

Interviewer: This is xxx interviewing xxx. This is her exit interview. The date is April 23, 2014. The first question is: How do you describe yourself as a writer?

Interviewee: I would definitely say I'm a competent writer. I don't have issues, really, writing things down, and I usually know what I want to say. There's not really much doubt as far as technicalities go. I don't know. It doesn't really scare me at all, either.

Interviewer: That's good. Could you describe how—how would you describe the role of writing in your life?

Interviewee: I think it's a huge—it has a huge importance in my life. I'm an English major, and math, as well. English—it's obvious you're always writing essays. You're always writing essays. You're always researching. You're always thinking about how you're interacting with the writers that you're reading about. Then, with math, as well, even though it's not as much prose writing. It also—you need to learn how to deduce your logic through it, and also how to explain what you are doing to an audience that isn't familiar with the concepts that you're discussing. In both aspects of my—the major aspects of especially academic life, it's a huge role. Because you don't really get anywhere without it.

Interviewer: That's great. How would you describe yourself as a writer when you began here at the U of M?

Interviewee: I would say I wasn't shy. I know some people come into English 125 or something, and they don't really know what an argumentative essay is, or they'd never written a personal narrative. Coming in, I came to Great Books. I was through the honors college. Skipped that whole English 124, 125 sequence, but had had really in-depth analysis of argumentative essays in high school, and those longer writings, as well, so the 15- or 20- page papers for term papers. That was normal for us.

I wasn't nearly as confident as I am, now. I think that having just the sheer amount of writing that we've been doing at the university has helped with that, but I wouldn't say that I was a newbie coming in, either.

Interviewer: I guess the next question is: To what extent would you say that you've grown and changed since then, since starting here? How have you changed as a writer?

Interviewee: I mean, I think, first, the major difference is that I tackled a senior thesis this year. The fact that I've completed a 57-page scholarly piece of writing and had people actually think that it's legit, and think that it's worth honors, is a huge, huge growth. Coming in freshman year, I don't think that I ever would have thought that I would have been able to do anything like that. Just to be looked at as a scholar and as an expert in a field definitely is a change from sitting in Great Books saying, "How am I supposed to write about Aristotle when I'm just a lowly freshman at U of M who's read, to be honest, 30 out of the 100 pages that had been assigned?"

Interviewer: That's about right.

Interviewee: Exactly. To grow from that to being able to recite lines of Spenser, “The Faerie Queene”, and write such an in-depth analysis of it.

Interviewer: Yeah, that’s great. I guess what would you attribute to this growth?

Interviewee: I think just time and patience, especially in regards to instructors. They’ve been, especially the English Department, has been so helpful. You always are able to go and just—not even send drafts, but just go and talk with professors. I found that really helpful. If I ever had an essay that I wasn’t 100 percent sure of the thesis, or just wanting to talk through some of the problems that I’ve been having running through my brain, the professors are always willing to meet with you, and to discuss it and bring other viewpoints in.

I think just that whole practice makes perfect, as well. Being forced to write. Hey, you have a 25-page term paper due in three months. Yeah, you’re gonna write that, and that’s gonna give you practice, no matter how you look at it, by just researching and developing ideas, and then the physical writing of it, as well.

Interviewer: I just want to make sure I don’t miss anything.

Interviewee: That’s fine.

Interviewer: As you graduate, what are your goals, first off, as a writer?

Interviewee: I definitely want to keep writing. Going into the insurance field, I'm definitely nervous that I'm gonna to be losing fact. There won't be the classes saying, "Hey, you need to read this work and write a paper on it." I really do just want to continue. It's not something that I ever really looked at as a chore. I know that there will be writing with job, with underwriting. "Writing" is in its name. I also just don't want to lose that, that analytical part of my writing, either.

Interviewer: Could you talk a little bit about what kinds of writing you expect you'll be able to do at the job, or what they'll demand?

Interviewee: I'm not 100 percent sure. I think explanations as far as where price—so, underwriting is pricing insurance—kind of nitty-gritty. I'm doing international trade credit underwriting, so I need to justify where we're getting the prices when we're analyzing the monetary risk involved, as well. I mean, if you're insuring somewhere that's in upheaval, you're gonna charge more for insurance, than if you're insuring somewhere in Canada that's stable.

