Episode 1: Wendy Belcher

# KL: Katie Linder WB: Wendy Belcher KL: You’re listening to *Research in Action*: episode one.

# [intro music]

# Segment 1:

# KL: Welcome to *Research in Action*, a weekly podcast where you can hear about topics and issues related to research in higher education from experts across a range of disciplines. I’m your host, Dr. Katie Linder, director of research at Oregon State University Ecampus.

On today’s episode, I’m joined by Dr. Wendy Laura Belcher, an associate professor of African literature at Princeton University with a joint appointment in the Department of Comparative Literature and the Department of African American Studies. Wendy is also the author of the best-seller [Writing Your Journal Article in Twelve Weeks: A Guide to Academic Publishing Success](http://wendybelcher.com/african-literature/writing-your-journal-article-in-twelve/).

Welcome to the podcast, Wendy. I’m so glad you could join me.

**WB**: Thank you, I’m delighted to be here.

**KL:** So, I kind of feel like I have to start this by saying I’m a little bit of a fangirl for your book, *Writing Your Journal Article in Twelve Weeks*. It’s a book that I have used myself, but also heavily recommended to faculty colleagues. I’m wondering if we can start with just a brief description of this book for listeners who may not be familiar with it.

**WB**: Yes, I call it a writing workbook designed for graduate students and junior faculty to aide them in revising a classroom paper, a conference paper, dissertation chapter, Master’s thesis into a journal article that can be published in a reputable journal. So the title is the aim of the book.

**KL**: I’ve found actually what’s really kind of interesting about this book is that it’s not just, I mean although the audience may be intended to be junior folks or graduate students, I’ve actually found a lot of senior faculty who really like it, because it keeps them on track. They may know the information that’s included, but they find it a really helpful way to just insert writing into kind of the rest of their work, because writing can compete with their teaching or their service obligations or other things they have going on. So I’ve found it really helpful to such a range of audiences.

**WB**: Yeah, I was really surprised by that. I’ve heard that as well and I’ve also heard quite a few people telling me they’re using it for undergraduate classes. You know, and obviously high level undergraduate classes trying to help people prepare for graduate school, but those people at the either end of the spectrum, that was surprising to me as well.

**KL**: You know, one of the things that I love, and you wrote this on your website where you have a bunch of additional resources for this book – and we’ll make sure to link to those in the show notes – but one of the things you write is that when it comes to academic writing today it’s rather like Freud’s analysis of sex in 19th century Vienna. Everybody does it, but nobody talks about it. And I think that’s so true, and I wonder, you know, can you speak to that a little bit? Like, why do you think that is and why is this such a mystifying process?

**WB**: It’s so peculiar. I mean, I don’t really know why, you know, if you’re in other fields you definitely talk about it. I think journalists talk about it and so on, but I think maybe there’s kind of this persistence of various romantic myths around writing and that writing is something that, you know, if you’re good you produce it effortlessly on a first draft and all those kinds of ideas, which, of course, is not the truth. The research says that experienced writers are the ones who make the most changes to their writing. So I think we have kind of outmoded ideas about what writing is and that means that people don’t talk about it or feel that it’s not appropriate to talk about.

**KL**: Yeah, I think what you’re saying about experienced writers make the most changes is really true. I’ve seen, especially in my own work, I mean, I think that a lot of writing is like 20% writing and 80% revision. It’s not, you know, the hardest part may be that 20%. Although certainly not for everyone; revision is also difficult in its own right. But I think you’re absolutely right, that it is about kind of figuring out the ins and outs of how to be the most productive writer for you, because for every person it’s going to be a little bit different.

**WB**: Yeah, I mean I had a student who talked about working with, when she first started off as a graduate student she was working with a woman that she really admired and had read her stuff. And when she was starting off the advisor asked her, “Look I’m starting to write something can you read my draft and give me feedback?” And when the grad student was reading it she was thinking to herself, “Oh my god, my advisor is an idiot! This is terrible. You know, what can I say? Like, I can’t, like, say, you know, a hundred things about this and how it needs to be improved.” So she kind of came up with three or four things to say and the advisor’s like, “Oh, you know, thanks so much, and I’ll revise it.” And then, you know, later the graduate student saw it in print and was just like, “Oh my god, what lightyears of difference!” Right? And that really encouraged the graduate student thinking, “Okay, so something can really start off as really bad and become really good.” So, that’s the promise of revision.

