

**WRITE IT, SELL IT
SERIES**



Top 50 **Freelancer**

Questions and Answers

DR. DAVID TAYLOR
Executive Editor

www.PeakWriting.com

\$12.95

Top 50

Freelancer

Q & A's

The
Essential
Answers
Every
Freelancer
Must
Know



Part of the
"Write It, Sell It"
Book Series

BY DAVID TAYLOR



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THIS BOOK IS NOT DONE!

The questions and answers herein are taken from exchanges with my students at www.peakwriting.com, the "Ask the Writing Doc" section of the site. The Q's and the A's go on every day and will be collected periodically and published as ebooks. To get a free copy of the next "Top 50 Freelancer Q&A's," register at peakwriting.com.

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About the Author



David Taylor is a television writer, producer and host, who can currently be seen in the Outdoor Life Network's weekly series, "Dive Today."

He served as an executive editor at Rodale Press for nine years. Prior to magazine publishing, David taught

fiction and non-fiction writing at Hampden-Sydney College in Virginia and at Moravian College in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.

His short fiction has appeared in numerous anthologies such as the Masques series (edited by J.N. Williamson), the Pulphouse series (edited by Kathryn Kristine Rusch) and Scare Care (edited by Graham Masterton). His stories have also appeared in magazines such as Grue, Noctulpa, GoreZone, Sci-Fi Channel Magazine, and many others.

David's latest book is [THE FREELANCE SUCCESS BOOK: Insider Secrets for Selling Your Writing](#).

Goals of this book

- to build a community of writers at peakwriting.com who ask questions and learn from each other
- to inspire you to write with confidence
- to demystify the world of writing—the one with thousands of people in it just like you
- to bring that world into your home and onto your laptop.

.....

About miracles

When it comes to realizing your writing goals, there are no miracles, no magic wands, not even a prescription drug.

Just hard work.

And one more thing: knowledge.

I know this as personal fact: The only thing standing between you and the realization of your writing dreams is the right answers to the right questions.

Find the questions, find the answers, find the people who can give them to you, and you're as good as there. Try [THE FREELANCE SUCCESS BOOK](#) today.

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Join the discussion on www.peakwriting.com.

Our staff is standing by to answer your questions with the knowledge that comes from years of experience on magazine staffs, at book publishing companies and in the college classroom.

Best of all, it's **FREE**.

Simply type in your question in the "Ask the Writing Doc" box and submit. The answer will be emailed to you within a few.

<http://www.peakwriting.com>

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Writing Help, Right Here	
Type Your Question Here	
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Chapter One

Getting Started

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How do I get started?

.....

Traveling and writing are my passions. I have always longed to find a way to merge them and believe that there IS a way! I just don't know it! Can you help me with some tips on how to get started? Also, are there any books, web pages, etc. that you can refer me too? Thanks for your help!

First, congrats on a courageous decision to follow your heart and not listen to all the nay-sayers who, I'm sure, have been trying to knock down your dream and tell you that you can't. They're just jealous, of course.

Second, there's absolutely no reason you can't merge your two passions. Many have before you. All it takes is ambition, perseverance and an average facility for words. Here are what I believe to be the keys to success:

Key #1: Target a publication and internalize it.

Collect samples of target magazines that publish the type of features you wish to write. Select one, two or three magazines that you think you have a shot at getting

published in by virtue of your level (unpublished freelancer) and the topics you are comfortable with.

When you've done that, DEVOUR the publication. Get inside the head of the editor. Know exactly what he/she wants in a feature: slant, voice, paragraphing, number of words, use of quotations, descriptive level of the language—everything.

Key #2: Follow the format.

Now write an article based upon your analysis of what this editor wants. Your goal is to produce a manuscript that the editor doesn't have to touch in order to get it ready for publication in his/her zine.

A book from the Writers Digest people, *The Writers Market*, is the most comprehensive listing of all magazines in America. There are plenty of zines to work for besides the newsstand slicks.

