

7 Steps to a Killer Freelance Writing Career

A Special Report



By Alyson Mead

Step 1: Identify Your Skills

Freelance writing can be a very lucrative field that allows you to work at home while honing your grammar, usage, spelling and other skills. Many freelancers enjoy their careers because they have time to work on creative projects. Others enjoy the freedom of working for themselves so they can travel or pursue educational goals.

If you want to build a successful freelance career, the first step is to identify your skills. You may be tempted to start by hitting up all the places writing is published, from magazines to newspapers and web sites. But many times, that will only get you blacklisted, and leave you no closer to achieving your goal.

Think about your strengths, then make a list on a piece of paper. Are you funny? Great with meeting deadlines? Excellent with interviews?

Now write down your weaknesses -- **without** lying. Do you sometimes procrastinate with deadlines? Are you a poor speller? Weak on research skills or grammar rules?

Beginning the process in this way will start to reveal where you'll find the greatest freelance success.

Step 2: Identify Your Market(s)

After you have identified the areas of your greatest strength and weakness, you are ready to determine which markets are best suited to your skills. If you're funny, for example, you may find success in writing greeting cards, or humorous essays for magazines. If you're great with people, and love conducting interviews, you may find success as a reporter for a local newspaper, or even as a celebrity journalist.

It's important to be honest. If you hate celebrities, there's no need to interview them. If you hate interviewing people, you may find greater happiness as a short story or feature writer.

The major writing markets are:

- Newspapers
- Magazines
- Journals and Periodicals
- Web Sites (Content)
- Greeting Cards
- White Papers, Research Reports & Case Studies

Spend some time matching your skills to the type of writing you'd like to do, and the market likely to yield the best response. If you have more than one, that's fine, too.

Step 3: Do Your Research

This is the step almost everyone rushes through, or leaves out altogether, which is a huge mistake. This is **absolutely** the most important step of all. Once you have matched your personal skills with the type of writing or editing you'd most like to pursue, it's time to find very specific outlets for your work.

Again, resist the temptation to carpet-bomb the entire publishing community with your work. Editors are very busy people, with very tired eyes, and will appreciate you if you make their work a little easier.

If you've decided to pursue magazines, for example, visit a newsstand. Buy a big armload of magazines that feature articles like the one you want to write. If money is an issue, try to borrow magazines from a library, or find them online. The purpose is to study the magazines for their style of writing, and taste for publishing certain topics.

After you've read a minimum of five magazines (or newspapers, web sites, etc.), start a new page in your notebook or journal. Write down the name of the magazine(s) you want to write for, as well as its/their genre & style. Then keep the magazines. You will need to refer to them in the next step.

Step 4: Craft the Perfect Pitch

Now that you have decided the type of freelance work you want to do, and have identified both your skills and desired markets, it's time to craft the perfect pitch, which will get you those well-paying jobs you covet.

A pitch can be done by letter or email, as long as you know an editor doesn't mind being contacted that way (if the email address is published on the masthead, he or she most likely doesn't mind). The query should be no longer than a page in length. Remember, editors are very busy. Respect their time, and they will do the same for you.

The first paragraph of your query letter should be eye-catching, but not overly cutesy. If your topic is timely, this is the place to add a catchy headline. Help the editor "see" your story.

The second paragraph should elaborate a little more on your topic, using active language that makes someone want to read on. Tease the editor a little bit - make them feel like they have to contact you to know how your story ends.

Lastly, the third paragraph should give an editor information about your background, including anything you've published, your schooling, or other related skills.

Step 5: Query the Right People

If you've written your killer query letter, and edited it until it's tight as a drum (no spelling or grammar mistakes, or you can kiss those freelance assignments goodbye), you will need to figure out who to send your query to.

This is where those magazines or newspapers you saved will come in handy. On the masthead, locate the name of the Articles Editor, if possible. Depending on the market you're querying, you may also choose to approach a Departmental Editor (such as music, if your story has a musical theme), or even an Associate Editor. These are the people who routinely assign and track stories for each issue of their publication.

When you query these people, make sure to address the query letter (if you're sending it by regular mail) to John Doe, Articles Editor. That will add a level of professionalism, and show the editor that you've actually done some of your homework. It may even get your query read faster.

However, you don't know this editor personally, so in the salutation, it's always best to write Dear Mr. Burns, or Dear Ms. Anderson. Conferring respect is not brown-nosing. It's representing yourself as a proper businessperson.

Step 6: Broaden Your Scope

Once you have published your first article, it's best to develop and deepen the relationship you now have with that editor. A good experience on their end is likely to lead to more freelance assignments for you, and a chance to broaden the scope of what you write about.

For instance, it's great to be considered the go-to source for information and articles on Tiger Woods, for instance. But if you can broaden your scope, by interviewing other golfers, beginning to review golf clubs and other gear, and even providing tips for playing difficult golf courses the world over, you've made the successful transition to expert on golf, not just Tiger Woods. That opens up a lot more magazines, newspapers, and web sites you can write for, and a lot more editors you can query.

If you're unsure about how to go about this, try sitting with a notebook and a pen, just writing down all the different permutations of what you're most drawn to writing about. Some of these you may not want to consider further. But once you see a complete list about this subject matter, I believe you will begin to see how it's best to always be broadening the scope of what you do, for your portfolio and your bottom line.

Step 7: Don't Forget to Collect

Of course, we all want to collect a paycheck at the end of the assignment - that's a given. Keeping track of payments may be your responsibility, though, as busy editors are not the ones who will notice whether you've been paid or not.

Rather than bothering the editor, you may wish to give a gentle reminder around the 30-day mark, unless you've already made other arrangements. Offer to contact the accounts payable person yourself, instead of burdening the editor, with whom you want to develop a relationship with over time. And always be polite, to everyone you encounter. You never know who handles the purse strings.

The second way to collect regards your writing itself. If you have a series of published essays about cookies, for instance, you might find success by collecting them into a book of some kind.

Even though you have already published the essay or article once, most of the time you will have the right to publish it in another arena, as long as you give the original publisher credit. Check with a publishing attorney for more information about various publishing rights when you're ready to do so. Until then, freelance and prosper!

About the Author

Alyson Mead's fiction, essays and articles have appeared in over twenty-five publications, including *Salon*, *In These Times*, *Bitch*, *BUST*, *the Whole Life Times*, *Punk Planet*, *MSN*, *The Sun*, *AOL*, *LA Tribe*, *Rockpile*, *ChickClick*, *Tapestry*, *The Stylus*, and the *New York Daily News*, among others.

She has received the Columbine Award for Screenwriting, the Roy W. Dean Filmmaking Grant and a *Writer's Digest* Award. Her work also appears in the anthology *Stories of Strength*, benefiting the victims of Hurricane Katrina.

She founded Find Your Prosperity, a web-based community providing free content on building a life of wealth and wellbeing, to serve the working population of the world. If you have ever hated your job and wanted to make a change, this site is for you. Sign up for her free newsletter, web deals and prosperity meditations at <http://www.FindYourProsperity.com>.