

G: All right, good morning, and welcome to Episode 3 of “Writing Across Cottey.” If you’re new to the series, the idea behind this series is that we interview faculty from across the disciplines here at Cottey about their experiences with writing, the attitudes about writing, and the various ways that writing is done and practiced in their disciplines. So I am very excited to be joined today by Dr. Elizabeth Verklan, professor of Women and Gender Studies. And Dr. Verklan is going to share her perspectives on how writing is done and why writing matters in the discipline of Women and Gender Studies. So, we’ll just get right to it. Dr. Verklan, what kind of writing is done in your discipline?

V: Well, as an academic discipline, peer-reviewed scholarly research comprises a significant component. That includes peer-reviewed journal articles, and unlike some other humanities or social science fields, it also includes a book. It’s considered the standard that someone pursuing a doctorate in my field would craft a dissertation that would then, in their pursuit of tenure at another institution, turn that dissertation into a book-length manuscript. There’s also a lot—and this is, I think, not just unique to my field but I think the humanities and social sciences more broadly at this moment—a pursuit of more public-oriented scholarship, certainly in venues that for my field would be feminist-oriented or have gender as some sort of lens are increasingly some component of a lot of scholars’ tenure packet.

G: OK. So why do you think it’s important to be able to write well in your discipline?

V: I think writing is probably one of the most important and useful skills that one can have in general, and particularly in today’s economy. Everything that we see on the Internet contains the written word, written text. And I also think that, as someone who has been both a student and is committed to learning as a profession and also someone who teaches other people, learning is a means—or excuse me, writing is a means to learn. Oftentimes, I think students or people think that you have to have something figured out when you get to writing, but more often than not, I have found that writing is the path for me to find that thing that I don’t yet fully know or I don’t yet fully understand. So, both as a very real professional skill, I think that writing is extremely important of course in my field for communicating one’s research and ideas but also as a tool to deepen one’s understanding of any issue.

G: That’s very interesting to hear you say that because even some of the faculty that we’ve interviewed before on previous episodes have also said that idea of writing to create knowledge or generate knowledge rather than just regurgitate or recycle knowledge that’s already out there. And that’s something we really try to emphasize in Writing Studies is that you can learn through writing! Good. So what specific writing skills would you say are important for writing in your discipline?

V: I would say good grammar is always good. I would say that having an ability to both communicate dense, sometimes very niche academic research or academic theory to a wide audience, a diverse audience, is a very necessary skill set. The discipline of gender studies is interdisciplinary, which means that in the journals that I publish in, there are people who have a lot of different disciplinary training. Some of them might not even be scholars, they might be people who are practitioners and work at research institutes or non-profits or maybe even, you know, political organizers. So, having that ability to communicate to a wide and diverse audience means that things that you think are very important will reach more people. It also increases the likelihood that people will understand what you’re saying, that people will remember it, and that your work could maybe even be taught in a classroom, which is really an ideal situation. It could impact policy. The more that you can come up with ways to communicate directly and effectively, the more impact your work might have.

G: Yeah, that's kind of the whole idea of this series is that writing is interdisciplinary. You know, it crosses these borders and these boundaries between fields, and while certain, you know, things change, certain rules of the game change across those disciplines, the fact remains that writing is something that is done in every discipline.

V: Right.

G: So, what has been the most important thing you've learned about writing in your discipline?

V: Most important thing I've learned about writing in my discipline?

G: Or important things.

V: Yeah. I think something that has been significant in my field of study is simply that writing has value. Writing—not every piece of writing will be published, not every piece of writing will be something that someone will see. But it still will have—it can have a lot of value. So, for instance, when I was writing my dissertation, I spent a lot of time just freewriting, and I still—that's a huge part of my process, is just freewriting whatever's in my head. I'll read a lot of stuff, and then kind of just write whatever it makes me think about or kind of what I'm—maybe even just try and summarize what I've just read, and you know, building on what I said a moment ago, that's actually really generative in that writing isn't going to be something that's published. It's not going to be probably even something that anyone else reads in that form, but it's nonetheless instrumental to me moving forward in my research, understanding the question that it is that I'm trying to identify or some gap in the literature or how it is that I'm thinking about something. It's a really, really valuable tool to the research process and to the learning process, and I don't know that [unintelligible]...And writing became a pretty significant component of my working life.

