

## What Makes This So Hard? Transitioning to Graduate Writing

Kristin Raub: 00:10

Hi, I'm Kristin [Rob 00:00:11]. You may remember me from last episode of What Makes This So Hard, where we talked about the myths of dissertation and thesis writing. In the rest of this series we are going to bring in different people who are either just defending or have recently defended their own masters or dissertations and learn more about their personal experiences. So today, we have with us Kelly Gray. Kelly, do you want to introduce yourself?

Kelly Gray: 00:34

Hi, thanks for having me. I am an Accelerated Master's student in English, and I can hopefully, today, provide some insight into both the Accelerated Master's Programs at UVM and also writing a thesis in the humanities.

Kristin Raub: 00:49

Cool. Could you tell us more about your particular research and also specifically what an Accelerated Master's Program is?

Kelly Gray: 00:57

Yeah, I'll start the latter question. So an Accelerated Master's Program is really a four plus one type of a program. And that means that the last year of a traditional four year undergraduate degree would actually count twice for a graduate credit as well. And for my own personal experience, that has meant in English, and so my last year, my senior year of undergrad actually also counted as my first year of my master's program, but I did that even stranger, in that I graduated the semester early for undergrad. So my senior spring, as people would call it, was actually full time graduate student. So that was a very stressful time, but really what the Accelerated Master's Program allows students to do is to start completing graduate credit on what is really just an accelerated timeline and allows students to start engaging with graduate level writing assignments beginning at the end of their undergraduate careers.

And so, for me, what that meant is that my senior year I started really questioning what it was I wanted to write about in my master's thesis after I decided that I did want to do so. And I ended up writing my master's thesis about Bach team ecocriticism, and then this post-modern novel, *White Noise* by Don DeLillo. And what that meant is that I really had to learn about all of these things in a very, very compressed period of time. And so what I think really defines the accelerated experience is just the process of self correcting and really learning as you go. And that's something we can talk about a lot more as it relates to the thesis writing process.

Kristin Raub: 02:38

Yeah, that does sound really challenging. Because, I mean, that's the beauty of a dissertation is you get so many years to figure things out, like, I'm currently in my fourth year and I can't imagine basically in a year and a half having to decide you want to do this very high level project and that's just, anyway, props to you. That's very challenging.

Kelly Gray: 02:56

Thank you. What it really meant, I think, in practice, is that what you initially envisioned is not at all what you eventually produce. And that's a really rewarding thing in that you're constantly learning and

constantly, again, self-correcting as you go, but you have to be flexible with yourself then in allowing yourself to explore new ideas and realize that what you initially envisioned was limited by the scope of what you had previously known then. And so the more you read, the more you learn, and the more you start questioning what you initially thought. A great process, but a very tiring one on that accelerated timeline.

Kristin Raub: 03:33

And I think also those challenges really get back to that concept of what does being an expert mean, because I think, I mean, as I personally experienced, what was meant of being an expert as an undergrad versus what it meant as a master's student or even a PhD student, those are actually two to three different levels of knowledge. I mean, did you have any experience with that, Kelly?

Kelly Gray: 03:54

Yeah, absolutely. That was probably the most challenging thing for me in making that transition. And that I felt like especially within the humanities, what you're asked to address in your writing assignments for undergraduate programs is really that what your professor curates for you. You're asked to address certain texts or certain theories as you've had them introduced within the really curated realm of a course description. But then in a graduate writing assignments, such as a master's thesis, you really have to justify yourself why you're including what you choose to include. And because the scope of that is so much larger, you have to be a lot more specific in that what you are intending to become the expert on. And so as I think that a lot of people discuss in graduate writing, it's this dual move of becoming a lot more specialized in your scope, but also a lot more in depth in the expertise that you're trying to curate for yourself. So it's a really interesting thing to try to do at once.

Kristin Raub: 04:58

That's got to be challenging. Because I mean, even myself, I'm in my fourth year and I'm only now starting to feel like an expert, but that is the challenge, though. With undergrad, you're handed knowledge of which you need to become an expert of, but when you're in any version of grad school, the emphasis really focuses or changes to you producing new knowledge. And I think that takes time and having to do that in basically a year in those accelerated programs, I can't imagine how challenging that would be.

Kelly Gray: 05:26

I mean, at least personally, I think that imposter syndrome is really the reigning effect of the graduate experience, which it's a universal experience, but I think also the idea that you are a constant student in teaching yourself new things is rewarding. And what that really looked like for me is that I was writing about things that I was learning at the time. So my initial thesis perspectives was way off from what I eventually wrote as my actual thesis project. So I really just had to learn to be forgiving with myself then, and also to realize that you only know at the time what you know. And I think what was really challenging then is that I was constantly petrified that I was accidentally plagiarizing someone, and that what my brainchild was actually already the full adult career of some other scholar.

