Transcript: Episode 5: Writing to Learn in Law and 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]

Hi, everyone! And welcome to the Writing at Work Podcast! Today's guest had so much to share that, as with several of our episodes so far, her interview will be in two parts. Be sure to check back next week for the second half of this interview. But for now, let's get to it. Let's talk about writing.

[Begin interview.]

Dr. C: Today I’m here with Bridget Brave. Bridget Brave started out as a journalist, became a marketing guru, and then decided to go to law school. Twelve years and two cross-country moves later, she has returned to the marketing realm. She holds degrees from Southern Illinois University and Marquette University Law School and starts a program in video game design this fall. Welcome to the show Bridget!

BB: Thank you so much for having me!

Dr. C: So, I wanted to start by asking you to tell us a little bit about the work that you do and/or have done.

BB: Oh, gosh. Okay. So, I started out, as you mentioned, as a journalist. I was actually a journalism major, and several of my professors told me, that’s great that you want to do this, you’re never going to have a job. And they told me that I needed to specialize a little bit, so I picked a marketing minor. And, they were right. I was not able to find a job as a journalist. So I found a job marketing for a mid-sized publishing company in Phoenix, Arizona. And I knew nothing about marketing. I had taken some coursework where I had basically learned how to do statistics, but I had never actually run an ad campaign, I had no idea how to do press contacts or anything like that, so really that first job was how I learned about the marketing realm. And I really think what was key in that is that I knew how to write. The journalism background really, and you know, this is something—you never want to listen to your mother when she tells you what you’re going to do with your life, but she said, well, you know, the journalism career is probably not the best career choice, but if you can write, you can do anything, Bridget. And I’ve really found that as my career has evolved that that has remained consistently true.
Writing was very important in law school. Being able to express yourself coherently on the page is key in the courtroom. And then, as I was making my transition back, I had to do a bunch of persuasive writing to convince people that I didn't want to be a lawyer anymore, and I wanted to be in marketing. So that meant learning how to write cover letters and basically, you know, introductions to myself proving that I was the right person for a job that I had not done for twelve years. ((laughs))

Dr. C: ((laughing)) Uh-huh.

BB: So, you know, throughout my career, that advice that my mother gave me was absolutely true. Being able to have those technical skills, being able to get your point across on the written page, has always been important. I think it's just becoming more so with the, you know, the fact that everything now is digital. You have very few face-to-face interactions with people.

Dr. C: Yeah, wow. So, as a writing instructor, I absolutely like hearing that ((laughs)).

BB: ((laughs))

Dr. C: Because that's certainly what I think as well! So, yeah. And that's one of the things that I'm trying to do and share with students and listeners to this podcast is that no matter what you do, writing is going to have some role to play—

BB: Oh, absolutely.

Dr. C: In, in what you're going to be doing in the workforce.

BB: Absolutely. It's absolutely true. And, you know, it's, every day of my life, I have to write something. Be it a press release, be it, you know, even as a lawyer, I was writing press releases, I was writing marketing copy, so, knowing, having that skill, it made me really stand out. I wasn't just “the attorney” in any office I worked at. They would also come to me because they knew I had that skill. So, if somebody had to make the media contact, if someone had to put something up on our web page or our Facebook page or anything, I would be the one that they would go to because I had that skill.

Dr. C: Awesome.

BB: Yeah.

Dr. C: Yeah, so can you describe, so there's sort of two different tracks here that we can talk about as we continue, as I'm kind of asking questions, and you can choose to talk about either your marketing experience or your experience in law or both, whichever you'd like to do.

BB: Okay.

Dr. C: Whatever sort of feels like what you want to talk about, related to that question, given your experiences. The next question I'd like to ask you is to kind of walk us through a sort of typical day at the office.
BB: Sure. Well, um, when I was a lawyer, and I worked in the criminal law sector for the majority of my career. I spent one year doing family law and guardianships for a private nonprofit that worked with kids who had been affected by violent crime. So most of my days were spent in the courtroom. And part of being in the courtroom means that, you know, you have to think on your feet. And while I was often expressing myself verbally, at the same time, I would have to be preparing my motions, my briefs, getting letters out to attorneys, getting the, you know, preparing for sentencing arguments. So there was a lot of writing involved from a, a highly—I don’t want to say more technical, because that’s not really true, but you know. ((laughing)) Legalese has its own language.

Dr. C: ((laughing)) Absolutely!

BB: Being in that track, and making sure I wasn’t getting too flowery with my writing, making sure that I was staying within the constraints and using language that would kind of clue the court in was a big part of my day. And sometimes when I would come home—uh, I am married, and my husband would say to me, “Okay, I need you to step out of lawyer for a little bit, because, you know, you’re ((laughing)) speaking to me a little formally right now.”

