

HOW WE WRITE

Interview with Marc Musick

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(Transcript edited by Allison Grove and Sofia Salter)

Welcome to *How We Write*, a podcast about how we write just about anything. I'm Alice Batt and I'm here with Marc Musick, senior associate dean for student affairs in the College of Liberal Arts at the University of Texas at Austin. That is quite a mouthful! Hi, Marc.

Hi.

I'm really glad you could come to be with us today.

I'm glad to be here.

I asked you to join us today for two reasons. First, because I know you really care about writing. I've heard you speak to groups about writing and I know you want to help people to write well. Um, and also because you're in a position to offer really good advice about a kind of writing a lot of people end up doing and really don't expect that they're going to. And you know, there may not be a manual for this kind of writing that most people encounter, and that would be writing for administrators. So I thought we would be able to address some of those challenges of that kind of writing in a way that would be helpful to listeners.

Okay.

Um, but before we launch in that direction, why don't you tell us a little bit about your own academic career and the kinds of things you write.

So, it's kind of funny to hear you say that I appreciate writing so much, which is true, because when I was a student that certainly wasn't the case. I wasn't a very good writer I don't think, and partly that was because I was so afraid of writing. I had this terrible habit of writing something and turning it in without ever editing it or looking at it a second time. I would just write it as fast as I could and wouldn't even look—literally would not look at it again and turn it in and just hope for the best. And somehow that got me through college.

(laughter) Good for you! I don't think it got most of us through college.

And then I got to graduate school in sociology and I don't know, maybe my first year or so I realized that just didn't work anymore...

Yeah.

...and I had to improve my writing. And so, I started reading my writing for the first time and it was very hard to read my own writing. But you know, it's with anything, the more you do it the better you get at it, the easier it is. And now I'm a wordsmith. I mean, I wordsmith a lot of my own writing, and it's become second nature to read carefully what I write and even to be embarrassed when I write something and finish it and send it out to whatever and think it was great, then come back a couple of months later and I look at it and think, "what was I doing?"

Of course, yeah.

And so I do appreciate writing, but it didn't start out that way. And, uh, but it did start in grad school and it came just through practice. I wrote a lot in grad school. By the time I finished grad school I had a number of published papers and I was forced to think very carefully about how I wrote. I had also taken a writing seminar from George Gopen who was a professor of rhetoric at Duke, and he completely changed my philosophy of writing. I had never really taken a writing class at that level, and he taught us to write for the reader and not for ourselves. And that completely changed my orientation to writing and I still think of it that way today. So, when I'm writing I'm not thinking so much about what I want to get across. I'm thinking about what the reader is expecting to see and making sure that I can deliver that to them so they can understand what I'm trying to say. So it completely changed how I write and I think that I write for the better.

So, what I do: I'm a sociologist and I study primarily volunteering—why people volunteer, but also the effects that it has on their lives. I also study religion, especially religion and how it affects people's health, and then I also do some more generally speaking in medical sociology. I started here as a professor in 1999. I became a dean in 2006, so I like to joke that I've been a dean longer than I haven't been a dean—

(laughter)

—and there are not many faculty who can say that. So it's very strange because most of my academic career after grad school has been actually as a dean, a majority has been as a dean. And that is a very strange place to be.

It is. And, you know, thinking back to grad school, I don't know of anyone who goes to grad school saying, “I want to become a dean.” You know? So how does it happen?

So, you know, in grad school I don't think I ever wanted to be a dean. I wanted to be the next Robert Merton. Robert Merton is one of the foundational theorists for my field. And, you know, he did his best work in the 1950's and 60's. I named my dog after him—

Robert or Merton?

Merton. And uh, I wanted to be the next great sociological theorist in my field and that was always my goal. And then—but, but even in grad school I was publishing a lot and I was doing what I was supposed to be doing to get my research credentials and everything else. It was also pretty clear early on that I was a leader in the department among the students, and even as a first-year student I was, you know, the head of the graduate student assembly for the department. I would lead efforts in various ways. As a grad student, I led committees that included faculty. So even as a grad student I was already leading, and I never really thought that this would translate into a... into a career in administration. I just thought of it as being an applied sociologist because that's what sociologists do. They understand organizations, they understand people and all I was doing was just applying what I knew.