I think definitely writing and explaining where we're getting these numbers from. I think to a certain extent also analyzing the news that comes in. Maybe not in a physical writing, but analyzing that news as far as, "Oh, hey, there's this political upheaval, but we're not gonna change prices because of this." Having that analysis involved, as well.

Interviewer: Thanks for explaining that because I had no clue.

Interviewee: Not a lot of people know what underwriting is, yeah, even my parents don't, so it's great.

Interviewer: It's like what's being an English major, anyway? They're not sure. They can tell you. Thinking about your writing experiences that you have, what do you think it means to write well?

Interviewee: I think writing clearly is a major part of that. Being able to attend your writing to another person and have them read and understand it. Because, ultimately, if you can't write clearly and you can't express your ideas, not even eloquently, but just logically, to a certain extent, what's the point of writing? I mean, certainly there's a personal gain. There's the journaling aspect that can take context out. I think writing well means that you can share it with other people and have them understand it. Writing is kind of shared ideas, so if you can't write well enough to share those ideas, yeah.

Interviewer: Clarity. Is there anything else that you would include under that?

Interviewee: I think, to a certain extent, I'd say writing well would also hide any hatred that you have for the subject, as far as, did I love all of the essays that I wrote? Absolutely not. There were those times it was midnight the night before,

I'm saying, "Why do I need to write this essay? This is so stupid." You can't let that show. Maybe in personal narratives you can let some of that show. I feel like in especially scholarly argumentative essays being able to be impartial, to do that research and to form an opinion, but then at the end of the day hide any ill will towards anything, that that is also writing well. Being able to insert yourself when necessary, but also take yourself out when it's not gonna add anything to your writing.

Interviewer: Sounds like you've really went through the ranks, here, to come to that. The next question is: Which upper-level writing courses have you taken? We'll just start there.

Interviewee: Let's see. I think I've taken three or four. Because I took English 495 and 496, which is the two-semester thesis writing for the honors program. There's also Math 422, I believe, which was Introduction to Life Insurance and Risk Management. That was an upper-level writing. I don't really quite know how, but it was. Then, there was also a English 450 class, I believe, last semester that I took as an independent study. That was an upper-level writing course on medieval and early modern literature.

Interviewer: Maybe we'll just step through each of these. You could talk about your experiences with each of them in terms of what sticks out. Maybe we'll start with the honors program one.

Interviewee: That put me through the ringer. That was most easily the hardest sequence that I've ever taken at the university. It's really did challenge me, even after taking the other upper-level writing courses. The fact that, as I mentioned before, you come out with a 57-page document that you wrote. It's a multilevel argument. You really do need to—you need to find that passion that you're—

hidden inside you somewhere on some topic. That was easily the hardest, but then also I think definitely the most rewarding.

Standing in the Kinko's and they hand you the thesis, and it's like, "This is my child." Actually, his name is Howard. Doing that, it's the most rewarding and also you have the best support system. I think that that's really when I felt the most in the English community. The fact that professors would pull me aside and give me a list of books to read because they knew what I was writing on—ideas had circulated. That was really great to be part of that community and having the cohort bond through this experience.

Interviewer: The question for this is: What effect did those experiences have on you as a writer, do you think, of that course, in particular?

Interviewee: It's I think changed—I was a competent writer going in. I feel like that course, especially, really told me that I was a scholar, and that I should have a backbone and be able to defend my work. I know that I write well, and I do know that I write well, but that you can defend it. That ultimately, yes, I'm an undergrad at U of M, but in the long run I probably have written more on Edmund Spenser than lots of people have, even as graduate students.

Interviewer: For that course, again, do you still think, I guess—the question is: Do you still make use of what you have learned in that course in your writing?

Interviewee: That was the last thing that I wrote, obviously. Sure, I don't think that I could ever go back to how I was before that course. I would say, looking

forward, definitely I'll still be using those tricks. Yeah, ultimately, that thesis was the swan song of my undergraduate experience.

Interviewer: It's nice, right, to have that capstone at the end?

Interviewee: Yeah, exactly.

Interviewer: That last hurdle, right? Now, let's talk about that Intro to Life Insurance and Risk Management.

