



By Linda Formichelli and Carol Tice

## LESSON FOUR: Build a (Cheap & Effective!) Writer Website

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When you write for the content mills, having a professional writer site is not essential—all the clients care about is that you can write fast and cheap, so who cares about whether you have a sparkling “About Me” page, or a list of testimonials?

And writers who aren’t earning much and don’t have a lot of time—because they’re busy churning out articles for the mills—aren’t too keen on dropping a load of money (and time) building a writer website.

But...without a writer website or blog where you can spotlight your writing, you’re invisible. You can’t present yourself professionally—especially if you want online writing gigs. An editor at *Writer’s Digest* magazine once told Linda that if he’s on the fence about whether a writer can pull off an assignment they pitched, he’ll take a look at their website to help him decide. No website = no sale.

You need an online home base that looks professional, so prospects can see you 'get' the Internet. Not only that, but a great website with the right keywords can bring clients to you.

The good news is, getting a basic site up does not have to be difficult, hugely time-consuming, or expensive. Here are our tips for making it happen, quickly and on a budget.

## 4 Quick, Free and Cheap Ways to Get a Writer Website

You'll want to skip all the free platforms such as Weebly, Blogger, and free WordPress—they don't come off professional. Instead, check out these easy, cheap ways to create a website you can send clients to:

1. Use [Writer's Residence](#). This UK-based website provider is entirely focused on creating great writer websites, fast! Writer's Residence provides you with easy, fill-in templates, so you don't have to learn to code anything. They also have a free trial to get you started, and then it's less than \$9 a month. Can you say "no excuses"?
2. Join the [National Association of Independent Writers & Editors](#) (NAIWE) for \$99 a year, and they give you a Wordpress blog site you can use simply to post your clips. The advantage here: They take care of hosting, plus you get resources and support for your freelance writing journey, all for one low price.
3. Use [OutstandingSETUP](#). Co-founded by successful copywriter (and now Amazon fiction author!) Sean Platt, OutstandingSETUP is a WordPress platform that can get you up fast, and gives you a help desk to call. Carol has reviewed sites OS has put up and thought they looked terrific! And she has a special deal on OS that's \$19 a month.

4. Show your [portfolio on your LinkedIn profile](#). This is a social-media platform you're going to want to be active on, anyway—because it's an enormous search engine that a lot of good companies use to find freelance help. Carol was found and hired by Costco, Alaska Airlines magazine, and other blue-chip clients through her LinkedIn profile. If you don't have a site up yet, this can be a solid stopgap solution.
5. Use your [Zoominfo profile](#). Zoominfo is a site that compiles information about companies and people online. If you have work online, you can take control of your profile, style it up, and organize the clips here. Carol actually used her Zoominfo profile as her first website when she got back into freelancing in 2005, while she was getting organized to build [caroltice.com](#).

## A Checklist for Your Successful Writer Website

A strong writer website is an essential tool for getting good-paying freelance writing gigs today. Here are some of the basic elements a good writer website contains (and that most websites don't have):

*1. The header is eye-catching and includes a photo of you.*

Remember, *people hire people*—they want to see this site has an actual, live person behind it and isn't a big piece of robot spam.

*2. There are keywords in your header and throughout your site for the search terms you think people might use to find you.*

Keywords quickly convey the types of freelance writing you do. This will really make a difference in the number of prospects who

contact you through Google searches for a writer. For instance, Carol's key search is "Seattle freelance writer," for which she often ranks #1 in search. Not sure which keywords to use? We mentioned these free tools in Lesson 3: [Google's AdWords Keyword Planner](#) and [Wordtracker](#) (which offers a free trial).

### *3. The design is clean and uncluttered.*

Keep your layout to one single sidebar on the right-hand side, or use a responsive format that doesn't have a sidebar. Avoid loud colors, flashing plug-ins, and dark or black backgrounds with white letters. Use a clean, large typeface—14 point or above.

### *4. Your main page could stand alone.*

Don't make prospects hunt around on your site to learn about you, especially when it comes to finding your contact info! Create a capsule of the types of work you do and the clients you serve, right on the landing page. A prospect should be able to quickly scan it, see you do the type of writing they want, and give you a call. If they want to learn in more depth, a few basic tabs can offer more clips (grouped by type) and a resume or [bio](#).

### *5. Your clips can be viewed.*

Prospects don't want to see a curriculum vitae-style list of titles of articles you've written or publications you've appeared in. They're expecting to either see links to PDFs or links (that work!) to where your articles appear online. If your articles aren't online, get them scanned and turned into PDFs you can post on the site. If you use links, be sure to check them periodically to make sure they're still working. (Wondering if your content mill clips will work? More on that below!)

