



YB+YS SEASON 1, EPISODE 13: The Lost Art of Copywriting With Freelancer and Podcast Host Nelson Jordan

0:53 Megan Ingram (MI): Today, Nelson Jordan, freelance content strategist, copywriter, and host of The Working from Home Podcast from England joins the show to talk about how to write compelling stories and copy, how you can be productive when working from home, and we'll also chat about remote work and freelance life. Welcome Nelson, glad to have you on.

1:12 Nelson Jordan (NJ): Oh, so glad to be here. Thank you.

1:14 MI: Great. Well, to kick it off as someone who has also journeyed from agency to freelance in my past, you've been freelancing for two years now. Tell us about your digital marketing journey from agency to freelance.

1:26 NJ: Sure. Well, actually it probably started even before I was at an agency, I worked in house for Hitachi. So a bit of a heavy engineering manufacturing environment. Then I went into digital boxing first in paid and organic social. So everything from managing paid campaigns from Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn, all of the big platforms and then eventually progressed to SEO and PPC. These days I find myself, within content, firmly within content. So I run a small e-commerce agency that handles paid advertising. But I'm just involved in that from a strategic point of view. I don't execute on any of the day-to-day. When I talk about my freelancing though, that's content strategy, content creation within the e-commerce and the SaaS world. I probably split 50-50 roughly between SaaS and e-com. I started off as a freelancer, as you said, two years ago. I actually managed to move to Spain. I managed to talk my agency into letting me do that, I still don't know how. So I left gray, cloudy Birmingham to go with my, then girlfriend and now wife to Valencia, Spain. So very sunny, lots of tapas, very close to the beach. Struck gold there. But eventually I was getting sick and tired of the long commute, which I was only doing once a month. The agency very graciously allowed me to fit all of my meetings into a two or three day period each month. And so I'd fly back to the UK, do all those meetings, and then fly back out again. But eventually I got kind of tired of that. I wanted to enjoy and immerse myself in the Spanish lifestyle a little bit more. And I thought, hang on. Yeah, I can just do this for myself instead of through an agency, but it was funny. It never really occurred to me before. I was never involved in the freelance world. It wasn't a thing that was run during my previous point.

3:45 MI: Gotcha. That sounds awesome. And I'm a very big fan of the digital nomad lifestyle. So I'm sure being in Spain and also kind of doing the work as well and having that flexibility, it must have been awesome.

3:58 NJ: Definitely. I have to say, I know a lot of people that could accurately be described as digital nomads. To be honest, if I was doing this again and I was in my early twenties or something like that, I might have fully dived into that lifestyle in terms of maybe moving to a place for a month or two, and then moving on. But yeah, I'm a little bit older now. I'm more of a homebody. So when we moved to Valencia, we stayed there for three years. So it wasn't like I was moving countries.

4:30 MI: Out and about to different places all the time? Although I am hopeful once we get through all this COVID that we can do a little bit more of that kind of stuff again. I was actually before COVID looking forward to traveling. So hopefully, in the near future, that will be something I can do. What did you learn from this experience that you've taken with you that's helped you as a freelancer?

4:52 NJ: I was quite lucky in terms of the amount of experience that I had as part of an agency, even when I was in a very junior role, I, by necessity, got thrust into doing things like new business development. So I was talking to CEOs and marketing directors and things like that when I was pretty young. And that threw me in at the deep end. So I skipped a lot of just the tactical day-to-day stuff. I was doing that, but I was also doing the high level. Okay, well, this is the strategy we should adopt. And I started to learn how decision makers about the sort of metrics they actually look for, the sorts of objectives, how they like things phrased. So I was very, very used to talking with those decision-makers from an early stage. So when I went freelance, I was very much used to understanding how to pitch my services, which put me quite far ahead, I think.

5:56 MI: Which is often a hurdle for some in terms of getting used to the sales and pitching and building a pipeline. And how are you going to get leads? And for some, that's an easier leap, and for others, that's a struggle in becoming a freelancer.

