**Sandra Collins**: Welcome everyone. The purpose of this video is for us to just have a brief conversation about professional writing, which is sometimes a bit of a mystery to students. We want to bring this topic down to earth to make it a little bit more tangible and to help students understand what it is that professional writing is about and also how it will impact them, not just in their program but also throughout their entire career. Let’s start with Simon.

**Simon Nuttgens**: Hi! I am really happy to have this opportunity as share a few words. I'll try to be brief. What I have to say actually goes back to a bit of a personal story.

When I started my master's program, I essentially saw writing as a necessary evil. I didn't see myself as being particularly good at it, and I didn't really like it that much either. This showed up in one of my early assignments where the feedback on my paper was “You made the word count, but this isn't writing.” And so I approached the instructor in person, and I said, “What do you mean this isn't writing?” And she said, “It's not writing.” And I'm saying, “So what is it?” And she continued to say, “You tell me what it is.” Then she said, “Tell me why you wrote this paper.” And I said, "Well, to get a grade.” “Wrong!” “To fulfill the assignment requirements.” And she said, “Wrong.”

So finally she said, "Think about, really carefully, why are you writing this?” I don't think I had the right answer. And she said, "Well it seems that you're reading for other people, and you're not writing to learn.” And I said, “Oh, say more.” So she said, "Well when you write, it is important to have some sort of purpose in mind, and if that purpose is someone else’s, and not your own, it is likely to feel like a big job, and you are not going to be passionate about it, and you are not going to enjoy, and if you don't enjoy it, you are not going to learn.”

So talking about this reminded me of this book that I had in my undergrad degree called Writing to Learn and Learning to Write. And the point it made was that those two things are interchangeable and independent; as you learn to write, you also become a better learner, and it is through the writing process that you become able to think critically about what you are writing about, to put disparate ideas together to form a clear and convincing argument, and really learn and dive deep into the subject matter that you're writing about. So I took that to heart, and I started to actually enjoy what I was writing, and it made a huge difference. I start writing for purpose. These days when students ask “What should I write about,” I am fond of saying, "Well I think I should write about something that you are either blissed about or pissed about, meaning that you're really excited about it or you're upset about it and you want to make an important change in the world.

I also think that writing isn't something that is very academic and stays just within your time in GCAP. I have a colleague, who Dr. Jeff Chang knows as well, and he has probably published more as a private practitioner than most academics have. His point has always been if you want to learn about something and become proficient and competent in it, one of the best things you can do is actually just write, write a paper on it, learned from you are writing. Write to learn!

What also comes to mind for me is something more recent I came upon: The purpose of writing, dedicated writing, as a way of not only learning, but also as a way of self-growth and increasing your creativity. I came across this author Julia Cameron, who wrote a book called The Artist’s Way. It is about a 25-year old book, but she has an exercise called “morning pages,” and what she says is just to pull out a notebook and write for 15 or 20 minutes, no censoring, no correction of grammar, no correction punctuation. Just go over 20 minutes. So I've been doing this as an experiment for the last few months, and it's just amazing how much it frees up your creativity, how you start to put together different ideas in new and innovative ways, and how it becomes once more enjoyable as well.

So I began my academic career thinking writing was a necessary evil. And now I think it is a necessarily good, and I really hope to impart that philosophy and belief upon you as well as you begin a journey with us at GCAP.

**Sandra Collins:** Great, thanks Simon. One of my aspirations, following up on something you said, is the similar kind of practice in art where you actually do art every morning. So, just some kind of thing that gets something on the page, and it's another kind of practice that helps enhance the creativity and the skill that comes along with also doing art. I haven't managed to do that yet, but maybe once we get ourselves all organized and we have a little break, I'll be able to start practicing that.

I want to talk a little bit about the connection between professional writing and communication with a slightly different slant on it to draw out some of the ways in which developing your skills as a professional writer feed directly into developing your communication skills with clients. Where I see that connection is in very specific ways. For example, one of the things that we really focus on in writing is developing your own voice. You do that through learning to paraphrase and learning to summarize, learning to take a look at an article and thinking, “What are the key themes that come out of this article that are meaningful to me, and how do I pull those themes together in a way that brings my own voice into that perspective and develops my own thinking around the particular topic?” The same thing happens when you are engaged in counselling practice with clients. In the moment-by-moment interaction with clients, sometimes it's useful to directly restate something that a client has said, but if you really want to communicate to a client that you've heard them, you have to be able to listen to what they said either, in a couple of sentences or in a larger chunk of the conversation, and be able to pull that out and put that back to them in your own words, as a paraphrase or as a summary.

