

Writing For Dollars -- A Freelancer's Guide

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Your novel sits unfinished, waiting for a burst of inspiration to send it out to be typewriter and right to the top of the best seller lists, right? You are not alone. Thousands of would-be writers are waiting as well. But a few successes under your belt will make the possibility of seeing your picture on the dust jacket in the bookstore window seem less remote. Freelance writing can replace self-doubt with self-confidence and put money in your pocket at the same time.

Just as all doctors are not neurosurgeons, all writers are not novelists. A look into the field yields categories you might never have imagined. Magazine articles, greeting cards, business writing, newspaper reporting-these are areas in which freelance can add do make money. Writing provides an opportunity to earn with very little expenditure. A typewriter with accompanying supplies, a flair for writing and the discipline to stick with a schedule and meet deadlines can start you on your way.

STRINGING

Many local and regional newspapers, unable to maintain enough full-time staff to adequately cover ever meeting or event of importance to the populace, will assign certain stories to stringers, or freelance reporters. Assignments may vary as widely as covering a church circle meeting for the weekly religion page to reporting on a town council meeting in a neighboring village. The editorial staff will tell you what they want, when they want it and what you can expect to be paid. Stringers are paid by the word, by the line or by the column inch, and while rate varies from one newspaper to another, it is a set fee which cannot be negotiated.

Building a good relationship with your editor through good writing, dependability and strict adherence to deadlines may enable you to successfully put forth your own ideas for feature stories and articles. You may be able to negotiate a higher rate of pay for these pieces. Don't forget to ask for a by-line. Part of the thrill of freelance writing is seeing your name in print.

GREETING CARDS

Visit your local card shop. There are hundreds of cards, many expressing the same sentiments. Each one is different, and somebody earned money for each of them. The greeting card industry relies heavily on freelance submissions. Each company has its own style; it is futile to fire off ideas randomly hoping to hit pay dirt. Companies will send writer guidelines to those who accompany the request with a self-addressed, stamped envelope

(SASE). This basic checklist will tell you the subject matter of preference (some companies may deal solely with inspirational messages while others want only adult humor studio cards), the correct method of presentation, length of time should wait for a response and the pay range for accepted ideas. You don't have to be an artist. Greeting card companies want your ideas and captions, although suggestions for accompanying artwork will be appreciated. remember, what may be unsuited to one company's needs could be deemed irresistible by another. Don't throw away any ideas in discouragement after one rejection. Submit, submit and resubmit should be your credo.

MAGAZINE ARTICLES

Thousands of special interest and trade publications are sold every year. Each is filled with articles, many of them written by freelancers. The trick is to find the right magazine for your article, and tailor your article for that magazine.. If you're a whiz at coupon redeeming, refunding and rebating, consider sharing your expertise with others in an article in Supermarket Shopper. No matter what your area of interest, there's a publication waiting to let you tell it all.

Like greeting card companies, magazine publishers will send you guidelines including style and subject matter as well as pay scales. Don't waste your time sending an article on the joys of a New England vacation to a publication specializing in recreation opportunities in the Ozarks. Guidelines firmly in mind, come up with an idea suitable for the particular publication and follow up with a query letter.

Many publications will not accept unsolicited manuscripts. even those that would rather read a well-written, creative letter outlining a proposed article than wade through a 2,000 word piece to find it acceptable. Your query letter can be open the door that might have been slammed in the face of your unreviewed work-especially if it is an example of proficient writing and piques the editor's interest in your subject and the angle you're planning to use.

While many magazines will not accept manuscripts currently being considered by another publication, you may wish to send query letters to several at the same time. If you are fortunate enough to have more than one acceptance, you can always write two articles with different slants from the same research.

The time it takes for your manuscript to be considered seems interminable. One way to avoid hovering over the mailbox with hope, dread and anxiety fighting for dominance is to keep the mailbox working for you. Don't send off one article and wait for the verdict. Send query letters, greeting card ideas, filler items and articles out constantly, never waiting to hear from one

before sending the next. If you receive a rejection, move along to the next prospective publisher for that item, dash off a new cover letter and shoot it out again. You can't sell what's sitting in a reject pile--only what's making the rounds on the market.

Publishers guidelines will give you specific instructions for manuscript preparation. Regardless of the differences from one company to the next, remember that neatness counts. Use typing correction paper or fluid to repair typographical errors. Strike-overs and hand done corrections appear messy and unprofessional. Each page of your manuscript should have the title of the article and your name, as well as consecutive page numbers for all but the first page.

INDEPENDENT PROJECTS

Newspaper stringing, greeting cards and magazine articles are established fields for freelance writers. Your public library will have books and magazine listing companies seeking freelancers for everything from crossword puzzles to innovative messages for telephone answering machines. But you may wish to explore some areas on your own. Whether you live in a small town or a metropolitan area local organizations and businesses can provide fodder for an impressive client list.

Perhaps the local historical society would be interested in your offer to research and write a history of the area. for a fee. The high school alumni association may be looking for a class gift to the old alma mater. A school history, researched and written by a professional freelance writer, would be an handsome addition to the school library, and purchases by class members of yore would add a fund-raising feature. Is you local hospital preparing to celebrate a founding anniversary? a prepared history of the institution, from one-room dispensary/infirmary to today's 200-bed unit would be a wonderful public relations tool for them an a terrific writing job for you.

Local businesses and organizations have varied writing needs. Grant proposals can be written for a flat fee or on a percentage basis. Customer relations pieces such as new service or product introductions and collection letters, annual reports, in house or consumer-aimed newsletters all provide grist for the enterprising freelancer's mill. Even organizations with public relations or customer relations staffs sometimes farm out work on a periodic basis.

Unlike established fields, where prices are determined in advance, independent projects such as these require you to charge by the word, by the page, by the hour or on a completed project basis. No matter how you quote your fee, estimate your time as accurately as possible. Time spent in research, talking to and

interviewing people and organizing material for writing is as important as time spent at the typewriter. remember to charge enough to cover expenses in addition to time. Typewriter ribbons, paper, postage and envelopes cost money-so does the gasoline you'll use when research involves travel.

Serious freelancers also have to consider the cost of overhead (heat, water, electricity and a portion of rent or mortgage payments to maintain an in-home office), equipment depreciation and normal employee fringe benefits such as insurance and social security payments when pricing their services. After all, the boss is expected to pick up the tab for these extras. As a freelance writer, you are the boss. And that's a fringe benefit nobody else can give you.