So I was really afraid that everything that I was writing had been done before and done better. And so, really finding my little niche was really the project of my summer before writing. And I really didn't start

writing my thesis until the fall of my second year of my master's program. So the first full graduate year in the traditional accelerate master's structure, and the advice that one advisor really gave to me just repeatedly over email was, "That's great, but stop reading and start writing, because eventually you have to start to actually write your thesis," as stupid as that sounds.

Kristin Raub: 07:01

No, it's hard. I mean, that's the whole point. I feel like that's universal of all grad work is when have you read enough. Because that's the challenges that it takes a certain level of expertise to know exactly how much you don't know, and that's a really debilitating feeling, but you also need to acknowledge that at least, you know enough to know that. So you have to [inaudible 00:07:20] the strength and be able to work through that and actually physically start putting pen to paper. So I guess for that, Kelly, how are you able to first start writing your thesis, was there any strategies that you used?

Kelly Gray: 07:32

Yeah, this is something that comes up a lot in the Writing Center, the idea of just breaking a larger task down into smaller, more manageable ideas. And that really manifested for me in making the switch from writing, write thesis in my planner to write chapter one intro or just breaking things down into actual steps that I could reasonably accomplish within a day. And that it really helped me to break down what I envisioned for my thesis into smaller chunks. So I went from write thesis to you have six chapters that you're going to write. You're going to start by writing the intro to your first chapter and breaking it down theoretically in that way. So that way I can then structure, and also allowing myself to know that I'm going to be revising it as I go.

And also, one other really useful thing I found was just changing my framework and how I was envisioning what this project was doing. Because what I thought of at first was that my master's thesis was going to be the defining thing for my academic lifetime, which is just simply not true, especially if you're going on to pursue a future work in a higher education setting. And so reframing it in my mind as just another step in a process of academic exploration was really useful. So that way I wasn't trying to do everything in one project. Because you can't, and I learned that really the hard way, at first, I would say.

Kristin Raub: 09:08

Well, I think that was actually a piece of advice, or I forgot, it's a quote from somewhere and I don't know where it comes from, but it's somewhere someone said that "Your master's or dissertation should be the worst thing that you will ever write, because everything that you write in the future should be better." And there's somehow a lot of freedom in that concept.

Kelly Gray: 09:24

Yeah, absolutely. I had one professor one time talk about how this one scholar's first book was their best work, and what an awful thing that is to say about someone.

Kristin Raub: 09:35

Yeah, for sure.

Kelly Gray: 09:37

And it was freeing in that way, I agree. And that, I hope that my master's thesis isn't all that I'll ever accomplish.

Kristin Raub: 09:46

Oh, no, of course not. I mean, you just said it yourself, you were just accepted into a PhD program, so there definitely are.

Kelly Gray: 09:51

Thank you.

Kristin Raub: 09:53

Congratulations again.

Kelly Gray: 09:54

A lot more to self-correct in the future, constant student.

Kristin Raub: 09:58

Oh, my God. Yes. I mean, aren't we all? Beautiful, it definitely is. I don't know not to segue into this, but the other concept that I constantly think about is just asking myself the question of, what is enough? Which goes back to your theme of, "Is this going to be the biggest, most perfect thing ever?" And also it's sometimes challenging with your relationship with your advisor.

Kelly Gray: 09:58

Yeah, absolutely.

Kristin Raub: 10:21

Because to me, I know earlier on I had a much higher standard for what that level of good enough was, before I would send it out. And I've definitely had the experience where, I mean, sometimes it's stress sometimes it's time, I'll just send things out because I have to, and the amount of comments that I don't get on certain sections really surprises me. And I think, especially with an Accelerated Master's Program time is of the essence. So I guess my advice, having not done an accelerated master's, but just as a person who's never left grad school would be, just send things out, wait for that advice. Your advisors are your advisors for a reason, they are experts. If you're missing a particular citation, if you are worried that you're plagiarizing somebody else's work, they're going to tell you, and it'll probably save you a lot of time as well. So, I think, constantly asking yourself what is enough and redefining that for yourself constantly throughout however long your academic career is, would be just, hey, I highly recommend that.

Kelly Gray: 11:15

Absolutely. One tongue in cheek comment that I had one advisor write on some earlier drafts of my thesis really related to it being an environmentalist piece of writing I was doing. And his comment was "Okay, but how does this save the planet." Which was a joke, but also a terrifying thing to really question for myself, and ask myself really, what is it that I was accomplishing. Because at once I was

trying to both write with a sense of gravity, but also write something at all and not let the pressure of saving the planet, or what have you way down on one piece of writing. And so again, I think just reframing what it is that you're trying to accomplish as just a beginning point in a larger project is really useful, a notes toward this purpose, rather than it being the final manifesto on a matter.

Kristin Raub: 12:12

For sure. So I guess, do you have any particular strategies when you are trying to figure out how much there is to know about a subject? Was there anything you were able to try?

