

## Documenting a Documentarian Friendship

Adrienne Jankens and Jennifer Grouling

*Jennifer Grouling and Adrienne Jankens met on Zoom in summer 2023 to talk about their experiences at CCCC 2023. They chat about their role as Documentarians, the way their CCCC experience has changed over time, their friendship that began online in 2020, peer mentoring, and writing program administration. The transcript below is edited from the full 52-minute conversation but is meant to capture the informal nature of speech.*

**Adrienne Jankens:** Maybe to get started, we should just introduce ourselves. You want to go first?

**Jennifer Grouling:** Sure. I'm Jennifer Grouling, associate professor at Ball State University.

**Adrienne:** Great. I'm Adrienne Jankens. I'm an assistant professor at Wayne State University. What's your cat's name?

**Jennifer:** This is Ghost. She likes Zoom.

**Adrienne:** Hi, Ghost. I'm glad you can't see too much of the room behind me because we put off school shopping until yesterday, so we had to pull all the old stuff out, organize it, go to Target. [Jennifer laughs.] And it's an absolute disaster. [Jennifer: Wow, yeah.]

**Jennifer:** Well, do you want me to start with my first question? [Adrienne: Sure.] So, what were you expecting going into this particular Cs? How were you expecting it to be similar or different from other ones? And since it was our first one back in person after a couple years?

**Adrienne:** I had attended some conferences online in the meantime, so I could see the desire people had to stay in touch with each other or meet new people. So, I expected it to have that kind of energy. What I didn't expect, and what was really nice to see, was that people seemed really happy just to be around other people. That could just be my perception, because I was not sure how I was going to feel about being around a ton of people. It ended up feeling really nice to just see people smiling. I wanted to spend that time meeting new people and

not what I've done in the past, which was spend most of my time with people I already knew.

**Jennifer:** Yeah, I feel like that changed with the online, like I met so many people like you over Twitter and social media and connected, and I was really looking forward to seeing those people for the first time in person. I was less seeking out my old, like I would go to the Virginia Tech alumni night sort of thing and meet up with people I already knew, which was great too.

**Adrienne:** Meeting you was like—I saw you right at the beginning of the conference and then I saw you right before we left. I remember I saw you at the elevators [Jennifer: Right!]. I could see you from the back [Jennifer laughs.] and I walked up, and I was like, “Well, well, well.” In my head, I was like, “You have known her for five days!” [Both laugh.] But I felt like I'd known you for a lot more.

**Jennifer:** Yeah, I feel like we'd known each other for a couple years at that point.

**Adrienne:** Yeah, just not in person. [Jennifer: Right?] So, it was nice to have that kind of familiar feeling, even in the midst of this crowded space. [Jennifer: Yeah, yeah.] What was it like when you arrived in Chicago? How did it feel to show up to the conference and sort of get in the zone?

**Jennifer:** Well, I drove three graduate students up. So, I was excited for that. But I was also, like, nervous to be at the conference and around so many people and meeting new people and all that. So, yeah, I don't know. I mostly remember getting checked in and trying to figure out all that because it also had been a while since I've done a hotel on my own [laughs].

**Adrienne:** Yeah, for sure. I drove in by myself, which was really nice. Work had been super intense for a couple of weeks, so I had a four-hour drive from north of Detroit just to enjoy time to myself. [Jennifer: Right.] I kind of forgot that people that I knew were going to be there [Jennifer laughs], like, that there would be an expectation that I did spend time with people that I work with when it was like, well, no, I'm getting away [both laugh]. Like this conference is for me [laughs]. Did you go in with things you wanted to do while you were there? I'm not sure that I went in wanting to check off a list of things.

**Jennifer:** Yeah, I don't think I really did either. Also, since my presentation was on demand, it was nice to be there and just feel like I could be more open ended in what I did. I had already looked through the program and like, saved a bunch of stuff on the app. But I knew I

wasn't gonna go to everything that I'd saved. So, it was more like these are some people I'd like to see while I'm here, things I'd like to go to. I think conferences have become a little bit of like a mentoring time for me, bringing the grad students up, but then it kind of felt a little weird because I'm being more cautious than they are. So, I was kind of like, you are here now. Be free. Text me if you need anything [laughs]. Like, yeah, we're just like, dumping them at the check in. [Adrienne: Carry on!] Good luck! [Both laugh.]