Dr. C: ((laughs)) Right, right. It’s hard to get out of that mode once you’re in it.

BB: It really is. And, I’ve actually found that as I’ve switched out that career, it’s been about three months now, since I have actively been a lawyer. My brain is working in new ways, and the way I present myself has changed. I was really terrified that I had killed that creative part of my brain, and that I would not be able to write in that kind of flowery prose that you need to have when you are working in a marketing capacity. Fortunately, it had not completely left me, and my cover letter got me in the door with my current company. ((laughs))

Dr. C: ((laughs))

BB: They were willing to ignore the fact that I’ve been a lawyer for this long just because they said it was the strength of my cover letter. She said she, actually, normally, if a cover letter comes in and it looks too long, she just doesn’t even read it, but she was like, there was something really compelling about what you wrote. And—

Dr. C: Oh, fantastic!

BB: And I was really thrilled with myself there. I was like, thank god, you didn’t lose it.

Dr. C: ((laughing)) Right!

BB: So. I’m not sure yet what my new day-to-day will look like, but I can tell you, in the past, the most important thing to realize in any job that’s going to, I mean, basically any job, is that day-to-day changes. And that having those skills, having that ability to think on your feet, switch tracks quickly, to be able to write a super-formal, self-contained, five hundred-word press release in one breath, and then get out a blog post that basically
blows all over a sponsor in the next, you have to be able to have that kind of, creative flow, that ability to switch gears at a moment's notice creatively.

Dr. C: Yeah, awesome! So, I definitely want to come back to your experience with writing and hearing from your current employer regarding that cover letter, but for a second, I kind of want to step back and ask you, if you could, say a little bit more about, sort of, the differences between that sort of more creative marketing speak and the sort of, more formal lawyer speak, and at the same time, if you can, because you also just mentioned being able to switch within the marketing discipline in terms of, oh I have to write this very quick, very formal thing, versus something that’s a bit more flowy or flowery and creative. Can you talk about the different sort of voices, I guess, you have to have both across disciplines, I guess, and within disciplines.

BB: Of course. And, um, we actually just had a discussion in my friend group about how you hear things when you read them in your head.

Dr. C: Mm-hmm.

BB: Do you hear them in the voice of the person who wrote it? Do you hear it in your own voice? ((laughs))

Dr. C: Yeah!

BB: What does that sound like? And I had to think about that. And I realized that when I write my lawyer-ly pieces, like briefs and motions, and letters, that kind of thing, or even just an explanation for someone else when I’m trying to brief them on a case, I use what I call my "radio voice" in my head. ((laughs))

Dr. C: ((laughs)) Uh-huh, uh-huh.

BB: And there’s a whole lot of enunciation, and. Because that’s kind of how I see it. I see the legal writing as being very, very structured. It has to follow an exact formula. Because you’re writing for a very specific audience, which is usually a judge. And that judge is incredibly busy. ((a cat meows in the background)) He has about eighty cases in front of him in any given day. He’s reading different pieces from different people. So, if you really want to, you know, get your point across to him, you have to be able to follow, they call it, I think it’s IRAC. It’s been years since I’ve been in law school. So, it follows a very specific, so here’s the issue, here’s the argument, here’s the conclusion, here’s the relevant law. So that he knows where to look exactly within your writing to see what points you’re making, what supports it, and what his conclusion should be. And then, when he’s looking at the other side, he can refer back because he knows exactly within your writing where those things will be.

Dr. C: Mm-hmm.

BB: It also, it needs to be a much more concise writing. A lot of lawyers do tend to become overly verbose. There’s just—
Dr. C: ((laughs))

BB: --way too much information in the brief. I always tried to keep mine, actually true to the word brief and give them a chance to see my points without having to get backtracked and saying, oh, god, do I really have to read eight more paragraphs of this, or is she just going to get to the point already. And I find that with my marketing work, dependent on, you know, press releases do have to be shorter, but I’ve contributed to a number of blogs, and there you are free to expound. People want to come in and they want to read your thoughts on, be it an art piece, or an even that’s coming up, something…. It’s something they’re interested in already, so they’re not necessarily going just to see the key facts. They’re going to get all the information they can. So, I find that’s two very different tracks in your mind that you have to be able to think creatively and expansively or very, very focused and pinpoint what your overall point is. And in the marketing realm, sometimes that change is happening within the same day. ((laughs))

Dr. C: Oh, wow. ((laughs))

BB: So. And it was actually a nice transition for me because in my last job, we didn’t have a marketing coordinator, so I was filling a lot of that job, just because I knew how to, so that kind of gave me the transitional period of working as a lawyer, and then working in marketing. But again, if I didn’t have that basis, which was just. I think any writing courses you can take in college are worthwhile just because it’s forcing you to write. And forcing you to write is the best way to learn. And it’s still something, I mean, I write everything down. I have about eight notebooks that I keep for different things throughout the day, where it’s like, this is my work-related stuff, this is things I need to focus on, this is, you know, just for fun, and that way, I can keep my thoughts very organized, but also, I just find that writing everything down helps make me a better writer and helps me process information better.

