Interviewer: Okay. It is April 24th 2014. This is *** and ***. This is a WDS [Writing Development Study] Exit Survey. It's okay for interview? Is it okay if we record this?

Interviewee: Yes.

[…]

Interviewer: Okay. How would you describe yourself as a writer?

Interviewee: I think I'm a really good writer, which is why I hate answering this question because I don't like to sound like I 'm really full of myself or anything but my family—their all educators. My grandfather was a [English teacher] ; my mom teaches English. It's a skill they passed on to me and I enjoy writing.

I think I'm good at adapting the different styles of writing, different assignments in school. Then I had an internship last summer where I was writing articles that were published online, mainly, for the legal community. I think I'm pretty decent at adapting to different styles.

Interviewer: Tell me more about the legal writing that you did. What was that for and how was that?

Interviewee: I really liked it. It was a lot easier than I thought. I had to send it to an editor who was my boss—every article that I wrote throughout the process. at first that was really intimidating because you don't really know if someone's gonna like your writing and you never like to hear that your writing's not good or they didn't get the proper tone or whatnot.

Mainly, there's a stereotype that trial lawyers are in it for the money and that they're not nice people so what the articles I wrote were about trial lawyers who were doing charitable work and community service donating their time and efforts not expecting money in the return and just wanting to help out the community.

I would research those, write articles about it that were published and the main audience was the legal community. Although, in theory, it's for people who don't really like trial lawyers but I don't really know if they would really go read the articles. It's mainly to show what the legal community and trial lawyers are doing to give back.

Interviewer: How did you get involved in that project?

Interviewee: [laughter] My mom used to be in politics before she became a teacher and had a coworker who now works at the company as the head of HR so my mom set me up with that contact. [Laughter] I know it's not super legitimate or anything [laughter] —

Interviewer: [Laughter] It's normal.

Interviewee: - but so I got in contact with the head of HR at the company and they had a few open positions for summer so I interviewed. I went home for I guess it was winter break last year. Maybe it was Thanksgiving. I don't know. For one of the breaks I was home and I interviewed with the different departments and this particular department asked for writing samples after and so I sent those in. She was really impressed and offered me the position.

Interviewer: What do you think was good writing in that context?

Interviewee: Well, funny enough that I was a blogger for one of my study abroads and they wanted us to just write three blogs but I got paid for it about our experience while we were living in China. She asked to actually see those blogs and I was like, "Oh, shoot."

Interviewer: [Laughter]

Interviewee: [laughter] I wrote those when I was procrastinating studying for a final exam. I was supposed to be speaking only Chinese the whole time. I was like I don't really—great. There goes that job.

Interviewer: [Laughter]

Interviewee: [Laughter] I sent those but they were closer to the type of writing she was looking for; just about 500 words talking about an event that had happened or observations that had been made sort of thing. What makes that good writing? I've been told I write like a textbook, which I think is a compliment but apparently it's not. Yeah [laughter] .

Interviewer: [Laughter]

Interviewee: This type of writing for blogs and online, short articles I think what makes it good for that type of writing is the tone you use; that it's more relatable. You're not trying to use too many big words. That you're just kind of—the way you would talk to someone about it but then putting it into proper English. Taking out that "like" I just used sort of thing.

Interviewer: [Laughter] Right, right.

Interviewee: I think that's what makes it good writing for that topic.

Interviewer: We'll come back to more about what good writing is but—

Interviewee: [laughter] Oh, gosh.

Interviewer: - how would you describe yourself as a writer when you began here at U of M?

Interviewee: A good writer but I think the [English course] I took was specifically for Michigan Community Scholars program and I didn't understand any of the assignments. They were just very abstract. The first assignment—it just stuck with me because I was so confused. The professor was like, "I saw a hawk on campus, go find it. Write about your experience." We're like—

Interviewer: [Laughter]

Interviewee: - "is it a real hawk or a statue?" He's like, "No, it was real." We're like, "Are you kidding right now? You want us to find a bird you saw?"

Interviewer: [Laughter]

Interviewee: [laughter] It was very confusing and basically every assignment was that confusing but after talking with him he wanted just a "show, don't tell" piece. He just wanted you to really see your surroundings at Michigan and write about the experience of trying to find some bird he saw once. I thought I was a good writer. I understood the fundamentals of writing.

I could clearly convey what I was trying to say in writing but I think I was a little bit intimidated when I was asked to do some assignments at Michigan that it didn't seem so obvious to me at first. I would just be a little bit scared of it and then it'd take a little time to gain my confidence with it.

Interviewer: To what extent do you think you've grown and changed since then as a writer?

Interviewee: I think I have started to care less about what is the professor looking for, exactly, and focusing on just how do I interpret this assignment? Just put my thoughts into writing, write it well and turn that in and not worry so much about why is he having me find a random bird on campus sort of thing.

I think after that class it got a little more straightforward, too, so it was not as challenging. I think more exposure to writing has just made me a little bit more confident when approaching different assignments. [laughter]

Interviewer: You talked a second ago about not thinking about the professor's kind of what he or she wants as much.

Interviewee: Mm-hmm.

Interviewer: Can you talk a little bit more about that or give an example?

Interviewee: Yeah. Which class was it? In my comm [Communication] class I just submitted my final paper yesterday and someone said, "What style of citations does the communications department want?" Or what's the style of writing a communications paper. I was like, "I don't care. I'm just gonna write my paper." Basically, when we were clarifying with the professor I was like, "How do you feel about footnotes? Because I really like footnotes."