G: OK. It's really interesting to hear you mention that you freewrite and find value in freewriting. That's of course a strategy that I think a lot of writers use, and it's comforting to know that some of the same strategies that very experienced, seasoned writers like you are strategies that may work for students as well, strategies that may work for people who are still practicing writing and still learning writing. So, it's all about finding those strategies that habit that work for you I think. So, what advice would you have for a student looking to improve her writing in your discipline?

V: Write as often and as much as you can. You know, I have told students so many times that when they have a lot of ideas and they're really excited about what we're reading, to just freewrite every day. And I have my students freewrite in my classes. I regularly give prompts, and you know, then we'll discuss them. And I think, for me, writing is kind of one side of the coin, and then reading would be the other. That when we're reading, we're kind of doing a little bit of the process of writing. We're taking in words, we're thinking about ideas, we're thinking about the—how an argument's formed. And that seeps into our brains and we then bring that to our writing process. I can't—it really doesn't get any more simple than that, is that you want to read as much as you can and you want to write as much as you can.

G: Right. Practice like anything else, right? So, what specifically do you think you would encourage students to read as part of that? Any genres in particular?

V: Yeah. I think it depends on where you want to write. I think that in, you know, our upper-division classes, we're reading a couple different types of things, and that's because students are going to land in

different places. So some of that is going to be the peer-reviewed scholarly work that I've discussed thus far. So, certainly work from those top journals, thinking of *Feminist Formations* and *Feminist Studies*, that kind of stuff, would be the type of things that someone would want to read if they're interested in contributing to scholarly conversations around gender, feminist theory, gender theory, etc. Other stuff that we read, I do teach more creative writing, both creative nonfiction and creative fiction. So, obviously, if someone is interested in writing more creatively—whether that be fiction or nonfiction—then you would want to center your reading there. You would want to think about are those writers who are getting a lot of attention right now, what are they saying? What are they writing? And then there's also more technical writing that I actually have in my classrooms. So, in one of the classes that I taught today, we're reading executive summaries from reports from non-profit organizations. And that's writing, too. That's writing that is very intentional because they are trying to impact, influence people to change—to write policy, to enact laws, to change their behaviors. And so those are all different kinds of writing that I think I try and introduce my students to. And I introduce it as, you know, this could be something you could do. You know, I think about why it is or how it is that people are choosing to write the way that they do. And then I would also just say—and this sounds like a contradiction to all that I just said—we should always read widely. Right? That strengthening one's writing skills means that you should also read things that you—that are really bad, that aren't just really good, that aren't like what you would write as well. Because it's just going to expand your vocabulary. It's going to expand the ways that [unintelligible].

G: All right. Get outside of the comfort zone a little bit. Read things you might not normally read. Write in genres you might not normally write in. And I really like that sentiment of just read broadly, read often, write broadly, write often. You know, I think a lot of people forget that writing is a skill like anything else that benefits from practice and it's not something that you are born into. You're not born a great writer, you're not born a bad writer. It's something that people can work at and improve at. And that's a good note to end on, because I'd like to remind you all the Writing Center is the perfect resource for you all to be able to do that, to practice your writing. And getting feedback on your writing is an essential component of effective practice. And so I just want to wrap up here by thanking Dr. Verklan and reminding you all watching that the Writing Center is open 6-9 PM Monday through Thursday. We are located in the lower level of the Ross Memorial Library if you'd like to come for a face-to-face session, or we are available through the Cottey College Learning Center online course that you can do a session via Zoom or chat with a tutor. And also be sure to check out our website. We've got a lot of good resources on there in addition to the recordings and transcripts of these "Writing Across Cottey" videos. We also have an online writing lab that has a lot of resources devoted to writing, common writing challenges and questions that people have. And stay tuned, because we are very excited to be announcing an upcoming guest speaker event as well to come in March, and we look forward to seeing you all there. So, Dr. Verklan, thank you once again for providing some insight into how writing intersects with your discipline of Women and Gender Studies. And those of you watching can look forward to seeing this episode and its transcription uploaded to our website very soon. So, thank you, stay warm, stay healthy, stay safe, and enjoy the rest of your day.