

\$40,000 A Year In "Editorial Services"

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\$40,000 A Year In "Editorial Services"

WHAT ARE "EDITORIAL SERVICES"

When I started out as a freelance writer the market for such services was a bit different than today. Most freelance writing then was "on spec" - you wrote something, a story or an article, then peddled it. If a publisher bought it, he or she provided editing, typemarking, payout, and other services to prepare it for production. Once the publisher bought it, you were finished with it.

Today there is an entirely different market for freelance writers, an enormous business market. You don't (usually) get bylined, and you don't write best sellers - but you don't work on spec, either, and you don't starve in a garret. You get paid for everything you write because you write to order, at an agreed-upon price, which you have set or negotiated. And you can work this entire market or you can specialize in segments of it, as you wish. (Most of us begin by working the entire market until we finally get into some specialized segment, for one reason or another.)

Why then, do I refer to "editorial services" in my title, rather than to freelance writing? Simply for these reasons:

Frequently, you do rewrites of someone else's bad or incomplete writing. But the client is reluctant to admit, even to him- or herself, that he or she doesn't write at all well. You are therefore advised by the client that all that is needed is a "little editing". However, since you are going to be paid on the basis of whatever your time is worth, what do you care what the work is called?

In some cases, what is needed is editing, proofing, typemarking, layout, and/or other such editorial services. Again, if the client is willing to pay you what you ask for your time, what do you care what the specific editorial work is?

In most, if not all of this market, writing assignments do often require more than writing itself. You may be called on to help conceive and plan the piece, analyze/identify/define the need, advise about printing or illustrating, etc. It is in your interest to be a general expert on most aspects of publishing paper used in business - brochures, proposals, reports, theses, speeches, presentations, publicity releases, storyboards, scripts, and many other kinds of written communications.

Learning and using all the related skills means earning a great deal more money. So while I may talk of writing throughout this

report, please interpret that to mean all the spectrum of writing, editing, and publication production services required to accomplish your client's aim and to earn you your fees.

HOW IT HAPPENED

I decided, at the ripe old age of 12, that I would be a writer. I had rather vague ideas, at the time, of just what a writer was and did. I didn't really envision myself as a great novelist or playwright; I hadn't come that far in my thinking yet. All I knew was that I enjoyed explaining myself in writing.

Ultimately, a few years later, I discovered the writers' magazines. (There were several of them, three prominent, "the big league" ones, and a few minor ones.) I began to read them regularly and to absorb from them, while I continued to practice on a beat up old portable for which I had somehow managed to scrounge up the money needed to buy it. Once in a while - once in a great while - I sold something. It wasn't much money, but it was satisfaction to have my name in the press and some of my work worthy of purchase. It was vindication of my claim to be a writer.

I managed to get in a little newspaper experience, doing some writing chores for a large city daily and, later, for a couple of U.S. Army newspapers during my WWII service. I even managed to win a few prizes in writing contests.

Eventually, with my continuing education as a writer, I discovered the trade press, and began to sell a bit more frequently, although at such low rates that I could not yet earn my living at freelancing, despite the occasional major sale, such as a book for \$4,000. But that was not often enough, either. I was meeting just enough success to convince myself that I was, indeed, a writer. The trick was to learn how to earn a living at it.

With that, and eating on a reasonably regular basis in mind, I used the G.I. Bill to get an electronic engineering education. And that led me, eventually, directly into technical writing. I was beginning to get closer to my goal, earning a living at writing, although I was not yet ready freelance full time.

That introduced me to Government contract work, a valuable experience that I tucked away for future reference. Too, as a result of my technical-writing experience, I stumbled into the design and writing of training systems, which turned out to be also valuable experience, leading me to the management of writing and writers and into direct experience as a marketer and contractor to the federal government, first as an employee and later as a consultant and independent contractor.

The diversity of my earlier experiences proved to be a most valuable asset, an open-sesame to where I wanted to go: My years in working for and consulting with many major Government contractors - IBM, GE, RCA, and others - required me to go to whatever company had a major contract at the time. (That was where the job openings were!) This required me to become an expert writer of resumes, since they had to be constantly updated and oriented to the latest needs. And I was meanwhile learning how to write effective proposals, which proved to be quite a boon to my career, propelling me into a consulting career, which soon led to activities as a seminar leader and public speaker.

I finally had all the tools I needed to be a successful freelance business writer. I could write resumes, proposals, manuals, brochures, training programs, reports, and many other things but - most important - I knew where and how to find the work and what rates to charge.

