

# The Learning Curve

## Episode 12: Advancing Academic Writing with Pam Walter

### Presented by the Academic Commons

[00;00;00;04 - 00;00;13;11] **Jacob Santos**

Welcome to The Learning Curve, a podcast presented by the Academic Commons.

[00;00;13;13 - 00;00;16;16] **Jacob Santos**

Your hosts for today's episode are myself, Jacob Santos.

[00;00;16;19 - 00;00;17;20] **Demi Harte**

And Demi Harte.

[00;00;17;25 - 00;00;26;08] **Jacob Santos**

Our mission is to illuminate higher education, teaching and learning through the power of shared experiences and research informed practices.

[00;00;26;11 - 00;00;52;18] **Demi Harte**

On this episode of Learning Curve, we'll be discussing the office of Professional Writing, Publication and Communication with its director, Pam. Stick around for this episode to hear how Pam Walter can help you push past writer's block, publish your manuscripts, and actually get your work out into the world. Stay tuned to learn how faculty, clinicians, and students can take advantage of this free resource provided by the Academic Commons.

[00;00;52;24 - 00;01;13;11] **Demi Harte**

Pam Walter has a lifelong passion for helping clients communicate better. In her role at Jefferson, and she's available to help researchers communicate their work through scholarly publishing, posters or presentations. Earlier in our series, we did discuss the scholarship of teaching and learning, of which publishing is an important part of. So welcome, Pam. Thank you so much for joining us.

[00;01;13;13 - 00;01;15;02] **Pam Walter**

Thanks for having me.

[00;01;15;05 - 00;01;30;07] **Jacob Santos**

All right. So to get us started here, nice and easy for you, Pam, let's start with some background about you and our topic for today. Can you tell us a little bit about yourself, your academic pursuits, and your role at Thomas Jefferson University?

[00;01;30;10 - 00;01;56;23] **Pam Walter**

Sure. So to give you a little background on me, I am one of those people who, since I was a child, loved to read other people's papers and give them feedback and editing. So that isn't for everybody. But it's been it's been my passion since I was a kid. And as it happens, that is it. A career in academia.

[00;01;56;25 - 00;02;21;19] **Pam Walter**

And here at Thomas Jefferson University, I get to fulfill that passion all the time, because there are a lot of people who want me to read their papers and review their presentations and posters. So I've really hit on an intersection of something that I love to do. I'm an actual coach too. I love to coach people.

[00;02;21;22 - 00;02;25;14] **Demi Harte**

That's awesome that from a young age you already had that passion.

[00;02;25;17 - 00;02;27;03] **Pam Walter**

Mhm

[00;02;27;05 - 00;02;38;24] **Demi Harte**

So then what inspired the creation of the office for Professional Writing, Publishing and Communications or OPWPC here at Jefferson?

[00;02;38;26 - 00;03;20;24] **Pam Walter**

Sure. I know it's a little bit of a mouthful. Putting all of that together. Well, I did talk to our director, Tony Frisby a little bit about that because he he was really the driver of providing this service. And he was interested in really supporting academic pursuits, particularly publishing. So Jefferson researchers have

been publishing all along, but having the the support available to them has made it easier to have a polished manuscript go out early in the process.

[00;03;20;27 - 00;03;44;09] **Pam Walter**

So that's really what what this OPWPC is all about is providing a service that people could find elsewhere. You know, researchers could use Elsevier as a editing service, for instance. But we provide this service in-house as kind of a, boutique support for research.

[00;03;44;12 - 00;04;02;13] **Jacob Santos**

Boston that, you know, we have this department here that is accessible to the, faculty to get their research looked at and assessed. So obviously, every, department, organization, group changes, from its early inception. So how would you say that the center's role has evolved since it first started?

[00;04;02;15 - 00;04;42;18] **Pam Walter**

Sure. So so the first the first iteration was mainly focused on manuscripts. But when I came in, I brought some other skills as well. So I was a consultant for a communications company for many years. And so it has evolved from really focusing only on publishing to offering workshops on presentation skills, offering feedback on presentations and all sorts of different training and support for other areas beyond just writing.

