

What Makes This So Hard? Episode 4, Pro Tip: Start a Writing Group

Kristin Raub:

Welcome back to What Makes This So Hard. I'm Kristin Raub and today we have Jen Santoro. Jen, would you want to introduce yourself?

Jen Santoro:

Sure. Thanks so much, Kristin. I am currently a fourth year PhD candidate in the Rubenstein School here at UVM. I work with Dr. Tony D'Amato in the Applied Forestry Ecology Lab, [00:00:30] and my research largely focuses on forest management and modeling forest responses to climate change. I use a ton of different tools, GIS, remote sensing, statistics, to assess the long-term outcomes of adaptive forest management practices in New England. I look at things like forest health, species composition, ecosystem services, and then how climate change might affect all of that. I'm currently a visiting assistant professor in the Department of Geography and the Environment at Villanova. [00:01:00] I'm teaching GIS classes and Environmental Science as I wrap up my dissertation.

Kristin Raub:

That's particularly challenging - having a job and trying to finish your dissertation at the same time. Could you maybe speak to some of the challenges that you faced? And maybe how you found ways to overcome them?

Jen Santoro:

Sure thing. Time management has been one of the biggest challenges so far with having this full-time job at Villanova and still fitting in time for my dissertation, getting things done and hopefully graduating [00:01:30] in the near future. For me, the time management issues I think started, or at least came to light, after I finished with classes and TA-ing at UVM. I had this nice structured schedule that I was used to from undergrad and a very class heavy Master's program. And then suddenly, I had this full open day of independently structured time. No classes, no TA duties, nothing to block off the hours. It was like, "Oh, look [00:02:00] a free for all." I wasn't very good at handling that. I wasn't particularly productive when that first hit my plate.

So, I learned very quickly that although I work well independently and by myself, these large blocks of unstructured time were not great for me. I also know that personally estimating the amount of time something is going to take is something I'm terrible at. I've never been good at it.

Kristin Raub:

Me too.

Jen Santoro:

I think [00:02:30] that on top of the large blocks of unstructured time made this time management problem particularly stick out for me.

Kristin Raub:

Yeah. That's a challenge, they call it, the ABD, All But Dissertation land, where you have this big, giant, very heavy stakes deadline that's fairly amorphous, and then all of this time to try to do it. And there's not really a whole lot of small checks. That's not like classes where there's a lot of short-term reward to that. It's where you have a paper it's due here and the stakes are high so you must [00:03:00] do it. But now it's sort of, you have, at least for me, I've been ABD for at least a year now. So, it'll be probably two years between ABD and when I actually defend. So, that's two years of unstructured time and learning how to deal with that is very, very difficult.

Jen Santoro:

Yeah. And I'm on a similar schedule with you Kristin. When I defended... did I defend something in September? Gosh I don't know. [crosstalk 00:03:21] I don't know but there was deadlines of getting a proposal and all that stuff. I like [00:03:30] deadlines. I love deadlines. I give a lot of them to my students right now. That's my love of deadline. So, there's the lack of hard and fast deadlines. Amorphous is the perfect word for it. It's amorphous, it's something you're working towards, but it's just like this nebulous blob in the sky.

Kristin Raub:

Yes. I guess, maybe we should just preface this as Jen and I do a writing group together. That's sort of why we're chatting. For a while personally, [00:04:00] when I was in this land, I was recommended a book and I found out that this whole giant ABD land, where time is very important and unimportant all at the same time, there's a lot of research on that. And one of the things that I came across is that having a writing buddy and a writing group is actually a good way to create that structure for yourself. So, I guess Jen, you want to maybe speak to your experiences in this writing group that we've been doing together?

Jen Santoro:

Sure thing. Yeah. I crave structure. I love structure. I'm obsessed [00:04:30] with structure. So, this writing group to me, I was like, "Yes. Double yes. Very much yes." I was all about this. Kristin and I are good friends anyway, so the opportunity to spend more time with a friend is of course always welcome. It actually has solved a lot of my time management, personal struggles as well.

