

JG: All right, good morning! Welcome to another episode of “Writing Across Cottey, Season 2,” where we are talking to staff and administration across the Cottey campus about what kind of writing they do in their work. And so in this episode, we are very lucky to have Dr. Jill Compton, and let me make sure that I get your title right here. It’s kind of a mouthful. Associate Vice President for Institutional Effectiveness and Student Success. Is that right?

JC: That is correct.

JG: All right, great. Dr. Compton, will you take just a minute to tell us a little bit about what you do before we even get into writing, like what your job entails?

JC: Sure. So I work with both institutional effectiveness and student success. On the institutional effectiveness side, I work a lot with our student data and our accreditors and the people that we have to remain accountable to, including our federal government. So there’s that one side of it. And then the student success side. So, I’m that person who’s looking through the concern notices that are being submitted for students. I work with the Cottey Outreach and Response Team, and I also chair the Retention Committee. So we’re looking at student success issues that are broader, bigger than the individual things that we’re working on with concern notices. I’ll also add that in order to get to this position, I have a Ph.D. in psychology, I started out as a faculty member, and then also worked for state-level coordinating board before coming to Cottey. So I have some different contexts in which I’ve had to write.

JG: Gotcha. Well, that is actually a good segue into the first question. What kind of writing is done in your position?

JC: So probably this is not an exciting answer, but I compose a lot of emails. It’s probably the number one thing. But the thing about email writing is that it can be a challenge in that you’re constantly thinking about your audience in that and also trying to be as compact in your phrasing as possible. So I have a friend who was an attorney when I worked at the coordinating board, and she showed me that when you write an email, it’s really good to have as much blank space as possible. Otherwise, when you open that email up, your first response if it’s really dense text is [groan]. So just being as succinct as possible in those emails while getting across the most important information, and the information is worded in a way that’s appropriate for the audience, whether that’s our liaison at the Higher Learning Commission or that’s a student who needs to avail themselves of resources. So there’s a lot of that. And then with the accreditation portion of my job, I also work with reporting for them, and again, that audience is looking for evidence. So that’s a very particular type of style that’s a little bit more scholarly in a way because it’s not a creative writing assignment. It is very much a “give us the facts” kind of scenario. So there’s that kind of writing. And then there are other things that I do that involve communication. For example, I’m pretty regularly asked to speak at President’s Council about, for example, Assessment Day surveys and results from those. So I have to kind of think about what their questions might be as people who didn’t usually write the surveys, they didn’t take the surveys. So thinking about what is most important for them to know about those. So those are some examples.

JG: Yeah, great examples. I'm sure Assessment Day is fresh on everyone's mind. That was just last week. So why exactly do you think it's important to be able to write well in your position?

JC: It's crucial. If I don't write well, I'm not going to be able to persuade anybody to do anything. I'm not going to persuade HLC to see us as meeting their criteria for accreditation. I'm not going to convince a student that it really is OK to go talk to your professor during office hours, that that's why they have office hours is for you to talk with them. So if I couldn't write, I would be in quite a bind.

JG: I love your way of thinking about persuasion and how sometimes we're not necessarily persuading people to do things rather than just persuading them to think a certain way. Like you mentioned HLC and persuading them to see that we are meeting our goals. And so this is something I touch on in the writing classes. All writing is, to some degree, persuasive in purpose. You may not be trying to persuade somebody to do something, but you might just be trying to persuade them to see something the way you want them to see it.

JC: Exactly. [unintelligible] someone to think about data in a new way. So it's not necessarily taking action but to look at it from a certain perspective.

JG: Yeah. Absolutely. So I think you kind of touched on this earlier. What specific writing skills are important for writing in your position? So you mentioned things like concision, but anything else come to mind?

JC: I really think that empathy and perspective-taking is really important, to be able to take yourself out of yourself and what you know and the assumptions you've already made because you've worked with some idea or some bit of evidence or data, whatever, and put yourself in the position of the person that you are talking with. So for example, we did a survey a couple of years ago, and I ended up doing presentations to some different groups. So when I talked about those results to students, I took a slightly different tack in some of the things that I needed to explain that wouldn't have necessarily been evident from a student perspective. Compare that to what I might have done when I presented it to faculty leadership or something like that.