So you are doing the exact same things in professional writing that you are doing as you are working with clients. We have set up the program so that during the first couple of courses in the program, you have an incremental exposure to the various elements of the writing process. By the time you get to the end of those courses, you should be able to really clearly express your opinion and voice your opinion in a way that articulates a clear argument And that leads you directly into our course that focuses on counselling relationships and counselling communication. You will see that same parallel between the skills that you have developed in writing and the skills that you use in your interactions with clients.

The other thing that I wanted to talk that draws the same analogy is the connection between reading and listening. So when you're reading something, you are applying a similar kind of lens to what you are going to apply when you are listening to a client: What are the keywords, what are the key themes, what are the things that I agree with, what are the things that I disagree with, what are the things that seem most important for the person who is speaking to me, or for the person who is writing about this topic?

And then on the other end, you have the idea of communicating effectively and putting that together either in the way that you respond to clients or the way that you write things down. But the critical piece that I want to talk about is the piece in between—Simon touched on this in what he said—and that is critical thinking. Because in between reading or the listening and writing or speaking is the way that you think. That is a really critical piece of the writing process, and it is a really critical piece of your development of as a counsellor. Being able to get to the place where you are engaged in skills like reflective practice or critical thinking or cognitive complexity, which allow you to view things from multiple perspectives or to figure out ways to navigate between different worldviews.

Another thing that I wanted to point out that I think is an important parallel between counselling communication and writing is ethics. Into ethics and values, I’m rolling things like respect for diversity, social justice, and inclusivity. You will see when you get into the writing course and when you get into the APA manual, that there is a lot of information in there about bias-free writing. That same principle around bias-free expression carries into the conversations that you have with clients. It is a way of thinking, and a process of training yourself to speak and to write in a way that is inclusive and doesn't engage in microaggressions where conversations or communication and writing breaks down, because of bias comes through that causes some kind of negative reaction in the reader or in the person with whom you communicating.

So for me, these things really make the connection within a counselling program between the importance of professional writing and the importance of the practice that we are engaged in with clients.

**Emily Doyle:** When it comes to the practice that we engage in with clients, in our practicum courses we have a really neat opportunity to practice this and be mentored in how we do this. So it's not just what we know about counselling practice and how we know to discuss it, but now how we know to represent it in our interactions, embodied interactions with clients.

The practicum is a critical juncture when it comes to applying how we represent our application of what we have learned in our practice. The one enduring record of what we do with clients, when my bum is in a chair and their bum is in a chair and were in a room together, is represented as the enduring record of that interaction and practice in writing in our case notes and in our case conceptualizations. We will have two full semesters in which we get to practice this together, and there is sometimes a question, "Why are we focusing so much on the writing when this is a course about practice?” The writing remains a critical interaction in our communication of our practice.

**Gina Wong**: I really like how you said that Emily, because it is so it is so important. I'm taking notes as I am listening, and Simon made me think about my first experiences writing when I started university. In my undergrad when I took my English course, I failed my first essay and I remember thinking, “Oh gosh, I'm not going to do very well writing.” I didn't really do much about it, because in undergrad, I didn't write any papers. But then when I got into my masters, I failed my first probably two or three papers, and so I was told that I should go to the Learning Resource Services of U of A. I think it was a weekend, and I took workshops on writing. It was probably the best thing I ever did. I didn't like it, but I was determined to figure out how to do it. And I remember—you're going to think I'm weird but I do this—I remember seeing a card and it said, “Someday you are going to write a book.” I actually bought that card for myself, and I thought someday I'm going to deserve to give that to myself. So I kept that as a goal, and lo and behold, many years later, I've done that. I share that story in terms of coming such a long way from where I started and also the fact that I never stopped learning how to write. I love reading and I love words. I actually have a little book of just words, because I love hearing new ones and then trying to integrate them. My kids laugh at me or laugh at me, of course.

Then I was also thinking about what Sandra was saying, well what everyone has been saying about critical thinking, because I don't think it is just about being in the counselling room per se. As I'm learning about chairing meetings, for example, and a whole group of people have just said a number of different ideas, it is important to be able to pull it together and summarize what people are saying, not necessarily adding my own thoughts just yet, but to have that ability to look objectively at what people are saying and to deliver that back in a way that is in your own words. So I think it comes out in a lot of different important practices that we will do in this profession.