Dr. C: Yeah, absolutely. There’s a, there’s a whole subfield, or a subdiscipline, I guess, within my discipline, that is all about writing to learn. So, I definitely second that. ((laughs)) The next thing I’d like to ask you is to tell me a little bit more about the kinds of things that you write at work. And you mentioned a few things, both when you were working as a lawyer, but again, you can either talk about work as a lawyer or work in marketing, or both, whichever you’d like to talk about. What kinds of things do you write, how often do you write them, and also, who reads the things that you write.

BB: Right. As lawyer it was, daily writing, you know, you’re writing your briefs and motions. And when you’re writing a brief or a motion, it’s very persuasive writing. You’re really writing it for both the judge and your opposing council. And it’s basically your chance to say, you know, I’m right and here’s why.

Dr. C: ((laughs)) Uh-huh.
BB: Without having to just sit down and say it off the top of your head. It gives you a chance to really organize your thoughts and then provide case law examples to show why you believe that your position is the correct one. So that's, that was what I was doing on an almost daily basis. You know, writing briefs in support of suppressing evidence or in support of getting a witness introduced at trial. Those kinds of things. When I moved into the nonprofit, not only was I still writing the briefs and motions, but I also started writing, you know, grant applications, which was something I'd never done before.

Dr. C: ((laughs)) Those are fun, too.

BB: It is fun, but again, it's one of those things where, once you learn how to do it, you're upping your market value ((laughs)).

Dr. C: ((laughs)) Yeah.

BB: Because if they know you've done it before, they're like, oh, you know, thank you, because no one here wants to do that, so you can take it and run.

Dr. C: ((laughs))

BB: So several times, I've had to, you know, basically, write what it is I do, what I'm, what I'm using the funding for, why it's important that we have this funding. Which actually helps center me at my job, too, because I understood better where that, you know, who was paying me, and why it was important that we were still receiving those funds. So, I did like that portion of it. In the marketing world, most of what I was writing—I worked in several different industries. I started out actually in self storage, for the magazine company that I worked for. Which, if you've have ever tried to make self storage interesting, it's very difficult.

Dr. C: ((laughs))

BB: ((laughs)) It was challenging. I also wrote for infection control—

Dr. C: Oh!

BB: --and some endoscopic nursing at that publishing company.

Dr. C: Oh, my.

BB: And then I got a fun job. I got to work for an art museum.

Dr. C: Oh, awesome!

BB: I know. That was amazing. So, I was writing about our upcoming art exhibits or, you know, parties we were having, or, you know, just, if we were bringing back a piece of the collection that had been in storage for a long time. And that was a ton of fun. And then, being a lawyer isn't always exciting, but sometimes, if you're a person who likes discovering things, likes learning, likes basically, educating other people, it can be really fun to write those kind of pieces, because you find a concept, you find the supporting
law, and then, sometimes, you would have a conversation with an attorney afterwards, who was like, I had no idea, but this is awesome.

Dr. C: Oh, very cool.

BB: That you found this. So, yeah. It’s always, and that was part of what I liked about being a lawyer is that you learn every single day, and a large part of that is through the research and writing portion. You learn way more that way than you do, just everyday sitting in the courtroom.

Dr. C: Cool. So, I want to pick up on a thing you’ve mentioned a couple of times now, which is, learning on the job, learning, specifically, learning how to write different types of documents on the job. Can you tell me a little bit about, sort of, how you approach doing that?

BB: Well, we’re very fortunate now that we have the internet.

Dr. C: Ha! Yes.

BB: Before internet, things were way more difficult. And now, what I like to do, and one of the things that I recently wrote that I had never written before was an appeal letter for a fundraising campaign. And I had no idea what that looked like, so I went and I looked at examples, and I read other people’s blog posts about what makes a great fundraising letter, what makes it personal, what makes it, you know, compelling for people. What makes them actually want to read and then contribute. So that was a huge learning experience for me. And it’s something that once you kind of get the formula down, um, you couldn’t see me doing the air quotes there.

Dr. C: ((laughs))

BB: But, uh, ((laughs)) once you get the formula down, then you can apply it over and over again. And it becomes, like, just another part of your repertoire. So I was pretty excited to learn how to do that. Before that, you know, legal writing is incredibly difficult. They basically, you just take courses in law school until you’ve been beaten into submission, basically.

Dr. C: ((laughs))

BB: So that was kind of how that learning experience went. But now that I’m going back into the marketing world, I’m really excited to learn the new platforms that are out there. Because everything is different. You know, what you write for twitter is completely different than what you write for your blog.

