Transcript: Episode 11: Getting into Freelance Blogging with Sarah Gilliland

[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]

Today we're back with Sarah Gilliland, a freelance writer and online influencer. Sarah maintains her own website, Sarah in the Suburbs, and contributes to other online publications as well. Sarah had so much to share that her interview will be in two parts! If you haven't listened to part 1 of Sarah’s interview, be sure to check it out. But for now, let's get to it! Let's talk about writing.

[Begin interview.]  

Dr. C: The next thing that I'd like to ask you is to kind of pick one of the documents that you've mentioned and describe what the process of writing it is like kind of from the beginning to the very end, once you either turn it into the editor or hit “publish” on your own site.

SG: Okay. Well, my process ((laughs)) was an imperfect process until I joined the Traveling Mom freelance writer team, and I learned from them some good skills that helped streamline my writing process. Because like I said, when you’re working at home, sometimes it’s great, and sometimes you’re all over the place because you get distracted. And I have found that if I’m going to start writing a post, I’ve really got to set time aside and my attention aside, and like turn off any notifications or sounds or anything that could distract me and just go. But I also, within the writing process, I was getting really caught up in my intro and in my conclusion. Like, making it sound—I really, I'm an orderly person, and so I really wanted to start, like, start with the intro, write the body of the post, and then end up with the conclusion. And sometimes, I can’t, I can’t do that. I kind of have to start with the body, and then come up with the intro and the conclusion. And working with Traveling Mom has helped me realize that. Because they’re, they have a little bit more specifics that they want. With my blog, I try to follow some of the advice that they have given me through their training, but again, it’s personal for me, my blog, and so I kind of, I do a little bit of what they’ve suggested, but then I also kind of blaze my own trail in that way. ((laughs)) Just because, I don't want to be so strict on myself. But, but using their methods has really helped me.

So, I write the body of the post. And then I go back in and see, well, first of all, I go back in and make sure all the grammar and stuff is correct. Then I go in with the Yoast tool and see how I can fix my passive voice because it’s inevitably going to end up in there, so I know I’m—I just write it, and then I go back and fix it. Because I was trying to edit in the midst of writing, and that just takes way too long for me. So, write the body, then start the editing process of the body. Once you’ve gotten it where you want it, then I go in and put in headers, or chapter titles if it
were, if you’re a novelist. And divide up the body of the post that way so that it’s easier for people to read who are on mobile or tablet devices reading my articles. Then I finish up with the intro and the conclusion of the article itself. And I’ve been doing that now for the last few months, and that has gotten—I can write three posts in a day if I do it like that. If I’m trying to edit myself ((laughs)) in the middle of writing, it—I can spend two or three hours on one stinking post. So. ((laughs)) I have gotten a lot more efficient in that way.

And then, also, too, I have to, like I said, different than traditional journalist writing, I have to also edit photos. You know, articles for the online world are real big on having a “Pinterest-worthy” photo, so to speak. Where you have, you know, just a little quip about what the article, like today I wrote a post for Traveling Mom. It’ll be coming soon! And if you guys want to read it ((laughs)), it’s called, “What to Expect on the Disney Magic Cruise Ship.” We took a cruise last year with my family on a cruise ship called the Disney Magic. And they wanted an article that was specifically about the ship. So, I tried really hard to focus in on everything people would want to know about the ship. About the room accommodations, about the dining, about the characters, what there is for parents to do, or just adults, even if you don’t have kids, you can totally take a Disney cruise and have an excellent time.

So, you know, trying to fill all of those things in, and then, have to make a pin that has really pretty pictures, but then also bold text. And I think my text said, “Disney Magic: What to Expect Onboard.” So. It’s just a very short, not even, I mean, that’s not even a grammatically correct sentence, but you just, you put that text on this picture or a collage of pictures. And you put it in the article with some of the other pictures where you’ve captioned different things that you’re doing on the ship, or, “This is a picture of the ship.” “This is a picture of the dining area.” That sort of thing. Um. Then you insert this pinnable image into the article itself, so that when people are reading it, they can, well, it’s, it goes both ways.

