



[Welcome to the Writers' Rough Draft Podcast, where I climb behind the glamorous book launch world of successful writers and entrepreneurs, and into the mind of folks like you who are just getting their start. Equal parts witty writing information and unabashed content curiosity—with a healthy dose of laughter thrown in—my conversations with these pros shares some of the trials, tips, and techniques that others have used to help you build your writing and content, and establish you as a leader in your field.]

[I'm your host, Elisa Doucette, and I'm here to talk about all of that, and have some fun. You can find the links, resources, and transcript on my website at elisadoucette.com/episode1.]

In this first episode, I wanted to talk a little bit about why I wanted to start this podcast, and what business a writer has getting on any sort of microphone, talking instead of just hiding behind her computer keyboard, which is my much more comfortable space.

The most frequent question I get from readers and clients—hands down—has always been, “How did you do it?” For a long while, I kind of assumed that they were delivering some sort of backhanded compliment—how did someone like me ever manage to create any sort of career writing for themselves and clients?

I saw a GIF once from some sort of “housewives of some city or county” show, and one of the girls is just looking at the other person and throwing her hands up in the air and screaming, “I had to sleep with like a million people!”

And that’s kind of how I felt and how I wanted to answer these people who were saying these back to me. But after I managed to kind of get over my own ego and pride, I decided to start asking a better question in response. In fact, it's kind of become one of my favorite questions or responses to people who ask me things that are maybe a little bit too personal or too invasive, or I just feel like whatever answer I'm going to give is going to be the wrong one.

So when people would ask me, “How did you do it?” I’d say, “Why do you wanna know?”

Often, we don’t find answers when we go seeking the perfect one, but we learn more when we ask better questions. I started out my entire writing career as a completely bookish geek when I was in high school. And even before that, my parents liked to joke that I was reading Golden Books by the time I was three years old, and got my first chapter book when I was five. Needless to say, I didn’t have a lot of fun friends growing up. My friends were in the books that I read and the stories that I wrote.

When I got to high school, I actually used to keep a journal beside my bed. Not like the cute, adorable, young, teen girl Lisa Frank type journals; I kept a journal which I would write down any words from the books I was reading that I either didn’t know, or that I thought were really cool words. And I would take it a step further and actually go to the dictionary and research the entire etymology of the word. So I’d learn what the root word was, what language it came from, when it started being used—all that kind of stuff. And I had this book of over five hundred words by the time I was a junior in high school.



Needless to say, the brilliant thing to do with that sort of background was to pursue an extremely creative degree when I got to university. I started as a music major, focusing on vocal performance and music education. I learned really fast that coincidentally, you really have to be super competitive and talented in those fields. And I barely did well at the high school level. I was probably one of the most—I wouldn't say loathed—but disliked members of my chamber choir. And at the university, it just wasn't getting much better. I have said before that in high school, I wasn't even cool enough to hang out with the band geeks—and I was totally a band and chorus geek.

Realizing that, I decided that I should get a much more useful degree. I was going to the University of Maine, which is Stephen King's alma mater, and I kind of went back to this love of words and language, and reading and writing, and learning that I had, and eventually landed on a dual major in English Creative Writing and Classical Studies with a concentration in Latin history and language. So I basically majored in a language that people don't speak anymore—super useful.

After I got out of school, I decided to put that degree to really good use. And I got a job in an insurance claims office. Eventually, I moved out of the claims office when I got laid off and into an insurance agency, where I kind of worked at the front desk, licking envelopes and being the receptionist. I kind of quickly learned that in an insurance agency, the way people make money there is becoming sales agents and selling, and making commissions, and making those commissions selling the big-ticket items.

I have very quickly started learning everything I could about how to have sales conversations with people about life insurance. Life insurance was the highest commissioned product in my office, which was kind of interesting because I was basically a 24-year old telling all of these much older, much more established, much more responsible people that they needed to go and buy life insurance. And I was an extremely awkward, internal, introverted, shy person who's spent her entire life buried in books.

