



# Making It As A Freelance Writer

It can be tough getting started in freelancing. Here's a short series of tips to help you.

## Tip #1 – Structure

Making it as a freelance writer is not easy, especially if you haven't been published before. However, with a bit of persistence you can be successful. Here's a tip to get you started.

As a minimum, you should know how to structure a news story or feature article. With news writing, you'll need to include the who, what, where, why, when and how of the story. If you're writing a feature, you'll need to flesh the story out a bit and tell it in an interesting way – and in the way that's most appropriate for the readers you're trying to reach. After all, you'd write very different stories for the *New York Times* and the *Surfing Times*, wouldn't you?

Make sure you have the right equipment: telephone and mobile phone; PC or laptop; a dictaphone or other recorder for recording interviews; a printer and a scanner. A [digital camera](#) is also useful, as you'll be able to take pictures to go along with your article.

## Tip #2 – Ideas

As a freelance writer, ideas are your bread and butter: keep having them. Have you got any interests, hobbies or obsessions? Has anything unusual happened to your friends or members of your family? These are all good starting points for writing articles. Look for work in new magazines that don't have established links with freelancers. They are more likely to give new writers a chance.

## Tip #3- Take It Seriously

It sounds ideal, doesn't it? Freelance writing lets you work from home, set your own schedule and still have lots of time to see the bight match. Sorry, but freelancing is not an excuse to have lots of snack breaks or sit in the garden. Treat it like a job. Set some time aside each day to look at newspapers

and magazines, look at job sites and, most importantly, do some writing. Keep copies of your articles, of correspondence (whether email or snail mail) and of all relevant bills so you can claim any tax relief or expenses due to you. If you take freelancing seriously, you might be able to make some money from your writing.

## Tip #4- Groundwork

As a new freelance writer, how do you get an editor to give you a try? Once you've decided which magazine or newspaper you want to write for, you'll need to do some research. Read the magazine or paper to see what kinds of articles they publish so you can suggest articles that you think might be appropriate. Look in the archives to make sure your idea hasn't been written before. Send a query to the editor (by email or snail mail depending on his or her preference) suggesting that you write the article. Do a bit of legwork (by phone) and find out the editor's name so you can address your query to the right person. I'll give more detail on the query in the next tip.

## Tip #5 – Be A Tease

You're a freelance writer and you think you've got a killer idea for a magazine or newspaper article. You've identified the person to address your query to. How do you nail that writing commission? By writing the perfect query letter. It's the first chance an editor has to appreciate your writing skill – and if you don't get it right, it might be the last.

Your query should lead the editor into your article. My advice is to write the lead and then say how you would develop the story. Remember to include any information about specialist sources you may have access to or areas of expertise that you are particularly qualified to write about. This will help to convince the editor that you are serious. However, don't give away so much of your material that the editor can commission someone else to write the article. Think of the extras you can provide – sending photos and material for sidebars will make the editor's life easier.

Remember to keep the query short, ideally a page (two at most). Editors are busy people – your query should be a teaser to entice them to give you that all-important commission.

## Tip #6 – Get Paid

When an editor agrees to hire you to write an article, try to get the details of the commission in writing. If the editor won't send you a letter confirming the details of the writing assignment, then you send one confirming the agreement you've made. That way, you'll have some comeback if there's a query later.

Once you've got that freelance writing commission, be professional and deliver on time. If you let an editor down once, you won't be hired again.

Finally, if you want to get paid on time, find out who's responsible for paying you (it may be an accounting department rather than the editor) so you can send your invoice in as soon as the work is delivered.

A final word of advice, though. Some editors will try to use your inexperience as an excuse not to pay you for your writing. Remember, if your article is good enough to go in the magazine, it's good enough for an editor to pay you. Don't work for nothing unless it's absolutely unavoidable.

Good luck!

## Tip #7 – Copyrights and copy wrongs

As a freelance writer, you'll need to be aware of the legal protection your work enjoys so you don't sign away rights that you should retain. Here are some key aspects of UK copyright law you should be aware of.

In the UK, copyright is an automatic and unregistered right. That means there's no need to apply specially or fill in any forms. Copyright takes effect as soon as protected material is produced. Copyright protected material is known as works and there are nine types of work that are automatically protected. These are literary work (including newspaper articles), dramatic, musical, artistic (photos, drawings, diagrams, maps etc), sound recordings, films, broadcasts, cable programmes and published editions of works.

