Transcript: Episode 4: Breaking into Freelancing

[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 Four of the Writing at Work Podcast, featuring the second half of my interview with freelance content marketer Taylor Holland. In this episode, she talks about the ups and downs of freelancing and offers advice for breaking into freelance work. Spoiler alert! It may not be what you think. All right! Let's talk about writing.

[Begin interview.]

Dr. C: Do you have a very particular memorable writing project, either one that you’re super proud of that you really enjoyed writing, or, on the other hand, one that you really, just absolutely hated working on? (laughs)

TH: Yeah. Well, I've probably had both. Um.

Dr. C: (laughs)

TH: Let’s see, so on the good side, the articles and proejcts that I really remember the most are ones wehre I’m telling a story, you know, a good story, and where I feel like that they’ll, there’ll be some value there for readers. And sometimes that’ telling my own story, sometimes that’s telling someone else’s. One of the things that I wrote most recently that I’m really proud of was a sotry about, or an article about why there will, there may soon be fewer female leaders at the top—

Dr. C: Mm-hmm.

TH: --in terms of CEOs and politicians. Really looking at data that shows how millennial women—and I’m actually one of the older members of the generation; I think it started the year before I was born—but, how people in our generation feel about work. And, you know, women in the past had really had this, this whole mantra that you can have it all.

Dr. C: Mm-hmm.
TH: That you can have a successful career, that you can have a successful family life, uh, you know, you just have to work hard enough to do it. And there’s been a lot of discussion in recent years about, among, you know top thinkers in business about how, you know, maybe that is or isn’t true.

Dr. C: Mm-hmm.

TH: And often the advice to women is always around, you know, how to do it all, how to pick your priorities, you know. But a lot of women have really found that sometimes you can’t do it all, and sometimes you don’t want to.

Dr. C: Right.

TH: And that’s something that women, women of our generation have really started to question, you know, in large numbers is, you know, do I even want to do it all? ((laughs)) Is my peace of mind worth working myself to death to try and be a good mom, a good wife, and a good business leader, and you know, more than other generations, the answer is often no. Millennials, and some of those coming up behind us in Gen Z, who are just now starting to turn twenty—

Dr. C: Mm-hmm.

TH: --are much more interested in entrepreneurship than in older generations, and in a large part it’s so we can have that control over our lives. Being willing to trade work-life balance for money. ((laughs))

Dr. C: Mm-hmm.

TH: You know, maybe you’re not going to earn as much, maybe you’ll never be CEO of a Fortune 500 company, but, you know, you can have the life that you want. So the article is really about how this is not, why this is a big deal for companies.

Dr. C: Mm-hmm.

TH: Because companies are finally starting to realize that they need to have more women in their top positions and why there’s a business and even financial value for doing that. And here at the same time that they’re realizing, oh, we need to start promoting and retaining really talented women, they’re ending up in situations where really powerful women may not want to be there.

Dr. C: Mm-hmm.

TH: So the article was focused on you know, ways that companies could, could attract and retain these women and maybe make some organizational shifts that would benefit everyone, you know, men and women both. And make the corporate environment a more attractive place for young women to want to build their careers. And I quoted two, two kind of the opposite ends of this debate right now. Oh, crap I’m going to blank on their names. Uh, Cheryl Sandberg, the CEO of Facebook, who wrote a book called Lean In.
TH: Which is really all about strategies for women to have it all.

TH: And then on the other end of this spectrum is Anne Marie Slaughter who is a Princeton professor who went on to be part of Hilary Clinton’s administration while she was Secretary of State. And had to leave her family, and eventually had to leave the job and go back home because her family needed her to be there. And, you know, she’s spoken out a lot about, even though it, you know, some feminists might take it as a slap in the face to say, you know, you can’t have it all, she’s pretty much said that. You have to—

TH: --pretty much superhuman in order to have it all.

TH: Yeah, so. I talk about both of them in the article, but then also shared a lot of tips for companies. One thing that was really interesting, or really cool for me, was that Anne Marie Slaughter actually tweeted about my article. ((laughs))

TH: That was kind of neat. Um. You know, but writing about subjects like that. That are really meaningful to me. Something that I am really passionate about. Um. I write about a lot of things that I think are really cool and interesting. And you know, but getting to write about things that I really feel strongly about on a personal level really makes them meaningful to me.

TH: So that would definitely be, like a positive, or, positive memorable writing experience. Probably ones that I remember not liking the most…. I’ve done a lot of, and I don’t do quite as much of it anymore, but a lot of ghost writing.

TH: With books and articles. And I actually do enjoy ghost writing when it’s a collaborative effort. When I’m working, you know, a lot of times, and I think ghost writing can be a very lucrative career. But, you know, I’ve worked with a lot of, you know, business leaders or experts in fields, you know, who are really smart, and have really good ideas. But just aren’t writers.