Key #3: Know the ropes.

Freelancing is a profession, and like any profession it has its skills and codes of conduct, from how to submit a query to publication rights and simultaneous submissions. What I'm saying is, they don't let brain surgeons in the operating room until they've learned their craft.

Same is true of editors: we don't let you in our magazine until you know the trade and are dependable and honest (that last one is more important than you might think).

I highly suggest that you find a published author or an expert like here on peakwriting.com to help you learn the ropes. Don't try to reinvent the wheel on your own. That road can lead to a LOT of frustration. Get a mentor. Grease the skids.

Key #4: Read the greats.

And not just the ones who've done books. The best travel writers today are writing in magazines like *Conde Nast Traveler*, *Travel and Leisure*, *Islands*, *Natl. Geo Traveler*. If your goal is to publish in those magazines (and make the kind of money they offer), then read them, study them, emulate them. Then add your own twist and personality to it. Virginia Woolf studied Joseph Conrad. William Faulkner studied James Joyce. Should we be any different?

Key #5: Be committed.

Getting your first byline is going to be hard. Bylines aren't merit badges; they're signals of significant professional achievement. Expect rejection. But remember: *The only difference between a published writer and an unpublished writer is that one has given up.*

You may find these online resources valuable.

American Society of Travel Writers: <http://www.satw.org/>

Freelance Writers Groups:

<http://www.freelancesuccess.com/resources/writersorgs.shtml/>

What should I write about?

.....

How does a writer know what topics are hot and what are not? I want to write travel articles out of Japan, mainly on culture and natural elements there. But I wonder if there is interest in Japan (specifically) in U.S and Australian magazines.

I like this question. It gives me a chance to say two things I believe strongly:

- **Editors are starved for good stuff.**

A good article—filled with solid, interesting info slanted toward a specific audience and publication, without errors—will always find a home.

During my nine years as an executive editor, we were always starved for good freelance stories. This is amazing but true:

There are plenty of freelancers who want to get published. There is a tremendous shortage of freelancers who know how to do it. When it comes to the latter, you have very little competition.

Good work from freelancers saves production time and usually a lot of expenses. The only problem: most freelancers (98%) don't take the time to study a publication closely and smartly, and thus send in something that, albeit a good idea, isn't executed specifically for that magazine.

The point: If you do your job as a freelancer—which is to target your writing for a specific audience and publication—you can sell what you write about Japan or anything else.

- **There are no new topics, only new writers with fresh writing.**

Again, it's my experience that readers and editors are always interested in the unique, the fresh and the well-written. If you have something unique to say from your own fresh observations and perceptions, then there will be interest in it. There are no new topics, only new writers. All of Shakespeare's themes are hackneyed—revenge, ambition, unrequited love—but the perceptions and writing aren't.

Now, how do you do it?

- **Read.** To offer something fresh, you have to know what's already been said and how it's been said. Select 10
- publications in the field where you want to publish. Read them voraciously. Mimic the format of the article you like. No, this isn't cheating or being a hack.
- **Know the difference between form and formula.** There's a big difference, A form is structure, which everything in the universe has. A water

glass gives form to water. The shape of the glass can vary from ornate to practical. But a form is always there. A formula is designed to fabricate things in cookie-cutter style. Like automobiles on an assembly line. Editors don't want formulaic writing, but we do want the forms or patterns that we are required to use in our magazine. Find the patterns that your editor needs.

- **Target.** Buy a copy of *The Writer's Market* (<http://www.writersdigest.com>) and find the zines most likely to be receptive to your article. Shape your writing accordingly. Start with magazines appropriate for your level of experience. That usually means smaller: in size, circulation and reimbursement.
- **Don't give up.** The only difference a published writer and an unpublished writer is that one has given up. Take rejection slips and throw them into the furnace of your writing to put steel in your prose.

Should I write books, articles or a regular column?