6:11 NJ: There's this big gap that I want to talk about. Cause I'm just incredibly interested in it. So there's people that are very good at the job itself, whatever that job is. If you're a freelance marketer, then it's marketing. If you're a freelance copywriter or a content strategist, then you're doing those things. But then there's this other skillset, which we don't talk about as much, which is the freelancing skillset. Now you can be very, very good at your job. That side of it, the actual execution of the writing, creating or whatever. And if you're bad at the freelancing side of it, you won't make any money. It's crazy. You just won't succeed. Get a client here or there, but you won't have a solid pipeline. You won't be able to make an increase in revenue. I feel like because I focus so much on those freelancer-specific skills very much. Like how do you market yourself? How do you get seen in the right places so that you're bringing in a regular pipeline so that you can charge more? How you can be very specific about the people that you want to attract and the people you want to turn away. I feel like I've been able to leap frog a lot of people in the industry just by taking that approach versus, Oh, I need to get better at writing or I need to get better at marketing.

7:35 MI: I also think that's developed a need or want from freelancers to have some place, whether it's an organization, a tool, work with someone who does that for them, because they just don't - to your point, they want to be in the execution of the doing of things, as opposed to the business of the business. Like where you're going out. And some people love it and they like to wear both those hats, but for others, they'd rather just focus on what they do well and not have to do so much of - I have to go out there and chase business and close leads and all that kind of stuff.

8:09 NJ: Sure. And to be a successful freelancer, like really at the top, you have to take on those skills. You can make it okay or a pretty good living. If you don't focus on those skills, but if you really want to take advantage, I would say of everything that the freelance world can offer you, you actually do have to

concentrate in the communities I've been a part of. Places like Write Minds and Peak Freelance, they have given me the skillset and the confidence to, not just the actual execution side, that freelancer skills that I've already been focused on.

8:47 MI: Yeah. Such a great point. I'm going to pivot a little bit into copywriting and content marketing. I've long said copywriting is a lost art and it's a very critical skill in marketing, especially in today's age. What do you believe is the key to writing compelling copy?

9:04 NJ: Probably just knowing your audience more than anything else. I think there's this weird disconnect that people that haven't been involved in copywriting or content creation don't necessarily get, it's not that instinctive to them, but copywriting actually has very little to do with writing copy. Like 60, 70% of it, depending on what you're writing, actually is about research. It's about knowing how to unpick your audience and doing it in a strategic way where, okay, this is the audience, this is where they hang out. This is what they talk about. This is how they like to be talked to. This is how we should position ourselves. It's all of that stuff. If I take on a project, a copywriting project, I spend most of my time interviewing customers, and I'll do three to five, roughly 45 minute long interviews with customers. And if I do those well, and again, I've been working specifically on asking the right questions and coming across in the right way. So people trust me. So the people that I'm interviewing trust me to open up about the situation that led them to use the service or the product, which is something somebody from outside that world wouldn't even think about, like what is your view methodology? How does your persona come across? If I do that well, what I've found is that the majority of my writing is already done. Because if I've asked the right questions, I literally just have to analyze, I use thematic analysis and I go through and pull out specific quotes, and then I might tweak them. I might put them together in different ways, and that ends up being the bulk of my writing if I do that correctly.

11:02 MI: That's so interesting. And I love being a data person and seeing the setup and the research side of that.

11:10 NJ: Just to say one last thing. If you're really listening and if you do it the right way, then your customers will tell you what they want to be told. They'll give you the exact words and all you have to do is flip it back and present it to them. And they'll go, I can't believe it, this person or this company knows my pain points, knows my troubles, knows everything I'm going through so well, they must be the person that I should buy from.

11:38 MI: Yeah, I love that. How have you seen great copy have an impact on a campaign and story?

11:45 NJ: So you'll notice that the majority of actual good campaigns split into two. Two kinds of buckets or two fields, right? There's the campaigns that get the ad people talking. So they're the ones that will appear in Adweek, or some of the campaign magazines. And they'll go, isn't this fantastic? And then there are campaigns that just quietly go about their business and just sell really, really well. So there's that in terms of copywriting to bring that back. There's the ones that you go, Oh, that's such fantastic copy. And you look at the words and you look at the angles and things like that, but there's, I can't remember who said it now might be like Eugene Schwartz or somebody that said, if my writing sounds like copywriting, then I scrap it or I go back and I rewrite it because there's this analogy that when you write something, it should be like a window. You're letting somebody view your product or your service through this window, which is writing. And if you're focusing on the writing itself, you're not actually seeing the product or the service.

