

## HowWeWrite\_MoniquePikus\_8-13-19\_12.22 PM.mp3

[intro music]

**Alice** [00:00:23]: Hello and welcome to *How We Write*, the podcast where we talk about how to write just about anything. I'm Alice Batt, and I'm here with Monique Pikus, the Associate Director of the Liberal Arts Honors program at the University of Texas at Austin. Hi, Monique!

**Monique:** Hi, Alice!

**Alice:** Thank you for coming to join us today.

**Monique:** Happy to be here.

**Alice:** Good. I invited Monique in because she knows everything about how to write surveys. And as somebody who writes surveys periodically, I can say she's been incredibly helpful to me, and I bet she has lots of tips to share with many of you. So, let's start off just by talking a little about yourself—what sort of work you do, and how you got interested in it.

**Monique** [00:01:03]: What sort of work I do...well, I do research looking at inequality in the U.S. education system, so that's my specialty. And also at lawyers—long story—or examining partnership attainment for lawyers, looking at racial and gender differences. So I'm really interested in questions of equality in education and professions, and lawyers were a part of my grad school experience, and working with American Bar Foundation. And once like many other people, wanting to actually be a lawyer and realizing it wasn't the right career path...but studying them is fun; I don't want to be one, but I like studying them.

**Alice:** Yes, studying them is good.

**Monique** [00:01:42]: Um..and so I also work as a research consultant for Diversity Inclusion firms. And so we go into private organizations, private firms, and I'm the one that creates the surveys for them, and we look at race, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, those types of issues, and see satisfaction with compensation, and retention issues—all those types of questions. And that's been a lot of fun, because then I get to kind of see what's going on, write a report, and write recommendations. And hopefully, they implement them.

**Alice** [00:02:13]: Yeah, and you know the sort of behind the scenes story everywhere you do this work. Cool.

**Monique** [00:02:18] : But I can never talk about it because of confidentiality.

**Alice** [00:02:22]: Right, so I won't ask you any pointed questions about surveys you've done. One of your colleagues once told me that he found that the proliferation of surveys, you know, they're everywhere in social media all over magazines, everybody wants to take some kind of quiz, right, that it actually makes the work you guys do harder. Do you have a feeling about that one way or the other?

**Monique** [00:02:45]: Um...I think in some ways it does because people are just saturated with surveys ,and so many people just think it's another marketing scheme or something, because I think a lot of the surveys we encounter are really marketing schemes.

**Alice:** Yeah.

**Monique:** And so, when we send out surveys it makes it harder because people are less likely to respond, because they think like, “OK, what are you trying to sell me...”

**Alice:** “...What's your agenda...”

**Monique:** ...and, you know, there is an agenda, but it's usually just to learn more information. So, in that sense it has been harder. But in another sense, especially with the rise of, you know, the Internet and things like that, it's been a lot easier to do surveys—to do them faster, to reach a wider range of people. You don't have to mail them out and all that; now you just put it online and hopefully, you know, you can get in contact with people who will respond to the questions.

**Alice** [00:03:28]: Very cool. Um...so... I expect that because we're surrounded by surveys, it's easy for people to assume they can write one, right?

**Monique** [00:03:40]: They can't.

**Alice:** They can or they can't?

**Monique:** They can't. Well, they *can*, it just won't be a very good survey.

**Alice** [00:03:47]: It needs to be something they learn, right? Okay. So you've taught a lot of people how to write good surveys. When they first start trying, and I speak as someone whose early efforts you have seen, what sorts of mistakes do people make?

**Monique** [00:04:01]: Um...I think one mistake is trying to do too much, or not knowing what you're gonna do at all. And so either, “I'm going to study this, this, and this...,” and you got a sum of things you want to find out about in this one survey, or you just have this broad “I want to learn a little bit more about...,” and you need to find a happy medium between the two. So you've got to figure out what are the one, two, at tops three major things I'm trying to learn about in this survey—what is the goal, what information I'm trying to gather. And then another mistake people make is the questions are lists. And so when you ask a question, and you're asking someone, “do you strongly agree, disagree, neither,” and you're asking, “I like New York, San Francisco, Chicago, and Atlanta.” How do I answer that? Maybe I hate New York, but love Atlanta!

