

JG: Hello, and welcome to episode nine of the Writing Across Cottey video project! If you are new to this series, the idea is that for every episode, we interview a faculty member from across the disciplines here at Cottey to better understand their experiences with writing, their attitudes toward writing, and maybe get some advice for aspiring writers in that discipline. So, for episode nine, we are very lucky to have Professor Sandy Chaney of history with us. Thank you for being here, Professor Chaney, and let's just get right into the questions. So my first question is, what kind of writing is done in history?

SC: Well, thanks for the invitation to speak. We do all sorts of different kinds of writing in history. Most frequently, it's analytical, but obviously historians tell stories. And so narrative plays an important role in the discipline. We use, for example, time as a way to structure the narrative and look at the beginning; it's got a middle, there's an end of the story. Sometimes cause-and-effect happens over that big time period. We have plot. So there is a big event, you've got settings, and also some cast of characters. Some of them are the main players, and then sometimes the narrator takes an omniscient voice as an outsider writing about it. But then there's also history writing narrative form, where you are one that's questioning; you're not exactly sure. So I would say narrative plays a really important role in the writing we do, but also the analytical piece. Students write research papers, where you have to have a thesis that's supported with evidence. So you say one thing, this is what I think happened for these reasons, and then you back it up. So it's argumentative; it's analytical. Also, I do a lot of description. One of the things—I'm an environmental historian, and so it's very important to evoke senses. Basically, what did it look like back then? Maybe smells, the sounds. So thick description is really important in showing people what happened rather than just telling. I write about horses, and just talking about the experiences that they had on the Eastern Front is very moving when you have that thick description. They also do sort of mundane stuff like on PowerPoint presentations. You have to take hopefully complicated information and compress it into these bulleted points that then are digestible. So yeah, we use lots of different forms of writing. Probably analytical and narrative are the main.

JG: It is really interesting to hear you say that history does so much narrative and descriptive-style writing because I think a lot of people associate those with, like, creative writing, you know? They don't think that there's really an academic context for that kind of writing, but there absolutely is. People don't realize that this ability to story-tell and describe things in a way that brings it before the readers' eyes are very much a part of academic writing.

SC: Absolutely. Yeah. And I think it's a fun part.

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

SC: Well, because historians do tell stories, you want to be able to get your ideas across and explaining why things happen, trying to do cause-and-effect. So you have to be clear and have a very clear argument. You're not going to get anybody to read your material—or listen to it if you're speaking about it—if you can't be clear and write well. And even if you're giving a presentation that starts with a written text—I'm on the Historical Society board, and the coordinator of the local museum just finished his master's in public history. And what he did is he created a series of panels about the welfare institute in the town here, and what was—so it's basically educating the public about a really important part of the community. So you need to be able to write for diverse audiences and in public history. And his panels that are on display at the museum right now, they are—it's short, concise, very interesting, illustrated. But it has to be clear so that people can learn about the story that he wants to tell. And it's the same thing with history more generally. You want to get your ideas across, so you have to write it in a way that's understandable, interesting, and maybe even persuade people to act differently.

JG: Yeah, so this is something that I think has come up in just about every, if not every, one of these episodes that we've done: this idea that when you speak of writing, you're really speaking of modalities beyond just printed alphabetical text. So you mentioned presentations, for example. That is its own type of text, and you've got to be a good storyteller for that just as much as you do in print writing. So someone going into history, in addition to writing texts, they're going to be speaking; they're going to be presenting. They may be giving conference presentations, for example. So, it really benefits you to be able to be a good oral storyteller in addition to a written storyteller.

SC: It's pretty interesting that you mentioned conference presentations because the field of history is different than others for a long time, and it's maybe changing a little bit, but when you give your conference paper, you read your paper. You're excited about the story that you want to tell. You have found your evidence; you've got some new piece of history that you want to share to your colleagues. And so you read the essay. And I think when we've done that with capstone here on campus. It's just a very different way of presenting. And I think historians are proud of their writing, but sometimes it's a little too dense.

JG: So that is an interesting difference of discipline, I think, because in my discipline, in composition, if you go to a conference, I think some people do read their paper, but more and more there seems to be an impetus to make it more of an off-the-cuff presentation with maybe even some audience participation. That's a big thing now. So it could be just a difference in discipline; the expectations shift a little bit.

SC: But I think you're right. It is a trend that's changing, and you have roundtable discussions more. And so it is changing, I think to be maybe more accessible.

JG: So, Dr. Chaney, what specific writing skills would you say are especially important for writing in history? Which I think you have touched on with the storytelling, but is there anything else that comes to mind?