So, when people are reading the article, and they say, “Ooh, I really like this.” This is a way, Pinterest has become a way for people to bookmark different topics. Whether it’s a how-to article, whether it’s a traveling tips article, like I was just describing, or whether it’s a parenting article with tips about, you know, diapers or education or behavior, whatever it is. Pinterest has become a place for people to bookmark things, and so they’ll read an article, and they’ll see the pinnable image, and they’ll, you know, click it, or there’s different share buttons on websites where you can pin something or tweet an article or share it to Facebook. And so, people will pin it and they’ll come back to it later when, if they’re getting ready to book their own vacation with Disney Cruise Line, and they want to know, “Oh yeah, remember, we read that article about that ship? Do you think she should do that one, or do you think we should do that one?” Or, you know, that sort of thing.

And then it goes the opposite way as well. Because once that article has been, quote-unquote “pinned” to Pinterest, people on Pinterest will be searching, and they’ll sometimes put in the search bar, “Disney Cruise Line.” So, if your pin, kind of like on Facebook or Google or Twitter, is at the top of what they call the “Smart Feed,” people will click on it, and save it to their profile. Or they may click on it and continue to do what they call a “click-through,” and actually go to the article and read what you wrote. So, you can, you’ve got Pinterest traffic coming from your site to Pinterest, and then from Pinterest to your site. So, it’s kind of the, it’s the circle of life of online media ((laughs)).

Dr. C: Right!
SG: Yeah. Um, so I try to save all the photo things and social sharing for the end of my process. Because if I start thinking ahead, then I get stuck, and then it just takes way too long. So. Write-write-write, then do all the other stuff at the end. ((laughs))

Dr. C: Yeah, totally! So, when you’re writing a blog post, and you’ve mentioned that you include a lot of pictures in your blog posts, do, how, how does, or how is, sort of…. How are the pictures incorporated into that process? Do you mostly write and then either take some pictures or go through the pictures that you have and see what you have to include, or do you start with the pictures and then kind of go from there? Or is it kind of a mix of the two?

SG: I would say it’s probably a mix of the two, because it depends on what I’m writing about. If it is a travel post, like we had for the Disney Magic cruise ship, I took a ton of pictures last year. I took pictures of my family, I took pictures of the kids at the character meets. I just, I knew that at some point I’d want to come back and share that, whether it would be on my own blog or on Traveling Mom, or just in general on social media.

You know, sometimes, don’t discount writing on social media, too, because there are a lot of people out there, and that’s another rabbit hole so I won’t go completely into it, but there are a lot of people out there who are successful via Instagram and Facebook, and they write very long posts about all kinds of different topics that people will read, and usually it has an accompanying picture with it, because pictures, visual media does a lot better than just written media. Especially with the millennial set, which, I’m one of those, I’m an older millennial ((laughs)). Um. But it does, when I’m reading something, if there’s a pretty picture to go with, with the story that I’m reading, you know, that’s always a good thing.

So, that, I already knew when I was on, when we were on our vacation. I’m going to write about this when I get home, so I’m going to make sure to take a lot of pictures. And you know, I, I mean, I took pictures of everything, so I have a ton of stuff that I don’t, I haven’t used yet, but you know, I just go through and kind of see, okay, well, this particular paragraph, I was talking about all the dining options on the cruise ship, so let me add a picture of one of the dining areas, so. I’ll add that in there.

Now. If it is for a project, like a DIY, which I don’t do a ton of that, but every now and then my kids are like, “Let’s make slime!” And I’m like, “Oh, all right, I guess we will.” ((laughs)) Um, and then I think, well, slime is really hot right now on Pinterest. Like, everybody’s making it, and taking really pretty pictures and posting their recipes and whatnot. Or I guess not recipes, I guess how-tos. Cause you don’t want to eat that stuff. But. ((laughs))

Dr. C: ((laughs))

SG: So, I’m like, well, I guess I should take pictures of this, so I can write about it later, and so sometimes, I will take pictures of things and I will write based on the pictures that I have. Whereas a lot of times, a traveling post, I will write the travel post first, and then I will go back and look through my pictures and see what I have that will fit within my post. Does that make sense?