Still, I didn't make the final move until an employer virtually forced me to by victimizing me so shabbily that I felt compelled to quit his employ immediately. And by now I was at a salary level that made it rather difficult to find an equivalent job quickly - one drawback of reaching above average levels in your field! So, while I considered my next move, I began to do some freelancing by calling a few people I knew to offer my services on a fee basis.

By the time I began to get some reasonably good job offers I had won enough freelance writing assignments to persuade me to turn down the offers and open an office in town. That was my preference, at the time; it was not and is not a necessity.

I had won my first assignment to write some proposals and a sales brochure for a company, which ultimately produced several thousand dollars for a few weeks' work. I also began to advertise a resume-writing service and won many clients for this at rates of from a low of about \$25 to about \$90, with an occasional one running as high as \$150, a good rate even in these later days. I also turned my attention to bidding for Government writing projects, usually small jobs of from about \$2,000 to \$5,000, although occasionally the projects were larger and ran to much higher figures.

Once firmly established, I began to think about another idea I had had for some time: what I regarded and referred to as freelance or "specialty" publishing: Printing and selling my own small how-to publications by mail. I soon learned that my idea was not original, as I had thought it to be, but already had many practitioners. (Of course, I soon added my own special fillips to it.) And so I became and am a freelance writer/editor/publisher, writing books and articles for

commercial publishers, still taking on an occasional customer-writing assignment, and still writing and selling my own little reports.

And you can do it too. You don't have to do it all or know how to do it all, and you don't have to make all the mistakes I made in learning, for I will pass on what I learned. Probably, armed with what I have to reveal to you now, you can do it better, faster, and probably with greater success than I did.

BUSINESS OR PROFESSION?

Freelance writing is a business. You may prefer to regard it as a profession, which it is also, of course. But all professionals in private practices - doctors, dentists, lawyers, architects, and others - must observe business principles and methods if they are to succeed. As a freelance writer you have expenses - office rent, for example, even if that office is a small room in your home. You have to spend part of your time finding assignments and making sales - marketing your business. That's a business expense too because you are paying for that time out of your own pocket. Actually, if you have a professional accountant keep your books for you, you will earn why you have to account for your own time as a business expense that you must pay yourself a salary, and that salary is not profit; it is cost. Any of that cost - portion of your salary that is not directly compensated by charges to a client for your time is part of your indirect or overhead cost. Remember that you will have to spend some part of your time in marketing and administration of your own enterprise, probably a third of your time, in fact. That time, as well as all other costs - rent, telephone, printing, automobile expenses, postage, etc - must be considered when you set your rates to clients.

PRICING YOUR WORK

Earning \$1000 for 80 hours' work does not mean that you can afford to pay yourself \$12.50 an hour. when you deduct all operating expenses, you may discover that you have not made even \$5 an hour! You soon learn that when consultants and other specialists charge several hundred dollars a day for their work, they are not getting rich.

In other words, if you want to make, say \$20 an hour, you must know what your expenses are and allow a margin of error in making the estimates of overhead and other costs. That is, if you estimate a 75% overhead, a quite reasonable rate, in fact, you must charge \$35 an hour for your time. You will probably not charge by the hour usually, but "for the job", so you estimate the number of hours the job will take and multiply that by \$35 to arrive at a price (adding other costs, such as printing, illustrating, or anything else required.)

At the same time you can't simply ignore "the market" - the average price charged by others for similar work. On one contract I may have charged only \$20 an hour because that was the market price - all I could get - and I wanted the job enough to sacrifice a bit. On most jobs, however, a flat price is called for, and I decide what the job is worth, as well as how long it will take me.

Here, there is another consideration: How efficient you are. If you are a fast worker and can do the job in far less time than most competitors can, you can turn that to your advantage in two different ways. You can be highly competitive without working below your desired minimum rate, and you can earn more than that minimum rate, even then. You are not cheating a client when you charge \$50 or \$100 an hour if your end price is still competitive and within the market. You should benefit from your productivity. So hourly rates are really a rough measure.

THE PRODUCTIVITY FACTORS

If you are highly productive, you are better off to charge by the job as often as possible. You might earn \$75 an hour, while charging no more than a competitor who earns only \$40 an hour because he or she is far less productive than you. Clients, however, tend to rebel at what they think is a high hourly rate, regardless of the total price for the job. Keep information about your productivity and your hourly earnings to yourself; they are proprietary and confidential information.

