



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.

Richa Nevatia (RN):

Hi everyone. Thank you for listening, I'm Richa Nevatia, and my pronouns are she/her. I am a twenty-seven-year-old grad student at the University of Washington. I am originally from India, from the city of Mumbai. Currently, I'm pursuing my master's in communication leadership and it's a two-year program from the University of Washington. Before that, I started my career with my bachelor's in commerce, which is a finance degree, and then I went on to pursue my MBA in marketing and communications from one of the best MBA schools in India. Which was great because it really helped to bring together both my analytical and creative sides.

I've been pretty fortunate because I got the opportunity to work first in Switzerland as the communications officer for CERN, which is the world's largest particle physics lab. And then I worked for a cloud security startup based out of the US as a content marketing manager where I created an e-learning platform. And then I worked as the brand manager for a skincare startup in India, which wanted to bring skincare for people of color with multi-active ingredients and was the first one to do so in the country.

Apart from my professional stuff, I love reading books. I read almost 30 or 50 books a year. I love traveling. I've been so fortunate. I've been able to travel to more than 15 countries in the last ten-ish years and definitely more than 150 cities or so. And I'm very curious by nature, so that makes me want to explore everything. So in the form of books, or travel, or even languages, I am multilingual. I speak five languages, English, Hindi, Marathi, French, and Spanish, and I can understand about five more, but I can confidently talk about these five.

HS:

Amazing, such a range of professional experiences and interests, and I'm really excited to get into those as we get started with talking about writing and how all of these things intersect and overlap in your field, but also as a writer presenting information. So to start with, when I say writing, what does that bring to mind for you? What does writing mean to you?

RN:

It's a very interesting word itself, writing, because when I think about writing, I think about reading. And as much as I read, I always wish I could write as well as I read, and I never feel like I'm there, but I feel that's also a part of a writer's journey. You're always second guessing yourself and you're always trying to get to that perfect finish line and there never is one. So it's a loaded question, but it's also a lot about self-expression and what do I think of writing and which language do I think of when I think of writing. For me it's mostly English, but it might be different for other people. For me, writing, it's a happy emotion.

HS:

No, that's wonderful to hear. And you're right, it is very much a loaded question. Writing is something that we all end up doing in our day-to-day lives and professional lives, whether or not we consider ourselves writers. And so another question that I often like to ask is do you consider yourself a writer?

RN:

Yes, I would say so. Even if I feel like I don't write enough or I don't write enough for myself, I still write a lot. I'm writing emails, I'm writing research for school or for work. I'm writing marketing campaigns, I'm writing briefs for the CEO or I'm writing presentation decks. Writing comes in so many different formats and forms. It would be hard-pressed for a professional in today's world to not be writing at all, and I think that makes everyone a writer.

HS:

I think that that's a really great perspective. So when you are doing all of these different forms of writing, how do you approach those? How do you navigate those moves across genre and speaking to different audiences?

RN:

Yeah, I think you hit the nail in the head with the question itself. Understand who you're writing for and what you're writing for. I usually look at why would anyone want to read what I'm writing? And once that piece of heart is there in my piece, the rest will follow. The rest is directing everything towards that heart of the piece, which is why should someone care about what you're writing? So it really helps transform that blank page into something with words on it.

HS:

Yeah, you get at one of the core questions that I hear a lot and which I also myself as a writer have to grapple with, which is, how do you begin? How do you start a piece of writing? I don't know if you want to elaborate there, but I think that this metaphor of finding the heart is really useful and salient.

RN:

Yeah, of course. I know for different people it's different, but for me, I start with a structure, that really helps define the scope of what I'm writing. So for example, if I'm writing a blog for a website, I would

keep in mind like, "Okay, this needs to be 500 words or 1,000 words." And if the topic is say, what is the ultimate guide to sunscreens? What are some of the things that I would want to include in a blog like this? I would like to include how do you choose your sunscreen? How do you wear a sunscreen? Is there any negatives or benefits about it?

So having those structural points to your piece, it just gives a great head start, and I can never find the right first words of my piece, so I just ignore it. I ignore my first sentence and my first paragraph, and I just go straight into the second paragraph, and that feels like way less pressure, so I can just actually write the middle of it. And then once I have that, I'm like, "Okay, yeah, I know what I've talked about in the piece. I can actually write my first sentence now without that looming pressure of, I need to start."

