JG: All right, hello, and welcome to Episode Seven of Writing Across Cottey! If you are new to this series, the idea is that every semester, we will interview a faculty member here at Cottey from across the disciplines just to get an idea of what kind of writing is done in their discipline, any experiences or attitudes about writing that they would like to share with the campus community, and just to get a general sense of guidance for anyone who may be interested in entering that discipline, what advice would you have for someone who's going to be doing writing in that discipline. So we are very lucky this time to have Dr. Amanda Gilchrist with us, our Associate Professor of Psychology. And I'm really excited about this one, because I have kind of an interest in psychology, and I think that writing and psychology actually overlap quite a bit. There's been a lot of research done in the cognition of writing and kind of what goes on in someone's head when they are engaging in writing. So I'm very excited to hear from Dr. Gilchrist. Thank you for being with us this morning.

AG: Yeah, absolutely. I'm excited to be here. Thank you so much. All right.

JG: So my first question is just a very general broad question. What kind of writing is done in your discipline?

AG: So we actually do a variety of different writings based on different aspects of our program. So I know that one of our other professors in psychology, Dr. Tietz, actually has her students write letters to different companies and different corporations for different purposes in her class, but by and large, most of the writing that is going to be done in psychology is going to be in the form of a scientific paper. And that's a lot of the work that I teach in my writing intensive research methods course. That's a year-long course. And we basically work through the different aspects of writing a research paper. We're actually learning about APA formatting this week, the formatting style for the American Psychological Association, and how to format a paper, and we go through those different forms of the research paper kind of throughout the year.

JG: Oh, very nice. So why do you think that it's important to be able to write well in psychology?

AG: Communication is going to be one of the biggest aspects of getting information out there in the world. So I will mention that I I'm trained as a research psychologist, and I can tell you that most of the students in my research methods class, while some are interested in research, most of them are interested in aspects like counseling like therapy, mental health, and behavioral health. And while a lot of people don't actually—a lot of those students don't really think that they're going to do research—they're going to do research in those fields. But a lot of the treatments that they're going to be using, a lot of the techniques that they're going to be using, are based on research, and those have to be communicated well. I believe it's our ethical obligation that, when we are doing research or we are learning about evidence based therapies and treatments, it is our ethical obligation to share that information with other people. And

psychologists, from my perspective, don't always do that very well. We often write for other psychologists, but I think it's also important to get that reading out to a more general audience. And if you want to share that information that you know, you have to be able to communicate it well, both in terms of speaking, but especially in terms of writing.

JG: Yeah, anyone who's seen multiple of these episodes can attest to the fact that that idea of audience has come up every single time. Regardless of your discipline, you're going to need to have a certain element of audience awareness. What does this audience know? What do they don't know? You know, what do I need to tell them versus what would maybe even be insulting to tell them? So it really comes down to knowing who you're writing for, who you're communicating to. What specific writing skills would you say are important for writing in psychology?

AG: So, one of the biggest things that I want our students to be able to do, and I would say probably one of the trickiest things that they need to do is, first of all, they need to summarize what they're reading. And most of them are pretty good at that, depending on the type of research that they're looking at. Summarizing might be a little more difficult in some subfields of psychology than others. So for example, I have a background in cognition and neuroscience. So a lot of the cognition papers, as long as they're not getting too theoretically dense, are pretty easy for students to understand and summarize. So for example, we're doing a replication project. In our research methods course, we're going to basically replicate something called the framing effect. So if I frame different options in a using different language—so for example, if I have a treatment for that I use "400 People will die" versus "200 people will be saved," same outcome, but if I frame it in terms of saving versus dying, do we get a different result? Most of my students can understand the concept of framing. Now on the other hand, my background is also in neuroscience. So in bio psychology, another class that I teach, students may have to summarize different aspects related to the nervous system and the brain. And oftentimes for scientific papers in those fields, they're going to look a lot more like biology papers with terminology that they may not fully understand, different types of measurements, different types of metrics. And that's going to be harder for them to summarize. So summarizing is probably going to be one of the most important skills, and again, depending on the subfield, students can grasp that relatively easily depending on the subfield. However, the other thing that I think is really critical for psychology students is synthesizing information. So grouping information together. So when you're looking at all of these different resources, on a certain topic, how are you going to group those together? Where are the commonalities in those different findings? Where are the differences? Can you compare them? Can you contrast them when taken together as a whole? What does this tell you about the particular psychological thing that you're looking at? And I think synthesis is one of the harder aspects for incoming psychology students to learn. So especially in research methods, I really try to hammer as much as possible: synthesize your sources, look for things they have in common, look for things that differ, and

don't just summarize paper after paper after paper. Start making connections between your sources. That's really going to be critical.