## 6. *The Home page is about your client.*

Writers love to create home pages that say, “Welcome to my website!” And then blather on about how they’ve wanted to write since they were five. Instead, create a home page that orients the client immediately, and shows them you are a freelance writer who knows their industry or type of writing, and could help solve their problems. For instance, Carol’s home page headline is, “Compelling business stories told here.” This signals her core types of writing—writing for and about businesses.

## 7. *The About page is about you...and the client.*

Don’t tell your life story on your About page. Start with the present, and the writer you are now, and why you enjoy writing the assignments you do now, which help clients. In other words, it’s your story, through the lens of what would interest the client. Then, fill them in a bit on your background. Show some personality here! Prospects want to get a sense of what you’d be like to work with, on a personal level.

### Clip Tips

#### *How to Get & Use Your Mill Clips on Your Writer Site*

You need some clips (samples of previously published work) on your website to show prospects what you can do, but if you’ve been writing through mills, or sites like UpWork or Elance, it can be hard to find or use your clips.

You may have written them under a nondisclosure. (If so, stop doing that! At this phase of your career, you need portfolio pieces you can claim credit for.) You may have been ghostwriting. Your posts may be behind a paywall. Or you may not even know who the end client was.

Let's see what we can salvage here. You're going to replace these clips as soon as you can with better ones, so you don't have to go after a ton of samples. Think of your 3-6 best articles or posts.

Know that you *can* use ghostwritten work in your portfolio. For ghostwriting, see if you can get a testimonial to put alongside your work, to prove you wrote it. But even if you can't, if you wrote it, use it.

If any of your low-paid or mill work appeared or was reposted on a better site—say, for IBM or *USA Today*, two blue-chip names that have been known to tap the likes of Ebyline and Demand Studios—use those clips over ones that appeared on an eHow or Demand. Not every editor you send those out to will know those classier sites may have picked up your piece from a mill. Presto—you look legit!

**Sneaky tip:** If you wrote something great for a site that has now disappeared, you may be able to find it again using [Wayback Machine](#), a site that takes snapshots of everything online all the time. Screenshot your article and put a PDF of it on your writer site.

### *Clips "too old"?*

We meet lots of writers who have 7- or 10-year-old newspaper or magazine clips, from before they quit to stay home with that newborn. Then, they started writing for mills.

The thing to know is, these clips are not too old to use! Editors are super impressed by newspaper clips, too. We've never had a prospect tell us our clips were too old—and Carol routinely sends out decade-old clips, if they show a needed expertise.

To reclaim these clips if you didn't save a copy of the issue, try to get a PDF from the publication, or see if it's since been posted online. Most pubs have a reprints department and keep a 'morgue' with one copy of every issue they ever put out. You can find these!

Remember, if you've guest posted on any popular blogs, those can be great initial clips to use, too. You might also use a post on your own blog, if it got a lot of comments or shares—those can help you [get freelance blogging gigs](#).

### *8. There are no fill-in contact forms.*

Nobody wants to fill in those little forms that ask for your name, email address, and message. Don't hide your contact information under a tab, either. Instead, provide your contact information at the top of every page—e-mail at least, ideally also a phone number. If you're on social media, include those contacts as well.

### *9. You don't have a rate sheet.*

Every client is different. Leave yourself the flexibility to set your rates once you know all the facts about a prospective job. If you find yourself getting a lot of super-low offers, you might consider posting a "minimum rate" sheet to send those folks away. For instance, we consider \$50 a blog post to be a floor, so you might mention that. But be sure to clarify that a client's actual fee will be quoted after you have all project details.

## *10. You talk in the first person.*

When you write, “Joe is a freelance writer who has written for X, Y, and Z”—c’mon, we all know Joe is YOU! Third person comes off pretentious on the Internet. We all know you wrote it, so take the opportunity to establish a personal connection. Talk like the prospect is sitting in the room with you. But keep it businesslike—prospective clients don’t necessarily need to know you’re bipolar or just got divorced...they just want to know if you have the writing skills to meet their needs.

## *11. You have testimonials.*

If you had good working relationships with any of your mill clients or editors, solicit their recommendations. Transfer over testimonials you get on LinkedIn and use them directly on your site, too.

### Bonus Tip

Get small head shots of your clients to put with their testimonials, and prospects will really be able to imagine themselves hiring you.