**Alice:** Right.

**Monique** [00:04:52] : And so...so those types of questions, we call them double barreled questions, where you're asking multiple things. Or, “I like New York because it's fun,” and that might not be the reason—I like New York because it's crowded. And so, if I say no, I disagree. You won't know which part of the question ...

**Alice:** ...you disagree with, yeah.

**Monique:** So yeah, there are keywords like “and,” “or,” “because” that are like, if I have them in a sentence, I might need to rework it. Another problem is the questions are really long. You have to remember that the attention span of the person filling out your survey is less than that of a toddler.

**Alice:** And why is that?

**Monique:** Because they are not invested in them like you are.

**Alice** [00:05:33]: True. OK. Toddlers are very invested in things.

**Monique:** I mean toddlers are like, “OK I’m doing this,” and then you hand them something else, and then and they’re doing that.

**Alice:** And they’re like totally invested in the time they’re doing it.

**Monique** [00:05:44]: Yeah, for the five seconds until something else catches their eye. And then that’s similarly with a survey—I’m not gonna read that question three times. So if it’s a complicated question, I’m either a) gonna just pick something, and I may not even be answering what you want me to answer, or b) say this is too hard and walk away and never finish it. So you want to make sure the questions are succinct, and similarly, the survey can’t be 20 minutes. Who’s gonna give you 20 minutes? You know, 20 minutes is...

**Alice** [00:06:07] : I’ve received a lot of 20 minute surveys in my, you know, through the email from folks in the writing center world. And yeah, I have to say, you know, it’s sort of that sense of duty that makes me open them rather than, “Oh yeah, I’m really excited about this.”

**Monique** [00:06:22]: And I honestly love surveys, but if I start your survey, and I’m on page three, and I’m looking at the bar, and it’s telling me that I’m only 30 percent done with your survey, and I’ve already spent 10 minutes on it because you have a bunch of open ended questions...that’s the other thing, too, to keep in mind: open ended questions require a lot of work on the participants versus clicking a category. And so if you’re going to have open ended questions, don’t have a bunch of them because you’ll be lucky if you get people to answer two of them.

**Alice** [00:06:49]: I remember I was using Qualtrics to put together a survey, and I hit a certain number of open ended questions or text boxes— it doesn’t even know if it’s an open ended question, it just says “text box”— and it said, “mmm, the percent, you’ve passed the percentage of text boxes you can have and still expect good survey completion.”

**Monique** [00:07:07]: Well at least they give you the warning.

**Alice:** Yeah! It’s great. It’s a really good tool.

**Monique** [00:07:09]: Yeah because some surveys...although Qualtrics can be a bit much, because they tell you alone “we’re not gonna let you do this.” Well, you don’t know what I’m trying to do.

**Alice:** Yeah, yeah.

**Monique:** And they don't factor in the idea that only certain groups are gonna answer this question based on their response to a previous question.

**Alice:** Right.

**Monique:** So that's something else when they...when that particular survey brand guesses how long it's going to take to complete a survey. If a person...if there's four branches and you only answer one of the four, then it's not going to take you 20 minutes. But Qualtrics doesn't say, "oh, they're only gonna answer one of the four." They just see that you have four branches and say it's 20 minutes. So...you do have to factor that in.

**Alice [00:07:44]:** That's good for me to know, Monique, because I was going to ask you about that for another survey I'm writing. So, I think you've given us a good number of mistakes, right? And then, what other tips do you offer people who want to write effective surveys? Like, overall, what should they keep in mind?

**Monique:** They need to keep in mind their audience and make sure they're asking questions that they can answer.

**Alice:** Mm hmm.

**Monique [00:08:12]:** So don't ask me what my husband's favorite color is, because I may or may not know it. Definitely don't ask me his coffee drink, cause I don't drink coffee. So I know he makes coffee in the morning, but I have no idea what his blend is...so don't ask me those types of questions. So you have to make sure of that...and another time, another problem I see a lot of times is they'll ask mood questions, or frequency questions: "I often... I spend on average five hours a week doing homework." Well, when are you talking about? Are you talking about this semester? Last semester? Three years ago? My entire life? So you need to make it time-specific...

