Transcript: Episode 3: Writing in Content Marketing

[Introductory Music]

Dr. C: The writing at work podcast gives you a peek behind the professional writing curtain, interviewing people in a variety of fields about the writing they do at work. I'm your host, Dr. Clayson. Let's talk about writing.

[Introductory Music ends]

Dr. C: Hi, everyone, and welcome to Episode Three of the Writing at Work Podcast. Today’s guest had so much to share that her interview will be in two parts. In part one, in this episode, we’ll talk about what it's like to work as a freelance content marketer. In the next episode, Episode Four, we will talk about the ups and downs of working as a freelancer and how to break into freelance writing. All right, let's get to it! Let’s talk about writing.

[Interview begins.]

Dr. C: Today I am here with Taylor Holland. Taylor is a freelance writer, editor, and content marketer, currently writing and editing for Skyword, a content marketing firm, and Taylored Editorial, LLC, of which she is also the founder. Through Skyword, Taylor has written for brands like Samsung and IBM, and through Taylored Editorial, she has edited for bestselling authors, like former NASA CIO (or Chief Information Officer) Linda Cureton. Taylor also has magazine writing experience as well; she has written and edited for Pink Magazine, a national publication for professional women, where she had a hand in launching their daily e-note, Little Pink Book. Taylor has a bachelor’s degree in English and Film Studies from the University of Georgia. Welcome to the show, Taylor!

TH: Thank you! Hi, Ashley!

Dr. C: Hi! It’s good to have you on!

TH: It’s great to be here! Thanks so much for your interest in the work that I’m doing.

Dr. C: Yes, thanks for talking to us! I’m going to start by just asking you to describe a typical day at the office, quote-unquote, wherever that might be for you.

TH: Yeah, so, a typical day at the office for me is not... there really isn’t a typical day. As a freelance writer, I work from home. Um, so, you know, what I’m doing, and even hours that I’m working really depends a lot on, just, what projects I have on my plate.
Sometimes it also depends on how much I’ve procrastinated earlier in the week—((chuckles))

Dr. C: ((laughs)) Mm-hmm.

TH: --and how behind I’m running on projects. That happens sometimes. I try to be good about that, but that is one of the challenges of a freelance writer; it can be very tempting to, uh, put things off. Because you know, you’ve got time, and then you’ll be doing them at the last minute. Um. So sometimes I, I’m starting at, you know, I may have an eight o’clock deadline that I’m not finished on, so I may have to be starting at like five a.m. Um. Other times, I may not be getting started til about ten or so. And sometimes I’m working until midnight; those are usually the mornings where I’m sleeping til ten or so. ((laughs)) Um.

Dr. C: Right.

TH: But it just depends a lot. And you know, in terms of what I’m doing throughout the day, that also kind of depends on the projects I’m working on. A lot of them require a lot of interviews. You know, so I’ll spend a lot of time on the phone, talking to the client companies that I work for, or talking to the people that they want to, um, whose expertise or stories that they want to share in some of the blog posts and articles that I’m writing. Um. Which is really one of my favorite parts of the job, is I get to talk to people who are doing, you know, very different and very interesting things, and kind of hear about their lives. So, I love the interview part. I do a lot of research. Specifically for, um, articles where maybe I have a lot of learning to do. I do a lot of writing for health care and technology companies, and obviously don’t come from a health care, technology background, although, I’ve learned a lot over the years because I do a lot of that writing. But I may, you know, need to do a lot of research for one of those articles. Um. Which is also a thing I love about the work that I do. Is that I’m, you know, constantly learning things I wouldn’t ordinarily learn, ((laughing)) or wouldn’t ordinarily look into.

Dr. C: Right!

TH: And, you know, then also, doing a lot of writing throughout the day. And probably, I’d say I write about, you know, anywhere from five to six blog posts, articles, or case studies a week. Just depending on that week.

