[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! Welcome back to the Writing at Work Podcast! Today's guest had so much to share that her interview is in two parts. If you haven't already checked out Episode Five for the first part of this interview with Bridget Brave, be sure to give it a listen. Brave has worked both as an attorney and as a marketer, so she has lots of really fascinating things to share with our listeners. So, let's get to it. Let's talk about writing.

[Begin interview.]

Dr. C: So, can you, can you pick one of the documents that you've mentioned, or one or two, and describe sort of what the process of writing that document is like, kind of from the very beginning of the process all the way to the very end of the process.

BB: Sure. And actually, I knew you were going to ask me this question, so I kind of thought about it. Because it's really tough. It is hard to pick something that you're especially proud of or think worked really well. But in this case, I had a brief I wrote for a posthumous name change. And when I say that, I mean that it was a name change for someone who had already passed on. And it was just important to the family that that person's name change because they shared the last name with someone who was involved in their death. So they wanted that changed for the burial and the death certificate and everything else. And, so, approaching that, that was something that was novel, in that, it's never been done before. It wasn't—it had never been done in our state. And so, I had to not only make my writing persuasive, legally correct, but also explain to them why they should do something that no court has ever done before.

Dr. C: Mm-hmm.

BB: So that, I think, really drew on more of my creative background. Because you have explain to them, I know that this person isn't here to ask for this. Here's why the rest of this think you should do it anyway. And it was relying a lot more on emotional appeal than I would usually use in legal writing. Um. Which was one of the reasons why I liked writing it. Because I felt like I actually got to flex some of my skills, something I felt
passionate about. But the process there was that, I laid it out the way I would a normal, legal document. I wrote my issue, I wrote my case law that supported it, I wrote my argument. And then I went back through and I put in the emotional impact of each. So, you know, here is the issue, and here’s why this is an actual issue. Here is my legal research and even though it doesn’t apply in this case, here’s why I think it can apply in this case. Here is my argument, and although I am arguing as if this is the normal type of case where a name change would come about because someone was still living and wanted their name changed, here’s why it’s important that this is happening posthumously. And then, um. In that process, I really felt like I was creating something novel. Which doesn’t happen very often. I know you probably don’t want me to say this to your students, but a lot of legal writing is plagiarism. Um.

Dr. C: ((laughs))

BB: ((laughing)) We steal from each other all the time. It’s like, you go through somebody else’s brief, and you’re like, that paragraph is great. I’m taking that. ((laughs))

Dr. C: Uh-huh.

BB: So. It was the, the idea of drafting something that had never been said before. And you know, we all are creatures who live on praise. So, when you have a judge reading something that is novel, and saying, you know, Attorney Brave is absolutely right. It, you know, it’s meaningful for you to know that you were able to get your point across so well in your writing that a judge, who has years more experience than you is agreeing with you, and thinks that, even though it’s something they never considered, that it should be considered, and should be granted. That was a huge work for me, and I—that was a lot of sleepless nights. That was a lot of coffee. And a lot of, one of the things that I really rely on as a writer, are my fellow writers. Um. I had to do a lot of crowdsourcing of that one, of sending it out to my lawyer friends and saying, “Does this make sense?”

Dr. C: Mm-hmm.

BB: Um. “Read this, tell me what’s wrong with it, and you know, be mean, because I need… I need this to be right.” And then on the flip side, that’s something that’s serious and that’s well-researched. Um. One of my favorite things to write was a blog for a clock. We did a show called Biedermeier, which is a furniture period, and it’s, in the art world, we had a younger crowd. It was very hard to explain why a German furniture design was sexy. So we decided to make it a little bit fun, and we had a clock that went as part of the touring exhibit. And I kept a blog for the clock. So, I planned out each city that he was going to go to, and what would interest a clock in that city. Um. I gave him a romance arc. He fell in love on the trip.