**KL**: Absolutely. I know, one of my favorite resources is Anne Lamott’s *Bird by Bird*, in which she talks about having, in not exactly her own words, crappy first drafts and what does it mean to have those and that you have to start somewhere. I’m wondering if you can tell me a little bit more about how, what lead you to write the book? What kinds of challenges were you seeing researchers having regarding writing and placing their journal articles that made you think this kind of resource could be helpful?

**WB**: When I got to graduate school, you know, I arrived there, I was an award winning author, I had been writing my whole life, and I could not figure out what these faculty members wanted. I wrote what I considered to be complicated, rich articles, like what we were reading in class and they would hate it. I would write very simple, straightforward kind of three point articles, some professors would love it, other professors would hate it. And, you know, I did fine, but I always felt like, you know, I had arrived in graduate school the day after they gave out the key about how it all worked. So when I came to the end of, I did two Master’s degrees, I decided not to go on for the PhD, even though most of my friends in graduate school were, and I went back to journalism. But after I’d been out a little while when people asked me, “Why didn’t you go on and do the PhD?” I started to be more honest and instead of saying, “Well I wanted to go back to journalism.” I said, you know, “I just feel like I couldn’t quite figure out what they wanted.” And everyone that I spoke to, all those people who went on to the PhD, all were like, “Yeah, I had that feeling too! That I arrived on the day after they gave out the key.” And one of them very memorably said to me, you know, “ I’m a fraud, but I’m a successful fraud.” And I thought about that a lot and then I was invited to teach a writing class and I demurred at first saying, “Well, what do I know about writing? Can writing be taught?” So we set up this class and I had six students and we did introductions. And the second person there said, “I’m a graduate student. I know that this article is really for magazines, this class is really for magazine writers and journalists, but my dissertation advisor has told me that I will never gain my degree if I don’t improve my writing and my dissertation.”

**KL**: Oh, wow!

**WB**: I was like, “Okay.” I felt, I had such this pain and feeling towards him. Like, I remember that feeling, you know. And then the next person spoke and he said, “I’m his friend. I’m also a graduate student. I’m also in the same boat. So, I’m just desperate for help.” And then the other two, you know, introduced themselves. And then the final person in the room was a man in his fifties, who looked at these graduate students with some sympathy and said, “I’m actually a full professor and I’ve published four textbooks and I still feel like I don’t know what I’m doing and that’s why I’m here.”

So I walked away from that class thinking, “Half my class were desperate academics! Like, what’s going on?” I was onto something. That thing that I was experiencing when I was in graduate school apparently is a much wider feeling. So, I started to teach that course and it was my laboratory. Every term they had to send their articles off and I said they had to just stay in touch with me after words. So, I learned a lot about what succeeded and what didn’t succeed in the peer review process and developed a stronger sense myself of what it was that was needed and why what I had been doing in graduate school hadn’t quite worked.

**KL**: It sounds like your experience with that class is really evidence of another thing you say on your website, which is what the great secret of academia is that writing dysfunction is the norm rather than the exception.

**WB**: Yeah, right? It’s a very few people who have no angst around writing.

**KL**: So, we’re going to go ahead and take a short break. After we come back we’ll hear a little more from Wendy about her tips for productive writing.

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# Segment 2:

**KL**: Wendy now that we’ve heard a little bit about how you’ve come to bring this book into the world, I’d love to hear some more specific tips for productive writing. And I know you’ve worked with so many academic writers, I’m wondering if you can tell us what are the kind of most typical hang ups that you see that impede writing productivity?

**WB:** You know, I actually have at this moment a graduate student who is writing in my dining room because she was struggling so much with trying to complete papers that I said, “Maybe you need a little company.” And so I was just talking with her about what is it? You know, she was saying she’s really struggling to finish this and very anxious. And she said “How do you describe this? What do you think is causing this?” and we were talking about you know, what is it? What happens in your brain when you just you can’t write or you’re writing so anxiously that you’re writing really slowly or not quite to purpose?