HS:

Yeah, I think that's a common struggle across genres is like, "How do I start this?" But you have talked about your range of professional experience and it seems like that would require the navigation of a variety of different voices. So, I'm wondering if maybe you can talk about that.

RN:

Yeah, of course. This is where who you're writing for becomes very important, both in terms of the demographic stuff and why should they care. If there is a person who wants to understand particle physics, they're probably already highly educated. They have a basic intro to physics, so you are probably going to want to write more with technical expertise. But if you're writing for someone who just wants to understand what is glycolic acid and skin care, they're going to be looking at it from the novice lens. So this means you explain what it is. Why should the person care about glycolic acid and ways and forms can it actually be used? So this really helps inform the piece a lot, and the voice of who you are talking to should reflect on your piece. I really think that, and if that is not, it doesn't make for a successful piece at all, in my opinion.

HS:

Yeah, it's really interesting, and I think maybe a slightly different way of approaching writing for different audiences than we often get exposed to in graduate school. I think that there's often the imagined audience that is not very well articulated, whereas it sounds like for you, you often start with the imagined audience and figuring out who they are and then working from there.

RN:

Yes, exactly. Because context matters. This is something which was driven into me when I was doing my MBA, be it a marketing campaign, be it a communications campaign, or be it like any sort of writing that you do. Context matters. You need to have the context of who you're writing for. You need to have a context of the piece in which ecosystem is the piece being consumed. Is the context of the piece a social media app like Instagram where maybe the first sentence of the caption is going to be visible to the audience, or maybe they're going to be looking at a story for less than three seconds. So the context of where the piece is, is going to also inform what you're writing and the context of the piece itself.

HS:

Yeah, so talking about context, I feel like language also maybe comes into thinking about context. You're highly multilingual. You did mention that you primarily write in English, but I'm curious if you feel like that multilingual background plays any role in how you approach the writing process?

RN:

Oh, absolutely. I would definitely think so, because even if I'm writing in just English, there's so many forms of English. There's the Queen's English, there's the American English, there's Indian English, which is a whole subset of its own, and you really need to make sure that the pieces like tone and formality adheres to that language specific thing. And it helps when you are multilingual because you know that, for example, French and Spanish, they're so lyrical in just their existence that even if you're writing in English, you want to write with a little more of a story, a little more of a nuance and the poetry of your piece.

But if you're writing for, say, an American audience, which cares more about straightforward communication, you don't want to waste your user's time with that because that's how the American user will perceive it. So that's important. And even if I'm not writing in their language, for example, when I was working in CERN, it was a bilingual ecosystem where they spoke equally in French and English. So having that context of, okay, 50% of my audience is going to be speaking more a different language than English, even if the context of my piece is highly technical, the language of my piece will not be using high-level English.

HS:

So being aware of, not only one's own multilingualism, but the multilingualism of the audience and writing in a way that is attuned to that.

RN:

Yes, exactly. Last year, I was working on a digital campaign with Democracy Cop 2024, and we were trying to reach out to marginalized communities to get them to vote, and this included a lot of Hispanic populations with the Spanish-speaking audiences. So I was able to use a little bit of my Spanish knowledge to transform the copy from English to Spanish and make it more accessible for someone who we are trying to reach. So in this case, even the core messaging of the pieces were the same, how we are presenting it to the audience in that language matter.

HS:

Yeah. I also want to delve a little bit more into you are a student right now. You've been a student in many, many different contexts, many different ways. What are those key differences that you've noticed writing across these contexts?

RN:

Again, context has mattered in every piece. When I was doing my undergrad in finance, context for writing was very focused and very much to the point, and there was always a right answer, which I was trying to get to when I was doing taxation. Language really mattered because a single and, or a single or

can really change the law completely, and you don't want that to happen to your clients. So that was pretty important. Precision and language was very important in that context. When I was doing my MBA, language of persuasion was something that I learned. How do you persuade the CEO of a company? How do you persuade a chief marketing officer, chief financial officer to accept your pitch and to actually take in all the information that you have gathered? Just doing research or understanding your audiences is not enough. You need to also convey that to your superiors.