I think one of the things to be upfront about is that I don't know if I would say that I absolutely subscribe to this and would go out and preach it but I think I did [00:05:00] treat writing as a solitary activity. Just thinking like, it's not like I don't like to write, I don't know that I love to write, but I don't hate to write either. I was just kind of in this middle gray area with writing. It's like, "Oh, I have to do it thing." It's nice to kind of sum up all the statistics and GIS I've been working on, but it wasn't like, "I love the writing stuff." It was just that I have to do to get the degree.

Kristin Raub:

That is definitely a big myth, that writing is a solitary [00:05:30] activity. And to me that's one of the biggest benefits of the writing group, because actually you add a bit of social life into the writing process. But I guess actually to begin, Jen, do you want to describe for everybody what our writing group looks like and how it works?

Jen Santoro:

I think it was fall 2018 when we started getting together for a writing group and Kristin, I believe you were the one who proposed it after reading that book you had just mentioned.

Kristin Raub:

Demystifying Dissertation Writing, if anybody is interested, I highly recommend it.

Jen Santoro:

Yes. So, [00:06:00] we combined our need to write and our love of coffee and met up at Henderson's. I think we started once a week, Friday mornings, for two hours. And we would just pick a table in a quiet corner, get our caffeinated beverage of choice, sit down. And what I like, when we started right from the beginning, was we would tell each other what we were working on and what we hoped to achieve that day. I think that really helped not only to stay on track, but so that we could at least have [00:06:30] somebody to celebrate or share our little accomplishments with and celebrate them at the end of the writing group.

That's how it all started. We started ramping this up, maybe doing twice a week when the schedule allowed. When I moved to Pennsylvania, we kept writing group going. We used Gmail and chat on Gmail and it's transitioned. It's one of the few things maybe that has transitioned very well in this new pandemic [00:07:00] world we live in. We're starting to do writing group as normal. Kristin, do you want to fill in any more details on what you and I do during writing group?

Kristin Raub:

Yeah. I would say to me, my favorite part too, is we always spend the first, I don't know, 15 to 30 minutes just chatting and catching up with each other. And I think because Jen and I are friends, it's really nice to be able to just be completely honest with where we are in our PhDs, because in grad school alone, there's many ups and downs. So, it's nice to be able to celebrate those wins. And also just commiserate on those, I wouldn't say losses, but just those times when you're kind of questioning your [00:07:30] sanity a little bit.

Jen Santoro:

[inaudible 00:07:31].

Kristin Raub:

Yeah. So, that's been really nice and sometimes it's like 15 minutes, we get right to work. I think we took a break for about a week, somewhere over the pandemic when we came back, I think we caught up for about an hour. But it's nice to be able to let it wax and wane and flow with what you need to. And once you get that out of your system, I don't know why, but I am just so productive during writing time.

So, we usually just specify... like lately I've been coding a lot of papers for a systematic literature review. So, my goal pretty religiously now has been, "I'm going to code [00:08:00] one paper." And then at the end, we set some check in time and then we check in again to say, "How did you do?" And then sometimes, I'll be able to offer advice or Jen can offer advice if I didn't really meet my goal or something. Or congratulate each other if we did meet the goal, et cetera.

And then, we usually spend the last like five minutes just making a plan for when we're going to meet next. But I think it's been really nice too, we've been able to pick different locations because sometimes there's the monotony of grad school. Being in the same place in the same time [00:08:30] constantly, which obviously during a pandemic, this is not possible right now, but we were at least able to sometimes work at New Moon downtown. That was really great.

We could work at Henderson's. In the hospital, there's a really great cafe, that's really quiet in the morning. So, if we have an early writing group, we'd work there. Sometimes being able to pick a different location, maybe that has a special beverage that you like or something. Or then remotely too, it has been really nice to be able to transition if you can't physically be on campus sometimes. That flexibility has been really wonderful as well. So, just [00:09:00] getting in that social fun part too also is something that's maybe not so fun it's been like a good little psychological trick, I would say, because I actually look forward to it versus dreading writing.