And I think a lot of people talked about perfectionism. I always feel like that’s kind of a cruel word; as if wanting to be excellent is a terrible thing. But there is something, I think two things. One, feeling viewed, right? That thinking not about the prose and the writing, but thinking about how people will see me as a result of reading this. And then the second thing is a kind of desire for mastery; that I went through this class or I read all these books and I really wanted to write something that locked all of this knowledge down. And it’s just, it can’t even take up 10% of what I looked at or thought or so on. So, I think those two things can be part of what makes it tough for people to finish things or to have writer’s block.

**KL:** One of my favorite parts about *Writing Your Journal Article in Twelve Weeks* is kind of the concrete tips and suggestions that are throughout the book. And one of the ones that I’ve told so many people about, I think it’s in the chapter where you talk about finding the right journal and the importance of fit, kind of, from the very beginning when you’re writing. Is you just have a very quick reference to the Ulrich’s Database, which is a way to find different publications and direct links to their websites and are the journals still active and how often are they publishing? I had never heard of it before and when I read about it in your book, I use it all the time. And I recommend it to people all the time when they’re not sure when they want to place something and I highly recommend to folks that they check this out if they’re on a campus or at an institution that has this database. But you have those kinds of tips and little tricks throughout the entire book and they’re so incredibly valuable. Are there some that are maybe your favorites throughout the book or that you’re frequently using?

**WB:** I mean, I think one thing that I just state at the beginning of the book is the idea of making writing social. And I think that’s huge – particularly for women, people of color, first generation students – is having a feeling of community that does not feel like the professor or does not make you feel like an outsider. And so I think building communities around writing is really essential.

One thing I didn’t talk about in the book very much and that I plan to do in the second edition is to talk more about reading and that I think one of those tips at that beginning, I have those kind of five keys to being a successful academic writer. I think I’m going to add one, which is actually reading journal articles. And I think a lot of graduate students can go through quite a bit of graduate school without really reading carefully particular types of articles, right? They’ll read theoretical articles, they’ll read methodological articles, they’ll read, you know, articles that change the field forever. But they don’t tend to read just the, you know, ordinary, garden variety article to get a better sense for how they’re being structured, the kind of simplicity of their claims, and so on. So I think that’s one kind of concrete thing that I’m going to recommend more is that you should be reading one journal article a week that’s something like what you hope to produce.

**KL:** That’s a great suggestion. You also, in the book, talk about kind of the helpfulness of finding a model article for something you’re trying to write. And that was something that I utilized to great effect. I was writing an article that had I think seven or eight different fictional, not fictional, memoir texts that I was comparing. And I just had no idea how to introduce them all at the beginning of the article. This was something that I had originally written as a paper in grad school and I was trying to move it toward publication. And I did exactly that; I went to the journal that I was planning to submit to and I found another article that had also analyzed, you know, seven, eight, ten texts. And I just looked at how it was introduced. How did they, you know, and it turned out they put them all in the first paragraph and they just kind of listed these are the things I’m going to talk about. And it was hugely helpful to me because I had just never done that before. I’d never written an article like that, but I’d also never thought to go to a model article just to look at structurally what it was doing.

I did also notice that you had posted recently on Twitter that you have started creating syllabi that people can use as a resource with the book if they want to use the book in the classroom. Can you speak to that a little bit?

**WB:** Yeah, you know, I feel a little guilty about that, speaking of writing, because I said in the workbook that I would be providing that and then I just never wrote them. I finally sat down and it takes a while to really think through and write stuff up, but I finally did that and people. I get about an email a day from somebody asking me, “Can you send that to me? I’m doing a fifteen week course or a six week course or something like that.” So I have them for different lengths of time. And it’s based on my own experiences. You know, the workbook developed out of my own course. So thinking about exercises that I did in the classroom and ways of facilitating the course.

