Episode 100: Wendy Belcher

# KL: Katie Linder

# WB: Wendy Belcher

# KL: You’re listening to “Research in Action”: episode one hundred.

# [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. Along with every episode, we post show notes with links to resources mentioned in the episode, full transcript, and an instructor guide for incorporating the episode into your courses. Check out the shows website at ecampus.oregonstate.edu/podcast to find all of these resources.

On today’s episode, I'm thrilled to bring back Dr. Wendy Laura Belcher, an associate professor of African literature at Princeton University with a join appointment in the department of comparative literature and the department of African American studies. Wendy is the author of the best seller *Writing Your Journal Article in Twelve Weeks: A Guide to Academic Publishing Success.* She is also the very first guest that we ever had on the “Research in Action” podcast.

Welcome back to the show Wendy it is so great to talk to you again!

**WB**: It’s so wonderful. I am so glad we are doing this, like a year later or six months later!

**KL**: This is even two years later! If you can believe it.

**WB:** Oh my gosh, no I can’t!.

**KL:** It has been two whole years, and since that first episode, Wendy, when I kind of fan-girled all over you, I have since met you, we have had lunch, which was great at a conference. And so now we are like old friends [**WB:** Absolutely.] so this is great!

Okay so since we last talked one of the most important things in your life is that you have been on a sabbatical. So I would love for you to update us on what have you been working on. What are some of the things that you were trying to accomplish on the sabbatical?

**WB**: Well one of the things about getting older is that you know yourself very well and you still kind of lie to yourself a little bit. You know that you are lying to yourself, and you lie to yourself, [*laughs*] so one of the things I always do when I am coming up to a sabbatical is, “yes, of course I am going to get books done over that twelve months.” It’s going to be like every day is going to magically expand into the equivalent of a week and everything is going to go lovely. So even though I know that is not true, somehow I still have it in my mind. So I guess in some ways you could say that I will be working on two books, but I think that bottom line is that sabbatical rarely works out exactly as you planned. And that this kind of infinite amount of time that you fantasize is there is of course not there. So one of my big projects has to work on the revision of *Writing Your Journal Article in Twelve Weeks,* which had kind of extended for reasons that I can talk about. Um and then my other big project for the year was to work on this book called *The Black Queen of Sheba: Global History of an African Idea,* which I think I talked to you about last time, has well been a long term project that I keep publishing articles and book translations and things like that. And this project just keeps on continuing. So I was able to finish up doing my revision of my writing workbook to submit to the peer reviewers and I am waiting to hear back from them momentarily. Then I moved on to working on the *Black Queen of Sheba* book, and one thing that happened is that I would really like for this book to get more pick-ups than my last history research book. I did a book called, *Abyssinia's Samuel Johnson: Ethiopian Thought in the Making of an English Author.* And it has a lot of my larger anti-racial schools of thought about convincing people that Africans have been writing for a long time, and have been thinking for a long time, and that their thought their discourse has actually shaped cultures, thoughts, philosophy all sorts of things all around the world; not just in Africa. But it was a more narrow book, and it got picked up a little bit but not a lot. So I was like, “well, I really need to try harder with this *Black Queen of Sheba* to make it more like a trade book that um maybe a number of people might read—especially because I am thinking if you can’t make a book titled *The Black Queen of Sheba,* you know a popular book, what can you make [*laughs*] a popular book? Um so I began to read some of the information about okay how do you make something more accessible or more popular. And it seemed to come down to a couple of different things: One article I read said this wonderful thing where it was like a consultant about this and he said, “academics are always talking about narrative, narrative, narrative” and I slowly realized when they say narrative they don’t mean stories[**KL:** Mmhh]. And what you have to have is a story. Um and what he means by story has to do with the second point which is advice you see many different places is human beings, human beings, human beings. And what’s weird in literature is that we often don’t have human beings. So for instance, I looked at the first slide of my book and it says “Three-thousand years ago a text was written,” [*laughs*] like right there—there—that’s the problem! There is no human being. It’s a text kind of acting in the world. So that was cool and then I read some other books like *The Swerve* by Stephen Greenblatt, and I saw that a lot of them had very kind of cinematic openings. There would be a human being and the human being would be in a particular place and time acting. So in that one, it is Pugo, he is in a German city, he is wearing certain clothes, he is walking down the street he can hear the fisherman yelling and the knife sharpers, and you are in this very kind of vivid place. So those are all great things and very fun those are fun ways to write. To think about making things more accessible and making it more storied. So I have been having a huge amount of fun kind of rewriting that way, but it takes it takes a real long time. Not the writing part, but the research part. So if you want to say that so-and-so is wearing certain clothes and walking down a certain street, and hearing certain things, you have to do a massive amount of research to make sure that you know indeed that is what that person would have been wearing in that century or what they would have been hearing. So um in general what I say about my sabbatical so far and working on the *Black Queen of Sheba* is that when I am writing I am very happy, I really enjoy that type of writing. And when I am not writing I am in a panic because it’s taking so long.

