Powering Through the Pain: Producing a Podcast

Annie Hackett

Annie Hackett explores the activity system involved in creating and producing a podcast. Annie uses cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) to explain how every little part of the writing process is important for producing a final text. She describes the steps she went through to make a podcast and concludes that sometimes, you just have to power through the pain and frustration to create a successful product.

No one likes change; change is hard. We hear people say it all the time. The reality is that people probably don't like change *because* it's hard. It's a process; generally something doesn't simply change overnight. As a writer, change is something I find myself constantly adjusting to. Every time I write it's about something different, for a different person, using different resources, to prove a different point. Although I go through this process often, I still panic when I'm presented with a new **genre** to write in. What do I mean by genre? Typically when we think of genres, music comes to mind: rock, pop, country, jazz, rap, etc. But genres apply to more than music. For example, there are movie genres (e.g. action, horror, comedy, romance), genres of literature (fiction, nonfiction, poetry, drama), subgenres of literature (e.g. mystery, romance, sci-fi, comedy), and writing genres. According to the glossary of the ISU Writing Program website, genre can be defined three different ways: (1) "A typified response to a recurring situation"; (2) "A text that makes a particular action possible"; and (3) "A 'stable-for-now category' that describes a particular kind of text that people use."

The possibilities for writing genres are endless. You can write about literally anything. Sure, there are authors of books, newspaper articles, magazines, poems; people who write scripts for TV, movies, plays; lyricists for songs and musicals; sports writers; movie reviewers; blog writers; but there are probably a lot of other genres you've never thought of. How about people who write instructions on the back of your shampoo bottle or manuals guiding you how to refill the oil in your car? Do you text, write emails, or carefully articulate a tweet or Instagram caption before posting it for the world to see? Think about the chalk you see on the quad walking to class. This is all writing and yet, oftentimes we don't think of these genres as such.

Writing is also involved in the process of creating a final product in which the product itself doesn't visibly consist of writing. Wait, what? For example, imagine an official music video. The song is played over various cuts of the singer or band acting out scenes and lip syncing to the music. But is there any actual writing you see in the video? Usually in an official music video the lyrics aren't shown. However, the making of the final video product involved tons of writing! The song had to be written, first of all. Duh. And even that's a separate writing system than the one I'm talking about. Secondly, there needed to be collaboration between the artist and the video producers to discuss and possibly sketch out what the video could look like. After deciding on a solid idea, a script would have been drafted and after that, several revised drafts of said script. A script doesn't necessarily mean dialogue and in this case, it would mean summarizing what happens in each cut and maybe marking positions.

Further writing involved in creating the video would have included scheduling times for everyone to meet, costuming and makeup, to film. I'm sure there was some contract writing thrown in there somewhere to figure out who has what rights and who gets how much of the profits. The final video itself doesn't have a bit of visible writing in it yet all this writing was necessary to make the video. Which leads me to ask—do you tend to think about how much writing surrounds you? Have you thought about the writing system behind your favorite music video? Probably not and that's totally fine, live yo life dude. But it's actually pretty phenomenal when you allow yourself to get in the habit of noticing all the writing around you. We can use cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) to simplify and better understand complicated writing systems. [Maybe I'm a nerd, but whatever, I live that life and it's freaking awesome.]

OK YOU GET IT, I WRITE AND THINKING ABOUT WRITING A LOT. But I mention all this because yeah, I've become accustomed to all kinds of writing over the years (oh hey, English major) yet learning a new genre is still scary and difficult. I had to learn a new genre, and therefore writing system, for my internship with ISU's Writing Program. The other

intern, Nathan, and I were required to create and produce a podcast by the end of Fall semester 2015 and I admit that I was not confident in the slightest about it. I knew next to nothing about podcasts before starting as an intern for the Writing Program. I'd only ever listened to one podcast in my life and I stopped halfway through the first episode because I didn't like it (off to a good start, right?). Immediate stress. No seriously, immediate. Despite doubting my ability to be responsible for creating something so intense, my supervisors continued instructing us to come up with an idea for the podcast, to draft a proposal, to create questions to ask the interviewees, edit and to finalize questions, find people to interview, communicate with them to find times to conduct the interview, meet and record the interview, and then edit it. In order to complete all of this by the end of the semester, we needed to start by familiarizing ourselves with podcasts.

