Transcript: Episode 8: Writing in Journalism with Cliff McCollum

[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]

Before we get to today’s show, I have a quick announcement to make. The Writing at Work Podcast now has a Patreon page! If you like the show and want to support us, you can become a patron at the 1, 3, 5, or 10 dollar a month level. Find us at patron.com/writingatwork. Don’t want to donate monthly but still want to support the show? Make a one-time donation at ko-fi.com/writingatwork. Your support will help keep the show sustainable, and it might even help us grow! And now, back to the show.

Today’s guest is Cliff McCollum. Cliff is the managing editor at Gulf Coast Media in Baldwin County, Alabama. He got his start in journalism at Auburn University’s student newspaper, the Auburn Plainsman, and wrote and edited for the Opelika Observer before making his way to Gulf Coast Media. Cliff had so much to share that his interview will be in two parts! This week, Cliff talks about the work that he does as a journalist, describing what it’s like to work on an investigative report. Be sure to check back next week for more insight on getting into journalism. But for now, let’s get to it! Let’s talk about writing.

[Begin interview.]

Dr. C: All right, welcome to the show, Cliff!

CM: Well, thank you for having me.

Dr. C: You’re very welcome. So let’s start by, if you could, tell me a little bit about the work that you do.

CM: Well, I’m managing editor for Gulf Coast Media over here in Baldwin County. We have four weekly papers, three on Wednesday that are zoned to different parts of our county over here. And then a Friday edition that’s a county-wide edition. So, in that job, I manage our team of editors as well as I’m acting editor for The Courier, which is our eastern shore paper, so, Spanish Fort, Daphne, and Fairhope. And then I also put together our Friday paper, The Baldwin Times, so I cover our county commission, our school board, our legislative delegation, anything political that’s going on down here. I’ve actually got to go and meet uh, Senator Strange at four o’clock this afternoon to, he’s coming for a meet and greet with the Young Republicans. So. Honestly, you know, it’s one of those things that, every single day, I’m, I never know what’s going to happen. Because anything can happen. Heck, it was like, maybe a month or two ago, an oil rig blew up in the far north part of the county, so I had to go out to Stockton,
Alabama, and there was still oil and a little bit of fire out there when I got there. I’m like, okay, well, wasn’t expecting this today.

Dr. C: ((laughs)) Wasn’t expecting an oil fire and explosion to be in my life today, but here we are.

CM: Yeah. And thankfully it didn’t get in the Tensaw River up there, so you know, we didn’t have, like, major pollution in the, uh, in Mobile Bay.

Dr. C: So in terms of being a managing editor, what does sort of some of your work tasks—tasks look like, in that respect.

CM: A normal managing editor for a paper our size, I wouldn’t write near as much as I do. I would just be managing our team of editors and making sure we’re getting the coverage we need to. Really, honestly, my job at another paper would be more of a public face kind of thing, just interacting with people and making sure we’re getting out who we are, but the way I operate here, and it’s the way I’ve operated at all the papers I’ve worked at. I—I have to write, and I enjoy getting out there, talking to people, learning about new things, and then getting that information and sharing it with our readers. Trying to bring it down to the lowest level of abstraction and make, you know, complex things like zoning issues or budgets and things like that, bring it down to a level that everybody can understand, which isn’t always easy. But uh, it’s a vital thing that we have to do. And then of course there’s some of the investigative journalism that I have to do, you know, with what’s going on in Fairhope right now, with some of the issues between the mayor and the council, there’s been a lot of stuff there, and we’ve been right at the front of it, making sure that we get information that we think the citizens need to know and getting it to them. Not taking a side, but just presenting information and letting them decide what it means.

Dr. C: Sharing what’s out there, kind of.

CM: Exactly.

Dr. C: Yeah, okay. Um, and I like the point that you made about you’re trying to take thing downs to the lowest level of abstraction and making sure that as many people as possible can understand what’s going on, because it’s things like zoning issues, like budget issues, that are going to affect them. That are going to affect their lives, so yeah.

CM: Local government, I think, is the part of government that people probably understand the least about but it most directly affects them. We don’t get near the kind of coverage on local government that we do at the state level or even the national level. But you know, changing zoning within your town can directly affect your quality of life, what type of buildings or what type of stuff goes in around your neighborhood, your property values. Things you don’t even necessarily think of. And the same thing with the budget. If you’ve got a town whose having to make budget cuts and do things of that nature, that could be your police protection, fire protection, parks and recreation. Stuff that directly affects your quality of life on a day to day basis. But most people just aren’t aware of it.