And so I never really planned in grad school. But then I became a professor in '99. And I was an undergraduate at UT, and so I was very attracted to the undergraduate part of the university because I saw the students that I was working with as me, just a younger version of me. So I started working with undergraduates and that led me into being the Undergraduate Studies Coordinator for the department. And I am not one to sit still. And so, when I took that job, I was told that it mostly involved signing forms, but I decided no, I'm going to do more than that. And I did some other things. And, you know, one of the things that I did took me to the dean, and I got on his radar. I had

gone to him for some help with something. And I knew him for other reasons, so it wasn't out of the blue. I went to his help for some stuff, and he learned what I was doing in undergraduate studies and sociology. So when this position came open, he was no longer dean, but I think the current dean had asked him for thoughts about who he might think could fill the job, and I think my name was one of those that was given. So, I never intended to be a dean, I think, in grad school. But then once the opportunity presented itself—and it was Judy Langois who was interviewing at that time. She offered me the job—and I took it. And that was it.

So, what do you like about it?

There are many things I like about it and things that I didn't anticipate that I would like about it. It's actually kind of funny how it's worked out. I think the thing that I like the most about the job is you have the ability to help people in ways that you can't as a professor. As a professor, most of your life is research and teaching. And you can help people in those ways, and I certainly tried when I was in those roles, but it's limited. As a dean, there's a lot more possibility. And one of the things that drives me in my life is helping people and especially our students and trying to help them forward achieve their dreams. It sounds corny, but that's the truth. I want all of our students to just, like I tell them, go out there and kick butt. Just be their best selves and go conquer the world.

I'm mentoring a woman right now and I'm pouring everything I can into her because, I keep telling her, "You could be the first Latina president of the United States." And I mean it, this woman is wonderful. And so, when I think about what I love about the job, it is helping people. And it's not just helping individuals, especially students, it's also helping organizations. You know, sometimes chairs will come to me with issues that they have, and I can help them work through them. You know, organizations will come to me for help and I can help them. So I think what I like the most about the job is that I have a platform through which I can help people.

But what was surprising about the job that I did not expect is how much I love meeting new people. When you're in the department, you really are constrained to the people you work around and your students, and you don't have many opportunities to meet people outside of that little world. So, when I was in sociology most of my world was other sociologists. When I became a dean, my world just exploded, and I started meeting all over the place. And if I were—if you were to ask me who are my four best friends on this campus right now, you know, they're all over the place. I mean, they're in different parts of the university, people I never would have met were I still in sociology. And so, you know, you and Trish and other people in the writing center, I never would have met y'all had I not been in this role. And so what... kind-of the unexpected joy of this position really has been making new friends and it sounds silly, but it's the truth. I have really enjoyed that.

Ah, that is terrific. Um, and as you're talking, I'm thinking of one thing that I could have envisioned about deanship—right?—and another thing I couldn't. The bit about communication—that, you know, you're making relationships happen, you're building relationships, you're communicating to people—I could see that. But I hadn't ever thought about being a dean as an activist position, and it sounds like to some extent it is.

If you make it that. I mean you can certainly be a dean and not do anything and just try to keep the trains running. And I think maybe there's some people, that's how they prefer to operate. I'm a builder. I like building new things. And if you look at my track record you would see, you know, example after example of things that I've built.

What are the things you're proudest of?

Um, I don't know, I think it depends on how I think about it. The thing that I think that I've done

that I'm most proud of involves a single person actually, and her...my nickname for her is K-Mac. And K-Mac was a student who had been dismissed from the university three times, and the third time at this university means you're gone forever. And most universities in Texas won't take you at that point because you're on dismissal from UT. So it effectively ends your college career. And I looked at her record, as I do with all the third dismissals, but hers stood out because we were kicking her out forever because she had gotten two B's and a C. Had she gotten three B's, she would have stayed in, but her GPA was what it was, and to stay in she needed the three B's and she didn't get it. And I thought to myself, "Can I kick this woman out forever for getting a C?" (basically is what it came down to).

