Transcript-

Hi, Julie.

Hi.

Thanks so much for your time in doing this interview.

Absolutely, my pleasure.

So I was hoping we could start by just having you tell the students a little bit about yourself and what your role is at GSEP.

Sure. So I'm Julie Stiegemeyer. I'm fairly new at Pepperdine and I work in the GSEP and writing support. And I am working with students in really any stage of their writing process. So if they are brainstorming or even outlining or whatever stage they're in, usually I get them when they turn in a paper that's drafted and then we work on it to polish it.

But I'd really like to encourage students to get ahold of me any time they are in the whole process of writing. Sometimes it's just really helpful to talk it out because people may not have their ideas formulated.

So I work with students-- they usually submit something, an idea, a paper and we can have a virtual appointment or if they have something already written, I can just review it, make comments, and then return it to them. So I've been teaching writing for quite a few years and so that's really something I enjoy.

Yeah, it's such a great resource for our students.

Yeah, definitely.

So we've talked a little bit about writing. And as you know, this course is focused on scientific writing and psychology. But I thought we could start maybe by talking about this idea that good writers are also good readers and you know how that might fit in with students' development as academic writers.

Yeah, I think that's a great connection to make. Anytime you want to improve your writing you begin with reading. My background or my early career is in children's writing and I've written quite a number of published children's books.

And I remember going to conferences when I was learning how to hone my craft and an editor once said that in order to really start writing in any genre of children's-- whether it's a picture book or young adult book or whatever, you should read at least 1,000 books in that genre--

Oh my goodness.

--in order to really master it and become an expert.

Wow.

And that's when you really understand the pacing and characterization and the plot line. And that really stuck with me because if you read 1,000 of whatever you're trying to do, with children's books it's a little quicker. But whatever you're trying to master, if you can read 1,000 of that whatever, you will then have just a really good instinct of what is working.

And so I really think reading and writing are just kind of the same-- one side of each coin and they work really nicely together. And I think that works with any field. So that was children's writing but in scientific writing you read in order to understand the research, what has already been said. And then you can add your contribution to it.

May I ask if you read all 1,000 children's books?

You know, I don't know if I ever actually counted. But I've read a lot of children's books that's for sure. And one other thing I did was actually wrote out the manuscript in manuscript form of a children's book so I can see what it looked like on a typewritten page. So it's pretty different.

Interesting.

Yeah, so it's such a process. Writing and creating anything artistic, you have to really devote yourself to a process and you can't think that it's just going to happen on your first draft. It just doesn't work that way.

Well, I'm really glad you mentioned that because one of the things that I think is maybe counterintuitive for students is how much practice it takes to really become a good writer. And that even once you are a "good" writer you can always be better.

Yeah, definitely. I mean, the books I've actually gotten published, the file of manuscripts is two inches thick of going through draft after draft and sharing it with numerous readers so that I could get their feedback. And then maybe it is just one little tweak that made the difference.

So it's really important to commit yourself to realizing it's practice and hearing how each draft can improve. And then you're encouraged by that because you realize even if you have a lousy first draft, it can come out to be publishable in the end.

Yeah, so one of the things I'd love to hear about from your perspective is for students who are relatively new to scientific writing or trying to strengthen their skills in that area. What are some of the main principles or skills that you think they should have on their radar as they're doing their own self-assessment?

Yeah, that's a really important thing to consider. I would say in any genre of writing but maybe in scientific writing even a little more is to look at clear content and logical organization. And then making sure the writing is very concise and not that you try to keep it within the sentences-- every one is necessary in that paragraph and you eliminate unnecessarily long words.

So I think clarity and conciseness are really important. And to get there you have to have a good central purpose. And that's the heart of any scientific endeavor, right, is having that central purpose and then outlining that and breaking it down in a lot of detail.

And so a lot of times scientists have great knowledge in their field but maybe their ideas are a little obscured by writing that's not as clear and straightforward as it could be. So I think focusing on that central purpose and then making sure that every sentence in a paragraph flows together nicely and then eliminating anything that's unnecessary or that might obscure or make the writing more difficult to follow.

There was one time a long time ago-- I always thought as a reader, I wasn't a great reader as a young child and I always thought it was me. And then I read somewhere that what's important is the writing needs to be clear. So maybe it wasn't I couldn't understand it but maybe the writing wasn't as clear as it could be. So I think that's important, especially a field like scientific writing.

You know, you and I have also had interesting conversations about sort of cultural aspects and values around writing. And even within the APA manual, they really emphasize things like active voice over passive voice and other stylistic topics.

And I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about that. I don't know if the "culture of writing" is the best way to frame that but just the idea that what we value in scholarly writing might be, to some degree, a cultural construct.