So, it took me a while to kind of come out of that shell, and really come in to my own. But eventually, I got to a point where I was a pretty sought-after sales agent and made some serious commissions. Eventually got promoted into our state's field management office; started as a secretary there. I walked in to my boss' office on the first day after applying for a sales manager job and being offered the secretary job and said, "Within the year, I'm going to be a sales manager." And he kind of laughed. He was like, "Okay."

Eleven months later at our annual meeting, he announced that I was being promoted to be the field specialist in the office for life insurance sales, also working on sales and marketing, online marketing, and tap training. I did that for a few years, and was really starting to miss writing. I kind of did it on the side; I wrote articles here and there for local newspapers and businesses. I, like any good writer, had at least seventeen unfinished books, novels, short stories hidden away in various places, and decided that I really wanted to start focusing on it again, but not in any way serious.

It was the late 2000s, and I did what every brilliant person with a story to tell in the internet was doing—I started a blog. And I looked back at some of the posts that I wrote when I was starting, and I've actually



deleted a lot of them. For the good of the internet, I have chosen to take those words and those posts down. I think there's far too much drivel running around online; I don't need to be adding to it.

But I started writing these posts. And at first, they just started being kind of ramblings and musings on different parts of my life, and different business stuff and life lessons and what not. Very quickly, I ended up getting involved with the site Brazen Careerist as they were just starting out. And they really wanted to start getting a lot of content. They've reached out to various bloggers and said, "Would you please put your RSS on our site, so that we can syndicate your content on our site?" And not knowing anything about how online worked, how RSS worked, how any of it worked; I was working sixty, seventy hours a week at my sales and management job, I was just doing this blogging thing on the side for fun. So I was like, "Sure, you can have my RSS. Go ahead."

And very quickly, I started featuring stories that I was writing, and people really started liking them. They were commenting on the site; they were starting to follow me on my own personal site; they were signing up for my newsletter; they were following me on Twitter. It was a whole new world. And I was fortunate enough to recognize that there was an opportunity there. And I started really focusing in my "spare time" on my site and this writing pursuit, and basically would work my sixty- or seventy-hour weeks at the office, and then come home and write at night. I'd wake up at five or six in the morning and write in the morning. I'd spend time responding to comments; interacting with people on various social media channels; getting on Skype with people; doing anything I could to really understand my audience more, understand my peers more, and continue building and learning and growing my writing.

And then in 2010, I got a killer offer. I climbed these ranks or rungs, and they kind of gave the barman's response of, "You don't have to go home, but you can't stay here." I didn't have to necessarily leave the company, but they really didn't feel that I could be in this very low, fairly minimal management position anymore. They wanted me to either get into the corporate side of things and really start pursuing my career there, or start looking into opening my own sales agency—both would have been exceptional opportunities.

And I'm one of those really random people that you don't meet very often anymore—I loved my job. I enjoy the people that I worked with. I enjoyed helping my sales agents and building my businesses. I thrived on sales conversations and strategy, and marketing. It was great. And I would have been happy for the rest of my life working for that company and continuing to build that world.

But there was a piece of me that felt like I would somehow be happier doing something else—and that something else was writing. So I knew that if I took either of those opportunities, that was making a pretty definitive statement in regards to my career. And I'd obviously have to start focusing on them, even more than I already was.

So I made a very difficult decision about midway through the year, and decided that I could either continue working on this writing—continue building it, and leave the company on good terms, because burning bridges leaves you on the other side of a big, scary river with crocodiles—or I could take the jobs in kind of one of the pads, and pursue those.



I decided to go with writing. At that point in time, I had a couple online, syndicated columns. I was writing a dating and relationship advice column for Maine's largest newspaper site. By the way, the idea of me giving dating advice to anyone is one of the most laughable things ever. My column was much more of a twelve-month exercise in all of the crazy stories and experiences I had with dating, including breaking out in hives on dates, which, let me tell you—nothing's sexier than itchy, blotchy skin on a second date.