13:00 MI: Definitely well said. And vice versa, you know, you talked about how you've seen good copy have a great impact on a campaign or a story. Where have you seen a bad copy fail with a good story?

13:15 NJ: So the only company that I've ever worked in house for was Hitachi. So I said at the beginning that they are a very famous Japanese company that operates all over the world. They're fantastic at what they do - engineering and manufacturing. And they're absolutely abysmal at telling stories. Their products are used in so many fantastic services by other companies that love and are white labeled, but they make a lot of component parts that fit into wider products. Within trains, for example, they might make some of the braking equipment and they make some of the controls and things like that, and the electrical systems, and they're full of like really, really clever engineers. But they've never worked out and still haven't from what I've seen recently. And I worked for them like eight or nine, maybe 10 years ago. They still haven't worked out that it's not enough to just create the best product. They get really excited about making something 2% more efficient, but that's not a reason for anybody else to get excited about it. Right? It's not enough to make the best product or to have the best service. It's the best kind of combination of product and service and then the best story and the best marketing. It's like an evolution. So what does best isn't the strongest just isn't the speediest or anything that, it's the thing that is most fit. It's the thing that is most fit for the environment. So what is most fit in the human world because we're individuals and groups that thrive through the ability to tell stories and to convince each other of these myths that we can not believe in what actually is most important isn't your product. It's that you can tell a story that attracts people to your mission.

15:39 MI: Yeah. I often find that clients, like you're saying, that have like a good product, but just have maybe failed at telling the story are some of the most fun clients, because the product's there, there's potential there. You've just got to find that story within. And for me, those are some of the best marketing campaigns that I've worked on throughout my career.

16:00 NJ: I mean, we all love the opportunity to have the biggest impact. And as you say that they're almost there, like they've created this incredible product or just amazing service, and you know people would love this if they knew about it or the right angle was taken. As you're saying that, just give you like, yeah, I can do something with this.

16:23 MI: So you get excited because there's a potential there in some instances where you have to figure out, okay, what's the market, is this even going to sell? Is this a capable product? There's a lot more in the foundation that you have to get right. But when you have something that foundationally works, the potential is there, then it comes down to marketing and the story and how you convey that to an audience.

16:46 NJ: A hundred percent.

16:48 MI: You are also the host of the Working From Home podcast. And for my listeners out though, definitely worth the listen. So we have to talk about remote work. What remote work trends stand out to you for 2021?

17:01 NJ: So it's about empowering people like myself, freelancers. So freelancers are on the rise all over the world. The increase has been staggering, even when you take into account some of the numbers in the US are a little bit shaky, because they include random things like independent contractors or people that don't have employment agreements and stuff like that. Even when you take that into account, freelance numbers are just going through the roof. Does this lack of a support system, there's individual groups and smaller communities based around specific niches, like copywriting or content strategy and

things like that. These all exist, but there's nothing comprehensive. If you're a freelancer operating in this country, these are the things that you need to have in place. This is how you get everything like your taxes in order. This is how you set up a legal corporation. All of the resources are available, but they're in very disparate places. You have to just know all the ins and outs and go through forums and stuff like this, comprehensive resources, no comprehensive software or anything like that. We're still in the very, very early stage of that. So that's one of the things that I'm excited about. The other thing is, and we're going to cover this later, but like how traditionally overlooked demographics within our society now that we've gone to remote work, how those people can be brought back in, which is going to be really, really good for the economy, but also really, really good for the individuals. So people that previously haven't been able to have full-time work. Maybe they have a disability, with certain places, certain constraints such as they get easily fatigued or they're not able to commute or anything like that. I'm really excited about bringing those people back into the fold because I firmly believe that humans need jobs. Whether that's jobs as we think of them now, or like jobs within the community or certain projects that we're really passionate about. I think things are for society and for individuals' mental health, when we don't have a goal, when we don't have something that we're working towards. So I'm pretty excited about that.

19:49 MI: I know that often sparks the conversation about AI and what you can manually do versus what's done. But the one way I always tend to look at that is that it allows you to do the things that truly create value. So for an analyst, you can easily put any data into a sheet. And whatever, the data is the data, but the true value is interpreting it and analyzing it and finding out what that means. And I look at those types of things as the way that people are really the future of our workforce.