I'm seeking advice on how to present ideas to leading magazines in possibly creating an advice column on the subject of spirituality. I actually am an Expert on the AskMe web site. I'm always scanning leading magazines to determine what type of advice is being given and in what areas. I think there is more to life than fashion, sex and relationships. One reason for starting a column on spirituality is because I'm interest in how others perceive themselves from a spiritual standpoint. Thanks for your help.

Spirituality is a hot topic in women's zines right now, and is growing. Spirituality is almost an entire division by itself at the company where I used to work: Rodale Press. So I don't think you'll have problems finding outlets.

- **Regular column**

Bad news, I'm afraid: Without a solid freelance track record supported by excellent clips, you're not going to get a regular column. You first need to establish stellar credentials with previously published work before an editor would consider you for an expert column. You may have these, I don't know.

- **Features**

If you haven't published widely in the area of spirituality, I would encourage to begin here. Getting published as a freelancer is an art in itself, and I'd be happy to give you some help getting started.

- **Books**

After you've got the credibility—by virtue of professional credentials or a solid publication record in an area dominated by experts—you are ready for a book. Perhaps the first book should be a collection of your feature articles, so be sure to keep book rights on any magazine contract you sign.

- Let me know if you want to pursue this further.

How do I break into a magazine?

.....

regina386 asked this follow-up question on 10/14/2001:

Dear David:

Thanks for getting back to me. Since the time that I posed my question regarding publishing I have had a essay published in the National Woman Writers Association monthly publication, and I was just contacted by a Metaphysical paper in North Carolina that they are interested in publishing one of my articles in their January issue. So things are looking up.

However, I have a manuscript that is ready for publication and I'm now looking around for a possible publisher. The manuscript is metaphysically based and consists of short stories, letters and essays that I have written regarding my own personal spiritual journey.

I would like to communicate with you further regarding writing and freelance work. I have contacted a number of magazines, and as you mentioned, if you are not already established in the trade they are not interested.

My question is how do you get that establishment if major magazines are not willing to give you a chance??? Just a little venting on my part.

Looking forward to discussing the publishing and writing endeavors in more detail when your time permits.

Regina

Dr. Taylor gave this response on 10/15/2001:

Regina—Congrats on your byline in the Women Writers Group! Sorry 'bout the other rejections. Afraid that's part of the process, however. To answer your specific questions:

- How do you get into the big-time zines? Answer: Slowly, carefully. It usually takes 1—3 years, depending on how hard you work, whom you know, your field of expertise. Here's how I used to have my students do it and it's still what I tell the many freelancers who contact the magazine and this web site:

1. Get a Writer's Market book.

Use it to make a list of target magazines. Prioritize the list from easiest for you to get published in to the most difficult. Start with the easiest and as you have success, work your way to your dreams.

2. Make sure your mail is addressed correctly.

Remember that 90% of all mail in America is sent to the wrong address. As editors, we get so many good ideas and stories in our office, but they're just not ones we can use. The writer has not studied our individual title closely enough.

Here's a very important lesson: There's rarely anything generic in magazine publishing. You have to write a specific article, at a specific length and slant, for a specific magazine and editor.

If you wanted to publish a feature on "Spirituality in Modern Marriage" in two magazines, each article would have to be substantially different because it must conform to the magazine where it fits—even though both those magazines are in the same genre of women's spirituality!

3. What should you do with your book manuscript? Three options:

- Send it to an agent (they're listed in back of Writers Market.)
- Divide it up into magazine articles and try to sell them.
- Self publish it and learn to market it yourself on the internet.

I recommend a combination of #2 and #3, but you have to be willing to work at marketing your own books. I'll show you how. But the work is hard and your ambition must burn intensely.

How do I handle rejection slips?

.....

Mark asked this question on 11/4/2001:

I'm writing this with my tail between my legs. But I also wanted to get back in touch with you.