He's like, "Oh, yeah. They go at the end of the document." I was like, "I have them at the end of each page because why would I want to flip between all the pages to see what the notation is?" He's like, "Oh, whatever. as long as you keep it consistent," so doing what you do—making sure it still fits their guidelines but not concerning yourself too much with, "What is a communications paper?" It's just writing the paper in response to the prompt.

Interviewer: As you graduate what are your goals for yourself as a writer looking way ahead?

Interviewee: [laughter] I don't really have goals but I guess to maintain the ability to write because I feel like that definitely comes into play in literally every job you could ever do. It's important to be able to get your thoughts across in writing. Lots of email use these days but I personally dislike when people have really poor grammar and such. I guess my goal would be to maintain proper grammar, proper syntax, spelling. Just the basics of writing. If that ever leaves then I'll be very sad.

Interviewer: How do you maintain it?

Interviewee: [laughter] I just know it. I don't know. Make sure you use spell check is the very most basic of it but I just kind of know how to write. When I was in China we were in the international students' part of the school so there were some—a bunch of students from Korea and they took and English class and they were like, "Can you help us with our homework?" We were like, "Of course. We're a pro at English." They're like, "What's the indirect object pronoun?" We're like, "Excuse me?"

Interviewer: [Laughter]

Interviewee: We realized we don't know how to talk about the English language at all but we know how to use it. It would be very difficult to explain it. In that sense I don't know to maintain it except just knowing it.

Interviewer: When you were there did you find yourself helping them with their writing?

Interviewee: [laughter] No. They would early write—they'd write a sentence at a time and none of the sentences had to be related. Basic English.

Interviewer: Ah, I see.

Interviewee: [laughter] The common language between us was Chinese so very basic English. They were advanced 00:10:04 and no, we weren't really helping out too much 'cuz we didn't understand their homework assignments [laughter]. It's like, "Identify this part of the sentence." We're like, "I don't know what that means."

Interviewer: [Laughter]

Interviewee: [Laughter] "Sorry." We weren't really helpful with that.

Interviewer: When you were in China did you—you were speaking Chinese?

Interviewee: For the most part.

Interviewer: Were you writing in Chinese?

Interviewee: Yeah.

Interviewer: Can you tell me about that?

Interviewee: [Laughter] What part of it?

Interviewer: Whichever part? I mean what was the experience like writing in Chinese?

Interviewee: The first time I studied abroad in [city] I was still in high school and it was my senior year and I took Chinese in America for my junior year. It wasn't too different when you're starting off with Chinese; the expectation is that you're learning reading, writing, listening and speaking and that you're not focusing on one. Currently, I focus on speaking with Chinese but when you start out you focus on just the whole language.

I'd had a year of practice of writing. When you first start to learn how to write Chinese it's very intimidating because it's about—it's basically drawing pictures and it matters, sometimes to some people, which order you write the characters in. Within a single character since they have multiple lines. That's basically so you don't forget any part of the character 'cuz that can create a different word if you leave out any line.

With grammar there were some differences. In modern times they will do the left-to-right, horizontal writing like we do, which makes it easier, but they still write—when we submitted essays in Chinese there they submit—they handwrite them but you know our lined paper?

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Interviewee: They have boxes on the page. They have the lined paper but it's also crossed perpendicularly with vertical lines. You put one character in one; punctuation mark in each box. You have to skip two boxes at the start of the paragraph for your indentation. Then you cannot have any punctuation mark on the farthest left column so it's got to hang off the right side sort of thing. There were little things like that—grammar wise—that we had to learn.

I guess with the sentence structure they do use some different sentence orders. That's always challenging to try and remember that when you're directly translating English to Chinese that you can't actually directly translate it. You probably have to reverse the sentence sort of thing and just thinking that one through.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. Do you feel like you're a fluent writer of Chinese?

Interviewee: [laughter] No. Still make mistakes. Probably always will. It's a very complex language. I've taken Chinese for six years, though, so I do pretty well with it but it would be hard to look at a brand new sentence and assume you know the grammar structure for it. Things would be like—the example character for "In summary" it's two to four characters to say, "In summary," blah-blah-blah.

If you don't know that then you wouldn't know how to incorporate that into a sentence and you wouldn't understand that it doesn't go in the middle of your sentence; it comes at the beginning of the thought sort of thing. That's a terrible example but there are some phrases in Chinese where it does matter where it goes. It's hard to explain.[laughter]

Interviewer: Yeah, it's always hard to talk about the minutia of writing, I think.

Interviewee: [laughter] Yeah, that's why we were useless to our Korean friends in China.

Interviewer: [Laughter] Thinking across your writing experiences at U of M, what do you think it means to write well at U of M?

Interviewee: I thought I understood that question until you said, "At U of M." Honestly, I don't think a lot of students don't have good writing here and I mean the basics of writing like comma usage. That every sentence should not start with

“However.” I literally write a 15-page essay where every single sentence started with the word “however.”

Besides the fact that your entire paper is a contradiction of itself, “however” is supposed to come after a semi-colon followed by a comma sort of thing. I’ve just seen so many times where especially comma usage or the wrong use of “there” and “their” and “they’re” and “your” and “you’re” sorts of things. People just misuse those all the time. I think what it means to be a good writer at U of M would not be up to my standard of what it means to be a good writer.

I think just at U of M it’s the ability to basically—that your reader can understand what you’re attempting to say. I feel really bad saying that.

