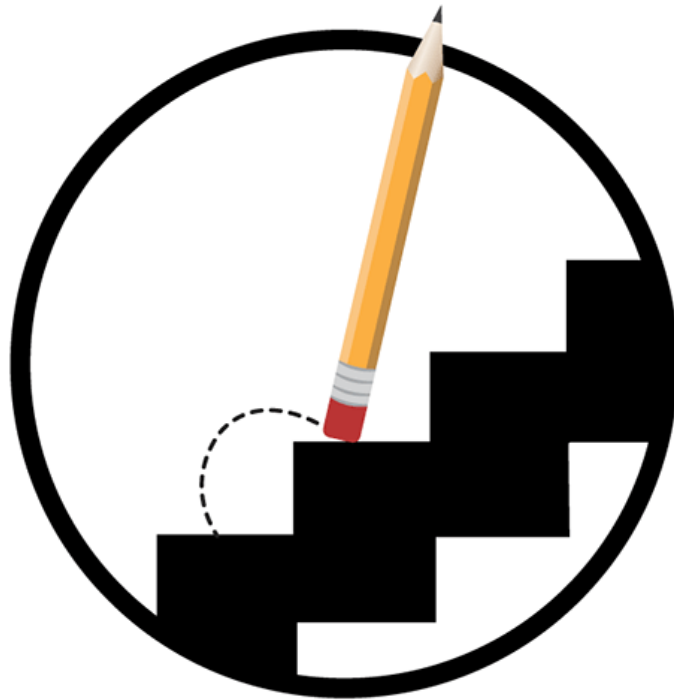


The Step-by-Step Guide to Freelance Writing Success

**How to Break In and Start Earning
– Fast!**



By Carol Tice and Laura Spencer

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Why Did We Create This E-Book?	4
Meet the Authors	5
Chapter 1: How to Find Your Best First Markets	7
How to Identify Your Best Opportunities.....	7
How to Follow the Money to Find the Best Pay	9
8 Great Types of First Markets.....	11
7 Types of Great Break-In Assignments	16
Q&A	20
Chapter 2: How to Market When You're a Newbie With No Clips — Without Seeming Desperate	28
How To Get Your First Clips	28
How To Pitch Pro Bono Work.....	29
How To Look For Paid Work.....	30
Chapter 3: 10 Marketing Strategies For New Writers.....	33
1. Your website	33
2. Your blog and guest blogging.....	35
3. The right job boards.....	37
4. In-person networking.....	38
5. Phone/Skype calls.....	40
6. Targeted emails	41
7. Query letters	43
8. Social Media.....	44
9. Partnerships and alliances	44
10. A plan	45
Q&A.....	46
Chapter 4: Build Your Confidence to Negotiate for Good Gigs	50
How To Build Your Confidence	50
How To Negotiate As a Newbie	57
Q&A	67
Chapter 5: Insider Tips and Tricks for the Pro Writer	72
4 Tips To Get Ready To Write.....	72
Writing Mechanics.....	76
Reviewing Your Work	83
Q&A	85
Chapter 6: How to Avoid the 12 Biggest Mistakes of New Freelance Writers – and Earn Big	90
1. Getting stuck in self-doubt.....	90
2. Allowing rejection to crush you	91
3. Not creating a writer website	92

4. Wasting time deciding on a niche.....	92
5. Failing to use contacts you already have	93
6. Thinking low-paying gigs are all that's out there	95
7. Forgetting to study your market	95
8. Writing weak query letters.....	97
9. Avoiding direct contact with clients and sources	97
10. Thinking you can't negotiate	98
11. Not reviewing your own work	99
12. Failing to market.....	99
Q&A	100
Learn More About Freelance Writing from the Authors.....	107
Blogs	107
E-books	107
Put this e-book into action!	108
Index	109

Why Did We Create This E-Book?

I see a lot of questions about how to get started as a new freelance writer from members of my [Freelance Writer's Den](#) community.

“I can’t get a writing gig without experience, and can’t get experience without clips — so I can’t see how to get started!”

“I’m stuck earning peanuts. How can I find legit writing assignments that pay real money? Do they even exist?”

“I just wish I could find a pro who’ll walk me through how to break in and start building my portfolio!”

To answer these questions, I got together with pro freelance writer Laura Spencer for a series of five one-hour presentations about what it takes to land great-paying freelance writing gigs — not the \$5 kind, but the ones that pay \$1 a word, \$100 an hour, and more.

In this e-book, you get to “listen in” on those conversations. Members of my [Freelance Writers Den](#) writers’ support community got to hear these chats live. They asked some great follow-up questions, so we’ve included those Q&A sessions at the end of most chapters.

We hope this guide helps you grow your writing income!

—Carol Tice

Meet the Authors

Carol Tice



I'm Carol Tice. I've been a full-time freelance writer since 2005. I was a staff writer for 12 years before that, and freelanced for several years at the beginning of my career, too. I've earned more every year since I returned to freelancing in '05, straight through the downturn, hitting six figures in 2011.

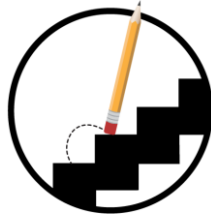
I write the award-winning [Make a Living Writing](#) blog, and founded the writer support community [Freelance Writer's Den](#). Besides my own blog, I've guest-posted for Copyblogger, Problogger, LifeHack, Write to Done, and many more. Paid writing clients include *Entrepreneur*, *Forbes*, *Alaska Airlines* magazine, American Express, Dun & Bradstreet, Lending Tree, and many small businesses.

Laura Spencer



I'm Laura Spencer. I've been a professional writer for over 20 years. I've managed my own freelance writing business since 2002. Before becoming a freelancer I was a corporate technical writer for over 12 years. My current writing specialties include: blogging, business writing, copywriting, and web content.

You'll find my blog at WritingThoughts.com. In addition to the ghostwriting and copywriting I do for my business clients, my writing has been published on blogs such as DesignM.ag, Everything PR, Freelance Folder, LifeHacker, MenwithPens, Vandelay Design Blog, and many more.



Chapter 1: How to Find Your Best First Markets

LAURA: When you're a new writer, it can seem like the impossible dream to start finding paying gigs. But remember, every writer working today once had no clips at all. We all found a way to get those first few samples, and you can, too. Once you get those samples, you have some clips – published articles – to show prospects, and you can start getting paying gigs.

In this chapter, we're going to show you how to quickly get over this no-clips hump quickly, by identifying the markets most likely to hire you to write an assignment that results in a great clip for you.

Often, this clip will be for little or no pay. But at this point, the pay rate is not the point. The focus is to get a few high-quality clips you can use to get more work. Then you've got a portfolio, and you're ready to pitch clients and ask for professional rates.

How to Identify Your Best Opportunities

CAROL: My overall philosophy of getting first clips is to reach for something fairly easy to achieve. Just get that first clip, and get over that whole "I don't have any clips!" hump. You want to find an assignment you can win at pretty easily, do a great job on and make an editor happy with, so you can start building that portfolio.

We find one big reason new writers get bogged and don't make any progress is there are so many possible markets out there to write for. The question is, how can you choose the right one? How can you find one that will hire you as a new writer? If you want to make this easy, you follow the low-hanging fruit theory.

How does it work? To find your low-hanging fruit prospects, use the following four steps to identify the types of markets most likely to hire you as a newbie. When you don't have any clips, you need to make a strong case that you're the right writer for this gig because you know something about this topic.

The answer lies within your unique strengths. They will tell you where to focus your prospecting. Here is a quick four-step exercise to help you zero in on your best first markets:

Step 1: List all the places you've worked.

Include every job, even if you didn't like it. For me, I'd list McDonald's, even though they fired me. My teen is working there right now. Maybe you worked in a bank — whatever it is.

I worked a couple of retail jobs when I was a teen, and I also worked as a legal secretary for years. That was my day gig when I was a starving songwriter. Those life experiences came in handy early on in my writing career and led to some gigs. They might do that for you, as well.

These may not be your favorite things, but when you get started, it's not about getting to write about your ideal, bliss thing. It's about identifying what in your life experiences would pay well, and then going in that direction.

Step 2: List all your hobbies and interests.

Do you watch CNN all the time and follow the stock market? Do you raise horses? Do you do needlepoint? What personal experiences do you have that you might draw on?

When I was a newlywed, my husband and I fixed up a hovel house we bought — our first house — and I used that experience to get one of my very first clips when I saw the *LA Times*' real estate section was having an essay contest about your DIY home project.

I thought, "Wow, they created this contest just for me!" That led to my writing features for that section for years, which was a huge breakthrough for me. Sometimes, those little things you're doing are a great source of ideas for first clips.

Step 3: List your life experiences.

These aren't your hobbies and interests, and they aren't your job, but things you've done or that have happened to you.

LAURA: Your life experiences have given you an area of knowledge, even though they weren't part of your formal job. A lot of people forget about these experiences. An example would be: maybe you helped a friend as they battled cancer. In the process, you might have learned a lot about how hospitals work, or doctors, or the process of getting medical treatment.

Maybe you fought City Hall to add a guesthouse to your property and learned all about building codes. Maybe you've written for a condo association newsletter, or your school paper. Whatever your life experiences are, you can leverage them, and they can help your writing career.

Step 4: List your passions.

CAROL: Take those three lists you just made — your jobs, your hobbies, and your life experiences — and boil them down to the ones you care about the most. But don't boil them down too far. Come up with maybe half a dozen best possible areas to focus on. You're going to limit your prospecting to these areas.

At this point, I can hear you thinking, "Oh, but I want to write about my love of embroidery," or whatever.

Here's the thing: If you've been working as a waitress in a restaurant, and you know all about the food service industry, but what you'd really like to write about is natural health remedies, I have a little advice for you.

You're going to have an easier time getting this rolling if you get a first clip or two in the industry where you can claim that life experience. You could write a restaurant review, or write for a restaurant trade magazine. From there, start building your writing reputation. That allows you to more easily branch out and write on other topics, because now you've got some great clips.

I find a lot of new writers resist this idea. You get trapped in the idea that "I want to write about what I want to write about," and then end up banging your head against the wall for years, because you don't have any clips in that dream topic. Or because that target topic you love doesn't happen to pay very well. To use my example above, I'm betting there isn't a lucrative market for writing about embroidery. And maybe you don't have any life or work experience in that area to help you get the gig without the clips.

My advice: Save yourself a lot of aggravation. For starters, aim within your areas of knowledge.

How to Follow the Money to Find the Best Pay

You've got a half dozen possible directions you're going to go — topics you're interested in and have some experience with, somewhere in your life. Next, do some market research to get a sense of which markets are the highest income targets. You want to find

out, throughout your career – not necessarily right this minute, but down the road – what will pay you the best.

There's a rule in freelancing that work of one kind tends to lead to more work of the same kind. I call it my [Newtonian Law of Freelancing](#). So you can help yourself progress faster at making more, if you figure out where the opportunities for money lie, and move in that direction from the start. This can save you a lot of energy and effort.

Some tools you're going to use for this research include sources like the [Writers' Market](#) and [The Book of Lists](#).

The Book of Lists is published in about 60 major U.S. markets. If you're overseas, there may be an equivalent in a major city near you. Every week, in every city they're in, *American City Business Journals* publishes a list of the biggest hospitals, the biggest tech firms, the biggest banks, and so on.

Then they compile all the lists into a book, which is a goldmine of leads for writers. It shows companies' annual revenue, so you can look at the industries in your town and see where the money is. Do you have a ton of big, successful technology companies? Or do you only have the medical-industrial complex, or federal agencies in your area? You can get a real sense of where the money is – and who the top players are with the revenue to pay a lot for writing.

The same process holds true for the magazine side, through [Writers' Market](#). The thing I love about *Writers' Market* online is its feature where you search by pay level. Set their pay rank to the top, to five dollar signs, and then run some keywords. Look through the magazines and see what they pay. You'll probably see that needlepoint hobby craft magazines don't pay nearly as well as the banking trade magazines.

Get a sense of where the opportunities are. Look at your local business pages and business weeklies. See who they're writing about, which companies are big and successful. Your phone book with its old-time Yellow Pages is great, too — if it's still being delivered to your house. Finally, here's a use for it.

Look through the biggest sections in the Yellow Pages having the most ads, or which businesses have placed the big ads. That's where the money is circulating in your community, in those industries.

If you're targeting nonprofits, look at [GuideStar](#) and [Charity Navigator](#). They rate charities for their effectiveness, and make those charities' tax forms accessible, so you can see their annual budgets. Run a search on your city to see all the local organizations.

You'll notice I'm talking about what's going on locally. Certainly, it's a global marketplace and you can freely go for any gig, anywhere – because more and more

publications and companies don't care where you are as long as you have a good idea for them. But when you're starting out, it'll be easier to connect with a local client – one whom you can physically meet. And that's advantageous – meeting with them personally.

For instance, if I researched my market, I would find we have a fairly strong financial services sector, despite the death of Washington Mutual. We're also big into natural health. We're the home of Bastyr University, which has spun out a lot of natural health practices, groups and practitioners. And needlepoint? Not so much. Maybe a few small crafting stores, maybe a trade magazine, here and there. That, to me, smells like not much of a money opportunity.

That's what you're going to do – take your passion list, do some market research, and then ask yourself where the intersection is between your life experience and where you see money opportunity in your town.

That's my basic primer on how to focus on getting your easiest first clips.

8 Great Types of First Markets

LAURA: What you're going to do next is match your top passion and knowledge topics you've just identified with the markets having the best earning potential of those on your list. Then, locate starter markets within those topics.

These organizations often work with new writers and are most likely to hire you. The clips you get here will position you to move up to better-paying markets in that same industry.

The key is not to get in over your head and drown in an assignment you're not ready to execute brilliantly, like Carol did. She actually wrote about this — [how she got fired by an early client](#).

CAROL: I still turned out okay!

LAURA: Right. But trust us, we don't want you to have to make our mistakes, if you can help it. To start, do fantastic, small assignments. Do your best work, and they will let you learn and position yourself to go after the bigger gigs.

Here are the prime candidates for starter markets:

1. Small businesses you frequent

Look around your community, and you're bound to find lots of small businesses. Personally, I love local businesses. I love their uniqueness. From a consumer standpoint,

mom-and-pop shops often offer the best service. From a freelance-writing perspective, they also offer a great break-in opportunity.

At most small businesses, the owner is very involved in the day-to-day operations; and if you frequent that local business — think of restaurants, small shops, even little businesses that service your car — if you're a frequent customer, you're likely to run into the owner of the business. In my experience, most small business owners will make an effort to get to know their regular customers, so that's the first of your potential markets to target.

Those small business owners might need their website copy rewritten, or a brochure, or an email marketing campaign. They may have been trying to find the time to do it themselves, but never got around to it. Often, they will be thrilled to hear from you and get your writing help.

2. Charities or nonprofits you support

It's a popular misconception that charities don't have any money to pay a freelance writer. That's true for some charities, but many, especially national ones, do hire freelancers, and they pay a competitive rate. Charities often need writers. If you approach a charity you're passionate about, that can give you an edge in terms of feeling good about what you do, and also in making your copy compelling.

Most charities need six types of writing:

- Press releases
- Newsletters
- Success stories or case studies about what they've done
- Solicitation letters
- Web writing
- Grant writing

If you can do any of those types of writing, there's a good chance a charity near you could use your help. If you're already volunteering at that charity, or you're otherwise involved, you've got your foot in the door. You probably know some people you can start to approach and ask, "Hey, do you need this? Do you need a newsletter? Do you need somebody to write an article for a press release? Do you need some help with your Web copy?"

3. Organizations you are active in

Local organizations, such as your local library or school, or even a sports team, can use your services. They often have writing needs, but they may not be able to afford to pay an expensive writer with tons of experience.

Their needs are similar to those of the local charity, with the possible exception of grant writing. They need newsletters. They need press releases. They need Web copy. Also, don't forget to include local chapters of professional organizations when you're looking for free or low-cost writing samples.

Many professional organizations send out regular newsletters, and they're desperate to find good material to fill those newsletters. If you offer to write a relevant column for them, usually they'll allow you to do it. An added advantage to writing for a professional organization is that it gets your name in front of business professionals. Another word for business professionals? Potential clients.

If you join a professional organization, or if you're already a member, you can try to get writing gigs there, and you also benefit from face-to-face networking. Some examples of professional organizations you could consider writing for would be your local Chamber of Commerce, local writers' group, skill development groups such as Toastmasters, a software users' group, your church or synagogue.

Personally, newsletters have really helped my business. Early in my career, I joined a users' group for a popular-at-the-time software program. Because of my background writing marketing materials and newsletters, I got the opportunity to edit the group's monthly newsletter. Although the position of editor was volunteer — I didn't get paid for it — it helped me make business connections I still use today, and I got some nice-looking samples for my portfolio.

CAROL: I wrote for my synagogue newsletter. And when I moved to Seattle, I wrote for my regional library system's newspaper. That was a great way to get clips in Seattle, where people could get to know me here.

That was unpaid, but it was a great opportunity to getting known in a new town.

4. Small, local newspapers

LAURA: Every community I've lived in has had a newspaper. Often, the papers contain little but a few features about local events and merchants. They leave the national news for the bigger newspapers.

Where I'm living right now, though, they have the small, local newspaper, and they also have a glossy magazine that has a few feature articles every month, along with tons of

advertisements. As a new writer, don't turn your nose up at writing for these markets. Sure, there's not a lot of money in writing for them. In fact, they may not even pay you, but you can get nice clips there.

And if you're looking to build up your portfolio, local newspapers are a great way to get your byline out there. An added benefit to writing for a local newspaper is that it gets your name in front of local businesses, and they start to know you're a writer. Usually, the paper will put a little blurb about you at the end of your column.

CAROL: The other thing about writing for local newspapers is those newspaper clips give you a lot of credibility. Even if it's a little newspaper, people think, "Oh, you have some journalistic sense. You know how to conduct an interview." There's a lot of credibility to these articles over, say, content mill clips. It's like night and day, how magazine editors will react to "Here's my article interviewing someone for the Dayton Daily News," versus "Here's the stuff I wrote on Suite 101 and Examiner."

5. Alternative papers

I broke in at *L.A. Weekly*, and ended up writing on an ongoing basis for their rival, the *L.A. Reader*. After I blew out my assignment and got fired at the first alt paper, I pitched their competitor and wrote for them for years! I worked my way up to writing 3,000-word cover features for them. They gave me my first chance to write big pieces. But, at the start, I wrote little bitty, 300-word things that paid \$50, nearly every week.

In my experience, these are pretty wide-open markets. They don't have a lot of staff. They can never cover all the issues and arts activities they would like. So, if you're going to a new play, a protest, a restaurant opening, a movie that's opening, just call and see if they'd like a write-up. That's literally what I did. I called up and said, "You know, I'm going to this big protest this weekend. Do you have anybody on that?" They said, "No, could you write up 500 words on it?" They'll take a flyer on it. I find they're pretty wide open.

A lot of towns have more than one alternative paper. Find alt papers at the [Association of Alternative Newsweeklies](#).

6. Other free papers

Here's another overlooked break-in market I really like: the other free papers out there. Stroll around your downtown and you may notice some free-paper boxes with little newspapers of various types in them. The one I connected with here in Seattle was called *Today's Careers*. It's gone now, or it's called something else, but a lot of cities have

these. It's mostly job listings, and they commission a few articles to keep from being all boring job listings.

I know LA has one, *Working World*, that paid \$100 a story, last I checked. I consider these a real step up from content mills, if you have an expertise in their area. I did a bunch of these. They might pay \$100 or \$200, and nobody pitches them. They're a completely overlooked market and a great place to break in.

7. Contests

To be clear, we're not talking about the crazy national contests that want you to pay them a big, fat fee to submit something. We think most of those are scams. And a million people are going to apply, so your odds of getting any attention are pretty low. What you're looking for is local contests: ones announced by your local newspaper, your local alternative paper, or maybe a trade or hobby magazine.

I'll tell you a great one, actually. One of the listservs I'm on just sent me a note that AARP was looking for first-person essays from men over 50 about some aspect of getting older.

LAURA: Of course, you have to be a man, and you have to be over 50.

CAROL: Unfortunately, I am not a man, so this opportunity is not for me. But AARP, as one of the country's largest-circulation magazines, pays terrifically well! It's a wide-open opportunity where they're going begging for a writer to write an essay on a particular topic they want. The thing writers don't realize is that essay contests like this can lead to regular, great-paying, reported story-type assignments.

That happened to me at both contests I won. The secret of contests is, it's not so much about winning first prize. Think about all the reality TV shows, where the runner-up singer ends up with the big recording contract. It's about getting in front of the judging panel of editors. You never know who you might connect with there.

Be on the lookout for local, free-to-enter contests, or a magazine where the situation is a perfect fit for you, like my L.A. Times home-improvement essay opportunity I saw while fixing up my house. Something where your reaction is, "I have a great idea for that." Just go for it, because you don't know where that might lead.

8. Family or friends who own businesses

LAURA: This ties in with Carol's low-hanging fruit theory. Don't forget to consider the people who are closest to you. Many new writers start out writing copy for a family business. Sure, you may end up working for a reduced rate or even for free, but doing pro

bono work or low-paid writing work for your friends and family can give you those first clips that you need so much.

Who better to start out with than someone who already knows you and cares about you? Plus, it's a great way to show your friends and family you're serious about writing for a living. It can be one of those easy, first markets to approach.

7 Types of Great Break-In Assignments

CAROL: We've told you about good break-in markets. Now the question is: What can you pitch them? What sorts of things could you write and easily get an assignment, with few or no clips?

We've got seven different types that are good entry points.

1. Book and restaurant reviews

LAURA: This is a pretty easy one that a lot of people don't think about, but if you're pitching a local paper, book reviews and restaurant reviews are something they probably publish. If you like to read, if you go to the movies, if you love to eat out, this might be for you. This is a fairly easy, first break-in assignment you can get.

Smaller publications often need these reviews to appeal to local consumers. If you can write a balanced review about your dining experience at that new, local restaurant, or if you can write a good review about the new novel you couldn't put down, it could turn into paid writing work.