So I have that column, and I also had gotten a column on forbes.com when they built their contributor platform. And I got on with their Forbes Women Channel, writing about Shattering Glass; basically the notion that the glass ceiling was at the point that we needed to break through the perceived notions and limitations that we have, including things like a glass ceiling. It's glass; it can be broken, but it's definitely going to be a process.

So, I decided to start writing more full time. I kind of became a freelance writer; started taking on a ton of clients, doing marketing and sales strategy for them; writing content, writing copy. And also got in with the old content mill sites, and doing a lot of very small kind of "how to" listical type articles.

I did that for about six months. And after about six months, I distinctively remember the day that I had the realization. I was sitting in my home office at my desk, and I stared at the computer screen and thought, "If I ever have to write another article on how to fix your own piano damper pedal, I would rather get a job slinging coffee at Starbucks than ever have to do this."

Unfortunately, I didn't make the best business decision at that point. I just stopped writing those articles, kind of hoping that I would get to do more of the work I wanted to, but not really marketing it, and not really setting up a clear sales funnel for myself; not really soliciting any new clients; instead, just kind of hoping that money would come. Which anyone who is any sort of entrepreneur knows is just about the side of a fool's errand. And I definitely hit a very, very low bottom in my business.

But I managed to pull myself out of it. I went back in a lot of these sales agencies very pitifully at that time; started pitching all of them on taking me on as a sales and marketing consultant, working in their offices on commissions—just starting to sell stuff again, do training with their staff, and help them with marketing. A couple of people were great and picked me up, which was so necessary, and welcome, and needed, and made me happy. And I started getting back into focusing on putting out more of my own writing and my own content, because that's what I told everyone they needed to do to build their businesses. So, it was kind of the time I started drinking my own Kool-Aid again.

In the summer of 2011, I interviewed a mutual acquaintance. I kind of knew him from social media, for an article that I was doing on my Forbes column about location-independent entrepreneurship. The person I interviewed was Dan Andrews from Tropical MBA. And what was supposed to be a twenty-minute interview to get a couple of bites for the article ended up being merely a two-hour conversation about life on the road and entrepreneurship, and his business model, and his vision for the future.

And I really found that I respected a lot of what he was doing, and I immediately signed up for his online dynamite circle of community; started offering any content advice that I could there, and started really



beginning to look into this idea of working and living anywhere. I had already decided earlier that year I was going to have to move out of my community in Portland, Maine to get to a place that kind of had a little bit more of network scene for this online content marketing. So I was looking at like, San Francisco, New York, Portland, Austin, San Diego—the usual offenders.

A month after my call with Dan, they posted a job ad on their site looking for a content writer to come in and basically create a slew of content for them, to build their publishing business. I kind of went back and forth, back and forth, because I really believed in them; really believed in their company. And I really wanted to be a part of it, but I had already decided earlier that year I was not going to write crappy how-to listical articles just to get traffic. I didn't think it was really a sound content marketing method. I didn't think it did anything to establish anyone's authority or credibility; all it did was get people onto your site who quickly bounced off, or who unsubscribed from your newsletter as soon as you started talking to them about actual issues, actual marketing, and actual things.

So I wrote back to them and basically crafted a twelve- to fifteen-page proposal after spending about a ton of hours researching everything about their site, their company, their competitors, their brand—everything—and explained that what they were looking for if they wanted to build their authority, and build their voice, and build their vision wasn't going to be a person to write a ton of content. What they needed was what exists in the publishing world—and that's a Managing Editor. They needed someone to get down in the trenches and do the day-to-day to manage the team; to make sure the content is going out; to help make sure the vision is aligned and branded; to be the work horse, so that they could be the visionaries; so that I could help them get their message out to the world.

And they are crazy, and out of about fifty applicants, took me on as a contractor—however you wanna call it. I started a professional working partnership with them. And part of the compensation for that was this little thing: I was offered a room at their villa in Bali to make up for a little bit of a lower income—but basically having room and board covered in a villa in Bali. And in my mind, being a 31-year-old girl from Maine who didn't even have a passport, moving to San Francisco was already this crazy, foreign concept that I had to kind of resolve myself to. So somehow in my mind, Bali was just a step further. It's just like, just across an ocean.