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TH: You know, so they hire ghost writers, or sometimes editors, depending on how much, you know, time or skill set they have there. To help them, you know, polish these stories. And I do, actually, really enjoy that when I’m working with someone who, like I said, has a really good message and just needs help just getting it out there and putting it the right way. But I’ve also worked on ghost writing projects where, it kind of started out that way, where it was collaborative, and I would interview the writer, or you know, get drafts from them, and it was really their ideas that I was just polishing, but that eventually turned into…. I was just writing the content and putting a name on it.

Dr. C: Right.

TH: They got too busy to do it, or whatever. You know, and those would, those would be projects I would ultimately walk away from because it felt, um, it felt inauthentic. You know, to some degree. And it also just wasn't fun. It didn’t feel like good writing. So, while I think that ghost writing is, you know, a very, can be a very, um, lucrative career, and there can be a lot of integrity there, it also is easy to go the other way. And also to kind of lose your own voice. So I usually advise people, those who are getting into ghost writing careers, you know if you’re going to do that, it’s great, you can make some money doing that, and sometimes it’s really interesting projects, but, um. Try and have you rother stuff going on as well. Things you can actually put your name on. Just for the sake of maintaining your own voice and also for the sake of, if you ghost write too long, you get to a point where you don’t have sources, or, sample material that you can share, because usually you can’t tell people what you’ve ghost written. So therefore, when clients say, you know, I want to see sample work, even though you’ve done a ton of work, you have nothing to show them, so.

Dr. C: Right, right. You don’t really have as much of a chance to build a portfolio.

TH: Exactly. Exactly. And when I first got into content marketing, that was actually sort of a problem for me because I had spent…. Between my time in journalism and the time I started doing content marketing, I spent about four years, um, mostly editing. And some of it was writing, but most of it was editing. And it was stuff that I, you know, got credit for, but it wasn’t my own original writing. So when I started doing content marketing, and people would ask for samples, it was hard to give them something wasn’t, you know, five or six years old.

Dr. C: Right.

TH: So. Yeah, I think it is important, whether you're editing or ghost writing, to make sure you're continuing to build that portfolio.

Dr. C: Awesome. Um So, I kind of want to build on that and ask you my, my last question, which is that, you work primarily as a freelancer through these different companies that you’ve mentioned, and a lot of my students are very entrepreneurial-minded, which I think, like you mentioned, actually regarding women, is a trend amongst college students in general today as well. Do you have any particular advice for
students looking to stride out—strike out on their own, sorry. Whether it be in writing and in editing, or just sort of in general.

TH: Yeah, um. You know, my biggest piece of advice would probably be not to start there.

Dr. C: Okay.

TH: You know, and I'm sure that there are people who do start there successfully, but I'm not sure how. ((laughs))

Dr. C: Mm-hmm.

TH: Because, you know, as a freelancer, most all of the business that I have done since I left journalism, when I was actually working full time for a magazine,

Dr. C: Mm-hmm.

TH: has come through referrals. Um. And that was people that I met while I was working at Pink Magazine. I had built a network there. I also had gotten some experience there, and done a lot of writing for them. I started out actually as an internship,

Dr. C: Mm-hmm.

TH: uh, which was a great way, even though it was free, to get in the door. Um. I would say that the fact that I chose an internship at a small publication… Uh, it was a national publication but it was a startup, uh, so, small team, was probably a big deal. Because if I had gone to a bigger company, I probably would have started off making coffee and copies.

Dr. C: Right.

TH: But because this was a smaller business, I got to get bylines pretty quickly. Start out with very short stuff, move up to, you know short articles, and then, finally got some feature writing. So that was a way for me to, you know, both build up my portfolio, and also to make some connections. I'm not sure how I would've been able to do either one, to get that really important experience, and a lot of, also, a lot of really important learning experiences. You know, coming out of an English program, you know, it still was really important for me as a writer, I'm sure that journalism programs are also very good at teaching people to be strong writers, but, you know, I think with English you do a lot of reading and writing, and that part kind of comes naturally, but then you have to, you still have a lot to learn in terms of how to do that well for different formats.

Dr. C: Mm-hmm.

TH: For magazine articles versus straight reporting for a newspaper versus a blog post. There’s a lot to learn that I don’t think I would have learned if I had just tried to go it on my own in the very beginning.