Research: Everyone's Favorite Part of a Project

People cringe at the sound of having to do research (I'm totally not one of those people, what are you talking about? I've never thought that in my life, how dare you . . .). We assume that research involves sitting in a library for hours searching for books and scholarly articles that are legitimate enough to count as a "reliable source." While sometimes research looks like that, research can also look like a lot of other things. For example, speaking with someone about an experience or watching a YouTube video can be research.

Fortunately my research on podcasts didn't involve sitting in a library for hours at a time, reading through hundreds of pages just to find one useful sentence on any given page. Nathan and I began our research on the Writing Program website by listening to the two previously made "Beyond 101" podcasts. These previous podcasts consisted of conversing with students who had completed English 101 and asking them about how the concepts they learned in the course apply to writing they currently do for coursework or in daily life. The podcasts weren't producing the effect our Writing Program Leadership Team was going for nor did it have the outreach we wanted, which in CHAT terms would be **reception**, i.e., "how a text is taken up and used by others" (Walker 75). Our Writing Program Director wanted to try something different and brainstorm a topic that would interest and relate to students more than "how did your freshman English class [that you were required to take] impact the writing you do now?" would. The two already-made podcasts became resources for how to organize an interview-based podcast but I also used it as a resource for what-not-to-do content-wise. I had a foundation now but listening to two podcasts that we were trying NOT to mimic didn't exactly give me confidence in my ability to produce one and so my search continued.

I Googled "podcasts" and skimmed the trusty first page of my search results. I came across one from Project iRadio called "Three Guys with Beards" so I clicked the link and perused their website for a bit. Near the bottom of their homepage, they had posted their ten most recent episodes. Figure 1 shows a screenshot of their homepage as of February 15, 2016.
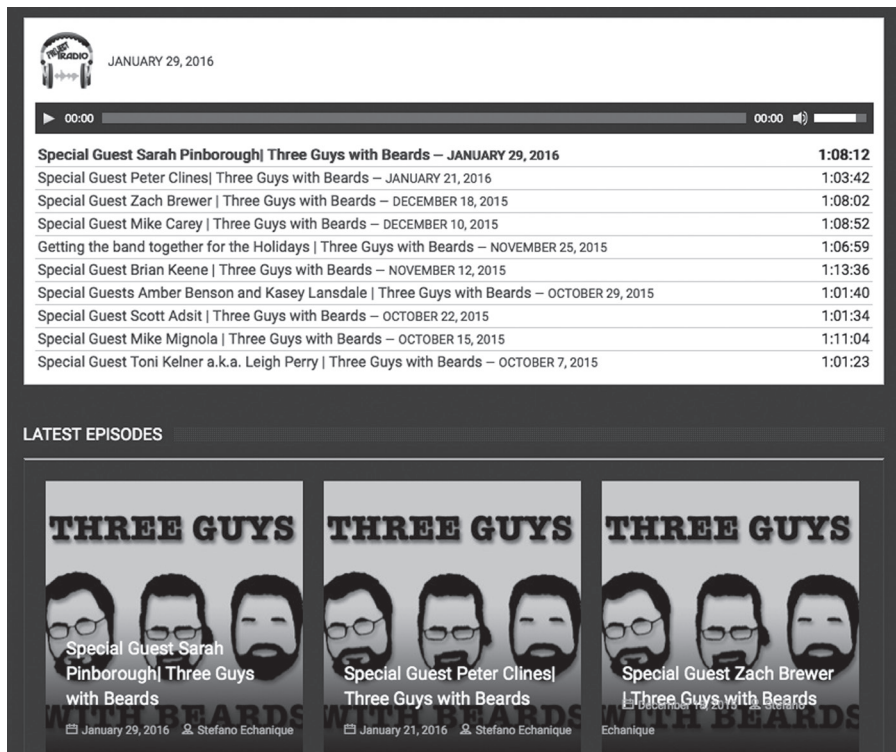