Jen Santoro:

Definitely. And it's like you said earlier, because it's nice to get a little bit of stuff off your chest before you dive into the writing. It doesn't let that emotional weight of whatever's on your mind then hold you back quite as much. Like "I've talked to Kristin about something, I feel a little bit better getting it off my chest." So now, my mind is freer from that [00:09:30] to really dive into my writing and do a good job on the science.

Kristin Raub:

Yeah. And we all know too that your life personal stuff definitely comes in and impacts your writing as well. So, just sometimes having a friend there to just be able to bridge that gap a little bit. And that might segue into our next section in terms of what advice we would have to somebody who's trying to start their own writing group. But I really enjoy the fact that Jen and I aren't just work-professional writing colleagues. We're also friends so that when you do have something happen in your life, you can spend those [00:10:00] first 30 minutes just commiserating because then it... for me, at least, it lets me get it off my mind and just feel supported and better about it. And then I can move on and actually be way more productive in my own writing time. I don't know, Jen, if you found the same.

Jen Santoro:

Definitely. Yeah. I think it helps a lot that you and I we're friends first and writing group buddies second. Jives with both of our personalities really well just to have someone to chat to and then someone to hold accountable and someone to be very honest with. [00:10:30] I also really like the accountability because Kristin is a friend and somebody I very highly respect. I will not disappoint her.

If some kind of emergency situation comes up and I can't make it to writing group. I am always going to make it to writing group and put my best foot forward, because I want to be able to get work done. Tell Kristen what I got done. Celebrate these little mini successes like, "I wrote a paragraph today. You know what, that manuscript, that's great." So, I think it really puts it in [00:11:00] a nice context for me where I don't want to just blow things off because I respect Kristin and it's made it a lot more fun, because I talk to somebody I trust and respect and I'm friends with about where I am in my degree program.

Kristin Raub:

Agreed. I will also say that to me, we usually have our writing group in the morning, the time varies, lately, it's usually been 9:00 to 11:00, but during the semester it's more, I don't know, 8:00 or 8:30 sometimes. And for me, it's the getting out of bed factor, like [00:11:30] there's mornings when you're just tired and knowing that I was going to go have writing group with Jen actually got me out of bed. And even if it was remote, just to sit at my computer and do the writing and I feel like I've gotten so much more done just because we've had that accountability. Which, I think would also segue into one of our pieces of advice.

Jen and I's writing group is only the two of us. And I think we would definitely recommend that you also keep your writing group small. I would say, we could probably accommodate a third person, but I wouldn't do more than that. And I think that would just be because knowing myself, if I was in a group of five or [00:12:00] 10 people and I didn't want to get up in the morning, I'd be like, "Yeah, but everybody else will be there. I don't really feel like I need to go." So, I wouldn't be as accountable, but I think just because it is only Jen and I, I know that if I don't show up, then I've wasted her time too. That keeps me accountable. And I think if it was any more than three, I would lose that accountability factor personally.

Jen Santoro:

I agree. I think with a larger number, with three, I don't think this would rock the boat too much, but with a larger number, you lose a little bit of that, like [00:12:30] catching up with anybody, that personal connection that we really like at the beginning. That's my feeling on larger groups. And I think it could work with some personality types, but I'm really happy that it's just the two of us.

Kristin Raub:

I think another thing I like too, is the fact that even though Jen and I are actually both in the same school, we're both in the Rubenstein School, we study completely different things. She does Forestry, I study Coastal resilience. So, they basically don't overlap at all, except that they slightly got a resilience component to them. So, it's actually kind of nice because we don't commiserate [00:13:00] on research at all. Like I can't say, "Oh, I don't know the nitty-gritties of her forestry work or people in her lab or specifically what it's like working with her advisor." So actually, there's a slight distance to it, which I find really nice as well.

Jen Santoro:

I do appreciate that.

Kristin Raub:

We're not saying you can't work with somebody specifically within your lab, but I do think that there are slight advantages to having somebody who's close, but not too close.

