.

GB:

Absolutely. That's in fact kind of one of my weird pet peeves in life, is when people are like, "I'm so anti-technology," and I'm like, "What do you mean? Everything around us is a technology." If we take, I think, the long view, a lot of objects that surround us and that very much structure the very possibilities of life today, like things as mundane as chairs and tables, which allow us to do this kind of, especially as graduate students, intellectual labor, sit down and settle our bodies and focus on our minds, that kind of things. Definitely when I was doing my master's here at the U-Dub, I got a certificate in textual and digital studies, and we were looking at the technologies of writing and things that we much take for granted, like the page.

There's a wonderful book called *How the Page Matters* by Bonnie Mak. And Mak really goes into the page as a technology and how it has evolved over time and how it has shaped reading and writing

practices, and by extension, the common cognitive practices and intellectual practices. And I find that fascinating. So even things like paper and pen, which we don't often think as technologies, are just very mature technical systems or technical objects that are so mature now that we might say the user interface is just so integrated and intuitive that we don't even think twice by using them. They're almost like extensions of our hands and minds, but they too at some point were the materiality of them, which much more apparent to people, like when you had to take the feather of a bird and work it into a nib that you could then dip an ink, and you would run out of ink. There were a lot more material constraints. Anyway. So all these both extraordinary and mundane material conditions of how we can live these lives of the mind in some sense have always really fascinated me.

So to answer the other part of the question which is, how does that shape my understanding of writing, I think I very much think of writing as a physical activity first and foremost. It's often thought of as this very abstract, slightly disembodied process, but I think of it as an actually extremely physical process. Any person who's written a lot knows that it's hard on your body. Writing is hard on your body. It can give you shoulder pain and back pain and neck pain and tendinitis and all these things. You kind of have to train for it just like athletes train for their art or their sport.

HS:

Yeah. So since you've mentioned the physical and the embodied, I'm wondering if you can maybe walk us through when you go to write, what is that like for you?

GB:

So, whenever I start a writing project, I will do the first draft or at least the very first loose draft by hand because the process of writing by hand helps me think. There's something kind of like a sensuousness to the process that I really like, but also you're forced to go slower. So that I find is easier. I also have a very messy handwriting so that I can't easily reread myself. And I find that really helpful to just get ideas flowing, because the one thing when you write on the computer is that it's imitating print technology in that everything already looks very kind of clean. So the temptation to just go back and reread what you've just read is very strong. It looks very set and final, so you kind of want it to be good, perfect even. And I find it really hard when you're still figuring out what your argument is or what your ideas are to start writing on the computer, but if you have already a sense of what you want to say, then it's a good tool for that.

But yeah, I would say that's the first step. And then typing it up, or now I love to pick it into a transcription app like Otter, and it's just so fantastic. It's like having your personal scribe or something. And then work with that draft, then polish it, add bits and stuff. So very concretely, I would say the body is very involved in the movement of the hand. And then speaking it also, kind of hearing myself say my thoughts out loud somehow helps me figure them out as well. So yeah, the hand and voice are my first two steps to the writing process.

HS:

I have a similar approach to the first draft. I often like to write it out by hand. I've never really thought about the way that the screen is imitating print and presenting you with something that is final looking and how that psychs a person out, for lack of a more articulate way of saying it. But I also think that that dimension of the use of the voice is really fascinating as well. So, when we talk about writing, what does writing more broadly mean for you?

GB:

I mean, writing means a lot of things to me. In some weird way, it has been the red thread of both my master's work and my very varied doctoral work. I've kind of worked on a bunch of different projects that I think at first glance seem like they're fairly disconnected, but they all have in common that they're some form of writing projects or projects where writing was an important theme in how we were either conceptualizing a technology or transforming a digital phenomena or interacting with systems. So writing has always been something that I've thought about a lot, and I think on some basic level it is a technology that shapes consciousness.