Dr. C: Mm-kay. Awesome. Can you, um, say a little bit more about, um, how you prepare for those interviews. Do you do a lot of research about the person beforehand? Do you write specific questions? Um. Just tell us a little bit more about that.

TH: Uh, sure. I do both. I try to, you know, look as much into what’s going on with that company and that person as I can. A lot of times, you know, so for example, say I’m writing for Samsung. I do a lot of interviews with them. I write mostly about their technology for healthcare. So, how healthcare companies are using mobile technology, tablets, smartphones, things like that.
Dr. C: Wow.

TH: In really interesting and innovative ways. Um. You know, for, to you know, help with communication with patients, communications with doctors. Perhaps mobile printing, or providing access to electronic health records, things like that. So, different, you know, ways that they're, or you know, remote patient monitoring or video conferencing with patients. So, you know, a lot of times Samsung will send me a lot of, um, background information about what that company’s doing that I can read, and then I do a little bit more research on my own. And then I prepare a list of questions. Um. Usually to, you know, get some background on what they’re doing, talk about the challenges that they’re facing. You know, how they’re using this technology, and then also the results that they’re getting from it. Um. And sometimes I send those questions to people in advance; sometimes they want to see them in advance. Sometimes they don’t.

Dr. C: Mm-hmm.

TH: So it’s really just, if they ask.

Dr. C: Mm-hmm.

TH: Um. But yeah, always prepare the questions in advance.

Dr. C: Okay.

TH: And then, I ask follow up questions, too, as I go along, but I like to have at least a, um. Some structure to follow.

Dr. C: Oh, sure, sure. Um, can you also say a little bit more about, you mentioned you do a lot of research. Um, sometimes for the interviews and sometimes just for the things that you’re writing. Can you tell me more about where you do that research? Do you use particular databases, or just like, Google search? Talk a little bit about that for us, please.

TH: Yeah, I often start with Google search, but of course, there are… good sources and bad sources. ((laughs)) And then, every company has their own, um, approved and non-approved sources as well. You know, for example, I write for Blue Cross Blue Shield of Tennessee, and they really prefer that all the information is coming from either top medical schools or from, um, government organizations, like the CDC, National Institutes of Health. Um. Mayo Clinic, maybe it’s more of an organization than a federal organization.

Dr. C: Right.

TH: Whereas somewhere like Samsung or IBM, the challenge is always being really careful not to use data that’s coming from their competitors.

Dr. C: ((laughs))

TH: And of course, you know, things like Wikipedia is always off limits.
TH: Right. Sources that are really not verified. But a lot of times, the research is coming from market research firms, like Gartner, Forrester, Aberdeen, some of those third party research firms that are really well respected, that do a lot of... Or, let's see, Price Waterhouse Coopers, PEW Research. These places do a lot of really great research reports that can be very useful and that are, sometimes they're sponsored by a particular company, but a lot of times, they're just good, third party research.

Dr. C: Mm-hmm.

TH: It's really just a matter of knowing what are going to be, you know. One, not competitors. And then, two, valid resources. You know, you never want to cite a secondary source. Never want to cite an article someone else has written saying.... Because sometimes, you'll find a statistic that's just perfect.

Dr. C: Mm-hmm.

TH: You know, for what you need for the article. And, you'll find it in multiple articles online. And everybody will even tell you what the source was, but then you go looking for that source, and it doesn't exist anywhere. It's all the secondary sources. It's people have picked up, um, where somebody else wrote it, you know. Maybe they made it up, maybe they didn't. But, you know, unless you can find that primary source and know that that primary source is reputable, you know, then it's not something that you can use.

Dr. C: Right. So when you get a situation like that where you're struggling to find a primary source, do you then, um. Do you try and.... Do you just discard that statistic, or do you try to come at it from another angle, or, what's your approach there?