[00;04;42;21 - 00;05;08;08] **Pam Walter**

And that's where the communication part comes in, because we're looking at presenting and posters and even we support some grant writing. And, yeah. So it has evolved. It's expanded into really providing a surround for researchers who are communicating their science and their research.

[00;05;08;10 - 00;05;20;12] **Demi Harte**

So you brought up a little bit of what how the OPWPC can help. If you want to go more a little bit more into that and also bring up who can access it.

[00;05;20;15 - 00;05;49;25] **Pam Walter**

So our focus is really on, on research. And anyone at Jefferson who is researching can access our services. And that may mean faculty, staff, postdocs, clinicians and and even students. And we do have

students from time to time who are collaborating on research. Our focus is not typically on students. There's a student writing center for that, but we do sometimes work with them.

[00;05;49;28 - 00;06;39;22] **Pam Walter**

And so we we help with anyone who is is communicating. We also partner with other groups at Jefferson who provide specialized support. So for instance, the Office of Institutional Advancement helps with grant writing. That's nonfederal. And they will help researchers find grants. And the race offers support for researchers who are and I can't remember what race stands for, but researchers who are applying for federal grants and we have a federal grant writer, Doctor Deb Roussel, who will review federal grants and anything that falls in the cracks we will review in our office as well.

[00;06;39;22 - 00;07;05;15] **Pam Walter**

So, for instance, grant writers might say, hey, I, I'd like you to look at the, the abstract for this grant or some other sections of it that the other two grant writing services are looking at. So really it's a it's a lot of different things. Everything from publishing to presenting and writing. That answer your question?

[00;07;05;17 - 00;07;06;18] **Demi Harte**

Definitely yes.

[00;07;06;23 - 00;07;30;04] **Jacob Santos**

Very much so. So it sounds like, you know, based off that answer at, you work with a lot of different people over the course of your time. Lots of different groups of people come in and interact with your department office. So could you, share for the listeners or particularly memorable success story where the center helped transform someone's work?

[00;07;30;06 - 00;08;09;09] **Pam Walter**

Sure. So I like to to kind of share this idea because I think for for those listening, it might prompt you to think, oh, we could do this with our group. So we work with individuals, but we also work with teams. So the success story I'm going to share is about a faculty cohort who came to us in 2019 and said, we really want to increase our scholarly communication, our publications, our posters, our applications for conferences, etc. and that was the Jefferson Center for Interprofessional Practice and Education.

[00;08;09;12 - 00;08;50;27] **Pam Walter**

And so we put together a program for them to work as a team to increase overall their scholarly communication, which they did. We didn't measure it. They measured it. So they they found that it increased by 50% from before to after this intentional effort to work together as a, as a faculty team. And that was exciting. And I share that with others, too, to say, hey, if a faculty cohort is interested in increasing their publication, they should we should definitely come and see us because we have a methodology for that.

[00;08;50;28 - 00;09;13;26] **Pam Walter**

We have tools and we can surround them with support for increasing their scholarship. So that's my little success story. And we've we've replicated it in other areas in a in small ways. And I'd like to share that story. And encourage people to come and see us as a team.

[00;09;13;28 - 00;09;43;23] **Demi Harte**

Yeah. That's amazing. That's really impressive. And it's really nice to share that and show you know, how successful this can be and how beneficial it is for people to take advantage of this department and what you all offer. And so I wanted to ask if you have any common challenges that you see faculty and staff struggling with in their writing and how this department could really a system or help them out with this.

[00;09;43;25 - 00;10;08;06] **Pam Walter**

So, so that kind of goes back to this, this process that I was talking about. But one of the common challenges that I see that might surprise people initially when you hear it, but then you'll go oh that makes sense. Is, is that in the last mile. Right. So a manuscript takes a long time to write, but in the last mile, it often happens that authors will disappear.

[00;10;08;09 - 00;10;43;12] **Pam Walter**

So you have three or 4 or 5 people working on a manuscript, and then suddenly nobody's around to push it through to the end. And this is a common problem with authors, is that that final push to get all the authors to review the final manuscript and sign off on it. So one of the ways that we help with that is to, at the outset, if we can be part of the process in the beginning, we encourage authors to meet as a team and to agree to their authorship responsibilities.