In order for material to have copyright protection it has to result from independent intellectual effort. In other words, you must have put some work into it. You'll need to be able to prove this if challenged, so although it's not obligatory, you can protect yourself by sending a copy of your work to yourself by recorded delivery and leaving the envelope unopened. Recorded delivery post is date stamped so you'll be able to prove that your work existed on a particular date.

Copyright lasts for the duration of the author's life plus 70 years for literary, dramatic or musical works. Different periods apply for films (70 years after the last to die of the director, screenplay authors and musical director), sound recordings (50 years) and published editions (25 years). People are allowed to publish excerpts from your copyrighted work for the purpose of news, review or criticism. This is known as

fair dealing. Works used in this way should be properly acknowledged.

More on copyright in the next tip.

## Tip #8 – Copyright: rent, don't sell

Copyright protected works are known as intellectual property. Intellectual property is a bit like real estate – it can be bought, sold, transferred and inherited, though only with your written permission.

The key thing to remember as a freelance writer is that ideas themselves are not protected but the way ideas are expressed is protected. So if you think of an idea for an article, that isn't protected; when you write it, it is. It's the information you select and the way you arrange it that makes it unique.

When you give someone the right to publish your writing, you are assigning that right temporarily (a bit like renting out your house). As a writer, you'll want to avoid signing away any of your rights permanently. Instead, be clear on what rights you are assigning. First serial rights are normal. This gives the publisher the right to publish your material first in whatever country or region (for example, the UK or US) the rights apply to. Once the material has been published, all rights revert to you. Some publishers will also request online rights and the right to keep your work in an online archive. You'll want to make sure these rights are for a limited period or are non-exclusive, so you can make the most of your material.

A key term to be aware of is moral right. This is the right to be credited as the author (have a byline) and to object to alterations or errors which might damage your reputation (known as derogatory treatment of your work). It also includes the right not to have work falsely attributed to you. In other words, no one should say you wrote something if you didn't.

So what do you do if someone tries to pass off something you've written as their own work? If your copyright has been breached you can take the infringer to court and try to get any offending material seized or destroyed. However, there are two things that could damage your case. The first is if the person commits innocent infringement, which means the person genuinely didn't know you owned the copyright; the second is if you have previously allowed someone to use copyrighted work without complaint. This is known as acquiescence.

## Tip #9 – The Art of the Interview

As a freelance writer, if you want to be published in a magazine or newspaper, sooner or later you'll have to talk to someone. Sorry, but journalism is not about sitting in a dark room and making up stories in your head. If that's what you want to do, write novels or short stories and use blogging as a publishing outlet.

People want to read about other people, so if you want to write a really interesting article, you'll have to learn how to do a good interview.

Preparation is key. You should go into an interview having researched your topic or interviewee and should already have a good idea

of the answers you are likely to get. You should also have prepared a list of questions you'll need to ask. At the very least, these should include the who, where, what, why, when and how of the story (I'll look at these in more detail in a future tip). Your question list should also include any facts that you need to check.

Having said all that, be prepared to go with the flow. If your interviewee goes off at a tangent, let her (or him). But make sure you've asked all the relevant questions before you leave the table. While it is professional to check any facts you are unsure of later, it is unprofessional to conduct a whole new interview over the phone. After all, you had your chance.

How you handle the interview will depend on the time allocated and the interviewee's personality. If the person is warm, friendly and used to being interviewed, you can wade straight in with the difficult questions. If you've got more time or your interviewee is nervous, start with the easy, fact-checking questions before moving on to more difficult issues. Remember to listen to the answers so you can decide when or if to change direction.

I always ask people how to spell their names, mostly because I have a terrible memory, but it's a good discipline.

Make sure you have a recording device (with spare batteries and power cable), a notebook and a couple of pens. Use both the notebook and the recording device, so you don't come away with nothing in the event of a technical failure. This has happened to me before and my article was much weaker because I couldn't quote directly.

Three final points: ask open-ended questions, rather than yes/no questions. You'll get more information that way. Establish whether anything that's talked about is off the record (I usually say that if they don't want it printed, they shouldn't tell me). Most importantly, don't be afraid to look stupid. It's better to show your ignorance in front of the interviewee than in print.

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## Tip#10 – Getting the evidence

In the previous tip, I suggested that freelance writers have a recording device and a notebook at every interview. These are basic tools for any writer.