Dr. C: ((laughs))

BB: ((laughs)) And. So that was part of the whole, you know, the whole journey of the Biedermeier clock. His name was Oliver. Um. And it was great to have that kind of tool that I was able to develop and use to educate other people about what the Biedermeier
period was because my favorite part is that, at the beginning, Vogue magazine showed up to cover our opening, and one of the first questions the Vogue writer asked was, “What’s Biedermeier’s first name?”

Dr. C: ((laughs))

BB: ((laughing)) Even though it wasn’t a person. ((laughs)). So it was a real challenge for me. You know, I was also not a big furniture person, so, stepping outside of myself, researching the time period, so that I could make sure that I made his voice sound historically accurate. It was interesting, and I felt like I learned a lot from that, and it was also a new medium for me because I was not a blogger before that. So, learning how to use that blogging voice. Writing first person is very difficult for me.

Dr. C: Mm-hmm.

BB: Uh, so.

Dr. C: ((laughing)) Especially when you’re not a clock!

BB: Right! I’m not a clock, and I was, you know, schooled in journalism. So ((laughing)) that kind of personal writing just doesn’t feel right. And.

Dr. C: Oh, right.

BB: Yeah, so it was, it was very challenging for me. But I’m very glad I had it. And, man. That thing has been awesome in my portfolio. Let me tell you.

Dr. C: ((laughing)) I bet.

BB: People love that clock! ((laughs))

Dr. C: ((laughs)) Yeah, I was going to ask you, is that available online, and would you mind if I put it in the show notes?

BB: I’ll have to see if I can find it. I have print outs, but I’ll have to see—it’s probably still on the museum site somewhere. I’ll have to dig it up.

Dr. C: Okay. That would be awesome. ((laughing)) Because it sounds really fascinating.

BB: ((laughs))

Dr. C: And really fun!

BB: It was fun. I really enjoyed writing him, and I would have mornings where I would wake up and look at my clock, and just be like, “Crap! Oliver’s supposed to be in Paris today!” ((laughs))

Dr. C: ((laughing)) That’s amazing. Um. I wanted to highlight a couple of things you said when you were talking about legal writing just now. One being the amount that you relied on your fellow writers, you said, seeking out
BB: Oh, yeah.

Dr. C: Laywer friends, and saying, "Hey, you know, read this and tell me which parts, you know, be mean," you said. ((laughs)) I really love that, because that’s something that I have found that I do also, when I’m doing writing still, and it’s, it’s, I find it super valuable, and I know many other professionals find it super valuable. In teaching writing, we call this concept peer review, or peer workshopping, and a lot of students totally hate it! And I know it’s because many of them have had, you know, experiences where they feel like they give more than they get in the peer workshop, or they feel like, “Oh, I could be doing X instead of doing this thing,” it sort of feels like a waste of time sometimes. But. One thing that I try to stress to students is that, when it’s done well, and when you can learn to, two things. When you can learn to give good feedback, and when you can learn to receive good feedback, workshopping and peer workshopping, peer review, whatever you want to call it, can be a thing that helps you, not just in a particular class that you’re in, but throughout the rest of your career. And it will make you, you know, receiving good feedback will help you and help your writing. Because it’s something that you’re literally asking, you know, for audience feedback, right? Um.

BB: Mm-hmm.

Dr. C: So you’re getting your project in front of a new set of eyes that are not your own, and getting a voice that’s not your own, to tell you how they received this document. But if you can learn to give feedback really well, that can also be something that’s valuable in the workplace. Because that’s sort of, you know, added value that you have as a team member as well.

BB: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. Because there’s nothing worse than, um, a coworker or even a manager who just looks at it and says, “It’s fine.” ((laughs))

Dr. C: ((laughing)) Right!

BB: You know, that’s not helping me at all. But, I think that there’s a lot of fear about, not only having the time and the energy to do it, but also putting yourself out there.

Dr. C: Absolutely.