To show these editors you know these forms, post reviews on your own blog. That's another way you can get reviews out there with your name on them. This could help you connect with and do reviews for your local paper.

2. One-person interviews

CAROL: One-person interviews are hard to mess up. They're pretty straightforward and simple. As it happens, I just did an interview with a cub reporter at my local paper, about my print book, *How They Started*.

They're a quick interview with an author or some other notable person in your community. You write up a little 300- or 400-word profile. If you have access to an interesting person, if you pitch a person that the paper hasn't thought of writing about, often, they'll give you a chance on it.

An assignment to talk to one person and write it up is fairly low risk for the publication. It's easy for you to succeed and turn in a nice little piece.

3. Front-of-book pieces

In general, a lot of these short pieces we're talking about are known as FOBs, or front-of-the-book pieces. They're often 300 or 400 words. Editors are way more willing to assign these to somebody without a track record than they are to assign a long feature.

A common mistake a lot of early-stage career writers make is pitching big magazines, and pitching them big feature articles. The problem is that's too high risk for the editor. Because, if you mess it up – if you turn in something that's not going to work for them – then they've got a big blank space in their pages, and they can't ever let that happen.

An editor's main job is to never have blank pages run in their publication. That's why they'll want to break you in on one of these FOBs. Everyone hates them, and they're more trouble than they're worth. The hourly rate is always terrible, but you just need to do them to get established.

Once you break in with a few of those, then you're positioned to pitch a bigger gig. Now they know you. They trust you. They like you. They like your writing, and they're going to take a chance on you for a bigger piece – like I talked about with my alt paper experience, where I wrote these little bitty articles for weeks and weeks and weeks, and then I finally started writing big cover features for them. That's normally how it works.

4. Event coverage

Think concerts. City Hall meetings — it's particularly hard for papers to get coverage for them. If there's an issue you're interested in – if you're willing to go out to the public comment session about whether the local pub should be allowed to expand, or whether neighbors oppose it because it could cause drunks to throw up on people's lawns all night – that's a great opportunity. Papers love to get that coverage, and they often don't have anybody to send.

5. Celebrity interviews

LAURA: Do you know a celebrity? Your first answer to this question is probably no. When most of us think of celebrities, we automatically think about national sports figures, or Hollywood stars. But celebrity is relative, and there are different degrees of celebrity.

Simply put, for the purposes of this assignment, anyone who might be of interest to your community could be considered a celebrity when it comes to pitching your local newspaper or your area magazine. Many freelance writers fall into the trap of believing they don't know anyone interesting enough to interview. However, if someone is prominent in your community, pitch an interview on them to your local publication.

Here are some ideas for celebrity interviews you could possibly pitch:

- someone older, whom you know, who lived through a particular era in history, in your town, during that period. Say, conduct an interview with them about what your town was like in the '40s or '50s, or even the '30s;
- an elected official, such as the mayor or state senator, or another political officeholder who lives in your town;
- also school officials, such as the principal of the local high school or the coach of the local football team, make good interviews.

As you look over the list of local celebrities, you'll probably start to realize you actually do know some of these people. You may even count some of them among your friends and family. If you do, then you already have a head start.

However, if you don't know the local celebrity personally, don't panic. It's much easier to get an appointment with one of these folks, a local celebrity, than it is to get an appointment with a national celebrity. Chances are, if you call your mayor or your football coach, they're going to agree to talk to you if you identify yourself as a journalist.

CAROL: Celebrities are everywhere. People think they're only in Hollywood or New York, but it's not true. I live on a tiny island where the professor from *Gilligan's Island* lived, until his death recently. Also, one of the characters on *Lost* and one of the actors in the movie *Grease* live here, as well. And I'm literally in the middle of nowhere.

One of our [Freelance Writers Den](#) members recently reported he lives in a tiny town in Washington — population, 18,000 — and without a lot of trouble, he located two national-level celebrities. One is in a successful rock band, and one is from a reality TV show family. Really, these people are everywhere.

He interviewed them for a little social media site for his town, and I said, "And you're going to re-pitch those nationally, right?" It hadn't even occurred to him, but, any time you get your hooks into a celebrity, if they are more than a local celebrity, you can often resell that interview.

Once, when I was still in my teens, I was working at MGM Studios as a secretary. And I realized I was going to be hanging out with a celebrity for a day, as part of my job.

I called one of the big national celebrity magazines. I had no clips at the time. I was still a songwriter, but I said, “You know, I’m going to be hanging out with this celebrity. Would you like an interview with them?” And they said, “Yeah, write up 1,000 words on it.”

I said, “Don’t you want to see any clips of mine or anything?” And they said, “No, go do the interview.”

Celebrities are a ticket in the door. Publications crave news about them. And it can be celebrities from long ago, too. Editors call those stories: Where Are They Now? “She used to be in Hitchcock movies, and now she has a charity that takes care of injured animals.” People love those stories, and it’s easy to get an assignment.

6. Web content

LAURA: This is a fairly easy area for new writers to break into. There are blogs, article websites, landing pages, and much more. All of them are online, and small businesses are hungry for content. While some of that content might be videos or infographics, most of what they’re looking for is writing, and that’s great news for us.

The beauty here is that you can learn how to write in the style and tone required by reading the prospect’s website and the websites of their major competitors. You want to take notice of key industry lingo, and it’s all right there on the Internet. To get started writing for the web, I would suggest you start a blog of your own, and update it regularly. Make your blog as professional as possible. This should not be your online diary where you vent about your feelings and what you ate for dinner last night.

Instead, use your best professional writing style. Be informative and engaging, and be sure to demonstrate that you know and understand how to write effectively for the Web. Don’t neglect the blog’s appearance. A lot of writers make this mistake, and I see a lot of blogs that are just plain ugly.

Use a professional-looking theme and use stock images to illustrate your posts. If done properly, your own blog can be one of your first online writing samples.

7. Personal essays

CAROL: A lot of magazines publish these on the back page. If you have something that’s a super fit for a magazine, write it up and mail it off. You can always potentially use that as your foot in the door, and then start pitching them reported stories.

LAURA: I see those all the time, those essays at the end of magazines.

CAROL: In the big magazines, they're quite competitive, but look for places where you could get an essay published.

Q&A

How do you handle prospective clients who are stuck in the Dark Ages? I got a response on [LinkedIn's] InMail for a project today, but they want me to snail mail the clips over. I live close enough that I could drive to their office and hand them over!

Why don't you? I would. That'd be fresh. "Hey, you know, I actually live near you. I thought I'd just pop over and hand those in." I'd do it, especially if I were trying to get new clips. If I'm trying to get first clips, I would totally pop in and do that.

LAURA: It also highlights the fact that you're local, which is an advantage.

CAROL: And that you're really interested. The other approach would be, just follow directions. Put it in the mail. You'll be amazed how far you can get by following simple instructions in the world of freelance writing.

I turned down a guest poster for my blog just recently, because she couldn't follow directions. She sent me a pitch. I said, "I don't like this headline, and where's the outline?" I assign off of a headline and outline – it's in [my writer's guidelines](#). That's my rule. And her next response was, "Here's my article."

I said, "I don't read prewritten articles that aren't assigned by me." Because, boy, would people like to send me them, and most are spammy, duplicate copy, and I just can't go there. At that point, I said, "I don't think this is a fit." Sometimes, you can go far by simply following directions.

When you're starting out, should you start a business first? You know, get a separate bank account, get a federal ID number, create a way to get paid... or do you just dive in to find jobs?

LAURA: It's a good idea to establish a way to get paid. For example, a separate bank account. Be as professional as you can up-front. You may not need a business ID number right away. You may be able to get by as a solo professional.

Also, look into the rules and regulations for running a business in your town, and make sure you're in compliance with those, as well as national rules and regulations.

A separate bank account is important. Start thinking about how you're going to keep your accounting records, because that's important. It's going to be *really* important when you do your taxes. Definitely set yourself up as a business, and start to get a business mindset about your freelance writing.

CAROL: There are two good things about going ahead and doing that. The first is, it makes you seem more pro – and some accounts *will* ask for a federal ID. They'll ask if you have a UBI number, or your state's equivalent business licensing number. And if you have one, it seems more like you're happening.

The other thing is, it does something good for your head. Your mind hears, "I'm really doing this. I'm not talking about it. I am planning to have a freelance writing business and have income this year that I'll be reporting. I'm setting this up so I can track it."

The nightmare that can happen is, you don't register your business, you don't take it seriously, and you don't end up with much revenue. Then the IRS might decide it's a hobby, and disallow all your expenses, because it doesn't seem legit. So it's good to go through the process as a way of making a statement to yourself, and it looks pro to clients. It's a win-win, and it costs very little.

You can get a federal ID number, free. And registering with your state usually costs less than \$100. It's worth it.

LAURA: Sometimes, you can take your startup expenses as a business expense, but that's only if you track them, like you kept records for what it cost to set up your website. What did it cost to buy your computer? Check with your accountant, of course, but if you didn't track your startup expenses, you're not going to be able to take those at the end of the year, when taxes come due.

How do I find good markets through Internet searches or websites? That way, I could figure out what clients to start with, and go from there.

CAROL: I actually don't advise that, because it's too overwhelming. You just start Internet searching, or looking at tradepub.com for trade publications, or poring over *[The Writers' Market](#)*. It's completely overwhelming.

First, do the low-hanging fruit exercise, so you have targets. Then, go on the Internet and search on "healthcare trade publication" or "healthcare companies in Pittsburgh." You're focused.

You'll get a finite result that's manageable and sane. Maybe there are 20 medium-sized businesses here, or there are 40 or 50 small businesses in my town in the right industry,

where I could build a marketing list. It's all about cutting off a digestible slice of the marketplace so you can focus and start getting things done.

I used to work at a local company which is prominent in the news now. Is it okay to ask for an interview?

LAURA: Sure – use your contacts there. Make sure you're connected to them on LinkedIn, and you're still in touch with your past employers and colleagues. Definitely.

CAROL: That's the low-hanging fruit of marketing—everybody you already know. The thing is, when you pitch that story to an editor, you need to disclose you did work for them at some point, but the editor likely will not have a problem with that.

I have a tax ID number, but when I applied, it was for a different category than writing. Can I use it, or do I have to get a different one?

I don't know. Ask your state if you can reclassify it, or if you need to. As I recall, there is no category for writing in my state. I'm in some weirdo, miscellaneous service business category. Maybe your state is better than mine for categorizing freelancers.

Just call up your state department for business. It's a different agency in each state. It might be the Department of Revenue, or the Secretary of State's Office, or the Department of Labor. Just call them up and ask. They are happy to help entrepreneurs start new businesses!

I work part-time for an Internet marketer and part-time as a freelancer. Should I still get a business ID?

LAURA: Yes. You need to start having a business mindset about your freelancing, even if you're only part-time. A lot of people start out part-time, but it's still a business.

CAROL: It's still a business. The IRS will still treat it as a business, if it produces income. Lots of people have more than one business going at a time. Serial entrepreneurs will have their hands in three different businesses at once. There's nothing wrong with that.

Can you give me some examples of writing that small mom-and-pop type businesses would need?

Surely: blog posts, website content. Most small business websites utterly suck. They're really wretched. Take a look.

They may not even have a website up yet. Their brochure hasn't been updated in years. They need to do a flier. They want to start a newsletter. They need to do an email marketing campaign to sell a new product. You name it. What they need is more marketing, and what they don't have is the time or writing skill to do it themselves.

LAURA: That's why they need you.

How do I pitch a local paper? With a letter of introduction or a query?

CAROL: All the times I did it, I just called them on the phone and asked for the editor and said, "Hey, would you like a story on this?" Doing it in a casual way actually implies "pro"-ness. It implies you're not all sick and nervous about this, and you do this a lot, and you think you could just orally pitch this and get a gig.

You definitely don't want to pitch a local paper a letter of introduction. That's going nowhere. Ideas are the coin of the realm. You get assignments because you have ideas. Even with trade pubs, where it's hard to know what ideas they want, I always find, if you pitch ideas, it makes a better impression.

What if even the alternative paper wants clips?

What if? They may not. They may not care. If it's something simple like, "I want to write up a restaurant I ate at," I don't know if they're going to ask you. They're just going to say, "Send it over, and let us take a look."

LAURA: And if they do ask for clips, use one of the other tips to get a first clip, and then pitch them.

CAROL: Or maybe send them to your blog.

Where do you find local contests?

Just keep your eyes peeled. You never know when they'll pop up. I'm someone who happens to notice them. Read widely. Read publications you're thinking about getting into.

Where do you find content mills, so I know how to avoid them?

LAURA: The definition varies depending on who you talk to. But I would say if they are an organization that seems to accept just about anyone, and you see a lot of low-quality content on their website, you can possibly think of that as a content mill.

CAROL: I would advise you to stop random, wide-open Internet searches for “write articles,” or something related. Because that’s the kind of search that tends to turn up the mills. Instead, do the steps we have outlined here.

Do your low-hanging fruit list. Figure out what you’re concentrating on. Use research tools like the *Writers’ Market* and *The Book of Lists*.

You’re going to find legitimate companies and legitimate publications. If you’re just poking around the Internet, looking at Craigslist ads, you’re going to find a lot of scams. That’s why we have taken the time to train you up on this other method of figuring out your markets. It should naturally avoid the mills for you.

How do you keep up with or find all the events going on in your community that would make great articles?

Reading widely is good. But, also, I don’t know that I keep up with *all* of them. I tend to pitch what I’m interested in. I pitch the things I found out about, through my own natural interests.

LAURA: And if you’re in some organizations, a charity or your local SPCA or something, and they’re having an event, that’s an event you know about, because you’re in it. Look to the organizations you’re in, and their events.

CAROL: Or maybe you’re involved in a group that’s trying to save the creek, and they have an event coming up that’s going to be really interesting. That might make a good photo in the paper. It might even be just a photo with a long caption. Anything to get in the door.

What is the difference between one-person interviews and celebrity interviews?

A celebrity interview *is* often a one-person interview, though you might also be talking to others about that celebrity – their manager, their biggest fan, the producer of their latest movie.

Beyond the celebrity sphere, one-person interviews could be something the paper might ask you to cover, once you’re on the phone with them. That’s the other thing to know

about getting on the phone. If you pitch an idea, and they say, “We don’t need that,” the editor might say, “but, you know, I really wish someone would go to *this* event and write about it.” You might even get tossed something like that.

You also have a chance to pitch them other ideas you have, or to ask, “What sorts of stories are you most in need of right now?” Great opportunity to learn more.

Can you give more examples of front-of-the-book writing?

LAURA: FOBs can be profiles of one interesting little company. Or you might notice an interesting local trend, and you’ve got three quick examples. In my experience, often FOBs are something that publication wants to be on record as having covered, but they don’t have time to develop it into a feature. They need to get it in now. There’s something time-critical; they want a quick mini-version of it so they can throw it into the next issue.

Is there a general formula for how many interview questions equal what number of words?

Not really, because you’ll get some people who will just not talk at all, and some people you might ask two questions, and they’ll go on and on. I would say it’s better to have more questions prepared than fewer. If you find you’ve got a talker, you can always not ask them some of your least-important questions.

Do the blogs have to be monetized in the future?

CAROL: Nope. Most aren’t.

Some writers do them just as a writing sample. Some people do them aimed directly at prospects. It might be marketing tips for small businesses or something, where it’s very much a marketing tool for your writing business, and that’s basically all it is.

Once you get a more substantial clip using this method, would you leave content mill clips out of your portfolio?

Hell yeah. You want to get rid of those as soon as you’re able.

LAURA: In fact, you should think of your portfolio as being dynamic. You’re constantly updating it and putting your best new material in there. A lot of times, the first pieces you get, you’ll use to get better pieces. Then you’re going to use those to get better pieces. You might want to drop the first pieces off, at some point.

CAROL: I don't have the stuff I wrote for the alternative press in 1990 in my portfolio. As you go, you're going to keep culling what represents the best of your work. You're going to keep dropping old stuff and putting in better stuff, and longer and more complicated and more sophisticated topics. You're just going to keep on improving it, hopefully.

Do you recommend keeping track of every time you pitch an idea or submit a piece?

LAURA: I do.

CAROL: I track it. My concern is, I'll forget and pitch an editor the same thing again!

I tend to have a little list where I note when I pitched who what, but I actually never follow up, which is probably what you mean. If you want to know how long before you can ask an editor if they got it and are they interested, I don't do that. I don't follow up.

Other writers I know create a follow-up system – after three weeks or six weeks or whatever, they want to email the editor about it. I find I'm better off taking that energy and sending more queries. I figure they'll tell me if they're interested, and I move on. I just find that's emotionally healthy for me.

LAURA: It's important not to be afraid of following up. Like Carol said, it's a matter of personal style and what type of writing you're going to do, too. Businesses tend to be more used to follow-up. In fact, you may have to follow up several times if you're pitching to small business, as opposed to pitching an editor who's constantly getting lots and lots of queries.

CAROL: That's totally different. That's customer cultivation.

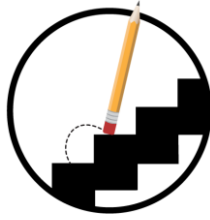
If I can't get an interview, can I quote out of someone's book and give them credit?

No. That's what you do in a college paper, not what you do in an article for a magazine. If you can't get an interview, you find another expert to interview. It's rare you have to have that particular person. There are plenty of experts out there in most topics.

Is your portfolio online, or in an actual notebook?

I'm one of those people who does have a physical portfolio somewhere around the house, but it's been a long time since I used it. At this point, everybody's portfolios are digital. And most prospects want to see them delivered digitally.

LAURA: Right. Although it wouldn't hurt to bring a couple clips if you're going face-to-face with a prospective client. Sure, bring something in your briefcase. Of course, these days, you can also just bring your iPad and your online portfolio just as easily.



Chapter 2: How to Market When You're a Newbie With No Clips — Without Seeming Desperate

LAURA: When you're a new freelance writer, you should expect the vast majority of your time to be taken up with marketing activities. If you don't market, you don't get gigs. It's just that simple.

Remember, most of the good opportunities are never advertised. They go to writers who market and connect with editors and business owners. There are a lot of different ways to market your writing, but some of them don't work well. And if you're a writer of a tiny or nonexistent portfolio, then you're going to need a little extra help.

How To Get Your First Clips

CAROL: As a new writer, the first thing you need to focus on is getting clips, or samples of writing you did for an editor or a business client. And you can get some great clips with a few free gigs.

You'll want to target the right situations, though. I see a lot of new writers making huge mistakes with this — they run around doing a lot of stuff for free, but it's not the *right* stuff. It's not building the portfolio they want, filled with quality clips from magazines or copywriting or Web content for businesses — work that will make prospects say, “Ooh, look who they've worked for. Look how legit they look.”

Here are some pointers on the type of pro bono situation you're looking for.

First off, the industry this free gig is in is one you're looking to write in. It's something that's on your low-hanging fruit list. It's an interest. It's a passion area, where you have experience you can leverage.

Second, this pro bono client is willing to keep it a secret that you did this work for free. This is just between you and them.

Third, they are going to promise they will recommend and refer you if they are happy with your work. That's basically how they're paying you.

I even have a little pitch letter on this, later in this chapter. You might even say, flat out, “I do need some pay. I need you to pay me in a referral.”

This organization has a good reputation. It could be small, but highly regarded.

Fourth, it's important that you're able to claim credit for the work. I run into too many freelance writers who've done a bunch of great free stuff, but they ended up signing a non-disclosure agreement, or NDA, where they can't tell anybody they did it. That defeats the purpose. We want a clip you can get into your portfolio.

How To Pitch Pro Bono Work

LAURA: When you've got potential clients for these first pro bono gigs, we've got a script you can use to either call or write to one of these prospects. It makes you seem like a professional writer and not a desperate newbie. You don't want to use this verbatim — adapt it to fit your situation and your voice — but it's a great starting point for you:

I'm reaching out to you because I'm a freelance writer looking to build my portfolio in the area of [insert the industry or type of writing assignment]. In analyzing your current marketing materials, I noticed you were missing [insert the piece they need — it could be an About page on their website, press releases, case studies].

Next, briefly describe your experience with their industry. You're going to tell them why you know the business, whether it's from past work you've done, or a hobby, or just because you've done a lot of research on them.

Next, you can say:

Because I want to build my reputation in this area, I'd be willing to do [name the project] for you without charge. All I'd ask in return is that you refer and recommend me in the future, if you're happy with my work. I'd also need you to not mention that I did this project for you without charge. We both win here. You get a free marketing piece [or article], and I get a valuable entry in my portfolio.

I'm happy to tell you more about my writing background and discuss this with you further. Let me know if you're interested.

And then you sign it, or wait for them to respond if you're on the phone.

The key is to keep it straightforward and simple. You don't need to say, “I have no clips now,” or “I've only been writing for three months.” Just emphasize the benefits to them. They're getting free writing from a writer with some knowledge of their business. And that's worth something to them.

How To Look For Paid Work

LAURA: Once you've gone ahead and pitched a couple of business owners or editors and done a little pro bono work, you're ready to start looking for your first paid projects. You're going to take those first clips and start marketing to your first paying clients.

The obvious place to begin is to tap your existing network. As we discussed in Chapter 1, these can be businesses you frequent, friends, or acquaintances. You're going to let them all know you're a freelance writer who's looking for new clients.

How do you turn a casual contact with a small business owner, a publications editor, or an executive into a business opportunity? Here are three principles to follow.

1. **Do your research.** Look the business or publication up online. Check out their Web presence. Consider the materials they have in their shop.
2. **Offer solutions.** Next, think about how you could help that business. Don't contact them and tell them their current marketing sucks. Instead, look for the missing pieces you might add, just like you did when you were pitching a pro bono piece. You're going to say, “You have a lack of product descriptions on your website.” “You're missing customer case studies.” “You don't have any good executive bios.” “Your travel magazine hasn't covered the Eastern part of the state in years.” Those are the kinds of things you want to look for, that you could provide them.

Once you've done your research and you've considered solutions, you're ready to approach them. A good way to open this conversation is to point out you're already a customer or a reader of their publication, and you love what they're doing. Then you can say something like, “I notice your website doesn't say anything about your [fill-in-the-blank]. I'm a professional writer. I could help you with that.”

