



ESCAPE

the Content Mills

By Linda Formichelli and Carol Tice
LESSON ONE: Finding Your Niche

Okay, we know what's going on. We got you all fired up with our intro Webinar on how much the content mills stink, and eight ways you can earn better. And now you're thinking, "Annnndddd.....?"

You may be wondering what you can write about that someone will pay you for, especially if you're used to choosing topics from a list generated by a content mill's algorithm, or grabbing SEO article assignments from Elance or Fiverr.

It can be confusing to figure out who to approach for better-paying work. There are so many possible freelance writing gigs out there! So, in this lesson, we'll lay out the fastest, easiest way for you to find good-paying clients—by capitalizing on what you already know.

Your Personal Experience Counts

Fear not! The answer can be found in your own life. The topics you already know about and have a natural interest in will tend to pay off best for you. Even if you have no clips (published writing samples), or if your clips are all from content mills, you have an advantage when you pitch a publication, website, or business on a topic where you have first-hand experience.

For example, a home decorating magazine might give preference to a newbie writer who's been a professional interior designer, over a more experienced writer who has only written about, say, parenting. A business that targets home beer brewers is likely to give you a chance if you hit them with an amazing pitch (more on pitches later in the course)—and beer brewing happens to be a hobby you're passionate about.

Not only that, but if you've written for content mills or bidding sites, you've probably gained some expertise in the topics you've written about. You can leverage this to land assignments.

A lot of writers think they have to be an 'expert' in a topic to write about it for good clients—but you don't. If you bring curiosity and some knowledge of the topic (like from your personal background or your previous content mill work), you can research or talk to experts for the rest.

Your Niche Will Find You!

Don't feel pressured to find the perfect, most lucrative, most wonderful niche right away.

This is not do-or-die. Chances are, you'll play around writing about several different topics until you find one that sticks. You'll discover that when you really enjoy a topic and you do a great job for an editor, you'll start to attract more work of that kind. Your

eventual, final niche will develop organically, as you gain experience and see what topics are paying best for you.

Also, keep in mind that you can have more than one niche. For example, Linda specializes in nutrition, fitness, marketing, and pets. Carol writes about small business, restaurant, franchising, finance, insurance, and legal topics. Again, this will happen organically...no need to push it.

In the next lesson, we'll tell you HOW to turn your experience into assignments, and help you discover what kinds of writing you'll want to do—copywriting, magazine writing, and so on. But first, we'll need to delve into your past and figure out what are the best writing niches where you can land lucrative assignments.

Fill in the Blanks

Discover your best writing markets by delving into your own background. We're going to look at every aspect of your life to tease out everything you know that might help you land freelance writing gigs.

You may think that you don't know much about anything, but you'd be surprised. Trust us, we rarely have a student who doesn't have experience that will help them write in one good-paying niche or other! The questionnaire below will help you brainstorm about what you know that might lead to lucrative writing work.

Important Note

Please print this or save this lesson to your desktop first! If you do it in the Web browser, your changes won't be saved. Once you've got a copy on your computer, just fill in the boxes below. You should be able to drag the corners of the boxes and enlarge them.

Your jobs

Below, list all the jobs you have had. (If you've had a million jobs, list the ten longest-duration ones, or the top 10 that you liked best.)

Your job skills

What did you have to learn how to do at your jobs?

What you learned from your jobs

What are the key skills or traits you took away from your favorite jobs? What did you learn from your worst jobs?

What you've already written about

Below, list all the topics you've written on, whether it was for the content mills, a college paper, or a blog.

Your hobbies

What hobbies have you enjoyed over the years? (Again, if you have a million, list your top 3-5.)

Your beliefs and passions

Are you a religious person? A devotee of simple living, homeschooling, or raw food? Have you done volunteer work for particular causes? Describe your beliefs and passions below.

Your education

What did you study in high school and college? What have you studied on your own or through independent classes?