[00;10;43;14 - 00;11;11;18] **Pam Walter**

So that's kind of a hard sell, because, you know, people are busy and they're in practice and teaching and, and in, in clinical practice. But that is a that's a pretty common challenge. And we we try to help by providing a writing retreat monthly that teams can come to as a group and meet if they choose to. And, and really we get a lot of questions about authorship.

[00;11;11;18 - 00;11;23;01] **Pam Walter**

And we, we try to guide people through that whole process of really just being responsible throughout the process and all the way to that last mile.

[00;11;23;04 - 00;11;52;15] **Jacob Santos**

So, Pam, you mentioned you just mentioned talking about the, service you offer of the writing retreat and how you encourage teams or writers to come to those, and that whole process of how your department really tries to support them through the entire process of research and writing. Can you mention, of all the services that you have to offer, in your department, are there any of the you find faculty members are surprised to learn about, like they come to you with an idea and they're like, oh, I didn't know you did this.

[00;11;52;15 - 00;11;56;22] **Jacob Santos**

You know, something that you feel should be known that maybe isn't.

[00;11;56;24 - 00;12;15;29] **Pam Walter**

So I think the number one thing that people are surprised by is that this is a free service. I think it's always shocking to people and and I do get a lot of questions about like, oh, is there a fee for this? And they don't want to send me their manuscript until they know whether they have to pay to get this service.

[00;12;15;29 - 00;12;42;28] **Pam Walter**

And so that's that's often very surprising to people, but also that we we will, for instance, for residents, we offer workshops and workshop series that are related to supporting them in their in their publishing efforts. So we do that with several cohorts of residents where we meet with them, you know, every couple of weeks to get them going on the process.

[00;12;43;00 - 00;12;51;06] **Pam Walter**

So it's really soup to nuts. We we offer a lot of a lot of support for writing. But I think the big surprises is always that it's free.

[00;12;51;13 - 00;12;59;07] **Jacob Santos**

That's awesome. I think that should be our tagline for our episode, right? That with that, that's our sound bite right there.

[00;12;59;10 - 00;13;01;13] **Pam Walter**

So,

[00;13;01;15 - 00;13;18;08] **Demi Harte**

So you were speaking about how a lot of the writers don't finish their manuscripts or they kind of go off and I'm sure that a part of that is writer's block. So how else do you support writers who are experiencing things like writer's block?

[00;13;18;10 - 00;13;41;22] **Pam Walter**

Sure. So we have a bunch of different approaches to that. It really depends on the writer. But one of the things we can do is is meet with writers. That's one way. Another thing I always encourage people to do is to write the abstract, whether they finished with the paper or just getting started. The abstract can be a really low stakes way to synthesize their thinking.

[00;13;41;25 - 00;14;07;15] **Pam Walter**

Honestly, if you can get 200 words down that summarize the entire paper, it can break through that writer's block. So those those are two ways. And we have a lot of other ways. The writing retreat is a way to get people thinking about it. And then I, I also use the technique of what I call writing sprints, and that's just what it sounds like.

[00;14;07;20 - 00;14;35;11] **Pam Walter**

Set your timer on your phone for 5 minutes or 6 minutes and sprint just right until your timer goes off. And that that helps some people. Some some writers need two hours of uninterrupted time. That's our monthly writing retreat. But some writers need just to get a little bit on the page every day. And that sprint concept can be quite useful for that.

[00;14;35;13 - 00;14;38;01] **Pam Walter**

So a lot of different ways that we approach it.

[00;14;38;03 - 00;14;50;08] **Demi Harte**

Yeah, I'm a big fan of using timers and just setting, okay, five minutes work on this and a little break and then ten minutes. And I think it's definitely effective at least for the way I think.

[00;14;50;11 - 00;15;10;08] **Jacob Santos**

So thank you I myself love the tomato timer a little little cartoon tomato on your screen. It will animate a little bit while you're working and then gives you mandated breaks and things like that. So that's awesome. So kind of in line with this, you know, these writing sprints and, just trying to get the researcher to put something down on paper.