Interviewee: That was an interesting class. I think that the class really—it taught me that there is more to math than just math. That really is where it bridged my math and my English majors. Up until then I would get the weird looks from people in East Hall. “Oh, yeah, I'm an English major, too. I have to write a ten-page paper tonight.” They'd be like, “You have to what, voluntarily write? You voluntarily took an English class?” For that it really did bridge that. Saying that the skills that I was learning in the English classes weren't going to be tossed on the wayside in the math world. That knowing how to analyze and explain situations through writing is definitely necessary, especially in the insurance business.

Interviewer: Let's just move on to the last one, which was the English 450, is it?

Interviewee: Yeah, it was on the early modern—or medieval and early modern literature. I think that was a precursor to the thesis writing. I took it as an independent study course, so even though I was attending lectures and reading some of the same things that the other students were reading, I was also going off on my own and reading what was interesting to me and doing different assignments. That was really nice. I was meeting with the professor more often, especially about writing and my writing. That really helped ease any worries about going to professors and saying, “I don't know what I'm talking about. Can you help?” Or like, “Hey, I have these 12,000 ideas floating around in my head. How can we organize these into a coherent essay?” That really helped, especially going into the thesis, where I would go in to my advisor and say like, “I want to talk about this scene, and how?”

Interviewer: Yeah, those conversations are so helpful. Thanks for that. What other writing courses have you taken besides these ones we've just mentioned?

Interviewee: I mean, I've generally taken just lots of English courses. I mean, probably two a semester since first semester of freshman year. Lots and lots of writing. I think just most of those they've affected me in so far as they've given me practice. A lot of them are just the argumentation, the analysis papers. Pick a scene in the Shakespeare play and write about its significance and stuff, which isn't bad. I mean, do I wish that there were other things involved? Yeah, maybe. I think that those really gave me a way to just practice the skill set that's always gonna be used. Just the analytical, the logic, the organization skills, especially in writing, that you're gonna need for life skills in general.

Interviewer: I guess you touched on this a little bit. I'll just ask you to be a little more clear. How have these courses do you think affected your writing?

Interviewee: I mean, I think they've, yeah, practice makes perfect. I think that through that practice I've become more confident in myself as a writer. I was confident going in. I knew that I wasn't awful. My teachers wouldn't cry when they would read my essays. I think just, yeah, being able to shape my ideas independently that that's really how they affected me. As far as, as I practiced and as I became more confident as a writer, I was also becoming more independent, especially in the ideas, where I'm not afraid to take a different stance than a professor, and say, "Hey, maybe you are wrong in this." I'm not gonna change your opinion, but, hey, let's pretend that you would for a second. That independence has really helped, as well then.

Interviewer: [Laughter] Great. I feel like I'm a therapist.

Interviewee: [Laughter] We should get a couch or something. I could start laying back.

Interviewer: The next question is: Did you take these writing courses in your concentration, by which I mean your major?

Interviewee: Yes.

Interviewer: We've already talked about—okay, I guess the question is: How have these writing courses affected your writing in the major or in the discipline? In terms of you talk about maybe thinking like a scholar, that might be one way to think about it.

Interviewee: I mean, definitely they've always been in English. I think, too, even looking outside of English in the other concentration, as far as math, the English, the way that I've thought and the way that I've gone through the research, and the developing ideas and making sure that they make sense, really does help with math, as well. If we're writing proofs or explaining stories of insurance, having that background in order—being able to interpret information and then explain it, that's really helped, yeah, in the other concentration of math.

Interviewer: That's really interesting. The next question is: How often have you used skills or strategies learned in these writing classes and other courses?

Interviewee: All the time. I don't think that I could ever really get away from that is all. I mean, just I've really only taken English and math classes, especially these past couple of years. I'm taking a history class this semester and the English—the writing skills, and the logic skills, especially the deductions as far as reading primary sources, that that's really, really just invaluable.

Interviewer: Yeah, I find that, too. Can you think of any specific examples where this has happened?

