

Interviewer: Let's see here. Okay, so do you have any questions about the study or what we're gonna be talking about today?

Interviewee: It's just—from my understanding—about the—my development as an undergraduate writer, I guess.

Interviewer: Yup, and I'm not actually one of the researchers on the study. I'm just participating in doing the interviews, so [laughter]

Interviewee: Okay. That's fine.

Interviewer: Yeah, I'll be asking you questions. Okay, so let's go. How would you describe yourself as a writer when you began at Michigan?

Interviewee: Well, I think that I came in knowing a lot of more—I was better at grammar than content. A lot of my writing may have been grammatically correct, but I think I am quite wordy and came in beating around the bush, I guess, and not being very straightforward.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. Okay, so how would you describe yourself now?

Interviewee: Well, I think after I—I mean, I've taken—I took [English course], and I've taken a lot of humanities classes that require two or more papers for the term. I think the more you write and the more you get critiques, the less wordy you get. I think that I've learned to be a lot more concise in what I have to say, just because I've written a lot more papers than I had when I was a freshman.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. Have you developed any language to talk about yourself as a writer or to talk about how you learned to write since you've been at Michigan?

Interviewee: I mean, I guess I wouldn't really describe a voice that I have when I write. I think that for the most part, I write purely academic essays. I don't really do creative writing or stuff like that, so I guess I more focus on the facts and presenting them in a interesting way, hopefully.

Interviewer: Okay. To what extent do you think you would say you've grown as a writer over the time you've been in college?

Interviewee: I mean, I think I've grown a lot. Like I said, how the more you write, you have to get better, first of all. I think that being able to get feedback from my teachers, the professors who have been editing papers for far longer than I have, really helps me see what needs to be said and what things are unnecessary to be said in a way.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Interviewee: I think that was my problem before.

Interviewer: Okay. You talked about two things. One was writing a lot and the other you just said getting feedback from professors.

Interviewee: Mm-hmm.

Interviewer: Do you think those two things are the main things that you would attribute your growth as a writer to, or are there other things, too?

Interviewee: I mean, I think those are probably the major reasons just because that's—I mean, obviously, you learn in these humanities classes how to write, and so it doesn't have to be feedback. It can just be instruction with—before you write your essay. I think just getting older, I have a more extensive vocabulary I'd like to think [laughter] than I used to. I just think that I have a—I don't know—just the older you get the better you are at [inaudible 0:03:47] things, I guess. I'm not sure.

Interviewer: Okay. That makes sense. What are your goals for yourself as a writer?

Interviewee: I guess, primarily, one, that it's not boring—that when people read through my paper, they're not falling asleep—and that what I'm saying flows together logically. It's not just a bunch of random ideas. I think one of my biggest concerns is trying to sound smarter than you actually are. When you try and come off that way, you're just jumbling a bunch of words together that you don't mean. I guess, being able to say what I mean effectively without boring people, I guess.

Interviewer: Do you think those goals have changed over your time at Michigan, or have you always had those goals?

Interviewee: I mean, I think now that I've been here for a few years—in the beginning, I was just writing. My goal was to write towards what the teacher wanted to hear, but now I feel like I write because I actually believe in the things that I'm saying. I guess it has changed a little bit.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. What do you think that shift came from?

Interviewee: Probably just appreciating more the subjects that I'm taking, and when you have a vested interest in the classes that you're taking, you want to write for the sake of writing the paper, not for the sake of, “Oh, I wanna get an A.” I mean, obviously that's a nice byproduct, but you enjoy it probably more.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. Okay. That makes sense. If you can think across the writing experiences you've had in Michigan, what do you think it means to write well?

Interviewee: [Laughter] That's a tough question.

Interviewer: [Laughter]

Interviewee: I mean, I think to write well is to be able to say what you—get your point across in an original and effective way.

Interviewer: Uh huh.

Interviewee: Obviously, grammar's important, but I think that's a very fundamental thing that makes you a good writer. I think having good grammar isn't the only thing you need. I think you need to be able to convince your—whoever is reading your paper—that what you're saying is true.

Interviewer: Uh huh. Okay. What do you think is most important in learning to write?