Dr. C: Right. And you know, making those, because they’re all technical issues, right. They’re all, all of those sorts of things are, are, like come from a variety of technical domains, and so making sure that people, like you said, everyone can understand it. That’s a difficult process.
CM: It is, and there are times when I’m talking to these elected officials or city officials who, you know, they’re content area experts. You know, when you’re talking to a planning director, they work in zoning every single day. They understand the ins and outs of zoning descriptions and the building code and things of that nature. They don’t have to think about, what does this mean to the average person. And so, it’s kind of our job—I was talking with Daphne’s public works director the other day. And, Richard Johnson, he’s one of the best at this, I’m like, all right, Richard, there’s some complicated zoning stuff coming before the city, and I’m like, Richard. Talk to me like I don’t know anything about zoning, and let me tell people what’s going on. And he goes, “Oh, yeah, yeah. Okay, see. R3 zoning is this type of residential zoning. You can have these types of houses there, and it could mean this type of dwelling or you could have this type of apartment.” And you know, being able to express that to people, it can help allay some fears. Because you might hear “R3 zoning” and you’re like, “Oh, god, they’re going to build an apartment complex next to my house,” but then it’s like, “Oh, okay, well, R3. It might be a little like, duplex or something like that, but it’s not going to be like a huge apartment complex next to my house. A duplex? That actually sounds kind of cool.” So, it’s helping to allay fears and again, just bring information to people.

Dr. C: Yeah, and so it also sounds like you, you’ve sort of developed some levels of, of, not necessarily expertise, but some levels of, of knowledge in these fields in talking to all these people and in doing this work for many years.

CM: Oh, certainly. I mean, I’ve been doing this for over a decade now, and you can’t help but pick up a little bit of it along the way. I am by no means a content area expert in planning and zoning, but doing enough of these stories over the years, you start to pick up little bits and pieces, and Opelika, back when I was there, had a Citizens’ Planning Academy. And so, really what helped me with that was, going to that, I learned so much about just the basics of planning and zoning, that, you know, I have a foundation there that I can build on, so I can, I kind of know enough, you know, different towns do things differently. But, you know, Alabama’s planning code is pretty uniform throughout the state, so it make it a little bit easier to have that base level knowledge.

Dr. C: Cool, yeah, and I was going to ask, sort of, follow that up with, um, how did you, how did you, you know what strategies did you use to, when you were working with the subject matter experts, right when you started out, were there any specific strategies that you used to kind of wrap your head around what they were saying, and then also translate that into your writing? Did you have any particular strategies you were working with?

CM: Uh, honestly, it was, you know, I would go to these meetings, I would record stuff, write down what was being said, and if there was things that I didn’t understand, just going to these experts and talking to them. I mean, there’s no real strategy, I guess, to it, other than just basic communication skills.

Dr. C: Asking questions, sure.

CM: Yeah. And it helped when I first started reporting, you know, I was a reporter in my hometown. So, I guess I kind of had a built in network there, because I’ve known most of these city officials, at that time, my whole life. So it makes it a little bit easier in terms of access to you know, our planning director back in Opelika, Jerry Kelly, lived three houses down from my parents. So, if even if it was like late at night, or like a weird question, I could just, you know, go
to my parent's house, walk down the street, knock on the door, and say, “Hey Mrs. Kelly, is Mr. Jerry there?”

Dr. C: (laughs)

CM: And so we’d sit out back and he’d sit there, and like, again, just explain it on a low enough level of abstraction for everybody to be able to get, and they’re even sometimes, you know, normally as a journalist, I’m not big on prior review, but sometimes for complicated issues, I will send portions of stories that I’ve written to some of these officials and say, “Hey, I know this is a complicated issue, can you just read these paragraphs, and just see if I am factually making sense here.” Not, you know, “Oh, I would change this because I know people aren’t going to like that.” It’s, am I being factually accurate in saying this? And it’s very helpful.

Dr. C: Absolutely. Yeah, one thing that has come up in several conversations that I’ve been having with people lately is, is the value of some kind of, in teaching we call it peer review because it’s students reviewing each other’s work, and a lot of students really don’t like it. Because they, for a lot of very different and very valid reasons, but, one thing that I try to stress to them is that it can be, if you learn how to both give and receive feedback and critique, and just learn how to do that in a good way, that’s something, that’s a skill that you can carry into you know, any kind of workplace, and will be beneficial in many ways.