Interviewer: [Laughter] then beyond U of M—

Interviewee: [Laughter]

Interviewer: - what do you think it means to write well?

Interviewee: I think it’s the ability to get across the point you’re trying to say without the reader being confused or having to really try to think about what you’re trying to say and to use proper grammar, punctuation conventions. All those things. Where the spelling’s correct. I get tripped up when the spelling’s wrong and I’ll stare at that and lose the meaning of the sentence because I’m so focused on, “Wait a second. That’s not the correct spelling.”

Interviewer: When you were first writing did you find yourself struggling with any of these grammatical or lexical choices?

Interviewee: Like elementary school?

Interviewer: Sure.

Interviewee: [laughter] I don’t remember.

Interviewer: What about—?

Interviewee: I’m sure I must have but I feel like Michigan’s supposed to be such a great school that people making such basic mistakes is just embarrassing.

Interviewer: We’ll come back to that.

Interviewee: [Laughter] I know it’s really harsh but—

Interviewer: No, no. It’s not harsh. Which upper-level writing courses have you taken?

Interviewee: My upper level writing was [title of course], which was [Asian course], I think.

Interviewer: What was your experience like in that course?

Interviewee: [laughter] It was confusing because I didn't really know how to write about natural disasters. The long piece in our class was talk—the natural disaster was famine in North Korea. I really wasn't understanding how famine is a natural disaster 'cuz we were mainly talking about typhoons, earthquakes. I wasn't quite understanding how famine was similar to that. I struggled with that one but I don't think it was based on basic writing techniques.

Interviewer: Your experience generally—how would you describe it in that course if you had to use a few adjectives to describe it?

Interviewee: [laughter] It was at 10:00 A.M. and I had a Groupon for 20 large drinks from Espresso Royale so I had a large coffee with me every class and still yawned through the entire thing so I didn't love it. Writing for other classes I typically enjoy but that one was a little abstract for me.

Interviewer: What effect did the experiences of that class have on you as a writer?

Interviewee: Hmm, not much. Just kind of moved past it once it was over. Just really glad to be done with that.

Interviewer: Okay. Have you taken other writing courses?

Interviewee: Just [English course] and the upper-level writing were the only ones specifically focused on English and writing.

Interviewer: What about courses that are writing heavy where you're doing a lot of writing?

Interviewee: [Laughter] Like my Honors Thesis?

Interviewer: Yeah, let's talk about your Honors Thesis. What's that process been like?

Interviewee: I wrote it for the Asian Studies department and you have to take a junior/senior colloquium and you basically write a 15-page paper at the culmination of that class. That's the start of your honors thesis and then if you go one to write an honor's thesis you have to elaborate on that or you have to start on a new topic. I basically spent two years on my honors thesis with a year in the middle off.

I did the colloquium at the beginning of my junior year and then I really considered a thesis just this semester. During that class 15 pages seemed like a lot and I really had no idea where else to take the topic. I was just glad I got to 15 pages and that was a struggle to reach that. It was the first time I wrote a 15-page paper.

Then, elaborating it for my honor's thesis I met with my advisor who was my professor in the colloquium class and we talked about a slightly different topic; a different focus within capital punishment in China. That gave me a lot of ideas and actually it was due yesterday. At 3:00 I had an epiphany that I had to add on a whole new section that would just make the entire thing.

I did that yesterday. It was much easier to add to it once we discussed a different angle on the topic where it wasn't just so much describing how the death penalty works in China and the potential future of the death penalty in China and how the Chinese citizens feel about it. [laughter]

That was my original paper and this one focused on why the human rights argument is unpersuasive so having a new angle definitely opened my mind to a new side of it and helped me to make the paper longer.

Interviewer: How did you get to that new angle?

Interviewee: My advisor. She likes a little bit of controversy. She's not a huge rule follower; she likes to put her toe on the line. She thought most people, when they talk about the death penalty, would argue that it should be abolished because of human rights, which is true. She thought it would make an interesting paper if I were to say in spite of human rights why China maintains its death penalty.

Interviewer: Can you walk me through the process of that? Of meeting with her and talking to her about the writing?

Interviewee: Yeah. I don't know when that first meeting was but we didn't meet too frequently throughout this semester. She emailed every two to three weeks just to say, "Checking in. How's it going? Do you need anything?" It was kind of an open invitation for, 'If you need a meeting just let me know' sort of thing. I just kept working on it.

She recommended a few professors that I could speak with. I tried to get in contact with them—not so helpful. One of them had just had a baby and the other didn't respond. Then I ran into the other professor at a lecture series and somehow knew what he looked like just because I had looked when I went to email him and such. I looked up his Michigan profile. [laughter]

He was really surprised; a random kid knew who he was. He met with me in office hours so then I contacted my advisor. I was like, "Hey, I found this

professor and we met and it was helpful. He recommended a stack of books for me to read." He also recommended a new angle on the subject so that was interesting to hear.

I met with her two or three times throughout the semester just to check in; to chat about the legal system in China in general. Talk about the things she knew just to see if it helps at all broaden my knowledge base, basically. More or less I just worked on it when I had time. Did the research on my own, checked in with my professor and she helped me with the formal process of writing an honors thesis such as we had to present it about three weeks ago to the department.

Helping me out with, "Okay, you need a PowerPoint for this. You need a two-sentence summary for the program. You need to decide on a title," sort of thing. Helping me revise those for the presentation.

Interviewer: When you were talking to that professor and the other professor that was helping you did they ever look at your writing and give you feedback on the writing?