**Alice:** "...within the past six months..."

**Monique** Yeah, usually the past six months, or sometimes less than that depending on... especially if you're asking for hard numbers. You probably want to make it within the last month.

**Alice [00:09:01]:** Oh that's interesting. That's really interesting. OK. So basically assuming that people really don't have a sense, or not an accurate sense, of what they've done in the last six months, but they'd have a much better idea of what they've done in the last month.

**Monique [00:09:16]:** Yes and it's also that, when I mentioned before, it is commitment. They're not as invested in...

**Alice:** ...in thinking back six months?

**Monique:** ...in your survey as you are. And thinking back six months might take...they could probably figure it out if, you know, their paycheck was attached to it...

**Alice [00:09:29]:** Right, right.

**Monique** [00:09:29]: ...Or if some prize is attached to it.

**Alice:** If it's your annual report.

**Monique:** Yeah, yeah exactly. It's your annual review and you're trying to figure out how many students you saw in the last year, you're gonna figure that out.

**Alice:** I'll do that math, yeah.

**Monique** [00:09:39]: But if someone asked you this question they're not going to do it. And so you need to keep in mind that the person taking your survey is never gonna be as invested as you are, so making sure the questions are easy to answer, there's not too many of them, and they're specific, and not asking five years, three years, or sometimes even one year, um, will increase your reliability chances of them completing it and actually giving you accurate information.

**Alice** [00:10:04]: Great. So, when you're writing a survey, what's your process? What do you do? Where do you start? What do you dread? All those things.

**Monique** [00:10:16] What I dread? I don't dread anything.

**Alice:** Any of it? OK that's cool.

**Monique** [00:10:19] : Yeah, it's fun to me, so there's no dread. The first thing I do is figure out what the goal is. Usually I'm writing the survey for someone else, so I will talk with the client. Or if I'm doing it for my program then I talk with the stakeholders, and we kind of figure out we're trying to measure. So once I figure out what the goal is, I just write questions. I don't censor myself. I just write them up, and then I review them: "why does this make sense? Does this not?" And, um, then I'll add demographic questions, which are pretty standard. I'll add that, and then I will walk away for at least a day. Then I'll come back, look at it, and reorganize, and figure out, "this is redundant. Maybe I'll cut that," or, "I need more questions on this." Do that. Stop. Walk away again. Then I print out and do a line edit.

**Alice:** Ooo, very important.

**Monique** [00:11:07] :Gotta do a line edit.

**Alice** [00:11:09]: I talk to students a lot about the importance of seeing it in two media.

**Monique:** Because when it's on the screen, your eyes just include that word that you forgot. It puts that comma there that you didn't put in, or erases that question mark that you put. Yes. So printing it out really helps. And so I'll do that, and I'll do a clear line edit of that. And then after that, I'll actually preview it, too, because you want to...it's most of the surveys I do, actually, all the surveys I do now, and most surveys people do, are online. So, you also need to preview it so you can see what your participants are going to see, and that's when you get like, "Oh is this color right. The logos in the wrong spot. Oh, let me put the back bar in so that if they want to change, they can change their responses to previous questions." And so you do that, and once you feel like "OK, I think this is good," this is the stage serious surveyors do, you pilot test it.

**Alice:** Talk about pilot testing.

**Monique:** Pilot testing is when you have a group of people similar to the people you will eventually survey, they can only be a few people, take the survey. And, you know, ideally afterwards you're going to meet with them, and you're going to say "what made sense? What didn't?" And, you know, they might have suggestions on how to reword a question, or say, "I really was confused on this question so I answer it this way," and then someone else was like, "Oh, I thought you were asking this," and I reword. So that's really an opportunity to kind of see if you were asking what you thought you were asking, if it's being received that way. And that is really crucial when you are doing a large scale survey, because you only get one shot.