The author, Iain McGilchrist, he's a neuroscientist and he wrote a book, *The Master and His Emissary*, which is on left and right hemisphere studies. Obviously language is a very big topic when you look at these questions. And one theory about why humans developed language and such structured form of language is as an extension of the need to manipulate the world, and that sometimes the hands and bodies were just not enough to manipulate the world in certain ways. So language came as a way to do that. And I think writing to me is a hundred percent an extension of that. I write a hundred percent to find out what I mean and to figure out my own mind, and also by extension, therefore, to figure out the world around me and how I think about the world and how I experience it, etc. So to me, that's what writing is, first and foremost. It's like a very good tool to manipulate the world, in the broadest sense of the word manipulate, like to handle and interact with it. So I think there's some of that.

I think on another level, for me, writing is a practice, and especially in graduate school. Moving into an engineering department, a lot of the contributions of my peers or of engineers in general are things. They make things, they build systems, they develop different types of technology, and yet the way that they will share that knowledge is through writing. So writing really is kind of the default or most official kind of mode of institutionally vetted knowledge production in the west at least. So as a practice, when you're doing the kind of intellectual labor that graduate students do, and then later as faculty or professors or all the other adjacent professions, writing is crucial to the work that you're doing. So as such, to me, it's really a practice. However you approach this practice, some people do a little bit every day, some people only do it in big chunks, but it's something that you end up doing on a fairly regular basis.

HS:

Yeah, I think thinking about writing as practice is particularly important in the context of graduate school because of the outputs that we're being asked to produce. To that end, I know that dissertations can look quite different in different fields. So for you, what is the dissertation going to look like?

GB:

Yeah, that's a great question, especially as I'm in the midst of writing it. I think my department is a little bit of an interesting case because while it is in the College of Engineering, we're very much the humanists of the College of Engineering. So the types of dissertation that are produced in my department really varies. I would say that there's a classic engineering dissertation, which is the stapled together articles with an intro and a discussion that you sort of tacked on at the beginning and end, and then you have the entire spectrum to the like monograph type of dissertation. My dissertation tends towards the latter, sadly. I would have loved to do something maybe a little less involved, but I think it didn't make sense given the wide variety of projects I worked on. So I'm going for a kind of more traditional type of dissertation, just kind of a monograph. Yep.

HS:

Yeah. Speaking of writing things with various purposes, I'm curious what you would like your work to do or who you're speaking to in your writing?

GB:

Who am I speaking to? I think this is a very tricky question and a conversation I've had with my advisors many times, because in an interdisciplinary field, there's a lot of different epistemologies and methods. So this is a constant struggle of really knowing who are you talking to. Because for instance, conferences I've presented to in human-computer interaction, you have a very wide mix of engineers, but also social scientists, of designers, who all have different foundational knowledge, all work within different really disciplines or within different epistemological traditions. They have different epistemological commitments. They have different ways of, I would say, evaluating contributions and what makes a good contribution.

So who you're talking to is always very tricky because I feel like you end up talking to these subgroup within the larger umbrella of human-computer interaction. So you might talk more to the designers who might be more interested in theory or the critical dimensions of building technologies, whereas for other people within that same community, they'll want a much more sort of empirical tone where you're just reporting as objectively as you can on that user study you read or something like that. So the question of who you're talking to has been a difficult one to answer.

Thinking specifically of the different articles I wrote over the course of my PhD, I think in the end, what was the most freeing was being like, I'm just going to write the article that I would want to read and hope it finds its people. And it worked. I wrote a paper last year, which was a fairly philosophy heavy paper for an engineering conference essentially. I was like, "Oh, my god, it might not even get in." But it did. The reviewers were quite enthusiastic about it, and it ended up finding its people. So it was, for me, a much more enjoyable experience to write for the kind of people I would want to talk to rather than trying to anticipate what different groups might want to hear or how they might want to hear something.

So I feel like the question of my audience, I don't know, this is very controversial because you always want to be able to think about your audience, but in some sense, I found that the most pleasurable way to write is to write the things that you would want to read, and trust that those texts are going to find their audience. I mean, there are a lot of writers I enjoy immensely who are fairly obscure, and I'm so glad that they didn't write for particular audience and that they just write the weird things they wanted to write because I love them. So that's who I'm writing for these days, is I guess myself.