When I'm doing my master's in communication leadership at U-Dub, one of the very interesting classes, in fact that I've taken is on power of revision. It's about how do you edit your own work. This is the first time in my life that I've formally learned how to edit a piece with both macrostructures, microstructures, and with language and with the context of who it's going to be used for. So that was pretty interesting. So learning more about writing for audiences beyond just executives in your company or beyond just writing for the law.

HS:

Yeah. I think you get at something important about writing, which is that one is always refining, one is always learning how to write better, and so it's not a skill that you reach a culminative stage.

RN:

Oh, yeah, no, that's never going to happen. I think I started with that. I'm never going to be perfect, and it's okay.

HS:

I'll speak from my own experience. I think that that has been one of the hardest lessons as a writer is accepting it's not going to be perfect, and it's okay.

RN:

I feel like we can go on refining, refining, refining, making it as close to perfect as we can, but as long as the message is getting across, I think it's okay. When I was just learning French and I was trying to write an article in French and I was so scared, I was scared of people judging my knowledge of the subject matter with my language skills. I was so scared of that. But thankfully, because of my boss who was so nice and kind, she explained to me that it's okay. Not everyone here is fluent in French, and you're helping people like that understand what you're writing about. So as long as you're coherent, as long as the structure of your work is fine and the point is getting across, you're doing fine. That kind of support really in my formative professional experience was so great.

HS:

Yeah. I want to circle back. You mentioned that you're taking this course on revision and that it's the first time that you've been formally taught how to do that, and so I'm wondering if you could give us one or two key takeaways from that experience.

RN:

Yeah, of course. One of the things that really was hard for me to take in was that criticism is for the piece, not for the person. So we had a system in class where all of us would write articles and then the articles would get shuffled around, so someone else would be editing my piece and I would be editing someone else's piece. So I love giving feedback, and I also consider myself a person who thrives on constructive feedback. But despite that, when my classmates would send me feedback, I would be like, "No, this is not wrong. This is correct. So what? Who cares?" These are the common reactions, which my instinctual reactions just threw up. And I'm like, "Okay, I need to understand that this criticism is for that sentence structure, for that macrostructure, for that phrasing, not for me." And the collective objective is just to make that piece better. So distancing personal versus for the greater good is very hard, but you can do it. I can do it. You can do it.

HS:

We can all do it.

RN:

I think another thing which stuck with me for that class was understanding how important or not important a disagreement is. Like, okay, when we go into editing of a writing, we dive so deep into the small things like, "Should there be a, the in front of this noun?" It may not always matter. It may be correct, it may be wrong. It may be more cohesive with an addition of a though, but it probably doesn't matter. So because my starting was with finance where every word matters, understanding that is not applicable to every context is also important.

HS:

I think that that's really insightful. Sometimes that precision is essential, and sometimes that precision is more about style.

RN:

And everyone has their own style, and it's okay to disagree. But at the end of it, if there is someone who is going to like this piece, there's someone for whom this piece is meant for, and that person is not you, it's still okay.

HS:

So, you mentioned, when you introduced yourself, that you are a pretty voracious reader. I would love to hear more about what you read, and do you feel like that reading informs your approach to writing at all?

RN:

Oh, for sure. I definitely think my vocabulary has increased a lot once I started reading. When I was 10 or so, there was this deskmate of mine, and she had a novel with her, which was like a 60 or 80 page novel, and I was like, "Oh my gosh, there's no images in this. And there's so many words." From that, I've gone

on to read, of course, more than a 1,000-page novels and so on and consuming or inhaling them in a day or two even. But when I started ramping up in what I'm reading, one of the things that helped was I hated picking up the dictionary and trying to learn which word I am not getting. I hated doing that, so I compensated for that with contextual clues, what is the sentence being spoken of? And so I may have gotten about five or 10% of them wrong, but it helped me not break my reading, and it helped me build that vocabulary, which I use in my day to day. And that's pretty cool, I think.