Also I want to talk about GCAP 695, which is the course-based exit that all our students will take, well not all our students, become some students will choose to take the thesis route. I was trying to think of an analogy. Well, first of all, in line with the transdisciplinary program outcomes that we have, which speak to the standards across Canadian universities for graduate level writing, we are not expecting students to do anything different than other graduate programs. It is a very important piece, because when you graduate, you want to, of course, have scaffolded your way towards these competencies.

So thinking about GCAP 695, let me know what you think of this analogy. I've got two kids right now who are ready to take their driver's test. It has been applied of process, because they take their learners, they do the test, they sit with an instructor and then with a parent, and then they drive around for a while. They drive, they learn their mistakes. And then there is a point where they have to do a driving test. They go, they book it, and they're on their own. So the instructor sits and tests them to see if all the scaffolding, and all the different hours they spent as a learner, takes them to where they have grown to the point where they can drive on their own. So I was thinking about that as an example, or a good analogy perhaps, of our GCAP 695. What do you guys think?

[Thumbs up from others.]

Yeah, I just came up with that. The idea being that GCAP 695 is about writing. You will have been doing writing throughout the program and you will succeed, but it's a little bit different because it is “Now let's do this at the level of peer-reviewed writing, and now you're going out onto the big roads.” So we want to support you to succeed in that capacity. That's what I wanted to share.

**Gina Ko:** Thanks Gina. I’m Gina Ko, the other Gina. I'm not talking about writing a thesis, and I'm going to steal Simon's idea and tell a story.

So this is back in, I believe, 2012. I remember sending Simon email, asking a question: “ I really want to work with human beings in my course-based exit course. I want to interview people. I want to find out about their lived experiences. And Simon replied, “That's interesting.” So Simon brought this back to faculty, and the decision was that I could not do that without ethics approval, so the course-based exit course would not be appropriate for that. However, I got to know Dr. Gina Wong—we got connected the previous summer—and she became my supervisor for my thesis. I have to say that was one of the most difficult decisions that I have had to make, because I wanted to graduate early. I wanted to get my degree, get a job, and start earning money again. But then I thought, "You know what? I really am passionate about this particular topic, which was about teaching my children Cantonese to pass on the culture and the heritage.” I really appreciate Simon's analogy about being pissed or blissed about something. So I really believe in passing on language. It is close my heart. My children do speak it with me, and we have a great time laughing in the language. I'm also pissed that some parents around me make fun of me sometimes, or they don't agree with me. They'll say, "Oh your children will be confused. What are you doing?” So there's kind of both sides. Anyway, I ended up doing a thesis. Gina, you are amazing. We met regularly. The process of doing a thesis is a big decision. It took more time for my degree; it can take up to one or two additional years. I think though, it was well worth it.

Going into a thesis, it is really important, going back a Simon’s comments, to make sure that you have a purpose. How come? Why a thesis? For me, as I progressed through this program, I knew that I might want to pursue a PhD on day. So that is one of the reasons. I remember Jeff asking me point blank, “Gina Ko, why a thesis? Why may be a PhD?” I replied. “Because I love teaching in higher education. I want to make sure I have those educational requirements for that.” I just finished my PhD. I did dissertation. I finished last year.

Going back to the process, I think it's really important to find the topic, and I love that suggestion to just write. During my thesis writing process, I realized my morning brain is fresh. I know that I'm going to sit there, and I'm going to just write. No one is going to look over my shoulder, no one is going to judge me. Meeting with my supervisor—Gina was my super visor in GCAP—I focused on planning ahead, what questions do I have, where is my progress, some critical thinking in terms of where am I going next?

I also have the metaphor, an analogy, for writing a thesis. It was actually the one I used for my thesis, and it is climbing a mountain. In terms of climbing a mountain, it is a long process, and some days I have to push myself. I'm going to use riding a bike up the mountain, actually, because I think I ride the bike more than I climb the mountain. Stretching beforehand, stretch you legs, stretch parts of your body to prepare for the journey. Then you ride, and sometimes the uphill is very hard, so you might need to take breaks. Some days. I told myself, "You know what, maybe it's not a long writing day. I'm going to take a break, and I'm going to allow myself some selfcare. And then during that break, I reflect. Sometimes while I'm driving, I would think of an idea for my thesis. I would park to the side, and record on my recorder or a piece of paper: Tip for reflection. Another part, in terms of the metaphor, is to keep going. Because the topic was so close to my heart, it's easy to keep going some days. And then the iterative process had me at the end of the years having this product, this piece that contributes to knowledge in our counselling world. I also really believe in publishing for practice as well. So, I encourage you, if you want to think of the thesis route, to look at the faculty bios, whose research interests match something you may want to write about, and to have conversations about that. Start there. And also think about why a thesis and maybe why not thesis? So that's my talk about the thesis writing