Interviewee: I turned in one draft to my advisor and she'd seen the original 15-page paper and she likes my writing. Part of the reason I chose her as my thesis advisor. I did turn in one draft and I told her, "Here's the draft you asked for just 'cuz you wanted a draft at this time. I would not say it's complete. I would not say that it's really what I want to be turning in to you. I'm just giving you some work to look at."

She read it through the eyes of she's literally revising it as—I was adding it to and changing it as my advisor was reading the draft so it was a pretty useless draft. We met after I submitted the draft to her and I explained to her the direction I wanted to go in. She ignored the draft at that point knowing where I wanted to go. She discussed that with me and was like—she explained it to me so I knew I wanted to add more about human rights. I didn't think I had added that aspect enough yet.

She said, "Think about what is a human rights argument. Why is that not legitimate to China? Then put those two together." That was a very helpful meeting. I wrote in my agenda book that day just little equation like "human rights + something = this." Just little equation like just that from our meeting was like that's what I needed to finish the thesis.

Interviewer: You can talk a little bit more about the strategies that you used to do the research. Where did you get most of your information?

Interviewee: [Laughter] Well, part of the limitation of researching capital punishment in China is that it's considered a state secret. Attempting to do online

research I got—in my colloquium class another student recommended a website that translates news articles and the comment section online into English.

That was really useful for understating the opinions of Chinese citizens so I use that website a lot. From the time I studied abroad in [city] I had a host sister that I was able to email with to interview her about what she knows about the death penalty in China.

Then for my junior year Chinese language class I had a language partner and we were supposed to talk for an hour a week on Skype so I decided to use that time to ask her about the death penalty, which in retrospect was not so great because she was applying for the Communist party at the time.

Interviewer: [Laughter] Oh, no!

Interviewee: Yeah. You can't just say, "I'm communist." You literally have to apply and you have to take two exams and they interview your teacher and classmates for a character review. It's intense. Maybe not the best source but she basically knew nothing. Or so she said. I was also able to interview her. Then when I was abroad in Qingming we had to have—we had to talk one-on-one with a professor for at least half an hour every day.

One of my professors knew I wasn't so interested in what we were talking about that day and so she was able to relate it to law. We basically compared the U.S. and China legal systems to each other. It kind of turned into talking about death penalty and that's actually where I got the idea for my honors thesis topic from, in general. It was just a very fascinating conversation just hearing how China does the death penalty. It was quite interesting.[laughter]

Interviewer: Would you say that the experience of writing the honors thesis affected your writing in away or has some effect on how you thought of yourself as a writer?

Interviewee: It definitely was the longest paper I had written ever, I guess. I guess I noticed that usually—earlier in my time at Michigan when a professor was like, "Write a ten-page paper," we're like, "Are you kidding me? How can I have that much to say? That is impossible. That is the worst news I've ever heard."

Interviewer: [Laughter]

Interviewee: Then with my comm paper it's supposed to be ten pages and I had three sections left and I was already at ten pages. I was writing that pretty concurrently with my honors thesis. They're both due on the same day. I think it has helped me to be able to look at topics and see it from different angles to be able to say more on the topic and be a little more open minded and think about a subject more critically instead of the basics of it to reach a page count.

Interviewer: What does it mean to think of it more critically?

Interviewee: [pause] How do I describe this? Instead of —I think just put more thought into it and broad—I know it says narrow your topic but I want to say broaden the topic but not the topic but the specifics on the topics. Instead of just saying—I don't know a good example but when you're thinking about a specific section of your paper and not making one point of thinking what other points you can make, how you can tie that into other things relating to subjects you've learned in other classes.

Which, surprisingly, I didn't really believe people when they said your classes would start to mesh together—I don't know what the word is. They would actually overlap. I was like yeah—no. A lot of my classes that shouldn't really overlap have overlapped. In my sociology class is on human rights so that worked with my honors thesis sort of thing where you can use knowledge from other classes to tie into a different class.

Interviewer: Talking about that cross-class stuff that happens how often have you used skill strategies that you learned writing your—when you were going through the process of writing the thesis in other courses?

Interviewee: I can really only think that I used—for my communications paper that I was really able to go way over the page count. He said as long as it's under 50 pages that's good enough for him. He said 10 page limit but it's not 50 it's good. That's the only time I really noticed that I was taking the topic further and trying to add more to it instead of being restricted by a page count. I can't really think of another time when I did that.

Interviewer: Can you think of an example when you were working through your honors thesis where you said, "Well, here's one area that I could do more work on"?

Interviewee: [Pause] What was the section? Well, from the original paper I didn't have anything on human rights so basically the whole thing had to have human rights thrown into it. I had a whole section on what is human rights. What is the human rights argument? Then the section I added yesterday was about—wow. Hold on. What was it about? [Laughter]

Interviewer: [Laughter]

Interviewee: As soon as I submitted them I was like—

Interviewer: It's out of your brain.

Interviewee: [laughter] - TV time.

Interviewer: [Laughter]

Interviewee: Oh, my goodness. Maybe this is why it didn't come to me until yesterday.

Interviewer: [Laughter]

Interviewee: Oh, the traditional, historical values. That came from my interview with the professor I met at the lecture series. He's in the history department, which I thought was pretty useless since I focus on modern China and he's pre-modern but I—a lot of the things that I learned from him are just China values harsh punishment. Like Confucian thought and that was the section I added. It really, to me, explained why human rights is a great argument and all but China really values harsh punishment.