**KL:** That’s wonderful. So to get access to those syllabi people should email you directly?

**WB:** Exactly. You know, I could post them online, but I’m like, I don’t want students to be able to read my little, “And then you say this” or whatever, right? And I think, also, for the instructors it’s useful if the syllabi’s not just kind of floating around out there. So, anybody who writes for me gets it immediately, I just don’t want it to be publicly, you know, constantly available online.

**KL:** Wonderful. Well I can make sure we put a note to that in the show notes so that folks can know where to get those from you.

**WB:** Great.

**KL:** I’m also wondering if you can share with us how you are keeping a steady writing pipeline amidst all of your other professional responsibilities. I did notice on your website that you have this option which makes me wish I was in Princeton of signing up for an hour long morning walk with you to talk about any aspect of writing. Can you tell us a little bit about how you’re, kind of, squeezing in because I’m sure those talks when they do happen help you to think about your own work as well. But how are you ensuring that you’re keeping up a steady writing pipeline?

**WB:** Well, you know, the walks are part of that. People often say, “Oh it’s so sweet of you. It’s so nice of you to do this.” And I’m like, “No. This gets me up. It gets me showered. It gets me out of the house.” I have a very stimulating conversation. I have fresh morning air and then I’m sitting at my desk at nine writing. So the walk is a mutual benefit and it’s definitely an important part of my practice of getting myself going. And I do sometimes still miss, you know, when I was in graduate school I had a half-time job as the managing editor of a journal. And so I had what I still think of as the dream schedule, which is I got up, I went for a walk with a dear friend of mine, I wrote from nine to twelve, I showered, ate lunch, went to campus, worked on my campus job from two to six. And I did that for over a decade and that was a real machine for me of being able to separate out different parts of my day.

And now that I’m a professor that’s a lot harder to sustain. And during the term it can be very tough for me to actually getting around to doing writing. So I struggle with it. I succeed a lot of the times and sometimes I don’t succeed. But I think what I have partly through writing the book or partly through having written for a long time is I can always get started again. I can always be back to it without being too anxious about it.

**KL:** What an excellent final tip for this segment. When we come back we’re going to hear from Wendy a little bit about her current research projects, any go-to resources that she uses as a researcher, and hopefully she’ll be able to tell us a little bit about the second edition of *Writing Your Journal Article in Twelve Weeks*.

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# Segment 3:

**KL:** So we’ve heard from our guest Wendy Belcher about her *Writing Your Journal Article in Twelve Weeks* book and some tips for productive writing. And now I would love to hear from you Wendy about your own research projects. I know you have a completely different writing pipeline than this *Writing Your Journal Article in Twelve Weeks*. So I’m wondering if you can tell us a little bit about your background and pathway, particularly as it relates to your work with Africa and how did you get to where you are now with some of your current projects?

**WB:** Yes, well I grew up in East and West Africa, in Ethiopia and Ghana. And my first memories are of Ethiopia and I returned to the United States when I was fourteen. So it was a huge part of my growing up. My dad’s a physician and we were there for his work. And, you know, when I arrived back in the United States I found out that this place, this continent, these countries, these peoples that I thought of as intellectually effervescence, were seen as nothing but blank darkness, chaos, corruption, barbarism, war. So it sparked me a desire to explain and to argue with people to prove to people that Africa was not the stereotype. So when I talk about argument I have had a lifelong argument, which is give the people of Africa some credit and acknowledge the tremendous contributions they’ve made to global culture and global history. So that’s a big engine for me and I’m trying to persuade the world of something that I believe in deeply.

I have written several book. I wrote a book about the 18th century British author Samuel Johnson and about the influence of Ethiopian thought on him. That book is called *Abyssinia’s Samuel Johnson: Ethiopian Thought in the Making of an English Author* and this is kind of squarely within my most important arguments. I have a book that I am working on now called *The Black Queen of Sheba: A Global History of an African Idea*, which is a similar kind of project talking about an Ethiopian text written in the 1300s that has shaped all sorts of things outside of Ethiopia. This fall I published a translation along with a massive amount of research of what seems to be the first known book length biography of an African woman. Also about an Ethiopian woman who was sainted in the Ethiopian church and has a very interesting life story. So I have always a lot of different things going on at the same time.