TH: Uh, well, I'll look really hard if it's just the perfect statistic, to try and find that primary source. I'll go, you know, I'll try Googling that, I'll try going to that actual, what they're saying is the primary source's website, and using the search tools on their website. But sometimes I just have to abandon it and find something else. You know, and, sometimes you're not going to find exactly what you're looking for, either. And you just kind of have to find something that's close and be a little bit more creative about how to, you know, use that piece of data to illustrate the point you're trying to make.

Dr. C: Sure, sure.

TH: There's a lot of people doing research, and so you can often find what you need, but, sometimes that perfect statistic just doesn't exist. You know, in those cases, too, a lot of times it's a good idea, if there's a oint you're trying ot make that you can't back up, you know, that's where interviews can be really handy, because you can use anecdotal evidence.

Dr. C: Uh-huh.
TH: That you can use in stories. And quotes from, you know, industry leaders, to kind of make that point without the numbers.

Dr. C: Right, right, right. So that will function slightly differently in whatever you’re writing, but it will still bolster your argument in a particular way.

TH: Right. Exactly.

Dr. C: Cool, cool! So, my next question is about what kind of things that you write at work and how often you write them. You mentioned blog posts, and articles, and cast studies. Can you tell us a little bit about those kinds of things and sort of, how often you’re writing them, and who reads the things that you write?

TH: Sure. Well, um, as you mentioned in my bio, one of the things that I do, and am probably doing more of than anything right now is content marketing.

Dr. C: Mm-hmm.

TH: And content marketing is, um, fairly new, over the last five, then years, but really in the last few years, become a big deal…

Dr. C: Mmm-hmm.

TH: …in that, it’s different than regular marketing. When I first started out in journalism, I ha—I occasionally had to do some marketing projects and I hated those, um.

Dr. C: (((laughs)))

TH: Because it was, it felt like long-form advertising.

Dr. C: Mm-hmm.

TH: “This is why we’re great; this is why we’re better than all of our competitors.”

Dr. C: (((laughs))) Right.

TH: And, you know, I wasn’t an advertiser; that’s not what I wanted to do. I wanted to tell stories, and provide tips that people could use to do their work better, or somehow tie to their lives.

Dr. C: Mm-hmm.

TH: And that’s really what content marketing, done right, has become.

Dr. C: Mm-hmm.

TH: You know, journalism outlets, magazines, newspapers, those kinds of things are, you know, there’s obviously still some around and hopefully always will be, but. Those options are much more limited now. You know, media has really struggled as an industry over the last five, ten years. And companies have really, kind of, picked up that slack.
Dr. C: Mm. Mm-hmm.

TH: In terms of producing content that’s not just all about, you know, why our company is great, awesome, we’re the best, but, providing information that will help their customers, you know, their buyers, in the case of companies that are selling to businesses, make a decision, or information that would be interesting to them. So, to some extent, content marketing has become a lot more like journalism.

Dr. C: Okay.

TH: In fact, the term that’s often used is “brand journalism.”

Dr. C: Mm-hmm.

TH: So a lot of stuff that I write, you know, for example, IBM blog posts that I write. I write for their Mobile First website, which is about different ways business and individuals use, well mostly businesses, can use mobile devices, cloud computing, things like that, to work better. To streamline their work flows, to share information, and all these things.

Dr. C: Mm-hmm.

TH: So, with these articles, for example, the point is never to mention IBM.

Dr. C: Oh, wow!

TH: We never—we talk about the types of services that IBM, you know, they offer cloud computing, they offer mobile solutions for businesses. But you never actually want to talk about, you know, that company. Instead, it’s, you know, ways to navigate your business’s things into the cloud. Um, you know, tips for how to put, or how to approach mobile security for your company’s data. It’s really more, um, like I said, tips that they can use. With Samsung, a lot of times, it’s more about telling their customer’s stories.

Dr. C: Mm-hmm.

TH: And, so, again, Samsung is kind of there in the background, but not exactly writing about Samsung, more writing about how these different, you know, innovative healthcare providers—doctors, hospitals—you know, are using this technology.