**KL**: So where are you in this sabbatical Wendy? Like how far into it are you right now as we record this?

**WB**: So halfway. Yeah I am half way through.

**KL**: So halfway point is where you hit the panic bottom, and you are saying “Oh my gosh, the time is running out, the magical unicorn of the sabbatical is going to be over.”

**WB**: That’s right exactly. And yeah, the whole book is not going to be uh written over this period and then in fact it is not going to be done by next year. So you know, I am very fortunate that I have tenure and so it doesn’t have to be a matter of anxiety that way. But of course, all of us have been produced by our education, so it doesn’t matter that we may find ourselves in places where there is a little less pressure because we have internalized all that pressure. We do it to ourselves. And of course I do want this book to be out there and doing good work in the world.

**KL**: Of course. So if I remember right, um Wendy, I think that last time we had talked you had said you were kind of a ten-years-per-book kind of person [*laughs*]. It took you a while to get these books out the door [**WB:** exactly] and I am curious going into the sabbatical did you realize you wanted to do more of these storied style? Or was that something you realized after the sabbatical started then you were like, “Oh this is going to be a different beast than what I thought it was”?

**WB**: Yeah, so I think of a sabbatical as starting in June right because well you aren’t teaching and it took me through September to finish up the writing workbook. So it was really in October where I began really to do research on how does this al work and um begin to think differently and begin to write differently. So it hasn’t been that long and I had an article that was due in there that took me maybe three weeks to do, so it hasn’t been that long. Um and yeah so both things are true.

**KL**: So I am curious when, Wendy, you have mentioned I think a couple of challenges [*both laugh*] that can come up in a sabbatical [**WB:** Yes, indeed.]. One is that your manuscript takes like a severe right turn or left turn in a direction that you weren’t thinking, um, could potentially happen. And also um just kind of things taking longer than you except. Are there other things that you faced as you have gotten into this sabbatical that have been particularly challenging for you?

**WB**: Um ,you know I’ve been working, I have been a daily writer for a long time. When I am teaching and there is heavy stuff going on—organizing conferences and stuff like that—um it’s not, it can fall away a little bit. But when I am in a period like this, I get up, I am at my desk by nine and I am writing. I write all day. I write ‘til five or six. So, I have always been a really slow writer, but I am a productive writer because I just throw that much time at it. So I am not doing just two hours a day, I’m pretty much working five to six hours a day every day. I always take the evenings off, so I have at least twelve hours of rest and relaxation, but um I am kind of crunching away. So I don’t, I didn’t have, someone was saying it takes me all fall just to kind of recover from that teaching and whatever. That’s not me. I that rhyme is really nature for me after all these years, so um having a schedule and sticking to a schedule has not been has not been difficult. Um getting exercise has been more of a challenge [*laughs*].

**KL**: Well, we are going to take a brief break. When we come back we are going to hear a little bit more from Wendy about some of the other ways that she is setting herself up for success over her sabbatical. Back in a moment!

[Music plays]

# Segment 2:

**KL:** Wendy, in segment 1, one of the things you talked about is writing pretty much all day. You know getting to your desk in the morning going all day long and then taking your evenings off to rest, recuperate, ‘til you start again the next day. I am wondering if you can talk, before we get into some of the ways you are setting yourself up for success in the sabbatical, how are you dealing with just sitting for that long every day? I mean, like the challenges to the body of you know dong that kind of writing constantly I know that they can be pretty challenging in themselves. So can you speak to that, what has that been like to you?

**WB:** Absolutely. That is a huge, huge issue and to be honest, when I first started doing this kind of intense writing, it which was a while ago I had terrible back issues. Um one thing that I did do is I invested in a nuero chair. They are expensive, but what a nuero chair does that no other chair does that I have been able to find does. Is that it tilts back, and lots of things say they tilt back, but they really don’t and this is something where you are literally like being kind of cradled in somebody’s hands. So that pressure on your back is off. And I see a lot of people were they are kind of hunched over a table they write in bed you know kind of hunched over or whatever and I am like yeah no wonder you can’t write for more than fifteen minutes. That is super taxing. I have something where that pressure is really off my back, and it makes a big difference. And I know that it is a huge factor because when I have to work somewhere else—For instance, I had to go visit my parents over the holidays—it was much, much harder to do that kind of level of work. It was just like “yuck” I don’t like this. So I highly recommend the serious investment, and you know that chair will last me forever and ever. I don’t, I have had it for fifteen years now.