**Adrienne:** So, when you messaged me and we met up, we decided to go out to dinner and try to find somewhere outside, which is maybe a challenge in February in Chicago, but we actually had pretty good weather.

**Jennifer:** Right? So that was one of the reasons we tried to do the first night because it was gonna get cold after that, but it was actually nice that night.

**Adrienne:** It was beautiful. And I remember you navigated us. You got us down the road. And then we had a hard time finding the restaurant. [Jennifer: Right!] It was a weird entrance. But we had to sort of decide whether it was okay, because we didn't end up getting to be outside, really. Was that—like in our post-COVID sort of entrance into being at events again—was that one of the first times that you'd had to make choices like that and with a new person, which is hard, too?

**Jennifer:** Yeah, I mean, we've been primarily eating outside. So, I went into Cs kind of with a mindset of, like, if there's an option to do outside, but if it's like a really important thing to me, like, and I need to eat inside, I'll, I'll do it. So, I was nervous about it. But also like, "Oh, I really want to hang out with Adrienne, and this restaurant looks really tasty."

**Adrienne:** It was good [laughs].

**Jennifer:** And that view was gorgeous. So, they had a little outdoor area, but it wasn't—they weren't serving food out there. But we did get to go out and stand on the patio and have like this—it was such a perfect background of Chicago that I feel like the pictures look like we're on a green screen. Chicago in the background [laughs] (Fig. 15.1).

**Adrienne:** Like this beautiful lighting from inside this very trendy restaurant and [Jennifer: Yeah.] the glow of the little fireplace pit [laughs] [Jennifer: Yeah.], and then big buildings and lights in the back. I was nervous, because I didn't want you to think that I expected that we do whatever we had to do to eat food. If you would have

been, like, “I can’t do this,” we could have gone to, I don’t know, a hotdog cart, and I would have been like [both laugh] this is great! Which I think is one of the hard parts about that shift from knowing people online to then meeting in person and it matters to you that the relationship, like, goes beyond the dinner [laughs]. [Jennifer: Right, right.] I hadn’t met new people in, like, three years, because that’s not a thing [both laugh]. You know, my world got really small.

**Jennifer:** Yeah. And I feel like, you know, you were great about it. I was like, “I’m really hungry and this looks good and we’re just gonna do it.” But weighing how that factors in with my overall risk at the conference.

**Adrienne:** Yeah, for sure. That was one thing that was challenging about being in the conference hotel. I really loved that we didn’t have to go places, but some parts of the hotel got pretty cozy, like the elevators.

**Jennifer:** The elevators, gosh, yeah, yeah. Like there were some good tables. I hung out with some other people at some tables, and we had some snacks and wine and hung out, like, up in that area where, kind of like where the poster session was. [Adrienne: Mhmm.] We went there in the evening. That felt pretty safe. But yeah, the elevators were [laughs] not my favorite.



Figure 15.1. Photo of the authors in Chicago: Adrienne Jankens (L) and Jennifer Grouling (R).

**Adrienne:** I didn't share a room, so when I wanted to just get away [Jennifer: Yup.] I could have my space.

**Jennifer:** Yeah, same. I used to share rooms all the time, right? And now it's like, okay, between actually having the money and being further along in my career and COVID, I'm like, this is my room, my safe space [laughs].

**Adrienne:** I ended up really needing the time to clear my head about a bunch of stuff that was going on at work. [Jennifer: Mmm.] And so that time to myself and [Jennifer: Yeah.] time just to sit with my one friend from work. We ended up having more time to just eat together or have a drink. There was so much processing [laughs] that happened about events that have been going on. I needed that downtime to not feel like everything had to be happening fast. [Jennifer: Yeah.] I think being in one spot for the conference and not having to travel to different locations helped me do that quiet time without feeling like I couldn't dash over to another session I really wanted to get to.

