

[...]

Interviewer: Okay, so how would you describe yourself as a writer when you started at Michigan?

Interviewee: I was okay, I guess. I was good at writing for someone who had just gotten out of high school. I wasn't particularly stellar; my first college paper I got a C. I was okay. I have a pretty good vocabulary and I knew how to structure a five-paragraph essay but I wasn't awesome or anything.

Interviewer: Uh-huh.

Interviewee: Yeah.

Interviewer: How would you describe yourself now compared to then?

Interviewee: I would say my writing has improved in the past three years. I've taken a lot of English and writing classes for that very purpose so it's been an intentional development. I'm obviously more proficient at writing longer essays. I have a better sense of what professors at U of M are looking for in an essay and I'm a lot faster at writing them, too. I can do it in a couple of days instead of a week. I feel like I've gotten a lot better at writing.

Interviewer: What language have you developed to talk about yourself as a writer or even how you learned to write?

Interviewee: Like what do you mean?

Interviewer: Have you learned any new ways to think about writing or to talk about yourself in any of your courses or even as you've moved through a couple of courses?

Interviewee: I guess I've learned how to look at the topic I'm writing about a lot more in depth rather than just sort of summarizing things. I've learned when it's appropriate to summarize and when it's appropriate to really analyze. I think I've learned a lot how to put my own voice into writing without making it unacademic and unprofessional.

Interviewer: To what extent would you say that you've grown as a writer over the last couple years?

Interviewee: A lot. I'm not where I would like to be in terms of writing but then again whoever is? Like I said, I can write much longer papers than I could before I started college. I can write much better papers. I can challenge myself without getting in over my head. I feel like I've grown a lot.

Interviewer: Yeah. What would you attribute that growth to, specifically?

Interviewee: Taking English classes, I guess. I'm not an English major but I just take a lot of the classes just 'cuz I like them and just starting with [English course] and the GSI [Graduate Student Instructor] there really challenged me and taught me a lot of different ways of writing which were applicable to all my other classes. Just taking one English class per semester really developed it because I learned a new thing in each class and got better with every semester.

Interviewer: What made you decide to take one each term like that?

Interviewee: Well, like I said I'm not an English major; I'm a political science major but after taking [English course], which I know I'm the big dork who liked [English course]—no one else does—but I just really enjoyed the structure of the class. I enjoyed the whole read a book, talk about it, write about it, workshop your writing, write a final. I just thought that was extremely productive and I just wanted to take more after I took the first one and then I just kept taking them.

Interviewer: Cool. How would you describe your goals for yourself as a writer?

Interviewee: My goals are to become—although less formulaic—I guess one of the downsides to writing as much as I have in college is that it has become a little bit formulaic and I would like to break out of that and not be quite so boring. It might be the subject matter but I'd like to explore creative writing a little bit more.

I enjoy it but I don't think I'm very good at it [laughter]. I'd like to get better at it. Not 'cuz I want to get published or anything but just for my own personal writing enjoyment. I'd also like to develop persuasive writing for my professional goals and 'cuz I enjoy it.

Interviewer: Have your goals changed since you became a minor in writing?

Interviewee: Like for writing or like—?

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. [Cross talk 0:05:22].

Interviewee: Okay. Yeah, I think so. Taking the [Writing] class made me think a lot more critically about my writing, which I hadn't done in the past. The class was a lot of reflection which definitely contributed to that. It kind of made me realize how formulaic some of my Poly Sci [Political Science] essays have gotten and that made me sad. That contributed to that goal.

Interviewer: If you think across all the writing you've done at Michigan—all different kinds—what do you think it means to write well? To be a good writer?

Interviewee: I think it means—hmm. Just finding a really original, different idea and just going with it and looking at whatever you're writing about in a different way, I guess. Conveying your ideas as clearly as possible.

Interviewer: What do you think is most important when someone is learning to write?

Interviewee: Learning not to be afraid to take risks, I guess. Learning that there isn't a definite essay structure and it's kind of learning that clarity is better than using a lot of fancy words.

