Transcript: Episode 9: Getting into 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]

Today we're back with Cliff McCollum, managing editor at Gulf Coast Media. If you haven't listened to the first part of my interview with Cliff, be sure to check it out! This week, Cliff talks about getting into journalism, and we discuss the pros and cons of having an online portfolio of work versus a print portfolio of work. So let's get to it! Let's talk about writing.

[Begin interview.]

Dr. C: So, gonna switch gears now a little bit and talk about, um, sort of breaking into the field, because a lot of the folks I'm hoping this podcast will reach are students and trying to get into their different fields and trying to paint a picture for them, both of what writing looks like in a given job, and then also how to get into that job, partly just in general and partly through writing. So my question is, how did you get your current gig?

CM: I failed upward.

Dr. C: ((laughs)) Go on….

CM: ((laughing)) Well, um, you know, I got my undergraduate degree in English Literature. Pretty much, even though Auburn doesn't offer it, British Literature, because every class I took was like, with the Big Three, Bertolet, Backscheider, or Wehrs¹. So, you know, I narrowly confined myself in that. I went back to do the master's in English Education. Taught for a little while and then realized it bored me to tears. I just, I couldn't do that. But I had worked at the Auburn Plainsman, Auburn's student newspaper throughout my college career. Thoroughly enjoyed it, loved every minute of it. Maybe not the Doyle editorship in my junior year where I was in exile for a little while, but other than that, completely delightful. Even in grad school I went back and did that some. They asked me to come back as Opinions Editor because, there was a guy who wanted it who would've torn the staff apart, and Lindsay was like, “I can't give it to him, like, we need somebody who's older and has wisdom,” and I'm like, “And you asked them and they said no so you came to me."

Dr. C: ((laughs))

CM: So, you know, we had that going on. And right around the time I was still in grad school and just kind of thinking about stuff, the Opelika Observer formed. It was a weekly newspaper in my

¹ Three professors at Auburn University specializing in different aspects of British Literature.
hometown formed by a bunch of owners who thought that the daily paper there, the Opelika-Auburn News, really wasn’t reporting on Opelika in a fair and balanced way. Like, any time you saw Opelika in that paper, and it’s still kind of that way sometimes, you know, it’s like, oh, a murder in Opelika, or, you know, somebody got stabbed or, it was just all negative stuff, and then it was like, oh, you know, here’s a picture of a kid and a kitten from Auburn. You know, like.

Dr. C: Uh-huh.

CM: If some of your students watch Parks and Recreation, it’s a lot like Pawnee and Eagleton. So that paper was starting, they needed writers at the time, my friend Tess Hollis, that I’d served at the plainsman with was the first assistant editor there, Jason Hill was the editor there, he was a dear friend, he actually works at the Auburn Library now. Um. But you know, they brought me on board as a stringer, just covering stories as they needed them. I did a column about how Opelika desperately needed a Krispy Kreme, which, you know, thankfully, okay, well, technically it’s in Auburn, but they have one now.

Dr. C: ((laughs))

CM: I like to think we started that movement.

Dr. C: Right, right.

CM: It kind of grew from there. They needed somebody there more full time, and it was kind of when I was transitioning out of wanting to do the teaching thing, so I became the news editor there. Worked really hard at that. And then, at the beginning of 2014, you know, it was a great paper, a good scrappy little paper, but we never sold a whole lot of ads, so at the beginning of ’14, they sat us down and told us, “You might need to start looking for another gig. You know, we’re not sure if we’re going to be able to keep this open through this year.” Now, of course, they have been able to keep it open; it’s still open right now. In fact, they just sold to some new owners that are going to change some stuff there, and they’ve won some Press Association awards. You know, I’m really proud of the kids and what they’ve been able to do. But so I started looking, and a dear friend of mine down here, Jill Gentry, who again, I worked with at the Plainsman. There was a managing editor position opening here; I was kind of looking to make a change. That was three years ago, April, and, best decision I ever made in my life. Hands down.

Dr. C: Awesome. So, do you have any advice for students just starting out in the workplace, either writing-related or otherwise?

CM: Get out there and just experience different things. Get out of your comfort zone and do stuff. You know, I had never really done any kind of, like, newspaper writing or anything like that when I started working at the Plainsman. I started doing it because, um, you may remember Amy Jones—

Dr. C: Mm-hmm!

CM: Amy, I met her at college, we had several classes together in the Honors College. And she was on staff at the Plainsman and she does, “You’re going to come write for us.” And I’m like…

Dr. C: ((laughs)) Okay.