JANUARY 29, 2016

Special Guest Sarah Pinborough| Three Guys with Beards — JANUARY 29, 2016	1:08:12
Special Guest Peter Clines| Three Guys with Beards — JANUARY 21, 2016	1:03:42
Special Guest Zach Brewer | Three Guys with Beards — DECEMBER 18, 2015	1:08:02
Special Guest Mike Carey | Three Guys with Beards — DECEMBER 10, 2015	1:08:52
Getting the band together for the Holidays | Three Guys with Beards — NOVEMBER 25, 2015	1:06:59
Special Guest Brian Keene | Three Guys with Beards — NOVEMBER 12, 2015	1:13:36
Special Guests Amber Benson and Kasey Lansdale | Three Guys with Beards — OCTOBER 29, 2015	1:01:40
Special Guest Scott Adsit | Three Guys with Beards — OCTOBER 22, 2015	1:01:34
Special Guest Mike Mignola | Three Guys with Beards — OCTOBER 15, 2015	1:11:04
Special Guest Toni Kelner a.k.a. Leigh Perry | Three Guys with Beards — OCTOBER 7, 2015	1:01:23

LATEST EPISODES

THREE GUYS   THREE GUYS   THREE GUYS

Special Guest Sarah Pinborough\| Three Guys with Beards   Special Guest Peter Clines\| Three Guys with Beards   Special Guest Zach Brewer \|Three Guys with Beards

January 29, 2016   Stefano Echanique   January 21, 2016   Stefano Echanique   Echanique

Figure 1: Screenshot of "Three Guys With Beards" homepage.

I happened to come across their website nearing Halloween. The episodes were about the writing and scripting for horror novels and movies. Each episode featured a guest star, normally the author of said book/movie, and the three hosts would have a great chat about writing and its relation to the final product. I normally hate watching scary movies and I refuse to ever read a horror novel, but these episodes were intriguing. I listened to conversations about writing but didn't feel like I was listening to conversations about writing. It made me think about writing without actually letting my mind know that's what was occurring. Let's face it: not many people sit down with their friends and talk about how awesome and cool writing is. BUT IT IS!!! This particular guest star seemed pretty normal, but most of the time, when I do get stuck watching a scary movie with friends, I think whoever created the story has gotta be effed up in one way or another. But do we tend to think of the writing that's behind these stories? Perhaps if there's a really cheesy line or something, we laugh and wonder why someone would actually keep that in the script. It's

more of an afterthought though. It disrupts our movie experience for a few seconds and then we (unfortunately) return to our unhappy place. Just me? Alrighty then. Anyways these are the types of conversations we can have about writing; it doesn't need to, and shouldn't, always be about the ridiculously long research essay you wrote for your overzealous English professor. Writing surrounds us in a crapload of forms. I stumbled upon these podcasts and they *happened* to relate to writing but there were probably podcasts floating around in the world specifically created to discuss writing. Back to Google I went.

Next, I looked at other university writing program websites to see if they produced podcasts. The top hits (shout out to ISU for being one of the top five!) were podcasts from other universities' creative writing programs and that wasn't quite what I was looking for. I generalized my search and typed 'podcasts about writing' into the search bar. I discovered this link: "Podcast-Helping Writers Become Authors." I perused the titles of each episode and listened to a few (each was only about ten minutes which was awesome and easy to listen to). All of these different episodes discussed various subject areas about writing and gave me ideas for numerous ways to talk about writing and organize podcasts. Next stop: deciding the subject of our podcast.