**Jennifer:** Yeah, yeah, that's nice. So, speaking of us meeting up, since we've met online before, and we chatted through Zoom, how did meeting in person and hanging out fit or not fit with your kind of expectations of me or our online friendship?

**Adrienne:** Yeah. It was so nice to meet you. It was really easy, which felt good. I feel like we immediately started talking about just things we like, and our families, and stuff. And that was really great, because that's what I hoped it could be like. [Jennifer: Right.] I think sometimes when you meet people that do the same work as you, there's some posturing and stuff, and people want to always show what they know. [Jennifer laughs.] And you know a lot and you're very smart and successful. [Jennifer: Thanks.] And I'm learning a lot from you. [Jennifer: Oh!] But that's not what the friendship time is about. [Jennifer: Yeah.] So I think that's really cool. I get super nervous meeting new people, and it was just so nice that you messaged me when you got in, and I was like, "I'm just gonna do this." [Jennifer: Nice!] So, for me, meeting you matched up with what I hoped that it would be like.

**Jennifer:** Yeah, I'd say the same. Like, it seemed very easy. And I mean, I think for me, like, I definitely think a lot of people feel like the online relationships aren't as genuine or something, but I don't really feel like that, so I felt like I already knew you. [Adrienne: Yeah.] Well, enough that I was just excited to see you.

**Adrienne:** That's awesome. Yeah, that's how I felt too. I think I told my kids, "I'm gonna see my friend Jennifer in Chicago." [Jennifer: Nice.] Like I just decided, you know, we're gonna be friends. [Jennifer: Yeah, exactly.] I think I feel, like, that we have some other interests in common that make that easy too; it's not just that we do the same kinds of jobs.

**Jennifer:** Yeah, it is interesting you mentioning—like it's kind of weird to me to feel like I'm mid-career like I'm going up for full professor. Sometimes that still just seems very strange to me, that perception of me as, like, somebody in the field that's farther in a career. [Adrienne: Right.]

**Adrienne:** I had to do a reflective activity a few years ago when I started in this position about identifying mentors. And I had been assigned a couple of mentors, but they were also my professors when I was in graduate school. [Jennifer: Right.] So, they already were serving that role for me. And when it came to finding mentors for other parts of a professional life, I had, like, two colleagues I could list. And I was like, "I really need to start identifying, [laughs] like, who." I think those relationships do grow, or you identify them, more organically, but you also sometimes have to be purposeful about it. We've talked before about our work with graduate students, and that's really helpful for me. And, you know, I will probably be a writing program administrator sooner or later. [Both laugh.] [Jennifer: Right.] The closer I get sometimes the more I'm like, Oh, boy. [Both laugh.] [Jennifer: Yeah.] and I just finished getting my manuscript under review, [Jennifer: Yay!] so that's really exciting. [Jennifer: Very exciting!] If I were to put you on the spot, and I'm about to, what advice do you have for me, for either taking on the role of a writing program administrator or taking on the role of being a published scholar in the field?

**Jennifer:** Right [laughs]? So, what's your WPA structure like? Do you have, like, a team of people?

**Adrienne:** We have a director of composition, who, for at least a decade has had the support of an assistant director. That's a graduate student position. And then there's a set of non-tenure-track faculty members in composition that do the assessment, curriculum development, mentoring aspects of that work. [Jennifer: Nice.] And then other tenure-track faculty are involved to varying degrees, although we have a small group right now, there are only three of us. I'm observing as time goes on, and our people power gets lower, because we have

more responsibilities and a lot fewer people [Jennifer: Right?], that I'm not really sure what the best structure is. [Jennifer: Mhmm.] So, it's variable [laughs], I guess, is the short answer.

**Jennifer:** I've been really lucky to have a team with, like, two associate directors that are non-tenure-track faculty, and then two graduate student assistant directors. So, it's a big team. And I think one of the things that I didn't know much about going in was just how to manage a team or how to work with that. It was kind of funny because during COVID, we were all working from home, and at the time, we were in a loft apartment with an all-open floor plan.