CM: Nah, I don't really… And she goes, “No, you’re coming.”
CM: Okay, cool. And, you know, because Amy dragged me to the Plainsman that one Wednesday night and made me write a story, it kind of all started from there. So I mean, you know, never, just don't say no to stuff, you know, open yourself up to new experiences. You never know what you're going to find. In terms of writing. The best thing you can do is just work at it every day. It's one of those thing, you're, the only way you get better is by continuing to do it over and over and over again. And, you know, I still constantly make mistakes, I… one was, it was like a year or two ago when I was Onlooker Editor, they had dedicated a new clocktower in downtown Foley. A big deal. A huge deal. I mean, it was celebrating the town's centennial, everybody was so excited, they were like, “Oh, we want this in the paper, we want to be able to cut it out and put it in our scrapbooks.” And they will, but for a completely different reason because I left the L out of “clocktower.”

Dr. C: ((gasps)) Oh no! ((laughs))

CM: So, kids, there are certain words that you always want to make sure you copyedit. “Clock” is certainly one of them—

Dr. C: Is high on the list.

CM: Also, “public meetings.” Never leave the L out of “public meetings.” It will completely--

Dr. C: Ls are crucial in many words!

CM: ((laughs)) Today’s message, kids, is brought to you by the letter L. Because so many times in my journalistic career, that particular letter has been very problematic.

Dr. C: Oh, no! ((laughs))

CM: When you talk about them holding a “pubic meeting” at City Hall, people get very angry very—

Dr. C: People ask some questions, I'm sure. ((laughs)) Oh, no. What happened with the ((coughs)) clocktower story?

CM: One of the former mayors of Foley, who has become a very dear friend, our probate judge, Tim Russell. Who is genuinely the nicest person in the world, like, I think Mr. Rodgers died so all that nice had to go somewhere, so it went to Tim Russell. And Tim goes, “Now, Cliff, I know you didn’t do it on purpose. And mistakes happen. And Sandy and I actually thought it was funny once we calmed down.”

Dr. C: Right.

CM: “But, um, you do realize that you put ‘cock tower’ on the front page of the newspaper,” and I’m like, “Yes, sir.” And he goes, “So you’re going to fix this, right?” I’m like, “Yeah, we’re going to re-run it next week and have it be normal.” He goes, “Well that’s all we needed. Mistakes happen, buddy, it’s okay.” And he goes, “And, to be completely honest, Sandy said she was going to clip it out and if Jay Leno ever comes back on TV, she knows he’s gonna use it.”

Dr. C: Perfect. So, you know, proofread, everyone.
CM: Always proofread, kids. Get other people—I think what it is, I did, actually, that day. My photo editor looked at it too, and it’s one of those things, as you’re reading words, unless you’re reading very carefully, or—let me give you this advice, when you’re copyediting yourself, read out loud. Because if you’re doing that, it’ll force you to see things like, oh I left the L out of this very important word.

Dr. C: This very important word. Absolutley. That was, that’s a thing that even my advisor told me about when I was writing my dissertation. Read it out loud. And, uh, read it backwards. So, start from the very last paragraph, and read the last sentence of the last paragraph, and then go to the next to last sentence, and then so on and so forth. Because that way you’re not just glasing your eyes over a thing you’ve read like a million times, because that’s how you miss those kind of things, you know what it says, you don’t actually have to read it, so your brain can kind of tune out, even though you know you’re not supposed to, it just happens sometimes. So, but like those kinds of strategies can help slow you down a little bit.

CM: Definitely, definitely. And again, prevent horrible mistakes that could be problematic for you in advancing your career.

Dr. C: Exactly. So thinking about, in terms of when you were getting into these jobs, what kinds of writing or what kind of documentation did you have to provide to the people who were looking to hire you?

CM: Um, well you know obviously you’ve got to have a good resume put together. Some very good references, which, you know, thankfully, working at the Plainsman, Ed Williams, the advisor there was well-known, I mean, the guy literally wrote the book on the history of the press in the state of Alabama, so, you know, people know who he is. Um. Gotta have some sort of portfolio. For me, you know, I had done a number of articles for the Plainsman, I was with Intrigue, so I had several of those I was pretty proud of. With my columns and stuff, I obviously had a pretty good roster of those. So, um. Just kind of putting together a portfolio of the types of writing that you have been able to do throughout your career is certainly very beneficial. I think I even, when I applied down here, included a link to the blog that I did back home, just to kind of show like, some other writing styles that I was into. And Sudie was, the publisher at the time, was actually very impressed by that. So.

Dr. C: Cool. Was all of that, um, sort of, how did you present that to them? Did you, do you have like a website, or did you just have, mostly, send it in an email with some attachments, or a physical binder, what kind of, how did you present that to people?

CM: Uh. When I first applied for the job down here, I sent the resume through email, just attached in an email. And said, you know, I could present my portfolio upon request, either electronically or in person, and Sudie called me, and she was like, “Well, you know, why don’t you just come down here and interview, and just bring it with you.” So I had printed off copies and stuff like that, and then on the last page, it has some links to the stuff, and I’m like, “I can email this to you if you need me to, if that makes it easier for you.” And, you know, she started clicking on stuff while I was there, the, my predecessor William was like, “Oh, I’ve already Googled you, and found this, and what’s this crap about Christmas trees at Auburn University,” and I’m just like, “oh, Jesus.” And maybe that’s another thing, too. Is, be mindful of your web presence, especially in today’s day and age, what you’re putting out on social media. And I realize I’m maybe not the best person to say this, because you are friends with me on social
media, you know, sometimes I tend to say out there crazy things sometimes, but mostly it’s just like, “Here’s this crazy thing that happened today.”