CM: Oh, sure. Well, there’s no one smarter than all of us working together.

Dr. C: Right, right. I like that.

CM: And um, especially with the way that we do our stories, especially if I’ve got a big story that I’m working on, you know some of the stuff I’ve been doing in Fairhope lately with the invoices from the IT company that the mayor is allegedly misusing, police department funds to investigate former employees. Um, stories like that obviously it’s a big deal, and we don’t want to have to eat a retraction or anything like that, so I have multiple members of my staff look over these stories before they print, and just to catch basic copy and grammar and you know sentence errors and stuff like that, but b.) make sure there’s a good narrative flow to it, you know, make sure, is somebody actually going to want to read this two thousand, one hundred and ninety-six word article. Sometimes I wonder if yes or no, but again, based on the web hits that I’m seeing, they’re interested. They really are interested, and it’s uh, it’s kind of funny because you get told by professors throughout J-school, like, well, your city council stories and stuff like that, people are going to find it really boring, like, people don’t pick up your paper for that. They pick it up for sports and photos of their kids. We’re driving subscriptions based on good investigative journalism. And that’s an awesome place to be in.

Dr. C: Very cool. So, can you tell me a little bit about the types of things you write at work, both in terms of things that actually appear in the newspaper, and then some sort of behind the scenes kind of things that you write.

CM: Sure. Um. You know, stuff that appears in the newspaper, obviously we have multiple articles a week, I mean, I could have anywhere between the two papers that I really put together, anywhere between five to ten articles a week, it just depends on how busy a week it is. I write a column for our papers. I’ve written a column, gosh, since we were back in college, at the Plainsman. And I mean, since then, thankfully, I’ve got ten years’ worth of reserves I can steal from in weeks where maybe I’m a little dry that week. I think I’ve run that Joni Mitchell
column at least for every single paper I've ever worked for. And then you know, we do a staff editorial every week. With that, you know, we also have to write cut lines for submitted stuff. Rework press releases to put them into you know, a normal story style. Um. Countless communications between us and various sources. I mean, I'm emailing people all day. Texting folks. I mean you don’t think of it as necessarily as writing, but it still is a vital form of communication that you have to engage in. Because there are some sources I know that only text, or only answer by email. You can’t just pick up the phone and just call people anymore, so. Trying to think what other types of writing I do. Um. My budgets that I have to make, both story budgets, in terms of what sort of content’s going into the paper, and then budget proposals, sending stuff off to our parent company up in South Carolina, trying to justify, I need this money for stringers, here’s this paragraph of how they benefit our company, and here’s why we can’t do it with just the staff we have. Thankfully, when you’ve got a county the size of Rhode Island that you’re trying to cover everything in, it’s pretty easy to convince the bosses up in Sumter that, hey, having one person cover, you know, an area that stretches a pretty good amount of miles and a few hundred thousand people, yeah, maybe, just once or twice a month can I get somebody to help me with some things. And thankfully they’ve been very amenable.

Dr. C: That’s really awesome. So you, in our conversation so far, it seems very apparent that you don’t really have a typical day at the office, but if you had to describe a typical day at the office, what might that look like?

CM: Um. I will wake up at about six o’clock in the morning. Scan like Twitter and Facebook to make sure nothing blew up in the middle of the night. Check my email there. Actually, I’ve gotten into the horrible, I know it’s a horrible habit, but I like to smoke a cigar in the morning, it’s like my version of coffee. And so, it gives me time to check my emails and kind of scroll through things, prepare myself for the day ahead. If it’s a deadline day, those are days I most likely will be in the office. So I’ll get in there about eight o’clock in the morning. Usually by the time I get there, I’ve got one or two staff members who have had something blow up or have, you know, some question that they need to ask, so that takes a good thirty to forty-five minutes. Um. Then it’s, you know, writing, putting stories together, calling sources. Sending stuff on our FTP site to our design team to help put the paper together. Communicating to them what we want the paper to look like. Yelling at my copy editor to turn off the Diane Reem show. And then from there, usually on my deadline days, there’s always some sort of public meeting after that, especially if it’s the Monday deadline for the Wednesday paper. I, every Monday night of my life I will be at a council meeting. So, you know, from, once we get the proofs back, we look over those, we send the edits through or whatever, and usually by the time we get done with that, I’ve got to immediately head to a city council emeting, where I’ll be sitting, taking notes, listening to things, sometimes trying to stay awake by trying to stay awake by jabbing a pen into my arm. You know, just depends on what’s going on. And then from there, I come home and, you know, try to make a little dinner. And usually, I’m still doing work even from home, trying to throw stories together, or make my notes a little more coherent or post some stories to our website while I’m watching American Horror Story. You know, just typical.