3. **Follow up.** Your next step will depend on how they respond.

If they seem only moderately interested, you can go ahead and leave an

information packet with them. Now, that doesn't have to be anything expensive or extensive. It could just be your business card or your business card in a small brochure, or even just a professional-looking handout sheet that lists your services. At this point, that should be enough.

You can ask them if you can add them to your mailing list, or connect with them through social media such as LinkedIn. A lot of professionals are on there. You could hand them your business card and say, "Hey, can we stay in touch on LinkedIn?" And if they agree, and most of them will, then you can follow through and make the connection.

CAROL: That's a great point for new writers, Laura. Often, in my marketing classes, we teach that the call-to-action should be, "May I send you my clips?"

But, of course, if you don't have any clips, you need a different, low-commitment, non-threatening thing to say. "Hey, can I connect with you on LinkedIn? Great. I'll send you an invite." And then it's all on you.

They don't have to do anything. They can just accept. They can press one button and start staying in touch, without any big obligation on their part. Which is what you want.

LAURA: Right. It's rare for someone to say, "No, don't connect with me in social media." And then, each time you do connect, the key is to share something of value. Don't be pitching them constantly.

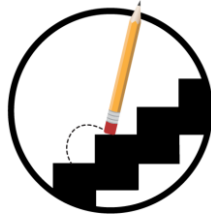
You may also offer a newsletter, if you're starting one. Maybe link to an article you read about their business. Your main goal in staying in touch is to keep your name in front of the prospect. You also want to build a positive relationship with them.

Don't write the prospect off if they don't hire you right away, especially if it's a small business. They might have a writing need later on, and now, at least, they know a professional writer. You're going to build a relationship, which is a big advantage over a complete stranger who contacts them. But don't pester the prospect by contacting them all the time and begging for work. That leaves a negative impression and hurts the relationship you're trying to build.

CAROL: It's ironic, but the way you want to present yourself is simply, "I love what I do, and I'm just staying in touch in case you need what I've got."

Even if you're totally desperate and you're eating beans and rice for dinner every night, that's how you want to present yourself to them. Like you do this all the time, you love doing it, and you'd love to do it for them or someone they know who needs it. You're just trying to stay in their mind as someone who does this, in case they need it. If you hit that tone, you're right where you want to be.

LAURA: The last thing you want to do is constantly say, “I’m starving. I’m hungry. I need work. I’ll do anything.”



Chapter 3: 10 Marketing Strategies For New Writers

Now that you understand some of the basics of marketing as a new freelance writer, we'll spotlight 10 specific strategies that are highly effective for new writers.

1. Your website

CAROL: I don't want to sound like a broken record – especially to those of you too young know what that means – but if you don't have a writer website, it's like you're invisible. You don't come off as serious about your business. It costs \$30 a year or so to host a website – and if you don't have one, it does not speak well of you, particularly if you're hitting online markets. They're going to think you don't understand the Internet, and that you're not a match for them as a writer.

LAURA: This is truer for writers than it is for freelancers in other positions, because, as writers, one of the things you're likely marketing is content. If you don't have a website yourself, they're going to assume you don't understand content.

CAROL: The thing is, if you're someone who's saying, “Woe is me. I have no samples,” here's an opportunity for you to create a great sample of how a business website could get clients — by writing your own website for your writing business.

A lot of writers don't fully grasp what an audition piece your site is. You want to get one up, and then you want to write the heck out of it. But for starters, you need something – a URL on the Internet where people can start to learn about you.

For those of you who don't have a writer website yet, I'm going to challenge you to get one up this week. I'm not kidding. Something. Anything.

Here are six quick, easy, free, or cheap ways to have a website you can send prospects to for starters:

1. **ZoomInfo.** This is a site that compiles information about people on the Internet. If you've written anything that's available online, [ZoomInfo](#) has a compilation of anything that carries your name. If you've done content mill articles that carried your byline, they have it. And you can take control of your profile, sculpt it, and make it nice. You can write a real bio for it. For the first 18 months, when I came back to freelancing in 2005, this is what I used. It's very down and dirty, and my photo is laid out sideways. You can look me up on there. It's still there! But you know what? I got gigs off that. It was somewhere I could send people, while I got organized and on my feet.
2. **LinkedIn's portfolio tool.** If you're into LinkedIn – and you should be – there is a portfolio tool that lets you add more clips and links to your LinkedIn profile. The tools they allow tend to evolve, but as I write this, it's called [Professional Portfolio](#).
3. **Free sites.** You can grab a free site such as [Yola](#) and slap something up in a day. I'm not a big fan of this strategy, but it's doable. You'll run up against a lot of barriers and limitations to what you can do on the free sites, because that's why they are free. Many of these either want to put their ads onto your site, or they don't have a lot of usability in the free version and want to up-sell you to a paid version. But a free site is better than nothing, and can hopefully migrate what you put up here to a better site later – be sure to check their policies on that, and what access you have to your content.
4. **Join NAIWE.** Another quick solution is to join the National Association of Independent Writers and Editors ([NAIWE](#)). I'm a member myself. The reason I'm a fan of this writer organization is that, with their \$99-a-year membership – which gives you a whole professional writers' support organization – you get a free hosted WordPress site. It's totally set up and ready to go. You need to know almost nothing. You can start blogging and have a portfolio page for clip links. You can literally be up tomorrow, for \$99. I think it's one of the best quick solutions out there. The site is simple and clean. A lot of Den members have used this, and it looks professional. You can always spin off your own site, and get better later. The downside here is, you will have .naiwe.com in your URL, which isn't ideal. But it's a place to start.
5. **OutstandingSETUP.** This is a website setup service co-founded by Sean Platt of the old GhostwriterDad blog. [OutstandingSETUP](#) will design the site for you and do all of your tech support. It's like an instant webmaster for \$19 a month. I have reviewed sites that OutstandingSetup has done for Freelance Writers Den members, and they're doing great work. If you want your site to start off right, on the best platform – WordPress – and to look nice, and you don't want to have .blogger or .WordPress in it, that's a solution to look at.
6. **Writer's Residence.** This is the new quick-site provider on the block, and I'm loving what I've seen from this new WordPress site provider that's completely

focused on writer sites. A couple of advantages here: [Writer's Residence](#) offers a free, one-month trial! And they have a handy portfolio tool and other page templates that make design super-easy. After the free trial, it's just \$8.99 a month, including support – a terrific deal.

I recommend new writers take advantage of one of these solutions, because I find getting the website up can be a big cause of delays. Writers get all wrapped up in trying to launch their site. They hire a designer. The next thing they know, they're spending \$800 or \$1,000, or more. Plus, they keep tinkering with it, and feeling they can't launch their business yet.

I've come back to writers two years after I mentored them, and their site still isn't up! And they're waiting to have the website up to start marketing. Don't let this happen to you. You need something basic up now. Yes, even if you have no clips. Writer websites are an evolving thing, always, so get something up, and you can improve from there.

2. Your blog and guest blogging

As we've just discussed, you can make a great writing sample by creating your own writer website. And you can create great examples of how you write blog posts and articles by having a blog and posting on it. I feel so jealous of all of you because, back when I started, there was no Internet or blogging. It's so easy to create good clips now.

If you're creating a blog with an eye to getting hired to blog for other people, or to write articles for other people, there are some basic things you want to do. You want your blog set up as a good audition piece, so prospects will see that you “get” niche blogging.

For starters, you want to blog about one topic. It does not have to be a business topic. It could be about your love of quilting. Tattoos, I gather, is a great niche that monetizes well. Unless it's something potentially offensive, like pornography or your radical right-wing politics or something, the niche doesn't matter that much.

It can really be any topic, as long as, when scrolling through your blog, prospects can see quickly that all of the headlines relate to one topic. This is where most blogs go wrong. Many people use their blog like it's a personal journal about whatever strikes their fancy every day. That's going to be a big turnoff to business prospects. That's not what they want. They're going to want you to blog about surety bonds, or business finance, or something. Pet food, or household cleaning products. Those are all things I've blogged about for clients!

Just show you understand niche blogging. And you want your design to be clean and simple, not a big cluttered-up mess with different colors and fonts and flashing ads. Make it nice and clean.

Blog headlines are super-important. There are a couple of great resources for that. Grab the [Headline Hacks](#) report from Jon Morrow, and get the report, [Why Do Most Headlines Fail?](#) at Sean D'Souza's site, Psychotactics.

Beyond the headline, your posts need to have useful practical information your readers can use. The other big thing for business blogging is that prospects can see you engaging your audience. You're asking questions that draw them out and make them leave comments, and you're responding to those comments, and you're getting retweets, and other social shares. Those are all the fundamentals that businesses, and even niche magazines, such as *Entrepreneur*, want you to do for them. It shows you know how to do those, right on your blog.

Once you have even three to six posts on your blog, start looking for guest posts. That's the secret a lot of writers don't realize. They think, "Oh, I need to blog for years and build an audience first." You don't. Just start pitching guest posts.

Many major websites are wide open to accepting guest posts from all comers. You'll know if they are, because they'll have a form you can stick your guest post right in. I did that with several sites including Probblogger, and ended up doing several posts for them. They just said, "Yeah, come on down." [Unfortunately, Probblogger is now invite-only.]

Make sure your idea is a great fit and that you have strong headlines for a big, popular blog. I highly recommend thinking of a scannable list. That's actually what I ended up doing for Copyblogger.

A lot of people don't know this, but my first post for Copyblogger never saw the light of day. My editor, Jon Morrow, and I looked at it and agreed it wasn't up to snuff, especially as a first post for them. It wouldn't get me the traffic and attention we wanted.

So I started all over and wrote a 50-tip list post, instead. That post made it into [Best of Copyblogger 2010](#). Presto! I got a lot of leads off it, from small businesses looking for bloggers. You want to do something that's information-packed and easy to execute. Something where, once you come up with the concept, it just writes itself.

LAURA: That's a good point, because lists are extremely popular. People criticize lists, but for online writing, that's what the Internet wants. I can personally attest to the fact that list posts drive traffic. I even wrote a post to help writers create effective lists posts, [7+ Tips to Writing Effective List Posts](#).

I wanted to weigh in on the topic of guest posting, too, because I've been on the other side of this fence in that I used to accept guest posts for my blog and [Carol also accepts guest posts](#). Our tip: Be sure to follow the guidelines the blog owner has provided.

I was responsible for accepting guest posts for a large blog, at one point, and one of the quickest turnoffs was getting emails from prospective guest bloggers who didn't follow the directions. I got posts that weren't related at all to the blog's topic. I don't think they even read the blog, because they were so off-base. I got weird things that indicated they weren't following the instructions at all.

Read those instructions and follow them. That's what a professional does.

For tons more on how to turn your personal blog into a great writing sample for getting freelance-blogging gigs, check out Carol's e-book, [How to Be a Well-Paid Freelance Blogger](#).

3. The right job boards

CAROL: This may surprise you, but one of our marketing tips is to get off Craigslist. And you might think that's crazy because, "I'm an entry level writer, and I know there are lots of entry level jobs on there."

But I'm not a fan of hanging around on Craigslist. Mass job boards are notorious for their poor-quality listings, and a lot of outright scams.

The problem is, it's a time-intensive form of marketing – and your odds of getting the gig are really low. Thousands and thousands of people are applying for the same job, and that drives rates through the floor. Meanwhile, you spend a lot of time applying.

I strongly advise you to get out of this crowded Craigslist job pool. If you do spend time there, be very selective about what you respond to. It's got to smell legit and be closely tied to niche expertise you have.

When I used to troll the mass boards, back when I was getting my freelance writing business established, I had it down to ten minutes, maximum, a day. I'd flip through, and if it didn't scream, "I am tailor-made for you and I seem like a fantastic client," I moved on and didn't bother applying.

What's better than Craigslist? You want to look for niche job boards for your particular expertise. Places where you might connect that not every writer in the world is checking. A board I use is called [Gorkana](#). They have journalism job boards for finance and healthcare writing, among other niches. Also for media, if you write about TV and radio, and such.

And they have high-quality leads. It's all major corporations, great niche trade publications — and serious pay. I got one good, year-long gig off Gorkana, blogging for one of CBS TV's network sites.

But, in general, in the great scheme of your marketing, the amount of time you spend looking at online job ads should be small compared to the more proactive forms of marketing we're outlining here. That's the massive mindshift you need to make — realizing that the lucrative writing career you want to build is probably not waiting for you on a job ad somewhere on the Internet. You need to go out and find it.

4. In-person networking

LAURA: In-person networking is something writers tend to avoid, but it's tremendously important. Meeting people face-to-face at events gives you a huge advantage. People like to know who they're dealing with, to put a name with the face.

There are a lot of opportunities to network face-to-face. Any time you get together with other people, you have a chance to talk about your business. It could be at your kid's soccer match or karate class — you never know. You can also actively seek out opportunities to network face-to-face by attending events and joining professional organizations.

There are local writers' groups in many towns and cities. Also, you can find people who share specific interests through the site, [Meetup.com](https://www.meetup.com). We have one in the city where I'm located that's just for WordPress users. You may have different meetups that would be relevant to writers in your local area — investigate and find out what's available.

Also, find any local business groups that might be located in your area. Or look at professional organizations, such as the Society of Technical Communicators, or the American Society for Training and Development.

CAROL: I love [Mediabistro](https://www.mediabistro.com)'s local events.

LAURA: There are also trade shows that come to your town. BlogWorld [now [NMX](https://www.nmx.com)] meets in several cities each year. One that's located about four hours from where I live is [SXSW](https://www.sxsw.com).

CAROL: If there's a trade show or convention within driving distance, attending is worth your consideration, even if just for a day. Here's a great guest post from my blog on how to bootstrap your way to conferences, and find clients there: [How I Find Writing Clients at Conferences – on the Cheap](#).

If you're like me, you're a bit shy when it comes to meeting new people — that's perfectly normal. If you are, prepare and think in advance about what you'll say, so that, when someone asks what you do, you have a ready, pithy answer.

We've got a little script for you here that you can use. Like any of our scripts, you don't want to say this verbatim, but it might give you a sense of how to get a conversation started:

YOU: *Hi, what did you think of the presentation?*

THEM: *Oh, I really liked it. I thought Jo did a great job.*

YOU: *I agree. By the way, I'm Carol. What's your name? Tell me about what you do.*

THEM: *I'm Laura...*

At this point, they will either tell you about themselves, or they might move away, because they don't want to talk. But most people are happy to jump in and pitch you about their business. If they tell you about themselves, be sure to listen and respond. Now you've started to build a relationship.

CAROL: What I like to say is, “What brings you here? What are you looking to do?” or “What kind of clients are you looking for?” There are any number of opening lines that throw it back to them. If you don't want to talk about yourself, just ask them about themselves. Usually, they will talk to you.

LAURA: It's kind of a turnoff to start talking about yourself right away, anyway.

Most people would love to talk about themselves, if you let them. If someone does move away, though, and doesn't respond, don't worry about it. Don't take it personally. They might just be having a bad day. It's probably not you. Just talk to someone else.

What you're listening for in this conversation is the key question, which will be something like, “So what do *you* do?”

That's your cue to share about yourself. And what you're going to share is usually referred to as a “me speech,” or an “elevator pitch.” This is a brief but compelling description of what you do.

You want to practice this, because you don't want to say, “Umm, you know,” and stutter all over the place. We've got a guideline to get you started, but practice and develop your own. This is something I might say: “I help small businesses increase their revenue by growing their customer base. I write compelling and effective Web copy.” Just that short and simple.

CAROL: The one I use now to introduce Freelance Writers Den and what I do as a writer-mentor is, “I help freelance writers earn more.”

LAURA: And that's quick.

CAROL: I find when people write these “me” speeches, they tend to come up with five sentences, when what you want is six words.

See if you can boil it down. Make it conversational. Not reciting a whole paragraph about what you do. That sounds like the goal or mission statement you might put at the top of a resume.

LAURA: Actually, they say it should be two minutes or less. That’s why they call it an elevator pitch. By the time they get to their floor, you’ve said it.

The key to delivering it is to practice until you can say it without hesitating or being awkward. One way to do that is to get a friend to role-play with you, until you're comfortable and it just rolls off your tongue naturally.

Then, if the contact you've met in person seems interested or friendly, you're going to do the same thing you did when you contacted the small business. You're going to offer them your business card and ask for theirs. You're going to try to connect with them through LinkedIn, or other social media, and stay in touch.

You're making connections. You're building relationships. You're not necessarily trying to pitch them right then and there, unless the opportunity presents itself. And they say, “Oh, you’re a freelance writer? I’m looking for a writer right now.” Otherwise, stick to relationship-building. Remember, contacts can help you with referrals, even if they don’t hire you themselves.

5. Phone/Skype calls

A lot of freelancers are shy about making phone calls, but there's no need to be. You'll find some prospective clients respond much better to a phone call. They feel better doing business with someone they can talk to. And that's perfectly normal. Some people are not phone people, and some people are.

One little trick I've learned is, if you find a potential business client is hesitating in responding to one of your pitches, offer to go over the information in person, or on the phone. That gives you an idea of whether they're a phone person or not.

If they're a phone person, you'll often find the hesitation to work with you just melts away. You can make a note of this, so when you deal with that person in the future, you'll know the phone is the best way for that client.

Take careful notes when you're talking on the phone, and then always email what you talked about back to the person for them to confirm. In fact, that's what Carol and I did when we set up this bootcamp!

You can also set aside a dedicated time for calls, so you don't get overwhelmed with them. I always schedule phone calls, rather than just letting people call me when they feel like it. I don't deal well with a lot of interruptions.

CAROL: I'm with you there.

You know what I try to do? I try to take at least one “virtual lunch” on Skype every week, either with a prospect, or with somebody who I might be able to partner or collaborate with.

LAURA: Skype is a great tool. It can be used as an instant messaging tool. Skype-to-Skype calls are free. You can also make video calls, which gives you that all-important, face-to-face meeting, without having to go anywhere.

You can purchase a low-cost Skype phone number, and Skype also has a social element with the chat. It can be a great way to land distant clients who would normally be a long-distance call for you. Just be sure to get a good headset and microphone, so your call quality is good.

6. Targeted emails

CAROL: A lot of writers love sending targeted email reach-outs because, after all, writing is our strength. It's an opportunity to play to that strength. These are also sometimes known as letters of introduction (LOI). They're appropriate to send to businesses, and to non-consumer publications such as trade magazines – think *Daily Variety* for show business executives, or *Ad Age* for marketers. (For major consumer magazines, you'll need to develop a story idea and send a query letter.)

That is, LOIs can be great if you're *not* the type of person who overthinks things and might spend all day writing one email because it's a piece of writing, so you'll obsess on it. In which case, you should use the phone, like Laura just talked about.

But if you're the kind of person who can get the hang of prospecting emails and dash these off quickly, they can open a lot of doors. As with your writer website, this marketing email you're creating is a writing audition that shows how well you can write.

It's another opportunity to create a free sample that shows your talents, without having much of a track record. Here is a basic template of the elements you want in an email to a business. Usually, you'll be targeting either the business owner or, if the company is big enough, the marketing manager.

As a freelance writer focused on [topic], I loved your recent newsletter piece on [related topic].

In checking out your [newsletter/website/brochure/whatever], I noticed you don't have any [recent coverage of Topic X, an About page, team bios, case studies, etc.]. I'd love to help you out with that. Do you work with freelance writers?

[1-line bio here: "I am a Houston-based freelance writer specializing in medical writing."]

[State some relevant experience here: "I was a long-time dental receptionist before becoming a freelance writer, so I know the dental industry well."]

May I send you a few of my [relevant topic] clips? [Or if you have none, you need another call-to-action — maybe, "I will give you a call in the next few days to see if I can learn more about your needs and tell you about how I can help."]

The main thing is to create a “warm” connection. This means the prospect sees there is a reason to talk to you, because you have some knowledge not all writers possess.

The best possible reason is, you have a personal referral from a person they know, which is why you want to do in-person networking. You might meet some people who could help you.

Barring that, you want to analyze what they're doing. Read the magazine. Look at the business's website, so you can remark on something they're doing. Note if they've been in the news, so you can say, “Congrats on opening the new branch office,” or something like that. That's making a warm connection.

It shows them you're not just pitching them cold, like those stupid guest blog-post people we were talking about a few points back, where it's clear they've never looked at your blog. Signal that you care enough to take the time to look at their stuff, and then spot the missing piece.

Tell them, “Hey, I noticed you don't have this item on your website. I would love to help you with that.” Then, end with one of those calls-to-action. “Can I connect with you on LinkedIn?” “Can I show you a couple of clips?”

The big thing to remember is, if you're sending marketing emails, it's a numbers game. You want to send lots of them.

7. Query letters

CAROL: I know people without clips who have gotten \$1-a-word assignments from national magazines, by writing a great query letter.

If you can write a strong query, you can quickly vault up the freelance ladder, and get in any door.

You know, in every webinar I've ever done, there is always one person who asks, "How do you get started when you don't have any connections?"

Here is the secret: You don't need any connections.

Your writing is your ticket in the door, wherever you want to go — if you can write a killer query. It will have a strong headline that shows the editor you understand their publication's headline style, and reveals exactly what the story will be about.

It has a strong news hook, which is a reason it has to be written now. Such as: "This critical vote, which will change everything in our state, is coming up soon," and this helps the editor see that having this article ahead of that vote would help readers understand the issue.

Another common complaint I hear from new writers is that they have sent a pitch, it got accepted, but it's never running in the publication. It keeps getting put off from issue to issue. That's because it didn't have a good enough news hook to compel the editor to run it now.

One great way to begin a query is by writing the top of your story. Just put it in there. I know people who disagree, but it works for me. Then write your nut graf — which is the paragraph that gives us the gist of what it's going to be about.

Then, move into pitching the editor, with a paragraph that says, "In my proposed article, [headline here], I will..." Then explain the other elements the article will include, the experts you'll interview and — this is important — "your readers need this information because of this news hook."

At the end of the query, add a line about you. Another big mistake new writers make is they go on and on about themselves when they get to the bio — and they dig their grave.

I have seen new writers say, "I just started freelance writing," or, "I'm all excited because this would be my first clip."

