

Writing & Resisting: Owning Your Neurodivergent Process

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When you're neurodivergent, it can sometimes be hard to love yourself, your ideas, and your writing. When you're a student, your success too often depends on how well you can read and write to fit neurotypical standards. It took me a long time to realize this because, due to lack of funding and staff, the writing pedagogy at my undergraduate school was lacking. I got good grades and my writing was never a "problem."

It wasn't until the first year of my PhD program that a professor told me, cold and hard, they said "You're not a good writer. Why do you write like stream of consciousness? Don't you know where the subject goes and the verb goes in a sentence? You're getting a PhD in English and you can even write the language properly."

I didn't understand. I was just writing what was in my head. Everyone told me that I had good ideas but that my writing lacked organization. What was wrong with my head? What happened between idea formation and the page? I just didn't understand and I didn't want to understand. I wanted to think like a "normal" so I could feel as if this academic world was made for minds like mine.

I examined my writing process. Wake up, throw down every sentence, fragment, image, etc. that comes to mind. Stop. Breathe. Go back in and make myself into Dr. Frankenstein, making a creature out of loose parts. There were no outlines or goals. No topic sentences or paragraphs. It was my brain on the page and it would not stop. 10 pages, 30, 50 pages of material for a 15 page paper. But yet I could only read a paragraph and hour and hell knows if I'd remember any of it. It may be hellish but it's mine and it's the only way I can.

Multiple professors told me this was my problem – I didn't know how to write. But, there is no other way that I can write. One thing that is misunderstood about neurodivergent people is this: it is not that our preference to think and process differently, it isn't just more comfortable for us. We cannot think and process any other way. Trying to write like a neurotypical is like trying to fly: I just can't and I keep falling. And why fly when I can already get around by my own means?

That was 5 years ago. Today, I'm halfway through my dissertation, an award-winning composition instructor and writing center tutor, and a multiply-published

author. I'm lucky as hell to have supportive, anti-ableist advisers – even if most days it feels as if I need to work ten times harder to read and write.

I'm sharing my story to set a goal: As a current and future educator, as well as a disability justice activist, I will do all I can to create more accessible and anti-ableist spaces for neurodivergent writers and readers. I will assure them that their writing process is valid, that they can communicate, and that their reading and writing skills do not define their value. My years of self-doubt and confusion left me feeling worthless and depressed. I burned out and I'm still trying to regrow. In my regrowth, I want to prevent others from burning out like me. If I could say just one thing to neurodivergent readers and writers it would be this: Your reading and writing processes are yours and nobody can define it for or take it from you.