Dr. C: Absolutely.

BB: A Facebook post is very different from something you’re going to send out to, you know, people who are following you on, like, Snapchat or Tumblr, or something like that. It’s like, everything is a completely different format to, maybe the same audience, but it
has to be tweaked slightly. So, that’s always something that I find really awesome, is switching in between those voices, too.

Dr. C: Mm-hmm. Yeah.

BB: And learning how to do that.

Dr. C: Can you say a little bit more about, I guess, if it’s something you’ll be doing in your upcoming work, maybe it’s not a thing you can expound upon too much, but when you’re thinking about switching from all of these different platforms, how do you, I guess, how do you approach that, or how are you planning to approach that?

BB: Again, that’s something where I learn by doing, and by following others. When I accepted this position, I immediately went and followed other companies and organizations that were similar so that I could kind of see what their language looks like. What words do they use, you know, what kind of punctuation do they use. Because that’s a huge thing, too, when you’re writing for different organizations. Is this an organization that uses exclamation marks.

Dr. C: Right. (laughs)

BB: You know? And that’s something that’s very, very different depending on who it is.

Dr. C: Absolutely.

BB: Um. You know, some of them are very emoji heavy now. (laughs)

Dr. C: (laughs) Uh-huh!

BB: Learning how to use that and how to use the vernacular, you know, the slang. So that’s something I really like to learn from other people. And I just, it’s always been the way I handle things, is just to get out there and do it. I’m not really a person who reads a lot of manuals, so, um. I’m much better at learning from other people and learning on my own.

Dr. C: Mm-hmm. So it sounds like, in all the cases you’ve mentioned so far, is you’re sort of looking for a model—

BB: Yes.

Dr. C: --or model-z, plural. To kind of, to learn from, and then, you know, of course, make your own, and do your own thing with, but yeah. That’s a really great thing, and I think that’s a thing that students can definitely take from as well. Especially if they’re facing, you know, a set of, they’re having to write a document they’ve never, you know, perhaps never even heard of before. And certainly have never written before. Um, I’d like to talk a little bit more about the kinds of tools you use to write, kind of again, either in law or in marketing. So that could be, you know, by tools I mean, you know, are you using the social media tools or are you, you know, Microsoft Word, are you using
Google, you know, what kinds of search engines are you using? Do you use any pen and paper? That kind of thing.

BB: Um, actually, I combine pen and paper and electronic, um. I had mentioned earlier my notebooks. Um, I usually keep them, the kind with the labels on the front, the composition books or little journals, so I know exactly what’s inside that. And then whatever I’m going to need that day, I carry with me. And then, at the end of the day, I transcribe my notes. Because that’s the best way I remember and learn.

Dr. C: Mm-hmm.

BB: I’m a big Google Drive supporter, because I love being able to access it anywhere, at any time, even on my phone. So, I keep my writing both in the documents and in spreadsheets. A lot of times, if I’m planning out different pieces that I have to write, I will keep a spreadsheet of what I have to write, when it’s due, what stage it’s at, anything I need to remember, like, in the little spreadsheet, so I can just look at it, and then. I like to link to my Google Docs from it. As kind of a method of better organizing myself. I also recently, it’s actually novel writing software. It’s called, um, Novelize. And then there’s also a paid for one called Scrivner, but. I find that the way you can organize research, and, they call them “scenes,” but what you can do is just put in, you know, this is something that needs to go out in March, this is something that needs to go out in April, and you can organize it that way, and link it to your research, link it to sites, link it to everything else. I found that that’s a great tool to use. Um. And I’m really, really liking it. For project management, I love Basecamp.

Dr. C: Oh, yeah, okay!

BB: I’m using Basecamp with four different organizations I’m part of right now. I think that it’s terrific; I like that it gives me a digest at the end of each day so I can catch up on everything. And because of all the different integrated, you know, the chat features, the messaging features, everything else with that, I think that it works really well for planning and sharing information.

Dr. C: Very cool. Yeah, I’ve definitely heard of Basecamp and Scrivner. I haven’t heard of Novelize, but I love that those are two things that you’re sort of, kind of, going outside their intended, I guess, use. And sort of making it your own and using it in a way that best suits you and your process. I love that. I’ll definitely look those up and put some stuff about those in the show notes.

BB: Oh, yeah, I have a novel that’s called, um, “Professional Work,” which is just where I’ve kept all of my cover letters. ((laughs))

Dr. C: ((laughs)) That’s amazing. ((laughs))

BB: ((laughing)) Yeah.

[End of interview.]
Dr. C: And that's the end of part one of my interview with Bridget Brave. [Outro music begins.] Tune in next week for part two, with more on writing in law and marketing. Thanks so much for listening to the show! If you're interested in learning more, 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 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. [Outro music ends.]