Dr. C: Right, right.
TH: You know, but I worked there for about five years, you know, and in those five years, I learned a lot, made a lot of connections, which I think is something that's also really important for writers. We tend to be very introverted people. We tend to be very behind the scenes people. So making those connections, like I hated going to networking events. They would make me occasionally go to networking events for the magazine, and if there wasn’t somebody I knew with me there, I just like, I’m really good at one-on-one conversations with strangers, and connecting with people, but, in terms of just walking up to a group of people who are talking and trying to just join that group, that was totally territory I didn’t like, still don’t. I try not to do a lot, but it was probably more important to do some of that networking, but also to make a few, like really good connections, as opposed to making a lot of really shallow connections. You know, but the connections, the experience, and the portfolio that I was able to get by starting by working for someone else, and obviously I didn’t even really do it that long, but that was enough to, that once I started on my own, it really didn’t take me very long to build up a client base and to start landing some really good opportunities. And I’ve never had to do… I guess I’ve been on my own for about ten years…. No, that can’t be right. Hold on. Oh, about seven years.

Dr. C: Mm-hmm.

TH: And in that time, I haven’t really had to do any marketing, really, very rarely even had to ask people, you know, do you know anybody who needs a good writer.

Dr. C: Mm-hmm.

TH: Those have just kind of come organically because I’ve, you know, had clients and done good work for those clients and they’ve been happy and they’ve passed my name along. So yeah. I think having those experiences earlier on, you know, even if you’re not working in an office per se, you know, being part of a team, maybe it’s some sort of work from home situation, but you know, just coming out of college, there’s still probably a lot that you need to learn, and a lot of connections that you need to make in order to be, you know, successful as a freelancer.

Dr. C: Mm-hmm.

TH: So, while I certainly understand the desire to work for yourself and work from home, because I do, and I love it all the time except for when I want to go on vacation and there’s no one to pay me, those paid vacation days, those I do miss, but other than that, I think being a freelancer is the perfect lifestyle for me. Um. But I do think that that experience was important to get.

Dr. C: Right, right. And I think the thing that you mentioned about the writing that you do in an English program or a Journalism program, I don’t know how much your program would’ve been mostly literature classes, or how many professional or technical or business writing classes you go to take, but it’s something that I tell even my professional and technical writing students is that, the actual genres and documents
that you may be writing in the work place may look very different from something that
we even do in a technical or professional writing classroom. Like, I could teach you how
to write, you know, a proposal in general, but the actual format of even whatever
proposal that you’re writing may look very different from what we’re doing in the
classroom, and, you know, so. A large part of learning how to do that is, unfortunately,
kind of, on the job, and just with lots and lots of practice. And thinking through, you
know, a document in terms of the bigger principles that I try to teach them, like audience
and purpose and thinks like that. So, and, you know, if you’re coming from a
background that’s, you know, mostly literature heavy, my undergraduate background
was kind of a mix of literature and creative writing and technical writing, and so, the
writing that I did for my literature classes looked, you know, so different than the writing
that I did in my tech writing classes, but that even looks different from other professional
projects that I’ve done. So, I think that thing that you said about learning on the job is
very important for students, and it’s something that I try to, kind of, hit home as well,
when I teach. So thank you for that! ((laughs))

TH: Yeah, absolutely. And you’re right, it’s, learning on the job, and each company
is
different. Each company has a different audience. Each company has a different kind of
style that they, maybe they want to be more conversational, maybe they want to be
more conservative, maybe they want to be more academic.

Dr. C: Mm-hmm.

TH: And those are all very different styles of writing, and I’m like you, I came from
mostly literature and creative writing background. And those skills certainly transfer. But
they take practice.

Dr. C: Right.

TH: They take on the job practice.

Dr. C: Right, right. Can you say a little bit about, if you can remember, I’m sure it was
awhile ago—not too long ago, though—about how you did manage to pick up those
skills and adapting to that new style of writing when you were first in the workplace.
Were there, sort of, a mentors that you followed, or other people commenting on your
work, or, can you talk a little bit about how that transition happened?

TH: Mostly working with good editors.

Dr. C: Okay.

TH: You know, and editorial teams that I worked with, and getting…. You know, a good
editor, and especially when they’re working with someone young, an intern, they know
that there’s going to be a lot of room for improvement and some things that you’re going
to have to learn, you know, so they would provide a lot of feedback, and not just edits.
Which is something, a few years later, when I was supervising interns, that I felt like I
kind of fell short on. It was easier for me to kind of just rewrite things—
Dr. C: Right. ((laughs))

TH: ((laughs)) --than to tell them how to do it. But and that was probably because I was really pressed for time, but I was probably not a great teacher, in that way. But I did work with some editors who were great teachers. And who would say, well, this is why this needs to be different. And who really taught me storytelling techniques that I hadn’t already, that were more specific to journalism. Showing instead of telling. Instead of telling the readers you know, this, something’s a certain way, telling a story that shows it. And weaving with the right information. And just basically sharing those tips with me and, you know, being willing, on my part, to, I guess, listen and learn and keep all that in mind. Because it’s kind of a lot of information coming at you at once, but. Again, it takes practice, and the more, I guess, feedback that you can get from talented professionals. In this case, it was my boss, but also other editors on the staff who did sort of become mentors who could provide me with feedback that was really easy and clear to use was really important. And there was also just, I guess, getting as many experiences as I could.

