



# Department of Writing and Rhetoric

UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL FLORIDA

## *Writers Speak: On Writing, Across and Within Disciplines*

Laurie A. Pinkert: Hello, everyone. My name is Laurie Pinkert. Thank you for listening in to “On Writing.” Here, we don’t just think about writing as a noun that can be described as good or bad but instead as a verb that often transforms our way of thinking, knowing, and being in the world.

Today’s “Writers Speak” edition of “On Writing” is brought to you as part of annual event that showcases the culture of writing that is supported by the Department of Writing and Rhetoric’s First Year Composition program, the department’s B.A. and M.A. programs, the University Writing Center, and the Center for Writing Excellence’s programs that support writing within and across disciplines.

Today, you’ll hear from two seniors—one in Computer Science and one in Biotechnology—as they talk about their writing experiences in their disciplines and their everyday lives. The field of writing, rhetoric, and composition has maintained a longstanding commitment to valuing the work of writers across ages, domains, and levels of expertise. So, today, we hear from these writers who are admittedly still learning some conventions of writing in their respective field, but are also for more expert than I in writing across many other domains. Let’s listen to their thoughts on writing.

Ashley Hart: My name is Ashley Hart. I am a senior in Computer Science. I’m actually slated to graduate this semester.

Jean J. Jerome: My name is Jean J. Jerome, pronouns he/him/his. I’m a fifth year undergraduate student at the University of Central Florida majoring in Biotechnology.

Laurie A. Pinkert: Ashley and Jean are in fields where students may not always imagine themselves to be writers, so I asked them each to describe the kinds of writing they find themselves doing within their majors.

Jean J. Jerome: So, it’s a lot of like fine detail, very specific measurements, and being able to briefly, but in a very explanatory way, explain what your findings were, then communicate that to an audience. So I more or less find myself, especially in that Biotech career path I’m on, doing a lot of like lab report type work and reporting data and findings. And then also with the research that I do that’s associated with that, it’s just kind of taking all the information that I received and figuring out some way to communicate that to an unknowledgeable or knowledgeable audience in an effective way.

Ashley Hart: Computer scientists, we don’t really write until we get to our junior year and they start having us write these technical documents. And I have yet to meet a computer science person that really likes writing those documents ‘cause they’re so long and you have to make diagrams. They’re important because we definitely need to outline what the software is supposed to do, what the software should not be able to do. You need to an outline use cases—why are we making the software

—deployment strategies—how we're going to host a software—everything about the software needs to be written down somewhere. It's very important because if something goes down, you need a blueprint to build back up from.

Laurie A. Pinkert: Like most writers who are encountering new situations, new expectations, and new areas of knowledge, Ashley and Jean noted the complexity learning to write within the disciplinary conventions of their respective fields and the difficulty of writing to faculty who are far more expert than they are, so I asked them what strategies they've used to try to meet the writing expectations of their majors.

Ashley Hart: So you go to Google. You watch videos. You learn how to make diagrams. You find pre-existing documents and try to read and emulate those—which is how I also learned how to get better at academic writing. When I did my research internships, I would read papers and try to emulate the style of those papers. Computer Science is a collaborative field. It feels very isolated, 'cause it's just you and your box of magic, but you gain so much more by interacting with people. Sitting down and watching tutorials is not going to get you there. You need collaboration. Some things you have to learn by doing and by building things. You have to just kind of put yourself in the position of, if I was not on this software development team and I was tasked to build somebody else's app, what would I need to know about it?

Jean J. Jerome: Sometimes it's something as simple as like defining a couple acronyms. Then it could be a bit more intricate, like taking a specific process and walking them through the step-by-step of why it does this the way it does, why it's important.

Ashley Hart: I talk to my mom a lot. So my mom—she it is currently working on her own graduate education, but she's not at all a tech person. She is in education, and, you know, tech is not really her forte. Plus the generational gap between us makes tech a little bit harder. But she is tech savvy enough for her job, but not at the same level that I am, where I'm building software and things like that. So I'm like, "Hey if I tell this to you, can you understand it?" Things like that. And then my dad also, who is slightly more tech savvy because of his job, he can say, "I'm following it; I'm not following it." He can do the same thing for me. So I talk to my parents a lot, and I also have a lot of friends who are not in my field who can say, "I can follow this." I like to send my drafts out to get that feedback 'cause it's very easy to get in your niche and start talking in your niche. But sometimes your audience is not always in your niche.

Jean J. Jerome: So the household that I grew up in, English was never the first language. I still have my mom come and ask me, "Hey, what are you doing in class again?" And I say, "Oh, it's organic chemistry. I'm working with conjugated compounds." She's like, "I have no idea what that means but that sounds cool." But it's an obstacle and a challenge that I actually look forward to, just because if I can explain it to my family, then I should be able to explain it to any unknowledgeable audience.

