Transcript: Episode 2: Writing in Law School

[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 back to the Writing at Work Podcast. This is Episode 2, which features the second half of my interview with Jeremy Hager, attorney-at-law. If you haven't heard part 1 of this interview, it's featured in Episode 1, so get over there and listen to it. In this episode, Jeremy gives us some tips about getting into law school. So let's talk about writing.

[Interview begins.]

Dr. C: All right, so let's—I'm going to switch gears a little bit and talk about getting into the field of law. So I've got a couple questions about that, the first one being, how did you get your current gig?

JH: Well I was in Milwaukee; I was practicing criminal defense, solo practice and I was also doing some family law stuff and a little bit of copyright stuff here and there. And um, you know, I was I was doing okay. My mother was diagnosed with breast cancer—

Dr. C: Oh, that's right.

JH: Yeah, she's in Ozark, Alabama, which you're familiar with.

Dr. C: Yup.

JH: I was still licensed in Georgia, because, well, you know.... Whatever, long story, I got licensed in Georgia and Wisconsin. So I said, ok well, I'll go back to Georgia and be close to family. So I applied for and got a job here in southwest Georgia at the DA's office. So that's how I got this gig. It was, you know, it's kind of.... If you practice criminal defense, then you know all the tricks, in theory, so then you can do prosecution. Usually, the migration is from prosecution to private practice defense because you make a lot more money for it; that's how it works.

Dr. C: Okay. So do you have any advice for students just getting started just starting out in law, writing-related or otherwise?

JH: Um, I would say do something else.
Dr. C: ((laughs))

JH: The research is out there; it's a pretty—it's pretty hard to get into law right now. It's still lagging behind as far as job market goes.

Dr. C: Sure.

JH: So I think I would be shirking my ethical and due diligence responsibilities to just not say you shouldn't go into law school unless you really, really like doing what—all this boring stuff I've talked about, right. But if you, despite my warning, still want to do it, ((coughs)) I would recommend that you…. There’s two options, I would say, if you want to be financially sound, then, major in a science, major in a hard science, and then go to law school. Because then, if you don't like anything else, you can do patents and you’ll be making six figures out of law school; it’s ridiculous.

Dr. C: Wow.

JH: If you want to do something else, I would say, for undergrad, just major in whatever you want. Because there’s so many criminology and history philosophy and even English majors that go to law school—

Dr. C: Mm-hmm.

JH: --that you don't stand out any more. Everyone does that. I did history.

Dr. C: Okay.

JH: So I would say, you know, if you want to, do industrial design or if you want to, do mathematics or, I dunno, underwater basket weaving, whatever going to do, do it, you know? Have fun and live, you know, live it up in undergrad. Make good grades and study hard and all that stuff, but have a good time because law school is murder. It's awful. It's really hard, like—

Dr. C: Right.

JH: Ten-hour days, nothing but studying. And you know, it’s on a curve so you’re competing with everybody else. At some more competitive schools, people are hiding books and dumping water on laptops, some weird stuff, so yes, be careful, but.

Dr. C: Wow.

JH: Yeah, I didn't see that—Marquette didn't have any of that, so.

Dr. C: That's nice. Um. Do you have any advice for students who are looking to go to law school who are applying any application advice?

JH: Yeah, I would say, take, you know, study for the LSAT. I would say take it two or three times if you have to, because you tend to go up in score. The LSAT, for anybody who's not, who doesn't know what that is, it's the Law School Aptitude Test or something.
Dr. C: Mm-hmm.

JH: It's just the arbitrary test you have to take. Um. Don't get arrested and don't do a lot of drugs—

Dr. C: ((laughing)) Right.

JH: Um, or if you do, be ready to explain it.

Dr. C: Sure.

JH: And when you take the LSAT, take it as many times as you want you want to get a good score on it. Sew some good relationships with your professors and with friends that are lawyers, or friends that are politicians because you're going to need them for references later. Um. Network really well—and when you study for the LSAT, it's just, I always tell people there's a book called the Logic Games Bible. Logic. Games. Bible. It's a green book. I always recommend that because logic games is one of the sections you take on the LSAT, where it's just, if A, B, and then C—

Dr. C: Right.

JH: Or something like that.

Dr. C: Okay.

JH: Um.... On top of that, go to a law firm and ask if you can shadow somebody. See what they do; see if that's what you might like. Sit in court and see how that, see what goes on there. Not just the fun exciting stuff like the murder trial. Go down there for an arraignment or go down there for bond hearings and things like that. You know, really see how that works. And then, when you're applying to law school.... This is funny. Writing is important, really important, because you have to do a personal statement.