Interviewer: Tell me more about the taking risk thing.

Interviewee: Just not being afraid to explore where your ideas or going rather than trying to stick to your thesis. Letting your essay shape your thesis rather than the other way around. It's faster to do it thesis then write essay but a lot of the times in the end it turns out a lot better if you figure out what you're writing and then shape your thesis to it. Not being afraid to take an idea into a weird direction that you hadn't considered before and not being afraid to use personal experiences in your writing.

I remember I took [title of course] and we had to write a personal story and then fit an argument into it and I thought that was the weirdest thing because I'd always been taught that if you put the word "I" in your essay you are automatically failed and you can go home and that's just terrible. Just knowing when it's appropriate to take risks and do things that are kind of out of the box and not being afraid to do it.

Interviewer: That makes sense. Who told you that it was—"I" was death? Was it in high school?

Interviewee: [Laughter] high school English teacher in ninth grade.

Interviewer: Okay [laughter].

Interviewee: Yes [laughter].

Interviewer: Okay so what first-year writing requirement did you take? [English course]?

Interviewee: [English course].

Interviewer: Okay can you tell me more about that class?

Interviewee: I think it was the first college class I went to, maybe, and it was taught by a GSI named [instructor] 0:08:50. She was the most energetic person I've ever met. She's always jumping up and down and so excited about everything. It was a fiction of the city sort of thing; we read a lot of short stories about cities. We watched movies that prominently featured cities and then we read Paul Aster's City of Glass, which was an amazing book.

I'm glad I took that class just 'cuz I read that book. It was very workshop heavy; we would spend two weeks just workshopping papers. I think we wrote four papers and spent most of—'cuz we'd get four or five papers from the class and we'd have to

workshop them for the next class. That was also really helpful. I'd never done that before; the whole workshopping thing. That was really interesting.

Got a lot of good ideas and good feedback and it was really helpful to deconstruct other people's essays too, because it makes you think more critically about your own writing. I really enjoyed it. The class had a really good energy and all of the people all really got along and so it wasn't as scary to have your essay critiqued because we were all kind of friends and it wasn't such a big deal.

Interviewer: Did you do it as a big group?

Interviewee: Yeah.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. What do you think you learned in that class that you have continued to use in your writing?

Interviewee: I learned first of all how to break out of the five-paragraph structure. How to write an essay that's longer than three pages, which is important. I learned how to really, deeply explore material. I don't think I really learned how to dig into a text and find the specific meanings of specific words.

We actually had to write an essay about a graphic novel and that was a completely different experience. Understanding you can really delve into the pictures as well as the words, it taught me how to go deeper into the material.

Interviewer: Okay. What language did you develop in that course to talk about yourself as a writer or talk about learning to write?

Interviewee: Hmm, I guess...I'm sorry. The "What language" thing throws me off.

Interviewer: That just means if you used any specific words or—

Interviewee: Oh. Okay.

Interviewer: It sounds like you talked about argumentation—

Interviewee: Yeah.

Interviewer: - and evidence and supporting that. Was there any other terminology that you can think of that you learned?

Interviewee: Nothing specific.

Interviewer: Okay, that's fine. Did you take [Writing course] or [English course] was your first one?

Interviewee: [English course] was my first one.

Interviewer: Okay and then what's your major? Poly Sci?

Interviewee: Political Science, yeah.

Interviewer: Do you writing in political science?

Interviewee: Yep.

Interviewer: [Cross talk 0:12:14]

Interviewee: Probably like two papers per class on average, I would say.

Interviewer: What kinds of writing are those papers?

Interviewee: Argumentative. It's a lot of theory, I guess, and it's a lot of synthesizing the different theories and coming up with a conclusion based on those. Or are you rooting for a theory or against a theory?

Interviewer: What effect—if any—have those experiences had on you as a writer of writing in Poly Sci I guess?

