



Freelance Writing Questions

I get a lot of emails from people who want to know how to get started as a freelance writer. It's one of my favourite topics and I never mind giving a few tips. My advice is based on more than 20 years in the writing business. I have worked as a reporter, sub-editor, and more. In my role as an editor, a few years later, I worked with a lot of staff writers and freelancers. I've given advice to journalism students, and I've had the chance to see how that worked out. Most importantly, I've done it myself, making the switch from being an employee to being a successful freelancer.

It's been a couple of years since I published my first set of tips for freelance writers. Rather than force people to browse the archives, I thought I'd start again, giving tips with the benefit of hindsight. I plan to blog about the process I followed to raise my profile as a freelance writer and get steady writing work. I'm not saying I know it all. In fact, I learn every day from the writers I work with.

Because of that, I don't just want to blog about what *I* think new writers need to know, but about what they *actually* want to know. So I'm inviting readers to post their questions here – and bookmark this post in case you think of something later. I will answer all the questions that I can – or draft in some of my freelance writing buddies to answer the others. I know that some people are shy about asking questions in an open forum. If that's you, use the contact form to send your question directly to me. Looking forward to hearing from you. And, hey, if you're an experienced writer just looking to compare notes on how I do stuff with your own methods, that's ok too.

Setting Rates

One aspect of freelancing that always stymies new writers is how to set the right rate for the freelance writing job. In fact,

even experienced writers who are bidding on a new area might have difficulty. A post the other day on [rates for blog posting](#) provoked some discussion. There are a few resources that I use when trying to decide what rate to charge for writing.

Writing Rates In Canada

If you want an easy ready reckoner, then check out Writers.Ca, which has a rundown on [professional rates](#) for different types of writing. Writers.ca admits that there are large discrepancies between the rates offered depending on location and experience but it is a good starting point. It's also close enough to US rates to be useful to American writers (or those who write for American clients, like me 😊)

Writing Rates In The US

The National Writer's Union provides detailed information on rates actually paid for writing through an online database. The catch is that you have to be a member to get the latest information. However, you can see what writers were being [paid in 1999](#), and the NWU even tells you how to work out what that should equate to today. [Writer's Market](#) also gives guidelines, but this information is now available only to members.

Writing Rates In The UK

For UK writers, the National Union of Journalists provides two great resources. The [freelance fees guide](#) gives the NUJ's suggested minimums for several types of journalistic work. However, it's also worth checking out the [rate for the job](#) database, which shows what freelancers are actually earning for the writing they do. That database is updated regularly.

Finally, if none of these resources helps you, use your research skills and see what other writers are charging for particular types of writing. Take their rates as a guide, look at their samples and see whether your experience and skills will allow you to charge more, less or the same. Take an average across a couple of sites for best results.

Finally, as a follow up to my recent post on writing [income](#), there are two more posts to read. One is from the Web Content

Copywriting blog on [Setting Writer Rates](#). See also Rachel Kaufman's post on [negotiating writing rates](#).

Why Go Freelance?

[Last week](#) I invited you to ask your questions about freelancing. I got a great response, with several questions to answer. [Rachel](#) asked why I decided to go freelance.

For me, the decision was relatively easy. I didn't realise how essential writing was to my well being till I stopped doing it every day. I was writing mostly academic stuff and I wanted to get back to regular writing.

On the face of it, it was a crazy decision. I had a good job as a lecturer, with a decent salary and flexible hours. Why give that security up for the uncertainty of freelancing?

My Reasons For Freelancing

I had two main reasons. First, lecturing was demanding, and it meant that I didn't spend as much time with my baby daughter as I wanted to. Freelancing was one way to be able to set my own hours, more or less. I was able to freelance half the week while my daughter was in daycare, and do mother and baby groups for the rest of the week.

Second, I wasn't happy not writing. When I went freelance, I knew I had made the right decision, because I was doing what I loved. I enjoyed getting up every day, even if I didn't have that many writing commissions at the start.

