



[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 with Sarah Peck today. You can find the links, resources, and transcript of our chat on my website at ElisaDoucette.com/episode10.]

Elisa: Sarah Peck is a writer, storyteller, and a designer with a background in communications and publishing for various urban landscaping businesses. In other words, she works to share narratives about how to make concrete jungles beautiful. She's able to transition that ability to perfectly pinpoint the important things we should take from our worlds and apply to our writing and businesses.

Her popular courses on writing and content strategy for thought leaders are a massive draw to her website, ItStartsWith.com, which is filled with such profound personal essays, you'll be stuck there for hours. She has also appeared on stages around the world, and facilitates storytelling and writing workshops to help people find their own unique stories.

A woman to never shy away from a good challenge, she raised over \$29,000 for Charity Water on her 29th birthday by pledging to and then actually swimming naked to Alcatraz at the end of October—brave woman right there.

Thank you so much for taking the time to chat with me today, Sarah. Is there anything I missed out?

Sarah: Wow. No, thank you so much for having me. And what a beautiful introduction. You thought up a whole new story that I've never heard before. I love it!

Elisa: Well, I didn't tell any story that isn't absolutely filled with the accomplishments of what you've done. And of course, since you and I have known each other for so many years, I probably have some backstories that I was able to weave in a little bit.

Sarah: It's true. And then all the stories that you didn't tell which—

Elisa: Yeah. You're welcome, by the way.

Sarah: Thank you.

Elisa: So going back into that background, and kind of digging back to the very beginning, how did you get started in writing?

Sarah: You know, it's such an interesting question. And there's a couple of points in my life that we can talk about that I think are relevant. The first being age four, I learned how to read books very quickly. I took books off the shelves all the time. I wandered around the house, and I used to tape paper to my face. I don't know why, but I did. And then I would take books, and to learn how to write, I would copy the words from one book on to the paper that I folded up and mashed up myself. And then I would go to my mother and I would go like, "Look, mom, I wrote a book!" And she was like, "How do I tell my five-



year-old child that this is actually plagiarism? I don't know how to have this conversation with her." So I learned at a young age that I really wanted to make things and make books and write.

Then fast-forward ten years later, and the life of I think 90%, if not 100%, of high school females—and just high schoolers in general—like filled with angst, filled with emotional worry. I was so scared of everything. And I think it's a time in your life when you have all these hormones and everything is kind of overwhelming. I had so much emotional energy and physical energy inside of me. Writing and movement were the ways that I just made it through those years. I needed some sort of "release valve" to figure out what it was that I was thinking. Figure out why I was unhappy and why was a moody, emotional teenager. And so I really started a journaling practice. It's kind of embarrassing to go back and look at all those diary entries like, "Dear diary, everybody hates me."

Elisa: Absolutely. The Lisa Frank unicorn just jumps out at you, and you're like, "Why?"

Sarah: Exactly. You're like, "Oh, my god. I was doing bubble letters with hearts on the i's."

Elisa: So you still don't do that?

Sarah: I think now that I'm on my 30's, I've moved beyond that. It's a new decade.

Elisa: What did you end up finding in those journals?

Sarah: Well, you know, people say writing comes so easily to me. And I think the most important thing is that actually, I did it for a very long time. And just the act of journaling and the act of learning how to express yourself, writing for me is a carving. It's like a constant means to get to know yourself; to get to know your own soul; to get to know who you really are. And there's so many times when I write a story down, or I go and I do my morning pages, and I think I'm going to talk about one thing, and something else entirely comes out. And it's just an amazing practice where I get to kind of "meet myself," I suppose.

Elisa: I think for a lot of people, that's actually one of the most terrifying things about writing: is that possibility that as you start doing more and more of it, you start realizing things about yourself. That some things are really great to realize—and some things, maybe not so much.

Sarah: It's true. It can be hard work to look at yourself and just be like, "Oh, this is a part of me that maybe isn't the thing that I want to know about." But I think beneath and through it all, there's actually so much wisdom and gold and beauty inside of, like, every single person. Stuff on the top—the stuff that makes us anxious—is superficial. And if you get deeper in there, it's like Tara Sophia Mohr in her recent book, *Playing Big*—she talks about how you can have your own inner guide. We all have wisdom inside of us and we all have a voice inside of us that we can attune to. And it's through that process of writing. It's scary at first. We have to put our credit to the side. We have to put our "harsh editor" to the side. It can be really beautiful.

Elisa: So true. And I think probably the editors that live inside our brains, and our critics inside our brains, are probably worse than anything we're going to experience outside of them.