Interviewee: Hm. Wow. I mean, yes, like I said, to a certain extent grammar, but I think that more is finding—I mean, I said earlier I don't have a voice—but finding your writing style and what the [inaudible 0:07:02] learning is learning how to use that writing style to your advantage so that what you're saying is well written, I guess. Does that make sense?

Interviewer: Yeah, that does. Do you think you have one style, like you said, that you can use in different types of writing in different types of contexts, or do you think it changes ever?

Interviewee: I mean, I think I use a pret—there's a pretty set format that I follow in general, just based on—in terms of introduction, that I have a pretty, I mean, my sense of structure is pretty, I guess, even across the board. Depending on the topic, obviously, you have to tailor your paper toward their needs. For example, with some papers, you have to write your personal opinion, use the "I" point of view, and in other papers, you have to remain more formal, but I think those are minor changes. Overall, the type of syntax and language that I use remain pretty even.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. Can you say more about the grammar, 'cuz you've mentioned it a couple of times? Was that something that was emphasized before you came to Michigan [University of Michigan] in—

Interviewee: Mm-hmm. I mean, I went to a elementary school—a private, Catholic elementary school—and they were into grammar a hundred percent. [Laughter]

Interviewer: Okay.

Interviewee: They didn't really teach writing back then, but they taught you how—when writing was incorrect, I guess.

Interviewer: Okay. All right. You mentioned [English course]. Was that the first-year writing requirement that you took?

Interviewee: Mm-hmm.

Interviewer: Okay. Can you tell me more about what you did in that class and what you learned?

Interviewee: Sure. Do you wanna know the assignments I had or—

Interviewer: Sure.

Interviewee: - the [cross talk 0:08:54] Okay.

Interviewer: Sure. Yeah. I mean, I guess thinking back on it, what would you say that you learned and how you learned it?

Interviewee: Well, I would say that was more—the class wasn't more focused on—it wasn't, I mean, it was academic writing, but it wasn't a research paper, or abstracts or something like that for science. It was just, I actually really enjoyed it, because it was just fun. I mean, you got to—we wrote—one of the assignments was to go to the Map Library at University of Michigan and pick out a map and analyze it. It taught you how to think and how to critically think about a wide variety of sources. I thought that was probably the most beneficial thing, because you can learn to analyze a text so many times, but to analyze a map, or to come up with your own sources and your own research, I think that stuff was really cool.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. What did you learn in the class that you continue to use?

Interviewee: I guess, I mean critical thinking skills in a way, or just learning how to analyze different types of documents. Because I'm a political science major, and so you read primary source documents, and then you read from the textbook, and then you can read a journal entry. I think since I was introduced to a lot of those sources in [English course], I was able to use that knowledge and carry that further, I guess.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. In the course, in [English course], did you use any—or did you develop any language to talk about yourself as a writer or how you learned to write?

Interviewee: I mean, the only thing I could think of is that at the end of your—our—semester, we compiled all of our papers together and made a portfolio. We had to analyze at the end what—where we thought improved, what we thought we needed to work on, and stuff like that. I mean, off the top of my head I can't really remember what I said back then, but I thought that was helpful.

Interviewer: Okay. Can you remember why you thought it was helpful, or what you were thinking about in general?

Interviewee: I just remember thinking—just because, I don't know, I guess, often times I don't really take the time to reflect after I've written a bunch of papers, “How has my language evolved?” Whereas this, you were really forced to analyze what's changed in

your writing and it—I think it helps you grow as a writer to look at what you did wrong or what you did well.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Interviewee: I should probably do it more. [Laughter]

Interviewer: [Laughter] Okay. Cool. Did you take [Writing course] before you took [English course]?

Interviewee: No.

Interviewer: Okay. All right, so what other experiences—and you can talk about ones we have talked about or other ones, too—that can be from the classroom or even outside the classroom—do you think have had an effect on your writing?

Interviewee: Hm. I mean, I took [higher level English course] [laughter], so that was a lot different than [English course], because it was more about forming arguments and making a persuasive argument. I thought that, those are just basic tools that can help you in any paper. You always have to have a good thesis, and I thought that was really helpful. Other things, I guess, would be, I think reading a lot also helps your writing. Because when you read other people's words, one, you do expand your vocabulary. Two, I think you see different types of writing styles and to you what works or what you would like to read or what you think is effective.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. Yeah, that's great. Can you say more about the [higher level English course] class? You said it was more argumentative. Did you not do argument papers in [English course], or how was it different?