Other Reasons For Freelancing

So those were my reasons. Many freelancers say they go freelance because:

- they can't bear not to write
- they want to see if they can make a living from what they love
- they are trying to balance work and home life
- they don't enjoy the office environment
- they want to work for themselves.

All of these are great reasons to feel the urge to go freelance. However, whether you *should* go freelance just for these reasons is a question I'll answer later.

Now it's your turn. I know that a lot of you have faced this issue – what were your reasons for deciding to go freelance?

When Should You Go Freelance?



In my last post in this series I answered [Rachel's](#) question about [why I decided to freelance](#). However, wanting to go freelance doesn't necessarily mean it's a good idea to just jump ship and do it. Rachel also asked: '*Should a young freelancer like myself try to get a stable job so I can stop paying for my own health insurance?*' Only you will know when stability outweighs the other benefits of freelancing, but here's my story.

Paving The Way

When I decided to go freelance, I planned it carefully. Since I was teaching, I had to leave at the start of the summer, but I was still officially employed until the end of the summer, which meant that although I was freelancing, I was still getting paid. That gave me a useful financial cushion.

Since I knew that I couldn't guarantee my earnings for the first few months, I arranged with my former employers to do some part time teaching. That worked well, because I did it all in one day a week and got enough to make some contribution to the household income.

In addition, my DH was working, which meant the household was not dependent on my income alone (the balance shifted later, but by then I was making a decent living).

The Part Time Route

Not everyone can manage to achieve all these things. That's why a sensible route for some people is to write part time until it's clear that they are successful enough to leave their jobs. That can work, but if you have a full time job and young children, then making the switch can prove a challenge. Some mums that I know have used their maternity leave to manage a career change. Since they are not at work anyway, they don't feel the financial pinch as much as they might when giving up a full time job.

Planning Is Key

To my mind, planning for the transition is one of the most important things you can do before freelancing full time. You need to be aware of the minimum income you need to keep things ticking over and any time constraints that might keep you from being fully productive. Having some money saved up will help to tide you over the slow period at the start. Check

out my other thoughts on this issue in [Is It Time To Quit The Day Job?](#)

Going Back To A Job

Here's another in the series of questions on freelancing. [Rachel](#) asked me: Do you ever think about going back to being an employee? She also asked about the benefits of freelancing. While the benefits are different for different people, here's what I get from freelancing:

- I work for myself. That means I don't have to answer to bad bosses or sit next to colleagues with BO (yes, it really happened).
- My hours are flexible. I can take time off to have coffee with friends, hit the shops, go to the beach.
- I can pick my daughter up from school every afternoon and get her first impressions of her day. I can sit with her while she does homework and play with her in the afternoon.
- I love to write, so I can't think of a better job.

So the short answer to whether I would think of going back to employment is no, but I also enjoy teaching, so I would consider doing part time teaching (no more than a day a week).

Finally, although freelancing has many benefits, I don't see it through rose tinted glasses. Although I work for myself, I also work for my clients. If I don't do a good job, that harms my reputation. I am more responsible for both my successes and failures than I was when I was in a job. That also means that sometimes those flexible hours aren't so flexible when I have deadlines to meet.

Creating A Writing Business

If you're going to write for a living, then you need to put your writing life on a business footing. That doesn't mean giving up the pleasure of writing; it just means that you need to take it seriously and get others to do the same. So how do you transform your writing from a hobby into a business?

Professional Presentation

One of the first things to do is to present yourself professionally. These days, that means having a decent [website](#) that includes:

- your name and contact details (either an email address or a contact form)
- a resume or CV which shows your education and writing background
- some samples of work
- some real testimonials
- a photo and some text about you that makes you human
- your rates (this is optional; not all writers do it)

That's only the beginning. Once you've got an online presence (I always recommend that you buy your own domain), it's time to let people know. You can do this by optimizing your website and promoting your site through article marketing.

Create Some Profiles

Next, set up profiles at some of the major freelancing sites. I love the profile features at [Ifreelance](#). Although I don't take many projects from there, it has been invaluable as a promotional tool. There are many other freelancing sites out there. It's up to you to find the one that works best for you. Whichever you choose, remember to include a link to your website and to your best work.