Sarah: They are horrible. Actually, sometimes when I'm writing, if they come out, I'll just write everything she has to say. I'm like, "Fine. You wanna talk? Go ahead." And like the first 750 words of my



750 words is her negativity. And then finally, she's exhausted, and so I close that out. I start a new document and I'm like, "Okay, now that that's out, can we move on? Great." And then I start writing again. I'm like, "Oh, I was really angry and upset and critical because I'm scared. And I'm scared of these changes that are happening. But I'm also kind of excited. I'm excited about this thing that's coming next."

And I just have to take my critic and I can be like, "Okay, you're here. I'm going to give you a blankie, and you can have coffee over there in the corner. And I'm just going to like, 'Shhh, quiet. I'm just going to go over there and do a little bit of writing. Okay?'" And like I have to coax her.

Here's a secret: there's not just one of them—I have like five crazy critics in my head like all the time. So sometimes, I can be like, "Okay, guys, I'm cooking you a dinner party and then I'm going to go hide in the bathroom while I write. Okay?"

Elisa: "You guys can just get it all out yourselves."

Sarah: Yeah.

Elisa: That's such a good strategy. I haven't really heard of anyone else actively doing that to kind of get past that place of the criticism—eating away at what your creative process is.

Sarah: If you look at it, like if you imagine that you invited all those people to a dinner party—you wouldn't, right? If you sat down with six people and one of them was like, "Oh, my god, you're so ugly," and the other one was like, "Everything you write is shit," you wouldn't have all those people at a dinner table with you. And yet, we carry these voices around in our head. And by giving voices to them, we can kind of soften them a little bit—soften their power.

And also, if you look at lots of different coaching and wellness books out there too, they talk about how those voices are actually there because they are worried and concerned and they care for you. They are like, "Don't you dare put anything out there on the internet with writing, because we don't wanna see people send you hate mail." And so they think of all the worst case scenarios, because deep down, they actually care about you. They want you to be safe and secure. And oh, by the way, never to change. They are like, "Stay still! Don't change. It's too scary!"

Elisa: That's so true. Speaking of change, your writing process probably has changed a slight bit from the "angsty teenager" to becoming the professional writer that you are now. How did you do that?

Sarah: You know, it's interesting. I did it for a really long time and I never thought it was anything special. I never thought that it was something that I could get paid to do. It was always something I did on the side. So I got an architecture degree. I got a psychology degree and then I got an architecture degree. And I went to work in the world of design. I actually worked there for five years. And I remember my first interview. I was interviewing with one of my mentors and they said, "So what do you really love about design?" And I said, "Writing." And they were like, "Okay. But you know you're interviewing for a design job, right? So what do you like about design?" And I'm like, "Oh, right." And then I went on with my interview answer.

And it was funny—it started to pop out in different ways. And I realized, "Okay, I love design, but I don't wanna give up writing." So I started a blog on my own, and I started writing critical pieces about the profession and submitting them to local magazines, and then more national magazines. And over the



course of about three years—this wasn't necessarily with planning and a big strategy. It wasn't like, "I'm going to do this and then all these things are going to change and happen." It was more incremental and accidental.

Over the course of those three years, people within the company started looking at me and saying, "Huh. Can you help me with writing?" Or, "Can you write an article for our company?" Or, "Can you help this partner draft an essay?" And so I started taking on more and more writing projects. And then we actually switched my role in the company. I went from a designer to being the head of communications there. I was communications assistant. And then I started helping work on communications throughout the whole company, helping them with their marketing efforts, helping them launch a magazine, helping them get a blog online. And before I knew it, at the end of five years, we had completely transitioned and I was doing writing for a design company—and it was such a fabulous transition.

Elisa: Which is something that I love about the way that you write—you do write these gorgeous, very vulnerable, poetic, personal essays. But you're also such a brilliant content strategist, in that you know exactly what stories to tell that make a business both look good and look bad, but at the end of the day, attract and engage audience. Do you have any idea how you kind of built that skill, which is something that so many of us are looking for?

Sarah: Such an interesting and such a broad question. I've so many thoughts on this.

Elisa: That's perfect. I love lots of thoughts; that's why I ask super broad questions.

Sarah: Well, interestingly in the process, like, sometimes a story comes into my mind, and sometimes an opinion piece comes into my mind. Like I really wanna talk about rental market in New York City right now, for example, because the prices are so high and there's tangible things we can do about it. And sometimes it's a story, like the experience of waking up and living in a city and what this concrete jungle feels like. There's two different things that will come in.

