

MARGINS

Season 4, Episode 4: "Organizing Ideas"

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The Big Idea

Mary Ellen Slayter: From Managing Editor Magazine, this is Margins. And if you've got content in your job description, we've made this podcast for you. I'm your host, Mary Ellen Slater, and this season of Margins, we're exploring what it means to be organized.

Elena Valentine: And I'm your cohost, Elena Valentine.

Mary Ellen Slayter: Ideas are hard to organize because we can't see them. I think of them in a language sense. You know what I mean? I think sometimes we talk about people who think in visuals inside their head, or do you think in words? I have that internal running narrative inside my head. And so for me, ideas don't become real until I can figure out a way to use my words, ideally the written word, to express them in a way that people get it.

Mary Ellen Slayter: I'm a very structural writer and editor. So I think about rhetorical frameworks... even before I knew that that's what you called it and I learned the names for them... I sit down and I think, "Okay, what's the story that I'm going to tell and how am I going to get there?"

Mary Ellen Slayter: First of all, an interesting idea, you have to be able to argue with it. This is something that comes up a lot in our thought leadership consulting. They'll say, "Well, my idea is this." And I'm like, "Okay. Could anybody argue with that?" If it's not, this is not thought leadership. So take that idea and then you're going to have to come up with the argument for it, and how you're going to back it up.

Mary Ellen Slayter: In my mind, you should be able to say it in a sentence, essentially. And then give me those bullet points... whether it's three bullet points, five bullet points... whatever. And then they need to have a structure and a flow to them. Only once I get that part right, do I go in and actually write.

Elena Valentine: So then how do you get your clients to go from here to sussing it down to enough solid bullet points for you to move forward?

Mary Ellen Slayter: Let's say I'm working on something and I'm ghostwriting... this would be a good example of it... I'm going to ghostwrite for someone else. I'm trying to help them tease out their ideas. I walk in with my knowledge of the space we're talking about, and I walk in with some sense of their perspectives based on anything they might've ever written about.

Mary Ellen Slayter: We'll usually start with a topic in mind and then I will start digging. I'll start looking for examples. What I'm listening for is one, when they get excited talking about it. I'm listening for that and then I pick up and I drill in some more, and I ask them to explore that idea. Then the other part is helping them thinking about how they're going to back up that case. Because passion is only part of the equation. I need both passion and logic.

Mary Ellen Slayter: I need a story and data for the kind of stuff that we work on. And so that's why I ask the question like, "Oh, how could we prove that? Or how could we disprove it?" And I do ask the question too, "Could anybody in

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your business disagree with you? Oh, okay. Well, what would they say? What would be their argument against this?

Mary Ellen Slayter: I think this is also a reflection of the type of writing that I do. That's that thought leadership type stuff. But I am coming in there... there's two things in this as I describe this to you I realize... I am marrying two things. So one, in science we put up a hypothesis and then we try to disprove it. So I ask my people as I'm talking to them to disprove the argument that they're trying to make to me. Because ultimately that will make it stronger.

Mary Ellen Slayter: And then as a journalist, I really ask a lot of questions. People often think that journalism is about where something's published. But journalism isn't about where it gets published, and it's also not about who is doing it. I wish that it were used more often as a verb because it's a thing that you do. It is a discipline of verification.

Mary Ellen Slayter: Phil Blanchard, one of my mentors growing up in journalism and at the Washington Post, used to have this habit. He would always say, "If you get to something in a story..." And he'd go, "Hmm. Interesting, if true." So I feel like that's what I bring into my interviews. That's what I bring into my conversations when I'm trying to figure out where the good idea is. I say, "Oh. That's interesting, if true." What do you think when we say organizing ideas?

Elena Valentine: I'll give you an example. So we've just gone through hours, and hours, and hours, of filming interviews. There's a lot of things that's happening in that client's head. They're there, they've been taking notes, they're excited. What we'd want it to be in three minute video, they're thinking this should be a feature film of however many things.