Laurie A. Pinkert: When I asked Jean to describe the people who influenced his decision to pursue Biotechnology, his influential experiences in STEM were enmeshed in his early reading, writing, and communication activities.

Laurie A. Pinkert: Who encouraged you into the fields you're going into?

Jean J. Jerome: The first one would be my elementary school librarian. When I was younger, I used to read a lot of books, but they were mostly just fiction books on action, adventure, and fantasy. It wasn't

until I was sitting in the library one day, when she came over to me and she said, "How would you like to look at some of these books?" And she took me over to the nonfiction section where I was reading books on science and biology and chemistry and whatnot. Pretty young and early in my youth, so I was super confused about a lot, but it piqued my curiosity. And I would say that's what initiated my interest in the STEM fields.

Jean J. Jerome: When I got to middle school, my next role model who was very influential for many years of my life, was a STEM teacher, also workshop teacher. Through her I also got involved in some extracurriculars, so I did Technology Student Association, and it was just extremely awesome. And that also challenged me to communicate in different way because now I've gone from reading all these fantasy and action books to now I have to communicate to the audience that can enjoy more technical aspects and being able to disseminate very accurate information without writing a whole novel.

Jean J. Jerome: Now, it's my peers at the McNair Scholars Program that continue to motivate me to push beyond what I previous boundaries were thought to be. So they definitely keep me motivated. And as I continue to have conversations with them—very high level intellectual conversations—it helps me develop my communication habits because now I'm talking to people of a high caliber from multiple disciplines that are somewhat familiar with my topic. But then again at the same time, it's very different from what I'm doing.

Laurie A. Pinkert: Ashley noted that her decision to pursue computer science hasn't always been easy but that, thanks to several mentors along the way, she's found her niche and is hopeful that she can mentor others as she continues to pursue her graduate degree and research plans.

Ashley Hart: I am a black woman in what they call a predominantly white field. It used to bother me a lot. I used to say to students who struggle with what I struggled with, I would just tell them to "fake it till you make it," but I think a better way to say that is to embrace the fact that you genuinely like what you like. What I would like to do is be another role model because I feel like if there were more women or just people, in general, of diverse backgrounds in high places—I feel like that's a place to enact true change. Like if somebody goes to a university and sees, "Oh, there's somebody that looks like me in my department," it minimizes that struggle with impostor syndrome that they may have. I hope that my presence and the fact that I love what I do will motivate more people like me to go into fields that they may be genuinely interested in but feel repulsed by societal factors.

Laurie A. Pinkert: Although writing in the university can be a big part of college students' lives—we know it's not the only writing that they are doing. So, I asked these two students to share a little bit about the writing that they are doing outside their classes. Ashley described the high volume of writing she'd done recently for her graduate school admissions and funding applications. And Jean talked about the ways that he's been continuing to hone and practice his communication skills toward stronger interpersonal relationships.

Ashley Hart: I applied to two fellowships: I applied to GEM fellowship and the NSFGRFP fellowship [National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship Program]. The NSFGRFP requires a personal statement and a research statement—two very different types of documents—and the GEM fellowship requires a brief version of a personal statement, really more so a statement of purpose, where they want to know why you want the fellowship and what you're going to do if they decide to sponsor you. And on top of that there were a lot of PhD applications, and every university has like different desires for what they want in the statement. Some schools want a personal history statement. They want to know your background, where you came from, why you're here, and why you're applying. Other

schools wanted us to make a statement of purpose, and they wanted to know what you're gonna do if you got into the program and how you would... Really, they don't say it explicitly, but they just want to know, what are you going to do for them if they let you in, and why are you qualified to be let in? So it was a lot of writing and time for a lot of introspection. But that's the majority of the writing I did really these past six months was just all of those because I had to get those out and I applied to a lot of grad programs. I applied to every program I considered. So I'm happy with what I ended up doing; it was just so much work!

Ashley Hart: So, I feel like the most important thing I ever wrote was actually the essay I wrote when I applied to MIT. I think it was the strongest essay ever wrote. And you know I may get in, I may not get in—whatever. It's just that, I feel like that essay properly captures my journey to this point where I am now. I'm far from perfect; I will never be perfect. But I'm definitely a lot better than I was. So that essay definitely captures that—I just feel very proud of myself honestly because it was hard—getting here was very hard, and I'm just so happy that I made it, and that essay just captured that very well.

Laurie A. Pinkert: I'm wondering what other kinds of writing you find yourself doing on a day-to-day basis or personally, beyond what you're asked to do in a lab or in a classroom.