Dr. C: OH, yeah, it makes perfect sense. Very cool.

SG: Okay. ((laughs))
Dr. C: Do you have a memorable writing project, uh, that you can tell us about, in either a good or a bad direction. Either one that you’re really really proud of or one that was super frustrating and you really kind of hated working on.

SG: Well, when I first started doing sponsored posts, that was an interesting thing. I got real excited because I had met a couple of friends online and then met them in person, and they were like, “Yeah, you can, did you know you can make money writing?” Because I was like, “Oh, I have a blog!” And they were like, “Oh, that’s cute! Do you make any money?” And I was like, “Wait, you can make money?”

Dr. C: ((laughs))

SG: I had no idea! I had no idea that people could do this for a living. And they were like, “Yeah, you should join what’s called an influencer network.” There’s a lot of them out there. They were like, “You should join this influencer network. And they’ll hook you up. They’re like the middle man between you and a brand. You know like Target or Starbucks or whatever. Or Baria Pasta. Whatever it is. They’re the middle man in between you and the brand and they can kind of hook you up and help you form a relationship with this brand. And then they’ll pay you to write a post, and it’s called a sponsored post.” And I was like, “Oh okay! Yeah, I’m down for that! Let’s figure all this out.”

So, I get on there, and I apply, they accept me into the influencer network, and I fill out an application for my first sponsored post. And I get it. And I thought I did a really good job on it. And I thought I did a really good job on it. Well, apparently, I wasn’t the only one that was assigned this particular topic; there were a couple of other people who were assigned the topic. So I’m searching the hashtag that they gave us for the campaign on Pinterest. Or, um. On Twitter one day, and I see this other girl is writing about it too, and I click on hers, and she is just…. It was for a Frozen-inspired birthday party. With products from American Greetings that you can get at Walmart. And ((laughs)) she blew it out of the water. She did all sorts of stuff. And I was like, “Uh.”

Dr. C: ((laughs))

SG: “Okayyyyyy. Well.” I just. I had no idea. I just did like. I mean, I will say this, about this project. I was true to myself, and I didn’t spend any more money than I normally would have on this particular project. Because I just don’t believe in spending five or six hundred dollars on a five-year-old’s birthday party. I just don’t.

Dr. C: Wow. ((laughs))

SG: So, yeah. And I don’t know that this girl did that. She may not have. But her pictures. You know, I’m sure the term “Pinterest-worthy” is, is familiar with people. So, this was a very, her party was a very Pinterest-worthy party. And mine was all like, “Oh, how cute. You went to Walmart and got the party supplies.” ((laughs))

Dr. C: Oh, no!

SG: I don’t know! I just had no, I just had no idea. That people put so much time and effort into it, and I thought, “This is why people are successful. And have really big followings on social media and on Pin, and you know, get a lot of traffic from Pinterest.” Anyway. So, fast forward to now, to 2017, and my most recent project that I have done, I wrote a personal post about. Now.
I’ll tell you this. The product was these new Teddy Grahams…. Uh…. They’re not cookies; I don’t know what they were. They were like soft… they were… I don’t’ know what to call them. They were like Twinkies, but they were Teddy Grahams. If that makes any sense. And they were Chocolate filled. ((laughs)) They were like, these little bears. They were shaped like bears, and they had chocolate filling, but they were soft. They weren’t hard. But they were made by Teddy—the people that makes Teddy Grahams. So. Anyway. I wrote this post, and it was real personal, but it was real at the same time. Like, it was sponsored by the Teddy Grahams people, but it was, it was about what I want to teach my girls this year. And it was things like, I want to teach them empathy, and I want to teach them kindness, I want to teach them to be independent and to stand up for themselves. I also want to teach them, and this is where I brought the sponsored part in. I said, I want to teach them to take care of their bodies, which includes a healthy diet but also knowing when it’s okay to indulge in sweet treats like Teddy Grahams soft—soft bears. Or whatever. I can’t even remember what they were called now! ((laughs))