They really value the whole eye for an eye is a great tactic kind of theory. That's been since Confucian times and that's why human rights doesn't really have them abolish the death penalty. The opinions of Chinese citizens—they all say for some crimes the death penalty is too lenient which doesn't make sense to a lot of people. Yeah, you're like, "What's worse than—?"

Interviewer: What's more—? Yeah. What's more severe or draconian than the death penalty?

Interviewee: Didn't quite get an answer to that. The closest I got is someone thought corrupt officials should be shot a thousand times instead of once sort of thing. I don't really know what's worse than the death penalty but they just thing it shouldn't be so humane.

Interviewer: Not so clean and quick.

Interviewee: Right. They shouldn't focus on minimizing pain for the offender.

Interviewer: Wow.

Interviewee: [Laughter]

Interviewer: That's rough.

Interviewee: [Laughter] Still wanna go?

Interviewer: Yeah, I do. I just won't say anything bad. Thinking back over the last two years what experiences in and out of the classroom have had an effect on your writing?

Interviewee: I think just the experience of writing. My internship last summer with writing gave me a lot of confidence because I had never had to go through an editor multiple times ‘cuz I submitted multiple articles throughout the summer. The first time I was like, “Oh, my goodness. What if she doesn’t like my writing?” Then there was an article later—I’m a very serious person. I don’t think I’m very funny at all.

There was one article I was writing about some trial lawyers. Their law firm had a rock band and they would only play shows that were charity. It was a really great cause and the lawyer I got in touch with was very funny. They just looked at the whole concept. He said he joined only because if your boss asks you to join his band you kind of can’t say no—

Interviewer: [Laughter]

Interviewee: - sort of thing.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Interviewee: I really wanted to write the article well for him. I wanted to do right by his attitude and tone which meant trying to make m writing a little funnier. I don’t think writing is humorous and I’m not funny so I can’t write in a comical way. I was extremely nervous turning that draft in. I was just like, “It still has to be serious; it still has to be professional but it should have a little hint of humor in it, still.”

It was still nerve wracking to turn that draft in but just over time doing the assignment again and again—so finding a firm that does charitable work. Contacting them, writing about what they do, turning in the draft to my editor, turning in a draft to the firm. Getting approval from both and then posting—just doing that over and over again, I think, builds some confidence just in writing in general if not just that one type of writing.

Interviewer: What kind of feedback, if any, would you get from the editors or that review process where you’d submit the article or post and then—?

Interviewee: There weren’t too many corrections, luckily. Makes me feel good about myself. Sometimes, she would want a different word choice to convey something slightly differently or minor things like she’d learned in journalism school with conventions. Actually, the biggest thing I learned from her was that when I’m talking about a firm that I would say, “Their” and it should be “Its” because the firm isn’t a person.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

Interviewee: Which, in retrospect is like, “Oh, true. Very obvious.” That was the biggest thing I learned from her that I still use today and I think a lot of other people make that mistake, too.

Interviewer: It’s funny. In British English it’s totally different. It would be like an organization is referred to in the plural.

Interviewee: Huh.

Interviewer: So like—

Interviewee: Well, no. I was giving it like—as if I was talking about a person. I don’t know if I’m even saying the right words. It was “their” versus “its” but the firm gave their time. It’s the firm gave its time.

Interviewer: Right. In England I think it would be “their.”

Interviewee: Oh.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Interviewee: I got to use that excuse.

Interviewer: [Laughter]

Interviewee: [Laughter]

Interviewer: The British English excuse.

Interviewee: [laughter] Oh, you know just working on my British English.

Interviewer: [Laughter]

Interviewee: [laughter] Actually, a lot of Americans use the British and English it’s supposed to be “toward” but a lot of people say “towards,” which is correct in British English but technically in American English it’s “toward.” That one bothers me now.

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah. There’s so many interesting little differences between what’s proper in different places.

Interviewee: Yeah.

Interviewer: How has your writing process changed as a result of that experience in the internship?

Interviewee: It hasn't, really. I've never done drafts, really, so turning in the draft to my honors thesis was useless since I already knew I was changing it significantly. Turning in the drafts for my internship was extremely useful but I had two for my job. With writing for school I write it once and then I submit it; I hardly read it for revision.

I trust myself enough to write it correctly the first time. Unless I felt uneasy about a certain portion—but I trust my grammar and how it conveyed the points I wanted to make. Nothing has really changed that. I just kind of don't want some; I'm done with it. [Laughter]

Interviewer: Yeah, fair enough. If I use the term "reflective writing" what does that mean to you?

Interviewee: Writing that reflects on something?

Interviewer: Have you used reflective writing in your own writing process you use or—as a sign or as voluntary?

Interviewee: Sometimes—rarely—but a few times I've had to reflect how if you had to do something as a group you have to turn in a little paragraph or whatnot saying how each group mate worked; what work they contributed. If you thought—basically, it's so the teacher can fairly assign grades based on what happened when they weren't looking. Yeah, I guess that's kind of reflective.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. That connects, I should say, to the next question which is what have your recent experiences been working with other writers in your courses or in other context?

Interviewee: [laughter] I hate it. Like I said earlier, I had a 15-page paper where every sentence started with "However." That was probably one of the most miserable experiences in my life. I had over a—you know the review function on Word?

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Interviewee: Where you can count it?

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Interviewee: [Laughter] I had over 100 comments and at that point I gave up on saying, "This is not how you use 'however.' It also makes you look extremely dumb to contradict yourself every sentence. I hate that process of it. For another class we had to write a group paper as a 15-page paper with a group of five. We each wrote three pages. Horrible experience of—'cuz not showing up.