Interviewee: I mean, we did, but this was just—we wrote in [English course] a persuasive essay. That was one of our major—that was our final paper, actually, but in [higher level English course] we wrote—it's again, outside of the box, not a typical research, five-paragraph essay type thing. One of them was we had to write an open letter to a cause that we believed in and say why we thought they were being honorable, thought they needed to improve. I'm tryin' to think what else we wrote. Basically, she just taught us how to make what we say mean something, I guess, which sounds silly, but I think it's kinda true. [Laughter]

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. Okay. Anything else that you would say has affected your writing?

Interviewee: I mean, I'm sure there are other things. I just can't think of anything right now.

Interviewer: Okay. That's fine. How has your writing process changed as a result of any of those experiences, do you think?

Interviewee: Well, I think that, as I said in the beginning, I've become a much more concise writer. I think I'm a rambler when I speak, so I have had to [laughter] change that with my writing style, because those don't go well together. I think that beforehand in my papers I would use a lot of the same words. I would say, "This should [inaudible 0:15:15]" or "This explains," or just stuff like that, where now I use words that are more active and more—getting to the reader more, I would hope.

Interviewer: Okay. All right, so if I use the term "reflective writing," what does that term mean to you?

Interviewee: Reflective writing?

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Interviewee: I guess, to me it would mean writing—well, if you're doin' reflective writing about your own writing, it would be, what I was saying earlier, re-reading past papers you've written and seeing where you went wrong, what went right, and how to fix it in the future.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. You talked about that one portfolio where you did reflective writing. Was that the only time where you did something like that, or have you ever done anything like that any other place?

Interviewee: I mean, not in my classes at Michigan. I mean, in a way reflect—I mean, you edit your rough drafts, but I don't think that's the same as reflective writing.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. Have you ever done reflection on your writing on your own?

Interviewee: Yeah, I mean, I like to go back a couple months after I've written something and read it. I mean, I just like to read it. I would—haven't—written anything on it, but it's interesting to see what you thought at the time was a really good paper, then to go back and read it and see if you still feel the same way, I guess.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. Yeah, okay. Cool. What have been your experiences working with other writers in your courses or maybe even outside of the courses, too?

Interviewee: I mean, for a lot of the humanities—well, for the English classes, there was a lot of peer review. They would give you your rough draft, and you would mark it up and whatnot. Then, a lot of times, I would take classes with my friends, and we'll exchange papers. I think that's really helpful because when you're with your friends, they're gonna be honest with you. I feel like when you're with somebody you don't know, you're not as willing to be critical. I think my experiences outside the classroom, having my friends critique my papers has been much more beneficial.

Interviewer: Hm. Could you maybe tell me about a time when you did that with a friend and what happened?

Interviewee: Sure. I mean, last semester I took a class on—what was it called—the Soviet Union and its successor states, and both of our exams were two essays—both for the midterm and for the final. My friend and I, we both wrote our papers, exchanged them. She is really good at cutting down language and not making things awkwardly worded, and I would more be, I guess, the content and, “This is a good idea, but you need to include this.” It was helpful to have someone who is better—has a strength in something that you have a weakness in and vice versa, because I think it made my essays better.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. Would you sit down and talk about it, or would you write on it, or how would you do it?

Interviewee: We would write on it and then we would meet up and be “Hey, I think you should do this, or you should do that.”

Interviewer: Okay. Have you ever done any group writing projects or projects where you had to work with other people to write something?

Interviewee: I mean, I have done presentations, but it’s not a—I’ve never done an essay that was written by multiple people, I guess.

Interviewer: Okay. If you were gonna give someone advice about their writing, what are some of the things you would say to them as they start writing a paper?

Interviewee: I would say, for me the most important thing is that I have an outline, because if I don’t, my paper will just go all over the place. I guess, try and say what you wanna say as clearly and with—as, I guess, as concisely as possible. Just because a sentence is long, doesn’t mean that it’s more appropriate or sounds better than a short, quick sentence that’s straight to the point. Yeah, I guess lastly, just make sure your ideas are there, like with the outline. Make sure your ideas show there before you start writing.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. Tell me more about that outline. When did you start doin’ that?