Jen Santoro:

I agree. I think one note on the closeness though, is I really appreciate that Kristin and I are at a similar place in our program. So, even [00:13:30] though we do very different research, we are both at this ABD step. I did my proposal defense, I think earlier than you did Kristin, but that's really a factor of how my advisor likes to structure things. I wouldn't say it really related at all to how much work we had done on

our dissertations. I feel like we're very much at a similar point in our degrees, where we're both looking to defend within the year. So, we're both at the same kind of [00:14:00] maybe mental and dissertating state that we can commiserate and bounce ideas off of each other on some of these PhD deadlines and assignments as well.

Kristin Raub:

And I think it's been nice too, that we kind of finished classes in a similar timeframe. I don't remember if that was the same time or just a semester off, but it was nice that when we're working, it's actually commiserating on dissertation stuff. And I feel like we're kind of in similar places in terms of... obviously, the data we're working with is very different, but similar rates [00:14:30] of where we are in the research versus where we are the writing. And I think you're looking to graduate maybe somewhere over the summer, I'm looking over the fall. It's slightly staggered, but it's not like one of us is in the middle of classes, not thinking about research and the other one is. I think that's also been really nice, that level of commiseration and our goals are I think rather similar as well.

Jen Santoro:

Definitely.

Kristin Raub:

So, I think generally, the advice would be to just choose your writing buddy wisely. I think generally, we've kind of touched on these things, but Jen and I happen to be very similar [00:15:00] people in a lot of ways. And I think that's been really helpful as we both take writing the same amount of serious. We both value our catch up and chat time, the exact same amount. We both like deadlines and goals and things. And I think that has made us very compatible writing partners. But I think that, that would probably be something very challenging if Jen really had no capacity for small talk and just wanted to get into writing, but that's happened to be something that I very much enjoy that would be a difficult thing.

Or if one person couldn't really commit to a schedule and [00:15:30] would often blow it off that kind of commitment probably wouldn't be compatible unless you happen to both be the same way. So I think, even though you might be really good friends with somebody, I think choosing particularly for this, because it is so important for... at least it's been very important for my progress, taking that consideration very, very carefully.

Jen Santoro:

Yeah. Making sure you both mesh or the three or four or five of you mesh, if you want to have a larger group.

Kristin Raub:

Yes, exactly. But just have a very clear understanding and very clear communication about what your expectations are because [00:16:00] to me, it's been such a game changer. I just want somebody else to... I take it seriously - I would just want somebody else to take it as seriously as I did. Or if I wasn't taking it seriously, it would be annoying to work with somebody who did.

I think another piece of advice would be having a plan and a schedule, but also having the wisdom to know when you need to break it is important too. Like, just because we typically have, I don't know, 15

to 30 minutes of catch up in the beginning, and our writing sessions are approximately two hours each. So, it's a solid hour and a half of writing usually. Sometimes less [00:16:30] is more, like if we've caught up a lot, maybe we'll just only do 15 minutes of catch up, but then there's definitely times when something happens or you just need to catch up more. So I think, not holding yourself too strict when things need to happen it's needed. And I think there's been a few times we've needed to cancel on each other, but not usually, but I think it's important not to beat yourself up with that it has to happen.

Jen Santoro:

Yeah. I think the canceling has been rare and life influences writing, writing influences life. It's hard to really separate those two. [00:17:00] So, if one of us has something on our mind and we just need to get it out, it takes a little longer than 15 minutes, but the two of us are... This is a space, a group where that's still a productive use of our time. Even if it takes away from that chunk of writing time, I think just as humans who have emotions and needs, this really helps to keep us focused on getting the dissertation done, even if it means a slightly shorter amount of time that particular session.

Kristin Raub:

So, because I've read so many different [00:17:30] books on dissertations and writing, many, many of them mention this writing group. And a lot of the common advice that they give is, "Yes, you can spend time generically working with each other, but making sure that you keep the writing group time specifically for work related to your dissertation." And to me, I like to broaden the definition of writing as to be literally any version of work that actually pushes you towards that ultimate goal. So for me, I've been coding papers for my systematic literature review.