Elena Valentine: One question I always like to ask... and I know some of this I'm kind of leaning into people's fears... which is to say, "Heaven forbid, we lost all of your footage. What could salvage three pieces of either someone's individual interview or from the entire day, and we can still put something out that you could be proud of? What would they be?" And that to me is how... in at least for some clients... are one of the ways I can very quickly get down to what they see as being the key ideas for this specific video.

Interview 1: Susan Jacobson and Elizabeth Marsh

Mary Ellen Slayter: Susan Jacobson is co-director of the Stephen Cruz Institute for Media, Science and Technology at Florida International University. The Institute connects top communications professionals and researchers with science and technology experts all in the name of better public understanding of science. Her colleague, Elizabeth Marsh, is Associate Chair in the Department of Communication at FIU. Her research focuses on the use of social media to communicate nuanced messages, such as those required for effective science communication. Susan started our conversation by explaining why work like theirs is so important.

Susan Jacobson: What often happens in academia is we have these amazing scientists... They may do this great research. They may get this great funding. It may find its way into a journal article, but a lot of times it ends up in a locked filing cabinet that is not accessible to the public. And no one gives a thought about finding ways to communicate some of this very valuable information to the public.

Mary Ellen Slayter: And as Elizabeth notes, there are maybe a few other reasons we need our scientists to be amazing communicators.

Elizabeth Marsh: We live in Miami and there is a very pressing scientific problem that's going to drown all of our homes, and it's important to us that this is communicated locally, and nationwide, and globally. Clearly scientists had not been doing a terribly good job communicating with people.

Mary Ellen Slayter: Look, global warming is here. I mean, South Park did an entire episode where they apologize to Al

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Gore. But why do scientists still have so much trouble getting their message out?

Susan Jacobson: I just saw this data recently from climate central, which is a big climate research organization here in the U.S. Although people in the U.S. have become more likely to believe that climate change is real and that it's human caused, there's still a lot of thinking that it's something that's going to happen in the future, far away, to other people.

Susan Jacobson: And also, although we've made some progress, so not everybody's a denier anymore, the idea of trying to find that news peg... that immediate in your face, in your neighborhood, this is going to affect me moment... Anytime we have one of those, that's when we need to try to tell the story of climate. Because otherwise it's still kind of considered an abstract idea.

Elena Valentine: And that's interesting because what you're then saying is you then have to kind of capitalize pretty quickly. What does that look like?

Susan Jacobson: There are some things in climate that are cyclical. Our perfect example... and if you're in Louisiana you probably have the same thing... are the king tides. This is the time of year when the highest high tides roll in. So what's happening in Miami is, every year the highest high tides get higher and higher. And they overwhelm our sewage drainage, our water system here in South Florida, and we get flooding on the street.

Susan Jacobson: It's not flooding from rain and it's not a busted water main, it's literally seawater pushing up through our drainage systems and into our streets. One of the things that we have done here at FIU is to organize citizens to go out and document the water in the streets during the king tide. So there are some things that are cyclical that you can take advantage of.

Mary Ellen Slayter: Sometimes your message is only as effective as your messengers.

Elizabeth Marsh: One of our colleagues, Kate McMillan, did a video that ran on PBS about climate change at sea levels. Specifically about sea level rise, because that's an easier conversation to have than climate change, sometimes. It was great and it was done by students, and it was talking to local people. So it has an authenticity that one does not often get when you have just scientists.

Elizabeth Marsh: That's been a couple of years now, and FIU was beginning to position itself as quote, a steward of the bay. The campus that I work from is on Biscayne Bay. So that was a good time both internally, because it got a lot of support in the university, but also the people of Florida were just sort of waking up. We had had a couple of red tides. People were now talking about what building codes needed to look like for the future. We'd had the king tide problem. So that was a good time for that documentary to be accepted.

Susan Jacobson: It was aired on our local PBS station and it's gotten more views on their website than anything else. So it was a great piece. We just recently did a citizen science event this weekend where we trained citizens. We gave them a brief introduction into the impact of extreme heat on their everyday lives, and then we gave them temperature sensors that they could set in their neighborhood.