Interviewee: It's really kind of taught me how to write about things I'm not necessarily super interested in. I like my major, don't get me wrong, but political theory is a very, very dry subject and it can be really hard to feel that whole "Yes, I'm reading about this awesome thing" when you're writing about Hana Arendt and Franz Fanon and stuff. It's taught me how to find something interesting in boring things to write about which is a good skill.

Interviewer: How confident do you feel about writing in Poly Sci?

Interviewee: Pretty confident. I do pretty well in almost all of my essays for my concentration and I feel like I know what people are looking for in a Poly Sci essay.

Interviewer: Where do you think that came from?

Interviewee: Practice, mostly. I've been taking one or two political science classes every semester since I started and like is said, one to two—I think the most papers I wrote for a Poly Sci class was five. It's just practice.

Interviewer: Do you see similarities or differences between the writing you do in the English classes versus the Poly Sci?

Interviewee: There's a lot of difference. I think English classes grade your writing harder; I think they look more closely at the grammar. I think they look more closely at how

deeply you're exploring the material, whereas Poly Sci just wants to know if you understood the material.

It's a little more like test-y than "I'm going to see how your writing has improved" I guess. They're similar in that they both kind of want you to analyze things and look at things critically but I think English classes take a much more comprehensive approach, I guess.

Interviewer: You mentioned the Writing [...] class; the gateway course in the minor. What impact has that course had overall on your writing, do you think?

Interviewee: It's made me a lot more reflective, which was kind of difficult at first because self-reflection as it's happening is not really my thing but yeah, I like to have a few months and then reflect. It was all like constant reflection; get in the moment. It was a little crazy sometimes but it's made me think a lot more critically about my writing and think a lot more about reflection and what am I learning from this as I'm learning it instead of like two months after the fact.

Interviewer: Has it had an impact on your sense of yourself as a writer?

Interviewee: Again, it was just very reflective and it made me think of myself of a writer a lot more intentionally, I guess. It's kind of solidified that identity, I guess and made me think about what that means.

Interviewer: What have your experiences in working with other writers in Writing [...] been?

Interviewee: Pretty good. Everyone in [Writing course], at least in my cohort, were really passionate about their writing and really passionate about getting better at writing. We all worked together a lot in the class because there weren't that many of us and again, we all got along.

I almost wish there had been more time for workshopping because I really valued all of their input and I liked reading their writing. The course blog was also really helpful with that 'cuz you got to know where everyone was coming from and what they liked to write about and how they viewed writing differently from you.

Interviewer: Did you do the same kind of workshopping as you did in your [English course] class in that class or no?

Interviewee: No. We did a little bit of workshopping in small groups but there wasn't always time. We had a lot of projects in [Writing course] so there wasn't always time to do really deep workshopping.

Interviewer: We've kind of talked about this but maybe you can think if you have anything else to say. The gateway course emphasized reflective writing—

Interviewee: Yes.

Interviewer: - as you've said in various forms. How would you describe your experience with all of that reflective writing in addition to what you've already said?

Interviewee: Like I said, it was very different. It was helpful. Sometimes it felt a little excessive but it was probably good for me. It was kind of hard at first and it was like I'm going to sit down and think about this for a while 'cuz I have no idea what to write about what I just wrote and then eventually it got easier.

Interviewer: What'd you do a reflective writing on? A piece of writing that you'd done every time?

Interviewee: Yeah, almost every time. Yep.

Interviewer: Are you still using reflection in your current writing?

Interviewee: No, not this semester. I've been really, really busy this semester so it would be—I wouldn't really be convenient to reflective write everything I write after I write it. 'Cuz I mean if it's not in an assignment I have 400 other things to do [laughter] so...

Interviewer: Do you ever find yourself doing similar reflective-type things anywhere?

Interviewee: While I'm writing I might think a lot more reflectively about it or go back and read it and think about it a little bit more reflectively.

Interviewer: Do you think that comes directly from—

Interviewee: Yeah.

Interviewer: - what you did in [Writing course]?

Interviewee: I think so. Like I said, I was not a very reflective person about writing before and now it's been a lot more reflection since [Writing course].