BB: Opening yourself up to criticism is incredibly difficult. But, just realizing how helpful that can be, and. If you think that they’re wrong in what they’re telling you to change or alter, you know, arguing that point. Defending your own writing is infinitely helpful because it gets you more touch with what you’ve put down, too.

Dr. C: Absolutely! It helps you work out those points even more.

BB: Agreed.

Dr. C: The other thing I kind of wanted to touch on ((laughing)) is your kind of throwaway comment, but I, I really liked it, that part of legal writing is plagiarism.

BB: Oh, it really is.
Dr. C: I kind of love that because, uh, you know. ((sigh)) Plagiarism is obviously a very contentious issue, especially in academia, in the professional world as well, but I feel like. Sometimes it gets kind of a bad rap. And you know, maybe I’m going to regret saying that. ((laughs)) but, you know. There is, you know, a subdiscipline, there are subdisciplines in composition that talk about, well, let’s think about, let’s try and reframe the problem of plagiarism. Because often, you know, it’s really easy to look at a piece of plagiarism and say, “oh, well, the student just did this because they’re lazy, or because whatever, whatever.” But usually that’s not why plagiarism happens. First of all. You know, it happens for many reasons. It happens because someone doesn’t understand, you know, copyright or citation requirements in this country. Or it happens because a student doesn’t fully understand the concept that they’re trying to talk about, and so they’re trying too heavily to rely on other people’s words, you know. So, it happens for a reason. But also, ((laughs)), in the professional world, it’s not always the same kind of thing. And plagiarism isn’t always plagiarism. Because it’s not necessarily where you’re working with, you know, intellectual property or something that’s copyrighted and that can’t necessarily be used from one context to another context. Some companies have, you know, boilerplate language that they use across lots of documents. And they encourage you to use it, and reuse it, and reuse it in other documents. So, yeah. I just kind of wanted to take a moment to think through what plagiarism is.

BB: Right.

Dr. C: And how it operates, and how it is or is not plagiarism actually, you know, according to different contexts.

BB: Well, and that can be very hard coming from, you know, a place of learning. ((laughs))

Dr. C: Mm-hmm!

BB: Where you’re writing for the first time, and they said, “Oh, just use this paragraph.” And you’re like, “I can’t use that paragraph.” Well, yeah, you can. You can, it’s fine. Because you still have that ingrained in you. But um. I think it was one of, it was one of my mentors who said ot me, she said, you know, “Why reinvent the wheel.”

Dr. C: Yep.

BB: If this guy has said it, he’s said it better than you’re ever going to say it, so.

Dr. C: ((laughs)) And I think it’s one of those things that when you are, you know, I don’t want to, you know, downplay ((laughs))

BB: Right.

Dr. C: --the potential seriousness of plagiarism, especially in, you know, academia, especially in the university. I’m not saying, “Hey, everyone, go out and plagiarize you papers, please don’t do that.
BB: Right. Exactly.

Dr. C: Right? But, you know, when you’re in a professional context, you know, it’s, that’s one of those things that you have to learn on the job in your discipline. To what extent do people expect you to reuse previous text in your documents.

BB: That’s where we come back to the adaptability.

Dr. C: Absolutely.

BB: Yes.

Dr. C: Yeah, so. The next thing I’d like to ask you is how did you get your current-slash-upcoming gig?

BB: Okay, so. ((laughs)) I recently located to the Pacific Northwest, which has a very different mentality toward job application. And a different—a wider variety of workplaces than. I came from Milwaukee. I love Milwaukee, but there was not a job like this anywhere in Milwaukee. I am working for a company that proclaimed themselves as proud nerds.

Dr. C: ((laughs))

BB: So. The job description was a little bit nerdy, and so I decided to write a cover letter that was a little bit nerdy and used nerdy references to highlight my different skills. And.

Dr. C: That’s awesome.

BB: It was something that I never would have imagined doing.

Dr. C: Uh-huh.