And so I brought her in and I said, "You have two choices. Either I can literally do nothing and you'll just be kicked out, because that's what's going to happen; I don't have to do anything, the process will just unfold. Or I can stop the process and keep you in, let you come to class, but if you do that, you have to meet with me every week just to talk, just to meet and talk." And she really didn't have a choice, and so she agreed to meet with me every week, and she didn't know why we were meeting. And really it was just to talk to her about what she was doing and what she was going to accomplish, anything else. At the very beginning of our conversations she was very guarded, she was very defensive. It was clear she didn't really trust me. She didn't know what was going on, but about a month into this, into these conversations, she visibly changed and she finally opened to me and she said, "I did not understand why you were meeting with me, but now I do. And the reason you're meeting with me is because you care about me." And I said, "Yes, that's why I'm meeting with you." And she said, "You're the first person at UT who's ever cared about me."

Mhmm.

And I apologized, and we went on. If you had asked an adviser "Will this student ever graduate?", every adviser would have said no because her GPA was so low. To get back to a 2.0 would be an impossibility. That's how bad her GPA was. To get a GPA that bad, you have to work at it. It's not just do poorly in classes, I mean she—her GPA was that bad. Three semesters later she graduated.

Wow.

And, you know, we're still Facebook friends and now to hear from her—she has a master's degree now. I mean she's moved on with her life. She lives in Houston. But I still think of her all the time. And it was that relationship that pushed me to creating our academic success program called UTurn.

So, we have a program in the college called UTurn, and UTurn is there to help students who are struggling academically. We identify them through their GPAs when they go on probation. It's an intensive mentorship program run by one of my staff, a guy named Ben Burnett. It's won a national award. We've helped hundreds of students in this program. And so, you know, what am I proud of? Well, K-Mac. I'm very proud of that and proud of her. But there's programs, too, and U-Turn is one of them, but there are others.

This is all making me very happy that you're in the dean's office. So, to turn to writing, as a dean what kind of writing do you end up doing?

[chuckle] I write a lot of emails.

I bet. [laughter]

I think if you were to ask me “What's the majority of your writing?”, far and away it's correspondence.

Yeah.

Far and away. I also end up writing a lot of memos, but they're not memos in the traditional sense where it's to-from. It's usually some kind of statement of a program or project, something we tend to do, something like that. So, it's not necessarily in a memo style, but it's something that would be normally conveyed in a memo style. It's short, it's on some specific subject, and it's there to serve multiple purposes, usually to explain and convince.

And so most of my writing is correspondence or loosely termed memo writing. I don't do much long form stuff anymore. I don't write many reports. I certainly don't do much scholarship. And to the extent that I do scholarship, my scholarship is co-authored. And I mean, don't get me wrong: last year I wrote a paper front to back, and I had a co-author, but I wrote the entire thing. So I will sit down from time to time and write academically, but it's not nearly as much as just the kinds of, you know, like I said. I mean, this morning, as a matter of fact, I was writing up a development document. I'll be meeting with development next week to talk about funding priorities for my unit, and I put together a list of our priorities. And that's three pages of single-space writing, and so, you know, I put that together in a of couple of hours. Um, that's the other thing: you don't have a lot of time.

Yeah.

So, any time, you know, if I set aside—well, actually this morning, now that I think about it, it wasn't just that document. I also wrote a letter of recommendation. So, within the space of about two to three hours, I wrote about four or five single-spaced pages on two different things. And both of those things were trying to convince someone to do something that I wanted. In the first case, let this student into your program; in the second place, you know, help me raise money. So, most of the writing that I do is along those lines. But then there is some report writing from time to time, and the report writing is very long and can be arduous, but it's there, too.

So, how's the process different from the process of academic writing for you? You can pick any of those genres. You just listed three.

Yeah, academic writing is very different in that that's what I was trained to do. And so academic writing comes very naturally to me. Um, you know, if you give me a set of data and some results, you know, I can write a results section in no time at all. And you know, if I have a coherent theory in my mind, I can flush out a ten-page theory without too much of a problem because that's what I was trained to do and it's pretty straightforward. With administrative writing you're not trained to write in these ways—

Right.