**KL:** So as someone who’s written multiple books do you find yourself drawn to that length of manuscript as, you know, something that you prefer? I know you’re also publishing a range of other things at the same time. Do you have a favorite kind of medium for communicating your arguments?

**WB:** I mean I feel like all my journal articles really want to be books. They’re always, you know, ballooning up in size. I just published a 17,000 word article. I just submitted one that has like 13,000 words. So I think the book is my preferred method, but of course they can be harder to sustain because they take so much longer, so you don’t have that kind of feedback that you do have, say, from a journal article which comes out quicker and which people have easy access to.

**KL:** How long does it typically take you to work on a book project from kind of the first beginnings of it until it comes out?

**WB:** I have clearly established with myself that it takes about ten years. The journal article one took ten years, the Samuel Johnson took ten years. The translation took five years if you count like dedicated work. Like I started to think about it and tried to find people to work on it. If you think about that then it’s also ten years. So I am not a swift writer; I am definitely a slow writer in particular because I do so much revising.

**KL:** Well and it sounds like you’re letting these ideas percolate a little bit as well.

**WB:** Yeah.

**KL:** As they develop over time.

**WB:** Yeah and moving different projects ahead at the same time.

**KL:** What are some of the go-to resources that you use when you’re researching your books or working on your articles?

**WB:** You know, I do love Google Scholar. I do love Google Books. I do love Academia where you can have access electronically to all sorts of knowledge. I love the librarians. I like to go, the Princeton library website sometimes if you do searches there you get a little not so much kind of garbage or weedy stuff there. So I’m trying to think if there’s any kind of more specific thing. It depends a little bit on project. On my Ethiopia projects there’s this magisterial encyclopedia, Ethiopica, which is an amazing resource that I use a lot.

**KL:** So my ears perked up a little bit in segment two when you talked about a second edition for *Writing Your Journal Article in Twelve Weeks*. What’s the status of that?

**WB:** Yeah, so I am working away on that. That’s actually my main project right now. And the second edition, you know, is going to keep a lot of the things that people like – the humor, the concreteness, the structure of it. But there were two, you know, most people loved it, most of the comments are positive. But there were two kind of outlier comments again kind of either end of the spectrum.

One was people saying, “Oh this is really a book for revising. It’s not for writing! I was looking for something about writing from scratch.” And since I had never dealt with that when I was teacher. That I had always dealt with people who were like, “I have so many ideas. I don’t know how to publish them” or “I have this idea, but I don’t know how to shape it.” And it really hadn’t occurred to me that people would be coming to the book with that desire. And of course, basically, I just didn’t anticipate the success of the book and that a lot of people would really buy it as their Bible and that was the only book that they would buy and I really had to address everything. So I’m not going to change the revision aspect of the book, but I am going to add a chapter about if you are writing from scratch how do you work your way through this book. So that should be good.

And then at the other end, which we talked a little bit about earlier, was senior scholars saying, “Well I bought the book and I didn’t realize it was so basic. That it was really for people who are starting off.” And I feel that in fact the book has a lot of stuff that is good for senior scholars or people who have been published a lot, but it’s sprinkled throughout. So now I’m going to add a chapter that’s called “Tips for Masters” where it will be more combined, you know, how do you get into better journals, how do you increase your citation rate, and things like that. Those are the three main revisions that are going to happen to it.

**KL:** Those sound like amazing additions. Do you have any sense of when I can add that book to my shelf?

**WB:** Well I’m hoping to be done by June with the revision. My estimates of these things are always off.

**KL:** Well as I’m sure our listeners can tell I of course love this book. I think it’s super helpful and would highly recommend it. So we will link to all the different resources we’ve discussed today in the show notes for this episode.

I want to thank you so much Wendy for your time and for sharing your resources and telling us a little bit about how this came to be, and also telling us a little bit about your current projects.

**WB:** Thank you so much. There’s nothing that I love more than talking about writing.

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**KL:** Show notes with information regarding topics discussed in each episode, as well as the transcript for each episode, can be found at the *Research in Action* website at [ecampus.oregonstate.edu/podcast](http://www.ecampus.oregonstate.edu/podcast" \t "_blank).

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