Interviewer: Okay. Do you think you use reflective writing in any other context besides for writing papers?

Interviewee: Well, yeah. I work at [center in Ann Arbor] and we have meetings and we talk about the week and there's a lot of reflection there, too. Which, again, I'm not that used to. I think the reflection I learned in [Writing course] helped a lot with the reflection that we're always constantly doing at [center in Ann Arbor].

Sometimes it's written, sometimes it's verbal. Sometimes they'd give us assignments to think about what we'd done that week or what we'd been doing all semester. I think the [Writing course] reflection practice really helped me be able to do that in my job.

Interviewer: How did it help? Was it just the practice of doing it so much?

Interviewee: Yeah.

Interviewer: Hmm, okay. How would you describe your experiences using new media writing? Which could be the blog or the remediation project in [Writing course]?

Interviewee: I liked the blog. It was nice. It was really cool to see what everyone else was going through with all the various projects. It turns out we all thought almost all the same things. It was nice to be able to put thoughts out there about writing and have people talk about them in the comments. I thought that was really productive and really interesting to create an online community talking about writing.

The remediation project—I struggled for a while to find a platform because I don't have a lot of experience with new media besides social media but I found a lot of different options for presenting ideas and I think that will be helpful someday just knowing that this stuff is out there. I use this website where you can upload a PowerPoint and then record your voice over it and make a presentation. That was just really cool and it was a lot easier than I thought it would be.

Interviewer: Do you think those kinds of writing in new spaces affected your writing in general?

Interviewee: Yes, I think. Writing in those spaces was a lot more informal than writing for academia. Blog writing is basically talking except with grammar and [laughter] I think it made me think of how I was presenting myself in academic papers and if it would be better to be more formal or when it's appropriate to be less formal. It makes you think about audience a lot more.

Interviewer: Yeah, say more about that.

Interviewee: Well, like with a blog your audience could be anybody. I suppose random Joe on the internet isn't particularly looking for, "Oh, I'm going to read University of Michigan minor writing blog. Yes!" No. Since there were people reading it and they were my classmates and I knew them all and [instructor] was reading all of 'em and sometimes she'd quote our blogs back to us in class.

It would be like, "Oh, there are people reading this." It was kind of a startling realization because you turn in a paper and it's just gone and you don't think about people writing it but with the blog it was very people are reading this because they are commenting on it or talking to me about it in real life. It just made me think a lot more intentionally about audience, I guess.



Interviewer: Did you have the same for the remediation project or was it different?

Interviewee: No, it was a little different 'cuz the only person who saw the finished project was [instructor] and again, that was kind of like I'm handing in a paper, it disappears and then it comes back.

Interviewer: Okay. The next couple of questions are about your gateway portfolio [...].

[...]

Interviewee: I made this on Google Sites. This was a premade template. I'm not as awesome as some people and they just HTML'd it up and I was like, "Nope. Just gonna use a template." I like the corkboard thing; I thought it was cute. This is the blog from the course. It's not updated because I couldn't figure out how to sync it but I just sort of copied and pasted all of my entries. That's the homepage; I have an About Me.

It's very short, pretty to the point. Contacts, I had a little bit. Photo gallery. I just wanted to have pictures 'cuz it's fun [laughter] and this is the remediating an argument, which I kind of walked through each step of creating it and wrote a little bit about each step. Then, I used some sources, proposal, outline and kind of describing how each step was in the process.

The one thing that I really, really like about this is that I link other papers and other pieces of writing that are related to each one so that if you particularly liked my proposal for new media you could to and look at another proposal. I don't know why. I just thought it was cool [laughter]. This did work out the way I wanted it to [laughter]. The voice thread didn't connect for some reason.

Interviewer: Was that the project you were talking about where you recorded over it?

Interviewee: Yeah.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Interviewee: Yeah, the voice thread never quite came up. Then, I have other writing samples like my blog and I talk a little bit about that. I put poetry that I've written—which is not wonderful but I like it better than most of my other writings—so I put that on there. Then, Poly Sci essays, just for a more accurate representation of what I write normally.