—and you have to, in some ways, figure out not only how to write in that way, but you also have to figure out what your goals are for your writing. So, with academic writing you pretty much know what your goals are. Your goals, at least in my field, are (to) publish. I have one book, but mostly published articles. My goal is to write a good body of work that's going to get past the editorial process and get published. I know what the editor is looking for, I know what the peer reviewers are looking for, I know what the state of my field it is, I know all these different things, so then when I put together a piece of writing at that level, I really have a good sense of what I'm going for. In administrative writing, you're not trained to do any of that. You're not trained even to

understand what your goals are.

[Laughter]

No one tells you that when you write in administration, you are doing image management as much as you're doing anything else when you write.

Can you give examples of that?

Yeah. When people read your writing, they're going to make, they're going to create impressions about you that go beyond what's on the page. And what you want to do is you want to write in a way that conveys the image that you are trying to portray. So, for example, in my correspondence I show gratitude a lot, and I show gratitude because people deserve gratitude for helping me or—or doing what I've asked or whatever else, because I'll ask a staff member could you do X, Y, or Z, they write back saying got it done, I'll write back and I will thank them. And I do this all the time. And so, part of that is extending gratitude because it's deserved and it should be given, but part of that also is because I want to convey the image that I'm a gracious person, that I am the kind of person who shows gratitude. A part of—so, showing gratitude is also image management. You're trying to project what you want people to think about you and how they want to see you.

So, when you write memos, when you write correspondence, they're not just looking at what you write. They're also looking at how you write and the images that you portray. If you write—if you write in administration and you're sloppy, or you don't have great grammar, or whatever else, people are going to see it and that's going to form an impression of you. I mean, you can get away with some of that in academia because you have editors, people who read your work and everything else. But when you're writing an e-mail to a donor, and it's poorly written and it's not well thought out, you know, there is no editor to catch you. The donor sees all of that, and you have now just portrayed a certain image. And in some cases, like for example, for a donor or someone external to the college, you're portraying the image for the entire college—

Yeah.

—it's not just yourself. And so, when you write at the administrative level, no matter what you write, you always have to keep in mind that image management is part of what you're doing. And so, when I write for administration, I will go over what I write multiple times. Even short emails, I'll go over multiple times to make sure that I'm portraying what I want to portray. Not just “Am I getting across trying what I want to get across?” but “Am I portraying what I want to portray?”

The other thing that's different about academic versus (administrative) writing is that in academic writing, mostly what we're doing is we're trying to explain what we've discovered. In my case, you know, I have a hypothesis and I'm testing the hypothesis, so what I have to do is explain the theory that leads me to that hypothesis, explain the data I'm using to test the hypothesis, explain the methods I use to test this hypothesis, explain whether the hypothesis was met, and then discuss what happened. You know, I mean that's the general layout of any academic paper that I write. And a lot of it is explanation and it's not even convincing. You know, you the reader may not be convinced that this hypothesis is a good one, but that's not how you judge the paper. You judge the paper based on whether the theory leads to the hypothesis, whether the hypothesis and theory overlap with the data you use, whether the data is used effectively, consistently, all of that. It's just, “Is this a good paper?” is in the sense of “Is this a high-quality paper, and it can be published even though it's not convincing about a given argument?” or something like that. In fact, I've published papers where the hypothesis was rejected, and it was,

the premise of the paper was “We think this is going to happen, and it didn't happen,” and it still got published because everybody thought this would happen and then we show that it didn't. And so, you don't have to be convincing in academic papers, you just have to be...they just have to be strong in the sense they're well thought out, they're argued effectively, and the data and results are... So, in administrative writing, no. Administrative writing—

It's all about convincing, it sounds like.

You have to convince people, that's right. I mean you have to convince people because everybody has agendas, and if you want someone to go with the way you see the world or your agenda, you're going to have to convince them to do that. And so, you also have to figure out for a given situation what's the best way to do that.

Mhmm.

Because, you know, I can tell you stories of writing something that went extremely well and in retrospect you look at that and you say, “Well of course that worked well.” But when you're not in retrospect, when you're looking at this going forward, it's a limitless tableau. I mean you can do anything to help the situation, and you have to pick one of many options, any of which might work or fail. And it's only in retrospect that you know what worked or what might not have worked or whatever else that it looks like, “Oh yeah what you did made sense,” but when you're looking at going forward, you have no idea. And so, in administrative writing—because you only get one chance.