No, no, no. "I am a freelance healthcare writer based in Minneapolis. Before I began writing, I was a nurse for 10 years." That's the new writer's ideal bio.

That's the big difference between new writers and pro writers. When I send a query, I write, "I'm a Seattle-area freelance writer. My work has appeared in blah, blah, and blah." The end.

Also, it's all about your strengths. Don't tell people what you can't do or don't know. It's all about staying positive.

8. Social Media

LAURA: I hear a lot of freelance writers say social media is a waste of time. Every time I hear this, I want to cringe – because I get a lot of my gigs through social media, including the opportunity to co-author this e-book. That's how Carol and I met.

In fact, I have a huge client coming on board next month, thanks solely to my social-media contacts. We have communicated with each other regularly for over a year. On social media, newbies can connect with top people.

The key to social media is patience. I saw a comment recently from a freelancer who said they were willing to give social media a try for a week. Well, that's just not long enough! In fact, I wrote an entire post on the correct way to build business relationships through social media, [Do You Make These 5 Careless Small Business Social Media Mistakes?](#)

I got my first gig from social media after being active for about six months. I was blogging regularly, sharing links, and interacting with others. Let's be clear: While social media isn't an instant fix, it's still necessary. It's a good tool, and it's usually low cost, and you should use it.

How do you start? I suggest new freelance writers start with the big four: LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook, or Google+. One resource for learning the fine points of these platforms: In [Freelance Writers Den](#), we've got a 4-week bootcamp called How to Use Social Media to Get Freelance Gigs, which puts the focus on LinkedIn and Twitter, and how to use social media as a marketing tool, in general.

9. Partnerships and alliances

A lot of people never consider it, but teaming up can be one of the best things a new freelance writer can do. There are a couple of advantages.

Partners or team members can refer business to you, and you don't have to do any further marketing, because they're bringing the business to you. Someone else is reviewing your work, and that means fewer mistakes. Two of you looking for work means there are more

gigs. And you have someone who gets what you do, which means you get some emotional support. That can be important.

Teaming up with another writer can be a good experience, but you should also consider teaming up with other types of freelancers. One of my clients has a small graphic design company, and they need someone to proofread the copy on their designs.

They don't send me a lot of work, but they do send it regularly. And that's just one example of a profitable alliance – proofreading graphic designs.

To form a partnership or alliance, look for someone who is trustworthy, someone who is compatible with you and your personality, and someone who has talent and skill. Don't forget to review prospective partners' portfolios, and call their references. Above all, don't forget to get your partnership agreement with them in writing.

10. A plan

If you're going to do marketing, you need to have a marketing plan. You don't want to just wake up each day and do some random marketing activity, where you spend hours on Twitter one day, send LOIs the next, go to in-person networking meetings the next, and so on. You want to pick a few modes you'll market in initially, and concentrate on them.

Write down your steps and goals. A simple marketing plan could just be writing down your target client, how you're going to reach that audience, quantifying how much marketing you will do per month – 10 query letters? 30 LOIs? – and, finally, measuring your success in reaching them.

Once you have a written plan, be sure to follow it. Remember to revisit your marketing plan from time to time, so you can adjust it as you find what's working best for you.

As a general rule of thumb, a marketing plan should be reevaluated at least every six months. If you evaluate it too often, you might not be giving it enough time to work. If you don't reevaluate your plan at all, then you're not able to take advantage of what you've learned along the way.

Q&A

Can I use an e-book chapter I wrote for a content mill as a clip?

I don't see why not. Treat it like any other ghostwriting you do. Unless you signed a non-disclosure agreement.

CAROL: Unless you're sworn to secrecy, you're free to post any and all clips. Even if they don't have your byline – otherwise, copywriters would never have a portfolio!

Even if you did sign a non-disclosure, you should post it anyway, is my radical point of view. What are they going to do? Who is going to see it? It's not like our little writer websites have huge traffic on them and millions of people will see. Only a few of your prospects are ever going to know. It's more important that you eat.

You can also ask your prospect if they mind your posting a link to it on your writer website. If that won't fly, you can always note on your website's portfolio page that you have additional clips available on request, and will email them out.

How do you get credit for your work? What do you call that?

In publications, we usually call it getting a byline. In business, take credit for your work unless you signed a non-disclosure and swore you would not tell anybody you did it. Otherwise, you're good.

Can you use articles published in content mills as clips?

Certainly. The problem is they tend to not help you get gigs, because these sites are very poorly regarded. Also, many of the mills don't give your articles a byline, so that weakens their value, as well. You want to get better clips so you can remove them from your portfolio as soon as possible.

What is a "call to action"?

It's what you want the person to do after they read your query letter or LOI. You want to ask a question that spurs the reader into action, or gives them something easy to do. "Can I connect with you on LinkedIn?" "Can I send you a few clips?"

LAURA: "We have a newsletter. Would you like to receive a copy of it?" That sort of thing.

I have a personal blog. Should I change this to my freelance blog?

It depends on what you're writing on there. If it's the kind of blog where you're keeping a diary where you write, "Today I was feeling yucky, so I only ate a hamburger for lunch," then you probably need to either get rid of that stuff, or write a whole bunch of new posts to push the diary posts down the page, so they aren't as visible.

Do you have to do interviews for all blog posts?

CAROL: No. A lot of times you'll see something happening in the news, and you will post a response to that. There are lots of other ways to create a blog post besides interviews. But it makes your blog stand out, if you do talk to live humans for the occasional post. That's another great way to make your blog higher quality, because many bloggers never do interviews.

What are your thoughts on freelancer.com or Elance? Are they the same as Craigslist?

No, they are different, but not any better.

LAURA: Those sites are flooded with people who work at very low rates.

CAROL: It's more of a race-to-the-bottom environment. I do know people who've made six figures on Elance, but it seems like one in a million writers make that on bid sites. Feel free to give them a try, but I think you're going to find yourself doing a lot of low-grade work for low pay that doesn't help build your portfolio.

LAURA: It comes down to time. How much time do you have? A lot of those sites rate you, and some people have a deliberate strategy for building up their rankings on that site so they can get better jobs. I've never had the patience to do that. But I wouldn't make that your focus. It can take a lot of time to bid on jobs on Elance, or to build up your ranking on a content mill, and you still wind up earning very little.

CAROL: Same thing as trolling through the thousands of listings on Craigslist. You can spend a lot of time preparing responses to these ads, and then you don't get the gig. Or you do get it and you're sorry you got it, because it pays so little.

How much time, in terms of hours per day, should a beginning writer spend in self-marketing activities?

All the hours you've got, if you don't have assignments yet.

LAURA: I've seen it as high as 50 percent of your time. But, like Carol said, if you're not working and you don't have a gig right then, market all day.

How do you find a nice job board and know their listings are legit?

CAROL: One way is through word-of-mouth from others I trust. Generally, you can tell right away if you're on a good job board, because companies are saying who they really are. Take a look at the jobs on LinkedIn, for instance – their listings are from great, name-brand companies.

Any board where they have to pay to list the jobs is a good place. They are real companies with real HR budgets, and they hire writers at great rates.

I'm new to LinkedIn. Is it worth starting there now, and changing as you go? Or do you wait until you're a little more established?

LAURA: Start right away.

CAROL: I have a saying: Be a writer, not a waiter. Waiting is bad. Doing is good. Don't wait for that magical point to come, where you feel okay enough to put it up. You need something right now.

Is it better to have two identities or sites or portfolios, if some of the work you do is serious and professional, and some of it is comedy/humor, and occasionally uses offensive language and is not professional?

I usually am against two. But you might have made a case there for two.

LAURA: If you think what you're writing under the one identity is going to offend your other clients, then probably you need two sites.

I'm a member of some technical organizations that have nothing to do with writing. Is it ethical to use those contacts to get writing assignments?

CAROL: Heck yeah! What is the point of belonging to organizations if we don't use them to build our businesses? Being in an organization like that, where everyone is not a freelance writer, is a great opportunity. It's a whole pool of people in an industry you know something about. You're a techie person, and you're a tech writer – and lots of software coders can't write well at all. I'd be spreading the word madly.

On the other hand, you don't ever want to feel like you're using or bothering people. You might simply let people in the organization know what you do and that you would appreciate their referrals.

Not coming at people like, “Hey, can I extract from you some contact information of other people you work with who might give me a writing gig?” You wouldn't want to go at it that way at all.

We talked in Chapter 1 about how the first thing to do is tell everybody you know that you're a freelance writer. That would certainly include people you hang out with in industry organizations.

LAURA: I can't really think of a situation when you would keep secret the fact that you're a writer. You're not an undercover writer. It's not a spy thing.

CAROL: You're not a writer for the CIA here. Or maybe you are... but unless you're a secret-agent writer, we encourage you to share with everyone you meet that you're a writer.

I don't think anyone is going to be offended if you mention, in passing, that you're a freelance writer and you're looking for a couple of new clients.

Ask if you can connect with the people you already know in the tech organizations on LinkedIn, and then you could see who they're connected to. From there, you could get them to introduce you to these new prospects through LinkedIn. That's a pretty low commitment, and a casual way to ask for a little help.



Chapter 4: Build Your Confidence to Negotiate for Good Gigs

LAURA: Confident people tend to be successful people, yet there's a crisis of confidence going around. That's particularly true in the freelance-writing world. If you've had any of the following thoughts, you could be affected.

You might have thought, "I don't feel like a real writer."

Or, "I don't have enough experience. Everyone can probably tell

I'm new to writing."

"I'm not as good as most writers."

Maybe you thought, "Most writers can work more quickly than me."

The list could go on and on. If this is you, it's time to do something to turn your self-confidence around, because lack of confidence can be a real barrier to success as a freelance writer.

CAROL: That's why we're going to give you 10 practical confidence-building exercises to help you feel more ready to do this. Then, we'll follow that with 10 key negotiating tactics to help you get paid what you're worth.

How To Build Your Confidence

LAURA: Even seasoned writing professionals sometimes suffer from a lack of confidence. Unfortunately, low self-esteem can hold you back as a freelance writer. It can create writer's block. It can cause you to not apply for gigs that you could get. It can keep you from negotiating decent terms when you do get a gig. But there are ways you can build your confidence. Here are our top 10 techniques:

1. Create a list of your strengths.

Take an objective look at your abilities and make a list of your strengths. Be honest with yourself. Include any areas that make your writing business unique, as well as any subject areas or types of writing you especially like.

Write down as many strengths as you can think of on your own. Then, turn to someone you trust, such as a friend or colleague. This is one area where a writing partner can really be helpful. Have that person add to the list.

Don't include any weaknesses on this list. That's not what this list is for. This time, just write down your strengths.

2. Gain perspective.

CAROL: I find this so valuable. I'm always trying to find a way to get a better perspective on how great I have it. Every week, when my family has Friday-night dinner, we like to talk about what went great in our week, and share inspiring stories. If you feel like you face insurmountable odds in trying to be a freelance writer, you need to get a perspective on how easy you've got it.

When I started, for instance, there was no Internet. I had to trot down to the library and get out the Gale's Guide, and research it to find publications. Then I'd type a query letter on an electric typewriter and put that letter in the mail, with my carefully Xeroxed copies of clips. Now, you press a button, and off it goes. It really has never been easier to get started.

If you think you have life challenges that make it too hard for you to pursue freelancing, consider a couple of people in my life whom I find inspiring. One of them is former Copyblogger associate editor Jon Morrow, whom a lot of people know, and whose new blog is Boost Blog Traffic.

But what a lot of people don't know about him is that Jon has spinal muscular atrophy and can only move his head a little, and that's all. He composes everything on Dragon Naturally Speaking, and has managed to build an extremely lucrative and successful career as a writer, despite extreme physical challenges. He recently reported that he made over \$500,000 the year he launched Boost Blog Traffic.

My other favorite is Bamidele Onibalusi, the Nigerian blogger of YoungPrePro, now known as Writers In Charge. He started when he was about 16 years old. English was not his first language. He was so poor he had to steal Internet access at a café to put up his blog. He lives in a country with no decent infrastructure.

Personally, I would find these challenges absolutely overwhelming. But they managed. They had the drive to make their living as writers. They both went on to build their businesses. Oni has gone on to post on a lot of the top blogs, including ProBlogger. He gets all his freelance clients from that exposure. I'm here to say that, if they can do it, so can you.

You want to refer back to that list of strengths and think about what you've got going for you. Wherever you're at in your life, however many challenges you face, somebody out there has it worse, and they're still making it happen.

3. Live the fear.

This comes out of my experience in my first type of writing, which was songwriting. When I got started as a songwriter, I used to voluntarily go to songwriting critique workshops on Hollywood Boulevard in Los Angeles, in this old office building. We would play our songs, and then the other songwriters would critique the lyrics, rip our songs apart, and tell us what was wrong with them.

Some newbies would come in and say, "I'm afraid to play you my song, because I'm afraid you'll laugh." Our teacher would say, "Oh, okay. We can do that." Then they'd play their song, and we would all laugh.

Usually, that person would end up laughing, too. When you confront a fear like this — when you actually experience the thing you're afraid of — you learn two things. The first is that your fear is a bit irrational and unlikely to really happen. Second, even if it did happen, you would survive. It wouldn't be as bad as you think.

It's the same with freelance writing. You can make terrible errors, get fired from gigs, have your stories killed — and you can still move forward and build a freelance writing career. Unless you flat out make stuff up or plagiarize, you might take some knocks here and there, but you will live to write another day.

Consider having a friend read an article of yours, and then tell you it's crap, just to have that experience and get over the hump of fearing people's reactions.

4. Look at old clips and praises.

LAURA: Everyone likes to hear his or her work praised. But if you're like most writers, you soak in those words of praise for a day, or maybe two. Then you promptly forget about them. But you can use those clips and that praise to help build your confidence.

I keep those compliments on file, so I can look at them whenever I'm feeling down about my work. I know other professional writers who do exactly the same thing.

Make yourself a praise or “brag” file. It doesn’t have to be anything fancy. You can just label a box in your office, or label a file in your email inbox. Some writers like to print them out, because they do better handling the actual, physical letters. I just keep them in a file on my computer. Either way, when you start to doubt your abilities, you can turn to past writing praise and reread it. It’s evidence that you’re a skilled professional.

Also, keep a file of clips you’re especially proud of. When you start to doubt yourself, you can pull them out and look at them to reinforce the fact that, hey, you wrote these. And you can probably write that next assignment, too. That’s another way to keep your confidence level up.

5. Grasp the mediocrity level of current writers — and that many people hate writing.

Many other writers do mediocre work. And a lot of people out there just hate writing. You’re unique because you’re a writer and you like to write. It can be hard to imagine, but many other professionals, people who aren’t writers professionally, hate to write.

Business owners put off writing tasks. They don’t update their web copy or their brochures. They even put off blogging. You probably know of business blogs right now that aren’t getting updated. They dread these tasks, and they aren’t good at them.

Years ago, I started a new technical writing job. The graphic designer came up to me and said something to the effect of, “I can’t imagine anyone actually wanting to do this job.” What he was talking about was the writing job I had just accepted! My mouth dropped to the floor. But he’s not alone. A lot of people really dislike writing.

This is a huge opportunity for the rest of us, those of us who do like to write.

If you’re a good writer, you’ve got a valuable, marketable ability most people just don’t have.

CAROL: It’s so true. Anytime I get that speech from writers of, “How can I ever make it, with all the more-accomplished writers out there?” I tell them to go down to their local Chamber of Commerce, and gather all the members’ brochures. There’s usually a big rack for them.

Take those home and read them. Just revel in the badness. You’ll see many of these marketing pieces are weak, and there is plenty of opportunity to do better than many writers who are doing this right now, for a living.

6. Say it out loud.

This is something I've discovered in recent years. It's one of the reasons that I advocate for writers to do in-person networking.

When you're starting out, there's a sense of unreality. You want to be a freelance writer, and you're having trouble imagining how that could happen. One way to make it feel concrete and get over this hump is to get yourself into situations where you say, out loud, to people, "I'm a freelance writer."

It does something magical to your brain when you say that aloud, where you start to incorporate that as your truth. I'm not a mystical person, but I think it's very powerful. It's like you're mostly telling it to yourself.

Just saying it aloud creates an expectation in your mind of what you're going to do. You have made a public statement that this is who you are. You will have a natural impulse to want to fulfill that expectation now, and not let people down. It's a strategy that can be a powerful confidence-builder.

7. Walk away from the negative.

LAURA: Some people live with a perpetual glass-half-empty attitude. No matter what happens, it's wrong. You've probably met people like this. If they're your client, they complain all the time, and they're never satisfied. If they're your friend, they can find a dark cloud in every silver lining.

These negative Nellies can really get you down, if you're feeling a little unconfident about your abilities. They can have you doubting yourself. Their constant gripes can make a serious dent in your own self-confidence.

Guess what? You don't have to put up with these people. If they're clients or colleagues, you can simply walk away by refusing to have much to do with them. If they're friends or family, you may have a bit more trouble getting away. But you can still limit the amount of time you spend with them, so they don't affect you quite as much.

CAROL: I've heard from people where their family isn't supportive, and their reaction to your freelance-writing plans is, "Oh, get a job." It's a generational thing, in part. People in our parents' generation couldn't imagine this. It sounds so risky. They don't understand there is no job security anymore. The workplace has changed so radically.

If they can't get behind it, my advice is, don't discuss it with them. If they ask: "How's that freelance writing thing going?" Just say, "Fantastic. I love what I do."

Don't give them any opening to ask anything further. Just move on to the next topic. Make that something you discuss in your writer network, and not with them. You don't want to give people an opportunity to fill you with negativity about what you're trying to do.

8. Celebrate your success.

LAURA: A lot of us celebrate significant personal events such as birthdays, weddings, graduations, and holidays. But we forget to celebrate when we've done something good, professionally. Celebrating our professional accomplishments means acknowledging that we did a good job on something. This is important if you have low self-confidence.

Also, throwing a celebration helps to anchor the achievement into our memory, so you remember you did it. It's putting a marker out there. When you look back over your freelance writing career, you can remember when you finished that book, because we threw a party and it was a big deal. So, it doesn't fade off into nothingness in your memory, when you're looking back over your achievements.

CAROL: There's a tendency in human nature that our minds tend to anchor the negative, hang onto and remember it. To counteract that, we have to proactively work to anchor the positive. That's why we have those dinners in my family, where we talk about our highlights of the week.

When I get a big new client, or finish a big project, often, I'll take my family out to dinner. I'll be like, "Mommy got a client. Let's go out." You need to celebrate.

9. Write a lot.

Many new writers seem to hang back from writing and aren't that productive, because they don't have confidence. The thing is, *doing the writing is what gives you the confidence*. So, you have to break this cycle.

I know this cycle well. I was a college dropout with no qualifications or experience. I didn't write for a college newspaper. I was massively insecure. Really, the only thing that solved it was to just keep writing. Bit by bit, I began getting published.

Going back to Laura's other point, I had one of those folders of my previous clips, for years. If it was 200 words that had my byline on it, I cut it out and saved it like a precious gem.

Particularly when I had a large or complicated project to do, I would get that file out and look at it, and think, "Wow. Look, I wrote all this."

Sometimes, I'd be overwhelmed, and I wouldn't know how I could organize a complicated new article. It's got so many sources, and it's so long, and it's just a mess. I'd look through that portfolio and think, "Look. I wrote all this stuff – and I can write this, too." It's huge.

Back to writing a lot – even if it's something small, even if it's for the library newspaper, or your condo association newsletter, it doesn't matter.

I know a great writer who started writing for the ACT-UP Los Angeles newsletter, the gay-rights group. His articles were just fantastic! He used those little pieces as a springboard to big stuff – he went on to write for national magazines, and then became a communications manager for national charities.

So, don't worry about where you find those first writing opportunities. You just want to do some writing, wherever you can get published. Keep publishing on your blog. If you get a blog post with a lot of engagement – it gets a lot of comments – print that out.

LAURA: A lot of writers I know, they have the goal to write something, every single day. It doesn't matter what it is.

CAROL: Even if you're writing on the side of a full-time job. Every week, write and finish something.

People are always saying to me, "I'm waiting to get my website up. I'm waiting to hear back on this query." Stop waiting to feel more confident, or to get a reaction from the universe about something. Just keep writing, because building your body of work builds your self-confidence.

10. Be your own cheerleader.

Reinforce that you're a talented and valuable addition to the writing world by looking in the mirror each day, and saying out loud, "Damn, I'm good" – and mean it! My dad taught me to say that.

That positive reinforcement from you – that feeling, down in your soul, that, at base, you're a good person with something valuable to give this world – that's going to make all the difference.

I've had writers complain to me about how they get negativity from friends, or some editor didn't like them. Don't rely on outside influences to build you up. Your self-confidence as a writer is your responsibility. It has to come from within.

Think about Stephen King. In his memoir, *On Writing*, he relates that he originally put a small nail up on his wall to hold his rejection letters but soon had to replace it with a big

spike, because he had so many rejections that he ran out of room on the nail. He was in no way discouraged by that. He knew he was going to write, and he kept writing. That's the thing. It has to be a drive that comes from inside of you.

Editors patting you on the head, or your winning an award – that's all great. But you have to build your self-confidence. Take responsibility for your own self.

How To Negotiate As a Newbie

Now that you're bursting with self-confidence, let's talk about what to do when you get a client nibble and you're ready to negotiate a deal, so you get the most pay you can.

LAURA: We're going to start with the basics. The main reason a lot of writers don't try to negotiate with clients is because they're afraid. But usually that fear is misplaced.

Most clients are willing to negotiate a project with you, and they even expect it. In the past, I've actually had clients tell me, "You're not charging enough." Or, "I've paid writers more than that before." When you hear this, it's like a knock on the head, telling you that you need to raise your prices. These clients expected me to negotiate better rates for myself.

If you think about it, it makes sense. You're the expert writer. The client might know what they want, but they don't know what you have to do to get to what they want. As an expert, that's your area. Only you know what it takes to write a particular piece. You're the only one who knows how much effort or time you're going to put into it.

As an expert, you need to think of yourself and what's best for your business. You need to negotiate terms that allow you to get the work done in a reasonable amount of time, for a reasonable amount of money.