I worked with Dan and Ian for two and a half great years as their Managing Editor. They taught me a ton. I continued doing a ton. I really refined a lot of this content strategy, and envisioned kind of skills and marketing for running an entire business, and was able to keep my own business going on the side as well.

So I continued working with content clients. I have people that have been my clients since 2009, when I got started. (Hello to the clients out there. Love you all. Thank you for continuing to pay me.) And I also started picking up a lot of new clients; working with them on things like content management and editing, and proofreading, and really making sure that their branding and their messages about their content were what they wanted and what they needed to position themselves as authorities and leaders in their field, and really take themselves to the next level.



Which brings me back to this whole concept of the better question: people ask me how I did it. And when I ask, “Why do you wanna know?” that’s when they started telling me what the problem was. They said that they wanted to write about these things that mattered to them; the kind of stories that they observe in their businesses, and in their day-to-day lives; and things that they knew would change industries that they were working in. They wanted to know how to write well. Not just create these listical hosts that got a ton of shares and a ton of traffic, but write this evergreen content that people would come back to year after year, and that would continue attracting new people to them. Not just how to properly dot there i’s and cross their t’s, but how to write this coveted, compelling content, that people would wanna read, and people would want to share.

So at this point, I now had about twelve to fifteen years of professional writing experience, and a lifetime of love of language and writing and reading and all that. So, I tried to answer with all this brilliant wit and wisdom that I had. And it didn’t help them. I couldn’t figure out what it was that I was missing, because what I do is not rocket science. I figure out what your business is. I figure out what's important to you and your business. I figure out who your competitors are; who your idols are in the industry; what you wanna say; and how you wanna say it. And then I either create the words or I can help you find the words to do that. So figure out your business; climb inside your customer’s minds; write brilliant stuff—not rocket science.

I was reading an article about Stephen King’s book on writing, when something kind of finally stuck out to me. The article writer talked about how Stephen King wrote two-thousand words a day without fail. And I remember sitting there and thinking as I was reading the article, “Of course he’s gotten that routine and dedication—he’s been at this for, like, fifty years!” No one talks about what his writing routine was like when he was twenty-two years old. No one talks about how hard it was when he was just getting started.

And that’s finally when I had the kind of light bulb go off in my head. People couldn’t understand how writers magically make it happen, and why we as writers can’t really explain it once we’ve gotten to a point that we’ve reached some modicum of success, where people actually want to know what our opinion are. We all keep on searching for this answer of, “How did you do it?” when the better question we should be asking is, “How did you get started?”

I can’t teach my clients, and I can’t teach people who ask me. And I can’t help anyone by trying to start them at step ten, when they really need to be starting at step one to three, depending on how much work they’ve done up until this point. We keep looking to the end, but what we need to be looking at is at people’s beginnings.

That's why I decided to start this podcast. I can only tell people about my own beginnings, and my own procedures, and my own existence and writing life on my sites. And obviously, I'm only one person; my personality, my thought process, my business strategy only work for certain people. There's a whole big, bad world out there, with lots of people and lots of ideas in it.



So I kind of figured, if I'm able to talk to lots of writers about their beginnings and their processes, there just might be some kind of trials they have gone through, some tips, and some techniques that work perfectly for them, and would help other people finally get their start.

Basically, I kind of learned people write rough drafts all the time—writers publish finished, quality work.

So, I hope you enjoy this podcast. And I hope it becomes something that's evergreen for you; that you can continue coming back to, to build and learn and grow your own writing and content life.

[You can find this episode's notes and resources at <http://www.elisadoucette.com/episode1>, and the Writer's Rough Drafts full archive at elisadoucette.com/podcast. If you wanna talk more writing with me, or just say hi, you can always catch me on Twitter at @elisadoucette. This show was produced and published by my outstanding content management team over at WritingBusinessWell.com.

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OUTTAKE:

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