Some kid just wanted to keep working on his film project so he skipped a scheduled meeting with us, which is ridiculous. I was able to just talk to the professor—it was my thesis professor, again. I would talk to her and she's like, "Just be open with me. Just tell me what's going on and I'll make sure it won't affect your grade." Basically, the experiences of reading other students' writing and usually not being impressed with it.

Interviewer: Aside from the "however" example and the—

Interviewee: [Laughter]

Interviewer: - guy didn't show up—

Interviewee: [Laughter] Great times.

Interviewer: - are these sort of middle-ground examples of how you've had to work with other writers who aren't at those extremes?

Interviewee: [Laughter] No.

Interviewer: Okay.

Interviewee: I mean they're like—'cuz you don't remember because they just kind of did their job and that's it. Not memorable.

Interviewer: Okay. This actually connects. Have you done work shopping or peer review in courses around writing?

Interviewee: A few times; not too much.

Interviewer: What were those times like? What class was it and what was the experience like?

Interviewee: I'll tell you a good time instead of all the bad times. For my [English course] class we had to read—peer view a paper on something. I don't know. Four years ago. I read my friend's paper and he said, "Of everyone in this class I only want you to read it. It's a very personal subject." It was actually him coming out as bisexual. We were friends so he only felt comfortable—he wasn't really ready for everyone to know that.

I was actually very impressed with his writing. He was saying how he's involved with Greek life which is typically—Greek life may carry homophobic stereotypes sorts of things and it's not extremely accepted to be gay or bisexual, especially in a fraternity house, but how his house was extremely welcome. He related his identity with Greek life and I was very impressed with that paper. I thought it was very well written. I thought the topic was very well thought through.

Interviewer: What kind of feedback did you give him?

Interviewee: I don't remember except telling him, "I was impressed with your paper. Good job. Mine sucks now."

Interviewer: [Laughter]

Interviewee: [Laughter] I felt so bad about my paper after that. I don't know what mine was on but I was like, "Oh, great." [Laughter]

Interviewer: [Laughter] Do you remember any feedback that you got on your paper?

Interviewee: [Laughter] Not that time, definitely. I'm trying to think if I remember any other peer reviews. No. People don't usually correct my grammar, though. That's always good. I don't know. [Pause] Nothing's coming to mind.

Interviewer: Fair enough. You're a senior.

Interviewee: [Laughter]

Interviewer: [Laughter] Let me ask you this: now that you're about to graduate what advice would you give to college students about writing? What are some of the things that they should think about as they begin writing a paper?

Interviewee: I will preface this by are you connected to the English department at all?

Interviewer: Kind of but not really.

Interviewee: Okay. I'm on the [honor council] and this year we partnered with the English department to do an integrity workshop for all first-year writing students. I've led those workshops about a dozen times for groups of 50 freshmen. It's an hour of us giving them advice mostly related to plagiarism so they avoid trouble. I guess that's where most of my advice would come from.

For writers I would just say, first of all, don't plagiarize. Definitely not worth it. I think the most important piece for success in any class at Michigan is communication with your professors and GSIs. If you're confused they can answer your questions; if you don't know how to cite, if you didn't learn something in high school before you got here that professors and GSIs actually want to help you.

I was definitely the kid that thought they're gonna look down on me if I go to office hours. They're gonna look down on me if I have questions but realizing

early on that the professors and GSIs really want to help you and no one shows up to their office hours so you'll have their full attention. No one else is gonna know and that they really do want to help you. If you prove to them that you're taking steps to succeed then it's gonna benefit you in the end.

Communicating with your professors and GSIs. It's useful just for their class and it's also useful for developing various skills in life. Better to ask your professor and GSI now than never know the answer and have that come bite you later. Also, for avoiding plagiarism and such it's really good. Then, they're also really useful for different resources. I think the way I found out about Sweetland in general was through a professor.

Then, I've had professors since then, even this year—my [title of course] GSI said, "I think everyone in this class needs to go through Sweetland before you submit this paper to me. I mean do what you want but it's not gonna hurt you to go through them." Michigan's a huge school and it's really difficult to know about the different resources available to you; not just what the name of it is here or where it is but that it exists.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Interviewee: If you communicate with your professors and GSIs they'll tell you about these different resources that can help you. With writing the most useful tool on campus is Sweetland. If you're struggling with that then the professor can recommend that to you and then you know about it and then you can use that resource and develop.

Interviewer: I had a couple follow up questions. First, how did you get involved in this group—

Interviewee: Honor Council?

Interviewer: - that—yeah. Or that piece about integrity and plagiarizing--what—?

Interviewee: Yeah, that's through Honor Council. I got involved with that through [local Ann Arbor newspaper]. Just said apply for this and I was like, "I like integrity. That sounds cool," so I applied. Just one of those things where you're just kind of like, "All right. I'll try to get it."

It was an application and interview process so I was a little bit nervous but then I got it. It's become a huge passion of mine. I was not a part of developing a relationship with the English department so I don't exactly know how we got that partnership.

Interviewer: Then you talked a lot about the importance of communicating with your instructors.

Interviewee: Yeah.

Interviewer: When did you realize that? What's the story about when you realized that and how you came to learn that?