Dr. C: Mm-hmm.

TH: I mentioned earlier that I was occasionally asked to do some marketing writing when I was working at the magazine. Like, for events that the magazine would do, or to market certain issues, or to market the magazine to certain types of advertisers who might buy ads in magazines.

Dr. C: Mm-hmm.

TH: And this was not something. You know, even writing, like, press releases for the magazines. These were not things I enjoyed nearly as much as articles I was writing for the magazine. But they were different types of media, and so by volunteering, or at least saying “yes” when asked to work on some of these projects, you know, it gave me some early experiences doing different types of writing. And really flexing different skill sets.

Dr. C: Mm-hmm.

TH: So I think that was important too, and, kind of helped me grow faster than I would have if I had just been doing the same thing every day.

Dr. C: Sure, sure. So, working with a mentor, and not being afraid to take on new and different things.

TH: Right. And knowing you’re not going to get it perfect that first time. But as long as you’re working with someone who will work with you and want to teach you, saying yes to those opportunities can be really important.

Dr. C: Mm-hmm. Awesome! Well, those are my questions. Is there anything else that you want to add that you think students today might find valuable?
TH: More just keeping an open mind, and trying different things. You know, when I first game out of, when I was working at Pink, I used to get invited, every year, to speak at the University of Georgia Alma Mater, both for the English and for the Journalism schools.

Dr. C: Mm-hmm.

TH: And I remember going, this was probably, I don’t know, three years into my work with Pink, and at first the magazine had done really well, but they launched at a time when magazines were starting to fall across the country, you know, big magazines that had been around for a long time. And they held on as long as they could. You know, doing bimonthly and then quarterly, and then, I think they still actually have the daily e-note, Little Pink Book, is still, you know, out there, but. Towards the end there, as advertising dollars were all going online and away from print media and companies were folding and, you know, on our staff they were having to lay off writers and editors. It was an unnerving time. Like, here I’d finally picked, I always knew I wanted to be a writer, what kind of writer, I like journalism, I picked a career, and now it’s quickly, like, going away.

Dr. C: Right.

TH: You know, magazines and newspapers are laying off really experienced, really talented writers, who are pretty much household names, are having trouble finding jobs. So it was kind of a scary time, and I remember going to speak to the journalism school, and they kind of asked me about that, and I tried to be as, you know, optimistic and Polyanna-ish as I could, and you know, advise them to really learn as much as they could about web writing, and maybe even learn some web skills. And, you know, I told them I really felt like there would always be opportunities for smart, talented writers, but, you know, I myself was a little nervous. And when I left, I went into book editing for awhile, because that just seemed, kind of easier to find at that time. Editing as opposed to writing. You know, but now, there’s, you know, content marketing, and there’s lots of other opportunities. Maybe not in traditional writing jobs that you might think about, writing for magazines or newspapers or writing books, even book publishing companies don’t put the kind of money behind their writers that they used to, don’t put out as many books as they used to. There’s just a smaller audience for that. Because people are going online for their content.

Dr. C: Mm-hmm.

TH: But there is a really high demand for online content. And companies are getting better and better, are taking more and more seriously, really wanting to put content out, and wanting to put content out that’s not just promotional. That is interesting. That is fun to write. You know, so I think we’ve really seen kind of a, a big uptick in jobs for writers in the last, you know, three to five years. So, a lot of journalists going into content marketing because of that. And a lot of people doing both.
Dr. C: Mm-hmm.

TH: But so there are.... The opportunities have changed, but there are still certainly a lot of opportunities, and I don’t think that’s going to change. I think that it’s just a matter of keeping an open mind about exploring different opportunities and finding something that’s a good fit. Something that you, you know, you don’t want to be writing about things you don’t care about. Because that’s—

Dr. C: Right.

TH: --that’s boring, and people know when you don’t care. But that there are a lot of opportunities out there. It’s just a matter of finding, you know, your niche.

Dr. C: Very nice! I think that will be very reassuring for students today. Because I know the job market for them is very.... Well, we’ll call it volatile. ((laughs))

TH: Yeah.

Dr. C: So that’s reassuring. Very nice.

TH: It is. But it’s there.

Dr. C: Yeah. Right, right, right. So just, kind of helps them to think about, well, reframing what I’m looking for. And being open to things tha t may not sound like the things that I had originally thought I always wanted to do, but if I take this interview, and take a chance at this company, it might actually turn out to be something that I really love. So.


Dr. C: Very cool! Well, I think we are about out of time today. I really appreciate you talking with us. And have a great afternoon!

TH: You too! And thanks for having me!

[End of interview.]

Dr. C: [Outro music begins.] And that’s the show for today, folks! Thanks for listening to the show! If you’re interested in learning more about making it as a freelance writer, 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.]