And I capture them both. And what I try to do is I try to stitch them together, because when you are making any sort of persuasive argument or you're writing any piece, you always have to land it in reality first. And that can be your reality or somebody else's reality, but you need to tell them what world you're living with in. Who are you? Where are you coming from? Why is this relevant? Why do I trust you?

In my writing classes, the first exercise that we do is called "describing environments." And I have people just take a look at exactly where they are and start to describe an environment. And then we move on and we go to the world around them and I have them start to articulate that. Because in every story, whether it's a fictional story, whether it's the Grimm Brother's *Fairy Tales*, whether it's a personal piece, you need a reality. You need a world. You need to say, "I'm coming from Silicon Valley and I'm a CEO and I own a company that's this big, and I believe that the world is changing like this." That's kind of I think the first thing that I would suggest in terms of how do you make these pieces hold together coherently.

Elisa: I love first of all that you mentioned Grimm's *Fairy Tales* because .one, I am a fan of Grimm *Fairy Tales*, and two, I talk to a lot of people about the importance of knowing narratives and knowing stories in a world other than the one in which you exist. So for a lot of people, I know they don't like reading fiction or reading stories or anything like that, but then they don't know how to tell stories either.



Sarah: I think it's so true. I think so many times, sales and marketing and trying to write business copy just doesn't work very well when you don't get out of your own way. When you don't get out of the world that you're living in and start to expand it to a bigger focus. And the best way you can do that is by reading lots of really good stories. How do you become a good storyteller? It's not a framework. It's not like, two rules or six steps or eight lessons or whatever—it's listening to the stories being told around you.

Elisa: Have you found any other good stories for people who just really cannot bring themselves to read *Grimm's Fairy Tales*—which I feel is just a sad place of being.

Sarah: Sure.

Elisa: But for those that can't, where are some good places that you can find those stories if fiction and that sort of stuff is just really absolutely not your game?

Sarah: Narrative nonfiction can be really powerful because it will show you how to weave a story together and still writing about something that's true. The examples that are really awesome is: don't read the whole book—just open the first page.

If you look at *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, and you read the first page, the guy talks about weather, the temperature, the wind. He sets you up on the road, on a motorcycle. You start to feel viscerally what's happening to him. And he gives you all that context before he goes into what this guy is thinking—him and his son.

And if you just started out with like, "I'm on the road with my son and we're thinking about this," well, you wouldn't have as much buy in. You wouldn't be as curious. But once you get to like, feel what a two-lane road is like, and how he's driving across Montana, and what it's like to be on the back of a motorcycle, and what his journey is—all of a sudden, the story becomes more rich. A little more compelling. So, just opening up any of those fiction books.

The other place, like Dani Shapiro writes a book, *Still Writing*, and it's got tons of little essays that each one is a story. And you learn more and more about her, and you learn a really great take away about writing. So she's a wonderful resource for storytelling.

And then two books I love that are narrative nonfiction examples are Scott Berkun's [The World Without Pants](#)—I think something like that. And the other one is by Jaimal Yogis. It's called *The Fear Project*. Also nonfiction, but it's an amazing story.

Elisa: Wow. I have not read that one. I will add it to my completely overwhelmed Kindle list.

Sarah: Well, it's easy to read, so I highly recommend it.

Elisa: Perfect. Those are good for the random commutes and various other things.

Sarah: Awesome.

Elisa: I know that you still sometimes work in urban landscape and design, but you aren't doing that position anymore. What does writing look like for you now? Now that it's basically—instead of having to always work within a company to fulfil a role, you kind of dictate your writing and your business and everything else. How do you fit that into your world?



Sarah: Yeah. So I transitioned and I started my own consulting practice. My business is made up of three parts: one part is product development. So I teach courses online, and that's wonderful because I get to reach a lot of people at an accessible price point for workshops. And it's also a product, so it lets me not be a writer who's always looking for service-oriented work, which I think is a really critical thing. We could talk for hours about it, but I'm just going to skip over it.

The next third of my business is service-oriented around writing. And I work with clients on content strategy, marketing plans, developing content, content series, content pipelines, content funnels. The Internet is a massive world of writing and people need so much of it. From about pages to blogs, to essays, to positioning thought leaders and helping them work on their stuff.

Some of my clients, I've done book chapter edits or books edits. So typically from a business stand point, I like to find longer-term commitments so that I'm not constantly doing the feast and famine cycle of finding another person who will pay me to write one blog essay—that's not a sustainable business model for a writer. So, just as like, as my business mindset, it coming out here in the show.