Interviewee: I probably, I think I started that sophomore year. I used to never outline my papers. I would just start writing, and that tended to be a problem for me. I was really reluctant to do it just because I was a little lazy, but [laughter] I realized that it actually really helped, because once you see everything mapped out, then you can just write, no problem, and you don’t really, it’ll [inaudible 0:20:50] against writer’s block and all that stuff. [Laughter]

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. Was that just an idea you had to start doing it randomly, or did you get it from somewhere?

Interviewee: I mean, since I've been writing papers, even in high school, it's not that it was told to you to make an outline. I just didn't want to do it. I was, "No, I'll be fine." I'm stubborn. [Laughter] Then I just started realizing that it was getting too hard, and when you have a ten-page paper, you can't just free write with no basis to look at. The longer the paper is, the more organized you have to be, or else your reader is gonna get lost.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. Okay. You said you major is poli-sci?

Interviewee: Mm-hmm.

Interviewer: Do you do writing in your major at all?

Interviewee: Mm-hmm. The class I was just speaking of—the Russia class—was a poli-sci [Political Science] class. I'm currently in a poli-sci class in [country], and we just wrote an eight-page paper. Most of the poli-sci classes I've taken require at least one essay in addition to exams and whatnot. Some require more; some re—actually, most have all required a paper.

Interviewer: Okay. Can you talk about some of those papers and what they're like?

Interviewee: Okay. I mean, I've taken most of the—well, I've taken a bunch of different types of poli-sci courses, but I think that some of my better papers have come from the ones the ones that are—the classes that are about different countries and comparative politics. Where I wrote a paper on the—I took a class on the evolution of China under communism, and we had to write a ten-page paper about the current problem in China and how this is an obstacle. I wrote a paper describing the problem between urban citizens and rural citizens. Economically, it's just poses problems from China to becoming a world power, and, I don't know. I thought I did a good job on that, so I was proud of that. [Laughter]

I'm trying to think—in my American politics classes, a lot of them are about—one I also really liked was we would read a lot of court decisions and/or legislation and then we'd have to—if the legislation passed and the preconditions necessary for that said legislation to get passed. I thought that was really interesting, 'cuz it took a different spin on laws getting passed. It made it way less worrying. It showed you how much effort really goes into making a law and stuff like that.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. Cool. What effect do you think writing those kinds of papers has had on you as writer writing in your major?

Interviewee: Well, first of all, writing those papers you have to do a lot of outside research, so it makes you knowledgeable on a lot more topics. I think that, obviously, it's helped my academic writing, because those are all either research based or based on mostly facts, and so I think it definitely helps with my—with that aspect of my academic writing. I think that since most of them were fairly long, at least eight pages—I mean,

some of them were six, so six to eight pages on average, I would say. You really do, like I was saying earlier, you really do have to stay focused. It really teaches you to stay on task, because, again, if you don't, it's just gonna turn into a mess. I think that's definitely helped develop me as a writer.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. How confident do you feel about writing in poli-sci?

Interviewee: I mean, I don't want to say really confident.

Interviewer: [Laughter]

Interviewee: I mean I've done well on the papers that I've written, I guess. I'm satisfied with the grades I've received. Since I like poli-sci—I think it's a great major—I actually enjoy writing papers on the subjects. Because I think you learn a lot more, I think, from writing, also. You wrote it, so you know what you're talking about.

Interviewer: Right. Okay. Can you give me a specific example—I mean you talked about that one essay that you were really proud of—do you think that was your best poli-sci paper?

Interviewee: I thought it was pretty good. I re-read it the other day, and I thought [laughter] it was good, but I think I've grown as a writer since then. It's been a year. I just wrote one now for my government class about Islam and the Middle East and the compatibility of democracy, and I also thought I did a nice job with that, another eight-page paper. It was just—what I liked about it is that our teacher didn't give us a set topic. He said we got to pick the topic and then—it's of our own initiative, so the success of your paper is not determined on the prompt, it's determined on how well you argue what you're trying to say. I thought that was cool, because it's up to you if you do well or not.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. Nice. Okay. Have you had any experiences with new media writing? That can be writing for a blog or website, or looking at using sound or video or even a PowerPoint.