And so, my wife and I were like literally working next to each other, and she was managing a team at the time. And to see, like, the way that she did that was actually really helpful. Like, I'm always like, "I don't want to be corporate!" And that's still true, but just like the way that she'd meet one-on-one with them and let them direct what they wanted out of the position—it was really helpful for me to see. And I think that's one thing I did well [laughs]. So, I feel like those relationships are so key.

**Adrienne:** Yeah, I think that probably is one benefit I'll have having worked with the same people [Jennifer: Right?] for a decade, being mindful of drawing on the strengths they have and asking, what they really want to bring to the table is going to be important.

**Jennifer:** When I took the WPA job, I also did, like, I was calling "strategic coffee hour" where I was reaching out to people on campus and being like, "Okay, you're the director of assessment, you are the person who does transfer credit, like, let's just get a coffee" or, you know, I'll come to your office, it doesn't have to be coffee. But like, here's what I do. Because I feel like, on campus, people don't know that this is a role; they don't know what it does.

**Adrienne:** It seems like unless you end up landing on a committee with somebody, you might not ever know. And then once you do know them, you realize the wealth of opportunity that brings for both offices to [Jennifer: Yeah.] learn from each other. That's something I'll have to get better at for sure.

**Jennifer:** Right. And so often we wait for an issue to come up. And then it's like, "Who do I talk to?" But if you have time, which you don't always because so many issues come up.

**Adrienne:** Was there anybody that you met at the conference that, or any conversation you had, or any session you attended that, like unveiled some of that working stuff to you?

**Jennifer:** I am thinking about Jacob Babb and—who is he working with?—was doing a thing with interviews with WPAs about their time during COVID. That was interesting, especially because I also participated in that study [laughs]. So, then you're listening, you're like, "Oh, was that quote me? [Adrienne: Yeah, right!] I might have said that [laughs]."

**Adrienne:** That's how I felt going through the surveys for the Documentarians. Like, oh, that's me. I said that.

**Jennifer:** Wow, I was smart! [Both laugh.] Yeah, but I think that that's kind of neat, too. Because both that and the Documentarian one, seeing their research presented, I was able to connect my piece of it to what they thought on the whole, and that was kind of fun to do and think about.

**Adrienne:** Yeah, that's really cool. I think, for me, the best example I have was seeing my friend Nicole present on the work she's done with summer bridge students. [Jennifer: Nice.] And it's like, this is a person I work with every week, in research teams and for mentoring stuff, and I didn't know this whole project [Jennifer: Yeah.] she was doing with students. And so that was really cool. She's an amazing teacher. I remember sitting in the audience for her session and people taking notes and asking questions, and everybody wanted to know so much!

**Jennifer:** Yeah, I know. It's a nice feeling.

**Adrienne:** That's definitely one of the perks. I was super nervous for my presentation. And didn't sleep enough the night before [laughs]. [Jennifer: Ohh!] It went fine. But I went in with really high hopes. I used to always want to do a thing where I would memorize my entire presentation and do a monologue, like, tell a story. [Jennifer: Right?] That's my high school drama director persona in me. And I don't have the time anymore to prep [Jennifer: Nope.] something to that level. The memorizing and the performance piece of it, I would have had to practice for weeks. [Jennifer: Yeah.] And the time leading up to the conference just didn't afford me that sort of attention, which felt weird because I was on sabbatical last fall. That sudden shift back to having almost no time to think once the semester started. I was like [laughs], "I thought I was going to be able to do better!" [Jennifer laughs.] I was just glad when my presentation was over. It helped me think through some things, so the process was useful. But I felt like I got more out of doing other stuff at the conference.

**Jennifer:** Yeah. It's interesting because I realized how much I like presenting online or doing the recorded stuff. I realized that pretty

early on during COVID. I mean, I'd made some videos for classes before, but not as many. And I was making one with my assistant director, graduate student at the time, for the writing program when we first transitioned online. And he noticed right away, like, a difference in my level of—I don't even know what to call it—comfort. I guess. [Adrienne: Mhmm.] When I'm staring at a roomful of people, I get more, like, tongue tied. When I'm just recording on the computer, I'm like, nobody's there. I'm just doing my thing. It's great. [Adrienne: Yeah.] [laughs] I was glad that I got to do this online, even though I was there in person too.