And then the third part is one-on-one, kind of coaching and collaborative work with individuals—not companies and businesses. And those people, usually it's a combination. Like, they wanna write, but they also want to develop their own kind of structure. "Where am I going next? What is it that I'm working on? What's really important to me?" So I help people find their voice.

Elisa: I think that is such an important piece. And probably what a lot of people struggle with when they look at someone like you, who has built an entire business around being able to write and do that strategy and everything. And they sometimes feel, probably, some of those "dinner table voices," but they feel a certain amount of inadequacy because they don't know how to fit content strategy and writing everything into their very busy business models. How do you work with clients who are struggling with that?

Sarah: That's a great question. We could do an episode on each one of these questions. I think the biggest thing that I teach on my content strategy class—I'll give it away for free—the biggest thing I teach is that not everyone needs to write forever. A lot of people, when they look at the overwhelming world of the Internet, think, "Oh, my gosh, I have to start a blog. I have to commit to it every week. I don't have the time for that. That's exhausting because I'm also a mom and a CEO. And adding 'fulltime writer' to my life sounds miserable."

And so the thing that we actually work on is creating evergreen content, and creating a website that showcases their brilliance where people can find them again and again. But doesn't mean that they have to get married to writing in this kind of "indefinite timescape" that goes out into the future forever. So we work on creating a package of six essays that talk to the things that they wanna talk about, which introduces them to the type of people that they wanna meet and the kind of business solutions they have for the audience they wanna get engaged with.

Elisa: Evergreen content, I find, is something that is valuable in the Internet. And I will jump on my little soapbox here for a moment, because I know that you'll be up on the soap box with me right afterwards.

Sarah: Do it.



Elisa: I get so frustrated seeing more and more of these articles coming out about these kind of “wheel and deal”, fast marketing strategies that just flood your site with traffic, but aren’t sustainable for more than, you know, the 10 to 30 days after the post actually goes active. And I find so many people end up struggling with writing because that’s what they are focusing on instead of writing—as you said—this really great, rich, evergreen content that actually saves you from constantly having to output stuff and gives you a space to direct your audience to, that's kind of there forever.

Sarah: Exactly. And I think if we can look at the larger web, we're not designing web pages in Times New Roman, neon-blue-on-flashy-red backgrounds anymore—that was ten years ago. And so nowadays, we're like swamped with the upworthies, and they are like basically the stuff that preys on our brain. The clickholes where it's like, “Oh, I got to click on everything. Oh, there's like a 100-word post.” Well, the internet is going to change. We are going to get so tired of this. I think there's going to be a big shift change again in the way that we use and create and consume media, because we're all either going to burn and get tired of it. And if you can create elegant, sophisticated, classy, classic pieces that talk about deeper issues and show, like, your interesting self and your thought leadership, it's not going to be a 100-word, bite-sized post. It's going to be a piece, and then that piece is going to serve you for years.

Elisa: Yes. You see the articles all the time. I was just actually reading one that—I didn’t even realize until afterwards—that was a year old, from a guy named Kevin Dewalt, on why it takes you three startups and five years before you are ever going to find any success as an entrepreneur. Because basically it takes a really long time, and additionally, you're going to cycle through ideas. Your first one is kind of the out-of-the-gate, pie in the sky, “This is what I think will work.” And then you realize everything you did wrong so you create a second business that’s playing it safe, which also is going to fail. So it's your third business iteration that's, like, the genius one that gets you to where you need to be—and that takes five years.

Sarah: Exactly.

Elisa: And that was, as I said, a year old. And I just shared it all over the place like it was the most brilliant thing I’ve ever read.

Sarah: Because we're going to get tired of the stuff that’s stupid, and we're going to look for things that are smarter and smarter and smarter. Not to scare people like, “Oh, my god. I'm not that smart. I can’t write about that.” It's like, “Okay, great.” So that’s why I recommend first you just write for yourself—free writing—and then we’ll work into it.

And people say, “Well, that’s not true. You look around and you see websites that are doing amazing content strategy, like weekly essays, it's like the buffer app of the world.” And you say, “Oh my god, I could never do that.” They have entire departments dedicated to that content research and creation. And if that's not the focus of your business, then don’t compare yourself to somebody that’s doing something else.

A great example—do you know the Peter Thiel Class Notes Essays?

Elisa: Yes.



Sarah: There's thirteen or nineteen of them. This guy wrote an essay for each class. He took notes. It must be like six years old or something now. I know so many people who read it over and over and over again. It's timeless. You don't have to write 52 essays every single year. He wrote this standalone series and everybody comes back and reads them again and again and again.