Recording devices are relatively easy. In the old days you used a tape recorder. Now you can choose from a range of devices, including minidisk recorders, mp3 recorders and digital dictaphones. My choice at the moment is my [Palmone Liferdrive](#), because it has a whopping 4GB of storage and I can transfer recordings onto a Secure Digital (SD) card and from there onto my computer. That makes it easy to back up recordings. The reason for recording is twofold. Not only does it help you to remember what happened, but it's a good backup in case of any challenge from the interviewee. That is

not as rare as you might think. When I was writing articles as a staff writer, occasionally someone would ask to see the article before it went to print. Our policy was always that interviewees were allowed to check for factual errors only. But many people would see something they didn't like and claim that they'd never said it. My response was always: 'That's strange, because I've got it on tape. Would you like to hear it?' Nothing like having the evidence to make people back down from a fake claim.

A more difficult decision for a freelance writer is which notetaking system to use. Once upon a time, reporters were trained in shorthand, of which there are two main varieties. Pitman's is the one with all the squiggles. I've tried and failed to learn this. Some people can do squiggles, others can't – and I'm one of the latter. A slightly easier system is Teeline shorthand, where the characters are based on real writing. I don't know this one either, but it's probably the one I would recommend learning if you're starting out.

Since I went into journalism via a language degree, I never learned either system and had to rely on my own note taking system, using semi-phonetic spelling and abbreviations that would only make sense to me (abbrevs that wd only mk sense 2 me). You will need a system because there's no other way to get down what people say verbatim. I did have a thought recently, though. In the last few years I've sent more and more SMS messages on my mobile phone. As this involves shortened forms of words, maybe that's the way forward for note-taking. What do you think?

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## Tip#11 – But First, The News

In the very first tip in this series I talked briefly about structuring articles. Now it's time to go into that process in a bit more detail, starting with news stories. In many ways, news stories are the building blocks of journalistic writing – and they're quite useful for other forms as well. That's because when you write something, you're telling a story to your readers. A good news story is the simplest way to do that.

Most journalism theory describes news story structure as an inverted pyramid (or, as I explained to some of my spatially challenged students, an upside down triangle). Apparently, this goes back to the dark days before desktop publishing and digital printing, when newspapers were laid out by a method known as 'cut and paste'. In order to edit a story, you had to literally cut bits out. It therefore made sense for the most important parts of the story to be at the top.

Because of this, the key part of your story is the intro or lead. This should contain the key elements (known variously as the 5Ws, 5Ws+H or 6Ws). The lead of a news story should tell the reader who is involved, what happened, where it happened, when it happened and how and why it happened. If you don't include those elements, you have no story.

Brevity is another key feature of news stories, so you should be able to cover those elements in two or three short sentences, which would make up the first couple of paragraphs of the story (as laid out in a typical newspaper). You then need to continue writing. Not surprisingly, there's a handy acronym for this, too. It's called the WHAT formula: what happened,

how did it happen, amplify the introduction and tie up loose ends.

Amplifying the introduction means saying more about the elements mentioned in the intro. This is where you put in any relevant background information. This will vary depending on the angle of your story, so I won't attempt to give examples. Just have a look at your local newspaper and you should get the idea. Once you've included all of this you need to follow the last part of the WHAT formula and tie up loose ends. This means reading your story to see if there's anything you've left out and checking to make sure that readers won't be left with any questions when they've read it.

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## Tip #12- Feature Attractions

Many people who decide on the freelance writing life are thinking of writing for magazines. If that's you, then you'll need to know something about feature writing.

Most feature articles do at least one of four things:

Feature articles have almost as many structures as there are writers. Throw out the inverted pyramid common to news stories or, better yet, turn it upside down, so that your story is building to a big finish.

Features are stories and should have a beginning, a middle and an end. Think about what you want to say and arrange it in a logical order (not necessarily chronological), so you lead the reader along the path you have in mind.

As with news stories, the intro (lead) is vital. This is what will draw your readers in. You can start with an example, an anecdote, a scene-setter or a quote from someone you've interviewed - anything that will grab the reader's attention. I once started a feature on the YWCA with the fact that the leader of the Oxford branch had a buzz-cut and roller-skated into work. This is not common in the UK. The intro establishes your authority as a writer to inform the reader "don't waste that opportunity."

The middle of your story will contain the bulk of the information, anecdotes, quotes, assessment and analysis, depending on the type of feature article you are writing. This is a good place to include any useful statistics. If you've interviewed someone, use their words where possible to tell the story. This will make it lively and engaging.

Endings should also be planned and shouldn't be left to chance. This is your last opportunity to impress your reader. You may want to make a contrast with the intro (which should NOT be repeated) or to include a relevant quotation.

Once you've written the story, read it back to yourself to see if it flows or if there are any loose ends to tie up.