Then, the "Why I Write" piece for [Writing course], which I just put on here because it wasn't very long and I thought it made more sense because it was more of an About Me sort of thing than like a writing sample so I just copied and pasted it. Then, for the final essay we had to write on about new media. That's pretty much it. Kind of stuck to the basics and did a lot of reflective writing for each step of the way.

Interviewer: All right. If you can separate out making the portfolio from all the other new media writing you did in the course, how would you describe your experiences creating that in particular?

Interviewee: Creating the portfolio was, again, very different. It was a little bit frustrating sometimes because I don't have that much experience with website creation and some things didn't work out that well like the voice thread and the numbers—as soon as I got to ten it thought I meant one so it put it back up here so I made it nine and it was a little frustrating sometimes. At the end when I got it all together it was a sense of accomplishment 'cuz I made a website and that doesn't happen that often.

Interviewer: Would you just say a lot of your struggles with it were sort of the technical aspects?

Interviewee: Yeah. By that time I had reflected writing so much that it was pretty easy to reflect on all of this because all of these things had been my life for the last half of last semester so it was pretty easy to write all the little blurbs for each of them and to select writing it was just all the little technical things that were kind of maddening.

Interviewer: What were your aims for the portfolio or your goals for it?

Interviewee: Well, we talked about what the portfolios were supposed to be like in class a lot and [instructor] said they had to reflect how you saw yourself as a writer and just have a good sample of your writing, kind of what that looks like. I tried to do that, hence the corkboard and quirky pictures. 'Cuz I write so many random things, it might as well be a corkboard with a whole bunch of stuff up there and that's kind of what I tried to do. To have a really good, wide sample.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. Say more about the pictures. Did you put pictures in with the reflections or were they mostly on the pictures' page?

Interviewee: Just in the pictures page [laughter]. There was an option on the template for a photo gallery and I didn't want to just leave it open. In my blog and in some of the pieces I wrote about how I'm interested in political science and I think I wrote about my sister once or twice and I wrote about my mom and my friend [name of friend] and I have a picture of the writing minor people. Just to give a visual to some of the stuff I talk a lot in my blog.

Interviewer: Say more about that choice to use the template because it sounds like it let you do a lot of things—

Interviewee: Hm-mmm.

Interviewer: Then in some ways it sort of suggested certain things?

Interviewee: Yeah. Well, I used a template first of all because I can't HTML or do any of the internet-y awesome things that a lot of my fellow cohort members could do so I felt a little better using a template than trying to make something. I like this one because it was cute [laughter]. It was a little restrictive because I could not figure out for the life of me how to change these menu settings for the longest time and so that was really frustrating for a while.

I couldn't delete the contact or the photo gallery, which is why I just ended up using them. It was a little bit frustrating but once I just sort of sat down and wrestled with it for a while I figured out I could make my own titles and just kind of figure stuff out.

Interviewer: How come you did it on Google Sites? Was that recommended?

Interviewee: Yeah. We had a whole bunch of different websites. I almost did one on WordPress but that was really limited 'cuz it just looked like a blog and since it was supposed to be a website I didn't really want it to look like a blog. My roommate is in the minor writing too, and she did Google Sites and she said it was really user friendly and she really liked it so I just did it.

Interviewer: Okay. What impact would you say creating this portfolio has had on your writing?

Interviewee: Well, like I said it was a lot more practice reflecting. It was kind of weird putting all of my writing out on the internet. Again, with the thinking about audience thing and I know they showed them all to the new cohort and that was kind of funny.

Interviewer: Did you think about audience when you were putting it together?

Interviewee: Not as much mostly 'cuz I didn't think anybody except [instructor] was going to see it [laughter] but I guess it made me think about how many different types of writing I do and how weird it is when it's all together it's just kind of—I just do lots of random writing, I guess. Putting it all together makes it all look really incongruous but I guess that's college.