[00;15;10;15 - 00;15;18;08] **Jacob Santos**

What is your philosophy on balancing technical accuracy with just engaging and writing and academic work.

[00;15;18;11 - 00;15;52;04] **Pam Walter**

So to be perfectly honest, all science writing, all research writing should be engaging, right? It should be engaging even if it's for someone in your technical field. Years ago I found this article I believe it's from 2017 by Hillyer et al. And it's they did research on climate change to see if elements of engaging writing or narrative writing can increase citation frequency in climate change writing.

[00;15;52;07 - 00;16;19;16] **Pam Walter**

In other words, what elements would there be? And they looked at six, and they found that narrative writing has something to teach. Science writing. And I'll give you some examples of that using connective words. A lot of academic writing does not use connective words. Thus. Therefore. However, moreover, these seem really basic, but they help you tell a story.

[00;16;19;19 - 00;16;45;07] **Pam Walter**

And in academic writing, you need to be able to tell a story. And that engagement doesn't have to be using flowery words. It has to be organization of ideas in a way that helps the writer or the reader not get

lost. And so that's that's kind of what I try to encourage others to do. But also when I'm editing, I try to incorporate that into the into the writing.

[00;16;45;07 - 00;17;13;02] **Pam Walter**

Because yes, it has to be technically accurate. I can't necessarily judge whether it's technically accurate because I am not a cell biologist, but I can read it and and realize the flow is not there. And so if the words themselves do not tell that story and create that flow, then the reviewers will come back and say, this doesn't make sense to me.

[00;17;13;05 - 00;17;21;03] **Pam Walter**

So having a logical flow will engage the reader. Then answer your question.

[00;17;21;06 - 00;17;38;02] **Jacob Santos**

No, no, for sure. Narrative tone and a structure of a research paper that is engaging and interesting to read for the reader is really important. You don't want to pour all your heart and energy into researching a topic, and then for someone to hand the draft back to you and say, oh dull, I couldn't finish this.

[00;17;38;04 - 00;17;39;15] **Pam Walter**

I was bored, right?

[00;17;39;15 - 00;17;46;29] **Jacob Santos**

You know, like, that's so crushing to have someone say that. So really working on that in your writing. Yeah, absolutely.

[00;17;47;02 - 00;17;52;12] **Demi Harte**

And we can add that article you mentioned into our resource guide for anyone to take a look at.

[00;17;52;14 - 00;17;54;18] **Pam Walter**

Oh, very good, very good.

[00;17;54;20 - 00;18;12;15] **Demi Harte**

So now we're going to jump into, our future forecast where we predict futures of this. You know, our topic that we're discussing. So I want to ask what emerging trends in academic writing and communication are you preparing for.

[00;18;12;18 - 00;18;14;00] **Pam Walter**

You know what I'm going to say, right?

[00;18;14;00 - 00;18;16;05] **Demi Harte**

Oh yeah. Go ahead.

[00;18;16;08 - 00;18;16;29] **Pam Walter**

[laughter]

[00;18;17;01 - 00;18;19;11] **Jacob Santos**

Say the magic words Pam

[00;18;19;14 - 00;19;01;17] **Pam Walter**

Generative AI, I think what is the magic terminology here? So, you know, everybody is exploring how to use AI for writing. What are the guardrails? How can scholarly writing engage with generative generative AI? So I'm preparing for that. I'm on the lookout always. And you all know you know, probably as much or more than I do about sort of what tools can identify generative generative AI usage and how to ensure that the ideas that authors are presenting are still their own.

[00;19;01;19 - 00;19;42;21] **Pam Walter**

Right. Use the tools, but it's still going to be the author's. The author's communication. And so I've been going to seminars about this and talks and learning what I can and, you know, trying not to close ranks and say, oh, you can't use it, but in what ways can you use it? And actually, what I've learned in the last year is that there is a place, of course, in scholarly writing for using generative AI, but it has to be documented, it has to be acknowledged, and every journal has their own rules about it.