Your "speediness" as a writer/editor is only one factor affecting productivity. Familiarity with the subject - or the lack of it - is another factor. If you are somewhat expert with the subject, your research time is lessened, and the reverse is true too, of course. The ease or difficulty of finding the source information is another factor. And these considerations apply with respect to the kind of writing - e.g. your familiarity with storyboards, report formats, proposals, or whatever it is you have undertaken to write. And your personal resources are still another factor. If you are equipped with a good computer system and adequate software, you have advantages that help you achieve a high rate of productivity. (I manage to do most of my research without leaving my office, by utilizing the mail, the telephone, and my access to other computer databases via my own computer and modem-telephone links.)

HOW SPECIALIZED OUGHT YOU TO BE?

These are arguments for specializing in subjects and/or kinds of written products, and many writers do so. I personally do not undertake to write books that would require what I consider to

be excessive amounts of research, for example. But that is a personal decision you must make for yourself.

Of course, in the beginning you tend to undertake almost anything and everything you can get a purchase order or contract for, and you don't worry overmuch about how profitable the job will be or how much your net per-hour earnings will be. But after a while, when you can get enough work to keep you busy most of the time, you begin to consider specializing to at least some extent. You decide that you like certain kinds of assignments and dislike other kinds, and you may very well begin to specialize gradually, without a conscious decision to do so.

WHAT IS "RESEARCH"?

When you freelance in the traditional manner, you decide for yourself what you will write, speculating, in the hope of finding a buyer after you have written it. The research is then entirely up to you, of course: You visit libraries, interview people, search through old records, and otherwise delve wherever you can. And you start with a rough outline of just an idea. As your research progresses, you begin to develop a more detailed outline or "book plan".

This is not usually the case when you are working on contract. In that case the client provides you with a requirement and usually at least some beginning information in the form of rough notes, perhaps an outline, or even a rough draft. You may get all the information, in some form, but, again, you may get nothing more than the bare requirement. "Research" may therefore consist of nothing more than sorting out and reading everything provided, or it may be a total, "from scratch" effort.

SOME TYPICAL CASES

To illustrate the above more clearly, we'll look at a few cases of my own: training development office of OSHA (Occupational Safety and Health Administration, Labor Department), gave me, as my first OSHA assignment, the task of developing a curriculum guide for use in junior colleges teaching the OSHA program "Voluntary Compliance". The guide was to assist college faculties in preparing a relevant course of instruction.

My research consisted of studying the two volumes that made up the course material, a student manual and an instructor's guide, and discussing their content with several OSHA experts.

I decided, after this research, that something more than a curriculum guide as necessary. Two hours' study of the manuals showed me that more information for the instructor was needed. I therefore recommended the development of a "study guide" of about 60 pages (about 15,000 words), which would include the

curriculum guide, estimating the job at \$2,400 (1974 prices!) The job was approved and a government purchase order issued. I then took the materials home and did the job there, expending about 100 hours on the job, including research and writing. (In 1991 I would price that job at about \$7,500.)

A General Services Administration task called for rewriting an aborted script for a 15-minute slide/tape presentation of a value engineering program. The client furnished the information and the original script that had never been completed. This took only about two days and paid me \$300.

A client who organized training seminars for government agencies often retained me to prepare the brochures. The client furnished all the reports on the seminar or conference, and I wrote a brochure of perhaps 500 words, for which I was usually paid \$150.

When I write on subjects in which I am already reasonably expert- electronics, for example - most of my research is in the client's outline or book plan, because most of the technical knowledge is already in my head, and I need to refer only to standard technical volumes in my own office library. On the other hand, I took on the job of preparing a two-hour presentation of the history and culture of the American Indians. I had no prior knowledge of the subject at all, and I had to do complete research. This was a \$9,000 project for which I had to develop my own outline and plan the extensive research required. I bought a number of books, begged many more from the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs, visited with officials of several Indian reservations. It was not a profitable job, and could only have been made profitable if I had won additional jobs writing about American Indians so that the research could have been made to pay.

WHERE (AND WHAT) ARE THE MARKETS?

The markets for this kind of service are everywhere - every business, every organization, for-profit or non-profit, uses written products. And the markets are enormously diversified, far beyond anyone's capacity to pursue them all. But it is necessary to review them and gain an appreciation of the scope and breadth of the opportunities. For example:

A non-profit corporation near my office sold a "prepaid legal services", group plan (analogous to group hospitalization plans). I was hired to handle their publicity, writing newspaper articles and other PR for them.