BB: It would have made me cringe, and you know, that’s one of those things, that’s like, keeping that professional line at work, especially when you’re a lawyer, is so important. Not letting them know ((laughs)) too much about how much of a geek you are outside of the office. Um. And this was the first time that I had ever really been able to open that part of me up. And when I came in, she said, “Oh, we passed your cover letter around.”

Dr. C: Oh! That’s awesome!

BB: ((laughs)) I was so thrilled. And uh, you know, it was. It was one of those things where it was a skill I didn’t even know I had, but. For another job I had applied for, I’d actually sent my husband my cover letter to review, and he said, “Wow, you really do write a good cover letter.” And that was something I’d never considered one of my skills. But apparently this is something I can do, and it was exciting to learn that I had that particular skill, especially since it’d been so long since I had written one. They aren’t all that common when you’re applying for legal jobs. ((laughs))

Dr. C: Right.
BB: So yeah, it was neat to meet people who had all read my cover letter. And, uh. I think this is going to be the first job I've ever gone into where I'm up front about just how nerdy I am. And it's pretty exciting.

Dr. C: ((laughing)) Uh-huh. That’s awesome.

BB: ((laughs))

Dr. C: Can you sort of, expand on that, and talk about the decision to change up your approach to that cover letter a little bit, for this particular job?

BB: Always know your audience. Um. And so I went, and I researched their website. I read about their background, the different people that worked there, so I, you know, it was. It was fortunate that I didn’t feel like I had to do too much tailoring because I was just thinking, “these are my people.”

Dr. C: Mm-hmm.

BB: But um. You know, that’s something that I always find you need to do with a cover letter, is go and really learn that company. You know, read its twitter page, read the Facebook page. Read any letters or blog posts that the CEO has made, so that you can kind of get an idea of their culture.

Dr. C: Mm-hmm.

BB: And, um. Tailor your writing that way. Are they a more informal company? Are they not going to appreciate a “To sir and/or madam.” You know. Figure out people’s names. That’s a huge one. Um. And, I try to always make myself, to show them how I am a good fit for them. Because I already have adopted, you know, either their culture or their language, or, you know, just highlighting how I am similar to the people that work there already. Because I know that for more and more companies, the culture is so important, and making sure that you’ve got that good fit with an employee, so. I can be qualified as all get out, but if you’re not going to like working with me, then what’s the point. So.

Dr. C: Absolutely.

BB: You know, learning how to highlight both your personal traits and your professional traits are huge.

Dr. C: Yeah. That’s so important. And as you’re telling this story, it makes me think about, you know, when we. When writing teachers teach cover letters, often we sort of look at it from, um, a genre approach, is sort of the approach that we talk about, the way we talk about it in the writing discipline is, you’re taking a genre approach, and we sort of talk about what this genre looks like, and one of the important things when we’re, when we’re taking a genre approach is that, you know. Form, you know, it’s easy to kind fall back on a form, and to fall back on formalism, and like, oh, well in the first line, you’re going to, you know, for example, say what you’re applying for, and then in the second line, you’re going to say this, and then in the third paragraph, you’re going to
say, you know. It’s easy to fall back on that formalism. But really, context is king. And like you said, you really have to know your audience. You have to know who you’re writing to. So that, you know, you can tailor, you know, that genre, and make it look like it’s supposed to for this particular audience. And really be flexible in your approach depending on who you’re writing to.

BB: Exactly.

Dr. C: Yeah. The next question I have is, do you have any advice for students just starting out in the workplace, either writing-related or otherwise, and, I’d like to invite you to either sort of, expand on that cover letter topic, or kind of go in any other direction you feel you’d like to share.

BB: Sure. Especially in your job search, make sure that you’re highlighting why you want to work there. I think that, a lot of people tend to send out these cover letters that are like, well, I’m competent enough to get this job. But if there’s not something to hook people, I mean, it’s just like any other kind of persuasive writing. Make them want to meet you.

Dr. C: Yeah.