Interviewee: When I was forced to take statistics. I suck at math. I hate everything about it. I got a point off my homework for thinking 200-1 is 119. That bad at math. Everyone says in the stats [Statistics] department that [instructor] is amazing and she's really great. I didn't have her as professor but I went to her office hours one day because it was at a more convenient time for me and she was just the sweetest lady.

She said, "No one comes to my Monday office hours. Why don't you come? It'll basically be one-on-one. I'll work with you on this." She's just the most compassionate person; not once did she make me feel stupid even though I was probably asking really dumb questions that are just obvious to her.

She just was very nice about taking the time to help me understand concepts and making me feel like someone cared about my success in that class and making sure that I didn't feel dumb the whole time. After that experience I was like, "Okay." "Maybe professors kind of care and they don't judge you for having questions." That was my story. [Laughter]

Interviewer: Did you tell that story to the students when you talk about this or do you just—?

Interviewee: No. Maybe I should pass that one along—

Interviewer: [Laughter]

Interviewee: - since I'm not gonna be on Honor Council anymore so I can tell other students. Because sometimes other people on Honor Council have better stories than you personally do. Throughout the presentation if that person's not presenting that workshop we'll say, "You know, another member of Honor Council had this experience," because the feedback we've gotten from the freshmen is that they like the personal stories the best. It speaks to them the most so if we share more of those so yeah, maybe that'd be a good one to pass along.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Interviewee: [Laughter] Or to tell people to—at least tell the other members, "Think about when you realized—when you realized going to professors is a good idea."

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah. This is a different kind of question. Have you had any experiences with new media writing? Writing for blogs or websites or making electronic portfolio, MPortfolio, digital portfolio?

Interviewee: [laughter] Just the blog writing when I was in China and then the articles for my internship. I briefly made a website for a Chinese presentation but I wouldn't really consider that. We made that in two hours and it was in place of a PowerPoint. We were supposed to make an ad so we made a website.

Interviewer: Do you write for fun at all? Do you write—?

Interviewee: [laughter] No. Not really. I mean I don't consider writing, in general, tedious but I don't really write outside of assignments.

Interviewer: Do you follow any kind of new media writing from blogs? Starting with blogs?

Interviewee: [Laughter] I have a Twitter?

Interviewer: Twitter?

Interviewee: Yeah, I don't follow any blogs or vlogs are any of those, though.

Interviewer: What about writing on Twitter?

Interviewee: I like—what about it?

Interviewer: Do you follow anyone or do you tweet a lot on Twitter?

Interviewee: I don't tweet that much. I follow a bunch of different accounts but nothing really serious. I don't go out of my way to make sure I've seen all of the tweets from any one account.

Interviewer: When you do tweet what do you tweet about?

Interviewee: My life. Memorable moments. I tweet about the bigger things that have happened in my life or something that's made me really happy. I tweet about how I submitted my Honors thesis. I had a really good dinner at Café Zola during restaurant week. You pay the set price for the three-course meal and we had that and it was amazing. They were like, "Hey, we're giving free crepes tonight," and so I tweeted that. It was really delicious and then they gave us a free crepe.

Interviewer: That sounds good.

[…]

Interviewer: You've been uploading pieces of writing to the study archive C-Tools [learning management systeme] 00:50:00. How has that process been going for you?

Interviewee: The email reminders are good. I wouldn't remember without them. The process is a little confusing, though. It's like, "Paste it here," and then I don't even know. I had to read word for word the instructions every time and then I get through it. If there were like a one-step upload process that would be cooler.

It'd be a little bit easier. I feel like you upload it and then you have to paste the link into something else. I might be wrong, maybe. When we submit papers for class we either just email it or we put it in the drop box on and just real quick, upload, select it, upload, done.CTools

Interviewer: Yeah, so that process might be able—might have improvement to do?

Interviewee: [laughter] It could. Doesn't really need to, though. It's not the worst thing in the world but if it were a little bit easier I wouldn't have to keep referring to the email.

Interviewer: Let me ask you this: why did you choose the pieces that you chose to upload to that archive?

Interviewee: [Laughter] Do you have a record of which ones I chose?

Interviewer: I have no idea what you chose.

Interviewee: [laughter] Oh. That would've been useful.

Interviewer: [Laughter] Do you remember?

Interviewee: I have no idea what the pieces were but I remember when it says to pick one from this semester I go, "Okay, which classes was I in?" and then I look through my documents on my computer. Then, I go alphabetically and like, "No, maybe. Egh."

Just trying to pick one that makes you look like a good writer and one that you were proud of sort of thing. Then, also attempting to get different styles. Yeah, really just picking one that I liked and then realizing I didn't like most of my writing for the semester. [laughter]

Interviewer: Do you remember one example of writing that you didn't like and why you didn't like it?

Interviewee: Hmm. If it's a really short writing assignment I don't put as much effort into it so I usually don't like those. They don't say much; they don't really show anything. I guess most classes, if they have a longer paper, it's one time at the end of the semester and you take four or five classes. One of mine is always Chinese language so take that off the list sort of thing.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

Interviewee: [Laughter] You only have a couple papers that you really put effort into to turn in. Then, when the study asks for the shorter writings I'm like, "Oh, great."

Interviewer: [Laughter]

Interviewee: Like, "Yeah, enjoy that one."

Interviewer: [Laughter] What was it like looking back over the old writing and uploading some of it for the study?

Interviewee: I love that. Now that I'm a senior I realize that you took so many classes and that you really don't remember a lot of them. When it says think of—you get little blips of, "Oh, I remember writing that piece about the hawk," sort of thing. I probably uploaded that one 'cuz that was a good time once I figured out what he wanted. I think it's really—it's pretty nostalgic to realize what you wrote.