Jean J. Jerome: It's usually been communication-based stuff, so it's really like talking from one person to another. And I would say more recently, it's trying to understand how my communication habits can affect others. So, one of the things I'm definitely trying to do is communicate more effectively and efficiently. So it's figuring out how can, for instance, for interpersonal communication in relationships—it's how am I going to communicate this topic without making it sound too overbearing but also still being very specific? So that's something I've been doing a lot more recently because I have been working on improving my communication, and just what that looks like is a mixture of like trial and error and seeing what works and what doesn't work as well as understanding the person that I'm talking to and what they connect with the most.

Jean J. Jerome: I do have one friend that I actually write a physical letter to every month, which is a bit of what they consider an archaic practice. But I think it's kind of fun to handwrite a letter, put it in an envelope then put a stamp on it, and just send it off. Then two or three weeks later they get it in the mail and they show you a picture of it. I do, as a person, I know I prefer to actually write pen to paper versus on technology all the time. There's just something about that feeling of actually like putting it on paper that's so fascinating and fantastic.

Laurie A. Pinkert: Yeah. Two to three weeks later, so it's either going far away or the mail is taking a really long time. One of those.

Jean J. Jerome: It definitely takes a while. I'll definitely—sometimes you know, I do procrastinate on sending it and sometimes it just sits at the U.S. post office for a while. But I do send it to the other side of the country.

Laurie A. Pinkert: Okay, so it is going a little a little farther away.

Laurie A. Pinkert: Ashley also talked about the ways that her relationships with her sisters and their shared love for gaming prompted her interests in telling and writing stories that they could share with each other and maybe one day with the world.

Ashley Hart: My sisters and I will play like Smash Brothers a lot, and as we were playing, we would just give the characters like these random personalities. And I said, "Oh, some of these are actually pretty cool." Maybe, and we couldn't always play the game whenever we wanted to tell stories, so I said maybe if I could try and like, you know, like try and expand them in my free time on the notes section on my phone, or if we could document the stories that we tell, 'cause we really enjoyed them. And that's really kind of where I came into creative writing. I actually still work on those stories to this day. They've definitely evolved into something that I really like now. I would love to be a published author one day.

Laurie A. Pinkert: Ashley and Jean also gave me a glimpse into their writing process and its unique relationship to reading in their lives.

Ashley Hart: I really love books! Anyone that knows me really well can tell you that I love books! And reading the books makes me want to write more. Then writing more makes you want to read more books. So it's like a positive feedback loop—I don't know if that's the correct term—but that's what it is.

Jean J. Jerome: For me, personally, when I look at prompts that I'm given. I'm looking at some sort of dialogue I'm supposed to write about, I very much think about it as like a storyline, right, because one of the ways I write the best is to think about it as some sort of narration. And that just comes from me as a kid reading a lot of books and being deeply vested in story. So I'll look at it as in, okay, so this is the plot and I have to somehow spin this plot off and communicate it to the audience. So it usually starts with understanding what the main topic is, thus finding details of what they're asking for, and then creating an outline, and filling in the gaps in what I need to include as well as elaborating on what I can continue to include.

Jean J. Jerome: Especially when I was younger I would never look to write essays and whatnot. But what I found is that once you start writing and get into that I really awesome flow, it's almost like it's impossible to stop. There's always something more to write down; there's always some story to expel from your brain and put it on paper. And it's a really exciting process if you let it be an exciting process. I think mindset is a very important thing when it comes to communication, and if you're in the right mindset you can produce some stellar work.

Laurie A. Pinkert: Before concluding our conversations on writing, I asked Ashley and Jean whether there was anything else they wanted to share about writing and its role in their lives.

Jean J. Jerome: What may work for someone else may not work for you. So it's important to figure out what your writing style is and what your processes is and to continue excelling at that.

Ashley Hart: Writing is very valuable. Of course, it's valuable. But it's just that capturing of an idea. Honestly, my interest in writing builds into my interest in research because you have the ability to write things that can be pulled by somebody in 50 years and potentially used to do something revolutionary in our society. So just having that record of an idea and a credible study that's peer reviewed, I think it's just invaluable. And I do think that anyone that would like to do research should definitely excel in their writing because you need to learn how to convey ideas clearly while also adhering to the scientific process.

Laurie A. Pinkert: Hearing these writers speak reminded me of the role that writing plays in communicating ideas across disciplines and communities. Ashley and Jean return again and again to a

concept we often teach in writing studies, the idea of realizing your audience—immediate and future—and of knowing that audiences bring varying experiences of their own, and so our writing, within our disciplines, our communities, and our interpersonal relationships, must account for that variation whenever possible, especially if we aim to be understood. This conversation also reminds me that writing isn't just for those who call themselves a writer. It's not just a thing we do in composition class or the college of arts and humanities alone. It's an imperative across fields and an essential component of research impact. So, as we end our conversation today, I hope you take away a new perspective or a little bit of introspection about the role that writing plays in shaping you. I'm Laurie Pinkert, and this is On Writing.