20:20 NJ: Sure. I'm a little bit skeptical about AI, not about the possibilities, because I think as it improves through things like machine learning, I think AI is going to get better. At the moment we have individual or specific AI, we don't have general AI, but I think I'm viewing AI almost in the same way that people viewed the Luddites. You had these people when the clothing loom was invented that were worried that it was going to wipe out everybody else. So they destroyed these looms. So these people have the view that if this happened, the same as they had in like the 1950s, 1960s, where they were like, well, by the time my grandkids are around, or my sons and daughters are around, they're only going to be working four hours a week or whatever it was that they predicted and that hasn't happened. So all I think is going to happen is that we're just going to take on more work, but each person is going to be able to produce more. But unless something changes, I don't see us working fewer hours.

21:38 MI: Okay. That's definitely fair.

21:41 NJ: Well, like, nobody knows how it's going to play out, but that's okay.

21:45 MI: That's the fun of it, right? You can have a prediction and then we all sit and wait and see how it turns out. What remote work opportunities are being overlooked? I know you hit on a few there, but could you expand upon that?

21:58 NJ: I know I mentioned people with some kind of disabilities a second ago. What I'm also excited about is women who have left the workforce to have children. So previously there haven't been a lot of opportunities for women who have an education, they've been to college or university or something like that. And they've got to a reasonable level in their career, and then they've chosen to have kids. I don't think there are very many opportunities at all from the women I've talked to or the women in my friendship group, to do flexible work. Even the companies, like my agency, were one of the better ones because it was quite rare for an agency, but it was run and owned by three women. And the majority of the workforce were women as well. So they were really good about getting people in and letting them

work part-time, and work slightly flexible hours, but they still had to be at the office if they were working that day, it was very much like, Okay. You can come in like an hour later. But you're still working all day. You've still got to find babysitting help and stuff like that. The transition for a lot of people, it's very much all or nothing like for women who maybe have like a two or three-year-old, for example. Not somebody who's going to be breastfeeding all the time, but somebody that might be comfortable like pumping or something like that, I feel like there's not enough opportunities there at the moment. It's very much like, you want to come back to work? Then it's full time. Or maybe part-time, I feel like there's a lot of women that would benefit from being able to do the hours, probably of a part-time role, but do them on their own schedule. So for example, so much of the work I do doesn't involve any regular time schedule whatsoever. I'm talking to one of my clients tomorrow at a certain time. And other than that, I've not had a single call this week with a client. I didn't have a single call last week with the client, so they don't care when the work is done. As long as we eventually meet the deadline.

24:35 MI: That's a great point. And I think that's, to me, one of the biggest benefits of freelance is it should be about the value, the deliverable that you are providing. And if you want to do that part time, full-time, whatever that may be, your performance should be based on how you deliver said thing, not let's check in at 8:00 AM in the office and make sure we're there because at the end of the day, I mean, well, that's a nice picture. It doesn't really matter in terms of what the value is that you're actually providing.

25:07 NJ: Oh, definitely. For my ecommerce agency, we have four freelancers that work for me. I don't employ anybody as a traditional salaried role, they're all freelancers. So they can do their own thing and they can work full-time roles and do this whenever they like, or they can take on other clients. It doesn't bother me as long as the work is done. Like, I don't care if they want to work on a Sunday and they want to do nothing on a Monday.

25:38 MI: I'm the same way. There's some people on my team that only work 20 hours a week and that's all they work and you can figure out how you want to work. But if we're not talking about a client meeting or when a deliverable is due, it's totally up to you how and when you want to do those hours, staying motivated, and you touched upon, it can be difficult for some when you're working from home for a long period. And we hear it all the time that loneliness and finding that sense of community is very important for freelancers. What tips do you have for staying motivated when you hit a wall?

26:10 NJ: So the community thing that you mentioned is just fantastic. It's kind of impossible to underestimate that. Even if you're not the sort of person who actually likes to post within the communities. What they call a lurker. It's still valuable to see what other people are doing. Particularly if you get the right community, because so many of these wild freelancers hang out, they're not braggish. They're all people just trying to figure it out. And they're being incredibly open about what's going on with them and their clients and their wins, or the things that they're not doing so well at the moment. So the community thing is absolutely huge for me. I will really be proactive in seeking out those communities because I've moved from a busy city center in Valencia to the English countryside. I live in a village that has like 1800 people maybe, and we don't even live in the village. So it's that small. So the community thing was really, really important for me. And they've been great throughout this whole COVID pandemic as well. The other thing that I'm just super passionate about is just being realistic. Concern yourself with what you know you need to accomplish in a day. What's a sign that you're not on track? What's a sign that you need to rest? The sort of things that you need to do on a regular basis to take care of yourself? So for me, I know that I need to run minimum three times a week. Otherwise I start to get really, really cagey.