## *12. Each page has only one goal.*

On your landing page, you shouldn’t be asking visitors to subscribe to your newsletter, take your poll, watch your welcome video, follow you on Twitter and eight other things all at once. When you give readers too many choices, they tend to make none. Instead, make just one “ask” prominent—contact me.

## More Resources for You!

To get ideas and see great examples of great writer websites, see [10 Writer Websites That Kick Butt and Get Clients](#). Carol's also working on another compilation post of good websites, and here's a preview—check out the sites of [Dale Cudmore](#), [Sonia Quinones](#), and [Sarah Polson](#).

## A Checklist for a Blog that Sells Your Writing Services

Maybe you aren't planning to put up a writer website, because you've already got a personal blog and plan to use that platform to sell your freelance writing services? It's usually not as strong of a solution as a standalone writer website, but it can be done effectively, especially if your blog has some readers. Here are our tips:

### *1. The site has a great, coordinated name, tagline, and URL.*

The reader should be able to glance at the top of your blog and know immediately—within a couple of seconds—what topics your blog covers. You also show you're serious with paid hosting, so you don't have .wordpress, .blogspot or something similar as part of your URL.

### *2. You have an attractive, graphical header.*

Investing in a little design work shows you're serious about your blogging (and will help build your subscriber list). Here's a post on [15 Places to Buy Cheap Premium Wordpress Themes](#), and if you Google "cheap Wordpress designs" and similar searches, you'll

find a lot of affordable options for beautiful design that won't break the bank.

### *3. Your posts have great headlines.*

Scanning through your posts, a prospect can quickly tell what each post is about, and sees how each post relates to your niche topic. If you aren't familiar with what makes a useful blog post headline that will bring you visitors from Google searches, [learn how to write them](#).

### *4. You show you understand blog style.*

Your paragraphs are short and you include useful links that add to the information in your post. Your posts are scannable—they have bold subheads, a list, or offset quotes. You show you understand the [types of posts that get good traffic and attract comments](#).

### *5. You show you know the technical aspects of blogging.*

For instance, your blog posts each have a nice big photograph at the top with properly cited photo credits, and social sharing buttons that work.

### *6. You stick to your niche.*

Any client wanting to hire a writer to blog for pay wants to see an understanding of how to develop many different post ideas around a single topic. It doesn't matter that much what that topic is, as long as you stick to it—don't wander off course and start posting about those funny videos you saw on YouTube.

### *7. You engage your community.*

Prospects can see you know how to write posts that get comments, and that you respond to those comments.

### *8. There is a way to subscribe to your blog via email.*

This shows you are serious about building your blog community and understand the business of blogging—the money is in your list. [AWeber](#) offers a free 30-day trial of its email marketing platform, and [Mailchimp](#) is free for up to 2,000 subscribers.

### *9. Your blog has a clean design.*

Your (one right-hand) sidebar is not cluttered with lists of friends, their recent comments, Facebook pals and other miscellany.

### *10. Your blog has a strong About page.*

The About page is the second most-visited page on most sites. Make it informative and enjoyable. As we suggested in the website tips above, write your About page in the first person.

### *11. You have a 'Hire Me' tab.*

Don't let visitors guess if you are willing to blog for pay, or if your blog is just a personal journal—spell it out. The presence of a 'Hire Me' tab can lead to [immediate offers](#).

### *12. You guest post—and aren't shy about it.*

One of the best ways to impress visitors is to guest post on more popular, bigger blogs. Those posts should send possible clients to

your site. You can also create an “As Seen On” sidebar with logos of blogs where you’ve guested. These “social proof” sidebars impress the heck out of prospects.

## HOMEWORK

Your task this Lesson is to fill out the downloadable website planner worksheet that comes with this Lesson. (Please download the PDF to your hard drive before filling it out or you won't be able to save it!)

Then, our challenge to you is to get a website presence going within the next week. This sounds like not a lot of time, but we want you to avoid “analysis paralysis” and just get that thing done. There will be time for tweaking later, but for now you just need somewhere to send prospects.

Don’t worry about making your Web presence perfect. Just get it up. You will keep rewriting it from here. All writer websites are evolving documents, and you’ll improve it as you learn more about writing copy for your website, and as you get more and better clips.

### Another Resource for You!

If you’ve still got questions—like how is About page copy different from Home page copy?—and would like a lot of help and support creating your writer website, [Freelance Writers Den](#) has a 4-hour bootcamp, *Build a Writer Website That Works!*