Subscribe to the feeds of the major sites that offer freelance writing jobs. Use a feed reader or have the latest job listings come directly to your inbox. This means that you'll be able to bid for jobs as soon as they are posted.

Writing Samples

Prepare some samples that match the kind of writing jobs you are looking for. It will save time when prospective clients ask you to show what you can do. In my samples folder, I have a 'how to' article about blogging, an article on consumer finance and another on real estate. However, my website has links to articles on parenting, blogging, education and all sorts of other areas we have covered.

I haven't talked about equipment yet. You'll need a computer with a decent internet connection, a word processing program, a spreadsheet or accounting program for tracking your writing work and finances and some equipment for recording interviews. I also find it handy to have a desk diary or online calendar for keeping track of deadlines.

I'm not claiming that this list is exhaustive. Writers will have additions that they can't do without. However, this setup works for me. What did you find essential when you moved your freelance writing from being a hobby to being a business?

Starting Out In Freelance Writing

Why aren't you writing yet? A lot of people dream of starting a freelance writing career, but never get around to doing it. One of the reasons is that they fall in love with the dream of writing, but find the reality hard to achieve. So what's the first thing you should do if you want to be a writer? The answer is simple – it's to write.

I don't mean to sound like a know-it-all, but I can tell you from my own experience that the more I write, the better I get at writing. One of my former students, SB, a mature student of around 50 looking for a new career, said that telling him to write was the best advice I'd given him in two years of teaching him journalism.

There's a lot you can learn from journalism courses about techniques and approaches, but that's only a complement to your own writing skill – and the only way to develop that is to write.

Getting Started

So, how do you get started? First of all, don't worry when you start about whether your writing is any good or not. The important thing is to have an idea and follow through by getting something down on paper. You may throw it away, but psychologically you will have taken a big step.

Find a publication that you want to write for and study it (I'll talk more about that in another post). This will help you to identify important elements about the content and style. Then try to write something again.

Finding A Critical Friend

One thing many beginning writers need is a critical friend. That means someone who can critique your work in a constructive way, but who has your best interests at heart. When I started out, my editor was critical, though not my friend. Other people have given work the thumbs up because they are friends, but have not been critical. The trick is to find someone who will strike the balance between being encouraging and helping you to improve.

This was what I did for SB and for all my students. I was thrilled when he got his first paid writing commission, and within six months or so, he didn't need my help as often. You can do that too. Your critical friend might be a member of your local writing group or a forum. Ideally, this person should have a bit more experience, so that you can ask specific questions about the writing process and particular skills. Don't worry if you can't find such a person, you can always [ask me](#) – and I'll be happy to answer.

On The Path To Success

You can become a successful writer. My student, SB, who had not written or published a piece of journalism when I met him, was writing and publishing in several magazines in his chosen niche within a year, and also did some PR work in a government department. So start writing and you'll have taken the first step in achieving freelance writing success.

Avoiding Scams

Give me my money! That's what most freelancers want to say when they have done a piece of work but have not been paid. When you freelance, there's always the chance that you might fall victim to a seasoned scammer – there are lots of them about.

Three Freelance Writing Scams

Here are some of the potential scams:

- The 'sample' scam
- The 'this is urgent, so work with me' scam
- The 'I've got plenty of work and you'll get a better rate later scam'.

1. The Free Samples Scam



The free sample scam is one of the most common. If you apply for work through a bidding site or Craigslist, then this is the one that might affect you most. I often see job postings that say that applications without a sample won't be considered. If someone asks you to provide a sample, you might feel like you have no choice, especially if you're new to the game.

Some 'clients' ask several writers for one free sample each. This is a way for them to get all the articles they want free of charge. Frankly, it stinks! If you want quality writing, then you should be prepared to pay for it.