**KL**: Okay well we are going to link to that in the show notes, because I am sure there are people listening to this who are very intrigued including me. I am like, “where is the chair, where can I buy it, where can I set it up in my house?”

**WB**: Well, what I was reading about was that the most unnatural thing in the world is a ninety degree angle. Right? Like, what you really need to have is something that absolutely gets you one-hundred and twenty and supporting your back at the same time. So if you can find something cheaper that can do that, there are lots of things that I looked at, tried out that I am like, no there is nothing like that chair. It is just a different kind of engineering.

**KL**: Okay so now I am curious about the logistics of this, because if you are basically reclining at a hundred and twenty degrees. How are you holding or engaging with a laptop or keyboard? Like tell me more about this.

**WB**: So I recently bought a house. As you know I got tenure not that long ago, so there was now you know, way, way into my life I got my first house. Um and I have an attic office, and one of the things I was very concerned about was that I have what is referred to as my magic desk. [**KL:** Okay.] I bought my magic desk like decades ago, um and it’s a magical desk, because for some reason it’s at a height that I have never found in any other desk. And it’s a lot lower than other desks. It also has like a little panel which was probably like a—what do you call it a privacy panel—or something like that, which I can put my foot on, so that was a desk in which I produce much of my work and it was starting to fall apart this was putting me in a panic. I am like, well you know it’s my townsman, how will I whatever, so I had somebody, I my house build something at that exact height that exact depth that exact weight and with a little panel I could put my foot on. [**KL:** Oh my god, Wendy, this is amazing.] Right? I reproduced it in my house the reason why I can recline like that is because I have a very low desk.

**KL**: Okay I feel like we might need picture evidence of this so people can really understand what it is. Or so if you are willing send us a picture and we will put it in the show notes so we can take a look.

**WB:** Okay!

**KL:** Okay, so what I am hearing Wendy is your setting yourself up for your sabbatical for success by having a magical chair and a magical desk. But what are the other things that and you mentioned daily writing and kind of really putting in the time and the effort. I am curious on a daily bases are you setting writing goals? Are you thinking about a word count a page count certain things you want to focus on? Do you know the night before what you want to focus on the next day? Give us all the details.

**WB**: That’s such a great question and I know a lot of people do. They work by hour or they work by page or word count. Word and page count can’t work for me because I am a reviser. I have no idea in any given day how many words I produce, because I don’t do it that way. And if you are kind of what I call a “first drafter” or, you know, you kind of sit down maybe, you have thought about it maybe, you have even written parts of it in your head, then you sit down and you kind of produce it maybe you do a little light proof read then you send it. You can do word count. If it’s not, I don’t know, I don’t know how those people count, I will add in two words take out three, add in ten um there is a huge amount of revising that I am doing and I am also doing a huge amount of research at the same time. So for instance, over October, um you know I am at my desk, I am writing, but I am taking notes doing research and doing all those kinds of things. And you know, if I told you the actual word count that was produced from those three weeks, it would horrify and probably make me faint. But literally, like probably something like five paragraphs. So um that’s what’s weird about me, I don’t know, I just, a lot of people say they are slow writers. I am defiantly a slow writer. A lot of people say they are revisers. I am defiantly a reviser. Um heavy reviser from the beginning, but um yeah it just takes me a really long time. Now there is that aspect also that I am doing I do research and writing kind of going in and out. Like, I need to know the date of that, and I look it up and insert it, or yeah I want write this paragraph about what was happening in Jerusalem in the ten thousands B.C. And I am doing this research putting these little things into a paragraph as I am doing the research. So I have to admit, I have forgotten what your question was there at the beginning. Oh the word count.

**KL**: I was asking about the daily goals, because I should admit, I am definitely a first-drafter. So, it’s interesting to hear from someone who is a reviser because I think, in some ways, and what I hear when you are describing this, Wendy, and what I really like, it sounds like you have accepted it. Because some people—like a lot of people—will say they don’t stop to look up the date. You know just keep going, don’t revise. Like, you have all this advice from people who are like giving you efficiency tips, basically, on how to get all the writing out. And you are just kind of like, “no I don’t work that way; this is what I do instead.”