Right.

Right? I mean, in academic writing—

That's the other thing.

But in academic writing, there's revise and resubmit. And if you get rejected you go somewhere else. I mean there's lots of opportunities, even for a paper that isn't that great. You know, I mentioned I wrote the paper, you know front-to-back, you know a few months ago—the paper got rejected, and if I decided that I want to submit it again, then I can just submit it again somewhere else, make some changes, submit it again. Administrative writing, there is no second chance.

No. [laughter]

You know? Once you send that first thing out there, it's creating an impression, and maybe there's a second chance to revise or something, but for the most part, especially with correspondence in volatile or sensitive situations, you don't get a second chance, and that first piece of correspondence will set the tone for what may be the next week of your life. And so you have to be very careful about it.

Yeah. So, I'm hearing lots of reasons why writing for administrators would be anxiety producing, and you're in the unique position to be on the receiving end, as an administrator, of a lot of writing from people who see it as a high stakes process, right? They know exactly what you just described: OK, you know, I have an impression I want to make and I want it to be right. So where do people go wrong?

Where people go wrong is not knowing what should be in writing versus what should be said

in person.

Oh, that's interesting. OK, can you give some examples of that?

Yeah, I mean, there are complex ideas that are not well conveyed in writing, and even for the best writers, because there may be some nuance involved in what's happening that just isn't conveyed well in writing. And in those instances, they shouldn't be writing me, you know, a five-page email explaining something. They should be saying, "I have a tricky situation. Can I meet with you?" And we can wrap it up in minutes, whereas in writing it would have taken forever because it's just so nuanced and it can't really be conveyed effectively in writing. Or what I will have to do is as an administrator is ask questions and—because you can convey all this to me, but if I have questions, we're going to start going back and forth and it's going to be difficult. So, you know, setting aside, you know... Let's assume something can be handled in writing, and a lot of things can be handled in writing, I think it's giving me a lot of information that I don't need. I think there's a tendency to feel like you've got to provide all this context and everything else, but as administrators we don't have a lot of time.

Right.

And so, we just kind of want you to cut to the chase and let us know what it is that you need, what you are looking for, and if we need that additional context, you know, you can provide it. So, do you know the abbreviation TLDR? Have you ever heard that before?

Too long, didn't read. [laughter]

Too long, didn't read, right. So it's, you're right, you write a long email and at the very end it's TLDR and you summarize the entire e-mail in two sentences, OK. There are times—I'm not saying that people should do TLDR, I don't do it myself—but there are times I wish that that was there because I'll be facing this email—

Block of text, yeah.

—email that has lots of detail in it, but the reality is there's only two or three pieces of information that are in there that are needed. But this, the writer doesn't know that because the writer doesn't have the larger context that I have. So I'll wade through a lot of text knowing I don't need all of this, all I need is that one sentence and that one sentence is what I'm responding to. But it took you maybe an hour to write all of that. And so, I think—and so the question you might ask is well someone who's a novice writing an administrator, how would you know what's the one sentence, right?

Yeah.

All I would say is start short. Start short with what you think is the most important thing you want to get across, and if the administrator has questions they can start asking questions, but really cut to the chase and say, "This is what I need." And there are administrators around here who I've given this advice to, some of them you know, who at one point in time were writing these large boxes of text, and I said, "Let me give you a piece of advice: just give me a little bit." And our correspondences are now lightning fast and they get just as much done and, you know, I get the question, I deliver the answer, and neither one of us spent much time on it, but it's just as effective as if long blocks of text had been sent. So I think that that is one of the mistakes that people make in writing administrators. For students, one of the big mistakes is assuming informality with us.

Yes.

And that's true with instructors as well, assuming informality. And so, I'd just say don't do it. If you're writing someone in a position of power, always assume formal salutations. And if that person writes you back and just writes their first name and doesn't bother with the whole thing, then it's an invitation to you that you can use, you know, I mean, and so you kind of pick up all those cues as well. So like, when I write people outside the university, I always use formal salutations. And then if they write back with it and they sign it with a first name, I know they're inviting me to use their first name in their correspondence, they're trying to make it more informal. So, it's really understanding those kinds of cues and everything else. But I think, in my mind the big mistake is just providing too much information. The final thing is, at least for this dean's office, we really do think we're here to help.