Interviewee: I mean, I've done PowerPoint presentations, but other than that, I haven't really done media writing.

Interviewer: Okay. You've been uploading pieces of your writing to the archive on CTools [learning management system]?

Interviewee: Mm-hmm.

Interviewer: Can you talk about how that process has been going and what you've done?

Interviewee: Well, I mean, it wasn't that complicated, I guess. I just uploaded one of the essays I wrote last semester for a history class and then, I just uploaded the paper I was talking about earlier about Islam a couple days ago, or yesterday.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Interviewee: So, I don't know. I wish [laughter] I could know why they were—not know why, but know what they think—of it, I guess, but [cross talk 0:27:53]

Interviewer: Okay. Can you talk about why you chose to do those two pieces of writing to put in?

Interviewee: I just chose the—from last semester I thought that this history pa—I just chose my best, what I thought were my best pieces of work, I guess.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. Talk about the history paper. Why'd you pick that one, 'cuz it wasn't in your major?

Interviewee: Well, the reason I picked it is because I could've done the—one of the papers from my Russia classes—but they were more, they were five-page papers answering a topic. It was an essay, but it was also making sure you knew the information that they presented in class, so I chose my history one, because it was another research paper. Again, there wasn't really a right answer. You had to come up with your own conclusions, and I was happy with what I wrote, so I just submitted that one, and then, like I said, I really enjoyed writing this last paper, so that's why I chose that one.

Interviewer: Do you think those two papers show similarities in your writing abilities or differences?

Interviewee: I mean, in terms of the way I wrote them I'd say, I'm sure they're similar, because when I made up these, I was sayin' when I make up these, I basically get the outline for my paper, which is what you're supposed to do, obviously. [Laughter] The way that I go about doing that is usually pretty uniform, I guess. I mean, since they're also different, because the history—I mean they're different subjects, although they're comparable subjects—just the events we were talking about, or the topic of the paper, were different, I guess.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. Okay. Let's talk a little bit about the future. What do you think—what kind of writing do you think would be most important for your career?

Interviewee: Well, I'm applying to law school in the fall, and so I think that the writing that I do for political science, depending on what—I mean, it's not the same thing—but it's the usual progression to go from political science to law school. I think writing those type of papers will probably be most helpful, especially the ones that I've written. I mean, I said I've written a lot about comparative politics, as well as I've written on American government and stuff like that, are probably more relevant to a law career, I would say.

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

Interviewee: I guess, I don't know, I guess I would say what one of my teachers told me, because I thought that was effective. Make sure you have the content down pat. Once you have that, the writing comes much easier. Don't worry about the format of—I mean, don't worry about, I guess, making sure it's up to regulations and—not regulations—I'm not sure how to say those. Make sure you have your ideas down, and once you have that, it makes everything else much easier.

Interviewer: Okay. That makes sense. [Laughter]

Interviewee: Okay. That was hard.

Interviewer: [Laughter] Yeah, teaching writing is complicated.

Interviewee: I'm sure.

Interviewer: [Laughter]

Interviewee: Don't know if I could do it.

Interviewer: [Laughter] Do you have any other comments about anything? Your writing? The study?

Interviewee: No. I think I'm all set. Do you have any other questions?

Interviewer: Nope. That was my last question. I wanna ask you though, how is [country]? I love [country].

Interviewee: Oh, it's unbelievable. I'm actually leaving Saturday, so I'm a little upset about that, but it's been phenomenal.

Interviewer: What have you been studying over there?

Interviewee: I mean, I'm taking a poli-sci course, and then just a art history class, which has been nice, because we go to all the museums for free.

Interviewer: Oh, wow.

Interviewee: Yeah, so that's it. I go once a week to different museums. I like that a lot, and then a business law class and a Nazi Germany class. [Cross Talk 0:32:45]

Interviewer: Wow. Sounds really fun.

Interviewee: Mm-hmm. It's been great.

Interviewer: Yeah, I'm jealous. [Laughter]

Interviewee: [Laughter]

Interviewer: Okay. Well thank you for making time to talk to me and—

Interviewee: No problem.

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