Dr. C: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

JH: And so many people—like, my personal statement was about me going to Greece and trying to find a job and not knowing what I wanted to do with myself. I dressed it up really nice, and made it sound like I was.... You always want to sound like this struggling, you know, person who deserves go to law school.

Dr. C: ((laughs)) Right.

JH: So. You have to do that because you have to make yourself different from everybody else. Everybody else is going to say, “I always wanted to practice law, and I think law is cool, and my mom's a lawyer, my dad's a lawyer, and my uncle's a judge....”

Dr. C: ((laughs))

JH: That's boring.

Dr. C: Right.
JH: But the ones who talk about, you know, seeing a homeless person on the side of the road and wishing you could help them, or wanting to help animals, and you know, really getting into the cerebral part of why you want to do it. It’s like, just, yanking at the heartstrings?

Dr. C: Mm-hmm.

JH: Because it’s just like applying for a job. They’re going to have 200, 300 sheets of paper on their desk.

Dr. C: Right.

JH: Personal statements. And you have to make yours stand out within the first ten seconds or they’re not going to consider it. So, and actually, when I got into Marquette, the Dean himself like, sent me a letter and said I was a per—I don’t know why—but he said I was personally very impressed with your personal statement. I really liked it a lot. I think that you would do well with our legal writing. It may have just been a pitch for legal writing to get me to go there, but I was happy to get it.

Dr. C: Yeah!

JH: I mean, I didn’t have great grades. I had bad grades. My LSAT score was good, and my personal statement was apparently really good; that’s how I got in.

Dr. C: Okay.

JH: So it can actually, you know, writing can be a very important part. And like anything else, grammar’s got to be great, you know, you’ve got to have, you know, have a good vocabulary. Don’t just, uh, don’t write a bunch of choppy short sentences: Hey, I like law. Law is fun. You know? Really get in there. And you know, that’s where you get to show your creativity is in the personal statement. As well as subtly here and there when you’re writing in litigation, just not as often.

Dr. C: Very cool. So, once you’ve made it through law school, then where do you actually go to find jobs as a practicing lawyer?

JH: Well, that’s the best or golden question.

Dr. C: ((laughs))

JH: I can write you a dissertation on that because I did it for a while. Your Alumni Association tends to try to help, I guess, though the market’s bad. A lot of the times, it’s through connections you make in law school and before. So go out there and rub elbows with people. They want to—you know, lawyers love to impress people, and well, I say they because I don’t, but lawyers love to impress people. They love to show how cool they are and how smart they are and how prestigious they are.

Dr. C: Uh-huh.
JH: So if you talk to lawyers, and you say, “I like law, I think it's cool, I want to have lunch with you.” You're going to have free lunch every time you do it.

Dr. C: ((laughs))

JH: They just want to sit there and wag their lips at you and tell you how cool it is and how—or in my case, say how much it's not fun.

Dr. C: ((laughs)) Right.

JH: So do that, like. And then that, you know, that Poindexter guy who does the patents, prosecutes patents, and is making tons of money with the expensive suit. He's, you know, you keep having lunch with him and a beer with him, you know, every other every other week, learning about this. He's going to be a reference for you. And then when you get out, he's going to know you're out. And he's going to say, “hey, you know, when you've passed the bar, you let me know. I got an associate position.” Or, “you could be my investigator. Or, “you can just sit there answer the phone.” Whatever gets you in the door. So networking is, I'd say 60% of it. You know, if you make great grades, you make great grades. Good for you. You're awesome. You can do that.

Dr. C: Right.

JH: As far as finding a job, keep in mind you have to take the bar and pass it in most states, unless you go to the one state, Wisconsin, where you don't have to. That's why I took the Georgia bar. You know, it's networking. Alumni association I haven't done in a while, but Monster, I imagine. I dunno, Craigslist? Probably not anymore those are just, those are slave labor jobs that are on there now, or just scams.

Dr. C: Mmm.

JH: And also, another good, some good options are, um. The states themselves will have government positions, and that's where they tend to advertise the government jobs. As well as the bar associations. Like the Georgia Bar Association will have job listings. Wisconsin Bar Association has job listings. I'm sure Minnesota’s does. You know, after you get past the head coach of the Vikings and all that kind of stuff they’re trying to hire for.

Dr. C: Right.

JH: I'm sure you’ll find something there through that. And additionally, individual firms will advertise on their website.

Dr. C: Oh, okay.