Yeah.

I think that the dean's office here in Liberal Arts, I think all of us see ourselves primarily in the role of wanting to help people. Yes, we have a lot of power, we have resources, we control resources, we do all those things, but at the end of day, we're using those things to help people achieve their mission. And so, I think knowing that, it's helpful when people approach us to know we're really on their side.

Yeah.

They don't have to approach us as an adversary. They should try to approach us as an ally, and that's what I do with my own writing. When I—when I'm talking to somebody in my writing that I may want something from them or we're in some kind of disagreement and I need to get them on my side, I start to use the language of an alliance rather than an adversary. And I will say, you know, I realize we're not, but I really need your help with this. You know, can you help me with this? Even though we don't agree can you help me with this? And using that kind of language invites them to help them work with you. It may not be able to get them to do exactly what you want, but maybe it will get them halfway there or something, so I try to use that kind of language.

So when you approach administration, don't approach them full boar, don't approach them guns blazing because you think you've got to be tough and get what you want out of them. That doesn't really work with us very well. What works with us is people come to us and say “I need help. I have a situation, this is hard for me,” and it could be something like, “I'm underpaid. I really do not feel valued by my department. I don't feel valued for what I'm doing, and I don't know what to do. I've talked to my chair and nothing happens. Can you help me?” That is much more effective than saying “I'm overpaid and you've got to do something—

Or underpaid—

—I'm going to do something about it.” And so even something that feels very personal and you feel like you need to go on the offensive, it's usually not a good idea to go on the offensive. It's usually a better idea to find allies and draw them in and try to get them to help you because most people in administration, that's what they want to do. They want to help.

Yeah. And you know, you were describing the dean's office as making relationships. I mean, it sounds like that goes for people approaching the dean as well.

Yeah.

Have you ever seen big communication gaffes, I mean, or headed one off at the pass? You know, not naming any names necessarily but—

I have, I have. There's a...the classic one is “reply all.”

Oh, ow! Yeah, I'm having a moment of PTSD here myself. Okay.

Yeah, so “reply all” and, or just sending something to someone you didn't intend to send and then having to backtrack or apologize or whatever else. Any time you do that, own it, own it. Don't try and dance around it, don't try to fake your way out of it, own it. Just say “My bad, you weren't supposed to see that. Yes, I'm a jerk. I shouldn't have said that.” Just own it. And I think that's the best way to get through those kinds of things.

There was another time where the college was putting together a piece of writing and I wasn't writing it, somebody else was, and I didn't agree with it. I didn't think it was what we needed for that moment in terms of what the college needed for something, and it was a difficult situation because the dean had already indicated—you know Dean Diehl, my boss—had already indicated that he liked the writing. He liked what was said. And so I was in an awkward position because I didn't and, but what do I do? Do I say that and contradict the dean, who had already done that? But it was one of those times where the issue is too important and I decided I've got to say what I feel, which is that I didn't like it. It wasn't that I didn't like it, I just didn't think it accomplished what we needed it to accomplish given our goals. And he called me into his office the next day, and I was like “Uh-oh, I'm in trouble,” and he sat me down and he said, “This is about what you said.” I said, “OK.” And he said, “I agree with you”—

Oh, interesting.

He'd had a change of heart and he said, “I want you to write it.”

Um, yeah, of course! [Laughter]

And so, he gave it to me and I found somebody else to help me with it who will also go unnamed, and the resulting product is what went out. And I'm not going to tell you what it is, it's very sensitive—

Yeah, that's fine.

—but, but what the public saw or what people in the college saw was what I had written, and if the original version had gone out, it wouldn't have gone over very well.

Yeah.

I don't think it would have been a bad thing, I just don't think it would have accomplished what we were trying to accomplish. So I wouldn't say it was just necessarily a debacle. Really the debacles are when you say something mean about someone and other people find out. You know, when you've crossed some kind of line and so, just don't do it.