Dr. C: Mm-hmm.

CM: But you know, you really do have to be aware of what you’re putting out there, and maybe if you’re having fun at like a party or something like that, like as fun as it is to take photos with friends, you know, like, keep that on your phone. And maybe not post that on social media. Because employers are going to look at that stuff out there. And you know, I know for a fact our company has not hired people because we’ve looked at their social media presence and seen, okay, well, maybe they’re doing some stuff that we’re not necessarily going to want to associate with our brand. Or, you know, they have some tweets that are not even borderline racist, just like, straight up racist, and that’s just not something that, you know, we really want to tolerate here. So, just be careful with what you’re putting out there.

Dr. C: Right, and it’s, you know, both in terms of what you, what you choose to share, and/or in combination with, how you, how you adjust your privacy settings and who you let into your social networks, you know, thinking carefully about those things.

CM: Well, and no, I think I’ve got so many layers of privacy on my social media, like, you know, people like you, that I’ve known for ages, you know, that’s fine, but like, my mother can only maybe see a quarter of things I post on social media, my boss can only see maybe a tenth of the things that I post. Like, there are layers that you can construct there, but you know, you really have to trust the people that you let into certain layers there.

Dr. C: Absolutely. Thinking about your audience all the time. Do you have any thoughts for students about, in terms of job application materials? Any recommendations or advice regarding those materials?

CM: These days, everything’s done a lot more electronically. I know the last few people we’ve actually hired, everything was emailed to me. So, um. Make sure you’re proficient in that, or honestly, even building your own website. You know, we went through that some in college, and I think it’s highly beneficial to be able to put that together and do that in that fashion. I think it looks very professional to be able to do that. In journalism, you know, the places that you’re working for will have websites, so to be able to include links to those, you know, obviously makes you look more credible than just, um. You know, throwing stuff up on your own, or just sending them word documents. Um. But I’m also still really a fan of like the paper portfolio. Like, I still have clippings that I keep in a notebook. Which I realize at this point is really old school, but. And it’s something that I think is beneficial just to have on hand to be able to give them something physical to flip through, but b.) you know, for posterity’s sake.

Dr. C: Yeah, and in terms of, you know when you’re actually sitting in a job interview, the way that, an electronic portfolio is used and can be used is very different from that physical portfolio. You know, depending on what technologies the office or conference room that you’re sitting in, you might not necessarily be able to pull up an electronic portfolio in the way you can, you know, “Hello, here is my, here is my binder. Let’s flip through it together and point to things, and you know.” So it’s just a matter of, um, you know, sort of, affordances, and what one medium can do that the other one can’t. That doesn’t necessarily make one superior over the other, it’s how you use them and, in what situations they’re good for. So. Yeah, no, I like that.
CM: It’s a little bit, it’s a mix of old school and new school. Um.

Dr. C: Right.

CM: Because this is, this is an industry that’s like rapidly changing. You know, we’re still a print product, but more and more it’s trending toward online, so you, you kind of have to have a little bit of both worlds in order to really make things fit.

Dr. C: Absolutely, absolutely. Um. So my last question is, just, is there anything else you’d like to add about writing in your workplace?

CM: Well, obviously, it’s the center of everything that we do. I don’t think, there are few professions like ours where writing is just, it’s absolutely essential. If you can’t write, you really can’t do this job. With this profession it’s absolutely essential. And I’ve always enjoyed writing, it’s just, you know, it came somewhat natural to me, you know, I’ve had to learn to modify my style a little bit, based on AP style, and the way that we construct things, but to get to do something I enjoy every single day. Now, don’t get me wrong, sometimes it can be incredibly frustrating, but to get to see somebody like, sitting on a park bench, outside of like Jewelwinds, on a Wednesday morning, like reading my story, or my favorite thing is, you know, like you’re out somewhere, and you hear people like talking about your story, and you’re like, “What do you think of it?” And you know, they give you their honest opinion, or, my favorite is when they’re, “I freaking hate that McCollum guy! He’s awful.” And I’m like, “Oh, let me tell you some stories.” You know, to me, love and hate are both equal. They really are. If somebody reads what I’ve written and they love it, that’s awesome. If they hate it, that is also awesome. Because something I’ve written has driven them to a point of like, anger or rage.

Dr. C: All right. Well, it has been an absolute delight to talk to you, Cliff. Thank you very much for being on the show!

CM: No, they, thank you for having me, and I hope your students enjoy it as much as I’ve enjoyed getting to talk to you.

Dr. C: I think they will.

[End of interview.]

Dr. C: And that’s it for the second part of my interview with Cliff McCollum. Thanks 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/writingatwork. For shonotes 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.