Subject Matter: The Graceful Art of Brainstorming

Nathan and I met with our supervisors and tried to brainstorm out-of-the-box ideas. We desperately wanted to come up with something that would involve discussion of writing differing from "Hey what'd ya learn in your required English class freshman year that you think about regularly and use all the time always in your daily life because you took that super awesome class and it impacted you in a way you never imagined?" (Too far? I digress.) We wanted to think of an interesting topic people don't often think about and this brainstorming sesh would be the **activity** element of CHAT. Activity consists of the stuff we actually do when we're creating something.

We tossed around several ideas, one of them being to shadow students from different majors and keep tabs on the writing they do throughout the day in their own crazy lives. Then, in the course of our brainstorming, someone brought up the circus. Light bulbs came on. It was chaotic, really. Not graceful at all. Nathan knew things about some person in the library that had some special things related to the circus; I'd seen the Gamma Phi circus before and thought we could reach out to current members. We were all talking over each other; everyone wanted to get their ideas out into the world before they left our brains completely. We were pumped to have something that got us excited. It was actually a pretty cool moment. We asked ourselves questions thinking about the writing process behind producing a circus. A circus is a performance,

but what kind of writing does that entail? We realized that collectively, we knew minimal information about circuses. Jackpot. We found our topic.

Drafting a Proposal: Or Making Your Idea Sound Really F*cking Awesome

Nathan and I drafted a proposal for our podcast project. In the proposal, we explained our goals for this podcast and our approach to reaching out to undergraduates from an intern perspective. *Side note: Google Docs is undoubtedly one of the best inventions ever*. I'd say this proposal was our first physical writing activity involved in the writing system of creating our podcast. **Ecology** played a part here. All the writing we did was online. Other than a few copies of the script later on, everything remained electronic. Producing everything electronically has both advantages and disadvantages: Google Docs allowed both Nathan and me to work on the same document at the same time and easily edit it; however, we edited often and none of the originality is there for us to see anymore because we didn't archive it. We continued to edit the proposal developing ideas and tweaking words and phrases until it sounded the best it could. A proposal is kind of like a selling pitch: this is what we're doing and here's why you should support it. When we were done, Nathan presented the proposal to the Writing Program Leadership Team at a bi-weekly meeting and they all approved the idea.

Research: . . . Round Two

We returned to research to educate ourselves about the materials in the Special Collections sections of the library and about ISU's own circus. The research included more than Google this time around. Nathan contacted the Special Collections librarian in Milner to see if she'd be willing to meet and discuss the circus collection. I contacted ISU's Gamma Phi Circus director to see if any of his team members would be willing to help us out. While I waited for a response, I checked out the Gamma Phi website. Guess what? Someone had to write all the information on there and there's quite a bit of it. I read through it all to have some sort of basis before beginning to write interview questions, which was especially helpful because I knew very little about circuses. After that, I headed to Milner's website and read through the circus tab under "Unique Collections" (another part of this writing system). Nathan actually went to the library and explored the circus materials in special collections there. The special collections librarian, Maureen Brunsdale, responded to us quickly informing us she'd love to help out (more writing!). You might be thinking, wait a second, the email didn't directly relate to how to create a podcast. You're right, it didn't. But all the little things we do in order to complete a project or paper matter, no matter how insignificant they

seem. It's all part of the writing process and activity system that made producing the podcast possible. CHAT helps us understand that it all matters.

Scripting: Guessing How a Conversation Will Go in Real Life

I said it once, I'll say it again: Google Docs is a genius invention. Nathan and I were never in the office on the same days so we used Google Docs to write up a list of topics we wanted to hit on in the interview with Maureen. Using Google Docs involved both the **production** and **representation** elements of CHAT. "Production deals with the means through which a text is produced" (Walker 74). Figure 2 shows the list of questions we created to ask about the circus materials that we could also relate to Writing Program concepts (notice the words in parentheses). We combined and narrowed down our lists to questions that we had both included to create a final list. We added a few aspects to directly relate it to Writing Program concepts and made edits (i.e., rephrasing questions, rewording things) to create a finalized script . . . for this portion. One big, scary chunk of learning this new genre is done AND the most writing intensive portion. YAY! However, at this point I'm still feeling super uneasy because we now have to actually record ourselves doing the interview. Yikes. Hi, bigger and scarier part of this process.