Interviewee: [Inaudible 20:09]Yeah. We were actually reading—oh, my goodness. I'm studying for this exam and I cannot remember the guy's name. It's like a guy's journal on his business explorations in Venice, I want to say. He's writing about, "Oh, hey, so I have \$1,000 and then I spent \$700, and then the boat was stolen, so I lost \$700. All this while I have 12 children, and, oh, my

wife died.” This whole life story of the guy. We were asked what makes a merchant? What makes an urban merchant? I think being able to read between the lines. We just had bare bones, as far as, oh, hey, his ship was stolen and he lost \$700. What does that mean? Well, he needs to have some veritable cash flow, and needs—he has the riskiness involved. By the way, he still has a family.

At that time, wives were looked at as a financial agreement, as far as you get the dowry, and you get paid for taking the wife and everything like that. I think definitely the research and the analysis involved, especially looking at those primary texts, through history, the English has definitely helped. Just being able to read between the lines and analyze, and interpret them in a different way.

Interviewer: Thinking back over the last two years, what experiences in and outside of the classroom have had an effect on your writing? The key in this question is “in and out” of the classroom.

Interviewee: . In the classroom, definitely, just English classes getting the ideas flowing, that that’s really affected it. I think, also, just writing outside of the classroom has really helped. If things are getting really overwhelmed, a lot of times I just make lists, or I just journal just to get all of these ideas that are floating around in my mind just on paper. That that’s a way to get everything down and organized. I would say that has helped, as well. Just the fact that I turn to writing as a way to organize my thoughts.

So many things are happening and, oh, yeah, it’s senior year, and I have finals, and lots of things are buzzing around my brain. I just turn and I just write. It’s like, “Okay, this is how we can organize—organize life.” Then it’s all out of my mind and on the paper, and I can read through and it’ll go into its little files in my

brain. I think that that's really helped. Just being able to take a mass of information and organize it in a way that then it's able to be all nice and tidy.

Interviewer: Do you think your writing has changed as a result of these processes?

Interviewee: Yeah, I think so. Freshman year I think I would have all these ideas, and I would undervalue the importance of an outline. I'd be like, "We don't need to outline. It's okay. We'll just go right into a draft." I think now I don't—even within a thesis, which is such a broad thing, I think I ended up with a ten-page outline for it. Because that's just how I can figure stuff out—and doing stuff like that. I think that writing outside the classroom, when things are overwhelming, and getting those ideas onto paper, that that really does help. You outline your thoughts and everything like that. Now, I can't remember the last time that I didn't outline a paper before I wrote it, and even after I wrote it, too. The fact that you read through it and then you do the reverse outline, that helps.

Interviewer: We're gonna shift gears a little bit, here. If I use the term "reflective writing," what does that mean to you?

Interviewee: I think looking inside of yourself is definitely—not being afraid to use the word "I" in a paper. I know that especially in high school that was drilled into me. That you never use personal in your essay. I think that reflective writing encourages that. I think that it also encourages introspection and reevaluation. That maybe it is just personal, but then it could also be of a text, and reflecting upon the text and what you thought about it, and how your ideas have changed. That that's I think the main part of it.

Interviewer: Can you think of examples of—or, have you used reflective writing in your own writing processes, whether in courses or just voluntarily?

Interviewee: I mean, not often. I mean, when I try and get my ideas onto paper, in getting overwhelmed and stuff, then I guess that can be some form of reflective writing. I also don't think that it's necessarily—I'm not reevaluating situations. It's more just an organizational tool. I would say, definitely, never or very rarely in an academic setting. I mean, I used the word "I" three times in a thesis, and that was very much not of my own free will. I think I've primarily just done the argumentative, the distance.

Interviewer: How about in courses? Have professors asked you to use reflective writing at all?

Interviewee: No. Well, wait, that may be a lie. In the second half of the thesis course, so English 496 this past semester, we did have to do evaluations every other week of ourselves, as far as we made our own timelines, saying this is what we're supposed to be doing on our thesis in order to get it done by the deadline. Every two weeks we had to look back and write. Say where are you on your schedule? Are you on schedule? What do you need to do? How has it changed? I guess that that's a form. I just have blocked those out of my mind. You just lie in them and it's great. I think that that's really the only type of reflective writing that I've done in a course, ever.

Interviewer: I'm gonna push out something you said. You said you just lie in them and then move on. Can you say something more about that?