Elisa: And that's such a great example when you read them. They legitimately are class notes. They are what you would scribble down as someone is talking, and you were as quickly as possible trying to get out all of what they are saying onto a piece of paper.

Sarah: Exactly.

Elisa: Personally, I love good writing, but I also like things that end up coming to you a little bit easy. So we are going to move in to some easier questions for you.

Sarah: Yes!

Elisa: So this is a fun little game I like to play with folks. Over the next two minutes, I'm going to ask you a series of either/or questions and I want you to answer with the first thing that pops into your mind.

Sarah: I'm excited.

Elisa: We're going to try to get through as many things as we can, and get a little sneak peek into the thoughts of a writer's mind. Are you feeling ready?

Sarah: I guess so.

Elisa: All right. Let's go. Pen or pencil?

Sarah: Pen.

Elisa: Mac or PC?

Sarah: Mac.

Elisa: Coffee or tea?

Sarah: Tea.

Elisa: Night or morning?

Sarah: Morning.

Elisa: Good writing or correct writing?

Sarah: Good.

Elisa: Noise or silence?

Sarah: Silence.

Elisa: Lefty or righty?

Sarah: Righty.



Elisa: Weird or typical?

Sarah: Weird.

Elisa: School or no school?

Sarah: No school.

Elisa: Outside or inside?

Sarah: Outside.

Elisa: Clean or messy?

Sarah: Clean.

Elisa: Teacher or student?

Sarah: Teacher.

Elisa: Town or city?

Sarah: City.

Elisa: Trains or planes?

Sarah: Trains.

Elisa: Skiing or surfing?

Sarah: No! Oh, man. Both. Surfing.

Elisa: Fantasy or reality?

Sarah: Fantasy.

Elisa: Love or money?

Sarah: Love.

Elisa: Introvert or extrovert?

Sarah: Introvert.

Elisa: Good content or good marketing?

Sarah: Good content.

Elisa: Smile or game face?

Sarah: Smile.

Elisa: Call or text?

Sarah: Call. No, text.

Elisa: Money or fame?



Sarah: Money.

Elisa: Older than you are now, or younger than you are now?

Sarah: Older.

Elisa: Think before you talk, or talk before you think?

Sarah: Think before you talk.

Elisa: Have a dragon, or be a dragon?

Sarah: Have a dragon.

Elisa: Bestselling book or million-dollar business?

Sarah: Bestselling book.

Elisa: What is one site you're loving right now on the internet?

Sarah: Ashley Ambirge's site.

Elisa: What is a book that you're loving right now?

Sarah: *MindSet* by Carol Dweck.

Elisa: And I'm not sure if you are a podcast listener, but if you are, what's a podcast that you're loving right now?

Sarah: The Fizzle Show. And Chase Reeves is hilarious.

Elisa: Well, we will leave on that exact note. You're getting me worried. You almost went through the entire list right there. I was like, "Oh, no! Start talking about other things."

Sarah: I have so many things to say about each of those. It's like, "Quiet? Of course, quiet."

Elisa: Your ability to control and filter yourself is astounding to me because even writing them, I was like, "Oh, well. But maybe I should include this because there's so many different facets. and how about..." Then I was like, "No, just either/or!"

So, thank you again, Sarah, for taking time to join me today. Where can folks find your writing and business, and everything else?

Sarah: Well, I go by my name all over the internet, Sarah K. Peck. And then my website is ItStartsWith.com. And there are a *lot* of essays up there.

Elisa: Very, very good essays. Definitely recommend people go check them out. Do you have any parting thoughts? Any wisdom or things that you think that listeners need to know before they log off?

Sarah: I think writing is so important. I think you do it for yourself before anyone else. Just get to know yourself and get in there, because it really, really, really changed my life. And it's changed so many lives around me. And I know and I've watched the process. So I hope everybody goes and writes.

Elisa: Great. Thank you so much!



Sarah: Thank you.

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Reviews and sharing your favorite episodes help me get the word out, and get more people on the show. So, thank you for doing that, and thank you for listening to me geek out today about writing with Sarah Peck. 'Till I'm in your earbuds next Tuesday—go create your own compelling content and make some words sexy.]

[Outtake]

Sarah: And then you, like, come back and you sit down and you're like, "Oh, I was getting coffee!"

Elisa: Yes. And then you're like, "Argh." And then you just slowly get up again being, "I got him defeated!"

Sarah: "I still need the coffee!"