JG: I think I would agree with both of those. Summary and synthesis, you know—we're talking about summary in my Writing 102 class right now. And I think it's kind of a deceptively challenging thing to be able to do. You know, a lot of people think, "Oh, that's no problem. I can write a summary." But when you are especially dealing with a very long text, to be able to break that down into a very concise form—sometimes just a few sentences—is very, very difficult. Sometimes I say that the hardest part of my dissertation was the abstract there at the very beginning, where you have to write like a one page summary of this 300 page paper, and you're just like, "I don't know."

AG: Did you write it first, or did you write it last?

JG: It was one of the last things that I wrote.

AG: Yeah, I was going to say, it's easier to write it last after you've created that whole narrative, right?

JG: It's like my professor used to say, "How do I know what I'm going to say until I've said it?" It's kind of a paradox. Like you don't you don't know how to summarize your thing until you've written the thing. But yeah, synthesis, too; bringing it all together and not just stacking your sources on top of each other. I see that a lot. You know, there's a—

AG: One paper, one paragraph.

JG: Right, right. Like the assignment is, you know, you have five sources that you have to use, and it's just, "Okay, summarize source one, summarize source two, three, four, five…" And there's no real conversation among the sources. We really need to be able to see how these sources speak to each other, right?

AG: I try not to be too hard on students when we're doing one paragraph, one paper because I know that that's the easiest way to start. But ideally, throughout the semester, we're doing editing; we're doing peer review with each other's work. Ideally, once they start kind of thinking about how these different pieces fit together, hopefully they're kind of working to integrate more where they can.

JG: And it's a skill that just takes practice like anything else. So Dr. Gilchrist, what has been the most important thing you've learned about writing in your discipline?

AG: So I can tell you from writing in the disciplines—so I've written a couple of book chapters, invited book chapters at this point. I had a very generous doctoral advisor who gave me those opportunities. In addition, I've also written a couple of opinion pieces. I've written a couple—I've written several peer reviewed journal articles at this point. I think the biggest thing that I've

learned from writing and from teaching writing is that, especially if you're like me and you're a perfectionist, the way that you write, you really should not expect your first draft to be the perfect product. So I can tell you very, very early on in my writing, I wanted to make sure every sentence that came out was perfectly crafted, perfectly edited. And so what that often meant was that I was staring at a piece of paper, writing a sentence then going, "Well, no, no, I could say that better," and then getting rid of it. And one of the things that I kind of learned and was brought to me both by my doctoral advisor and other graduate students in the field, based on what we know about writing and how we kind of think about writing, one of the things that the best writers do, and they just get all of their words out on the paper. And then they go through the process of editing. I was trying to edit before I even had words on a paper, and I found that my writing became much, much better when I wasn't so concerned with how it looked at first. So I would get out what I wanted to say, and then I would edit it later as I got new sources or as I added information. And so I really encourage my students to just get something out on paper because the real work is done, from my perspective, in the editing. The other major thing that I would say, especially when you are writing psychology papers that have a lot of complex ideas, outlining about how you want the flow of your topics to go is going to be really critical. And so my writing really improved, and the narrative that I was trying to create very much improved once I started actually working with outlines. My writing has gotten a lot more concise. And then finally, one thing I have to add—one thing I have learned: I will often procrastinate from writing by looking for more sources. There will always be more sources, and at some point, you've got to stop reading sources and get stuff down on paper. And so my writing has become tighter because I cite fewer things. I still cite a lot. But I try to make an effort to not cite as much as I used to. I tell my students, I actually had an instance for a peer review journal where right off the bat, I got a really nice major revision—or minor revision decision, which is awesome from your first attempt. But the reason that they gave me a minor revision is that they believed my introduction was far too long. I had cited too many papers, and I was actually able to remove about nine pages of my introduction and still have a workable introduction to that paper. There will always be more papers. So start working with a few and then start writing. Don't wait until you've got like 75 papers to begin the work of writing.