[00;19;42;23 - 00;20;24;12] **Pam Walter**

So you might have one journal, who's who's asking authors to put it in their methods section. You know, include in the methods how you use generative AI for the writing of this paper. And others might say it needs to be in the acknowledgments, but really, all of them want transparency. And because it hasn't been a very quick learning curve, you will find a couple of years ago people putting generative AI as like ChatGPT as a coauthor on a paper, the point there is that journals got together and said, hey, that doesn't make any sense because chat cannot take responsibility for that authorship.

[00;20;24;14 - 00;20;46;28] **Pam Walter**

Right? And that's really only humans can take responsibility for the authorship of something. And, you know, in the end, that's that's the main takeaway is humans can only be authors, right? But these tools have a place in helping to frame ideas and helping to to kind of get background together.

[00;20;47;00 - 00;21;18;10] **Demi Harte**

Right. And it's what it is. It's a tool, like you said, you know, it's not something that's also an author. It is something to assess. So that's the way you explained it is, is great. So thank you for bringing that up. And how generative AI is something that's growing and it's there and we have to kind of learn how to how it could benefit us in a way that's still good and not just overtaking everything and we just lose our voice.

[00;21;18;13 - 00;21;22;23] **Pam Walter**

It's funny, you knew it was coming when you asked me that question.

[00;21;22;26 - 00;21;27;05] **Demi Harte**

We had to ask it. Of course.

[00;21;27;07 - 00;21;51;03] **Jacob Santos**

There's no way of talking about future forecasting without talking about AI. Oh, It's here to stay. So one point that I picked up on in your conversation about AI is how, you know, it's very much a tool, and really you want to keep the human at the center of it. All right. The human is the author, the generative AI is simply, a tool that the author can use as a means to an end to help them get to that finish line.

[00;21;51;07 - 00;22;05;05] **Jacob Santos**

So with kind of the idea of keeping the person at the center, how is, the, the your, the center adapting to supporting digital and visual communication needs as we are, you know, very much digital world.

[00;22;05;07 - 00;22;33;06] **Pam Walter**

Sure. So so I'm going to sort of tag team on what we've just talked about and, and share this idea that now in scholarly journals you're seeing more and more graphical abstracts and graphical abstracts are a graphical summary of, research paper, for instance, it could be a poster, could be could be a, presentation as well. But it's a graphical summary.

[00;22;33;06 - 00;23;00;22] **Pam Walter**

And going back to the idea that only humans can be authors, not all researchers are artists, right? So you have a graphical abstract, and not everybody thinks visually or graphically, but we have tools that enable researchers to be more graphical in their their presentation of ideas. So we share that people can use, for instance, a tool called BioRender.

[00;23;00;24 - 00;23;43;25] **Pam Walter**

And I'll definitely include that in in your your list of tools from this podcast. But BioRender allows even the most non-graphical person to come up with ideas that can summarize their research very quickly. It has thousands and thousands of templates, everything from cell biology to population health mapping, etc. so that someone who kind of has the germ of an idea of how they want to summarize their, their research can find these templates and then kind of drag and drop icons that are beautifully rendered into their template.

[00;23;43;27 - 00;24;09;10] **Pam Walter**

So it's really cool. Even if you can't draw a cell or a pathway or a map or a hospital, there are a lot of different icons. You could just drag and drop them in there to to show your work. And that's kind of how we've been adapting is is pushing that idea of using those tools and, and enabling our authors to begin to use them.

[00;24;09;13 - 00;24;26;07] **Demi Harte**

Yeah, I do think it's important to emphasize that there's so much out there that can help, you know, you don't have to do everything by yourself and on your own. There's, you know, your group and there's this,

you know, BioRender that can help with this type of thing and many other things that can really assist you with, with writing.

[00;24;26;07 - 00;24;39;05] **Demi Harte**

So thank you for all of that. We have just a few more questions, as we wrap up with our closing thoughts, but I wanted to ask, what's the most rewarding aspect of leading the writing center?

[00;24;39;07 - 00;25;05;02] **Pam Walter**

I think it's engaging with so many different people and really feeding my curiosity about what's going on in research. I love that I love learning new things all the time, and I'm a natural extrovert, so I love meeting new people and helping them with their projects and I and getting the the word out. So that's so rewarding for me.

[00;25;05;03 - 00;25;07;13] **Pam Walter**

People and the research.