When you talk to prospects, try to get around to a money conversation pretty quickly. Carol sets a 30-minute outer limit and tries to get there in 15 minutes.

If you think about it, this negotiation process is how many professionals work. You may know you want your car fixed, or you need help with estate planning. But only the expert – the mechanic or the attorney – can tell you for sure how long those particular tasks are going to take, and how much they're going to cost.

You might have a budget in the back of your head. But the attorney or the mechanic, or whoever it is you're coming to for professional service – they have the last word.

CAROL: A lot of new writers are afraid to open a negotiation. They think they're going to lose the client. But that just doesn't happen.

Present any legitimate opportunity in a professional way – not like, “Oh my God, you’re only offering that? Well, I think it should be *this*.”

I mean, you have to be professional about it. But if you are, all they can do is say “no,” or, “That’s all the budget we’ve got for it, sorry.”

You’re not going to lose the client by asking if there’s wiggle room in the budget. Many times, when you do ask, there *is* wiggle room and they will go up a bit, is what I’ve found.

I had a formative experience in negotiating, because I was a legal secretary for a lot of years. I spent many hours listening to attorneys negotiate contracts with people. Now, I have an instinctive response to counter when people make me an offer.

That is actually what most good clients will expect. I find the big problem is, new writers get really excited when they get an offer, and then they want to say “yes” right away. They just want to say, “Me. Yes. Pick me!” Instead of considering carefully what exactly they are proposing and what the hourly rate is going to work out to be.

You don’t stop to ask a lot of questions to find out what the gig entails. And you find out too late what an underpaid hole you’ve dug for yourself.

Finally, remember that if your client is the type where you can’t negotiate – as in a content mill, where they pay \$10 an article and that’s it – that’s the wrong kind of client.

You could work there for five more years, and you’d still be getting \$10 an article. This is the wrong kind of client. You want clients where you can raise your rates a year from now, when you can say, “I know all about your business now. I’ve acquired this expertise. I’m worth more,” and get a raise.

Likewise with clients you get off Craigslist ads. They’re looking at 200 writers’ resumes, so your negotiating position is weak. When you market proactively to find your own clients, you’re going to have a stronger negotiating position.

Now that you know you should negotiate, how does it work? Here are our 10 key negotiating points:

1. Define the scope.

LAURA: This is so important, and that’s one of the reasons why we put it first. Scope answers important questions that follow the five W’s, just like in journalistic reporting.

Who is in charge of the project?

What is the project?

When is the work due?

Where can you contact them? How do they want the work done?

Why is this project happening? What is the goal?

Those are just a few examples of the questions you need to ask when you're defining scope. Carol likes to ask as many as 40 questions.

The key to defining scope is that you want to be as specific as possible. Think about situations that might arise, like revisions. Personally, I typically allow for one round of revisions in my proposals.

Specify in detail how and when you will be paid. What date is your payment due, and is it going to be paid on PayPal, or by check?

If the client departs from the agreed-upon scope during the course of the project, then you're justified in pointing that out to them and asking for additional compensation. That's perfectly allowed. That's actually what you want to do, if the scope changes.

CAROL: To give you an example of how badly this can go wrong, I had one freelance writer come to me, moaning that she had bid \$300 to write a company's website, on the vague assumption it would be six or seven quick pages of content. In fact, their website had *34 pages* they wanted rewritten.

She didn't bother to ask. She didn't define that project. Then she got to do slave labor, writing this elaborate website at what worked out to a ridiculously low hourly rate.

I'm totally with Laura on this – the minute a client tries to exceed the project's defined scope, you want to say something right away. Stop what you're doing and say, "Oh, that's not in our contract."

The other thing that trips up a lot of people is if it's a project having milestone payments. Maybe you get 30 percent up front, or 50 percent, and 20 percent when you turn in the first draft, and then the rest comes in a final payment when the project wraps.

Defining when you get that final payment is key. If you don't define it well, the client can take your first draft and disappear. There's nothing that ever triggers your final payment, because you never hear back that they were satisfied with the final draft.

You always want a clause that's something like, "Final payment is due within 30 days of turning in the first draft or finalizing of a final draft, whichever comes first."

That'll get them off the dime, give you a chance to send your bill and say, "I haven't heard from you, so I guess I'm done. Here's your bill." That will usually wake them up if they actually did need revisions, and get them calling you.

2. Make them blink first.

Often, the best way to find out what a client is willing to pay is to simply ask them.

I'll go 15 minutes into the conversation. They're telling me all about their website.

Then I'll recap with: "It sounds like you need six pages of Web content developed. Is that right? And I'll need to interview you for half-an-hour. Do you know what your budget is for that?"

Sometimes, they'll just tell you. You'd be surprised how often that happens. They'll say, "You know, we've got about \$1,000 for it. Will that work?" Other times they'll say, "We've never done this before, and we don't know." They'll throw it back onto you.

Or they'll say, "It's \$5," and then you can move on right away.

I find throwing that budget question out there can save you a lot of time, and, to me, it's just professional. I'm a professional – I do this for a living. I'm curious whether you've got the money to hire me. It's just a straightforward, honest question to ask.

3. Delay or use silence.

People hate silence in conversations. I once got a Fortune 500 client to pay 50 percent more than they originally offered on a large package of blog posts, just because I took a moment to think about it.

They said, "It's \$200 a blog post." I said, "But it's rush work." Then I left this big silence, and let that hang out there. They said, "Yeah. You're right. How about \$300?"

People hate silence. By not rushing to say "yes," you convey that you're not a desperate person. You're considering this job, like a professional would. Ideally, say you're going to think about it and call them back tomorrow. That works well.

4. Don't negotiate when you don't feel well.

LAURA: This is a common mistake freelancers make. Don't negotiate when you don't feel good.

I've made this mistake myself, negotiating a project when I'm too tired, or I'm not well. Unfortunately, those are the times you're most likely to make a mistake, or sell yourself short.

We rush to negotiate projects because, like we mentioned earlier, we're afraid. We think the client might award the work to someone else if we don't give them a proposal right

on the spot. But, in most cases, that's not true. Here's what you should do if a prospect contacts you and you're feeling sick, or you're tired.

You need to acknowledge that they contacted you. You can say something like:

Thanks for contacting me about X-Y-Z project. I'm currently wrapping something else up, but I'm very interested in learning more about this project. Can we set an appointment to chat in a few days? I'm available Thursday afternoon or Friday morning. How does that look for you?

Of course, you could do this in an email or on the phone. What this does is it lets them know you're interested. It even lets them put a date on their calendar for your first meeting with them.

CAROL: You know what I love about it, Laura? It also conveys that you're a busy person. "I need to schedule you in here." Even if, in fact, you have nothing else going on that week.

I also do that when I am overloaded with projects and have other deadlines.

If you're sick or you're tired, you shouldn't be negotiating. That's not the time to do it. So, give yourself a day or two to pull yourself together, get some rest, and get well.

One thing I want to make sure writers understand is, I didn't put in that email, "I'm too sick," or "I'm too tired. I can't get to your proposal right now."

It's really none of their business if you're sick or tired. I might share that, if it's somebody that I've known for a long time and we're close. Otherwise, they don't need to know, and certainly not a new client.

The professional thing to do is to set an appointment to talk to them, and not let them pressure you into making a quick decision, especially when you need a little bit more time to pull yourself together.

Like I noted earlier, I use this exact type of response when I'm overloaded with work.

5. Don't cave to pressure.

In fact, if the prospect is putting a lot of pressure on me to respond right away, that's a red flag. It often means this isn't the client for me.

You know what it means? It means they have let this slide until it's become a crisis. Now they'd like to turn *their* crisis into *your* crisis.

LAURA: It might even be an indication the client is going to be difficult to work with. I once had a prospect like this. I check my email usually only about three times a day: in the morning, at noon, and at close of business.

This particular time, I had a prospect contact me right after I checked my email at noon, so I didn't see it. I was busy. I didn't check my messages again until the end of the day. By that time, he was leaving irate messages, wondering where I am. This is somebody I've never met.

When I finally did answer him, he said he wanted a writer to be ready at a moment's notice. Now that, to me, is unreasonable.

CAROL: Sometimes, they want to know your instant-messaging address so they can be in 24/7 contact. I run screaming from those, as well.

LAURA: Naturally, I didn't take the gig. I can only imagine what it would be like to work for him. The same goes for pricing pressure. If the client is trying to pressure me to drop my prices too low, I just let them go elsewhere, because that's an indication to me they're not a prospect for me.

I've had people tell me the going rate is \$5 for a blog post. I say, "No, it's not." But I don't spend a lot of time arguing with them. I'll just say something like, "There might be a few good writers who work at those rates. But I've found you usually get what you pay for when it comes to hiring writers, and you're welcome to try your luck elsewhere."

You don't want to put down all \$5 writers, because there are a few good ones. I prefer to let clients learn, on their own. I don't try to argue with them about this. I know some writers might.

CAROL: I have to confess, I used to argue with low-payers. I can report to you, firsthand: it's a total waste of energy. And it's unprofessional. It's not the direction you want to go.

In those low-ball scenarios, I close out with, "I'm sorry, your rates are lower than I can work with. If your budget ever changes, feel free to reach out to me again." Then don't think about it anymore. Go vent to your writer friends.

But don't talk down to them. Because you never know when that company's fortunes will change, or their philosophy on content development will change, or where that editor will end up. One editor I knew was only able to assign \$100 articles for an online website. That was their thing: "Our articles are \$100."

One day, they realized they weren't getting the authority-building they wanted out of that approach – and instead, they took away some of those \$100 articles and started assigning ten, fully reported, \$800 features every month. And there I was.

So be nice, because you never know how you might reconnect later and end up with a good-paying gig. It could still happen in the future.

6. Refuse to blind-bid.

I'm pretty militant about this. This is the scenario with many Craigslist ads. They say, "We want some writers. Please send us your rates."

They include absolutely no information about who the client really is, what subject you'll be talking about, how complicated the project will be, no details. It's just, "Please tell me your rate."

You want to move on here, because these are never good clients. Good clients tell you, "This is our website – could you please check us out? This is the kind of writing we're looking for."

They're not at all mysterious about it. They know you're going to need some information to give them a real quote. But a lot of writers make the mistake of responding to these blind ads, and giving some rate without any project details. Or they have a single rate for everything.

I don't have a rate sheet anywhere on my [writer website](#). Every client is different, and every project is different.

Why on Earth would I do a task for someone who is a nightmare client – who's going to send me 50 emails a day and need to talk to me, 24/7 – the same as I would someone who's going to take five minutes to deal with and just write me a check at the end? They're going to love everything I write. Everything is different.

LAURA: That's why I don't put my rates on my website, either. A lot of people ask, "Why aren't your rates out there?" Because all freelance jobs are not the same.

CAROL: I know people who post their rates to eliminate low-ballers who waste their time. They feel it screens those out. But, to me, you're boxing yourself into a corner you don't want to be in. Your site says you work for \$40 an hour, but, if you did it right, you might have been able to bid it to \$200 an hour.

When I used to respond to those ads – where they asked for bids before telling anything about the gig – I'd give a huge range.

I'd say, "I charge from \$.30 a word to \$1.50 a word, depending on the project." Or similarly with an hour rate. Then I'd say, "Once you've described your project to me, I'll be able to give you a more precise quote." If they're the type to only pay \$5, they won't respond to that huge range.

If they're a real client, they'll respond that they're somewhere within your range. Yes, you might end up with your bottom-quoted rate. So that rate should be the lowest you'd ever work for. The highest should be the most you could imagine working for. But make it a giant range, so they can just see your mileage may vary. You're going to have to fill me in.

LAURA: I'd even make the bottom of the range a little higher than the very least you'd work for, because you don't know how much work is involved at this point.

7. Raise objections.

CAROL: If there are legitimate reasons you can point to why this gig should pay more, you want to bring them up, any time it smells like rush work, a sophisticated topic, a sophisticated audience of CEOs of healthcare companies, or it needs a lot of interviews. It's going to have a lot of moving parts to it. Just bring it up. Raise that as an objection to their initial offer.

"Generally, I might charge that, but given the rush work situation here, I'm thinking there needs to be some kind of a premium." And let them come back with something.

8. Ask for feedback — or stand firm.

There are two ways to present a bid. I'm not going to tell you which one to do; you need to decide which one works for you. Longtime copywriter and now-fiction author [Sean Platt](#) taught me you should say, "This is my offer, The End. There's no wiggle room, because I'm a pro, and that's what it'll take for you to hire me."

For newbies, that may not be the best choice. For a lot of years, I didn't use Sean's script. Instead, I would end my bid with, "If you're considering going with another writer purely on price here, I'd appreciate an opportunity to revisit my bid."

That leaves your door open, in case you really want to work with this client, even if they come in a little lower than you were hoping. You can always say "no," later.

So, there are two ways to present a bid. Just be conscious of which way you're presenting it: be firm, or leave the door open. But don't be wishy-washy or nervous. Don't convey, "I'm not sure how I feel about my bid." Just say, "This is my bid, and I might be willing to revisit it if you bring that up to me."

9. Bid by the project.

LAURA: While we're talking about bidding here, in most cases, you should bid by the project and not by the hour.

Clients often balk at hourly rates, because they're comparing the rate to a salaried hourly rate, without taking into account the many benefits that might go with a salary.

An hourly rate sounds more expensive to most prospects. It's like they're writing you a blank check, because they don't know how many hours you're going to spend on the project. Prospects might worry they'll end up overpaying you.

As a newbie, you want to avoid hourly-rate gigs, since you're going to be slower than other writers. You're still learning. Quoting a project price lets the client know at the start of the project what they're going to pay. It also benefits you, as it rewards you for being efficient. If you learn to work quickly and accurately, and you stay with your clients and get to know their needs, over time, you're going to earn more.

Of course, there are a few exceptions. If you're consulting, for example, or they're just paying you for an hour of your time and your brainstorming, or if they've got you working on-site for a specified number of hours, it's hard to do a project rate.

This happens a lot with technical writing projects, because those folks have huge projects that might take six months to a year. They don't know the scope. They might try to give you a scope, but it's a constantly changing animal. They usually want you to work on-site, too. In that case, I would probably bill by the hour.

CAROL: Rewriting is another one where it's usually an hourly rate.

LAURA: Or excessive meeting time. I mean, we encourage you to meet and talk to people on the phone. But you'll want to charge meeting-abuser clients your hourly rate, and they'll think twice about setting up some of these unnecessary meetings. .

CAROL: I'm very high on by-the-project quotes. The thing is, it's rare to get \$200 an hour if you just say, "That's my hourly rate."

Most prospects would just fall over. They'd say, "Oh my God, my doctor doesn't make that much!"

But the fact is, if you bid by the project, you can end *up* earning that hourly rate.

What I do is, I sell it as a big win for the client. I say, "I'm not going to quote you an hourly rate. I'm going to just tell you what it takes to do this project. If it takes more time than I thought, you will not be penalized."

For new writers, this is a great line. You know you're going to be slower. Tell them, "This is the figure. You can put it in your budget line and count on it." That's a big plus for a lot of businesses.

They don't want to hear you say, "It's a mystery until I turn in the bill," and then they flip out when they see how much it is.

That's my sales angle on bidding by the project. The other thing about hourly rate gigs is that tracking hours is annoying as heck. I mean, you should be tracking your hours for yourself, to learn about how long it takes you to do things and help improve your bidding in future.

But you don't want to have that conversation with clients, where you have to submit a little time sheet to a freelance client. It's just annoying. You don't want to go there.

Here's the way project-bidding works for you: If you bid a project and get in with a client, later, they often send you more projects. Over time, you get to know their business and you get more and more efficient at writing for them.

Your hourly rate gets better and better. But they don't need to know that. They're happy because they know it costs X to get blog posts from you – and you're happy because your rate has gone from \$50 an hour to \$150 an hour over the course of a year. That's how you end up with high hourly rates – by setting project rates and becoming more efficient over time.

10. Have a contract in writing.

LAURA: The written agreement is how you prove what you agreed upon with the client. Be sure to get one, so if there's trouble later on, you've got something to fall back on. If you don't take anything else away from this chapter, please take this away.

I hear freelancers griping about how a project is going, or about getting paid. The first thing I usually say is, "What did your contract say?" More times than not, they'll sheepishly admit they didn't have any written agreement with this client.

CAROL: A contract: Don't leave home without it. You want a contract, even if it's just sending them an email that says: "This memorializes our agreement, please respond with 'I agree.'"

My understanding is that has held up in court. Hopefully, you're never suing anyone. But it creates a paper trail of what you have agreed to. You can forward it to them in the future, if the scope changes, or the payment doesn't show up.

LAURA: Never rely on just oral conversation. People forget. Or they may deliberately forget.

CAROL: Or they leave the company. I just turned in a book manuscript, and the person who commissioned it left in the middle of my project! If I didn't have a contract, I'd be really unhappy now.

LAURA: A great tool that saves me a lot of time when I create client agreements is [QuoteRoller](#). With this tool, you create a proposal for clients that becomes your work agreement when the client signs off on it electronically. You can archive and copy old proposals, create and store templates with your standard terms of service, create various pricing options, and more. It integrates with a lot of popular accounting tools, too, like [Freshbooks](#), Harvest, QuickBooks, and PayPal. It helps me a lot that I don't have to remember my terms and that I can look at how I've priced other projects.

Q&A

The hardest thing for me is the mind game. I feel like everyone who wants writing from me wants it cheap. I know that's my fear talking, but it infuriates me because writing is my gift.

CAROL: This is a great topic. When you're trapped in a world where everyone wants to rip you off, you're doing the wrong kind of marketing, or you're not marketing your writing business at all. If all the marketing you're doing is responding to online job ads, those are pretty well-known as the home of cheapskates.

If you're reading the [Book of Lists](#) and identifying the top 100 healthcare organizations in your city so you can send them letters of introduction, or contacting the editors of those hospital magazines about writing for them, things will be different. When you seek clients that pay real rates, you get paid real rates.

LAURA: Right. There are people who go out and troll for writers who are cheap, because they don't want to pay well. But if you've done your homework, and targeted a reputable business or publication, you won't have as much trouble with rates.

CAROL: The other thing is, you should be constantly evaluating who you're writing for and what kind of hourly rate you're making – and proactively going after better clients and dropping lower payers.

That's another big thing new writers are scared to do. They never want to say "no" to anybody. But the problem is, the longer you write for low-paying places, the longer it's sucking up all of your time for marketing and finding better clients.

At some point, you need to find a way to drop your lowest payer and replace them with a higher payer. And then, keep on doing that.

That's how I got to the rates I'm at today, which are completely top of the line pro, \$1-a-word, \$2-a-word, \$100-an-hour rates. Every six months, I looked at my client base and dropped people who weren't worth the time.

That scares the daylights out of people. There are only two ways to accomplish it. One is, you've already found a better client so you can drop the lower one, because you know you've replaced the income.

Or you can lower your expenses – figure out what expenses you can cut, so you can live without that client long enough to market.

Or you can take a side job. I know people who have worked pumping gas while they started their writing careers, worked as a bar back, worked stocking shelves at grocery stores at night. I know a print journalist who did that last one every night, so he could write for the daily paper until he got a better-paying gig. Figure out how you can financially make it work to move up. That's the only way you're going up.

Do you have any examples of those instinctive responses you learned working in the law firm?

I'm so glad you bring that up. One of the strategies I learned is the "mild surprise" reaction to a low bid.

Once, I asked the client to blink, and they said, "Our budget is \$1,000 for this."

I said, "Really? I'm a little surprised to hear you say that, because of a, b, and c reasons." Which are that it's rush work, or it's a lengthy white paper, or whatever my reasons are. "I was thinking more like this number. Maybe we could meet in the middle somewhere with that?"

That's how I tend to come back. Not angry, not nasty, but in a totally professional, mildly surprised kind of way. That's my tip.

Can you negotiate with magazine editors when they have a per-word payment in writer's guidelines?

You definitely can. I have.

When you're a new writer, you're probably not going to negotiate with magazine editors. You're going to take their rate and thank your lucky stars you got the gig, because you're going to get a nice glossy magazine clip out of it, and you got paid whatever they offered.

But as you acquire expertise and build your reputation, I find there is wiggle room. I've pitched articles that are particularly complicated and asked, "Can I get some extra on this, because you know I'm going to drive all the way to the city dump east of The Dalles, Oregon for this article on where Seattle's trash goes?" They'll often say, "Yeah, we'll reimburse your mileage on that."

LAURA: That's the sort of thing you should be thinking about when you negotiate.

CAROL: Ask yourself: How complicated is this thing I'm going to be doing?

LAURA: That driving trip is something out of the way that's going to take your time. Your time is worth money.

CAROL: The other thing is, if you can't negotiate the amount, negotiate how fast you get paid. Magazines are notoriously slow payers. I used to have one that paid on a schedule we liked to call "half past when the Messiah comes." It could take eight months from when you wrote the article – *if* they put it in the planned issue and it didn't get held! It was ridiculous.

I negotiated that they would pay me 50 percent of the article fee when I turned in my first draft, so I only had to wait an eon for half of the payment, instead of all of it. There are things like that you can do.

Can you schedule an appointment if you still have a job?

Absolutely. It's, "Oh, the only free time I have to talk to you is 6:30 p.m. tonight." They don't need to know why.

LAURA: You're going to schedule a time that works for you, whether it's your lunch hour or after work or before work. You're definitely going to schedule a time you can actually meet with them. So yeah, it'll work.

How do I know what to charge per hour?

CAROL: [*The Writers' Market*](#) has a "What to Charge" resource. [Chris Marlow](#) has done a survey of copywriters' fees that you could check out.

But the best thing is to talk to your writer network. Talk to them about the project you're looking at, the kind of client and what they think about your bid. I got about \$1,500 more on a government contract I wrote last year by doing that. My friends said, "That's too low. You're kidding. Put more into the bid." I did, and the agency accepted it without a peep.

Estimating the cost of a project is something you just have to do to gain experience.

LAURA: You'll make mistakes. Don't beat yourself up if you make a mistake.

CAROL: It's trial and error. You're going to learn as you go. In general, new writers don't bid enough and are always surprised at how long it took to do it. Keep that in mind. However long you think it's going to take, it's going to take longer. And factor that in.