JG: So what counts as "empathetic" writing is largely dependent on your audience at the given time.

JC: Yes.

JG: That concept has come up in I think every single interview I've done for this. You've got to be in tune with what your audience needs from you.

JC: Yeah. I was just going to give another example. When I was working at the coordinating board, I was in Kentucky. Kentucky has eight public universities and 16 community and technical colleges, and we would get leadership from those campuses altogether. Early on when I got there, the agency had produced this wonderful bit of data analysis and had put it together in the shape and form of what you would submit to a scholarly journal. And they gave that to the provosts. And provosts, if you don't know, they are the academic leaders of universities,

and they may have upwards of 500 employees under them. They are incredibly busy people. So that was an opportunity missed, I think there, because they did not have time to read that entire thing. Give them some bullet points, something abstract, and an opportunity to read that further if they wanted to. But just handing them a 20-page paper...no.

JG: That might have been good for an audience of other academics and scholars in that field but not for provosts. Yep. What, Dr. Compton, has been—would you say—is the most important thing that you’ve learned about writing in your position?

JC: I think that just understanding that there are different scenarios that I have to write for. Getting a Ph.D. is all about doing your own research, and you have to write a dissertation. And much of my training was to write a dissertation. Mine ended up being 158 pages long, I was verbose, I had lots of references, I needed to go into explaining that I knew my background. So that’s what I was trained to do in graduate school. And then I had to kind of unlearn some of that as I went along and started understanding that audience part of it and the rhetorical situation that I was a part of. So just learning to be flexible, really, in my writing style so that I can come at it from a very assertive, scholarly kind of way, of like, “Hey, this isn’t just my idea; five other authors wrote about this” to switch to an email where I need lots of white space so that people actually read what I send.

JG: I think that’s probably a common experience for people who go to grad school. You know, in grad school, you’re surrounded by likeminded nerds who are just as into this stuff as you are and willing to wade through pages and pages, 150 pages, about something. But your average person? Maybe not so much. So you’ve got to rethink your approach. I won’t say, like, “Dumb it down,” but you know, just package it in a form that’s more palatable to that audience.

JC: And when people would ask me—like, non-psychologists—would ask me, “What’s your dissertation about?” At first, that answer was difficult to come up with because I was so steeped in it, and it was hard for me to come back up and just hit the high points.

JG: Big picture.

JC: [unintelligible] hit the high points.

JG: I still struggle with that. People ask me that, and I say, “How much time do you have?” I’m working on it. So, last question for you. What writing-related advice would you have for someone who might be seeking to enter your position or a similar one, similar line of work?

JC: Learn from examples. Don’t think that you ever have to reinvent the wheel. One of the things that I will be taking the lead on is writing what HLC, our accreditor, refers to as an assurance argument. Hundreds of those have been written at this point. So I don’t have to just start out and come up with my own style. I can look back at Cottley’s past assurance argument, look at other institution’s assurance arguments, and take from their style that you can fit your scenario the best, and be willing to be flexible.

JG: Yeah, that kind of reminds me I have a database of email templates that I have saved. You know, every year, I'll send some of the same emails as certain events come up, and rather than spend all this time writing a new email, I just go back and I plug that one in, maybe change a few things, but it saves a lot of time that way. Don't reinvent the wheel.

JC: Exactly.

JG: Yeah. Good. Well, that is all the questions I had, so thank you once again, Dr. Compton, for sitting down with me today, and I encourage our viewers to check out our Writing Center website, where we will be uploading this episode as well as a written transcription of it. And you can find this episode here—or you will be able to, anyway—as well as all the other episodes that we've done. I suspect that this one will probably pop up on the website here in a few days. So with that said, we still have a couple of weeks left in the semester here. There's still time to come to the Writing Center. No appointment necessary, just walk right in and say that you would like to meet with a writing tutor. We have excellent writing tutors who would be willing to help you at any stage of the process. So if you're working on one of those final papers or anything at this point, this would be a very, very good time to come see us at the Writing Center. All right? So Dr. Compton, thank you once again. We will conclude this episode here, and I wish everyone a happy end to the Spring 2026 semester. Bye-bye.