2. The Urgent Work Scam

I've fallen victim to the second scam before. My bad. The client approached me via my website, gave a payscale that wasn't great but was acceptable, and gave a time within which I would be paid. So I wrote the article. (Note to self: you KNOW better. ALWAYS ask for a deposit.) I don't know why I broke my own rule, but I didn't get paid for that one.

3. The Wait For Rates Scam

The third one is where clients try to persuade you to write 100 articles for \$100 (or less!) with the promise that there will be more, better paid work later. Don't hold your breath. They will move on to find someone equally gullible for the next batch of articles.

Avoiding Freelance Writing Scams

So what do you do to avoid falling victim to a scam and ending up out of pocket? First of all, beware of the client who wants you to write a large batch of articles without payment. If you are going to do a lot of work, you should get paid.

My policy is to ask for a 50 per cent deposit up front. Clients who are not willing to pay this usually melt away. I might lose out on a job, but it separates the clients who value my work from those who don't. Once a client becomes a regular, then I can afford to be a bit more flexible.

However, clients are within their rights to ask for proof that you can do the job. I approach this in one of two ways. Either I use something that I have already written and mention that it has already been sold, or I write a fresh sample and post it on my blog. That way I can use it to promote myself, even if I don't get paid. (Incidentally, that's what I plan to do with the last article I didn't get paid for.

Sending In The Heavies

No matter what you do, there's always the odd client who manages to escape your 'con artist antenna'. If you fall prey

to one of these people, then you have a couple of options. You can chalk it up to experience, you can report the client to [Preditors and Editors](#), or you can ask [Angela Hoy](#), who publishes Whispers and Warnings, to help you. This is the writing equivalent of calling in the muscle. Angela wrote to a client who owed me last year and he paid up straight away, so I'm a big fan.

Last Word: It's Not All Bad

One final note. If you're a newbie, you may be worried that there's a scammer around every corner. I don't think so. In the last three years, I have only lost out on payment for two articles, and only one of those payments is still outstanding. With a bit of care, you can avoid most of the scammers. And remember, if a job posting raises your BS antenna, then listen to your intuition and avoid it.

How To Bid Successfully

One of the mysteries for new freelance writers is how to bid for jobs. As a new writer, you often have no idea what to charge or what clients are looking for. Sure, you can write, but bidding is about selling yourself so you can get the chance to show your skills.

I'll say up front that I'm not speaking as a bidding expert. In the days when I used to apply for jobs, I used to have a near 100% success rate with landing interviews. Bidding is much harder, in part because the competition is even stiffer. Still, although I get a lot of my work from my other promotional efforts, I've managed to win bids when it has really counted. Here's what I've learned.

1. Choose Your Targets Wisely

OK; I'll admit that the more you bid, the more chance you have of getting a few wins, but there's no point in bidding for things that you are not qualified for. My most successful bids have been those where I have been able to bid with confidence because:

- I have done that type of work before
- I have published clips I can show
- I know the field well
- I know where to find relevant information

Here's a recent example. I happened to see a project on [GetAFreelancer](#) for someone to write some financial articles. It happened that I had written on this subject for other clients, knew the terminology and knew the sites that would make good sources. That meant that I matched the client's requirements; all I had to do was prove it.

2. Make A Match

In this instance, the client had a list of points that he needed bidders to address. They related to the subject matter, the keyword requirements, the type of English (UK) and the deadline. My bid addressed all of these issues. Here's what I said:

I am an expert keyword article writer. I have ghostwritten more than 150 articles on rent back, quick house sales and

repossession and I understand both the legal process and how to stop repossession with a quick house sale.

I will provide error free, Copyscape proofrewrites in UK English within the specified deadline. Please see my website (<http://sharonhurleyhall.com>) for further examples of my work and testimonials from my clients.

My bid is based on a rate of \$xx per article, which reflects my expertise in the topic. I look forward to working with you. My rewrite sample is pasted below.

As you can see, my bidding letter was very short. I highlighted:

- my expertise
- my knowledge of the client's target subject
- his requirements
- additional reasons to hire me
- the rate I required

My bid was a combination of selling myself generally as a writer (establishing my expertise and providing testimonials to support this) and showing how I could meet the client's needs.