The client's going to turn out to be a bigger pain, or they're going to ask for another interview to be put in the story. They're going to ask for more revisions than you thought. Somewhere, there's going to be more to the project than you're thinking off the top of your head. Think of the worst-case scenario of how much time it could take, rather than the dreamy, "I'll just knock this out in an hour" kind of thing, because things go wrong. They really do.

LAURA: If they don't go wrong, you're pleasantly surprised and you earned a good rate.

CAROL: I did that in that government contract I bid – we built in a lot of space for problems. We ended up making a great hourly rate, because the agency ran out of time to send us revisions and had to do the rest of it themselves to meet their deadline for releasing the annual report we were working on. They didn't have time for back-and-forth anymore, so we just pocketed some money. There's nothing wrong with that.

How much contact information should you give the prospect? How do you avoid excessive contact?

LAURA: The contact already contacted you, you're sure they're legitimate, and you're afraid to give them your contact? I'm not sure what he's thinking there. But I would say definitely an email, and probably your phone number. You should have a business line, a Skype or Google Voice line. Something that's just for your business, so they're not calling your home phone.

CAROL: Remember that email doesn't have to be responded to right away, and phone calls can go to voicemail. I know freelancers who use an autoresponder on their email that says, "I pick up email twice a day. I'll be with you in four hours."

You can control how much you're willing to interact with clients. You don't want to be too crazy about it. I haven't had too many boundary-pushers on this front. But I know people who have. If the client asks for your instant messaging address, it's usually a bad sign.

When you write Web copy, do you include SEO work with that? Or do you find most of your clients want only the copy?

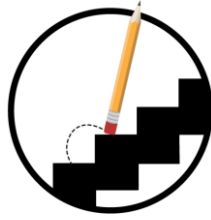
Putting keywords into copy often isn't two activities. They go together. At this point, we all write with an awareness of what keywords our clients are trying to rank for, if we're writing online. SEO in the paying client realm is often not a big, complicated thing you spend a lot of time on.

LAURA: The ones who want you to do it and say, "This is an SEO job," tend to be the lower-paying ones. At least the ones that have contacted me have been oddball clients that want you to write 10 articles with a weird phrase. "Use this phrase 10 times in each article for us." That's the kind of work you want to avoid, because it's generally low paying, in my experience.

CAROL: There are two kinds of online writing. There's writing that's intended for search-engine robots to read, and there's writing intended for people to read. The writing intended for robots – which is often advertised as an "SEO copywriter" on Craigslist – pays very poorly. Writing for people pays well, because it has to be better.

LAURA: The thing about it is, if you write a nice, well-written piece, you're going to most likely go to the top of the search engines anyway, because your piece will have that voice of authority.

CAROL: People will read it and share it, and that will drive your results. You want to be in the world where that's their focus – delivering something that's compelling, so that it gets shared. Yes, it will include keywords, but that will not be the focus of the conversation.



Chapter 5: Insider Tips and Tricks for the Pro Writer

CAROL: You may love to write, but writing professionally is a lot different from the academic writing you did in school, or creative writing, such as writing a novel or short stories. For instance, in a college paper, you'd be able to quote long passages from books or from other academic papers. But that's not going to work in a magazine article.

That's actually one of the most common questions I get. "Can I just quote from an author's book?" You can't, really. You need to find and interview experts.

You need to understand the audience you write for and their needs so that the tone and style of what you write appeals to that audience. Writing for the Web has its own style and its own set of conventions. We're going to do a little mini-training on how that's different. These are differences that often can take new writers by surprise. I know, because I've reviewed a lot of blogs. Getting the hang of blog style is definitely something you have to learn.

It doesn't matter if you figure out good markets, market to them and get a gig. If you turn in a piece of junk, they'll never hire you again. So, writing is a critical piece of the puzzle.

4 Tips To Get Ready To Write

1. Study the market.

You've done your interviews and you've done your research. Now you've got a pile of information, and you're looking to organize it and get it written.

For me, that begins with studying the market. I know what the market I write for sounds like. But I don't run on my recollection. When I sit down to write, I usually pull out the publication, or look at the company newsletter one more time.

I spend a few minutes soaking up their tone and style, looking at their headlines. That's a little exercise, where you get their style, subliminally, into your brain. It makes it a lot easier to knock out a first draft that will be pretty close to what you want.

2. Analyze the audience.

LAURA: To write effectively, you need to know who your audience is. Even if you have a niche topic you write about, you can't assume you'll always be writing for the same audience.

An example: Let's say your niche is dogs. Your material would be different, depending on whether you were writing for an audience of dog owners or veterinarians. Statistics for the average reading level in the U.S. vary. I've seen averages ranging from a 4th-grade level to a 9th-grade level. Many mass consumer magazines are written somewhere in this range. You need to target your writing to the appropriate grade level for your audience.

For a general audience, you should target your writing to about the 6th-grade level. But this is another reason to study your audience. You can learn more about reading levels and those types of statistics at the [National Center for Education Statistics](#).

You also want to understand what your audience already knows. To go back to the example of writing about dogs, you would state medical terms quickly in an article geared towards veterinarians, as they already understand these terms. But if you're writing the same article to the dog owners, you would want to explain the medical terms in more detail, and in plain language. It's important to know who your audience is.

CAROL: Laura, I often find myself writing for an audience of technology companies, CEOs, or an audience of restaurant owners. Then you're getting above the sixth-grade level. In a lot of business writing, you're actually writing for a well-educated audience, where most readers have advanced degrees. In part, that's why it pays so well. You have to be able to pull that off.

LAURA: Right – that's why you want to make sure you've studied your market. One way you can find out who your audience is, is to look at *The Writers Market*. The publication descriptions usually identify the target audience. If you're dealing with a new publication or blog, ask the editor about reading levels. The editor should know who the audience is.

You can also look for an advertisers' guide. Most publications have one, and it's often posted online. It's usually full of information about readers' income, jobs, family makeup, geographic location, and more.

If you're dealing with a business, just ask the business owner for demographic information about their typical customer. They'll usually be happy to provide it for you.

CAROL: I love advertisers' guides. I think most writers never look at them, but they're full of juicy details about the target reader. I don't think most writers, especially new writers, understand how much time publications spend analyzing who reads their publication. What level of job do they have? What's their family income? Where do they live? What do they do in their free time? How much savings do they have?

They usually have tons of information that can help you picture this reader in your head. That's really helpful, too, if you picture a reader and their demographic. It helps you write.

3. Get and use quotations.

The next thing to do to get prepped is to get interviews and properly use quotes. There are some basic sources for finding experts and man-on-the-street-type interviews. One of the best is [HARO](#), which is Help a Reporter Out, and [ProfNet](#) is an older service having many university professors and consultants. These are free, though I know HARO won't help if you request a website below a certain traffic ranking. ProfNet can often be a backup.

Amazon's book tab is great. Sort their search by date, and find experts who have an upcoming book on your subject, or a recently released one.

Social media can also be a good venue for finding sources. I'm always posting in my LinkedIn status about sources I need. I find people in that business-oriented social media platform are happy to help you find sources. Check with your writer groups, too – often, someone will know someone. You don't want to end up interviewing a lot of other writers. But they can often lead you to a source.

Let me introduce you to my basic theory of quoting: Quotes are there to spice up your stories, make them more interesting, and break up the narrative writing so it's not just blobs and blobs of narrative.

Quotes should not say the same thing you're saying in the narrative. They should add something new, add an insight or piece of insider information. That's a common newbie mistake, where the quote basically repeats something that's already been said. That's not what you want. I like to think of quotes as raisins in a delicious piece of raisin bread.

Why are quotes like raisins in raisin bread? If there are too many, the bread falls apart. I've seen new writers quote four paragraphs, nonstop. That's too much raisin. Quotes are

usually a sentence, or two or three at most. You want to sprinkle your quotes in lightly, to provide some spice for your piece.

Obviously, no raisins make for unappetizing raisin bread. So, sprinkle a few in. If you're new to interviewing, here are a couple of posts with tips on how to do that: [7 Stress-Busting Interview Secrets from a Successful Freelance Writer](#), [10 Killer Interview Tips for Amazing Articles](#), and [3 Easy Tips for Un-Sucky Email Interviews](#).

4. Research — and organize your materials.

Once you've done all that, you're ready for the next step, which is rounding up your research and organizing your materials. In this department, the top newbie crime is over-researching. I was so guilty of this when I started out! I was the worst case, ever. I would do a book's worth of research for every article. It was terrible.

Let me save you a lot of time -- if you're writing a 500-word article, only two or three experts are going to fit in there, and maybe a statistic or two. Beyond that, you're wasting both your time and your sources' time, which is bad.

Because when you interview sources, you're trying to build a relationship so you could potentially talk to them again in the future. That's what makes you more efficient and makes life easier. You learn where experts are, and you're able to use them again for other publications. You don't want to waste a source's time. Then they're mad at you and don't want to work with you again.

I knew a cub reporter who would spend hours with people. Then they would call the paper and complain to the editor, when they saw all that time spent and only a paragraph about their business ended up in the story. Try to always be mindful of how much space that source is going to get. For most interviews, 20 to 30 minutes ought to do it, unless it's a lengthy, one-person profile.

Over-researching wastes time. It makes your writing process longer, too, as you undergo the painful process of having to choose what to leave out among all these precious, interesting things you've found. It just gums up the works.

You always have that fear that you don't know enough about your article's subject. But remember: It's an article, not a book. You're not expected to be the nation's leading authority on the subject. Let your experts give you information. If they've given you a variety of it and you're starting to hear a few of the same thoughts from the second or third expert, assume you've got it covered, and move on.

As you research, the other point is, you want to find quality sources of information. Don't be imagining that something you see on Wikipedia or eHow could be a source for a story.

However, you can find legitimate sources in the footnotes of Wikipedia stories. That's a good use of Wikipedia – useful, legitimate experts who were quoted in a *Wall Street Journal* story on the topic, or something like that.

When in doubt, do searches on your topic and see where top publications or big companies are sourcing their research data. Or *The New York Times*. Who do they quote? Call those same people, or look up that research study, and you'll know you've got some pretty decent sourcing.

The final step before I write is to take all my notes and organize them, so all the good parts are ready to pop into the story. Sometimes, I'll go through with a highlighter marker, or just read through them, depending on how much material I have.

One shortcut I developed over the years makes it easy. I call it the idiot's outline. It's actually not an outline, which is why it's so great. You don't have to figure out the most important thing yet.

All you do is go through and write the name of each source or website or person or research house. Next to each source, write the most important point or two that they make. Briefly note an amazing quote, if they gave you one. Now you have a boil-down of the most important stuff for the story.

I find that, once I do that, I'll immediately see how I want to start the story. I'll realize, "This would be a good little anecdote to kick this off." Then I can move into the story. The material will naturally organize itself if you create this little idiot's outline.

LAURA: I've used outlines like that for a long time.

Writing Mechanics

1. Write great headlines.

CAROL: You want to invest some time in crafting your headline. My blog-post headlines routinely go through a half dozen iterations before the final version. It needs to grab people and search engines, in many cases, bringing in new readers and making them want to read your post.

If you write the headline first, you can save yourself a lot of time and aggravation. A common new-writer mistake I see is, writers dabble around writing the draft, in hopes that a headline will occur to them as they write. This is reverse-engineering your article, and it takes more time.

Instead, write a killer headline. Once it's written, you'll know exactly what to put in the story.

The headline organizes your material for you. It tells you what's important. You'll spend lots less time rewriting rambling stream of consciousness if you've first written the headline.

In general, a good Internet headline often tells us a few basics. It contains keywords about the topic. It tells us we will learn [The Art of Being Interesting](#). It has a benefit. It tells us who the story is for. In this case, everybody.

When you're writing your headline, try to think: What's the benefit? What will readers learn from reading it? Then, build that into your headline.

2. Lede sentences

Now more than ever, in our short attention span era, the first sentence – called the “lede” in journo-speak – needs to grab people and make them want to read more. I once wrote a news article that started, “Briefly, it was Bambi in bondage.”

Don't you want to know what that story was about, and read the rest of it? You want to write something that's knockout-compelling. Otherwise, readers won't stay with you.

In Web writing, these first lines are SEO-bait, as well. When you do a Google search, see how the first sentence shows up in your search results? It's all-important in online writing that this opening line not be, “I was walking with my uncle down the street the other day, and we passed a store and we went inside...” and you're leading to something that's coming six paragraphs later. Cut to the chase! Use keywords in your lede.

3. Nut grafs

Once you've written the headline, an awesome lede and opening paragraph, the next thing you need to think about is the nut graf. This journalism term refers to the paragraph that gives you a quick summary of what this story will be about, why readers should care, why this story is timely, and why it's something I need to read now. Get to your article's or blog post's nut graf as quickly as possible.

A story: Toward the end of my *Puget Sound Business Journal* tenure – this is nearly a decade ago now – we got a new editor. We had been letting nut grafs turn up in about paragraph five or six. With this new editor, if you didn't hit it by paragraph three, he made you rewrite it.

Often, in newspaper stories, the nut graf is paragraph one. There's no little anecdote on the top. It's just bam, into the story. You can tell where you need to put the nut by studying your publication and seeing how far in they go before they get there.

Many newbie writers seem to fear the nut graf. They think if that, by putting that information early in the story, no one will read any farther. They'll read that little bit, feel they know everything, and then leave.

But if you do the nut graf right, there's plenty more flesh left to put on the bone. Give them a sense of what that skeleton graf will later flesh out. I know that current and former *Wall Street Journal* editors are obsessed with this graf and flashing that summary. There shouldn't be any surprises. Often, we feel we'd like to hold back some interesting point and throw it on the end. That's not a good plan, and our next point explains why.

4. The inverted pyramid

LAURA: This is something I learned way back in high school journalism. The inverted pyramid is a method journalists use to make sure the most important information is covered early in the story. It makes use of a summary lede, which covers all of the important story information.

The reason for using the inverted pyramid is that print publications have limited space. Way back when, of course, that's where everybody was writing.

It isn't unusual for print editors to run out of space during layout, and shorten an article by removing the last few paragraphs. If you put something crucial in the last few paragraphs, when the editor cut the bottom of the story, it messed up your whole article.

When the inverted pyramid is used, all the important information is in the first few paragraphs. Then, whatever might be lost in the edit is the least important information. I learned this from my high school journalism teacher who made us all write that way. If we didn't write in inverted pyramid style, she would turn the story back to us.

Later, I got to edit my college newspaper. At the time — and this dates me — it was a physical newspaper. We did several corporate newsletters, and I was the editor who was cutting off the last few paragraphs in order to squeeze the story into the physical available space. The technique is still important to keep in mind if you're submitting material to a print publication. It's even still valid for the Web. Carol has found this fun little [song about the inverted pyramid](#) on YouTube, if you need inspiration on this point.

Also, we recommend you read this [article from the Poynter Institute](#). It gives you a more detailed explanation of the inverted pyramid.

5. Writing conventions

No matter who you're writing for, it's important that you write well. Be sure to ask the editor or company manager you'll be writing for if they have a style guide for their publication. They may or may not, but we're going to share some writing conventions that most publications have in common, starting with grammar.

Point number one is to use proper grammar. We'll talk about conversational style later but, in most cases, you want to use complete sentences. You want to make sure your sentences have punctuation marks. There are a lot of tools out there that help you check for grammar and spelling errors. I suggest you use them, but don't rely on them totally, because they're based on a general algorithm. [Grammarly](#) is one tool.

Just remember, they're not going to catch everything, because they are mechanical. There's no substitution for human eyes. Read your stuff thoughtfully.

In most cases, you'll want to avoid passive voice. In passive sentence construction, the object of the verb becomes the subject of the sentence. For example, an active voice sentence would be: "Sally gave me the ball." The ball is the object, and Sally is the subject.

Passive voice flips it around, and that sentence would be: "The ball was given to me by Sally." You see how that's not only awkward, but it's also kind of weak. It's less concise, too.

If you use passive voice too much, it makes your writing seem weak and lacking in authority. Watch out for passive voice.

I think of it as legalese writing, because it's often used to avoid assigning responsibility to anybody. Sally doesn't want to take responsibility for giving you the ball. You want to avoid that in your writing, unless, of course, you're writing a legal brief.

You want to use words correctly. You need to be aware that there are a lot of words that sound the same, or have similar meanings, and they're misused so often that it might seem natural to use them in your first draft. Your spell-checker is probably not going to catch these.

Some examples would be: Weak and week. Read and reed. Two, too, and to. I see these mistakes all the time, in all kinds of publications, even well known ones. You want to avoid these word-choice errors whenever you can, because it's going to make you look sloppy.

You want to avoid misspellings, so, again, use your spell-checker. Also, an important point about spellings is to make note of the correct spellings of any names, places, or technical terms in your piece. It looks bad if you're interviewing a subject and you

misspell their name. Or you're writing an article about a place and you misspell it. Or you misuse technical terms. You want to be sure to get these right.

In general, in most writing, shorter words and shorter sentences are better. Most general audiences are not going to follow a long, drawn-out sentence. You want to especially avoid what your schoolteacher always called run-on sentences. I've seen this in newbie writing, where it runs on, line after line, and it's all one sentence.

CAROL: I see a lot of "\$5-word" syndrome. This is where you're showing off your vocabulary. That's great in school papers, but deadly in articles. You want to use a word if it's the right word to use, if it's the one that best expresses the idea for that audience. But you really want to watch out about being recreationally highfalutin' with your language.

LAURA: Shorter words actually make your writing more accessible for most readers. Look for ways to be more concise. If you're using five-syllable words, that's not concise.

For most writing assignments, you want to write in present tense, especially when it comes to headlines. Check the publication, but most use it, at this point.

Double-check your work and make sure you didn't slip into past tense somewhere in the piece. If you mess up on too many of these writing conventions, you're going to look sloppy.

A lot of new writers overlook paragraph transitions. These help tie an idea in one paragraph to the idea in the following paragraph. They help your story to flow smoothly. Make sure you have good paragraph transitions in your piece.

6. Writing for the web

CAROL: Before we dive into this, I want to share an example of great Web writing from one of the masters of blog format, Derek Halpern from Social Triggers: [Five Psychological Master Keys that Will Open the Doors to More Sales.](#)

There's not a lot of mystery about what you're going to learn there, and who it's for, though you do need to read on to find out what those five keys are. People who want more sales will be attracted to this post and will want to read it.

Each paragraph of the post is only one to two sentences long. And some of the sentences are only one word. Then, a big subhead. This blogging template gets the best readership.

Derek's piece also captures the conversational style. I wanted to give you that piece as an idea of how different an article in *Vanity Fair* is versus an effective blog post. Online writing has a different style.

LAURA: Online writing has some unique challenges. The key point to know is that an online audience is very distracted. They have all kinds of things coming at them. They might even have a couple of browser windows open at once. You have to capture their attention in a few seconds, or you're going to lose that reader.

Here's a brief summary of what you need to know about good Web writing:

1. **Have a strong, Web-friendly headline and lede.** These are especially important for Web writing, because they're the first things your reader's going to see.

Chances are, your reader will glance at these first to determine whether or not they want to read the rest of the piece.

2. **Be scannable.** This is a huge mistake I see new writers making all the time. They don't make use of any visual formatting. So, they've just got huge, big, boring chunks of text.

CAROL: I like to call that "the blob."

LAURA: Don't be that writer. Make use of bullets, numbered lists, images, and bold fonts so your reader can scan your piece quickly. Use short paragraphs, as you saw in Carol's example. Paragraphs online are shorter than for any other type of writing. A two-sentence paragraph is usually enough.

I've been known to put a single sentence by itself, or even just a single word, something you wouldn't do in other types of writing. But it's perfectly acceptable for Web writing. In fact, it's good style.

3. **Use a conversational tone.** The thing about the conversational tone is, it's also moving offline to marketing materials. So be aware of that.

CAROL: The Copyblogger philosophy is that all blog posts are copywriting, really. You're trying to capture a reader and eventually sell them something. Or you're trying to convert them to your point of view. That's all copywriting.

It's why you see sentence fragments and one-word sentences working in blog posts. It's because it more closely resembles ad copy than feature article writing.

LAURA: Right. Conversational tone is something you need to study and master. Basically, when you use conversational tone, you're writing the way you speak. This means breaking grammar rules, in some cases. But breaking them in a knowledgeable way, not just being sloppy. If you want to learn more about writing in a conversational tone, read my post, [Why a Conversational Writing Style Is Important](#), and [The Hazards of Writing with a Conversational Style](#).

With a conversational writing style, you can do things such as starting a sentence with the word “but” or “and,” or use an incomplete sentence, if that’s the way you would use it in conversation. But be careful, because conversational tone has to seem natural. Otherwise, it’s just going to look like you made a bunch of stupid grammar mistakes.

I once edited a piece for a blog post. Somebody had turned in a guest post and he started roughly every third sentence with the word “but.” It just looked sloppy. It looked like he didn’t know what he was doing.

CAROL: It’s not an excuse for bad writing. It’s a license to be creative, is what it is.

LAURA: Exactly. You’ve got to be careful, but you need to know that.

4. **Understand SEO.** I want to distinguish using SEO in your online writing from the jobs out there that call for an “SEO writer.” The important thing you want to remember about SEO, which stands for search engine optimization, is that SEO is a tool, and not a type of writing.

A prospect might ask you to write an SEO piece for their website using unnatural phrases like “cake, wedding, chocolate” because they think somebody is going to type those words into a search engine, and they want their piece to come up. That’s not a serious writing job, it’s a task of gaming the search engines.

However, well-written, natural-sounding content nearly always makes the site more visible in the search engines.

5. **Use social media.** Finally, write with social media in mind. Write your online pieces so they’re designed to be shared. Social media is often used to drive traffic to blog posts and other Web content. So, keep that in mind when you write. This means using shorter headlines if you think your post might be tweeted, because Twitter posts are limited to 140 characters.

CAROL: Remember, the tweet gets longer as people share it, because it adds “RT @TiceWrites: [Headline].” I know top bloggers who use 14 words as their upper limit for headlines.