Yeah, I was going to say though the whole thing about text like it's going to be read in a deposition, same with e-mail, same with—

Oh, yeah. Everything I write I know that through a FOIA request it could be it could be

subpoenaed or whatever else, it could be requested. And so, everything that I write I think about that in that way. But you know, I talked about image management a little while ago. I don't want to be that person either. I don't want to be the person who writes the snarky e-mails and stuff like that. I want to be the kind of person that I'm writing in such a way that I wouldn't mind anyone else reading it. Now, there are times where, yes, I'm writing something for a particular purpose that I don't want widely disseminated because it has a particular purpose. And I wrote something like that yesterday that was going to a specific person and it had a purpose in mind and I would not want it being read widely because it would create an image about something happening in the dean's office that I don't want to create. It's nothing bad, it's just you know, dean's office stuff.

It's just a thing.

And so, that's a piece of writing that if it got out, would I be embarrassed by it? No, not at all. I wouldn't be embarrassed about it at all, in fact I'd be proud of it because I thought it was well written and well structured and made the argument well. But at same time I don't want it getting out there because we don't need it out there. But nevertheless, every time I write something, I write something knowing that it might go beyond the person I sent it to and I have to be prepared for that. So, I'm going to write in ways that I'm never going embarrassed about. And I think that's key. And it really...every night I sleep well and I sleep well knowing that I've not done something to trip myself up because I wrote something stupid that I shouldn't have written.

Yeah. Any final tips for people?

One of the hardest things you can master in writing at this level is convincing people of a position they are dead set against. In other words, completely flipping someone. That is a very hard thing to do. But I've done it, I've done it many times. How have I done it? You know, it varies from case to case, and I think that you have to—as you stay in administration a longer period of time, you start to learn that different people have different motivations and they want different things. And if you want to change their mind about something, you have to know who you're talking to and not necessarily what motives they have, but what they might value, and once you understand those kinds of things then you can speak to their motives and their values. That's how you can get people to change their mind. And I don't mean this in any kind of manipulative way.

No, this is good rhetoric.

You're not lying to people, you're not misleading them. All you're doing is being a rhetorician. I mean you're really taking it to heart about "How do I convince this person?" And there's different ways to convince people depending on who they are and what they want. So, I've convinced faculty to completely change their minds on things. I've convinced parents. I had a parent once who I was...I was kicking his kid out or his daughter out, and he was angry and everything else and he wanted my head. And by the end of two or three emails, he was glad his daughter was getting dismissed and this is the best thing in the world for her—

Wow.

—and he was so thankful that I was in this position. And the next time he was in Austin, he wanted to buy me a beer. I'm not kidding. And so that's, that's the power of effective writing. And, you know, what did I do in that instance? I mean I can't tell you now—that was years ago. I can't tell exactly what I told him, but what I probably said was "You and I care about the same thing. You don't realize it, but we do. We both care about your daughter, and we both want your daughter to be successful. We want her to be happy and successful. I want that for her—maybe not as much as you do, because you're her father—but believe me I want it. She's my student and I want it, too, and we

need to figure out how to get her there. And so, this dismissal is going to stand, she's going to be dismissed. Let's start talking about what we do after that. Let's start talking about what she should be doing while she's on dismissal.” And I turned the conversation away from what he wanted, which was keep her in, and basically said “It’s not a good idea for her to stay in, that’s why we’re dismissing her. But let's do all this other stuff so that when she gets back she is ready to hit the ground running and everything else.” And that really changed the nature of the conversation.

Yeah.

And so, one of the hardest things you can do in administration is change someone's mind. And if you're going to be an effective administrator, you've got to learn how to do it. And, you know, I tell people it's the art of telling someone “no” and having them be happy with it. It is hard to do, but if you want to be effective in your job, you've gotta learn how to do it. So that would be my one piece of advice.

I think that's a great place to end. Marc, thank you so much for talking with us today.OK. My pleasure.

I’m Alice Batt, and I've been speaking today with Marc Musick, senior associate dean of the College of Liberal Arts at the University of Texas at Austin. *How We Write* is a production of the University Writing Center at the University of Texas at Austin. Our theme music was created by Michele Solberg. Until next time, keep writing.