**Murray Anderson:** Jeff, do you want to jump in here?

**Jeff Chang:** I want to talk about writing from a couple of other perspectives outside of this program. Over the years, I have run a number of programs, mostly children's mental health programs, and it's really important that people know how to write. They may write progress reports. They may contribute to writing a proposal for funding. And if I'm deciding between two candidates, both of whom have great experience, who appear to have similar skills, who already worked in situations where the clients may be difficult so I know they know how to handle crises, there have been a few times when writing skills have carried the day. As an employer, it's just one less thing for me to have to focus on with a new employee, one less thing that I have to supervise them about. So there are a few times when writing skills have been the deciding factor.

The other thing is that, outside of this job with the program, the main stuff that I do is writing reports for court, usually when people are fighting over their kids in the process of a divorce, so they are bilateral child custody evaluations. Of course, anything that is going to go to court has to be really precise. Now, you may be thinking, I'm never going to go to court. It petrifies me! And , indeed, most of you won’t. But what I've learned from that is it's not just a question of getting the facts out there and letting the judge decide. I actually want people to settle, and to go back to something that Sandra said, I want people to feel understood through what I wrote about them. If they see themselves in what I wrote, if they think I got it and understood them and their concerns about parenting and their concerns perhaps about the other parent’s parenting, if they think I got it, then they are much less likely to push this issue through to a trial. They are much more likely to settle, and that is much better for children. So I want them to experience the fact that I got them, I understood where they are coming from, and even if in some ways the facts are not on their side, they can still see that I understood where they were coming from.

Now, you may be saying “I'm never going to do that,” and probably most of you won’t. But you may be doing other kinds of reports, like I said before, progress reports. You may end up working in the school system and doing psychoeducational assessments. In all those kinds of reports, you are writing for an audience, you are writing recommendations for children services workers and or you are writing recommendations at school that schools will want to implement.

**Gina Wong:** Jeff, I was just going to jump in there very quickly. I completely agree with you. I do a little bit of expert witness work, and for sure not everybody is going to be doing that, but reviewing files of other psychologists and their letters and reports, there is such a wide range of quality. And I have to say when a poor-quality report or letter comes across in the large file that I'm looking over, it does paint a little picture for me. So I think, yes, not everyone is going to do court work, but you will very likely be someone who will need to write a letter, do a report, or in some way have to communicate, like you're saying, for the public. So yeah, I really very much with what you are saying.

**Jeff Chang:** Absolutely. And that may be the only experience that somebody reading something that you've written has of you, which may form their opinion about your competence as a practitioner. And you don’t want your writing to reflect poorly on you.

**Gina Wong:** I was going to make a joke about handwriting, because reading some of those case notes can be quite tough. But even raw case notes, you don't think necessarily that they are going to become part of what somebody reviews, but they may. So it's critical.

**Jeff Chang:** One more thing about writing as a counselling practitioner, you may be seeing a couple or maybe seeing a child, or you may be seeing an individual adult. Then three years later, five years later, the couple is getting a divorce, or the individual adult you were seeing has been in a car accident, and they want to know about that person’s, as they call it, premorbid functioning. So then you are going to have to go through your old file. So your file is going to have to make sense to you. Then you probably have to write some kind of summary report about what their function was like then. So it's really important to have clear notes when you're seeing folks and also to be able to express yourself clearly, maybe some years after this fact.

**Murray Anderson:** Thanks Jeff. I think that's excellent. What I have to add builds on a lot of the sentiments of what you're saying. It goes back to the first time I taught at Athabasca in 2013. At that point in my career, I was in the last stretch of doing the dissertation, so I was up to my neck in writing. I remember giving back the papers that I just marked for the first assignment in GCAP 621, and I had an email query for one of the students. This was her first formal writing assignment, and she was, I wouldn't say upset, but she was wondering why there was such a focus on learning to write in APA style and learning to focus on grammar. After all, she was only going to be a counsellor and she wanted to work with people sitting in front of them, so why was this so important? I remember taking that email in with me and thinking about it throughout the course of the day, and when I got back later that night, I responded to her and I said, “Would you if I open this up the importance of writing to the class as a discussion piece, without using your name?” It was one of the more fruitful conversations that came out of that and some of the responses were great: as a counsellor, your are going to have to make referrals to various agencies and organizations; you are going to have to be an advocate and reach out to people by a phone but also by letter and email; you’ll be involved in consultation with peers and other agencies; on top of that, look at your case notes, how can you be very specific and write case notes, as if the client is looking over your shoulder and is agreeable with what you have to write.