Kelly Gray: 12:23

Yeah. One thing that I found really useful was just reading anthologies. That's pretty humanity specific, but as an accelerated student, I was trying to learn all these different fields at once that I was trying to then be able to enter into on a competent level. And for some of those interests that I was pursuing, I really hadn't had the opportunity to really experience them prior in my undergraduate experiences in classes or what have you. So having just these massive anthologies of just all the canonical texts are snippets of them, rather like essays on a certain topic was really useful in allowing me to explore a wide range of things in a pretty condensed period of time. And I found that really useful in just getting the lay of the land in terms of a theoretical field and where it has gone, and where it's been before, where it's heading all of those things.

I had one advisor, really recommend that I draw upon certain texts prior to the 1990s for environmental writing, having some from that time period, and also some more contemporary ones, just to make sure that I was aware of the more contemporary turns in thinking on the matter and being aware of that trajectory. So that way I wasn't reverting back to something that's been done before, done to death rather, and also making sure that I was contributing something new. Because that's really the jump from undergraduate to graduate level writing and that you're trying to produce knowledge rather than summarize it rather.

Kristin Raub: 13:54

And I was just going to add that the concept of reading an anthology definitely translates to many other fields, as an interdisciplinary scientist myself, I find that, especially when I'm trying to add an aspect of a new field that I don't need to necessarily be an expert in, but I need to be conversational about, writing review papers, or quite honestly, just going to the Wikipedia page will give you a lot of information in a very short amount of time. And as we all say, time is of the essence. So it's definitely great advice.

Kelly Gray: 14:21

Yeah. In reading the citations for good pieces, that's just like a spider web that you can go into that brings you to all these other pieces that will in all likelihood be really useful for you, which is something that I know is also a pretty common tool across all disciplines. But I found really useful and finding what was relevant for me to know as I was trying to learn it and write at the same time.

Kristin Raub: 14:47

So, I guess, was there any way in which the writing center specifically was helpful? Because I don't know if we introduced this, but Kelly Gray is also a writing consultant at the Graduate Writing Center, along with me.

Kelly Gray: 14:57

I think the idea of the writing your dissertation in 15 minutes a day, which is a book that we have on the shelf at the writing center, and also a guiding principle in how we try to help students actually tackle on these larger projects in a more reasonable, smaller task way was really useful for me. And also just the idea of a writing space appointment.

Kristin Raub: 15:20

And I think we should note too that that particular skill that you're talking about, we have a handout on the writing center website, it's called, Making a Smart Goal. It's an acronym, and I can't quite remember what it stands for right now, but it's that concept of breaking a morpheous giant task into something more concrete that's limited to a time you can actually know if you did it or not did it, it's very specific. I think that's what the [inaudible 00:15:45] is probably specific. Anyway, so it's a great handout, I highly recommend checking it out. And it's been a big game changer for myself using that skill. Is there anything else about an Accelerated Master's Program that you either found particularly difficult or actually even maybe made completing your masters possibly easier?

Kelly Gray: 16:02

One thing about starting a thesis on an accelerated timeline is that you're bound to not know what you're doing. That's just the reality of learning as you go. And I know that within my cohort, specifically in the AMP group, some people didn't choose to write a thesis because they were worried that they didn't have anything to write on, but I knew that I wanted to write a thesis just because I really wanted to have something at the end of it, to be able to learn those skills of writing a larger piece and taking that next step up from a seminar style paper. So I chose a thesis because I want to learn how to write one really, and also learn how to engage in an ongoing dialogue and contribute something new to it. But I think, really, if you're going to go on that route, but you just seem to be forgiving on yourself and knowing that what you initially set out to do will change, because what you know will change.

Kristin Raub: 17:02

And I think the universal trend in and of itself, is that you never quite know what you're going to learn next and how it's going to change your perspective. So I think that's the beauty and the challenge of grad school is that your learning is always evolving and you're always adopting new things and a certain level of open-mindedness is good, but then it's also challenging because in the end, what is enough and what is done?

Kelly Gray: 17:22

Yeah, absolutely.

Kristin Raub: 17:23

So, as long as you can be critical enough and know when to put it down and know when there is a next step, and you just need to finish this current step, and that's also where advisors in the writing center is

all very good, because sometimes, we're grad students, we like learning, so there's always more to learn. Great. Well, thank you, Kelly so much for chatting with me today. This has been really great.

Kelly Gray: 17:42

Yeah, thanks for having me.

Kristin Raub: 17:43

And with everything we've said today, we want to remind everybody that the Writing Center is still open for online appointments, even during all of this pandemic chaos. We don't want to harp on productivity too much, obviously, this is a crazy time for everyone, but we all know that life still goes on, and we both found much help in the writing center, and we hope that we can be help to you as well. So in the meantime, have a great day.