28:06 MI: I'm starting to hit that stir-crazy wall and I'm like, I need to go somewhere. Oh, I'm a big Peloton biker, but you know, it's the same idea.

28:19 NJ: Yeah. A hundred percent, you have these things that are really nothing to do with work, but you have to get them right. So that you can actually work in the right way, especially when your work and home have just blurred into one. We used to have this physical barrier or physical signal that used to tell us that we were moving from one environment to the other, in terms of a commute. We used to be like, okay, well I'm physically getting up and leaving my house and closing the door and getting in the car or bus or tram or Metro or whatever it was. And then we're in the workplace. That was a trigger to our brain. And then at the end of the day, we can stop. We can shut the laptop. We can leave the office. We're in a different environment, different context. Our brain goes, okay, this is somewhere different, but we don't have that. Freelancers who work from home. Specifically in their home and not in, like a shared space or anything like that. We need different signals. So for me, the biggest thing, and not everybody has access to this, but I have a room, now an office that is just for work. And I never, never, never take my laptop anywhere else. It's always here. I'm always done with it. I close the door when I'm done, so I can't even see it. And I won't work anywhere else. That's huge for me, but we only moved back here to the UK the summer before that, all the other times that I was working, especially even during the Spanish quarantine, we lived in a studio apartment, so my laptop was always there. I could always see it. And it was just something simple. Like, well, the laptop's there. I can see it. I'm going to close the laptop. Little things like that. Even if they make a percent difference, that's really, really important. Putting your documents away or covering it up or something like that. Anything you can buy into to say like, Okay, this is the barrier. I am no longer at work. I am no longer checking emails. Like deleting email apps off your phone. Like if you do something like I do, and you're fortunate enough not to have to respond straight away to emails, then why should you have the email app on your phone? There's no reason for it. Delete it if you can.

30:50 MI: Those are really good tips. I call them the unplug zone, which I can personally attest to that I struggled mightily with because it's like everywhere. And I find it even more incredibly tough during COVID because for me, the separation used to be to go outdoors versus home. But when your home becomes everything, it's even harder to be away from technology and find that place. Now I've found things like the Peloton bike or there's certain activities that you'll do like reading a book or whatever cooking that can allow that. But it is a tough challenge. I was actually a pre-COVID worker, working from home pre-COVID. I would go to a coffee shop. I went to public places a lot. I had a membership at the Wing, so I would go to a place. So actually physically being in the home for 12 hours a day has felt like it could be grueling some days like to need that separation, like you're saying. So those are all really great tips. Definitely. I'm a big proponent of taking time for self care and unplugging, especially when you're really having a tough time concentrating and focusing. How do you create positive habits that translate into remote work and freelance success?

32:10 NJ: I think about my day in different stages. So I don't ever put pressure on myself to work before nine. So I tend to get up and I'm awake between seven and eight. Even if I am awake, I'll just chill out. I might watch TV for a bit. I might just be on my phone and I'll never beat myself up about, Oh, I should be doing work right now. I just won't do it. I think of it as my time, a lot of the time. I'm not doing it so much cause it's quite cold in the mornings right now. And I'm a bit of a wimp. But I was kind of going downstairs and doing yoga, and reading, and listening to podcasts. I still read and listen to podcasts, but I've let the yoga slip recently. I have to, again, not beat myself up about that. Then depending on the day, I'll have either lined up an admin and call type day. So what I like to do is batching basically. So putting lots of similar tasks together either on the same day or in parts of the day to avoid context switching and the energy that that takes up. So I like the first three days of the week to look like versus