SC: I think the first word is clarity. You've got to be clear, because as somebody who reads students' writing, as I write my own self, when I have to do revisions, it's like, this is just not clear. You have to be clear and organized. So I think that's the first thing. And then for me, like when I write a book review, I can summarize the content of the book and look at the sources and analyze those. But the hardest part for me for evaluating students' writing or looking at my own is the analytical piece. It's hard to say—you know, it's the “so what?” So like, I didn't know—I just got done with writing an article and I said, after working on it for a year, I said, I'm still not sure what my thesis is. So it was clear in the information that I had found, but it was really at the description stage still. And what I needed to do was to go back over it, and then it's basically, “Who cares?” Explaining why it matters. And that's the analytical piece. So clear, descriptive, but then explaining to your audience, your reader, why it matters in the first place.

JG: You know, that's something that we try to stress in the writing classes too, especially the first year writing classes, is getting at that “so what?” question: why does all this matter? And then maybe in your conclusion, reflecting on why all of what you just said should matter. So I think that that can be a big hurdle for new writers to get over: figuring out, “How am I going to articulate that ‘so what/why does this matter?’ question to my audience?”

SC: There is a guide book that we use in the junior-level seminar and also in the senior capstone, and I hadn't thought about it until—we use Turabian. It's sort of our Chicago style for people in the field of history and some other disciplines. But one of the opening questions is like, historians are not going to solve a medical issue with their research. You're going to basically learn something more about part of the past so people can have greater understanding of it. But the first thing you have to know—and this is

going with the analytical writing—is I am working on X, working on the French Revolution, so that I can understand why, what women's roles were in the French Revolution. And then the final piece, the analytical piece, which is the harder, is the “so what?” so that I can help *other* people understand why. And it gets at this idea that we're writing history to satisfy our own curiosity. But we're always writing for an audience. You've got to write for somebody else, always write to help somebody else understand.

JG: Yes, I like that. So what has been the most important thing you've learned about writing in history?

SC: I think it's what I just mentioned, that you are writing for an audience. When I taught first-year writing seminar for some years, one of my mentors was an English professor who had published short stories, and he would always tell—well, one of the things that he did that we don't do is that he would tell them that since kindergarten, you have had somebody who has, in a sense, coddled you and read all of your writing. And he says, “I'm your editor. And when I don't find it interesting anymore, I'm going to draw a line and stop reading.” But it woke people up, you know? You had to actually have a point. And so it taught me that I really did have to focus on the reader. And he was focusing on the reader when you get to the final version of your essay. You've got a reader, and you've got to keep the reader happy so they don't stop reading and there's no confusion about what you're trying to say, thus the clarity. But I realized that when I write the first draft, at least, the reader hits me, because I'm trying to figure out, “What do I know and what do I think?” So I'm writing for a reader; the first draft is me. And then as I go through it, edit, fine tune it, I'm writing for an audience, depending on what the context is. So knowing that I have to keep a reader happy means you need to be clear, have an interesting story, a captivating thesis, compelling evidence.

JG: So you are kind of the first audience, right, you yourself, for that first draft. But then you have that larger audience in the back of your mind as you're composing.

SC: Assuming that they are waiting for my findings, right?

JG: Right. I think that is smart to always remember that you are writing for an audience, even if you just write something to yourself. You can be your own audience, right? Being reflective of the impact that your language is going to have on that audience, I think, is the mark of a developing writer.

SC: Absolutely. Absolutely.

JG: So last question. Dr. Chaney, what general advice would you have for a student who is looking to improve their writing in history? So a history student who wants to improve their writing: what advice would you have for them?

SC: Well, I know this is advice other people have given as well: to write frequently, write often, and do it also, I would say, for fun. Often people in history classes just assume that you write this essay, this history, there's—you have multiple voices, and the rhetorical situation will change, and the historians write for different audiences. And so enjoy knowing that you don't always have to write in the same style. It's not always a research paper. Sometimes you're going to be doing a presentation and like that, but it doesn't have to be always formal. Sometimes, you know, write in a journal. Keep a diary. Those are historically important sources—write your own! So I think it's writing often and in different—for fun, or seriousness, sarcasm. So enjoy your writing.

JG: I think writing for fun is a very underrated thing. Sadly, I think a lot of people do kind of associate writing with being something that you have to do, you're obligated to do, you're required to do, and we

forget that we can just write for fun and just forget about the correctness, forget about getting everything absolutely perfect. And just write what you want to write. I think that is excellent advice.

SC: Right.

JG: All right. Thank you so much, Dr. Chaney. This was very, very enlightening. I found it enlightening. I hope you all watching also found it enlightening. We will have this episode posted to the Writing Center website along with a written transcript very soon. And I am also excited to announce that this is the end of season one of the Writing Across Cottey project. We began this project in the spring of 2020, four years ago, and it has been a very, very enlightening experience. And we're going to continue the project, but we might take it in some new and interesting directions moving forward for season two. So stay tuned for more information about that, and until next time, thank you very much for watching. And don't forget to come visit the Writing Center! We're open Monday through Thursday, six to nine, and we have excellent tutors this semester—as we do every semester—and they would be glad to see you there. So Dr. Chaney, thank you once again for joining us today. Thank you for watching, and until next time, see you later.

SC: Thank you for having me.