Susan Jacobson: The idea is these temperature sensors sit there in areas where they would go in their everyday life. So the bus stop, the playground, the parking garage, and then we collect them and we see what the temperature reading is. And believe me, those temperature readings are much different from what you hear on the news, which is usually taken from a central location like the airport, for example. It can get quite hot in parts of South Florida.

Susan Jacobson: We had some visual journalists there... and fortunately we held our event in this beautiful park... and we had the journalists travel along with the citizens who were placing the sensors in the park benches and the bus stops. These things sort of came together to tell a pretty good visual story.

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Susan Jacobson: We do the same thing during sea level rise, by the way. We send journalists out with citizens who are measuring and documenting the flooding in the streets.

Mary Ellen Slayter: I'm a former journalist with a science degree and I'm fascinated by how the media covers scientific discovery and inquiry. So how can they do it better?

Susan Jacobson: Average Americans, journalists, are not necessarily well-schooled in science. American science education is not the best in the world, let's just say that. Unless they're specialized, these journalists in the stories that they're covering, they have to come up to speed with the jargon. Understanding, for example, how clinical trials are run in medicine. That's a complicated scenario.

Susan Jacobson: A lot of times, especially at a smaller paper or even a midsize paper, it might be the climate or the environment person who gets thrown on the health story, or the health person who gets on the environment story. And suddenly they have to learn all this new jargon and all these new contacts.

Susan Jacobson: And then scientists, they have a real thing about being very accurate and precise, to a fault. They get really irritated when they see journalists, as far as they can tell, over simplifying the research that they did. So there's a gulf between the extreme precision of scientists and the need to be able to communicate to the general public in English... in a way that they can understand.

Susan Jacobson: There is sometimes a little bit lost in translation. You don't want to be false, but you don't have to have the level of precision of scientists. This is one of the things that rub up against scientists when they talk to journalists all the time. They're like, "They didn't explicitly state all of the caveats and precision that I want." And then the journalists are like, "They gave me too much information." It's a conundrum.

Mary Ellen Slayter: Maybe scientists need to learn the art of the elevator pitch.

Susan Jacobson: A lot of times we tell people who come to us for help to boil their research idea down to an elevator pitch. That's not only just the nugget of what they're talking about, but it's also why is it important to me, the general public, in two or three sentences. That's a very hard thing to do and most of the time scientists... they've never really had to figure that out.

Susan Jacobson: And quite frankly, that's probably all the bandwidth that the readers or viewers are going to also have to absorb.

Mary Ellen Slayter: They also have to remember the golden rule.

Susan Jacobson: The golden rule is you have to communicate to people where they are at. You cannot insult people. You cannot call them stupid. Even if you think that their beliefs in certain things are misguided, shall we say, you cannot use that language in your communication. The minute you do that, you lose them. Then you still have to be able to communicate your messages and ideas clearly in a way that a general public can understand.

Elizabeth Marsh: I have two complimentary messages. To young strategic communicators, I say, "You need to tell the truth. You need to allow some nuance and you need to be ethical." Ethics is part of PR and you need to understand the burden of storytelling... how powerful storytelling is... because you're engaging emotions. There's some neuro-physiological changes that happen in the telling of the stories. Some syncing of the teller and the listener.

Elizabeth Marsh: If you've ever watched something with music, pictures and music can make people cry, no problem. You have to appreciate that power. And then you have to tell the non-communicators, which in this case are scientists, to appreciate this power too, and realize that you are going to be touching emotional cords. That's what makes an effective message.

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Interview 2: Mackenzi Lee

Mary Ellen Slayter: Mackenzi Lee is a historical fiction and YA author, who is currently writing a series of books featuring Marvel antiheroes. The second book in the series, *Gamora and Nebula: Sisters in Arms*, has just released. She talked to me about how she organizes her ideas.