Yeah, I think that's definitely true. I've been really interested in this topic lately, especially, and have been looking into it more. So there was this book that came out in the 80s called The Alphabetic Effect and the proposal or the premise is that by learning to read an alphabet, Roman letters, that trains your brain to think in a certain way. And on the other side, learning a logo graphic or characters and reading from right to left as opposed to left to right that that trains your brain in a different way.

And so one thing I've been reading about is how the two most common languages in the world are English and Chinese and they come at language very differently because of the alphabet or the characters. But there are also some cultural constructs that make the thought process different.

So in the East, there's more of a sense of holistic sense and you take the little details and you end up with your point or your conclusion. Whereas in the West, you look at separate components and you tell your point right away and you drill that all through the whole paper. And so it's very obvious what the central purpose is.

And I was really confused about that because I read a lot of papers from students from China and their point-- I wouldn't be able to find their main thesis at the beginning of the paper. And after learning about that, I realized they were trying to build up to it.

I see.

And then in the conclusion really say, OK, well, this is what all this supports. And so I think that's a different approach.

The Western style essay or paper or scientific writing is very logical, analytical, very rational, linear. So you go at it with no surprises, get the conclusion, right? You tell what the point is and then you repeat that throughout. So it's been an interesting investigation I'd like to learn more about.

Mm-hmm. So for students who maybe struggle with some aspects of scientific writing, what are your recommendations for how they can assess their own areas of strength and weakness and then make use of the resources available?

Well, the first thing in writing support that we always recommend students do, and it seems kind of old school, is to actually print out a hard copy of whatever the writing is.

OK.

And the reason for that is it helps to give the student a little separation and a little distance from their writing. Because often, when you're working on a paper especially a long paper that's really involved and you have to spend a lot of time on, you get so into it you almost have it memorized. So you want to try to create as much distance as possible to be as objective as possible.

So if you print a copy, you sleep on it-- a couple nights is even better if you can, and then read it out loud and read it out loud with a tutor or with a friend or just by yourself. Then you can hear and catch yourself when there might be something that you would have just skimmed over if you had been reading it silently.

Right.

So that's one area where you can try to objectify a little bit, your work, and set it aside from your own process. And that's one way to begin. And then, as a writer, I really value having readers. The wonderful thing about writing is it's not done in a vacuum. We write for an audience. And so you can have an immediate audience to help you and support you by reaching out to writing support. And usually, we're not going to be correcting grammar or looking at those details so much.

We would hope that the students can begin to become their own best editors but we really try to look for content and making sure that the clarity of purpose, like we talked about earlier, is coming through really well and clearly. And maybe structure-- maybe a paragraph needs to be moved or things like that.

So we can look at it as a whole and then try to guide the writer to make their own evaluations and really grow in their own work. So we can if students go to the community web page for writing support at the GSEP, they can find all sorts of resources. Grammarly is free to Pepperdine students and there are a lot of tutorials and they can also then sign up for writing support through that portal.

Oh that's great. I'm glad you mentioned that because I was going to ask you, what are the local resources? So it sounds like the community site is where students should start.

Yeah, Grammarly is also a great resource. What it does is it helps students to be able to see if they've repeated a word too many times in a paragraph. And it'll help point out any punctuation or grammatical errors.

Oh OK.

So I find a lot of students you can just copy and paste your paper into the Grammarly site and then it'll give you feedback.

Oh wow.

And it will catch things like active versus passive voice and it'll look at your content to make sure it's not too similar to too many resources on websites.

Oh so it functions like Turnitin?

It can. There's a feature where you can click and it will check for plagiarism.

Oh interesting.

So it'll show you 8% similar to everything else it can check on the web. So yeah so it's a great little resource and I know Pepperdine has that available for free to their students.

Well, is there anything we haven't touched on yet that you think is really important for students to know heading into this course?

Well, I would say the best thing to do with writing is to plan, to try to break down your assignment into components. So if you have a big assignment due in six weeks, what could you do week one to prepare?

Do your research and write up notes and go through in each week, try to set some goals because when you're scrambling at the end and you're really struggling with getting everything finished, then it can be a challenge to write really well and clearly.

So I think planning is really important. And then reaching out for writing support, like I said, at any stage in the process can be really helpful.

OK. So one last question before we wrap up. I would love to hear, as a writer, what's your one or two top favorite things about writing? Why do you do it?

Well, I do it because I love the playfulness of language and I like being able to play with words and create metaphors. Lately, I've really been writing a lot of haiku and just that little breath of poetry is being able to watch the world and find a little observation that I can then turn into something that will remind me of that moment in time.

And then using language and playing with it and having fun, I like writing in rhyme as well. It's difficult but it's fun because English has such a broad vocabulary that you can really just kind of play around with it. So I love playing with language and in poetry in particular.

Sounds like the opposite side from scientific writing.

A little bit.

Which is always nice to be reminded exists. Well, thank you so much, Julie. Really appreciated your insight and your time.

My pleasure. Thank you for having me.