Your family and friends

What topics have you learned about through the people you know? Have you perhaps nursed a relative through cancer, or learned how to raise chickens from a neighbor?

Businesses you frequent (local and online)

Make a list below of businesses you have visited in the past month (or virtually visited on the Web). These are all industries you know something about, through your experience as a consumer.

Print publications and websites you read

What magazines, newspapers and weeklies are on your real or virtual nightstand?

Places you've lived and visited

Sometimes, knowledge of a place can help you get a gig. Where have you traveled, and where have you lived?

Strengths you bring from mills

The good news is, your time slaving in the junk-content mines wasn't a total loss. You've probably developed some useful skills that you can feature as you begin looking for better clients. Depending on where you've worked, you may have learned to:

- Meet deadlines
- Write using SEO keywords
- Work with editors
- Quickly research and learn about new topics
- Write to a required length

What did you learn from mills? Note it below.

What would you like to learn more about?

Sometimes, what's on your to-do list can be a clue to good writing niches for you. For instance, Carol recently wrote a ton of posts for Forbes about an emerging business sector: Legal cannabis. But she was curious about how this startup sector was evolving, so she started reading up and finding good survey data, and was able to break in and quickly become a respected writer on the topic.

What are you interested to learn about? List your topics below:

Find your common themes and favorite things

As you look back over these lists of your activities, education and interests, do you see some topics repeating? Note these below, along with your favorite topics that appear anywhere in these lists.

Compare these with what pays

To narrow down your list of possible writing topics, take a look back at the lucrative niches we talked about in our kickoff Webinar, *8 Ways Content Mill Writers Can Earn More—Fast!* See which of your interests fit best with this high-earning industry list. Those are your best targets.

List your top 2-3 most lucrative niches below:

So Now You Know Yourself Inside-Out

Okay, so you've indulged us and filled out our form. You've gazed deep into your navel and know yourself like you never did before. So what?

This wasn't just an exercise to get in touch with your soul. Did you notice any themes popping up in your list? Topics you love, classes you've taken, and so on? Those are the topics you'll want to start writing about.

Sometimes, expertise can come from who you *are*. For instance, we hear from many recent young college-grad writers who feel they don't know anything yet—but what you know is what it's like to be young. There are a ton of youth brands dying to target people your age...and they make great target markets for you. Likewise, if you're a retiree, many brands and publications target the senior market.

While topics from your own experience may make you think of local markets, keep in mind that it's a global marketplace—you might be able to write on your interests for a national market, or for a business in another country.

For instance, there is a lot of low-paid blogging work about pets, but Linda has been able to earn well in this niche, writing for *Whole Cat Journal*, and many other magazines for pet owners, as well as pet-industry trades such as *Pet Age*. She's written for WebMD online at \$1 a word, and some women's magazines run pet columns. Then think about all the businesses that make pet products that you might write blogs, newsletters, Web copy, and more for!

Remember, you are in the driver's seat in terms of what types of clients you choose to reach out to—so why not reach out to the kinds that pay well!

But I Don't Love My Topics!

Here's where we lay some tough love on you: We don't care. Right now, your mission is to get out of the mills and start earning more from your writing. Sometimes that means writing about topics you aren't head-over-heels in love with.

Linda has written about trends in vacuum cleaners. Carol has blogged about surety bonds. These topics didn't have us burning with passion, but you know what? They were good work and they paid the bills.

Right now we just want you getting some good-paying gigs fast, and the best way to do that is to focus on what you already know—which is more likely to get you assignments. It's just easier to make the case that you're the writer for the job when you have some knowledge of the topic that sets you apart from the masses.

Once you have a steady stream of income, you can start pitching some passion projects.

We know, you may have lots of interests – that's okay! This top topics list is not written in stone, and you're free to update it later. Just go with what you feel are your best options at this point, so that you're focused and not trying to go in a million directions (a top cause of writers getting nowhere with their marketing).