Mackenzi Lee: I have yet to write two books in the same manner. The thing that seems the most consistent about my process is I tend to collect ideas and little fragments of things. I'm sort of a historical magpie, kind of a living document on my phone and my computer, that anytime anything enters my field of vision, I will write it down.

Mackenzi Lee: I have this list that says, "Train cars sunk under the ocean." And then the next thing is, "Swords women in the 1700's." It's a list of things I'm interested in that I have come into contact with in some way or another. Often several of those ideas will sort of magnetize and pull together. That's where story ideas come from for me. It's never one moment of inception. It's more, a lot of things collected over time that then eventually end up synthesizing.

Mary Ellen Slayter: Mackenzi walked me through her writing process for the first book in the series, *Loki: Where Mischief Lies*. It's just as chaotic as you might expect.

Mackenzi Lee: With *Loki*, my editor and I talked about different historical periods. Because he's an ageless immortal God, why not put him anywhere? So we talked about doing a *Game of Thrones*, medieval history kind of thing. My history background is actually specifically in the Wars of the Roses. That's what I studied in university, and I lived in England for a while. So we were talking about putting *Loki* in kind of medieval dynasty war. We talked about putting him in the 1920s with *Gatsby*.

Mackenzi Lee: These just felt like for us... places *Loki* as a character... that his energy kind of matched. In the twenties, you have kind of hedonism and people making bad decisions and doing a lot of illegal things. Same within the medieval times, was a lot of family alliances and backstabbing and things like that.

Mackenzi Lee: We settled on Victorian England because, again, it's a focus on the kind of crime-y, grimy underworld of Victorian England, which he also sits in really well. But also I had a couple of things on that list of things that interest me that I brought to the table and said, "Okay, so if we write about Victorian England, I've always wanted to do a book about spiritualism at that time and the fake mediums and sort of that whole thing."

Mackenzi Lee: I'd also just read about the death clubs of Victorian London. Which were these clubs that were set up to look like theme bars, essentially, but the theme was hell. So there would be people dressed as demons and all the drinks were named after different diseases. It's these kinds of things that I just love because it's like, "Oh man, people never really change. Where history changes, but people are the same throughout history. We still have these weird theme parties and novelty cocktails." So I just read about those.

Mackenzi Lee: I had also become very fascinated with something called the Necropolis Rail. Which essentially in Victorian England, there were so many dead people because Victorian England was so gross and full of cholera, that they had run out of places to bury people. They had to build a cemetery outside of the city, and then they had to build

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a train specifically to carry bodies outside of the city. So you had a train full of dead people that would run once a day between London and Brookwood.

Mackenzi Lee: I just became obsessed with it. I bought someone else's master's thesis on some weird academic website, and I paid for them to print it out for me and send it to me. I'm sure nobody has ever purchased this sweet man's thesis on the Necropolis Railway. Because he wrapped it for me and wrote me a card and was like, "I'm so glad you're interested in this." And I was like, "Thanks. It's for Loki."

Mackenzi Lee: But yeah, that's the start of every process, is synthesizing a bunch of things that interest me. A lot of them come from history because that's what I'm interested in and so I read a lot about it. I seek that kind of stuff out, but I also pick up weird things from new stories, or from podcasts, or from things people say to me.

Mary Ellen Slayter: The characters themselves can influence the process.

Mackenzi Lee: I love writing antiheroes. I think all of my lead characters of all my books, they're kind of antiheroes in their own way. Even the ones that aren't for Marvel. I think part of what attracted me to that is when you have a traditional hero... someone like Captain America who is that sort of lawful good... as a reader, as a viewer, whatever, there's this predictable kind of morality to them that at some point you know they're going to be faced with a choice. That choice is going to be hard and it's going to require them to sacrifice something. But in the end they're going to do it, because they're the good guy and they're lawful good.

Mackenzi Lee: Whereas with antiheroes, they're faced with that same choice often and you don't know which way they're going to go. And so it creates, I think, real suspense that often is missing when you have heroes that are more straight and narrow. Or where the test of their morality is kind of almost a false test, because you know Captain America is going to do the right thing. He's never going to blow up a planet to save his friends. That's never going to happen.