Dr. C: Cool. So, what kinds of tools do you use to do your writing?

CM: Sometimes it’s old school, like, you know, the notepad and the pen. More often than not these days, though, the laptop I’m talking to you right now on, is the new pen and pad. I also have an old iPhone of mine that I use as a recorder. Even back when it was my real phone, I still used it as my recorder, it’s just so much easier than tape recording. And there’s an app that,
if I know I don’t want to have to listen to a bunch of tape, there’s a dictation app that I use as well, that actually is pretty reliable. That’s been pretty helpful. But that’s, and a camera still. You know, we have our cameras on our phones that are okay, but I still carry a Nikon around just because there’s a depth that you can get with some of those pictures, especially with breaking news and things like that, like when we had the oil fire thing. It was beneficial to have like a real camera and not just my phone.

Dr. C: Absolutely.

CM: So, you’ve talked a little bit about the different types of documents that you write, both in terms of articles, columns, editorials, and then on the behind the scenes side, you know, text messaging, emails, things like that. Can you pick one of those types of documents that you mentioned and describe what the process of writing it is like kind of from the beginning to the very end? Til it goes to print?

CM: Sure. You know, right now, with most of the stuff that I’m doing, that I’m having to work the hardest on, are these investigative articles. Um. We’ll just use the invoice story as an example, because this is pretty typical of document-based reporting. I’m given a copy of these invoices that show that the mayor of Fairhope is using a thirty-five thousand dollar police contract to investigate employees she fired to try to create a reason for firing them. Um. And the invoices show the paper trail of like, this date she asked Elias Technologies to do this for this amount of money, and then of course, you know, later we get the, I get the transcripts of text messages between her and Elias Technologies to kind of back up what you’re seeing in the invoices. It’s a lot of meticulous, okay, the invoice says on this date, this happened, the text messages in this, this happens, and so, really for writing those particular articles, it’s going straight to the documents and going, “This one says this; it’s backed up by this. On this date, this one says this; it’s backed up by this.” And so, that’s how I wrote those stories first, and then I went back and started to call some of these officials and some of these people who are mentioned in it, of course, I reached out to the mayor. And, there’s a higher likelihood of me being named Queen of all England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland than there is of her talking to me at this point, but I have to do it to say that I tried. Reaching out to the City Council President for their comment. Trying to get the police chief on the record. And then I talk to all of these people, and I let the documents speak for themselves, and then the follow up questions, kind of the meat of why is this important, I talk to these officials for. So, I get all that together, throw all that on the page. And then I actually go in and try to make sense of it, and that’s why I write my lead. That sort of hook that brings people into the story of, in a one or two sentence paragraph, bringing people into the story, like, here’s what this is, and here’s why you should read this. And then, throw a headline on there, get some of my fellow editors to take a look at it, and then post it on our page, and throw it in the paper.

Dr. C: Awesome. It sounds like in the beginning when you’re working with those documents, those, that’s a lot of stuff to kind of put together. Do you ever do any kind of visual diagramming or like creating a timeline or something like that to help you with that process?

CM: Honestly, both. It kind of just depends on the type of document. I know with these, actually doing a timeline format was really helpful because it’s by date and you know, we have that information there. You know, you write on the whiteboard in there, like, on 3-1, the invoice says this, the text messages say this. And it’s just very helpful to have it visually put up there right away, because when you’re just looking at all these pages and pages of documents, and we’re
talking, seventy something pages of documents, it can be difficult to parse all through that. But once you break it down in that way it makes it a whole lot easier not only to understand but to be able to express to others.

Dr. C: Absolutely. Very Cool.

[End of interview.]

Dr. C: And that's it for part one of my interview with Cliff McCollum. Be sure to check back next week for Cliff's insights on getting into journalism. Thanks so much for listening to the show! Don't forget, if you like what you're hearing, you can support us at patreon.com/writingatwork or ko-fi.com/writing at work. For shownotes or transcripts, check out our website at writingatworkpodcast.wordpress.com. Questions? Want to suggest a podcast topic or an interviewee? Email us at writingatworkpodcast@gmail.com. Find us on Facebook at Facebook.com/writingatwork. Subscribe, rate, and review us on iTunes, Stitcher, or wherever you find your podcast love. And until next week, keep on writing.