3. Show What You Can Do

Sometimes clients want proof that you can do the job they plan to hire you for. It's true that sometimes this is a [scam](#), but at other times it's on the level. You'll learn to distinguish between the real cases and the BS. I've had to provide two samples recently. One was for the bid above; the other was for another site, which said that I would not be paid for the sample, but that I would own the copyright. Under those circumstances, I had no hesitation in writing the sample required. I saw it as an investment, which matured quickly when I got a paying gig.

4. Clarify The Brief

I find it useful to ask a lot of questions up front. Some things may seem small, but in my experience, the more you find out at the start of a project, the more likely it is that you will be able to deliver it successfully. In the GetAFreelancer project, I realised half way through that I would be short one article, so I asked the client if there were any keywords he wanted me to reuse. In fact, I communicated with him throughout the project, whenever I needed clarification. This kept things ticking over smoothly and he was happy at the end.

5. Deliver

Once you've followed those four steps, it's really up to the client. As writers, we are no longer in control. However, once you clinch the deal, then it's up to you to make it work for you. Deliver what was promised when it was promised and you will get good feedback, referrals and even more work. You'll also gain the confidence to make more successful bids.

How To Say Goodbye

As a freelance writer, you sometimes find yourself with a bad client relationship. It's not that the client is bad; it's just that you just can't reach an understanding. You know that things are going wrong because:

- you thought you understood the brief but the client doesn't like what you have written
- you didn't understand the brief, but your requests for clarification leave you none the wiser
- the brief was clear but your client wanted something that wasn't in the brief.

In any of these situations, you find yourself with work where you have to do so many revisions that it just isn't worth it, or with a client who rejects the work you have spent so much time on and flatly refuses to pay. So, what do you do?

Clients Have Rights ...

Let me say that I think clients are entitled to ask for revisions, within reason. If they give a clear brief and I make a mistake, I am happy to revise it. If I spot a typo, I am happy to correct it. Even if the brief isn't quite clear and revisions are needed, I am happy to do them. However, when the list of revisions gets longer and longer and the client is impossible to please, you know that you're going to lose money.

... But So Do Writers

Sometimes you just have to fire the client. This isn't something that I do lightly. I always try to deliver what the client wants. The clients I write for are generally happy, but occasionally there's one who isn't. Today I said goodbye to one of those.

This was a job that I subbed out, with the client's agreement, as she wanted an expert in a particular topic. The client finds it difficult to give a clear brief. The first time I worked for her she rejected the article, which ticked all the boxes on the brief. I did a revision, but told her I would have to charge more for future commissions because of the extra work her articles needed.

She disappeared for a while, resurfaced and gave us a new job. These were a couple of articles which she accepted and paid for. Then a few days ago, she brought a new job to me. I got the brief, tried to piece together what she wanted and got the writer to do the article. Again, it ticked all the boxes, but the client obviously wanted something that wasn't in the brief, because she complained again.

At this point I had to decide whether it was worth persisting with this relationship. I communicate clearly and am pretty savvy with client briefs. All of a sudden I had a flash forward to dozens of articles which were more trouble than they were worth. I consulted with the writer, who felt as I did. It was time to say goodbye.

Taking Action

I then refunded the advance that the client had paid by Paypal and wrote her a short, but courteous note, which went something like this:

Dear Client

I really feel that I have supplied you with a well written article that covers the points in your brief. I realise that we seem to have a communication difficulty. Obviously my understanding of the brief does not match your requirements. Rather than go round in circles and nit pick on every single point, I have refunded the money you paid me as we seem to

be on completely different wavelengths. I wish you success with your venture.

I am still waiting for her reply. In the end I realised that this was one client relationship that wasn't worth pursuing. Not only was it taking more time than the job was worth, but it was potentially jeopardising my relationship with one of my colleagues. Finally, in the long run, it wouldn't do me any good to have an unhappy client, whether it was my fault or hers.