But anyway. You know, so that’s how I like, brought the sponsored element into the post, but also, but the main, I would say, 75% of the post was about, I mean, real things that I want my girls to know. They’re six years old; they’re in first grade. I feel like if I lay a good foundation for them in this time of their life, they’re going to grow up to be good, upstanding individuals ((laughs)). Kind people. Um. But anyways, so. That was something I was super proud of because I had been really struggling over the last couple of years, trying to figure out how to keep an authentic, and this is another thing that’s very important for online media. You want to keep an authentic voice. You don’t want to sound like a commercial. And I didn’t want my post to sound like a commercial for these Teddy Grahams products, but I knew I had to include them because they paid me to, so you have to. ((laughs)) But at the same time, I wanted it to be something where, if somebody read the article, they would still, they would get an idea of who I am as a person, and a mom, and who my kids are, and that it would be authentic. You know. And they would know, okay, well obviously Teddy Grahams sponsored this because now she’s talking about it in the post, but they would understand that like, that there’s that connection between the two. If that makes any sense. So. I’m just proud of how far I have come from the beginning when it was just like, “Here is a way to set up your party. And here is a, here is the garland that I bought from Walmart. And here are the balloons.” You know, it was just very, uh, clinical, I guess, is the best way to say it. There wasn’t a lot of feeling in it.

Dr. C: Yeah, no that makes perfect sense. That’s a really cool… I think that’s really cool for people to hear, too. Because, you know, if someone is just kind of trying to start out, they can kind of say, “Oh, okay, this is sort of where I’m feeling like I’m at now; I’ve just kind of, kind of got to get into a groove and find the sort of method for incorporating these sponsored posts that, that works best for my blog or my project or what have you.” That’s really cool.

SG: Yeah, and I would absolutely encourage people, the biggest thing that you can do for yourself is to not quit, to not give up, to not, um, and don’t delete the bad stuff. Because I could’ve deleted--that post is over two years old now, and I’m only required to keep sponsored content from certain brands only sixty days after it publishes. So, I could’ve deleted it like a year ago. But instead I leave it, and occasionally, whenever it shows up in my Pinterest feed, I’ll click it and go back to that article and read it, and I’m like, “I have come a long way!” ((laughs))

Dr. C: Right!
SG: Since this. So, don’t give up, and don’t get discouraged if your writing or, you know, photography or whatever it is, doesn’t look like other people’s. Don’t compare yourself to other people. But then, also, realize that you can learn from them. You know, I learned a great deal by looking at that girl’s post, like. “Oh! I need to add a personal element to these stories. And I need to do a little bit more than just give people a how-to.” Because that’s not. My blog is not a how-to blog. I’m not a DIY person with step one, step two, step three. I’m a storyteller, I guess. I like to incorporate my personal stories into anything that I write. And I just think that’s real, I think that’s important in writing in general, whether you’re a novelist or a journalist or, you said you’ve interviewed a lawyer. Like, you know, you’ve got to have your voice in whatever you’re writing. And people can tell if it’s you or not. So. Don’t give up! ((laughs))

Dr. C: Right! And storytelling is definitely very important across, across many different types of writing, for sure. That’s a really good insight. So, I have two more questions for you, and both are sort of related to kind of getting into a profession. So, the first thing I want to ask you about that is, how did you get into freelance blogging? Can you tell us a bit more about it? You’ve talked a little bit about it, um, but kind of give us a little bit more history?

SG: Sure! So, anybody can start a blog. That’s number one. Like we’ve talked about, you can get your own Wordpress site. I think Blogspot might still be around, but I would highly recommend you start out on Wordpress. That way if you ever wanted to buy your own domain at some point, and really invest in online writing, you will already be familiar with the Wordpress platform. So, anybody can start a blog. However, not just anybody can freelance write. You usually have to go through application processes. And you kind of have to know some people.

So, I would encourage you to, specifically for blogging, if you want to freelance write for websites, you’re going to want to get out there and meet people in person and online. I am in several groups that are focused on helping other online influencers or entrepreneurs grow and expand. And occasionally, we’ll share tips and advice in those groups, and those have been real invaluable to me in helping me grow as an entrepreneur and a writer in general.