And while that's not physical writing in the narrative sense, it is [00:18:00] something that needs to happen for me to be able to do writing. But for example, I don't spend writing group time checking email or working on my Writing center projects et cetera. So I think, that's really important too, making sure that you're actually taking the time to work on your dissertation writing projects because I know for me, it's very, very easy to pick the things that have shorter deadlines that are much lower stakes because they're fun to complete, because it gives you a little satisfaction. But I think making sure that you're using writing group time for dissertation is really the most important part.

Jen Santoro:

[00:18:30] That's a great point. I've spent quite a few writing groups writing code instead of writing paragraph, citations and using Zotero or whatever. I've done a lot of code writing, but it's all to get that dissertation done. And I think putting aside, I know I struggle to put down email, that is an ongoing challenge for me too, but yes, I live, I literally live for checking things off of my to do list. It gives me such a [00:19:00] little rush to put that check mark on the page.

It is hard for the dissertation to do that because it's such a nebulous long term thing. It's easy to check off of, reply to this email from your colleague at Villanova. I agree with Kristin, you have to put that down. It's writing time. You can reply to that email at 11 o'clock, nobody's going to come punch you down and yell at you for not replying to an email at 9:00 AM instead of 11:00 AM.

Kristin Raub:

But I [00:19:30] will say I do put writing group on my to do list and then I am able to check it off after we're done. So, that's always satisfying as well.

Jen Santoro:

That is true. I think [inaudible 00:19:37] it's always the first thing on my to do list too.

Kristin Raub:

I know. And hence, that's why we're compatible because we're both nerds for checklists.

Jen Santoro:

Checklists [inaudible 00:00:19:45].

Kristin Raub:

Indeed. My final question to almost everybody is, I know you yourself are not a writing consultant, but you have used the Writing Center before. How has the Writing Center helped you in your own dissertation journey?

Jen Santoro:

[00:20:00] I will say that I had a few preconceived notions or misconceptions about Writing Centers in general. And my big one was that I always felt that I had to have a complete draft before coming to the Writing Center. So, draft, not perfect, not polished that's okay but complete being the operative word there. Everything had to be written in paragraphs, sections, and if I'm talking about say, a manuscript, [00:20:30] I had to have that intro, methods, discussion, everything all written out. And maybe my figures weren't complete but I had to have the text there. And that was a huge roadblock for me. It's hard to get the whole thing written out. That's a big challenge for me.

Kristin Raub:

Yes. Me too.

Jen Santoro:

Word document is pretty darn daunting. One other thing, this is like a dumb moment, I might've have actually head-desked, [00:21:00] was Kristin suggesting... I was really struggling to get a start on my second manuscript, and Kristin suggested like, "Oh, if you have a bulleted list of ideas, just come with that." And I was like, "Really? Can I do that?" I don't know, I was cautiously skeptical, I'm not skeptical of Kristin, but I was like, "I didn't know you can do that." You told me. So, I did just that. I [00:21:30] signed up for an appointment with Kristin and came with literally one page of bullet points in Microsoft Word of ideas for my second manuscript, and big, broad picture things, my argument, what I wanted to talk about, some of the evidence to back it up, and it was, was it half an hour or an hour Kristin? The time-

Kristin Raub:

Probably an hour.

Jen Santoro:

Probably an hour?

Kristin Raub:

Most appointments ran for about an hour. And I think we were on time on that.

Jen Santoro:

It felt like five minutes.

Kristin Raub:

I know. They fly, especially when you're working [00:22:00] on cool stuff.

Jen Santoro:

For sure. And this is invasive insects, forest management, it gets into the silviculture and Kristin is not a silviculturist.

Kristin Raub:

Not at all.

Jen Santoro:

But it was a productive appointment, because Kristin didn't need to be a silviculturist to sit there and dissect, "Why are you making this argument?" And I had to go back and fill in some of those pieces that sometimes I take for granted just talking to my lab group who are all silviculturists. [00:22:30] And really defend why I wanted to do this work, why I was making the points that I was, how it solved the problem that was not present in the literature, how I filled my hole for this manuscript. And so, Kristin was really able to challenge me to verbally articulate that. And we took a lot of notes in that software that you're both on, it's like Google Docs, but for the Writing Center, what is that called Kristin?