BB: Because, it’s so much easier when you’ve got that interview to get into a job than it is just blindly sending out the same cover letter over and over again. So you should be talking to each person like it’s an introduction, like it’s a real introduction. Like it’s someone that you would want to meet with in person. So that they want to make that personal connection with you. And always show, because I find that, especially people who are writers. One thing that we all have in common is that willingness to learn. And I think that really highlighting that in your cover letter and in your job applications and in your interviews. You know that, yes, I’m applying for this job, but you know what, I saw that you also do this, and I would love to help out with that, because that’s an area that I’d like to know more about. And that’s something that is so attractive. And also, it’s going to benefit the company, but it’s going to benefit you more. Because you’re going to learn new skills from them. And it’s easier to make that up front with them because then, even if they don’t think you’re perfect for that job, they might come back, they might circle back for another position in regard to you. And that’s happened to me multiple times. Where I have applied for one where maybe I thought I was qualified for, but then after they read my letter, met with me, they thought, you know, she did say she wanted to work in development. So let’s get her in here and see if she’s still interested in that. So it just, it opens up more doors. It makes you look like a more all-around employee. They don’t think you’re someone who’s just going to come in and do your job and never want to expand with the company. And it makes you likeable.

Dr. C: ((laughs))

BB: Which is huge. You know, if you’re a person who seems like they’re going to pitch in and help out however they can, they’re going to love you.
Dr. C: Right, right. Um, so, just letting them know that you’re willing to learn, like you’ve been saying, learn on the job, and take new opportunities as they arise.

BB: Right.

Dr. C: And, also highlighting that fit, you said again. So it’s not just about, yes, I’m qualified for this job, but how I fit with this job and how I fit with this company in a particular way. You know, is really important to get through in the cover letter. Not just those technical skills.

BB: Exactly.

Dr. C: Very cool, very cool. Uh, so is there anything else that you, you know, want to add, either in terms of writing on the job or breaking into a field, or anything?

BB: Again, just keep writing. I mean, put yourself out there in other ways. I, you know, I always write on the side. I write, personally, I write for my friends. I write ((laughs)) you know, I write letters, I write little, dumb fiction for my friends that make them laugh. Um. Just because keeping those skills active, like, keeping those muscles engaged. So important. And, because you never know when you’re going to have to draw on another area of your, you know, creative expertise.

Dr. C: Mm-hmm.

BB: So try to, try to practice every day. Try to learn all you can. There’s so many resources out there. There’s free courses. I mean. I’ve, you’d think I’d be sick of school by now, but.

Dr. C: ((laughs))

BB: I am always taking other courses if I can. I’m trying to learn computer programming so that I can do that side of things, too. Just because I think it’s important to always be growing like that.

Dr. C: Yeah.

BB: So that’s, my huge takeaway, is just, always learn.

Dr. C: Always learn, always grow. Keep practicing your writing, because that is how you get better.

BB: And read! Read while you can. ((laughing)) Because there are so many jobs where you will not be able to read for fun.

Dr. C: ((laughs)) Right. Get it in while you can.

BB: Yeah.

Dr. C: Or, you know, listen to podcasts.

BB: Yes. Podcasts are great.
Dr. C: ((laughs))

BB: They save my commute every single day, so.

Dr. C: Oh, absolutely.

BB: ((laughs))

Dr. C: All right, well, this has been absolutely fantastic, Bridget. Thank you so much for being with us today!

BB: Well, thank you.

[End of interview.]

Dr. C: And that’s the end of part two of my interview with Bridget Brave. Thanks so much for listening to the show. If you’re interested in learning more about writing a good cover letter, or about plagiarism, or… [Outro music begins.] …any of the other topics on today’s show, 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, you can email me at writingatworkpodcast@gmail.com, or you can find us on Facebook at Facebook.com/writingatwork. Subscribe, rate, and review us on iTunes, Stitcher, or wherever you find your podcast love. Until next week, keep on writing. [Outro music ends.]