Not all writing though. Some writing is definitely much more transactional, and that's okay too. There's some pieces you just want to put out there in the world because you want to show that you know something or that you have this particular take on something, and that's good too. It's a different type of writing that has its place. So yeah, depends on what you're writing because I'm not always writing academic articles.

HS:

So, since you've mentioned them, I wonder what are those other pieces of writing that you're doing, and do you approach it differently in terms of bringing something to fruition?

GB:

Yes. So I approach these pieces differently when it's less about figuring out an argument and more about just saying something that I think is very obvious, but it's actually not obvious for someone outside my field. And I will be frank, this is a fairly new type of writing that I am currently working on just because I'm on the job market, and so I want to reach a different audience than an academic one because I'm interested in other types of positions outside of academia. So that's the purpose of writing those pieces, is just to have almost a writing portfolio to show that those are the things that I'm interested in, that I have expertise on and have opinions about. So in that sense, it's extremely transactional. They're also much shorter pieces than any academic paper. Again, they're usually not making a very complex argument. They're just there to say like, "Hey, you want to know about what's going on in that field? Here, I'm going to give you a bunch of information about that." And then also try and bring an interesting angle that might not be elsewhere. Yeah.

It is actually a very relaxing type of writing because a lot of academic writing is, in some sense, you're trying to convince. You're making an argument, and you want to ensure that it is strong and that it is perhaps, first and foremost, in conversations with other people who are thinking these things in your field and elsewhere. And I think that's kind of the hallmark of what academic knowledge is about. The difference between someone just having opinions about how humans live and an anthropology researcher is that the anthropology researcher is aware of the conversations that are going on in their field and are able to insert their own work within those conversations. So you're effectively in a dialogue with an entire community of researchers. So a lot of academic writing is understanding what those conversations are and what the different size of the debates are and why they matter to this field and so on. This other type of writing that I'm kind of getting into right now is just not that. It's more about putting information out there.

HS:

So, you've done academic writing, you're exploring a new genre, and in that it seems like you are fairly confident in your voice and your ideas, but I wonder were there periods you felt maybe less confident in putting your voice or your ideas out there?

GB:

Yeah, I love that I'm projecting confidence right now. Yes, I've definitely had periods where I was very unconfident about my writing. In fact, I would say that it happens fairly often, that you cycle through periods where you're like, "I cannot write. I've never written a single good word in my life," to periods where you're like, "Okay, I got this. This is going well." In fact, I think it's a meme where it's like the creative process or something like that, and it starts really excited, like, "Oh my god, this is going to be amazing. Actually, this is going to be tricky. Oh my god, this sucks. I suck. Okay, wait, I think I got this." It's just like you kind of cycle through all these states. So the "Oh, it sucks. I suck" is very real.

I think perhaps particularly in academia, because you're working on your projects, those are your ideas, this is your research, so there's a lot of you in the work. Especially I think coming from a humanistic background into an engineering department, I think I spent many years trying to prove to myself that I could be an engineer or something, or that I could be there, that I wasn't just a fraud. Now I'm totally like, I think now these distinctions matter actually less perhaps than I once thought they did. But that sort of imposter syndrome, which I think a lot of people feel for all sorts of different reasons, was very hard on my writing, especially as...

So I've been mostly publishing for this big association in the US called the Association for Computing Machinery, the ACM, and the type of writing that is kind of expected. This thing that I came to call the ACM voice is like this weird type of empirical, slightly impersonal engineering voice that felt extremely foreign and that I actually think feels foreign to everyone. It's a little bit like what they called the Transatlantic accent back in the days in Hollywood where it's just this kind of English that nobody speaks, but it's weirdly of everywhere. It's a little bit what writing those early articles felt like, where I was like, this is definitely not my voice, but I can't fake it and hopefully hope that I make it. It makes you feel unconfident in your capacity to both write in that voice. And also when you try and go back to maybe a more flavorful type of writing, you're like, "Well, can I do it now? I don't know."