Kristin Raub:

It's just the Writing Center online platform. [00:23:00] We also use Zoom a lot nowadays, quite honestly, we use Google Docs a lot. It's just basically a platform where two people can edit at the same time, you can see each other's writing. So, it's really helpful.

Jen Santoro:

But that was super helpful. So, we in an hour, talked it all out. Kristin did most of the typing, full disclosure, but an entire bulleted outlined list with the whole structure for this manuscript introduction, every paragraph had a topic sentence, [00:23:30] several bullet ideas of what to talk about underneath that topic sentence. And I've been using that to write my introduction. And let me tell you, it was way less painful than writing the introduction section for my first manuscript. I do not like writing introduction sections. So, I just go ahead and assume they're all painful, but this was largely not, thanks to the Writing Center and Kristin.

Kristin Raub:

I'll say two things. Number one, even though I did most of the typing, those weren't my words. I was literally just writing [00:24:00] down what you were saying, and that's pretty common for any writing appointment too. What I write is usually just what I hear. And that's actually a really helpful practice too, you can just talk and then somebody else captures what you say because how many times do you say, "Oh man, what did I just say? That was so great." So, you have somebody there to capture it, which is great.

And then the other thing too is even though you came in with a bulleted list, there's people who come in and they don't have anything. And I've done that too, where I'm like, "Okay, I think I have a story, but I just need to talk it out with somebody." And I have zero things written down and just being able to talk and then somebody does [00:24:30] site. When I am the consultee and not the consultant, I'll just talk and somebody will write down what I say. And it's that same process. And once I learned that, that was an option, I use it all the time, it's just magic to me and I love it. So, I love sharing it with other people who might not know that it exists as well, because it just saves me so much time and time is what we all need.

Jen Santoro:

Definitely. And I think I had to get over myself and I thought that, "Oh, if I just showed up with a bulleted list, I was not doing my homework before coming to the Writing Center. And then I was wasting this consultant's time." And that is not [00:25:00] the case at all. It was immensely helpful for me. And I'd like to think it fulfilled the whole point of having a Writing Center appointment because it made that writing process much easier to talk it through with Kristin and have that outline with the topic sentences.

Kristin Raub:

For sure. And I'll just preface that by saying there is no singular point to a writing appointment. There are so many, I've had many, many writing appointments and I don't know if two have ever been quite the same. It's usually just whatever somebody needs. And I've had [00:25:30] people come in and just lament about how awful writing is and this class is horrible and they don't know if they can meet the time. And just that honest ability to just... It's almost like writing therapy. You just have a conversation and I've always been there to... there's never been a situation where I'm like, "What, I don't know what you're talking about." So, it's just being able to commiserate and help people figure out how to get back on track just because I've been there or worse than I've been able to figure out how to get myself out of a hole. And I would love to make somebody's time getting themselves out of holes easier.

Maybe it sounds weird but [00:26:00] that's the truth. The whole point is I've never gone to a writing appointment and had somebody say, "Sorry, we can't help you with that." So, there's help to be found always.

I'd also like to mention that the Writing Center, even though the physical Writing Center is closed right now, we still have plenty of online appointments available. And then even over the summer, at least myself and I think one other consultant will be on call for appointments. I'm not quite sure if those are going to be by request or if there'll be a physical calendar up yet, but either way, if you go to the appointment [00:26:30] calendar, there'll be information for how you book those. So, there's definitely

still help to be found. So Jen, once again, I'd just like to thank you for chatting with me today as always. It's been really great talking with you.

Jen Santoro:

Thanks so much for having me on the podcast, Kristin. This was a lot of fun and I guess I will see you Wednesday, when we write.

Kristin Raub:

Yes, indeed. All right. Well, that concludes our podcast for today. So, happy writing.

Jen Santoro:

Happy writing.