**Alice:** Right, right.

**Monique:** And it doesn't have to be 100 people; it can be 10 people, um, that you have take it. You want to make it as diverse as possible, just so you can get the different perspectives, and just have a meeting with them over lunch or whatever and discuss the survey. And then once you've gotten that feedback, done your final round of revisions, then you can send it out.

**Alice** [00:12:58]: Yeah. So, there are lots of different sort of scopes of where you can send things like this, you know, depending on the project, right? When you're working with student writers, what do they typically end up doing in terms of distributing their surveys?

**Monique** [00:13:15] :They usually will do it through their class or their organizations. That's usually how they distribute their surveys.

**Alice** [00:13:27]: OK. And then with university projects, you can go across the university. Certainly there are a lot of assessment projects that, you know, basically, lets you survey the entire incoming class, that kind of thing, or across institutions or send it out on national list serves etc..So for you, like when you're doing the kinds of work you do, where do you typically end up distributing?

**Monique** [00:13:51]: Well mine is usually, and kind of what you were saying with that, is there's rules and regulations for each level. So you're trying to do university, you'd have to go through proper channels. Mine is usually unit specific. So when I was in the College of Liberal Arts, I surveyed all the college students in Liberal Arts at the time or sent it out, I should say, and they didn't all respond. And depending on the types of questions that I wanted to answer, we decided that having the advisors send it out increased the chance that they would actually open it up, you know, and not hit delete. So now in Liberal Arts honors, I do it multiple ways. So we will send it out through our list serve, we have our Facebook page, our social media page—and actually, I did that in COLA, too. So you send it out through multiple media, and so we'll send it out that way, send reminders. If you know faculty, you know, having them talk about it, or just reminding them, you know, "there's a survey." And always in your email, you want to say what the purpose of the survey is. You know, the title should give them an idea of what it's about, and usually within the first couple of lines, because that's probably all they're going to read before they decide if they're going to click the button or not. You know, you're explaining on why they should respond, why they should take five minutes out of their day to answer the survey.

**Alice** [00:15:08]: Yeah this is really helpful. Just reminders that, you know, people's time is precious. They don't have a lot of it, and you need to get to the point quickly.

**Monique**: That's the one thing you can't get back.

**Alice** [00:15:18]: Yeah, yeah, true. So, what courses would you recommend to students who wanted to learn more about survey work?

**Monique** [00:15:24]: There are some survey design classes. You can take those...um...they could be major specific. I know we have the stats camp, I forgot what the official name is, in the summer where Dr. Musick, he teaches a survey design course. But you want to make sure that the person who is teaching the survey design course is someone who actually does surveys, and not just someone who talks about surveys. And you can read, and there are research methods books that can give you a little cheat sheet on surveys. And really take a moment to look at some of the surveys, the academic surveys you've seen. A lot of times at the end of journal articles, they'll have the actual survey instrument, so you can kind of see how they create the survey. And then similarly, like, I send out the survey to all the COLA students—actually look at that and see how I ask my questions and how I ordered them, you know, and kind of analyze it and try to model it off of, you know, what you think is a good survey.

**Alice** [00:16:23]: Cool. Do you have a dream project that you'd love to work on? What would you do if you had your druthers, you know, who would you survey about what, and what would that look like?

**Monique** [00:16:35]: A dream...any dream project I would have would be longitudinal, would be studying the same group of people over time. I feel like we constantly get snapshots of here, there. Really studying people over time...so since I'm in a university setting I would like to study students and looking at climate: what's working in terms of their feelings of belonging, what isn't working, trying to explore differences based on race, gender identity, sexual orientation, social background things, like that, and kind of seeing how that grows, changes, improves, or not, over their time here at UT.

**Alice**: So, are having a positive impact?

**Monique** [00:17:12]: Right, are we having...are we making it better? Are we making it worse? Or is it the same? Prior to that, though, what I'd really like to do is do a focus group, because I think I know what, you know, matters to students but I don't.