I happen to be a professional writer in the most literal sense of the word; no other work is as satisfying to me - I have a driven need to write - and I have felt that way most of my life.

However, many of the freelance writers making a good living in this kind of writing work are not professional writers at all. Many just happened into this field by chance and found it profitable.

The point is that you do not have to be an author, in the classical sense of that word, to succeed at this business. You do not have to be one who has the psychological need to be a professional writer. Anyone who can handle the language with reasonable facility and fluency can do this kind of work adequately. One person I know, for example, was an illustrator who found himself preparing advertising art for most of his clients. Before long, he discovered that he could write acceptable copy for that advertising. And soon he found himself spending as much time writing as he did illustration. Another writer I know started as sign painter, and still another managed one of a chain of hardware stores. And still others are former teachers, psychologists, sociologists, junior executives, engineers, clerks, and others who became freelance writers without realizing that that was their new profession! They just gravitated into the work without realizing immediately that it was actually for writing that they were paid.

In actuality, in this field of freelance writing we are more writing consultants than freelance writers in the classical sense, and you will probably be able to see that more and more in the various cases and examples that follow. Bear it in mind.

The training field is an excellent example. There is a substantial market for developing training programs of many kinds. With technology developing rapidly, almost everyone who isn't a day laborer requires specialized training of some kind, beyond high school and even beyond college, frequently. Companies and government agencies want their employees to learn such things as data processing (even grammar-schoolchildren are being taught the basics of computers today), value management, supervisory principles and practices, basic accounting principles, safety, energy conservation, and hundreds of other subjects considered to be a necessity for modern living. But they cannot always find off-the-shelf or proprietary programs (e.g., seminars, audiovisual presentations, and other "canned" programs) to teach these, and so must develop their own programs. Many government contracts are let for the writing of training programs and related materials.

Manufacturers need manuals for the equipment they manufacture. Sometimes these are technical manuals, but quite often they are simple, brief instruction manuals - brochures and booklets, even- for the buyers of a small calculator or kitchen blender. Manufacturers also need such things as specification sheets, catalog sheets, sales letters, marketing brochures, product releases, news releases, circulars, and many other such items.

They need advertising copy written, slogans invented, signs designed, all work for writers. Some of the larger organizations have their own writers on staff, but even those are often overloaded or need someone with special skills and experience and send writing work out to freelancers. Many large organizations, if they do a great deal of advertising, have an advertising agency handle their writing chores, but advertising agencies often hire freelance writers to help them.

For example, one large corporation, who didn't do a great deal of national advertising, paid me over \$4,000 to develop a marketing brochure of 20 pages. I had to arrange for typesetting, art work, layouts, and printing, which were at least as much work as the writing was, but I was paid for all this work.

I have often worked by the day as a proposal specialist, generally charging from \$150 to \$300 a day in the early days, then \$500 a day, as inflation progressed, and now \$1,000 a day. But that is based on a short-term assignment, usually a few days, often 14-hour days, that are typical of proposal schedules. For the occasional long-term assignment. I sometimes negotiate a special arrangement.

That is consulting work and billed appropriately as such: I am hired for my abilities as an expert in marketing to the government and as an expert in proposal-writing. I charge and am paid accordingly. I prefer a flat day-rate, and I have a most flexible scale as to how many hours make up a day; I simply do not count the hours, but only the day. (My daily rate considers that many days will be well in excess of 8 hours.) But that is not necessarily how others work. Some charge by the hour, others for an 8-hour day and bill time-and-one-half for overtime and double-time for weekends and holidays worked. Others negotiate a flat price for each job. You make your own rules, because each situation is different and each individual's preferences are different.

One of the great inducements you can offer, if you are willing to, is a "quick response" service. Many organizations find themselves in difficulty meeting a deadline - a scheduled delivery day - for a proposal, report, or other obligation, and they suddenly realize, as they approach the deadline, that they are not going to "make the date" without some extra help. That may require working evenings or over a weekend, but if you are willing to make a few sacrifices you can usually win such jobs (rescue operations!), get paid premium rates - you are fully entitled to charge premium rates and clients will usually pay them cheerfully under such circumstances - and win the gratitude and future patronage of the client. It's worth doing, and some individuals specialize in such services.

If you wish to take advantage of such opportunities, advertise your "quick response" or "quick reaction" services. A number of individuals built up substantial companies offering such services.