LAURA: Another social-media strategy is to include quotes readers might also wish to share. Also, directly invite the reader to share the piece. For example, you can say, “If you think this is an important issue, share it with your friends.” Of course, there are also social-sharing button plugins you can attach to the piece to make sharing easier, such as [Sharebar](#).

Reviewing Your Work

CAROL: Recently, a writer told me, “I was in a hurry, so I dashed something off and turned it in. And they hated it.”

No surprise there. You don’t want to be turning in sloppy first drafts!

Don’t let this be you. It’s professional to carefully review your work before you send it in. This sets you apart from amateurs and hobbyists. It’s what’s expected when you’re getting paid to write something. Go through your draft and refine it before you turn it in.

Here are our rewriting and polishing tips:

1. Rewrite.

LAURA: You should expect to rewrite your article or blog post. It’s often the difference between turning in something mediocre and turning in something exceptional.

I don’t know who originally said this, but don’t let yourself be afraid to write a bad piece initially, knowing you’re going to fix it later. A lot of writers get stuck because they don’t want to write a bad first draft. The bad first draft can be fixed. It’s better to write it and then start fixing it, than to say, “I have writer’s block.”

Also, it’s okay to create a draft that’s too long, because then you can pare it down. It’s better sometimes to write a long draft than a piece that’s incomplete. If it’s incomplete, you’ll have to go back and do more research, trying to flesh it out to length. You don’t want to over-research, but it’s okay to be a little too long and then make it more concise.

2. Slow down.

Too many writers are in a rush. They’re trying to dash things off very quickly, because they underpriced the project. This becomes a vicious cycle, because, to get decent pay, they have to write really fast.

Occasionally, you can produce a quality piece quickly like that. But usually, if you’re trying to write too quickly, it shows up in the quality of your work. What you’re going to end up with is a mediocre piece you don’t want to call your own. It doesn’t help you or your client when you produce this. It just becomes this vicious cycle you can’t get out of.

You should plan to revamp your writing at least once before you show it to your client. If possible, give yourself a break between writing your first draft and your revision. That way, you’ll be able to look at the piece with a fresh perspective.

3. Shrink your draft.

CAROL: There's a formula an editor once scribbled on one of Stephen King's rejection notes that changed his life. Because, prior to reading this, his second drafts were always longer than the first draft. He would put more in, and it would get longer. An editor scribbled to him,

Second draft = First draft – 10%

That was his editor's way of saying, "You've got a lot of flab in this that you could have cut out, a lot of excess stuff that doesn't serve the story." King says this was the big turning point in the development of his craft, when he realized it was about boiling it down and making it more concise.

Some of the things I do when I'm rewriting are to seek and destroy any word, phrase, whole sentence, or paragraph that is not meaningfully adding to the information in the article. If it doesn't add new insight, or if it's repetitive of something else, it's got to go.

Remember, editors are not paying for the first 500 words you think up. They're paying for the 500 best, most interesting, most relevant 500 words on this topic. You want to boil it down.

New writers think, "I've got 500 words, and that's the assignment length, so I'll stop now." That's not it. Write everything that needs to be in it and then figure out how to make all of it fit the word count in the most elegant, concise way.

I look again at my word choices. Is each of those the best word for that situation? Am I using a word repetitively that I need to vary? I just look at word choices. I look at those paragraph transitions.

My philosophy is that the end of one paragraph and the beginning of the next should be knit together like a sweater. There shouldn't be any jarring leaps of logic.

I also reread my notes in the rewrite phase, in case there was some great quote I'm forgetting to include, or one interesting point that's been overlooked. Try to carefully read it all again, one more time, to check for these issues in your story.

4. Expect to be edited.

LAURA: Don't get too attached to your writing. If an editor changes what you write, don't get angry. Sometimes, the rants you read about bad editors are justified. But a lot of times, the writer is just angry because their work was changed. You don't want to be that person.

There are many legitimate reasons for an editor to change your piece. It could be it wasn't what the publication was looking for. You didn't deliver what you said you would. The publication ran out of space. Or maybe there's new information available. Or, horror of horrors, maybe it's poorly written. There are legitimate reasons for an editor to change your piece.

As a professional writer, don't take edits personally. The editor knows their readers best, and they are usually trying to make your article the best it can be.

Q&A

What's the best way to contact interview prospects?

CAROL: I don't know if there's one best way. I usually use email.

LAURA: I wouldn't just call them out of the blue, even if you had their contact number. That might be a little disconcerting. I usually send an email and make an appointment. That's more professional.

CAROL: I like to make appointments. When you're interviewing an expert, you want them be prepared for the interview. You want them to have a chance to gather their thoughts, so they'll be sparkling and intelligent when you talk to them. So, it's better not to ambush them and ask them for quotes.

Is every article supposed to have interview sources? If not, is there a way to know which ones should?

LAURA: That's a good question, really. I don't think they all need them. It just depends on the publication you're working for, whether it's a blog post, or a story for a magazine.

CAROL: There are different kinds of articles. You might be writing a first-person essay for the back page of some women's magazine, where it's all about your observations or experiences. You can tell whether it needs interviews by looking at similar pieces in the magazine to the one you're thinking of doing.

For example, if you get assigned a 300-word, front-of-the-book piece, look at their FOBs and see how they do them. Maybe they are little mini-profiles of people or companies, and, at the end of each one, there's a quick quote from the owner. That'll tell you that you'll need to do one interview. Study the publication. You can't do it enough. It will tell you what you need to know.

How can I sharpen my interview questions?

We gave you several resources above for learning about how to conduct interviews. Beyond that, a few basic tips: Ask open-ended questions that can't be answered "yes" or "no." That gets them talking and sharing whole thoughts that make good quotes.

Ask them what pisses them off the most about this thing. Ask who disagrees with them on this issue, so you get names of other sources to talk to who would provide a different viewpoint.

Your last question should always be, "Where can I reach you when I remember the one important thing I've forgotten to ask you about this?" Because you will have follow-up.

Another newbie perception is that it's a disgrace if you call or email sources back and have a follow-up question you forgot to include in the initial interview. Actually, I almost always end up doing that.

You think of more questions as you're putting the piece together. Always set up the expectation that you will follow up, so it's totally expected if and when you call them again. That's routine in the world of pro writing.

I like to pick their brain at the end of the interview and find out what else is on their mind. What other big issues are going on in their world? What was the hot topic at the last conference they went to? Ideally, you'll want to leave an interview with your next story idea.

This is how you become an efficient freelancer who can make a living – every one of your interviews hopefully serves more than one purpose. You're going to use the interviews for more than one article, or you're going to get another couple story ideas from your source.

If someone famous like the President says something at a press conference, can you refer to that in your article, or do you need to speak to the person again?

As it's unlikely you will get to interview Barack Obama personally, it's generally accepted to repeat a statement a public figure has made to the media. But, in general, I find this instinct to re-quote, or reference someone else's blog and what they said, is often just lazy journalism.

Obviously, in a situation like the President, it's unavoidable. Aside from this sort of special situation, you want to be doing your own research. If you want to get paid good money as a writer, the reason they pay well is because you're actually going to do the

shoe leather work of getting out there and gathering fresh information for them, so their publication has something new nobody else has.

That's what publications live and die on. Fresh angles, fresh news, fresh ideas that aren't elsewhere. That's really your job, to give them that uniqueness. That's what keeps people subscribing to their publication. That usually involves you going out and finding some new, yummy stuff to talk about, not lifting a few quotes out of something that's already been published.

What do you think of this question: "What surprised you about this topic, or what advice would you give others who were planning to do this?"

I like to ask, "What have I not asked that you think is important for readers to know about this? Have we covered the most important points?"

Because, sometimes, you haven't. Sometimes, you've come into a story with an angle you think the story's about, but really, there's a better angle. A bigger angle. A different angle, that emerges as you interview your experts.

Maybe you want to go back to your editor and tweak your concept after you talk to your sources. Watch out about asking sources leading questions that just confirm the thesis you've put together. Ask more open-ended questions to see if your thesis bears up in the light of day. You don't want to bend their answers to your will. Find out what's really going on out there. Your editor will usually be thrilled if you discover something even more interesting and want to tweak your story.

If I'm using my blog as a series of writing samples, is it okay to show a variety of writing styles? For instance, all my posts may not all get to the nut graf right away. Will people assume I don't know how to write for the Web? I have print samples, but they're all profiles of one person.

That's an interesting situation. The great thing about your blog is you can use it to show whatever you want. If you want to use it as an audition to get 1,000-word feature magazine articles, write your blog posts like 1,000-word feature magazine articles.

If you want to get paid blogging work, you might want to use the format Derek Halpern uses that we showed you above, with short sentences and subheads, to be really scannable. Show your versatility.

What I wouldn't recommend is changing all your old blog posts. Don't worry about the past. Concentrate on going forward. Be more conscious when you blog that these are writing samples you're creating, and think about the type of work you want to get. Show that style of writing in your blog posts.

We are all on a learning curve, learning new online writing forms. I was blogging for pay for a couple of years before I was at CBS's old BNET site, and my editor said to me, "You know, the first line of the post has SEO juice, too, not just the headline."

I was not approaching my posts that way, at that point, and I was taking too long to get into my keywords! That changed my blogging style, from there forward. I never did it the same way again.

As you learn more about how to rock these writing styles, you can demonstrate them. If you want some article work and some blogging work, maybe some of your posts take one style and some another.

LAURA: When you're applying for gigs, you can link to the post that best fits the job you're applying for.

CAROL: Great point – fire them straight to the post that's intended for their type of market. Don't just send them over to the blog so they see whatever happens to be your most recent post. Send them to the post you wrote that shows them you know how to write business blog posts, magazine articles, or whatever it is.

Most people, when they're writing for their own blog, don't think about these style conventions. Business clients are looking to see that you understand these forms. If it's an article you're creating for a sample, have a couple interviews in it, for example.

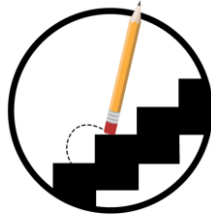
To me, one of the easiest ways to turn your blog into a better sample is to do some interviews, because almost no one does that on their blog. It just says "quality" right away. It says, "I'm doing more. I've got more going on. I understand how to gather information."

Most blogs are a mess. Generally, the achievement level in blogging is low. It's easy to stand out as more of a pro. Writers see so many blogs and think, "How will I ever stand out?" Really, it's not hard.

Read a bunch of blogs and you'll see that the quality of information and writing, and the understanding of blog format, is pretty low. Most blogs are self-involved, and it's all about them.

LAURA: They're writing about "What I ate for breakfast yesterday."

CAROL: Or how they're feeling today, or whatever issue struck them this morning, or a YouTube video they saw. They're not writing in service of a reader, and they're not writing in blog style. You can overachieve pretty easily.



Chapter 6: How to Avoid the 12 Biggest Mistakes of New Freelance Writers – and Earn Big

CAROL: There are a lot of common mistakes we see new freelance writers make. We're going to explain how you can avoid them, so you can move forward faster and start earning more sooner.

Laura and I spent years making mistakes and figuring things out the slow way. We're hoping to spare you some of that with these tips.

1. Getting stuck in self-doubt

Do you think you can't ever measure up to the big, successful, established writers already out there? I hear this kind of negativity all the time:

"Oh, there's no point in starting a blog now. It's too late."

"What's the point of trying to write an article when there are so many writers who are better than me?"

But the fact is, there are tons of small businesses and smaller magazines and newspapers that have no hope of hiring someone like me. They cannot afford me, and they need you. There are so many opportunities!

What's more, you bring something completely unique to the writing marketplace — your own, one-of-a-kind self and your life experiences. Somewhere out there are markets that are a perfect fit for both who you are and where you are in your career, no matter how many other writers are out there, or how advanced their careers are.

Instead of measuring yourself by others' careers, focus on your own self-improvement. This has been my whole philosophy, all the way through my writing career. Don't worry

about what other people are doing. Just keep getting better at what you're doing, and this is going to work out for you.

2. Allowing rejection to crush you

LAURA: There's nothing more potentially devastating to a new writer than rejection. We've all had this happen. You work hard on a query, or craft a response to an ad, or answer an email, and you know beyond a doubt that you're a great fit for this gig. You know you can do it. Then you get that rejection letter. What a disappointment. You crumble.

For many would-be writers, this is exactly where their writing career ends. They let that rejection crush them. They get a few of those rejection letters, and they figure those rejections mean they don't have what it takes to be a professional writer.

What those writers don't know is that the writers who succeed receive rejection letters also. The difference is, writers who succeed don't let rejections keep them from writing.

Even after years and years of being paid for my writing work, there are still times when I don't get the gig. Yes, it still bothers me. I mean, who wouldn't be bothered by that?

How do you overcome this? Instead of letting rejection crush you, be strengthened by rejection.

Rejection is a normal part of the writing process. Remind yourself of this fact every single time you receive a rejection. It's normal to feel disappointed.

But you can totally change your attitude about rejection and turn it into a learning opportunity. One of the things I like to do is read some positivity blogs to help me keep the right perspective, such as Gretchen Rubin's [The Happiness Project](#), and Henrik Edberg's [The Positivity Blog](#).

Of course, you probably have your own resources to help you fight negativity. But I find myself visiting these blogs, either or both of them, about every week. Not every single week but almost once a week.

CAROL: I have [holistic coach Linda Gabriel](#) on my Facebook. She does a micro-gratitude day once a week. I find that uplifting.

Just one final thing on dealing with rejection. I wrote a blog post about what to do after [you get fired from a freelance writing gig](#) when you totally blow it. I had a couple of experiences with that. Like Laura said, it happens to good writers. You screw up, the

editor is crazy, or whatever. Something goes wrong, but you can't let that derail you in any way.

Remember Stephen King and his big spike that held all his rejection letters. He wasn't disheartened by them. Instead, he looked for those little crumbs of encouragement, where sometimes the editor would say, "Good but not for us. Try us again." Those kinds of things. And then he would cling to those for dear life, instead of dwelling on the rejections. That's a good philosophy.

3. Not creating a writer website

I hear from new writers: "I don't have any clips. What's the point of having a website?"

The thing is, without one, it's like you're invisible. You don't come off in a professional way when you have no Internet home to send people, where they can get to know you as a writer. There are quite a few [low-cost ways to get a site up](#). I'd like to challenge everybody to get something up this week. You can see several suggestions on free or low-cost ways to get a site up quickly in Chapter 3.

Obviously, in the ideal, we'd like you to buy a URL that's either your name or some snappy branding about writing like the [Word Chef](#), Tea Silvestre's site, or something cool like that. Get it self-hosted for \$40 a year. But learning to create your own site can take time.

In general, create it now, add clips later, and make it better as you go. Writers get way too obsessed on how perfect it is. New writers often ask me, "When did you consider your writer's site done?"

To which I always reply, "What makes you think I'm happy with it now?" Because I'm not. Having a website is always a constant improvement process. So, just get it up and improve from there, is the philosophy you want to have.

4. Wasting time deciding on a niche

I'm always getting questions about this.

"How do I figure out what my niche is?"

"How can I find out what is the best-earning niche?"

The process where you sit around in a vacuum trying to figure this out is the biggest waste of time that freelance writers can indulge in, in my opinion. The fact is, the marketplace is going to tell you what your writing niche is.

You can sit in your ivory tower and think, “I like food. I want to write about food.” Then you might go into the marketplace and find no one will pay you to write about food.

Don’t have this academic conversation with yourself after researching niches: “Oh, I think business writing is good-paying,” or, “I want to write about healthcare.”

Instead, get a lot of different types of gigs, of every type you think you’re interested in.

Then, when you’ve done those gigs, you’ll see whether or not you like that type of work, whether you say, “Wow, that was really fun!”

At some point, you’ll go, “Gee, I have several types of writing I like... and some of these are paying better than others.” If you want more money, you’ll go in that better-paying direction. That’ll be your priority. And you’ll do more of that kind of thinking.

I started out covering communities and protests for alternative papers. Then I got this funny staff-writing job writing about retailing that paid really well. At first, I thought, “This is crazy. How am I going to find this interesting? This is business. That’ll be so boring.”

But I was fascinated. I loved it. And I never looked back.

I kept developing more subspecialties within business, covering different industries. The marketplace told me where the opportunity was. That will happen to you, as well.

You might have a good theory on what will be good niches for you, based on your life experiences and your interests. But you need to do a lot of writing. Everyone’s writing journey is different and unique, because it’s tied to who you are. Technology might be a great niche, but you might be that one person who can’t get anybody to pay you decently to write about it.

So, you have to market-test it, find where the universe responds to you with better pay and with work you enjoy. It’s more “get out there and do it,” rather than figuring out in a vacuum which niche is right for you.

5. Failing to use contacts you already have

LAURA: When I started out, I was so unsure of myself that I didn’t tell anybody what I was doing for a living. I’m not alone. If you ask a lot of freelance writers the question, “Do your friends and family know what you do for a living,” they would say no.

I can remember at a family gathering asking one of my younger relatives what I did. She said, “Oh, you do something on the computer.” Well, folks, that’s not really good enough.

Most new freelancers are uncomfortable with their new role, so they don’t tell anybody. They don’t tell their friends and their family what they’re doing. They might think they’re unimportant, that these contacts won’t help them. But the truth is, they will.

It’s true they might not understand at first that you’re really working when you’re at home. But it’s still important to let them know about your freelance writing business.

There are a number of ways they can help you. Some of your friends and family might actually own a business that could use your skills. You might eventually get the opportunity to demonstrate how you can help them. But even if you don’t, you never know who people know.

Your Aunt Sally, your Uncle Bill — they may know someone who owns a business that could use your skills. They may get to talking one day, and they might talk about you. It’s a good idea to let people know what you do. They may meet someone who could use a writer.

You might be able to use their friend as a source in an article you’re writing.

Also, you want to get in touch with former teachers. Teachers work hard to make sure their students are successful. And yet, in return, they receive little feedback about what actually happens to their students once they graduate.

Most teachers I know, they’re in a helping profession. They’re thrilled to hear from past students. Many of them are willing to help you out if they can. So, teachers are another contact.

Former colleagues also – people you worked for in the past who know you do a good job, and know how hard you work. All of these should be the start of your network.

CAROL: I’ll give everybody a tip. One of the first questions I ask people in my one-on-one coaching is, “Are you connected on LinkedIn with every editor, teacher, marketing manager, and writer that you know, whom you’ve written for in the past, or met in the past?” And the answer is always “no.”

I consider it the number one, low-hanging fruit, easy way to get freelance writing gigs. Go look all those people up and connect with them, and say:

“I see you’re at X place now. Me? I’m freelance writing. I’d love to have a Skype call with you sometime, and catch up. Just let me know if you know anyone who’s looking for a writer who does [white papers, blog posts, etc]. I’m looking for a couple new clients right now.”

I did that with one editor I had written for. Actually, he was the editor at my first full-time gig covering business. Hadn't written for him in about a decade – and he referred me to a \$.50-a-word, global custom publisher that produces special sections in newspapers all over the world.

It's so worth checking in with those people and letting them know you write. It will never get easier to market your business than telling people who already know and like you that you would appreciate writing referrals from them. If you do nothing else, do this. Such an easy way to move forward.

6. Thinking low-paying gigs are all that's out there

You have formed the impression in your mind that \$20 a post is all the money there is in freelance writing. I get this a lot. I've spoken to a lot of writers who've concluded the content mill rates they got at the first website they ever found are the totality of all the freelance writing opportunities out there. I have been flat-out called a liar when I talk about getting \$1-a-word assignments, \$100-an-hour gigs.

Crack a [*Writer's Market*](#) if you don't believe me. Or get it online and sort their database to the highest pay level, and look at all of the markets that pay really well.

Big companies pay freelancers well, too. Trust us, you can make a comfortable living as a freelance writer. It's not all working 100 hours a week for some mill and having to get up at 6:00 a.m. to download their dashboard opportunities. I call that The Underworld of Freelance Writing that's grown up since the Internet was created. There's a whole other world of freelance writing out there.

Remember that people like Laura and me broke in when there was no Internet and there was lots of freelance writing opportunity. It hasn't gone away. Opportunities are still out there.

7. Forgetting to study your market

LAURA: One of the best ways to find a good gig is to do homework. By homework, I mean you need to study your prospective clients. One of the biggest complaints you'll see on the Internet and that I hear from freelance writers is about their awful clients. It seems like a lot of freelancers have problems because they find awful clients who don't treat them right, who don't pay enough.

CAROL: Definitely an epidemic.

LAURA: One of the best ways to avoid working for a bad client is to find out everything you can about that client before accepting the project from them. Over the years, I've put together a list of places I check, starting out with Google, but it's not the only place you want to look. But first, I start by Googling their name.

You could also do a social media search through a tool like [Social Mention](#), which is really cool. Just type in their name, and it'll bring up all the tweets and everything that's been said about them recently in social media. You'll want to look through that. If you find out the company that's looking to hire you just dumped a bunch of acid in the river, you may not want to associate with this company. Or, if people are complaining they're about to go out of business...beware.

Then you want to look at their company website. Take a good look at it.

Then I look in writer forums to make sure your prospective client isn't being ranted about by other writers. [Glass Door](#) is a great place that looks at companies from the perspective of their employees. If they're not treating their employees right, if their employees are miserable, there's a good chance they're not going to treat the freelancer right, either.

Then, of course, there's your local Chamber of Commerce, whether or not they're a member. And you can check the [Better Business Bureau](#) and see if there are complaints. Of course, you'll get some organizations and clients that are too small. But most of the bigger ones will be in some of those places. It's a good way to get an idea of what they do.

Take your time and be thorough. Don't let yourself be rushed by a client. You want to do your due diligence. Learn about your client. If they have a bad online reputation, for me, that's a red flag – that client's not for me.

If they've treated their own clients badly, what makes you think they're going to treat you any better?

CAROL: I like to Google “[company name] sucks” and see what comes up. That can be a real shortcut to some interesting blog posts about how people have been treated by companies. You can quickly see this isn't a place you want to get involved with.

LAURA: “Problems with [company name]” will pull up some things, too.

8. Writing weak query letters

It's important to learn to write strong query letters. If you're going to write for a magazine or a newspaper, querying is an important part of looking for writing work. Even some online publications now require queries.