**WB:** Uh yeah, and that’s why I say I am a super slow writer, but I um that’s why I just throw so much time at it that it turns out okay. Um, so, I have never been “count the pages, count the words.” As you can see, I am kind of a little bit on the hour thing, right? Like, I get up at nine and get off at six, absolutely five, sometimes four thirty, depending on what else is going on. So I know what I am going to work on the next day because I am working on those things or then I am working on the middle, or you know I am pretty much start at the beginning go to the next section, go to the next section, go to the next section. And flow right one paragraph links to the next paragraph one sentence to the next sentences. Probably too important to me, that’s why doing chunks here and there doesn’t really work for me. And also the thing about, okay you can just go and do that research later, is I found early on that often research really matters whether it was 1910 or 1920.

**KL:** Like you can’t go forward without knowing that.

**WB:** Yeah. So, and what I also found that has happened to me recently where all day kind of looking stuff up and I am like, “I need to stop,” like this is way too much this is not working out. And then at the end of the day, I found something and I am like, “wow,” I just had this kind of inkling that other people didn’t have it quite right and that people were missing something. And I found manuscript that has stuff and I was like that’s why I do what I do. Because even though lots of it might look like “are you insane? Why are you spending so much time on ‘x’?” Mmh, but my books are you know really, really deeply researched and really deeply accurate. And when it comes to Africa, there is so much, well as we have seen with our president misinformation and so much published academic scholarship that’s wrong. That it takes a lot longer I think to produce things that are truly solid.

**KL**: Well, Wendy, I could talk to you about this all day. So I am really glad we have one more section left. We are going to take another brief break. When we come back we will hear a little bit more from Wendy. Back in a moment!

[Music plays]

# Segment 3:

**KL:** Wendy, something that I am really curious about in terms of this sabbatical, um and I have never taken one the one thing I have done in the past is do like a ten day writing retreat to work on some of my projects. But what I found during those retreats is that it was really hard to get out of my own head and I felt like I was in a little bit of a zombie phase. Even when I was trying to like step away from the book and take a break. Like, I just kept thinking about the book. So I am curious, when you have a sabbatical, is that a challenge for you? I mean like are you finding yourself at the end of the day actual able to set this aside? Or is you brain just kind of still crunching on it even if you have walked away from your desk.

**WB**: Ah, no, you have hit the nail on the head; it’s a huge problem. It’s not so much um what I find the zombie thing like you met a friend for dinner and it’s not even that you are thinking about your project, it’s just somehow like regular language is hard to access.

**KL:** Yes!

**WB:** Your focus, your ability to focus on what somebody else is saying is kind of somehow reduced. Um so you know, the way I think about it is that when you are in intense writing, you know it doesn’t matter what is happening. Nineteen elements of your hard drive are in the background processing that stuff. Even if you are not consciously thinking about it.

**KL:** Right; it’s like your brain is taken up already with just this.

**WB:** Yeah, it’s like having a virus on your computer. Just everything else is slowed down because you are thinking about it. But I think for me, the evening break is key it’s key to actually see other people and get you out of your shell. I believe that television is a productivity tool to get brainwashed. I defiantly believe in genre fiction things that are like totally different kind of writing and very gripping and takes you out of your own head. And I also really believe in, you know, getting a lot of sleep, so you really wake up refreshed and ready to go.

**KL**: So, one of the pieces of advice I think that we have heard from some of the research on productive writing is you should have positive self-talk with yourself. And that negative self-talk does not really take you very far it just turns you into a kind of anxiety ball. About whether or not you can get things done. And I am wondering, as you are in this moment you mentioned you kind of hit this kind of panicky stage you are halfway through and you are really starting to think about what you can do here. What is the kind of “self-talk” you are giving to yourself? As you are working through this sabbatical and as you are kind of entering into the panic. Can you share on how you are kind of revving yourself up, motivating yourself to keep going with this? Because a year is a slog. That’s a long time.

**WB**: Yeah. Well I think that’s why you have to have the pattern right? That you just get up and you write and for me the morning is really regulated. I wake up, I eat breakfast, I don’t shower or do anything; I go upstairs and start writing. And its, I was reading this about how people think that, lets say, productive people are more discipline than other people. And then found that, in fact, productive people are actually less disciplined than other people. They simply have these patterns, right? I don’t think about “should I write today or not?” or “will I write today or not?” or “do I feel like writing today or not?” It’s just, I get up and I do it because it is not a conscious thought. So this was not true for me, certainly not in my twenties or in my thirties. Um it took a long time and, to be honest with you, it took ‘til graduate school and it took a fierce advisor, who I was terrified of, so I was always like “got to work, got to work, got to work.” And then I just became that kind of person who woke up, and got up, and went and wrote. So that, just doing it, getting yourself to a place where you are not making the decision to write you just are writing I think is how I deal with the panic. The panic is there, but I am still writing and some of my self-talk is “every book you have ever done has taken you ten years” “you know that you are a slow writer” “you don’t look at things on your cv and think how long it took you to write it” I just think oh yeah that’s so great I am glad I wrote that. “It’s going to be good in the end” “It’s going to be unsalable” “It’s going to be rock solid” It’s not going to have things where people can be like “oh look that’s off that’s wrong”. Um so those are the kinds of things that I say to myself.