But also, going to conferences, and this is the part where, I don’t—don’t feel like you have to, again, go into debt or anything like that to get started. But if you can afford to go to writing conferences or blogging conferences. Workshops of any kind like that. And actually meet people face to face. You know, online is so important. You really want to, I guess, put your best foot forward online. Because it’s pretty much like your resume. An employer can look at, just about any employer can get on Facebook and look at what you’re doing. And if they don’t like what they see, they’re not going to hire you. But I feel like, too, personally seeing someone, and making that personal, face-to-face connection, that’s never going to go away. I mean, I don’t, I don’t know what’s in store for us technology-wise for the next 50 years, but I feel like still, at the end of the day, like the caveman tools of a pencil and paper, the caveman tools of, you know, going to have coffee with someone, or whatever.

Dr. C: ((laughs))

SG: Just like, meeting people face-to-face and getting your name out there, is just invaluable. Because if something isn’t working right away for you, like if you meet somebody and they’re like, well, we don’t really have any more room for freelancers at this time, but I’ll keep your card. You never know what’s going to come of that. They could pass you on to somebody else and that could turn into a great job opportunity. Or they could keep your card and call you in six months, and say, “Hey, we have an opening. Are you still interested?” So, I definitely think
having a good online presence that you curate to the best of your ability and remain authentic, you don’t want to be fake and pretend you’re something you’re not, but you do want to put your best foot forward there, but you also, I would encourage you to get out there and meet people and just make those connections with people.

You never know if like, your college connection…. I love meeting people, you know, and sharing that I went to Auburn, and they’ll say, “Oh, I went to Auburn, too! When did you graduate?” And then you have, you know, something to reminisce about or to talk about. And so, those are meaningful connections that are going to help you get your gig in the long run.

So that’s how I got to work with both Birmingham Moms Blog and Traveling Mom. I had a friend that was already freelance writing for Traveling Mom, and I said, “Hey, what do I need to do to get with you guys and start writing?” And she was like, “Oh, it’s real easy! Just fill out this application.” I had no idea it was so easy, so I filled out the application, I, one of the editors emailed me back and said, “Hey, why do you want to join?” So, I kind of had to sell myself, you know, what am I going to bring to the table? And then I wrote, I had to write three sample pieces as a guest author before they would bring me on board fully. And, um, but that was good, because then what I knew what to expect. I knew what their rules were, what their expectations were.

And then, Birmingham Moms Blog was a little bit easier. (laughs) They don’t have nearly as strict of rules. Because it’s more personal, but still. I had a friend who lives in Huntsville and she saw that someone was starting a—the Birmingham Moms Blog is part of a network called City Moms Blog that actually, I think started in, I think it started in Minneapolis. I’m not sure. But anyway. Lots of major cities all around the US will have a, like a HoustonMomsBlog.com or AtlantaMomsBlog.com. So, each city kind of has their own resource for parents within, you know, with writers from the town. And um. This, this friend of mine that lives in Huntsville tagged me in something on Facebook, and they were like, “Hey! You’d be a good writer for this!” And I was like, “Hey, thanks!”

Dr. C: (laughs)

SG: You know? So again, it was one of those things where I knew somebody, and they knew what I did already, and they thought I’d be a good fit, and so I applied, and they were like, “Sure! We’d love to have you.” So. Connections. It’s all about connections, I think.

Dr. C: Absolutely. And I think what you said about, um. The face to face. That’s also something that I’m interested in kind of, in my research in writing, is that like, the face to face and the material stuff, like, you know, pen and paper. Those, those things have remained and continue to remain relevant even in this age that often seems really, really digital. So, yeah. I think that’s really, that’s really spot on, what you were saying. Um. And to kind of build on that, are there, is there any sort of other advice for students just starting out, either, you know, specifically related to the writing aspect of it, or kind of, other things like networking and things like that?

SG: That is such a good question. I don’t know if I feel qualified to give that kind of advice, but (laughs).