[00;25;07;13 - 00;25;09;15] **Demi Harte**

So that's awesome. Thank you.

[00;25;09;20 - 00;25;29;16] **Jacob Santos**

Continuing this closing thoughts question, earlier, we talked about, what is a surprise for, many people learning about the Learning Center. And once again, I'll plug it's free, for anyone who wants to use it. Now, what would you say is a common misconception that people have about academic writing in general?

[00;25;29;18 - 00;25;58;01] **Pam Walter**

Yeah, that you have to be a perfect writer before you can write something. I think that's kind of a common misconception for many researchers, particularly those in, let's say, the lab sciences. They they come into their latter latter stages of learning, let's say they're a postdoc and they suddenly have to have to write, but they've never had a writing class.

[00;25;58;03 - 00;26;23;17] **Pam Walter**

The emphasis all along has been on their science, on their research, learning techniques in the lab, and then suddenly they're required to write, and the writing becomes the most important thing for them to, to get the research out. And yet they have no training. So common misconception is, oh, I can't write, but if you can speak, you can write.

[00;26;23;19 - 00;26;56;00] **Pam Walter**

And there are plenty of resources available to turn that unpolished writing into polished writing. So I think it's a misconception for people to say, I can't write, you can write. You just haven't had training necessarily in polished writing and you're you're great at your job, you're great at your research, and it can't hurt to get support from someone who really has spent all their their life and career.

[00;26;56;02 - 00;27;11;25] **Demi Harte**

Yeah, it's I mean, it's like anything, right? You aren't going to be perfect. I mean, maybe some people are automatically perfect. That's one thing. But that's usually not the case. It takes some time and training and learning. So it's a very good point.

[00;27;11;28 - 00;27;12;24] **Pam Walter**

Mhm

[00;27;12;27 - 00;27;22;05] **Demi Harte**

So last question what workshops do you offer for anyone who may be interested in working with your department. After listening to this episode.

[00;27;22;07 - 00;27;45;29] **Pam Walter**

Sure. So many different ones. And also we we can do bespoke workshops for groups that are interested in in building team writing, in working on manuscripts together we have workshops on turning a thesis into, manuscript. We have workshops on how to write a paper called it Write That Baby in Nine Weeks.

[00;27;46;01 - 00;27;47;24] **Demi Harte**

That's a great title.

[00;27;47;27 - 00;28;29;25] **Pam Walter**

We won't and actually write it in nine weeks but it every topic over the course of nine weeks. Everything from the introduction and abstract to, you know, picking authors and picking journals. So it's a nine week series on writing a paper. And no matter when you broadcast this podcast, we have monthly writing retreats for anyone who wants to come first Fridays in the morning, you just block off a couple of hours and we have a librarian available and a writing consultant available for you to get some accountability and also just block the time for getting your project done.

[00;28;29;26 - 00;28;58;14] **Jacob Santos**

Awesome. Well, thank you very much for sharing all that. And hopefully when this particular episode airs, Write that Baby in Nine Weeks will be a continuing segment you run because it's just such a good title. We have to keep going. So, Pam, that brings us to the end of our interview for the day. We want to thank you so much for taking the time to be here with us and to share your knowledge and expertise with us here in this space and to the listeners, wherever they may be.

[00;28;58;16 - 00;29;09;26] **Pam Walter**

Thank you so much for inviting me, and I look forward to sort of seeing the the episodes as they unroll and listening in. So thanks.

[00;29;09;28 - 00;29;11;02] **Demi Harte**

Thank you Pam.

[00;29;11;04 - 00;29;14;28] **Pam Walter**

Of course.

[00;29;15;00 - 00;29;36;29] **Demi Harte**

Thank you for joining us this month on The Learning Curve. You can find more information and resources related to this episode at [academiccommons.jefferson.edu/thelearningcurve](https://academiccommons.jefferson.edu/thelearningcurve) and we hope to see you at some upcoming Academic Commons workshops. If you would like to be featured on a future episode of The Learning Curve, please contact us using the button on our show page.

[00;29;37;04 - 00;29;38;00] **Demi Harte**

Thanks for tuning in.