And one of the other things, which I guess a lot of people do talk about is how much reading opens up your world to different experiences. Just the other day, I was reading a book, which was set in the industry of a book publishing space, and I learned so much about the book publishing space because I read a novel which was set in the book publishing space. So learning specificities of that industry was less like a side bonus of me consuming a really nice story. And when I was talking to a friend of mine about the book publishing industry, and I'm like, "Yeah, of course. It's like these rounds of editing. There are these bundles of manuscripts which editors get, and then they sort through them and decide which ones they're publishing house wants to publish."

And my friend is looking at me like, "How do you know that?" And I'm like, "I read a book about it once." So that knowledge base expands. Even if you're reading fiction, that knowledge base just keeps expanding and no one can take that away from you. So that will, of course, seep into what you are writing.

HS:

That sentiment reminds me of something that you mentioned a little bit earlier in terms of perhaps the way that you are approaching writing more generally, which is very audience driven.

RN:

Yes.

HS:

You're not just speaking out into the ether; you're speaking to someone. And with that in mind, it's very nice to have someone speak back.

RN:

Exactly. It really helps. And it not just allows you to hear good things about your work, but it also helps you grow. And if you have people who are going to be honest about what they feel when they read your piece, that can be a game-changer for your writing experience.

HS:

Absolutely. So we talked a little bit about how you get started with a piece, but I think that also a common experience for writers is writer's block or just getting stuck. There are some parts of writing that feel trickier than others, whether that's a part in the process or whether that's just within a piece. You've reached a sticking point. And so, my question to you is how do you deal with that? How do you get yourself unstuck?

RN:

That is a tough one because that sticking can happen in so many different contexts. But one of the things which helps me is putting away my piece completely and forgetting about it for a day or two. And I don't know, somehow maybe in the back of my mind it's still there, and then sometimes I'll see something or it'll spark something, and I'm like, "Okay, yes. Now, when I go back to my piece, I will have something to write about." So walking away from my piece is really helpful when I'm thinking about how do I get unstuck, just detached completely and then come back to it, maybe something would struck you in the meantime.

Maybe something wouldn't have, but now you would have a pair of fresh eyes looking at your work. And if you don't have the time to do that, that can be a pretty big motivator. So if I'm on a deadline and I need to write something, even if it doesn't feel perfect or it doesn't feel finished, it has to go out on a deadline, so it will. And you don't have the luxury of being stuck anymore. So it can be a very compelling external motivator.

HS:

Definitely. Do you feel like you're a deadline driven writer, or do you feel like you're driven by an internal motivation?

RN:

Oh, definitely deadline driven. I am too disorganized. I have a lot of thoughts of like, "Oh, I should write this. Oh, I will write this when I get time." That never happens. It only happens if I have a deadline.

HS:

Yeah, I think that a lot of us have that sense of, "I'm going to write this," and then those always get superseded by something else that needs doing. And so those deadlines can be really helpful motivators.

RN:

And one of the things that I've learned about myself is that if I have a deadline, which is at midnight and I've had a week to do it, and I still haven't done it, all throughout the week, I would still be thinking about what I'm going to be putting in there. So there's this mental space that I have where I'm just making notes of, "I will add this, I will add this, I will add this." So that structure, which I was talking about earlier, that is forming in my head regardless of me putting it out there or not. So very helpful to have that deadline because maybe at 11pm for a 12-midnight deadline, I might actually sit down and put together everything that I've thought about in the last week, but at least it's there on paper now.

HS:

And I think that that experience also speaks to the fact that writing isn't just the act of sitting there and typing out what you're thinking. There's a lot of that work that's happening in the background, and I think that it can often feel like, "Oh, I'm not working on this," because you're not sat at your laptop, but in fact, you are writing, you're thinking about it. You're doing that work.

RN:

Exactly. Right now, there's three pieces that I'm supposed to be writing, which I have not yet written that are in my head, and I know I will write it once I write it, and it'll probably be done in 15 minutes. After write an email, I have to write an article about this project that I did. And then there is another piece, which is my research work that I'm doing, and I need to present it on Monday and today's a Wednesday. So yes, these kind of things are accumulating in my brain, but once that deadline creeps in closer, it will happen.

HS:

For sure. And speaking of presentations, presentation writing is a unique form of writing, and so I'm wondering if you have any thoughts to share about the process of presenting information through words, but specifically in a presentation format as opposed to a document?