Questions we had both written, so clearly ones that we think are really important.

-What kind of promotional materials do you create for the circus?
  • Do hang flyers around campus? If so, where? (distribution)
-What do you use to create your materials? Mostly computers? Mostly handwriting/drawing? A combination of both? (production/ecology)
-How does social media impact your writing? Is this where most of your writing happens?
  • If so, why is this more effective than other ways? Is it based off of previously successful materials? (representation/antecedent knowledge)
-Who writes for the circus? Everyone involved or are people assigned to particular tasks? Is it a collaborative or step-by-step process? (activity)
-Do you ever chalk the quad? Do you consider this to be writing?
-How do you think people react seeing and reading your materials? What do you have in mind when creating them? In other words, do you design them with a certain expectation? (reception)
-What are your expectations for reviews/post performance comments and feedback? (socialization)
-How have classes you've taken influenced the way you write for the circus or vice versa? (transfer)
-Are there certain writing styles (tone, style, jargon, etc.) that are more effective than others for circus materials?
  • Do you tend to use circus terms or more casual language that everyone can understand in your writing?
-What about deciding how much information to include in things you write? Do you feel limited or that you have to fill space?
-Is your writing influenced by traditional ideas about circuses? Has the writing changed over the years? How? Why do you think that is?

Figure 2: Screenshot of Nathan and my list of interview questions created in Google Docs. The questions marked in gray are questions we had both listed.

Collaboration: Why We Lo(athe)ve Group Projects

First, we needed to figure out a time when we could all meet. We emailed Maureen back asking when she could meet and the ball got rollin' pretty quickly. Fortunately, the times she gave us actually worked for Nathan and me, and Frank, who is our tech coordinator. What are the odds?? A few days before meeting to record the interview, Maureen informed Nathan that she had forgotten there was an event in special collections that day. We knew it was too good to be true and so we were back to square one. Things always become more complicated when more people become involved. I was starting to get nervous that we wouldn't be able to find a time that worked for everybody and was slightly terrified that I'd have to do the interview alone. (I didn't panic, it's fine, everything is fine.) We rescheduled and thankfully were able to find another time that worked for everyone. We met in the special collections space in Milner library on a lovely cold October day (I just love that walk from Stevenson to Milner, don't you?) and Frank set up his microphones while Nathan and I got to know Maureen and her colleague before beginning the interview.

The Interview: Not the Movie

Frank had us all converse for a bit to make sure we could all be heard and that there wasn't any distracting background noise and such. Nathan, me, Maureen, and her colleague sat around a square table in the special collections room and began the interview. We introduced ourselves and then Nathan began by describing the circus materials we had in front of us: a newspaper clip and a flyer advertisement. We all had our scripts before us, and had sent copies of the questions to Maureen in advance so she could prepare. We went through the questions and had a great discussion! Some things Nathan and I thought would be great talking points didn't lead to much discussion and others that we thought wouldn't be super important turned into big parts of our conversation. The interview lasted just over an hour, which was awesome, but presented a little bit of a problem because the podcast as a whole was only supposed to be 30 minutes and we still had another portion to add. It gave us a lot of material to use, which was both good and bad. On one hand, we had a variety of intriguing discussion topics to choose to include in our final text, but on the other hand, we had a lot of interesting discussions that we would have to cut out entirely.

Scripting: . . . Round Two

Now that we had the bulk of the Special Collections portion completed, we needed to start moving forward with the Gamma Phi portion. We managed

to set up another time that worked for Nathan, Frank, and me and met with Hannah, a four-year member of the Gamma Phi circus, which meant it was back to the drawing board, er, the scripting board. We approached this script a little differently than the first because for one, we wanted the focus to be different and for two, we were sitting down to speak with an undergraduate. We went through the same process of creating questions and narrowing down the most important topics to touch on, but our questions were more specific this time: instead of talking generally about materials created to promote the circus, they were about the actual writing that happens before the circus is produced. We finished much quicker this time.