Don't worry if you've got additional information that didn't fit in the main story. This is the perfect chance to impress an editor. Editors are always looking for added value, so any sidebars or tables a freelance writer can provide will earn brownie points.

I'll be looking at feature types and feature preparation in more detail in future tips.

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## Tip #13 — Keep It Fresh

As a freelance writer, your words need to be fit for purpose. One of the ways you can ensure this is by doing adequate research into your target publication. What does the publication claim to be about? Who does it say it caters for? How many people does it reach? Those questions are a good starting point, but you should also ask a few more.

How old are the publication's readers? What's their education level? Are they mostly men, women or children? Most of this information can be obtained from the publication's own website or via a bit of judicious googling.

Having found this information, you'll then be in a position to write appropriately for your target audience.

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## Tip#14 — Press Here

Whether you're publicising your own services or doing a writing job for someone else, as a freelance writer you're likely to be asked to write a press release at some time. Here are the basics of what you need to know.

What is a press release?

A press release is essentially a news story written to interest a specific publication or audience. It consists of three main parts: the headline, the introduction and the body. There may also be a note to editors at the end of the story which contains extra information for those not familiar with your organisation or product.

As with a news story, the intro (lead) is crucial and the facts that you want to organize should answer the who, what, where, when, why questions, right from the start. The press release should sound like a news story, with short sentences and paragraphs. Your story needs a clear angle, and no loose ends.

How do I decide what to put in a press release?

News is essentially about people, as Harold Evans says in *The Practice of Journalism*:

"news is people. It is people talking and people doing. Committees and cabinets and courts are people; so are fires, accidents and planning decisions. They are only news because they involve and affect people."

It is therefore important to stress the people aspect of your story.

Four other techniques you can use are:

- controversy – examples could include attacking a government decision, making a prediction about the future or suggesting a new policy
- conflict – examples include price cuts, fighting for an elected office or a battle for market share
- novelty value – describe a coincidence, a chance event or a surprising statistic.

- empathy – show how your product can help the reader, a survey on issues that concern people, provide tips to handling a common problem.

A successful press release should be:

- relevant to the people it is sent to
- focused: that is, correctly targeted
- timely: fitting in with the publication deadlines of the organization you're sending it to
- readable: if it bores the person who does the initial read, the chances of getting it published are slim
- presented in the right format.

Most of all a press release should be news.

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## Tip #15 — Keep In Touch

If you're a freelance writer, then you need contacts. Contacts are either people who can give you stories or people who can give you work. Let's have a look at these in more detail.

Contacts who can give you stories

Many of the stories in magazines are spin-offs of events that have made the news. For example, when deep-veined thrombosis hit the news a few years ago, the magazines were full of tales of sufferers, investigations into legroom on airlines and a few stories of those who had actually died after a long-haul flight. My point is that the people that you would get in touch with for news stories will also be able to give you good leads for writing feature articles. So, who are these people, anyway?

Media research shows that most reporting is based on a limited range of sources. The main ones include politicians and government officials, the courts, the emergency services (police, ambulance, fire) and hospitals, the representatives of local businesses and industries and the unions. Other good places to look for information are schools and universities, churches, local clubs and societies, the military and national pressure groups and charities.

Much of the information that will spark a feature idea comes in the form of a press release, saying what that organisation or individual is planning. These days, most press releases are available on the internet (often on the organisation's or individual's own website), and are therefore relatively easy to find. Press releases usually have a name, number or email of someone you can contact for further information. Once you've actually got past the PR person to the person who has the information you want, try to get their direct number and email and make a note of it. The next time you've got a similar subject to cover, you've got a ready-made, friendly source.

As a writer, your contacts book is one of your most valuable resources. Be obsessive about collecting contact details for people you meet or speak to, even if you can't see how they will be useful. You never know when a chance encounter will lead to something useful. A former colleague of mine overheard a conversation and was able to break a story about a company that was up for sale. So make sure you get email addresses, web

addresses and phone numbers (as well as physical addresses and fax numbers, just in case). Keep in touch with your contacts (a friendly email every so often) so that your name stays in their mind.

Contacts who can give you work

You should collect the same details for people who might be able to hire you. If you belong to writer's forums or if you blog, then you'll probably get lots of leads from other writers who have found places that are hiring. Even if they don't want what you're looking for right now, keep the details so that you can query about other writing. Again, you never know where the next commission is going to come from. My most recent paying gig came from one of my ex-students who wanted me to review a charity concert he'd organised. A few hours listening to music, food laid on and I got paid fairly for my 500-word review. Now, that can't be bad, can it?

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