Finding Our Own Rhythms: Writing Practices for the Neurodiverse and Disabled
Thursday, February 8th, 2024
10:35 to 11:50 am
Room 2104A, Kansas City Convention Center, Street Level

Lori Lynne Armstrong writes poetry and prose about mental health, addiction, and living with disabilities. She is influenced by her background as a scientist, counselor, and patient, having earned bachelor's and master's degrees in molecular biology as well as a master's in counseling psychology.

Vayl Larkin is a trans, wheelchair-modded writer and performer, living in Pittsburgh. They've published work from poetry to theater, and they are a frequent feature at accessible literary events. Focus on access and inclusion includes a position on an advisory board for Allegheny Health Network.

Mira Hadlow is a deaf Canadian author, thought leader, and advocate for personal power. Since the publication of her first book, she has amassed a cult following on social media, and drawing on her experience with domestic violence, Mira uses her platform to empower survivors.

Aqueila M. Lewis-Ross Using her poetry collection, Stop Hurting and Dance, and her performance art workshop, "From a Victim to a Thriving Survivor: Learning How to Revive the Soul"; award-winning poet, author, and journalist, Aqueila M. Lewis-Ross honors what it means to live with resilience, love and prosperity.


This panel will begin with each person briefly introducing themselves and their work. Then, each person will take turns sharing writing practices that have worked for their unique bodies and minds. Next, each person will speak to how the publishing and writing industry can become more inclusive and equitable for people with disabilities and who are neurodivergent. Finally, we will take audience questions.

Main points, summed up in a sentence or two, that each panelist wants to make about how they have adapted their writing practices to work for them and advice they have for other writers:
Vayl Larkin:

My personal writing practice involves a flexible routine. I start when my mental acuity allows, which can vary from day to day because I have polyneuropathy that affects me cognitively in some ways. I also have ADHD, much improved with medication, but between this and my short fatigue threshold, I find that shorter intervals of writing work well for me, interspersed with mental planning and idea-sifting while I use my hands for something repetitive.

(I practice both physical and mental meditative techniques, and this incorporates them into my writing practice, allowing me to reap the benefits of greater focus and mental retention). This has the dual effect of allowing my attention its own duration, and giving me an expected stopping point before fatigue forces a stop when I do not feel ready. Focusing my energy before I use it, because using it is exhausting and the better prepared I am, the more effective my work times.

I don’t recc techniques specifically though. The key to adaptive practice is Adaptation: The willingness to adapt and find a new way of doing things that works better for you than it might for others. Being weird is cool. Don’t try to fit in ;).

Advice to people working with disabled writers

Publishers who have worked with me on flexible deadlines. Technical/spec writing on a per-case basis, instead of with a minimum. Publishers willing to answer questions and interact, at least to a reasonable degree. (I appreciate the opportunity to send a single email with a question or two pre-submission if I need to. Post-acceptance I appreciate transparency and being kept in the loop).

Lori Lynne:

I’ve had to develop tools to 1) write in ways and quantities that respect what I’m capable of at the moment and 2) get back to writing after forced hiatuses, whether they lasted days or weeks.

I need to use a lot of psychological practices to center myself and resist being sabotaged by internalized ableism. These include meditation, prompt writing, and affirmations of core principles about creating. Comparing myself to more productive writers is, for me, a toxic behavior I need to avoid.
To maximize the writing I can do, it’s important for me to have multiple projects in the works so at any given time I can choose a piece of one that I feel capable of (flow mode, edit mode, brainstorming mode, business tasks…) It also helps if I have a variety of moods in my projects. If I have these choices, I have options for using even a little bit of writing energy rather than zero. I’m a big believer in the helpfulness of doing any nonzero amount.

As an independent publisher, I feel I don’t have too much to share about the industry side, except to encourage people not to exclude us from their thoughts automatically. My conditions are a big part of why I chose this path, and I am sure I am not the only one. In future dealings, my most important desires would be clear communication, very defined tasks, and accountability on both sides. It seems strange, but I am actually good at meeting deadlines if I am smart about what to take on and when. But for the system to work, I need others to meet their own deadlines and commitments.

**Anita Cameron:**

To be honest, I don’t really have focused thoughts on my writing. A lot depends on my energy, which I don’t have much of. I write for work, but also for fun, and to process my thoughts.

Most often, when I’m writing for work, I make scripts in my head before putting things down. I’m thoughtful and measured because in my work, I’m an oddity and am closely monitored, indeed, put under a microscope because I don’t look like the typical person who works with the issues that I address in my work. Because I deal with significant executive function issues, I find it difficult to schedule and manage time. If I’m given, or I choose a writing assignment, I will schedule a time to sit down, do research, write an outline, develop a script in my head and put it down.

If I’m writing for fun, I don’t script as much but I do code switch quite a bit. I tend to write on the fly, or when the Spirit hits me or when something pops into my head, rather than scheduling writing time, as I must do when I’m writing for work.

I often encounter ableist practices, even from disability organizations. I have multiple disabilities, including blindness. I often need some reasonable accommodations, such as an alternate way to get paperwork filled online when the platform is inaccessible to me. I need to be able to work with folks on deadlines and extensions, if need be. I need folks to be available because I have perception issues and sometimes cannot understand what I am reading but can process information better if it’s spoken to me. I sometimes cannot form the words that I want to say, and my writing is garbled.
I need clear communication of expectations and I need reminders - lots of them - about tasks and schedules.

I need publishers, etc, to understand that I may need accommodations in how you pay me - a paper check isn’t practical for me, so requiring me to fill out banking forms involving checks, when I cannot physically write a check due to disability is out. I need those with whom I work, to understand that I have multiple disabilities and chronic illnesses and live with intractable pain. My health turns and changes on a dime, so meetings may have to be suddenly canceled because I’ve suddenly become very ill. Unfortunately, I have to sometimes schedule things around my health.

**Aqueila M. Lewis-Ross:**
Currently, my relationship to writing hangs in the balance as I struggle daily understanding how to show up and be dedicated to it, when instead I must drop it and be ever present for traumatic experiences surrounding my family including my spouse of over 6 years who has mental and physical health struggles and complications with Sickle Cell Disease, Diabetes, Gout and more. I “live” through my 6 year old daughter who is a girl scout, adventurous, eager to learn, loves school, and wants to be a teacher when she grows up.

I am also still healing from a knee injury four years ago, attending regular doctor visits with an Orthopedic Surgeon and physical therapist. I use a walker to get around on public transportation while awaiting approval to use the Paratransit. Regardless of the level of pain I am in, I still must be a mother and a wife. It's something I signed up for. I haven't quite figured out how to make the time to write and perform because even within my “free time”, I am exhausted.

I have heard about seasons or periods of growth and change, times of healing that we go through. Many times there isn't a definite end to the season, but one must be steadfast and hopeful that when the time is right, the season will end and you will be prepared for anything. Today, I am hopeful. Today, I am still within the season, but I know that when it ends I will be victorious and we fulfill my writing and performance dreams again.