

An Interview with a Technical Communicator: Jennifer Sano-Franchini's Tips for Academic Writing

Just earlier this semester, I had been assigned an article in my Special Topics in Technical Communication course with a title that instantly drew me. "What Can Asian Eyelids Teach Us About User Experience Design?" asked Dr. Jennifer Sano-Franchini in the October 2017 issue of *RPCG*. As a technical communication student interested in unequal racial representations, I wanted to know more about how user experience on the Internet differs for minority races, including Asians. Dr. Sano-Franchini argued that race is relevant to user experience because all user experience is culturally situated, and that technology designers are obligated to consider how culture and cultural values are depicted. Right off the bat, I felt that the article tackled the user design issues from the ground-up; because the author was using a thoroughly explained case study to demonstrate the importance of the issues, I began to wonder how the research began and what Dr. Sano-Franchini's processes were for structuring such complex arguments. In my phone interview with her, I sought to understand the beginning-to-end strategies and techniques she used for "Asian Eyelids" (Sano-Franchini, 2017, p. 29).

I ordered my six interview questions based on what I most strongly wanted to know and what are most related to my deficiencies as a writer, which are as follows: argument structures, writing systems, time management, research process, proposal feedback, and modus operandi (MO).

I first asked Dr. Sano-Franchini, "What do you usually do when you have trouble structuring an argument, and how do you check the validity/strength of an argument in your writing?" Her response was that she usually turns on the voice-to-text transcription

app on her phone while in her car, and she talks into the phone as if she's trying to explain the argument to someone else. She says this helps her boil down the main points and why they matter. As she talks through the argument, it helps her write more clearly and legibly than if she was just sitting at a computer. Other than note-taking, she thinks about genre conventions specific to the discipline she's writing in. With "Asian Eyelids," it was the article that broke her into the technical communication field. She had first spoken to Kristin Ward, a colleague, about the field when she had initial trouble getting traction. Ward explained to her that Tech Comm looks for in-road organization conventions (such as the scientific method) as well as "spoken" explanations. Essentially, she had to think of it as delivering a presentation at a conference. The approach Dr. Sano-Franchini uses based on this advice is to start with a PowerPoint, which helps her organize her arguments and puts her in the framework of organization.

The second question I asked was, "What technologies or tips do you use to make writing physically or mentally easier, such as note taking methods or diction software?" Dr. Sano-Franchini explained with a laugh that she isn't the best at note-taking, as she will take notes everywhere and in different programs, then forget where she had put the notes. She says that the hardest part is getting started on writing. To help her motivation, she finds that deadlines are the most helpful; she'll either create her own deadlines or force deadlines on herself by signing up for proposals. For her, being stressed about a deadline motivates her the most, but she prefers small, short-term deadlines over large, far away ones. Collaborating is another way she finds motivation, and she commits to meeting with a group of writing friends every week. Her friends' support helps her clear away doubts and questions she has during the writing process. I

mentioned to her that I had a hard time committing to regular meetings with writing colleagues, so she recommended that I try an online group called “Women in Tech Comm.” She said that the group has a lot of effective ways to build their community and encourage members to get to know each other.

The next question I asked was, “How do you handle time, manage it, and make it work for you in terms of the writing project, and how are you able to sequester yourself while committing to the project?” Dr. Sano-Franchini said that the way she uses is to treat herself like she would treat a student or colleague of hers, by writing herself into her schedule and respecting the blocked time. She does her best to commit to such blocks of time every week. Having a dedicated time for just writing is important, and just as important to her is to recognize the conditions in which she writes best. For her, she prefers public places with moderate, but not distracting background noise, such as coffee shops. When I told her I’m most productive late at night, she laughed and said she used to be the same way before she had her child.

Then, I asked Dr. Sano-Franchini, “How do the research and writing processes intermingle, and what do you look for when conducting research?” She said that the research process varies depending on the project, but the two processes are always intertwined. Even when she isn’t actively writing down specific language, she’s taking notes and checking them later. And, in some situations where she had to research a lot of data in a short time period, she would look back at her research notes and gather ideas for methodologies. Sometimes, she found that she had to begin writing before she knew what her research needs were.

After that, I asked her, “How was your proposal initially received, and how much of your original concept did you change based on feedback?” Dr. Sano-Franchini said her proposal for “Asian Eyelids” was well-received right away, and that she felt more comfortable writing proposals than anything else. The harder part was taking the feedback she got and then developing the manuscript for an unfamiliar audience. She said her first draft and her final draft were very different, and that she had made substantial revisions based on the feedback she got. However, she thought the feedback was, for the most part, very helpful and detailed, especially regarding her methods section, which she admitted was fairly barebones at first. The reviewers asked her for a lot of details regarding her methods. One reviewer, she recalled, asked her if she had even thought about the methods at all, and suggested that she start the whole project over from the beginning. Dr. Sano-Franchini believed that the feedback and revising process were necessary for her to understand her writing goals and to improve her clarity for her audience.

Lastly, I asked her, “Do you have an MO for formulating your articles, or do you adjust each piece to account for different rhetorical moves or journal requirements?” She said that she does have a standard MO for understanding academic writing conventions, but it will differ based on the writing venue. She has to think over a wide variety of considerations, such as who the audience is, who the leading researchers in the field are, what other researchers have said about the topic already, whether it’s an edited collection or not, and so on. Dr. Sano-Franchini stated that she, of course, uses broader writing strategies, like building each section on the previous section, mapping the article before writing it, and the importance of the overall article. A tip she had for

writing articles is to write each section in a broad-narrow-broad pattern. In other words, she would write the introduction before the thesis, the analysis before the conclusion, etc. She says this tip is great because, when you have the methods and the broader implications in mind, you can think of the more interesting aspects of the article and bring them back to the introduction.

I thanked Dr. Sano-Franchini for her time. Overall, I felt that this interview was very enlightening and helpful because I learned a lot about how to reflect on my own writing practices, as well as how to better interpret a writer's techniques behind their completed articles. I certainly had trouble weighing the realistic aspects of time management, argument structuring, etc. and thinking of them as real processes rather than seeing only the finished work, despite the fact that I myself write and use writing techniques regularly. Now, I feel more confident in my ability to honestly recognize the steps that writers take and how hard they work to get published in academia.

Reference

Sano-Franchini, J. (2017, October). "What can Asian eyelids teach us about user experience design? A culturally reflexive framework for UX/I design." *RPCG*, Vol. 10, No. 1. Web.

Sano-Franchini, J. (2019, November 5). Phone interview, with Ross, J.