Bear in mind at all times that you are not selling your writings in this kind of undertaking; you are selling your services. The client is buying your time, your energy, your talent, your effort, your expert knowledge. You are satisfying a need, and the better you satisfy it, the more valuable your service is. You are, in fact, at least as much the writing consultant as the writer.

So far, we have talked mainly about organization - corporation, companies, associations, and governments. But individuals often need writing services too. Professionals are called upon to prepare and deliver papers at conventions and conferences, to make speeches, and to write articles for technical and professional journals. Students must write term papers, theses, dissertations. Working people must write resumes and special letters of many kinds. (Yes, I and others are often hired to write letters for individuals, especially letters to organizations.)

One individual hired me for an unusual job: She had been appointed to the school board of her county and needed to become knowledgeable in school affairs quickly, in preparation for her first board meeting. She hired me to review several school journals she supplied and abstract all the pertinent articles for her, as a kind of briefing paper!

A graduate student paid me nearly \$1,000 to write a master's thesis, for which he had already prepared an outline and drawn up a rough draft, going as far as he could go without some professional help. A city employee hired me to write a letter appealing a decision of the civil service board. (He got the decision reversed!) And many individuals, some of them chief executives of important companies, paid me to write resumes and cover letters for them.

A placement firm paid me to develop an entire marketing approach, including the presentation to individual applicants, addresses to groups, a contract form, and a resume workshop for clients.

An association paid me to prepare a newsletter for them every month. In this case, I developed the newsletter idea, then went out and sold it to a national association. (An idea you might borrow.) They took care of the printing and distribution (mailing); I merely wrote, typed, and delivered the camera-ready copy to them every month for a fee which averaged about 25 cents per word, a good rate for those days.

A federal government agency hired me to answer their mail and to design a complete set of standard replies to the most frequently asked questions. (Not exactly a form letter, either.) It came out to about \$20 per letter!

Another government agency paid me \$1,800 to attend a week-long training session and critique the program, with my recommendations for improvement.

HOW TO GET WORK

Now comes the critical question: How to get assignments and orders - how to get started doing business. A few initiatives:

Many individuals begin by placing small classified advertisements in the daily morning newspapers. That works reasonably well - sometimes remarkably well - in seeking orders from individuals for resumes, term papers, and the like. It is usually not effective in getting work from organizations. That is better pursued in other ways:

Advertising in trade journals that the organization members read.

By making in-person and/or telephone solicitations.

By mailing or otherwise distributing brochures and sales letters.

Mailing can be difficult. You need to collect names. And it can be expensive: postage costs are high and still climbing steadily. Far better, I believe, is to simply distribute your brochures in office buildings, since almost every office is a prospect. Get enough brochures/circulars/letters out this way, and you are almost certain to begin getting calls.

Call every acquaintance, business and personal, and tell them about your service. (You will be surprised how many people want and need professional writings services.) Ask them to recommend you to others. Ask them to take a handful of your brochures and cards to give to their business associates, friends, and acquaintances.

Post notices on public bulletin boards in supermarkets, libraries, community buildings, local colleges.

Write up press releases for yourself and send them out to newspapers, magazines, trade journals, newsletters, local companies, business clubs, other organizations.

Follow up. Many people throw a brochure away the first time it comes into their hands, but hang on to it as it arrives for the second, third or fourth time and becomes familiar recognizable.

(Why is that? Who knows? Ask your psychologist. All we know is that it is true. Repeat mailings to a given list are almost always more effective, in the long run, than single mailings to new lists.)

Be highly specific in your literature. Tell the prospect exactly what you offer to do. Stress service - fast, efficient, convenient, accommodating service. Make your telephone number prominent, easy to find. Make it easy to do business with you e.g. one simple 'phone call and you will do the rest. Call some of the prospects later - as many as you can; many who hesitate to call because they never take the initiative will hire you if you take the initiative.

Persistence is important, of utmost importance. The individual of average talent and ability, but blessed with great persistence, will almost always do better, in the end, than the brilliant individual who is not persistent.

When you have completed a few assignments, list references, either by name or by general reference (e.g., "...written speeches for prominent, local architect"). Or specify references available on request.

Make personal calls with your literature. When you get the "Sorry, I don't have a thing for right now, ask for referrals or suggestions as to whom else to call. You'll be surprised at how much help you can get this way, for reasons too complex to explore in this limited space.

Start small. Take on jobs you know you can handle swiftly and with good results. Build a reputation, and before you know it you won't be seeking assignments; they'll be seeking.