the last three days. And I say like the last three days, cause that's six days. I tend to work on the weekends because I enjoy it, not because I have to, so I tend to work on Saturdays and most of the time, Sunday mornings as well. But Saturday I'll probably stop work at about like 12 or one. But that's kind of my choice to do it. But like Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday looks very different from those days because they're the deep work days that I call them. So that's when I'm going to be doing the heavy lifting of my job, like actually working on projects. That's all of my writing. So I might start writing at half eight, nine if I want to. And then I won't stop. Even for food or anything until one or two on some of those days, I'll just work right through. Because once I get into the flow of it, I just don't want to stop. So if I'm creating a new landing page or writing a blog, I'm doing the bulk of that work then. Then I take a two or three hour break because I like long lunches. I like to relax a little bit. I'll cook myself a nice lunch, chill out. I might go for a run and then it's washing up time and then getting back to work. And I'll probably work again from roughly kind of half two three ish till about six or seven, depending on whether I need to cook dinner that night, or if my wife's cooking, then we kind of changed the times. Then on the other days, like Thursdays, Fridays, they're pretty, they're basically just calls, podcast recordings, podcast appearances, and admin. But I won't ever try to do creative work on those days because I can't do it. And that took me a long time to figure out. It took me a long time to figure out that actually getting into the flow state for writing and researching and interviewing people like doing those tasks on the same day, just wasn't going to work when I was also having to do calls.

35:44 MI: I do the exact same thing. I am the same way. I have what I call "call days" and "no call days." Because what you're saying, it's really hard to separate for me. It's the strategy work, and I need big pockets of time to write a strategy plan, to think strategically. And it's just really hard for me to do that on days like today, where when I'm recording podcasts and I'm talking and recording video, and they're just very different parts of the brain type activities. And I find it easier when you separate it.

36:14 NJ: So much. Like Monday I was doing keyword research for a client and I worked from like nine ish to about seven and I had about 45 minutes off for lunch. Not because I have to get back to it just because I was thinking of ideas all the time. And I was really enjoying myself, but I didn't open my email. I didn't talk to anybody. I wasn't on any social media or anything like that. And I just worked through, because I was like, I'm making such good progress with this. I'm happy. I wouldn't have been able to do that. And I know myself well enough that I'd never have been able to do that if I had to stop like every two hours to answer an email or to jump on a call with somebody, I just wouldn't be able to do it. I know myself well enough.

37:04 MI: Yeah. I realized that early on in freelance. I was like, there's no way. I've got to separate these two because trying to do everything is like, I couldn't focus on anything. Because you're so split in your brain, there's too many things going on and those types of things. So I definitely think that those are all really great tips. What are you most excited about that's up and coming for you this year?

37:24 NJ: It is a very different year for me. I'm in an incredibly fortunate position. It's an amount of hard work, but a lot of luck as well, like a tremendous amount of luck, but I'm in the position where the agency only takes up three or four hours of my time a month, but returns to me the equivalent of a full-time salary in the UK. So I am able to concentrate and be more specific about the projects that I take on. The type of clients that I work with. And also how much of the time I want to balance on my client's work versus my own projects and businesses as well. So for me this year is about transitioning from this freelance mentality, which is if I don't work, I don't get paid. Essentially, because I am in the business of - How do I create something where I have equity and that potentially earns me while I'm sleeping or while I'm away on holiday and working out what it looks like? So whether that's setting up a community, whether that's running courses, whether that's creating, I dunno, using new code tools to

create software. I don't know, to be honest. We're at the start of this year. I've done a few interviews for startups to become their CMO. Ultimately I've not found one that I want to work with in terms of the amount of time that they need from me versus the equity and salary considerations as well. But this year for me is moving into that phrase that I hate, but I haven't found a better phrase for it. Passive income. So stuff that essentially isn't tied to your output. You almost create it once and it's from that Jack Butcher, phrase build once, sell twice.

39:35 MI: Love it. That's so great. Well, thank you so much for joining the show today. We were thrilled to have you, where can listeners find you?

39:42 NJ: Yeah. So, it's Nelson-Jordan.com is my website or you can find the Working from Home Podcast. Just go on Spotify, or YouTube or, iTunes, Apple podcasts, wherever you want to find it. It's there. So that's the Working From Home podcast, or if you want to work with me, if you're an ecom or SaaS business and you want to work on your content strategy and creation, then Nelson-Jordan.com. We're here in the UK.

40:20 MI: Great. Well again, thank you so much for coming on today.

40:23 NJ: Thank you so much for having me.