CAROL: I just wanted to interject a little something. Linda Formichelli and I did a survey of several hundred writers before we did our [4 Week Journalism School](#) class. One of our questions was, "Do you get good responses to your query letters?" Sixty percent of my blog readers told me they had never sent a single query letter. So, that's kind of incredible.

LAURA: That's pretty astonishing. But if you're planning to query a publication, you need to study the publication. There's nothing more annoying to an editor than getting a query from a writer who has no clue, has never seen their publication, knows nothing about it.

Whatever you do, don't send a canned query, a one-size-fits-all kind of query. That's just a big no-no. You need to tailor your query to the publication. Most queries are weak. So, if you send in a good one, you're going to stand out. You're going to get a response.

9. Avoiding direct contact with clients and sources

CAROL: I get this question a lot: "Is it okay if I just do my interviews on email?" Many writers seem to have a phobia about direct contact.

LAURA: Freelance writers do have the reputation of working alone, being isolated, maybe even being introverts, and preferring to communicate with clients only through email. But isolation is usually not the best way to find new writing jobs.

Face-to-face client meetings, phone calls – these things can bolster your credibility. Clients are still more comfortable working with a writer they know. Most of them like to hear from you by phone. Let the client take the lead on that.

Obviously, you don't want to be calling all the time, and you don't want to spend all your days in meetings. But if they're going to be investing a significant amount of money in hiring you to do a project, I've found, a lot of times they want to talk to you.

You may not live locally, but you can still pick up the phone. I use a Skype phone for my business calls. You will also be more comfortable if you've met your client in person. Plus, you'll have the advantage of putting a face to the name, which is always nice when

you can picture someone you're working for. If you're lucky enough to find a local client, that can give you an edge over a long-distance freelancer, if you're in competition for a particular gig.

CAROL: I've actually gone through a period of time where almost all of my clients were in my own city.

LAURA: The other point, and this is a little bit different. But if you're going to sell a feature interview to a publication, the interview is not just an email with a question.

If it's a feature interview, you're going to miss a lot of insight into the subject, a lot of material you would have gotten if you'd met face-to-face, or even if you'd talked with the subject over the phone. A lot of times, if you go meet with the person face-to-face, you can see how they're dressed. They might have a picture of themselves with a basketball trophy on their desk. You can ask them about that. You're going to miss an awful lot of information you couldn't find online.

But if you can't meet face-to-face because they're not in the same city, at least try to schedule a phone call with them, especially if you're going to sell it as a feature interview to a publication.

CAROL: You miss so much great stuff. When people read my features, they say, "Wow. How did you do this?" And the answer is, I went and hung out with them for an hour-and-a-half or two hours, or a half day. That's how I did it. That's the secret. Soaking up the ambiance of that person's life.

10. Thinking you can't negotiate

The first thing to know is, if you have the kind of client where you really can't negotiate because it's \$10 a post and "That's what we pay, honey," that's the wrong kind of client.

You want the kind of clients where you get a contract and you negotiate that contract. And ask if there's wiggle room in their offer. That's what professionals do. The key thing to know is: everything's negotiable.

I have just done a couple of book contracts where I struck clauses out. They said, "Here's our contract." I read it and said, "I'm not signing that."

One of them wanted to pay me half of my advance when the book comes out a year from now. I said, "I'm not waiting that long! How about when you finalize the draft?" They said, "Oh, okay."

Speak up if you feel uncomfortable. You're never going to lose a gig by raising the issue. I just don't know anyone who says, "I asked if I could get more money and they said, 'In that case, we're not hiring you.'" That doesn't happen.

11. Not reviewing your own work

LAURA: Typos online are not fatal. Typos in your samples are not fatal, but they make you look bad. It's up to you to review your work.

One of the things I do is, I don't try to proofread something I've just written. I usually let it sit at least overnight or a couple of hours, and then go back and read it again. Double-check things like names and references. There's nothing worse than getting somebody's name wrong. People don't like to see their name in print, misspelled.

Another proofreading tip is to read from the back of the material to the front. That takes it out of the context you wrote it in and makes it look fresh to you. Then, read it more than once.

I try to read all of my pieces at least three times to look for errors. The first time, it might be too fresh in your mind. Your mind tends to put in the things that are missing. So, it's really important. Another resource you can use is a tool like [Grammarly](#). Of course, use your spell-checker, but don't rely on it – because it's not always right.

12. Failing to market

If you don't walk away with anything else from this e-book, learn the importance of marketing your freelance writing business.

CAROL: Anytime I sit down with a writer who's coming to me for mentoring, I always ask, "Tell me what you're doing to market your business now, so I can see what other things you might do."

The answer is always the same: "I'm doing nothing. I'm not marketing my business." And then they're shocked that they don't have clients.

LAURA: In a traditional job, you probably had a boss who brought new projects to you. As long as you continued to work for that employer, you didn't have to worry about marketing yourself. That's one of the biggest differences between freelancing and being employed in a traditional job. In freelancing, you have to market your work in order to earn a living as a writer. You have to continually market yourself and your skills and abilities.

A lot of writers will stop marketing when they get busy, and that's a big mistake. There is a lot to consider when it comes to marketing. Most writers just simply aren't prepared to market.

Fortunately, you can learn to market your writing skills and be effective as a writer. It will make a real difference in your writing business.

So, if you don't walk away with anything else from this e-book, remember that we told you to market your writing business.

CAROL: Market your business. It's a business! And you need to market it.

Q&A

If you're setting up your writer's site and you don't know your niche yet, how do you do that?

For example, just write, "Joe Schmo, freelance writer." Put freelance writer in your tagline. Don't put it in your URL, do your name URL. And then, if you develop a niche over time that you want to spotlight, add it in your tagline. Some people never do. Some people have so many different topics that they never want to go that direction. But if you find it's all in healthcare and you really want to call that out, then change your tagline to "healthcare writer." It takes but a moment to add or change.

You never want to let thinking about your niche distract you from getting your website up. That's Job One. You need a website.

LAURA: A lot of people get hung up on their niche. That's something to worry about as you get more advanced. Like Carol was saying earlier, you start to see that all your jobs are falling in this one area. But when you're just starting out, you want to try a lot of different types of writing to find out, first of all, what you like and what's out there.

You mean use Joeblow.com as your address?

CAROL: Every header of a website has a headline and a tagline. The tagline is good for SEO, as well. In your tagline, you put "freelance writer." Then later, maybe you change your tagline. But you can stick with that same URL. That's what I was talking about.

Is reaching out to editors on LinkedIn bad form?

I don't think so. I use InMail like crazy.

I reach out to all kinds of people. It's fine. You might get a response and you might not. The thing I look for on LinkedIn is whether they're active on LinkedIn. If they've got three connections and they last posted a status update six months ago, I'm not going to try them on LinkedIn, because they may not have the email notice hooked up, and then they may never see it. So, there's that to consider. But it's certainly worth a try, and often can be a lot easier than finding someone's email. And it's unusual, still. There's a novelty factor.

I don't live in the U.S. Is there any hope of me finding gigs in U.S. markets?

Certainly, particularly in travel. If you have knowledge of your area, I just think that's an easy way in.

LAURA: If you're trying to break into the U.S. market, in most cases it's really important that you have good English language skills. So, if English is not your first language, make sure your skills are strong.

I live in Texas, where there's a huge Hispanic market. That's growing in a lot of parts of the United States. So, if you're fluent in Spanish, you still may be able to target a U.S. job.

I'm in contact with an editor who keeps telling me she appreciates my writing. I submitted a story, but, each month, it's pushed back to the next month. Am I being strung along, or is it really just a space issue?

CAROL: The error is that the piece you wrote doesn't have a strong enough news hook. A news hook means there's something in the story that *needs* to come out *now*.

Anytime you write a nonpareil piece like "How to choose a cantaloupe at the market," it can always fall victim to getting put off and put off, because there is no compelling reason to run it right now. You always want to build that news hook in, where the editor would have trouble holding it. Also, if it gets held and held, you might ask if you can shop it somewhere else, if you think it's really never going to come out.

If you have a personal website, is it worthwhile to have a NAIWE site, as well?

I actually do have both, so I guess I do think so. I don't know that it's required, but there are some definite advantages to hooking up with a big platform like that.

Should I say I'm a freelance writer, or an aspiring freelance writer?

LAURA: I would say you're a freelance writer. I don't see any value in pointing out how green or new you are. I would say you're a freelance writer. The "aspiring" makes you sound amateur, and like maybe you're not serious about it.

CAROL: There's a basic rule in freelance writing: Don't tell editors or business owners what you haven't done yet, what you can't do, what you don't know about. It's all about your strengths. That's what you present to them.

It reminds me of when I was adopting my kids. What they told us is, tell birth parents whose child you're thinking of adopting what they want to know. What they ask, you answer. Don't provide them with any additional information.

That's a self-sabotaging strategy, when you start saying, "I'm really new at this," or, "I'm going to be on vacation in the next few weeks. I hope that won't be a problem." This is information they don't need, and you don't want to share.

LAURA: You wouldn't go on an interview for a full-time job that way. You wouldn't go in and say, "This is my first job ever." I mean, they can look at your resume, they can look at your clips and get an idea of your experience. But you don't need to add any doubts in their minds as to whether or not you could do the job.

Can we use keyword research to determine the best niche for us?

CAROL: There's no online algorithm that can tell you the best niche for you. The best niche for you might be a small niche. I know people who write about veterinary medicine. There's a [Freelance Writer's Den](#) member right now who is an astrophysicist. What a terrific niche! He can write for every space museum.

But Google is not going to tell you the answer. The answer lies in your life – and what you want to write about, and have an interest in, and know a little bit about. When you get started, it's all about starting from what you know, or at least have a basic grounding in.

What if you're just beginning and you don't have contacts?

LAURA: Everybody has some contacts. You have friends, you have family, you have businesses you frequent. Even if you've never worked, you're right out of school, you have teachers.

Your job now is to start making more contacts. And you're going to do that face-to-face, by going to maybe local Chamber of Commerce meetings, handing out your business card to the people you meet.

You're going to do it online, by building a Web presence and a social-media presence. There's no such thing as somebody who has no contacts. But you want to start with the easy contacts – the people who already know you, like you, and think highly of you. Branch out from there.

CAROL: Let's bust the myth that you need to know editors personally to get a freelance writing gig. That's baloney. What you need to know is how to write a query letter that will knock an editor's eyes out and get them dying to hire you. You can go in the door cold to any publication and get a gig with the strength of your ideas and how you write them up and present them.

I call this syndrome of being paralyzed because you don't have contacts, "waiting for the luck fairy to bring you a job."

You're waiting for the magical day when you somehow meet an editor at your dream publication, and then they'll give you an assignment. That's not how it works. It's all about proactively marketing and cold-calling the markets you want to write for.

LAURA: You can't sit there and do nothing and wait to be discovered. It's not going to happen.

Should new writers fork over for a LinkedIn Premium membership?

CAROL: If you join the LinkedIn Group [LinkedIn for Journalists](#) and take their free training, you can get the premium level for free. Join that group. LinkedIn wants journalists to use their platform. They're very hot on that. You can get free premium access if you can make a case to them that you're the kind of writer they should have in the group.

Is it negative if you have more than one field of expertise listed on your writer website?

Certainly not. Many of us have several different areas of expertise. You might just set up different pages on your site for them. That's no problem at all.

LAURA: That's a strength.

CAROL: Sometimes, an industry goes down, like real estate during the downturn. If you're only in real estate, then you're hosed. Ideally, you want to have more than one specialty area, so you can roll with the punches better. Personally, at this point, I have expertise in legal, insurance, retailing, restaurant, franchising, startups, and on and on. So, if the insurance industry goes down the tubes, my career isn't over. That's how you want it.

What if you have specialties in areas that seem too crowded, like holistic health, pets, gardening?

My take is that there is no niche that's really too crowded, because there are always different markets within that niche than most writers think of. What everyone is thinking is, they want to write for some big gardening magazine that's a national glossy.

But they might not be thinking of reaching out to nurseries and helping them with their marketing. There's always a way to flip your area of interest to places that other people aren't pitching. Maybe you're going to write for a trade magazine for professional gardeners or professional landscapers. There are so many ways to cut those areas of expertise and find good markets.

LAURA: Look for different angles. Don't go for the obvious publications in a niche. If you're trying to select a niche, look for a different angle that maybe the average person doesn't think of.

Should we as writers rant about bad clients? Is it our duty to warn other writers?

CAROL: Trashing clients is generally not good business.

LAURA: If you do that, your prospective clients are probably going to find that online, and they're going to think, "Look at how she trashed XYZ Company. I wonder if she's going to do that to me."

If you really feel fraud has been committed, or something like that, you might need to get authorities involved. Otherwise, don't trash anybody online.

How crucial is following up on a query, or is that annoying?

It's okay to follow up. It actually can set you apart. You want to do it politely. I would do it fairly quickly. Of course, you don't want to be following up every day. But I would follow up at least once, maybe twice on a query.

CAROL: Keep it down, or you're going to reveal that you're new at this.

My personal philosophy is that I don't follow up. I move on and send more queries. I assume that if they love my query, I'll be hearing from them.

Occasionally, I hear tales of people who followed up and then the editor went, "Wow, it was in my spam folder, and I love it." Personally, I feel that the energy I am spending wondering whether they liked my query and following up is just better spent writing more queries. So, that's how I do it.

LAURA: If you follow up constantly, it does make you look desperate. One follow up, two at the most, is not terribly harmful, but I wouldn't go beyond that.

If they didn't like my query, is it time to confess that I'm really green and try to get their advice?

CAROL: If they didn't like it and they didn't respond to you, they're not going to help you improve your queries. You need to find pro writers and read books, and go out and improve.

The norm now is you're not going to hear back unless they're interested. No one is able to send, "Sorry, not for us" responses to every writer anymore. They're just completely overwhelmed. Don't take it personally.

That's the other thing. Getting back to the rejection thing, you need to realize it's not about you. They just don't have the time. They'd love to mentor every writer on Earth, but they can't. They've got to put out a magazine.

Is it okay to set up interviews on email, and then do them live?

Absolutely. We all set up interviews on email all the time.

If you want to interview a particular expert who prefers to answer questions over email, would you consent as an exception?

Only if I've got to have them. There are a lot of experts in the sea. In general, if someone is being weird about not wanting to talk to me live, I tend to move on.

What about pitching an idea accompanied by a video clip?

I don't think most editors are looking for that. You might mention you have a relevant video clip to go with the story. People dig multimedia in the story. But it's a little early to bring it up before you know if they like your idea.

Should we connect with other writers to become their backups for their clients?

Heck yeah! Networking rocks. Know other writers, particularly if you have a niche. I know nearly every other high-profile business writer in my town. We do refer each other. I have a friend who was referred a book contract by a writer in his niche, who didn't have time to write it. She knew him from his networking efforts. So yes -- a thousand times, yes.

LAURA: Definitely. Writers give other writers work. There's a myth out there that other writers are your competition. That's only partly true. They're also your colleagues. Definitely connect with other writers. Connect with other freelancers, too. For more on this, here's a useful post: [Why I Connect with Other Freelancers and Why You Should, Too.](#)

What about making multiple submissions?

If it's the same piece, if they didn't like it the first time, they're probably not going to like it the second time you submit it. Now, of course, if it's the same publication, but you've got something new, I don't see any problem with submitting new material to it.

But I wouldn't submit the same piece over and over again to the same editor. That could get annoying. That's like following up on queries. You follow up on the query maybe once or twice, but not more often.

Is it okay to send a query for the same article to more than one magazine?

CAROL: Totally. Do it. Don't wait to hear back from the first one, either, even though they may say they don't want simultaneous submissions. You've got to make a living.

Should you write your article before you submit the query?

In general, no.

When you write an article without having an assignment from an editor, you're writing in a vacuum. You don't really know what they want. You want to find out, get an assignment, then write it. Otherwise, you're often wasting a lot of time.

Example: You're writing and sending off a piece called 12 Bed and Breakfasts in Pennsylvania. The editor gets back to you and says, "Could you write the 12 most disabled-accessible bed and breakfasts in Philadelphia, instead?" Then you're going to have to write a whole new article.

The exception is if it's what we call a Front of the Book or FOB piece that's 200-250 words, or so. Then the query pitching the idea would be longer than the article! So it may make sense to study the publication well, and then simply write it up, send it in, and hope it's a fit.

Learn More About Freelance Writing from the Authors

Blogs

Carol Tice: Make a Living Writing

<http://www.makealivingwriting.com>

Laura Spencer: Writing Thoughts:

<http://www.writingthoughts.com>

E-books

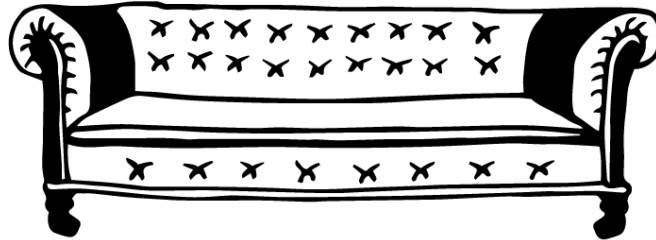
13 Ways to Get the Writing Done Faster: 2 Pro Writers Share Their Secrets, by Carol Tice & Linda Formichelli

How to be a Well-Paid Freelance Blogger, by Annabel Candy, Sean Platt, Carol Tice, and Greg Ciotti

Both available at: <http://www.makealivingwriting.com/ebooks>

NOTE: Some links in this e-book are affiliate links. That means Carol and Laura earn commissions if you buy products through those links. It won't cost you more, and we appreciate your giving us credit for referring you to these useful resources.

freelance writers den



Freelance Writers Den is the learning and support community where freelance writers learn to grow their income – fast. The Den offers support forums, live Den meeting events, and more than 100 hours of recorded trainings and transcripts.

Membership is \$25 a month – no obligation, leave at any time. See what members say, view a video on the Den's benefits, and get on the waiting list to hear when we next open to new members, all at <http://freelancewritersden.com>.

Put this e-book into action!

If you didn't receive it with your e-book download, you can click the button below to claim your Step by Step checklist.

Easily create your own customized plan for launching your freelance writing career -- take notes and get going finding your first freelance writing clients!

**Get your
Checklist!**

Index

1

13 Ways to Get the Writing Done Faster 107

A

AARP 15
 ACT-UP 56
Ad Age 41
Alaska Airlines 5
Alaska Airlines magazine 5
 Alternative 14
 Alternative paper 14
 American City Business Journals 10
 American Express 5
 American Society for Training and Development 38
 Association of Alternative Newsweeklies 14

B

Bastyr University 11
 Better Business Bureau 96
 BNET 88
 Book 4, 10, 16, 24, 67, 107
 Boost Blog Traffic 51
 Businesses 26

C

CBS 38, 88
 Celebrity 17
 Chamber of Commerce 13, 53, 96, 103
 Charity Navigator 10
 CIA 49
 Clips 28
 Confidence 50
 Contests 15
 Copyblogger 5, 36, 51, 81
 Craigslist 24, 37, 47, 58, 63, 71

D

Daily Variety 41
Dayton Daily News 14
 Department of Labor 22
 Department of Revenue 22
 DesignM.ag 6
 Dragon Naturally Speaking 51
 Dun & Bradstreet 5

E

E-book 107
 Elance 47
 Email 75
Entrepreneur 5, 36
 Everything PR 6
 Examiner 14

F

Facebook 44, 91
Forbes 5
 Fortune 500 60
 Free 34
 Freelance Folder 6
 Freelance Writers Den 4, 18, 34, 40, 44, 108
 Freshbooks 67

G

Glass Door 96
 Google 44, 70, 77, 96, 102
 Google Voice 70
 Gorkana 37, 38
 Grammarly 79, 99
 Grant 12
 Grant writing 12
Grease 18

H

Harvest 67
 Headline 36, 82
Headline Hacks report 36
 Hispanic 101
How They Started 16
How to be a Well-Paid Freelance Blogger 107

I

Interview 75

J

Journalism 97

L

LA Times 8

Lede	77
Lending Tree	5
LifeHack.....	5
LifeHacker	6
LinkedIn for Journalists	103
Local	13
Lost.....	18

M

Magazines	69
Make a Living Writing.....	5, 107
Marketing.....	33
Mediabistro.....	38
Meetup.com	38

N

National	34, 73
National Center for Education Statistics.....	73
<i>New York Times</i>	76
NMX	38
Nut graf	77

O

<i>On Writing</i>	56
One-person	16
Online	80, 81
Organizations.....	13
OutstandingSETUP	34

P

PayPal	59, 67
Personal.....	19
Portfolio.....	34
Poynter Institute	78
Press release	12
Prologger	5, 36
Professional	34
ProfNet.....	74
<i>Puget Sound Business Journal</i>	77

Q

Query	43
QuickBooks.....	67
QuoteRoller.....	67
Quotes.....	74

R

Rejection	91
-----------------	----

S

Scope.....	58
Seattle	13, 14, 44, 69
Secretary of State	22
Sharebar	82
Skype.....	40, 41, 70, 94, 97
Small.....	11, 13, 44
Social Mention.....	96
Social Triggers.....	80
Society of Technical Communicators	38
Solicitation letters	12
SPCA	24
Suite 101	14
SXSW	38

U

UBI number.....	21
-----------------	----

V

Vandelay Design Blog	6
<i>Vanity Fair</i>	80

W

<i>Wall Street Journal</i>	76, 78
Web... 12, 13, 19, 28, 30, 39, 60, 71, 72, 77, 78, 80, 81, 82, 87, 103	
Web content	19, 28, 60, 82
Web copy	12, 13, 39, 71
Web presence	30, 103
Web writing.....	12, 77, 80, 81
<i>Why Do Most Headlines Fail?</i>	36
Wikipedia.....	75
Word Chef.....	92
WordPress.....	34, 38
<i>Working World</i>	15
Write to Done.....	5
Writing	1, 36, 38, 71, 72, 76, 79, 80, 81, 95, 97, 107
Writing Thoughts.....	107

Y

Yellow Pages.....	10
Yola	34
YouTube	78, 89

Z

ZoomInfo.....	34
---------------	----