Interviewee: Well, I mean, as far as there were some times that, realistically, maybe two pages got written of the thesis, and in the schedule you were saying that you were supposed to write an entire chapter. It's like, "Oh, yeah, things are going really—" mostly, the lie came with, "Things are going really well. I've been really productive these past two weeks." It's like no, no, things aren't going well. Realistically, I fell asleep three days crying myself to sleep. Don't worry. Everything's fine, don't worry.

Interviewer: I feel like I've gotten that from students. Switching gears, again, what have your recent experiences been of working with other writers in your courses, or in other context outside of course work.

Interviewee: Definitely, all positive, recently. We have this English cohort, so it's now a group of 17 kids who wrote an honors English thesis. I mean, I don't know what I—I know for certain I would not have finished the thesis without them. It was very much a support system. Everything from, "Hey, I wrote a really crappy five-page draft. Can you read it and tell me why it's crappy?" To, more recently, after every single class we would go out to Ashley's and just have a beer, before we went back to the library to write. It definitely—they've influenced my writing, as far as it's not all my writing in so far as they've shaped certain aspects of a thesis.

In my introduction, I'm like, "I never would have written it like this, but I like it because [my classmate] told me to maybe—she suggested to add this little part into it, and highlight that." It's better writing because of it.

Interviewer: That's great to hear. Have you ever done workshopping or peer review?

Interviewee: We did it in the honors seminars, so the 495. We would just have groups of three or four. A couple of times it would be the entire class, and we would just workshop five pages of two peoples' drafts, and just go through a couple of weeks like that.

Interviewer: That was, obviously, it sounds like it was productive.

Interviewee: Yeah.

Interviewer: All right, so, we're nearing the end here. Now that you are about to graduate, what advice would you give to college students about writing?

Interviewee: Oh, gosh. Do it. I mean, as simple as just—what is it, the Nike slogan? “Just do it.” I would say don't be scared of it. That reading other people's work—I usually will peer edit coworkers' and friends' papers, and I can always tell when they're scared of their writing. If you be confident about it, that confidence, even if you're faking it, it's gonna show through. I think our motto of the thesis was, “Just fake it, till you make it, and eventually you will.”

Interviewer: That's right. Then this is little bit more specific. What are some of the things they should think about as they begin writing a paper? I guess you already went over that a little. Anything else you can think of?

Interviewee: I mean, I think figuring out exactly what you're saying that that's important. You can definitely tell when a paper is just wandering and looking for an argument. I would say to never start with a blank page, be it just rambling at the beginning. I know some people do that. I usually start my papers like a letter. I always address them to my grandmother. I say, "Dear Gram," and it's just something is on the page. That you're not just staring at this blank page. I almost turned my thesis in with Chapter 3 starting, "Dear Gram," I was like, "Gotta catch that." Yeah, knowing what you're arguing and not being afraid to start that first page is definitely helpful.

Interviewer: That's really great advice. It's like write a story is what you're saying?

Interviewee: Yeah, exactly.

Interviewer: Have you had any experience with new media writing, such as writing for blogs or websites, or making an electronic portfolio, or digital portfolio.

Interviewee: I mean, I guess so. One of my English—I want to say it was the 450, as well. I've taken so many English 450 classes. It was the History of the Book, and we actually—our final project was to make a page of a Google site on

a topic that we chose. I wrote pages on the history of typewriters and did that. It was more of like an interactive just putting everything on a website. Other than that, I haven't really had that much experience of it. I surf Tumblr, is that that kind of writing? I don't write for it, or write on it.

Interviewer: I guess you have that one experience. What has that experience of writing that Google site, for example, had on you as a writer?

Interviewee: I mean, probably not all that much. Really what she was asking us to do was write like a ten-page paper and then just drop it onto a Google site. I organized Google a little bit differently, as far as it wasn't all just ten pages of transition from paragraph to paragraph. It was okay to have sections, which I guess also helped in the thesis, as far as not being afraid to change topics in chapters, changing from Chapter 1 to Chapter 2. That there is very distinct section break. That that helped as far as I didn't feel like I had to write a 60-page continuous paper. She really was just asking us to write an informative paper and toss it on a Google site.

Interviewer: Transfer it.

Interviewee: Yeah.

Interviewer: Good. I think you've been doing some uploading of stuff to Ctools. Do you want to pull that up so you can look at it?