The truth is that you can. So I feel like I'm slowly finding that tone back, writing the dissertation. But also, reading helped immensely. I really think that you read to hear other voices more so than you read to get information, because otherwise nobody would read fiction, for instance. The interesting thing about fiction is yes, the world building and the plot and the characters, but it's also interesting to hear other voices. And I think that's something that you find in any kind of good writing really. I think that's really what good writing is about. It's good thinking, but it's mostly an interesting voice. In my writing journey, moments where I felt unconfident about my writing, I felt that one way I could go past these moments of self-doubt was by reading scholars that I thought wrote very well or just reading people who I thought wrote or write very well. And I find that it just reminds you that it is possible. Someone did it somewhere so you can maybe learn from them and try to write well as well. Yeah.

HS:

I wonder if you can tell us who some of those writers are that you find really compelling.

GB:

There are many. So one author who I was actually talking about with someone yesterday, she was a French philosopher, her name is Simone Weil, W-E-I-L. She wrote mainly between the '20s and '40s. She didn't publish any book while she was alive. She wrote articles. She was an activist. She was very involved in labor struggles. Most of the writing that survives are her notebooks. So those are the things that I read. Sometimes it's fragments, sometimes it's sort of personal essays where you can feel her sort of making connections and working through ideas. Sometimes they were a draft for actual articles that she ended up publishing.

But there's something about an extremely capacious and a rigorous mind that I find infinitely inspiring. She was able to pull from so many different sources, for instance, from folklore and from all these different traditions in the original language, and then would create these really interesting comparative analyses of all these different myths and stories and folktales. She was also a very good mathematician. I think there's just something about a mind that could do a lot, and that was very both discerning and unjudgmental, and therefore able to pull from a lot of different sources and kind of meld it together, and very unafraid and instead very interested in finding something honest. It's not exactly academic writing, although she was a scholar in her own right in a way. So she's one writer that I find very inspiring.

Maybe a slightly more traditional example is, I really like the writing of Tim Ingold. He's an anthropologist who's written a lot about also material culture and making in particular. I really like Ingold's writing too because I find that there's something kind of conversational about it, but also very articulate. I think that mix is really nice and really hard to do. So my first language is French, if that was not obvious from my accent, but I really also like the continental philosophers. So like Maurice Merleau-

Ponty, and the *Phenomenology of Perception*, which sounds so dry, but is actually a marvelous, marvelous writing. And that might be a bit of a linguistic sensibility, but English is a kind of language that I think it likes fairly straightforward sentence structures.

French isn't that particular about straightforward sentence structures. It likes very meandering ones. And I think that does something rhetorically that I really appreciate. I think you can make a different kind of argument, or it becomes its own kind of tool. You can just work the ideas in a different way, and it brings you somewhere that I think is really interesting. So I loved reading Merleau-Ponty when I was an undergrad. I find their writing so, again, very rigorous, but also a lot of life to it. There's kind of an almost musical element to it, I think. Yeah. So those are three authors that I'll revisit every once in a while where I'm like, "Oh my god, I can't write any more in the ACM voice."

HS:

Yeah, I think it's really interesting to hear what those touch points are for different people. It helps illuminate the fact that even if we find ourselves mostly writing in academic spaces or contexts, that there's an entire world out there of other forms of writing doing different work. I also wanted to come back to, you're multilingual, and as a multilingual writer, do you feel like that factors in ever to the way that you approach your writing?

GB:

Yes, it definitely does. I mean, actually I answered very confidently, but now that I think about it, I'm not sure. I think there was a time where a hundred percent I think I was reading mostly in French, and therefore my prose was much more French-like for better or worse in English. Now I spend so much time mostly reading and writing in English that I feel like it no longer is true. I have adopted a much more straightforward style.

HS:

Yeah. So this question comes from things that other guests over the years have talked to me about in terms of the process of writing a research article. So I'm wondering if you have any insight or advice as a writer in terms of how do you develop something from an idea into an article.