The Interview: Not the Movie Sequel

We wanted to meet with a current member of the circus because it was important to keep that undergraduate connection like the first two 101 podcasts included. Hannah, the current VP and former PR intern, provided insights on the different types of writing that are necessary to produce the Gamma Phi circus. This interview was more direct and brief than our first because we sort of had the hang of things and directed our focus without going on too many tangents (also we made intentional breaks in the discussion to make the recording easier to edit. More on that hell later). The interview took just under 30 minutes. We had both parts of the circus podcast done!! But the final podcast wasn't even close.

Editing: Or Can I Please Bang My Head Against a Wall Instead of Do This?

With of an hour and a half of material to work with and only thirty minutes to include in the final product, Nathan and I knew we would have to make substantial cuts. This part of the process was by far the most time-consuming, infuriating, actual worst part of creating the intern podcast. I severely underestimated this step in the process. I pushed it to the back of my brain thinking it would be easy and a minor, but necessary, part of completing the podcast.

Nathan listened to the recording and made a list that broke down, to the second, the various topics we discussed and for how long we discussed each. We began marking segments in the Special Collections podcast that were indirectly related to writing program concepts and ideas in order to keep the segments with direct connections. Figure 3 shows the Google Doc listing, to the second, of our topics and which sections of the recording could be cut. The potential cuts are typed in gray.

Annotated breakdown of times and topics for Circus Podcast:
Introduction/Explanation of what a press book is
0:00 - 2:17
Reading of document from press book and discussion
2:18 - 4:37
"Sawdust and Spangles"
4:38 - 5:13
Edit out
5:14 - 5:23
Who would have written this?
5:24 - 5:54
Why these words?
5:56 - 6:39
Adults/Children/Recipients of text: "Ponderous Pachiderm"
6:40 - 7:52
Newspapers/Other types of advertisements/Technology
7:52 - 8:52
Playfulness of language, advertising compared to household products
8:53 - 10:08
Forms of circus language used
10:09(maybe start at 10:18) - 10:37
10:38-11:34
11:35-12:32
Nostalgia, still marketing like it's the '30s, "timeless"
12:32 - 14:37
Cirque and television, going to the circus
14:38 - 16:08
Nathan talks about "genre" for a long time
16:09 - 18:51
Writing practices for the circus, "scripting" of acts, spectacle
18:52 - 20:58
Music as a script, bands, sideshow bands
20:58 - 21:59

Figure 3: Screenshot of to-the-second markings of our Milner interview
that we needed to cut out. The text in gray is what we eventually cut.

This seemed like a great plan and totally would have worked had we thought of it while we were actually recording. We left zero breaks for ourselves. *Zero.* No breaks between questions, no breathers before subject changes; there were no places that gave us any space to cut the recording without it sounding like a person was cut off from speaking. Panic and frustration. How were we going to cut this hour-long recording down to less than thirty minutes when there wasn't even a second of silence where we could split the audio? I must have blocked this out of my memory because I admit that I can't even remember how we ended up solving this.

The interview with Hannah from Gamma Phi was far easier to edit than our interview with Maureen. We approached it the same way by listing all the subject matters and their timestamps. And again we marked sections that could potentially be cut that applied to the writing program's concepts but weren't directly connected to our overall project. Figure 4 shows this list.