Don't want to pick your top niches now? That's okay, too! You can work with your "common themes" list for the time being.

What if My Experience Is Lame?

We do need to point out that not every area where you have experience is worth pursuing.

For example, even if you're the most experienced travel maven on the planet, travel is an extremely competitive niche to break into—we would leave that for later. Or maybe you're passionate about your religion. Sadly, most religious magazines and organizations pay little to nothing. You know everything there is to know about raising teens? Unfortunately, almost all of the parenting magazines focus on parents of younger kids.

For a reality check on whether your interests line up with where the money is in freelance writing, let's talk about some of the most lucrative industries to write in, and see where they match up with your experience:

- Finance
- Business and marketing
- Parenting (babies and young kids!)
- Health and medicine
- Law

- Technology
- Real Estate
- Insurance
- Trades such as plumbing, construction, restaurant management, retail, and banking
- Hobbies like jewelry making, paper crafts, beer brewing, tea and coffee, horseback riding, and more. These tend to not pay as well as the others on this list but there are lots of businesses and publications that target hobbyists like these that need writers. What if you don't like writing for businesses? That's OK—there are lots of other ways to earn writing about these topics. We're going to go over that in Lesson 2: Markets That Pay.

HOMEWORK

Keep thinking about the worksheet you filled out above...is there more you can add? Are two topics of interest combining in your mind in some cool way?

Also, it's time to start raising your awareness of how many different types of writing markets are out there. How?

- Look at every magazine you come across, whether it's on a friend's coffee table, in your mailbox, at the doctor's office, or in the free rack outside your local cafe.
- Take a stroll around your town and check out the businesses located there.
- Read through a print copy of *The Writer's Market*, or even better, [get it with online support](#).
- Consider all the nonprofits you've donated to, volunteered for, or received fundraising letters from.
- What college did you go to, if you went, and do they have an alumni magazine?

- Take note when you visit a local business's website and realize it could use copywriting help.

We just want to prime you to be open to opportunities you may have missed before! Keep your eyes open for writing of all kinds, from brochures to newsletters to blog posts to articles—someone had to write it (and they probably got paid), so why not you?

What's next?

Our next Lesson takes you through all the types of freelance writing markets. We find many writers don't even know some of these exist! You'll learn about all the different types of paid writing out there. (And it goes way beyond content mills and blogs!)

If none of your niches aligned directly with one of the better-paying industries, don't panic! You may just need to think a bit more broadly about related topics to your favorites. For instance, if you love to write about homeschooling, but that's not a huge copywriting or article niche, you might broaden that to writing about education—which opens the door to many more types of clients, from school districts to nonprofits that advocate for education reform. Or if you enjoy history, you might write company histories, opening the door to finding lucrative business clients.

You can **MAKE** your niches fit a lucrative market. For instance, if you're interested in healing, instead of pitching niche healing magazines that don't pay much, think of some way to make the topic relevant to a broader audience of people interested in health. Then, you can pitch the big-circulation women's and health magazines.

You can get a lot of mileage out of your niches by reslanting the same topics for different audiences. For example, Linda knows a

tech writer who's written on technology topics for *Family Circle*, *Playgirl*, and *AARP*. You can bet they each required a very different approach!

Don't go crazy...

We know you're excited to move up and start earning more, but one cautionary note: Don't wake up tomorrow and quit all your content-mill gigs! We are not advocating that any writer do anything that might put them in financial jeopardy. Yes, they're not the best place to be, but we don't want you to starve. Once you start marketing and finding better clients, you'll be able to kiss those mill accounts goodbye.

Stay focused and do the homework—it's going to come in handy in the next lesson.

Important Note

Some of the links in this course are affiliate links, to products or services we highly recommend. Clicking and buying through these links will not cost you a dime more, but they'll send us a small fee for referring you over. We appreciate your giving us credit for turning you on to these useful resources!