Dr. C: Mm-hmm.

TH: With Samsung I also do write some case studies, and those do focus a little bit more—still, the focus is more on what the client is doing, and how they get results—but you know, we do talk a bit more about Samsung for those. Because, you know, the point of a case study is really to show how your product or your business’s product or solution looks in action. So those are a little more focused on that.

Dr. C: Okay.
TH: But those are probably the two biggest things I do, are the blog posts and case studies. You know. And the audiences are always a little bit different. You know, with the two examples I’ve already given you, those are really business audiences.

Dr. C: Mm-hmm.

TH: So the audience would be business decision makers who are looking at ways to use new technology to do business in a more efficient, effective way. But I also write articles for David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA.

Dr. C: Mm-hmm.

TH: And those are for their admissions website, so it’s really targeting pre-med students or newer medical students who are wanting to learn more about careers in medicine. You know, learn more about applying to medical schools, and I’ll interview doctors and professors there who are in different specialties and talk about what a day in their life is like.

Dr. C: Okay.

TH: Or maybe tips or things that happen around UCLA that would be interesting to prospective students.

Dr. C: Mm-hmm.

TH: So, there’s a lot of um, I guess, a lot of variety in the kinds of things I write, which is something I really enjoy.

Dr. C: Nice! And it sounds like they’re, the biggest similarity between those two audiences that you write to are, um, both of those, it sounds like both of those things are trying to, or both of those audiences are trying to make decisions in some capacity. So, you mentioned the business decision makers, and they’re trying to see, oh is the technology right for me, and then the pre-med students and new med students are trying to see if, you know, if medicine is right for them, or if the UCLA school is right for them, vs. if they’re in that school, what specialty they might want to pursue. That kind of thing. So you’re helping people make decisions in a lot of the writing you do, it sounds like.

TH: Right. Yeah. Making decisions or, you know, sometimes it’s just learning the, kind of, better ways to do things.

Dr. C: Cool.

TH: Or new, innovative ways to do things.

Dr. C: That’s very cool. So, my next question is about, what kind of tools do you use to write those things. And that can be, sort of, anything from, do you do a lot of pen and paper writing, do you mostly use computers, what software do you use, that kind of thing.
TH: Uh, I do most everything on the computer.

Dr. C: Mm-hmm.

TH: Uh, I do some personal journaling and things I'll do by hand, but mostly on the computer. I'm much, much faster that way. Um. In terms of tools I use there, uh, I occasionally use Microsoft Word, but that's usually on bigger documents, because I do still do a little editing, books and e-books for other, you know, writers or experts. And usually they tend to work in Microsoft Word. Because that works better with larger documents anyway.

Dr. C: Mm-hmm.

TH: But most of the stuff that I do, I actually use Google Docs.

Dr. C: Okay.

TH: Um. It's nice. There’s no, uh, don’t have to store the documents on the computer, or, like on the hard drive, and they're easy to share, especially if they’re, you know, content that I need to, uh, run by interview subjects and get their feedback on, they’re easy for them to comment in there. So, I probably use Google Drive more than anything. And Google Docs specifically. Uh. I use freeconferencecall.com is a really good tool that I use for all of my interviews because it provides pretty good recordings of those interviews. Unless you mess up and forget to put in the code to record, which I only did one time.

Dr. C: Oh! Oh, my goodness!

TH: And that was real embarrassing because the call didn’t record and I had to call him back and be like, “Can we have this conversation all over again?”

Dr. C: Can we repeat this? ((laughs))

TH: Thankfully, it was someone I had already worked with in the past and so, he knew that, overall, I wasn’t irresponsible. ((laughs)) It was just.

Dr. C: “Whoops.”

TH: Uh. So yeah, I use that. Um, do I use any other tools? With Skyword, I use their platform, because they actually have a platform for submitting, and like, collaborating on documents.

Dr. C: Mm-hmm.

TH: Um. But yeah, that’s really, probably, mostly it. Mostly it's just me and the computer.