Already cut
Can be cut if needed

intros/her role in the circus
:00-:04
:05-1:26
context of writing
1:27-2:39
what goes on facebook?
2:40-3:36
material distribution on campus <u>vs</u>. in town
3:37-4:28??
audience reception from different materials
4:28-5:20
why traditional print is better received than new media
5:21-7:17
distribution locations
7:18-8:43
social media use
8:44-9:28
9:29-10:00
what technologies do you use?
10:00-11:22
transferring from print to digital
11:23-12:13
Hannah's writing in Gamma Phi
12:14-13:49
communication among Gamma Phi members
13:50-14:48
styles, jargon, antecedent knowledge
14:49-16:10??
Annie trying to figure out how to word a question...
16:11-16:45
how the writing has changed
16:46-18:41
18:42-19:04

Figure 4: Screenshot of to-the-second markings of our
Gamma Phi interview that we needed to cut out. The text
in gray is what we cut.

Luckily, we had started editing the Special Collections podcast before we completed the Gamma Phi interview so we knew to leave spaces and breaks before questions and the conclusion. THANK GOODNESS. Our built-in moments of silence made editing a thousand times easier. We copied the

audio file into Audacity, an audio editing program, and cut all the sections marked in gray in Figure 4. After these were cut and deleted, we were able to splice together the remaining parts of the recording to create a fluent conversation. OK cool, that's done. Now we needed to splice the two separate interviews together to create one cohesive recording.

We did what we could with the Special Collections recording and putting the two together was actually fairly simple because we had built a transitional introduction into the Gamma Phi interview. All that was left was recording an introduction for this now cohesive podcast and some transitional background music.

Recording: We're So Close Yet So Far

Nathan scripted a brief introduction to the podcast in its entirety in order to keep the genre conventions of the previous Beyond 101 podcasts. Frank explained the recording program to me and later when Nathan and I met, I set up the microphones and got everything ready to record. We recorded it in one take, quick and painless. The intro was then easily added to our [finally] cohesive podcast.

The Final Search: Starting to See Stars Spinning Around my Head

Nathan and I searched public domain stuff for some nice introduction music to begin the podcast and to transition between the two interviews. We also thought we might be able to use it to cover up the awkward moments we didn't manage to cut completely. I don't know whether I was just so ready to be done with the process or what, but every song I listened to annoyed me. We considered adding circus themed music but even just the thought of that annoyed us both. Nathan ended up finding something pretty decent and, again using Audacity, added it as another layer beneath the audio. We were finally done!!!!! (You can check out the podcast we created at: http://isuwriting.com/podcast/beyond-101-fall-2015-episode-3-writing-in-the-circus/.)

Mission Accomplished: WE MADE IT.

Learning new genres can really suck sometimes. New writing systems become much more difficult and intensive than you imagined. If you are reading this and need an example, you didn't skim this article well enough. It wasn't an entirely painful process; there were some aspects that were enjoyable, especially

the special collections interview. The point is you can be a writer your whole life, you can even be an English major (like I am) constantly writing in all different genres but that doesn't automatically make the process easy. Sometimes it may be. You can pick up on genre conventions quickly but not always. Don't let that stop you from giving it a shot. I knew nothing about podcasts before beginning as an intern with ISU's Writing Program. Certain parts were simpler and less time-consuming than I anticipated while others were completely underestimated and infuriating. But I used a whole new system and I learned a new genre, which was not only helpful for creating one to two additional podcasts this upcoming semester, it may also be beneficial to apply to future writing situations.

It's important to remember that nothing is ever truly completely new. Whether or not you consider yourself a writer doesn't actually matter. You've learned concepts in your (feels like) hundred years of education that you can apply to new and scary genres that make them not so new and scary. Even if those things you're applying are what NOT to do (which I had experience with in the all-positive podcast production process. Hey, I didn't even mean to make that alliteration!). Power through the pain and you'll challenge yourself in a way that will continue to benefit you well after school days are over because, believe it or not, some things you learned in your required freshman English 101 class you do actually use and apply to other courses or writing in regular outside-of-school life. Perhaps it's indirectly applied or maybe you don't even know you still use it. Even when you feel like you received nothing beneficial from a writing experience, power through, keep going. The most challenging experiences are generally the ones we get the most out of. Take it from me, someone who writes long essays, does a whole lot of research for classes, and someone who still wanted to bang her head against a wall in the midst of learning a new genre for her internship.

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