Interviewee: [Background noise 34:34]Yeah. I'm a PC person, so this is scary.
. To [inaudible 34:35], or Drop Box? I don't know which—where you want it to go.

Interviewer: Is there a way you can look at everything you've uploaded?

Interviewee: Yeah, sure.

Interviewer: Good. Do you remember what each of these are?

Interviewee: The two things that are—yeah, I believe so.

Interviewer: You can just open them just really quick so you just have an idea. When I ask you, you don't have to speculate so much.

Interviewee: [Laughter]That was freshman year. That was a solid, solid paper. I didn't even realize that I still had that on my paper—on my computer. Oh, okay, yes, got it.

Interviewer: You have an idea. How was the process of—how has that process been of uploading the stuff?

Interviewee: Super simple. Yeah, I mean, it helps that they include the instructions on how to do everything in each email, but, yeah, I haven't had any issues with it at all.

Interviewer: Could you reflect on why you chose the pieces you chose for upload to the archive.

Interviewee: [background noise 36:15] Yeah. The first one I did was they were asking for something from freshman year. That was actually the only paper that I had from freshman year on my computer, so that was a real simple decision. I think everything else was just final papers for topics. The one from the Fall of 2013 was actually a final paper that led me to my thesis topic. It really holds a little place in my heart.

Then the one from—I'm trying to figure out the ends of dates, here. Yeah, and then there's one from the last fall, which was the final paper for an independent study course that I was doing. I thought that it was interesting to look at how I had interpreted the course, as a whole, and changed my viewpoint based on that. I had a lot, I think, more freedom in choosing that paper, and liked that I really did write something that I cared about, as far as, there were certainly required readings that I was limited to, but I could pick any topic from there. Then the one from this past semester was actually my thesis.

Interviewer: That's great.

Interviewee: My child. Somebody gets the privilege of reading that giant 74-page document, so, that's great.

Interviewer: [Laughter] It's always a birthing metaphor.

Interviewee: It really is, though. I already told [Name]. [Name] was saying that a thesis is like the best form of birth control. You don't want a child after you write the thesis.

Interviewer: Could you talk about what was it like looking back over your old writing and uploading some for the study? Did that process make you think differently about your writing at all?

Interviewee: I think, honestly, it helped me gain some of the confidence. When I read a paper that I wrote in freshman year, I was like, "Wow, this is actually good, isn't it?" I write the papers, and it's not a lack of confidence when I'm writing, but I just don't see how good of a writer I am when I'm writing because for me it's just normal. It's like, "Oh, yeah, I'm gonna throw in words like pulchritudinous, whatever." Just drop that right in there. For me, that's normal. This is the way that I write. I can't imagine writing any other way. Then I think,

looking back, having some time to separate myself from the writing, that that really helps. Because I look at it and I'm like, "Wow, so this is what people read. Wow, okay." Just being able to look at it from an outsider's perspective, especially that freshman year paper. I was like, "Oh, wow, I was actually semi-decent, there." Whenever you're writing papers, I'm just like, "Oh, yeah, this is okay." Yeah, just being able to see myself from other people's view, that that helped.

Interviewer: That's really helpful. The final question is: What do you think instructors should know about teaching writing at the undergraduate level?

Interviewee: I think that just realizing that for a lot of people it's scary. College writing is different. I was lucky enough to have teachers in high school who had taught college courses before, so they molded us to write at a college level. I know that a lot of it is new, especially for freshman. They're seeing things and having resources thrown at them that they've probably never seen before. That being patient, while still holding the student responsible. I think finding that balance would be super helpful. It's a hard balance to find.

You don't want to baby freshman. Because, ultimately, they're 18 or 19 years old, but at the end of the day it is new. I think being able to look back and remember what it was like to not know how to research a ten-page paper. Realizing that when you do a 15-page term paper that that could be the longest paper that anybody has ever written. I think just, yeah, having that. Knowing that a lot of this is new would be helpful.

Interviewer: Do you have any other comments—things you want to say to us?

Interviewee: No. It's been fun, I guess.

Interviewer: Okay, great. That's a nice way to end summer term, I feel like, or it would be.

Interviewee: Exactly.

Interviewer: I'll just shut this off.

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