JG: I think that is all excellent advice, especially what you said about chasing perfection and trying to get your first draft perfect. And you know, there's the—I have to plug a very, very useful article by Anne Lamott. I'm going to censor it because it has a swear word in the title, but "Crappy First Drafts." It is a very well-known article and is just excellent reading. Anyone who hasn't read it: I strongly recommend it because Lamott is basically saying, "You know, your first draft is supposed to be pretty bad. It's called a rough draft for a reason." So you get it out there. You get feedback on it, you clean it up, you revise it, and pretty soon you end up with something that is not so crappy, but it's okay to let the first draft not be the best. So last question here, and I think the previous question kind of touched on this, but what general advice would you have for a student looking to improve their writing in psychology?

AG: Well, one of the first things that I would say is have other people look at your work. And one of the things that I always found really useful is having other people look at my work and tell me what I was doing right and what I was doing wrong. And generally, people were pretty open with what I needed to do better. They weren't often saying things like, "Oh, this draft is terrible; get rid of it," but they'd say, you know, "The flow of your topics is kind of disorganized. Maybe you should start writing from an outline and see if this fits how you want this paper to go." So I would say get used to handing your work to other people. Be prepared to take feedback. Now, one of the things that I will say that I really try to impress upon my students is that yes, you are creating this paper, but it's really important to keep your ego out of the game. Yes, you created this, but somebody's giving you feedback to make your paper better. Even if they're being really blunt or really direct about it, it is not a mark against you. It is going to make your work better. Additionally, sometimes you find that with some feedback, some feedback has no basis. Sometimes I have gotten recommendations for things that I needed to change in a paper in peer review, and I don't necessarily think that they're needed, and that's fine. That person has a different perspective than I do. However, what I'm not going to do is dismiss all criticism outright because they said one thing that I didn't agree with criticism. It doesn't necessarily mean we throw it all out. And it doesn't mean we have to accept it all, either. We need to very critically look at these different types of feedback and figure out which of these can we keep, which of these could we not necessarily keep, so which of these can we ignore? But of course, we need to tell that person why we're choosing to ignore it and give a good rationale for it. You should have a good reason for why feedback is necessary for a certain thing or not. So look to other people. Take feedback very, very well. I'll go ahead and plug the Writing Center because I know that y'all are doing great things, and I would tell all of our students to check out the Writing Center, and just keep writing because it's a skill, and like most things, skills are only going to be built through practice. I don't expect our students to write like I do right out the gate. Even by the time that they're done with the class, they're probably not going to write like I do. But they'll write better than they started. But the only way that that's going to happen and that progress is going to happen is by constantly seeking it out, constantly engaging with it, and not trying to run from it. Because yes, you're going to be uncomfortable in this process. But the only way you're going to get more comfortable is by practicing the skill. So we have lots of opportunities in my classes for multiple rough drafts, multiple opportunities for peer review. I'm pretty open about meeting with them when they need me so they get that feedback. So those are kind of the things I would say.

JG: Thank you for that shout-out to the Writing Center. And I would reiterate the importance of getting feedback, taking advantage of all your sources of feedback: your professors, the Writing Center, your peers, these peer review workshops. And I agree it can be a little painful to get feedback on your writing. I think that, you know, when you get criticism on your writing, it's almost like a criticism of you as a person. Because when we write we really are sharing a piece of ourselves, so it's almost like someone is critiquing us, and it can hurt. I went a long

time without even looking at the feedback from my professors when I was an undergrad, and I really regret that because I could have used that. But, you know, I would agree with, you know, acknowledging that some feedback is better suited to your goals than others. And it's not necessarily a matter of incorporating all the feedback you get, but you should at least consider all the feedback that you get and take it seriously and ask yourself, "Do I or do I not want to incorporate this feedback, and why do I or do I not want to?" That's the big question. Right? Well, Dr. Gilchrist, I thought this was very enlightening. So thank you for taking the time here to talk with us today. And we are going to be having a recording of this video as well as a written transcription of the video posted to the Writing Center website very soon. I will also be sending an email out to campus when that happens, so you will be aware when you can watch and or read this Episode Seven of Writing Across Cottey. And I hope that you will stay tuned for Episode Eight next semester. Thank you, Dr. Gilchrist.

AG: Yeah, you're very welcome. Have a great day.

JG: Bye-bye, everyone.