It's just a fun little process trip down memory lane for me. I liked that. I liked being forced to see what you had written and then if you're like, "Oh, let's look at what that one is about." Then, in retrospect judging your writing and seeing do you still think it was a good paper? Do you definitely see room for improvement? I thought it was fun.

Interviewer: When you were looking at those little papers did—like room for improvement where?

Interviewee: [Laughter]

Interviewer: How have you grown?

Interviewee: [laughter] Spelling.

Interviewer: Spelling?

Interviewee: Yeah, 'cuz I don't read over it before I submit it and so if I read closely now I'm like, "Oh, wow. Really?" If a key was too close or so—which keys are close? I don't know. If you do "on" instead of "of" sort of thing—

Interviewer: Right.

Interviewee: - you're just like, "What?"

Interviewer: Right.

Interviewee: [Laughter] You're like, "Really?" Just slight disappointment there. You're like, "Darn it."

Interviewer: [Laughter] So spelling?

Interviewee: More or less, yeah.

Interviewer: Looking back, that process—did it make you think differently about your writing?

Interviewee: [laughter] It makes me think I probably should do my own spell check before I submit them. When I see the spelling I'm like, "Oh, maybe I should start checking for that." Even with my Honors thesis it's 30 pages and I got so—I was like, "I am so done reading this." You get to the point where you've seen it so many times that you know your eyes are not gonna catch everything anyway.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

Interviewee: [laughter] That you're not gonna process it the same way as if someone was reading it for the first time. It's hard [laughter]. That's why I don't really edit 'cuz I know I'm gonna read it as if it's correct even if it's not. Just thinking I probably should attempt it a few more times.

Interviewer: [Laughter] Finally, what do you think instructors should know about teaching writing at the undergraduate level?

Interviewee: I think they should—they shouldn't accept when students at Michigan make very basic mistakes like confusing "your" and "you're" and "there," "their" and "they're." At this level that's really horrible. I think that's one of the—it makes you look stupid. You shouldn't be doing that at this academic level. You shouldn't be doing that if you're admitted to the University of Michigan.

I think that teachers, especially for first-year writing, should focus on that and not just let it slip by. They should let students know that that is something that they need to work on. I think that could help a lot with overall writing to—for sounding more intelligent, even.

Interviewer: Any other comments you have about your experience with writing at the University of Michigan? Has it been a good experience in general?

Interviewee: In general—

Interviewer: Or a bad experience?

Interviewee: - yes except for this comm class. It's just annoying me because he keeps saying that my writing's not clear but English isn't his first language so I'm sorry that I use more advance sentence structures that aren't clear to a non-native speaker. It's just very frustrating because I think I'm doing good writing and then he's dinging me because he's not comprehending it but I don't think it's incomprehensible.

Interviewer: What course is that again?

Interviewee: It's [title of course].

Interviewer: Okay.

Interviewee: It's [Communications course], [Asian course], [International course]; cross listed on those three.

Interviewer: That's been kind of a—?

Interviewee: Yeah, that's been an extremely negative experience because when you grow as a writer you start to make your sentence structures more complex. You put them in—you put your sentences in orders that aren't as basic and so for a non-native speaker I understand how that's harder to read but that's how I write. I don't write for an elementary audience so it's very—seeing that feedback from him just boggles my mind.

I'm like, "I don't know what to do for you." I don't know how to dumb my writing down to put it in basic English form for you. I feel bad saying this but I really do attribute it to the fact that he's a non-native speaker.

Interviewer: Have you gone to his office hours and talked to him about this?

Interviewee: No. I emailed him because that's basically the biggest comments he's had on my writing and I find huge issue with the fact that he hasn't provided feedback throughout the semester on it. Twice throughout the course we had to closely read the articles and then facilitate the discussion for the class. We had to submit our write up for that; just the main points of the article, discussion questions and our review of the study.

We did that twice and Tuesday night—like 10:00 P.M. on Tuesday—I get both my assignments graded. I had an 82 on the first and an 81 on the second. Clearly, I didn't improve but how could I if I had never seen what he was looking for between the first and the second one? I wrote him a very nice email explaining that there was no room for improvement in this course and therefore I'm very concerned about my grade because he's only really given me B minuses.

As a graduating senior wanting to apply to law school that's not really gonna work for me. It's just upset me that there's been no feedback; not potential to improve your grade in his eyes. My thesis advisor loves my writing. I have an A+ in one of her courses and an A in the colloquium where I started the thesis. She loves my writing and then this professor apparently can't understand what I'm saying.

Interviewer: Interesting.

Interviewee: That's a bad experience I've had at the university that literally every professor has different expectations so every time you try to improve as a writer you take the whole semester to try improve and then you get a new professor who expects something different and you have to adapt your writing. I think that stunts growth because you're so stuck in, 'What's this professor gonna approve of?' —

Interviewer: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

Interviewee: - that you don't really get to improve as much overall because everyone expects something different. One professor loves my writing; the other doesn't even know what I'm saying. To go from the professor who loves my writing, says I'm doing great and then to go to a professor who doesn't understand that's like making backwards progress for me.

Interviewer: Yeah, I can see that as being frustrating.

Interviewee: Good times.

Interviewer: [Laughter] Well, I think that's it. Thank you very much.

Interviewee: Thank you.

Interviewer: It's always fun to talk about writing.

Interviewee: [Laughter] I can—?

[End of Audio]