But two of the more important things that came from that discussion have really stuck with me. The first was that our practice is lifelong. It's not just about what we are doing in this moment; we are always crafting and honing your skills. That's why we go to conferences, and that's why we work on our writing. The second was that the impact of the future activities: Here we are just now working on a paper, but really we don't know where our careers are going to take us. I'm sure if I was to put it back to you, Jeff, would you think that you would be doing these assessments 20 years before? Probably not. And that's the beauty about what we're doing and about people coming into the program is that this career will take you in so many different directions. So if my focus was just on working with clients and teaching you how to work with clients, that's great. I'm more than happy to work with you in that way, but I want to work with you, just as everyone here on this video today wants to work with you, in ways that craft the whole counsellor. And that includes learning how to write, which will then focus on how to do a poster presentation, how to apply for conferences and grants, and it also will improve how you want to future your education. Maybe you want to do a second masters or want to go on to do dissertation, a PhD route, all these things. So learning to write, how to craft your language, is so very important. And I would think that my job as an instructor, as a teacher, as an educator wouldn't be enough if I was focusing on your work with clients. I want to help you be the best writer that you can be.

**Sandra Collins:** Thanks Murray and thanks everyone else for your ideas about professional writing. I assume maybe people have some final words. As I was listening to everybody, I was thinking that, in terms of the applied practice piece, one of the things that I have done with clients through most of my practice career, is to write my notes and provide them to clients directly after the session. That means that I have to be really careful about all of these things we've been talking about, so that it becomes a relationship building tool and a useful tool for them. And it doesn't risk causing damage in some way, because I haven't been careful about the words that I've chosen or the ways that I put them together, or communicating something that was not really where they were in the conversation, rather it was just happening in my own hand. So for me, that was one of the places where I really valued my training in professional writing, because it allowed me to be effective and purposeful, but also ethical in my communication. Anything else that people want to say as we wrap this up?

**Simon Nuttgens:** Well Sandra, that just reminded me of honing my skills in narrative therapy and people who watch me sometimes would think, “How you get so good at using these externalizing conversations?” And the answer is that I wrote and I still write many, many, many narrative therapy letters using an externalizing way to frame the clients problems and the intervention around that. And so, it was through that writing process that I mentally honed that ability to have a face-to-face conversation with someone in a very meaningful, intentional way using an externalized version of the problem. So that's another example of how my ability to write really informed my ability to become better therapist.

**Gina Ko:** I want to add a little bit to that. I'm starting to learn and to take a little bit of a risk to write poetry to give to my clients. It's actually a really a vulnerable process for me. I use their words, metaphors, and language, and then when I present a poem to them, they read it in front of me, and I can just feel that they so appreciate how I've listened and they think that I get them. I also need to tell myself, “Gina, don't be so critical. This poem doesn't have to rhyme all the time, or doesn't even have to rhyme at all.” This is a gift. I've heard you and using externalizing language. So I'm starting to do that, and I want to do it more. So I'm glad you brought that up, Simon, regarding letter writing, and I do that as well. Poetry is something new that I am learning.

**Jeff Chang:** I will say write for your audience. Understand who your audience is: the teacher of the eight-year-old while you're doing therapy, a judge or a lawyer, the folks who are deciding whether your agency gets a grant or a contract to provide services so you can maybe keep your job or help create jobs for others you work with. Know your audience, and write for your audience.

**Sandra Collins:** And write for yourself. I remember a student who came into the program a couple of years ago. She said to me that the best thing she got out of the writing resource that I had written was the idea that she could have a voice. She had no idea until she got to that point in a program—I think it was in the middle of GCAP 631, her first class, when she was looking through that writing resource again—and she really honed in an idea of voice. That’s the gift in writing, especially at the graduate and professional level: You are invited into a space where you have a voice, and you have contributions to make that are uniquely yours, and uniquely influence the profession, and influence those around you.

Okay, I think we'll wrap up there, and invite you into your own experience of what writing means to you.

Thanks everybody.

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