**Alice** [00:17:26]: Yeah, talk to them.

**Monique** [00:17:29]: You gotta talk to them, right? Like, "oh, when I was a student this was really important to me" or "I remember students from 10 years ago told me this was really important" and I was like, "no. talk to the current students." So in a perfect world, I'd begin with a focus group, and have different stakeholders, different types of students come, and kind of explain to me their experience, and what's been good, what hasn't, and using that to then develop a survey, to get a larger sample and see if it holds for all students throughout the university. And to see if people are happier in certain colleges, too, would be really interesting.

**Alice:** That would be very interesting.

**Monique** [00:18:01]: Are engineering students happier or less happy than communications students?

**Alice** [00:18:05]: I would love to know that. So you mentioned demographics a little while ago. Are there important considerations to keep in mind when you're designing questions about demographics, or collecting that information, or telling the IRB board that you're going to collect that information?

**Monique** [00:18:22]: You know, there's a lot there's a lot of things you need to consider. You need to be sensitive to the people who are participating in your survey. Race and Ethnicity is a difficult question; how many categories do you put? How do you group them? Do you just leave it open ended? If you leave open ended, then how do you code it? Gender identity, and how you word that question, is also a question that's tricky. And sometimes students just don't want to report those things for various reasons, and giving them that option of saying, "I prefer not to say..." When you're dealing with different populations, though, there is that issue of confidentiality. So if you have a small sample and you're asking race, gender, you know, where you went to high school, or what town you're from, it can get very specific. And you can imagine a case where someone could go in and figure out, "oh, that's Amy because she's the only one I know who is a transgender female who comes from Lubbock and is a sophomore in natural science."

**Alice:** Right, right.

**Monique** [00:19:24]: So you want to be mindful of that, so when you gather the information you have to be mindful of how you protect it, and also what you choose to report and not report. So, a common rule of thumb is you do not report answers for categories with less than five people in it.

**Alice:** Oh, interesting.

**Monique:** Sometimes you can get away from that if the sample is so broad, you know, there might only be five African-Americans, but they might be from all over Texas. So you can't really say, "which one." So, then you can kind of do it. But in general that's kind of a little rule of thumb, people call.

**Alice** [00:19:53] : Cool. You mentioned the "prefer not to answer" option. If you've set up the survey so people can skip questions, do you still include the "prefer not?"

**Monique** [00:20:06]: I like the "prefer not" because that lets me know it's a conscious choice, as opposed to a person who skipped the question or ran out of time. Yeah, it's a conscious choice, and then it's my job as a researcher to try and figure out possible reasons why. A lot of times when I do my diversity inclusion work, the participants, the employees who choose not to answer are the ones who are most distrustful of the organization. So they don't believe you when they say, "I want to keep it confidential," and your boss isn't going to know your responses. And so you'll find a lot of times when doing analysis you break it down by that particular category, the "prefer not to answer" are the ones who have the most negative feelings, opinions, and things like that. So, had I just left it blank, I wouldn't know that. And so that's why I want it. I like having that as an option.



**Alice** [00:20:56]: Okay great. Anything else that we should know, all of us out here, students and professionals, who are doing survey work?

**Monique** [00:21:10]: Be kind to those...to those who are taking surveys, be kind. Take a minute. Do it. And those who are doing surveys, make sure you have at least one other set of eyes look at your survey. Even myself, I still have, you know, my clients look at the survey, I have colleagues look at a survey before I send it out. You need another at least one, preferably two or three sets of eyes to kind of look at your survey.

**Alice** [00:21:32]: See, as a writing center person I love this. Yeah of course. Get feedback. Get another set of eyes. Do some revision.

**Monique:** Because survey is writing, right? It is writing, it's just a different type of writing.

**Alice:** Yeah. OK, Monique, thank you so much. This has been a pleasure.

**Monique:** Thanks for having me.

**Alice** [00:21:47]: This is Alice Batt, and we've been speaking to Monique Pikus about surveys.

**End** [00:21:48]: *How We Write* is a production of the University Writing Center at the University of Texas at Austin. Our theme music was created by Michelle Solberg, episode titles or by Vince Lozano, and the transcript for this episode was edited by Laura Tarrant. Until next time, keep writing.