GB:

A lot of fumbling and stumbling through the dark. No, I'm kidding. But there's definitely a little bit of that. So first of all, I think maybe to situate that kind, I think there's a little bit of accepting to be lost, perhaps especially if you're making a novel argument, or just finding an argument that is really yours, that you haven't read it somewhere and you're sort of reproducing it with your own sauce in this particular context. But really understanding, making the links for yourself and understanding something for yourself and trying to articulate that. I think there's an inherent aspect of that process, is not knowing where you're going because if you already knew, then you wouldn't be trying to make this argument. The whole point of the research paper in some sense is for you to figure out what the argument is and to make it.

So I think accepting that you're going to be a little lost and that there's going to be a little bit of uncertainty and you not exactly knowing where you're going to put your foot next, which is really important to embrace and not be freaked out by. I mean, I've thought many times over the course of

both my master's and my PhD, and I feel like oftentimes students, they go for the safe choices because they're too afraid of going through that process of not knowing what their argument is going to be and not knowing if it's going to be good enough. And it's not a criticism on them. I think a lot of it is shaped by just the educational system that they're working in. But if you want to write this research article because you want to learn something new about the world and about this phenomenon you're interested in, a little bit of unknowing is needed. So I think embracing that is very important.

And then my other piece of advice would be to just write, to just kind of sit. Even if it's stream of consciousness style, to just start writing and try to write a little bit every day. And to not be precious about it so much as to understand that the writing is also a tool. It's not just the end product, but it's a prototyping tool and you need to use it to figure out how you're going to say things and what you're going to say.

So yeah, I find putting out a very messy first draft quickly is very helpful because then you have something to work off of. Also, you've done the work of wrestling with some of the things you want to say, which I think is really where the real thinking happens. Even though it's unpleasant. I won't lie. Sometimes it's frustrating. You don't really know how to say it, but you just kind of have to do your best and put fingers on keyboard and put it out there, and then forgive yourself for having written a lot of garbage. But a lot of garbage is better than having written nothing because at least it's material you can work with later. So yeah, I would say those are strategies that I find I go back to.

HS:

Yeah, I think the lesson of get it out and then forgive yourself is one that resonates with me personally as someone who has a lot of trouble with that. I think that a lot of us who tend to go to graduate school have these kinds of, whether you want to call it perfectionist tendencies or whether you want to call it just ambitious tendencies, I think it's a common trait.

GB:

Yep.

HS:

Is there any tool or text or practice that you would like to recommend?

GB:

Not really, just because I think everyone has their own approach to writing. What might work for me might not work for another person. So I don't know how helpful the tools I use might be for other people. I think maybe then one thing that might be helpful or that was, if not helpful, very inspiring to me when I felt a little kind of moments of doubt or a little stuck in my writing process, is I listened a lot to this podcast called Writer's Routine. It's literally just writers talking about their routines. When I say routines, it's like, "Okay, so I wake up at this time, and then I have coffee, and then this happens." it's literally just them going through their day. And it's so interesting to get into the minutia of how professionals writer writes, like when do they do it? What is their writing environment? How do they separate different moments of the writing process? How do they structure them? How do they navigate writing with other demands on their time, et cetera?

What you find out is that everyone has a different process that works for how they like to write, how they write. Some people write really fast. Some people write slowly. And it's really just about finding something that makes you happy and excited to get into writing. So listening to that podcast was really inspiring in that regard, in both giving you maybe ideas of things that you might want to try for your writing practice and also just giving you permission to just do your own weird thing and doing whatever thing makes you happy. Because also, I think that's the other thing that is not often emphasized, that writing is hard, and as grad students, we need to do a lot of it. So seek joy. Find a routine that is going to make it the most fun for you. Maybe you need to gamify it. Maybe you need to just have a very nice notebook. Maybe you need to go to this cafe that you really like and pretend you're, I don't know, Stephen King or whatever. I don't know. But it'll just make it a lot easier. And a lot more fun.

HS:

I really love that.

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