Mackenzi Lee: Loki might do that. Gamora and Nebula... they might do that. So it allows you as an author and as a creator to do, I think, really interesting plot stuff and to execute twists that you wouldn't necessarily get to do with a more straight-laced character. I think in particular with female antiheroes, and part of the appeal... especially of writing Gamora and Nebula... is in science fiction as a genre, women are rare and they are typically presented monolithically good or monolithically evil.

Mackenzi Lee: So either you have your group of six leading men, or 10 leading men, or however many, and then you have your one token woman. And she's just good. She's kind of there to be the good influence on the rowdy boys and she doesn't get any personality outside of her influence she exerts on these men. Or you get the evil queen and she's jealous and she's bitter, and usually it's something to do with someone being younger and hotter than her, or some kind of challenge.

Mackenzi Lee: Those are kind of the only two architects that have existed. In female antiheroes, we are giving women the complexity of personhood, and we are allowing them to be many shades of gray, and to be complicated, and to not always do the right thing, and not always do the wrong thing. It appeals to a lot of readers in general, because I think we're all kind of antiheroes. We like to think that we would make the noble choice and that we would be Captain America, but I think in the end, most of us would be Loki's and most of us would be a little bit more self-serving.

Mackenzi Lee: I think it's a little bit more relatable to read about somebody who sometimes acts in their own self-interest and acts against the greater good. I think for women it's just gratifying to see well-rounded female characters that allow for the real complexities and intricacies of being a woman and also being a person.

Mary Ellen Slayter: I asked Mackenzi, "Does it feel constraining to write within a universe with such an established

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canon?"

Mackenzi Lee: I think I'm used to working within constraints because I do historical fiction, because you have the constraints of a time period. So with *Nebula* and *Gamora*, I was thrilled I didn't have to spend four hours researching 18th century cutlery. Oh my god, that made things so much easier. Who cares if I have to take into account canon or whatever.

Mackenzi Lee: I was also a fan-fiction writer for a long time. I was just doing the thing that I thought was for fun and just because I enjoyed it and I wanted more of these worlds I loved. What I was also doing was teaching myself craft, and teaching how to write characters, and dialogue, and cliffhangers, and learning about story structure, and identifying problems and gaps, and things I didn't like, and stories that I loved, and then trying to correct them. So it was not a hard switch, honestly, for me to write in *Marvel*, because I feel like all of my stuff has existed in some kind of wider world, or in some kind of canon, or existing history.

Mackenzi Lee: So yeah, I've found *Marvel* a really cool collaborative space to work. I think part of what *Marvel* is doing right now that is so smart, is bringing in lots of different storytellers from different backgrounds and different mediums, and then letting them do their thing, and letting them do what they were hired for.

Mackenzi Lee: I know when I was brought in, I expected they'd give me like a story beat and say, "Okay, just write. We already have the plot. We already have the idea. Just write the story." I was shocked that they were so collaborative, and they wanted to know what I wanted to do, and what I was interested in.

Mackenzi Lee: They're bringing in voices for a reason. They're bringing in people for a reason. I think their best projects are when they let creators leave their own sort of stamp on these properties. That's what makes them exciting and keeps them fresh and new and keeps people coming back from more. Because, you don't just want to see *Thor*, you want to see Taika Waititi's *Thor*, or you don't just want to see *Nebula* and *Gamora*, you want to see my *Nebula* and *Gamora*. It's exciting. It's cool.

Outro

Mary Ellen Slayter: So that's it for this episode of *Margins* from *Managing Editor*. You can find us on Apple Music, Stitcher, Spotify, or wherever you listen to podcasts. Make sure you get organized and subscribe so you don't miss a single episode.

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Elena Valentine: And a special thanks to the universally basic badassess who made this episode possible. Producer Rex New, audio editor Marty McPadden, and assistant producer Michael Thibodeaux.

Mary Ellen Slayter: We'll see y'all next time.