Interviewer: Yeah. Was the reflective writing in the portfolio? Did it have any affect that was different from the other reflective writing? Or like you said it kind of built on it?

Interviewee: It kind of built on it. I guess it had been a lot of reflective writing but kind of spread out and this was like an entire—I just sat down and did this whole entire night of reflective writing for each one of these things and most of these things. It was a lot of concentrated—I don't know, the crescendo of reflective writing for the year [laughter].

Interviewer: Right. Okay. In general, thinking about the gateway course [Writing course], do you think your writing process changed?

Interviewee: I think a little bit. I started thinking a lot more about different things I could do with the writing 'cuz [Writing course] was very, very focused on not being an academic writing course. I guess I had started to think about writing in different context and for different purposes, which I think was the point so that's good. Again, I thought a lot more about audience.

I don't know, though, 'cuz this semester I haven't had to do a lot of writing; I've had maybe three or four really big papers and a lot of those were really, really rushed so I don't think this semester is an accurate representation of anything I've really learned from [Writing course]. Sorry if that's unhelpful.

Interviewer: No, that's not unhelpful. That's interesting though, that the course made you sort of expand your thinking about writing but then you went back to a smaller—

Interviewee: Yeah.

Interviewer: What maybe someone could describe as a smaller version of writing or something.

Interviewee: Yeah.

Interviewer: Do you have thoughts on—could you have used more or was it because of the time crunch that you did it?

Interviewee: I had a lot of "I'm going to finish up all my requirements" sort of deals. I took logic and astronomy which were no writing at all. They were like—astronomy was my QR and logic my academic advisor's been telling me to take that forever and ever and ever so it was like, "Okay. I have extra space in my schedule."

Yeah, I would've rather written more than taken silly requirement classes 'cuz I'm not a huge fan of those. I missed writing a lot. Like I said, I think I had two papers for Poly Sci and two papers for my Women's Studies class and they were really kind of boring, formulaic. Write about theories and the effect of birth control on social identity. It wasn't a particularly stimulating semester for writing.

Interviewer: Okay. All right so let's talk about the future. What kinds of writing do you think will be most valuable for your career?

Interviewee: Well, I would like to become a lawyer, eventually, so persuasive writing, I guess. I wrote a legal brief for my remediating and argument which was really, really difficult [laughter]. I kind of enjoyed it and I liked learning what the whole process was like so I'm assuming I'm gonna have to do more of that soon.

Interviewer: Okay. If you could tell your teachers one thing about writing or how to teach it better what would you tell them?

Interviewee: Besides grammar rules don't give really rigid structures for anything 'cuz students can get really, really locked in that and it can be really, really hard to break out of those structures when they have to write something different.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. Yeah, that kind of goes into the goal you were talking about.

Interviewee: Yeah.

Interviewer: Just realizing how to writing something that's different. Okay. What suggestions do you have for the minor capstone course? They're developing it this summer—

Interviewee: Yeah.

Interviewer: - so in that course you'll do a final minor portfolio, too. Do you have any suggestions?

Interviewee: I'd say make it a little more focused than [Writing course] was. Like I said, we did a lot of projects and we were like a lot of the time I just felt like we were trying to do everything. I think if it has a little bit more focus and kind of pulls in a little bit and is a little bit more intentional about choosing the stuff we do in class it won't feel as expansive.

Interviewer: Yeah, meaning that you wrote a whole bunch of different kinds of things in [Writing course] or—?

Interviewee: We wrote a bunch of different kinds of things. We were trying to read articles and analyze them, do the blog, do the four main projects, do little other random projects. I don't know. It was just a lot of things I guess. If they kind of narrowed the focus I think it would've been (a) a little easier and (b) a little more productive. I liked the class; I really did. I just think for [Writing courses] in the future narrowing the scope of things we're focusing on might be a little bit more productive.

Interviewer: okay. That was the last question. Do you have any comments about anything?

Interviewee: Nope.

Interviewer: Okay, great.

Interviewee: all right, cool.

Interviewer: Thank you.

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