Dr. C: Very cool, very cool.

TH: Um. Then, the next question that I have is, can you pick a particular document, it can be any of the ones you’ve mentioned, or something you haven't mentioned yet, and
describe what the process of writing that particular document is like, from the very beginning, once you get an assignment or choose an assignment, all the way to the end.

TH: Hmm. Okay, so. With case studies, for example, those tend to follow a pretty similar flow, so that might be an easy one to discuss. Um. You know, for those, I would get the assignment from mostly, most of the work I’m doing now is with the company I mentioned called Skyword. And then they have a lot of clients. They’re… IBM and Samsung and David Geffen School of Medicine, all these are their clients that I was on the program with them.

Dr. C: Okay.

TH: So, I would get the assignment. And either contact information for the people I need to interview, or sometimes they set the interviews themselves, and just ask about my availability. So, they usually send some background information. I do my own research, write up some questions, and do interviews. Sometimes it’s just one interview, with the end user. Sometimes where there’s a technology partner there, like say, there’s an app developer who has developed some sort of custom mobile app for the customer and then put it on Samsung tablets, you know, then I might also speak to that technology partner, that app developer, and get insights from them. And you know, really talk to them. Again, with case studies, the formula is usually pretty simple. It’s, you know, here’s the challenge this company was facing, here’s the solution they put in place, and here are the results that they got because of that solution. Um. You know, so really crafting those questions around you know, those bullet points. But also you know, really trying to make sure that it’s not just, not just data.

Dr. C: Dr. C: Mm-hmm.

TH: You know, not just, here were their numbers before, here’s this, how, the solution they put in place, and here are there numbers after.

Dr. C: Mm-hmm.

TH: You know, to make these more, much more compelling, you know, and really try and look for the story. You know, how, what was this challenge, you know, how did this put a burden on your clients or on your staff. You know, why, how did you come to this decision that you needed something different. Um. You know, how did that change things, you know, how did this affect the people involved, you know. What’s the bigger story here?

Dr. C: Mm-hmm.

TH: So then after doing the interviews and transcribing those, then I sit down with all of that information and try to figure out what quotes, what data goes into which bucket.

Dr. C: Mm-hmm.
TH: And then work on writing it from there. Um. Trying to tell, you know, the story. Making it as human as possible, where it’s not just all data and math, because that’s boring and nobody wants to read that. But of course you need the data and the math because that also supports the points.

Dr. C: Mm-hmm.

TH: So finding a good way to blend those two. And then, once we’re, I’ve submitted a draft, it goes to editorial team, who might do a little polishing, and then back to those clients and interview subjects to review and make sure that, you know, everybody’s happy with the way they’ve been quoted and all that.

Dr. C: Mm-hmm.

TH: And then those ultimately get published. Uh, with blog posts it can vary a lot, depending on the type of blog post, and you know, whether it’s a tip piece that I am, you know, just doing some research looking for industry experts who’ve maybe already written or talked about that, who I can quote, if there’s not already an interview there. If there is an interview there, again, doing that. And then looking for, um, even when I’m doing interviews, I’m still going to go and look for some data, some good research, that kind of helps to paint the big picture.

Dr. C: Mm-hmm.

TH: Of how, um, you know, why this is an issue, why this is worth writing about. And then providing insights from those interview subjects.

Dr. C: Okay. Very cool.

[End of interview.]

Dr. C: And that’s the end of part one of my interview with Taylor. [Outro music begins.] Tune in next week for part two, on breaking into freelancing. Thanks so much for listening to the show! If you're interested in learning more about freelance content marketing, be sure to check out the show notes at writingatworkpodcast.wordpress.com. If you have questions, or if you’d like to suggest a show topic or interviewee, email me at writingatworkpodcast@gmail.com. Subscribe, rate, and review us on iTunes, Stitcher, or wherever you find your podcast love. Until next week, keep on writing. [Outro music ends.]