**Adrienne:** Yeah, you still get to share your ideas and get feedback from people that are watching it. But I agree. I'm so comfortable doing workshop kind of stuff in class [Jennifer: Mhmm.] and answering questions. But when it comes to the performance of delivering content, even for a ten-minute thing, I'm very nervous about it. Even though I know the stuff [laughs]. [Jennifer: Right?] Getting to record something, I get very animated. I'll realize how loudly I'm talking to the camera [both laugh], but very comfortable to the point where I don't even stress about that anymore in the same way. So, I'm glad you got to enjoy both sharing your information and then not having to worry about that part of it.

**Jennifer:** Yeah, of course, a few weeks before when I was recording, I was like, "Ah! [both laugh] I have to have this done already." So how did documenting the conference impact your experience of it? And do you remember any time when the survey, or your work as a Documentarian, maybe changed something about your approach to the conference?

**Adrienne:** So, this was the fourth year that I did the Documentarian work [Jennifer: Nice.] and the first time doing it in person. I think probably the biggest impact for me is on setting expectations every day and really going, "What is it that I want to get out of this conference today?" [Jennifer: Yeah.] That moment makes me be reasonable [laughs]. [Jennifer: Right?] I wanted to go talk to publishers. And I did try. Like writing it in the survey meant, "Okay, Adrienne, you said you were going to try this thing. So, you have to walk your body downstairs [Jennifer laughs] to the tables, and just do it. It's going to be fine." So, I set my purpose, and then at some point in the day, I did it, because I didn't want to have to write later on, "Oh, I didn't do it." [Both laugh.] But nobody was ever there when I

went [Jennifer: Oh.] which was okay. I mean, that was really like the reason I told everyone I was going to the conference. It's happened since, so it's okay. But I think that doing the survey work has made me be very intentional about setting a purpose and making sure that I get something out of what I'm doing. How was the experience of doing the reflections for you?

**Jennifer:** I've done like diary days here in Muncie. There's like a local community that everybody will write, like, about their day or a certain [Adrienne: Oh!] day, which is really cool. But that hasn't had that survey component. And so that was, that was interesting to me to think about, especially like, the second day of the conference, I think there were questions about what you were looking forward to, or how you were feeling. And I realized I was gonna go to lunch with some people from grad school, and I really didn't want to go [laughs]. And I was just feeling like, the first day of the conference, I was excited to be there. And I went hard and did a lot of things. So, I decided, you know what, you don't have to, so I told them, like, "Let's do drinks later, instead of lunch." And I went out in Chicago more that day. I think that in my head, I was like, "This is what I've signed up to do today, meet these people for lunch, I need to do that." And then the survey helped me gauge where I was at with that and be like, you know, that's okay to push that back and do something you need to do for yourself today.

**Adrienne:** Yeah, that's good. Where did you go that day?

**Jennifer:** So, I went up to—it was like a contemporary art museum. I kind of wandered through the city, went by the big, the bean. [Adrienne: Yeah]. Right. [Adrienne: Yeah.] I was not great at navigating [laughs], so I got lost a bit. But I finally found my way up to the museum. It was really cool.

**Adrienne:** Cool. Did you go out in the snow? Or before the snow?

**Jennifer:** It was not the day it was snowing. It was cold, though.

**Adrienne:** When I graduated from Valparaiso, most of my friends moved back to Chicago, and I moved up to mid-Michigan. I spent my first two years teaching high school just wanting to move to Chicago because it was cool. [Jennifer: Yeah.] And I love visiting there and stuff. I feel like it's pretty easy to get around. But I think I'm more of a green-space person [laughs] now. I felt spoiled getting to go there for a conference, because I got to see college friends and only had to drive. What was your favorite thing about being in Chicago that weekend?

**Jennifer:** Hmm, I mean February is not the best time of year to be there [laughs]. Even the times that I got DoorDash or whatever, I just enjoy getting really good food [laughs] in a big city.