Dr. C: (laughs)

SG: Just, like I was saying earlier about writing, don’t give up, don’t get discouraged. Um. When you get started. Because. I feel like, writing is, I feel like writing is sort of like, uh, acting. Um, I started out as a theater major in college. And, gosh, that is a rough profession. You know? I
mean, even the George Clooneys of the word got rejected at one point. And that, sometimes that rejection can sting. And like, every now and then, I get rejection in my writing, and it, and it stings. And not just people correcting my grammar. Like people telling me that like, your article was crap. ((laughs)) And I’m like, “Oh, man, like that hurts!”

But you just kind of got to roll with it, you know? Take their feedback, because, if they just say your writing was crap, you’re like, okay, well, can you tell me why? Like, I need something constructive to improve upon. If they just say it’s crap, just move on. ((laughs)) But if they can give you something constructive, you know, just learn from it. Um.

And don’t be afraid to adapt. This is for the people who are a little bit older, who are maybe set in their ways about things, definitely don’t be afraid to adapt. You know. If you want to be relevant, if you want to be current, if you want people to read what you write, don’t be afraid to publish online. Um. Don’t be afraid to put yourself out there and ask for help if you don’t know how Facebook works. ((laughs)) If you don’t know how Twitter works. Uh, you know, ask! It never hurts to ask. Um.

Because in this day and age of social media just really dominating the way people communicate, if you want your writing heard-slash-seen, you’re going to want people on your side who can get your awesome writing out there. So, don’t give up, don’t be afraid to ask for help. Um.

And stay true to yourself. I know, I feel like I’m a broken record saying that, because I’ve said the word “authentic” so much. ((laughs)) in this interview, but I think being authentic is really important because there are a lot of voices out there. There are a lot of blogs. If you turn ar—if you turn around, you know somebody that has one. But if you want to know somebody who has a successful one, look at the kinds of things they write about, look at the kinds of projects they undertake. Look how they are on Facebook, on Twitter, on Pinterest, Instagram, and on their blog. If it’s a consistent message all the way across, then they are staying authentic and true to themselves, and they are not quote-unquote “selling out” just for pay.

But if you see, you know, if they claim to be a green blogger and they are really caring about the earth, but then they are writing about, you know, Exxon Mobile or whatever on their blog, you know, then, there’s a disconnect there. And it’s hard for people to believe you. They’re like, well, which one are you? Are you somebody that supports this or are you somebody that supports that? So. And it’s, it’s really okay. Like, if you wanna support Exxon Mobile, then just support it all the way, or if you’re going to be green, just be green all the way. Because there are going to people who are going to disagree with you ((laughs)) and give you feedback like, “You’re crap.” ((laughs)) But if you’re authentic then you just know that, you’re like, but this is what I believe, and this is what I’m putting out there, and I’m going to stand by what I wrote, so. Authenticity is important.

Dr. C: Awesome! No, I think that’s a really, a really good, you know, thing to hear. Because. It can be—especially when you are doing writing, because it can be, you know, when someone tells you your writing is crap ((laughing)), it’s, like you said, it does really, that hits a nerve, and if you can, if there is something of substance through the “oh this is crap,” you know, if there’s something of substance there, then there’s an opportunity to learn. You know. And being able to shake off the, you know, the unnecessarily harsh phrasing, you know—

SG: The haters. ((laughs))
Dr. C: ((laughs)) Right! Being able to—

SG: As it were.

Dr. C: Exactly. Asking the haters to just step aside, but. Being able to take anything that does seem to have some substance to it from them and learn from that. That is a good skill to have, and it is not always easy to do. Especially if you’re just starting out.

SG: I wish I could go back and tell my twenty-year-old self, like, “Hey, it’ll be okay, criticism sucks, but you, you’re not gonna die.” ((laughs))

Dr. C: ((laughs)) Right! It will help you grow! Exactly.

SG: Yeah.

Dr. C: Exactly. Well, thank you very much for being on the show with us today, Sarah! I, this has been a really, really great conversation. I really appreciate it.

SG: Well, you’re welcome. Thank you so much for having me.

[End of interview.]

Dr. C: And that’s it for part two of my interview with Sarah Gilliland. 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 show notes 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.