**KL**: So one of the things you mentioned early on in this conversation was how much you know yourself. And you said it kind of doesn’t really work in terms of what you project about what you are going to be able to get done over sabbatical. But I can tell just from how you talk about your writing, you do deeply know yourself as a writer. I am curious if during this sabbatical time is there anything you have learned about yourself that was kind of new to you about yourself as a writer, or while you have been working on this revision on the twelve weeks book? Is there anything that is kind of sticking out to you as like, “oh that’s interesting”? Like maybe it was unexpected or something that is kind of new for you.

**WB**: Well this was not so much the sabbatical is what happened the year before. This was with the revision of the writing workbook. Um and what happened then is I think of myself as a slow writer, and you know heavy revising and so on. And so I sought to do the revision of the writing workbook and you know it kind of went along. And it took longer than I wanted but um I had set up something in the summer that made me be okay I got to just do it produce it out. And then what happened when I sat down and looked at it is that the most shocking thing happened, which is that I had blew the book way up I had actually written eighty thousand words in nine months [**KL:** Oh my gosh], which seems like crazy. That is. So not my image of myself I had to think and ask, “how did that happen?”, and oh well. That’s a totally different type of writing the workbook writing. That is basically telling other people what to do. That it just flows it just comes and I was just like yeah this must be like other people’s. When they can do a first draft and they can it pretty easily, even though I was doing a lot of revising, I found it very shocking that I produced a huge amount of words and created a problem for myself. So what happened then is actually very rare for me. I went into a state of collapse because I couldn’t get up in the morning and write because that’s what produced this very problem of all these extract words that couldn’t possibly fit in this book. And I felt depressed and sad because there were so many things that I wanted to share with people and so many things that I thought they should know. That I was no longer going to be able to produce in the book. So that took me about two months to get over that, before I could go back in and really do some serious cutting. So, that’s not so much the sabbatical, but previous experience.

**KL:** That’s really fascinating. I can tell you right now that people are listening and whatever made the cutting room floor, can you publish it as a ebook or something? I mean we are interested.

**WB**: Right, so I think um that’s exactly what I had to think to myself is well I can provide more things online. So, one of the things, you know, I almost can’t even say this out loud, because it is so depressing to me also, is one of the things people loved most about the book was in the first chapter. I said “okay, here’s all the obstacles.” Right? Like obstacle one, my advisor is the anti-Christ, obstacle three, all these things that were causing problems and then here’s all the other people that have that problem and here’s the possible solution. THAT had to go! So I was like, so how is that possible that the problem with it of course in the meantime. People have been sending me “yeah mine wasn’t in there you need to add mine”, and it also ballooned up. I was like nope this is something that would be great to tweet the obstacle post it online and anybody can go read it and you know be encouraged and so on. It doesn’t have to be that doesn’t have to be in the book. Um and I did make some decisions were I was like yeah I would rather have this other thing. For instance something that I am adding in the second edition that I cared a lot about and was really important to me was to talk about um ask people to think deeply about their citation practices and whether they are citing women or people of color. Or any other category they wanted to think about foreign authors or whatever. And that we all need to do a better job of really thinking about who we are citing. And so, that’s in there for instance. So, yeah. It won’t be lost. I can’t lose that kind of stuff [*laughs*] I am too committed to it. It will just be yeah in a different form.

**KL**: Right, I mean I am already thinking that’s the book after the next one. I mean like you have a pipeline, you already are creating a pipeline for yourself. Um well, Wendy, this has been so fun to catch up with you and hear about your sabbatical and learn a little bit more about what is helping you to be a successful writer. Thank you so much for coming back and being on the show!

**WB**: Thank you so much for inviting me the first time and this time. It has been a privilege.

**KL**: And thanks also to our listeners for joining us on this episode of Research in Action! I am Katie Linder, we will be back next week with another episode.

# Show notes with links to resources mentioned in the episode, a full transcript, and an instructor’s guide for incorporating the episode into your courses, can be found at the show’s website at [ecampus.oregonstate.edu/podcast](http://www.ecampus.oregonstate.edu/podcast).

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