JH: You really got to cast a real wide net and just look

Dr. C: Right.

JH: For things like that.
Dr. C: Okay. Yeah. ((JH starts to speak at the same time.)) That sounds—sorry, go ahead.

JH: I was just going to say, I mean, you go to be creative with the writing because you have to make cover letters and you're against the same thing. Hundreds of applicants and you've got to sound special. So the writing never stops.

Dr. C: Yeah. That is absolutely true. We are actually about to get to cover letters and resumes in my class right now. Do you have any tips on cover letters specifically?

JH: On a cover letter specifically. I have a formula. I actually just talked to one of my friends who's looking for a job yesterday. I have a formula I use, and you know, your mileage may vary. But I always say, right off the bat, something that—I'm paraphrasing—I'd dress this up better. You know, I wanted to contact you to show interest or in reference to the job posting for X, the posting for X, that you posted, that I saw on Y. They like to know where you saw it.

Dr. C: Mm-hmm.

JH: And you know, that their advertisement's working. I always, next I'll always say, I'm interested in this position because some—I won't cuss here—because some pseudo-nonsense reason why this is special to me. You know, that's next. Then I'll always say, I believe that I would be a good fit for this job, and then I give the reasons why I'm qualified for it. And then I'll say, moreover, I think I would be extremely, you know, helpful or beneficial or whatever to your firm for these reasons. And that's where you're, just, really, you know just coating it with the sugar, I guess.

Dr. C: Mm-hmm.

JH: While you're good for it. And then, I've realized with a lot of jobs in this market, a concern is retention. You'll always have a paragraph after that about why I am going to be invested if you give me this job. So that shows them that I'm not going to just pack up and leave after a year or two. So, you'd say something like, I've always wanted to live in Minneapolis. I've got lots of family there. It's nice to—you've heard great things. I'm a big fan of, you know, their bad football team.

Dr. C: ((laughs))

JH: Whatever you have to say, however you have to sacrifice, whatever you have to say to get up, you know, to get in the city. Because I think a lot of employers have a concern that people are just going to show up, get their experience, earn their stripes and then book it.

Dr. C: Right.

JH: So, you want to say something towards the end that shows you're going to stick around, even if you're not. And then, you know, I always follow that up with, thank you for your consideration. And honestly, it's a template, like, I'll have just paragraphs like
that for different types of jobs where I plug in the specific…. Because you’ve got to read the job ad. That's where you put in the skills you have that are mentioned in the job application because you have to mention what's in there. I've heard rumors from HR people that they actually have, they screen cover letters and resumes for keywords that are in the posting to see if they're even mentioned in the resume. And I've heard that from pretty high up in HR firms.

Dr. C: Yes.

JH: So yeah have to mention that as well.

Dr. C: Yeah.

JH: And then you just follow it up with, you know, your signature, or before that, if you have any questions please feel free to contact me. And guys, I can't stress this enough, if you don't listen to anything else I say, please make sure you have a professional sounding email address.

Dr. C: ((laughs))

JH: I see, you know, I've seen so many people with like, you know, littleslick69@yahoo, or Camaro_Camaro_blast_fan. Whatever.

Dr. C: Right.

JH: Just use your first name, your first initial, and your last name, and some the numbers if you have to. Whatever you've got to do, please don't have anything stupid. I mean, we've all got our email addresses from 10 years, 20 years ago.

Dr. C: Right.

JH: So don't use those. But just I made up my own email address just for jobs.

Dr. C: Right.

JH: That's just first name middle initial last name and that was it, you know? So.

Dr. C: Right.

JH: Just do that. That would be a good idea because if I, you know if I get your, you know, invaderzimrules27@hotmail.com

Dr. C: Right.

JH: Probably not going to take you seriously. I hate to say that.

Dr. C: Right.

JH: If it was Ren & Stimpy, I might.

Dr. C: Right. Maybe.
JH: Yeah.

Dr. C: So save the invaderzim27 for your personal email and have a professional sounding one for your work email. Very good.

JH: Exactly.

Dr. C: Very good. All right! Well, that's all the questions that I have for you, Jeremy. I really appreciate you coming on the show!

JH: Thanks for having me! I appreciate it. This was pretty nice.

Dr. C: Yup! Thanks for being here!

[End of interview.]

Dr. C: That's the end of the second part of my interview with Jeremy Hager, attorney-at-law. Thanks so much for listening to the show! If you're interested in learning more about writing in litigation, check out the show notes at writingatworkpodcast.wordpress.com. If you have questions, or if you’d like to suggest a show topic or an 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.