There's a place—way back in 2011 I went to NCTE in Chicago, and I think that was when I discovered a donut place I really liked. [Adrienne: Nice.] But I ordered DoorDash and I just ordered a dozen donuts. And my friend from my MA program came up and we watched, well we “watched” the opening session. We ended up talking through the entire thing [laughs]. But she came up and had donuts with me. And then like the rest of the trip I was just eating donuts, [Adrienne: That's great.] 'cause I had, like, a dozen that I just ordered, so.

**Adrienne:** Now I'm just thinking about good food. So, anything else you want to ask?

**Jennifer:** I guess this is another future thinking one. But did anything from this particular Cs make you think differently about future conferences? Or Cs in the future?

**Adrienne:** I think it showed me that I am not as out of place as I sometimes feel. That I can just show up and be in the moment of the conference, and I'll get what I need out of it. [Jennifer: Mhmm.] And it was a good reminder for me that I much more enjoy presenting on something I've been working on for a long time than something that's a little bit newer. To go in feeling confident about what I'm going to talk about is a better choice for me. [Jennifer: Yeah.] How about you?

**Jennifer:** I always thought Cs was, like, the thing to do every year. And I still love it. But I think, like, balancing it with smaller, more focused conferences is good for me at this point, because, like, travel funding has gotten cut, right? Like, it's just harder to do all these things. And I'm less willing to spend my—even though I have more of my own money, I'm less willing to spend it on. Because I'm like, “This is my job. You should be, you should be funding me to do this.” [Adrienne: Right. Yeah.] There was a time where I was like, “I'll never miss a year at Cs.” I'm not done with Cs. This is great. But I think like next year, I might try to go to a smaller conference instead and kinda play it by ear a little bit.

**Adrienne:** That makes sense to me. Like two weeks ago, I searched the program from the 2023 conference [Jennifer: Mhmm.] for GTA training, teacher development, other versions of those keywords. And I found, like, four sessions. [Jennifer: Really?] That was what I could find. Like, if the people that I'm supposed to be connecting with aren't

people that I can find this way, [Jennifer: Mhmm.] how am I going to find them? I mean, obviously there's a lot of other ways to connect. But I was like, "Oh, I wonder, what did I miss? What didn't I go to?" [Jennifer: Right?] So yeah, I hear you on being selective. One of my mentors told me a couple years ago that I should stop going to conferences and just work on my book. He was like, "Adrienne, you've done all the conferences. [Both laugh.] You don't need to show anybody that you can do them anymore." So, every time I'm about to apply [Jennifer: Yeah.] even for next year for Cs, I was like, I don't need to do this.

**Jennifer:** Yeah, it's hard to, to get that balance. I mean, I think that's the other thing that has become like, definitely a time where I can like, support my grad students. Like I went to a presentation that one of my grad students did at Cs. [Adrienne: Oh, cool.] It also was, and I think maybe this is just having been away from it for a few years and not seeing it in person—but Cs felt very young to me this year. Did it feel that way to you?

**Adrienne:** Yeah, it did, which is great. [Jennifer: I agree.] I hope that conferences, with the spoken emphasis on inclusivity, which includes a lot of different things, but it seems like the point should be giving younger scholars in the field an opportunity to talk about their ideas or talk with other people. [Jennifer: Yeah.] And the only way that can happen is if the people who are reading their proposals are open to hearing new things and new ideas. That's a good shift. [Jennifer: Yeah, I agree.] It's cool to see, like, the big people. It's cool to see them at a conference for sure. But when I was a grad student, they weren't the people I was gonna end up working with. [Jennifer: Right, right.]

**Jennifer:** Yeah, I loved all that energy. I was like, "This is great," but also made me feel a little disconnected.

**Adrienne:** There is a moment where you go like, wait, I'm not the young person at the conference. [Jennifer: Right?] [Both laugh.] I'll just take my gray hair back upstairs. That's how I feel. [Jennifer: Yep!] [Both laugh.] Nothing wrong with that. I had a great time. For sure.