RN:

Oh, for sure. Presentations are probably one of my favorite ways to convey information to anyone, and I have a lot of thoughts on it. So I'm a people person. I like talking to people, and when I talk to people, I want to look them in the eye. I'll tell you an interesting story. So my department holds the screen summit every year, and it's a competition with different categories where I was competing for the strategy award, and I created this whole presentation on how you can use transmedia, which is using different pieces of media to tell a story. And that story would be teaching high school kids about entrepreneurship. So I had a whole 15 slide deck and I had four minutes to present it to a panel of judges, and I had everything laid out in there. I had my talking points already. I knew what the slides were, and before the judges came to my table, my department head came to my table and she asked me, "I want to know more about your project, can you share with me?"

I was like, "Okay, I'm going to use this as a practice to just talk her through my presentation." I clicked through it and I'm talking to her, and I realized, she's not looking at me, she's reading the presentation slides, and I was like, "Okay, no, this is not working for me at all." If I want people to know my passion. I am a very passionate person, and when I have worked on something, I know my material well. So I want them to look in my eye and see what I'm talking about, see my emphasis on what I'm talking about. This presentation is a visual aid to what I'm talking about. It's not the material. I am the material.

So, when she left my table, the judges were going to be in my table in less than a minute, and in that minute, I edited my PPT to just remove all the text completely and just kept the visual icons in there. And when the judges came to my table, I was able to talk to them and not have them look at my slides. So that was amazing. I ended up winning the award and a pretty hefty cash prize. So that was a great, it worked out. But that is a long story to just illustrate my point, which is that presentations are visual cues for you to talk. They should not replace the talking, which means they should not have a lot of words in them, and it's super important to remember that whenever you're making a presentation.

HS:

Congratulations, by the way.

RN:

Thank you.

HS:

Yeah, I think that that's an important and relevant insight thinking about the work that different media is performing in the course of presenting information. So when you're giving a physical presentation, utilizing media as a form of cueing as opposed to relying on it to do the work of presenting the information.

RN:

Yes. Of course, this is going to be completely different if you're turning in a presentation for people to read in their own time, in which case you're going to put all your words in there. You cannot be explaining things to people by your own words, so you have to put them down in your presentation. But still presentation as a format needs to rely heavily on images because the more you do that, it's like condensing your information in visual cues. And people respond to images so much better than words. It's just their truth. Even as a writer, you should know this.

HS:

Yeah, I think just thinking about writing across mediums and information across mediums is really helpful.

RN:

Yeah. If you remember, the first thing I talked about was context. Where are you writing? What is the context of which the user is going to be gaining the information? It's just a big part. If it's social media, or if it's a website, or if it's a physical book or if it's a presentation, you need to make sure that you're keeping in mind the medium that you're presenting your information in.

And I think another thing which maybe we haven't talked as much upon but maybe touched upon is cultural context. So an interesting class that I did when I was doing my MBA was on cultural contexts of communications. So this was trying to understand how different cultural codes exist for different kinds of geographies, and countries and situations that people live in, and that informs how you take in information. So when you're communicating the same point, you need to communicate differently because how they're going to be taking in information is going to be reflected from that. So I would highly recommend checking out *The Cultural Code* as a piece of additional reading if that is something that is interesting to you.

HS:

We always appreciate recommended texts. Is there anything else that you would recommend writers read?

RN:

No, just read. That's my advice. Just read. Apart from reading books, I also read newspaper articles. I'm also reading things like fanfiction. I'm reading things like research texts. I just finished a book by

Jonathan Haidt on *The Righteous Mind*, and it's about the political divide between Democrats and Republicans, and that was pretty interesting. So whatever you're going to be reading, you're going to be broadening your horizons.

I think as a writer, you need to be inherently curious. If you want to reach people, be it in any context, like the context of marketing, or communications, or the context of research or the context of writing for graduate school or writing for any governmental organization, being curious will give you that open mind. And you will take in information, not just in the form of reading, you'll take it in the form of learning different languages. You'll take it in the form of traveling. You'll take it in the form of just keeping an open mind when having a conversation with someone else. So being curious, if you do it, it's going to show results and it's going to show it in so many different ways.

HS:

Amazing.

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