I want to quit my job and work as a freelance writer. But I've got one big problem: my stories keep getting rejected! Both articles I've sent out so far have been rejected three times each. How many times should I keep on sending them out? Is three times enough? Thirty? Should I invest in a personal stamp machine?

Mark

David Taylor gave this response on 10/4/2001:

Most often, a professionally done manuscript is rejected for reasons that have nothing to do with the writing. Usually it's timing or some internatl affair you have no knowledge of or control over. And who can account for taste?

Since this is September, let's look at it from a sports point of view.

If you're a baseball fan, I need say no more. This is the season of hope and glory, defeat and bitterness, heroes and bums.

Try to imagine the pressure that Roger Clemens must feel when pitching in the ninth inning of a series-deciding game? What elation he must feel when he gets the K, what wretched dejection when he watches some Brave slug one over Ted Turner's gaudy scoreboard.

Elation and dejection. So far you've only had the second half of that equation.

So, what would Roger Clemens do if he's in a slump, the way you are now? Always the bum, never the hero? Leaving out the personal stuff, you know exactly what he would do:

He would do it again.

Whether he wins or loses, he goes back to the mound, chew stuffed in his cheek like a ping-pong ball, spittin' and diggin', going for the win.

Again. And again.

Because he knows that some days he'll win and some days he'll lose. Over the course of a season, pitchers want have won a few more than they lost. To beat par. But, here's the key:

Pitchers know—and accept—that they will win and lose. Both are part of their chosen profession.

What about batters? The greatest batters hope to achieve a lifetime average of around .400. In other words, less than half the time do they plan on "winning" by getting safety on base. They consider themselves a success even though they are *rejected* six times more often than they are *accepted* on base. Batting is hard. Hitting a little round ball going 90 miles an hour with a wooden stick with any precision is just a damn hard thing to do.

So is writing.

Putting words together with thought is one of the great triumphs of human evolution. Putting them down in written form is one of the great triumphs of human will.

We're dealing with the fickle hand of creativity, the soft underbelly of thought, and the infinitely nuanced world of symbolic language.

And then there's editors. Talk about fickle. We've all heard the stories of masterpieces being rejected umpteen times, with the future Nobel prize winner barely rescued from the edge of destitution and despair.

Those stories are true.

Whether it's James Joyce, Jack Kerouac or J.D. Salinger, their masterpieces--now enshrined as icons in our literary corpus--were once considered crap by at least 20 editors each before somebody got a clue.

OK.

So here's what we got so far:

- A) You will inevitably be rejected as a writer, probably more often than you are accepted.
- B) You've chosen a difficult craft because of the nature of language and thought.
- C) Editors' tastes can change as often as Michael Jackson's nose.

Should you take solace in those cold realities? Yes, you should. Here's why.

- **Acceptance is inevitable.** If rejection is inevitable, so must be acceptance. You show up. You write. You submit your stuff. Do that enough and the law of averages dictates that it will all come together (the ideas, the words, the editor) successfully and be accepted at a rate determined by variables like your experience, work habits, chosen market, etc.

What is the rate of acceptance vs. rejection? What are the odds, to put it in gambling terms?

According to some calculations, about 1 in 12 is the average. In other words, on average, a manuscript from a competent freelancer being submitted to appropriate magazines will be rejected 11 times and accepted on the 12th.

This is why you should always have 6 to 12 stories circulating at once. You increase your odds of acceptance. A roulette wheel has 50 numbers. Place one bet and you have a 1 in 50 chance of winning. Place 50 bets, you have a 100 percent chance of winning.

If you have 12 stories on editors' desks, the "Law of 12" says that one will be accepted. Lots of variables, of course. But the point is clear:

If you submit a single story to three top magazines, get three quick rejections, then give up, you have failed to understand the rules of the game. If you want to drop out, fine. But do so knowing the rules:

One acceptance for every 12 submissions—on average.

- **Rejection is an invitation.** To what? To learn and to revise, thereby improving your odds the next submission.

Learning—and willingness to revise in light of it—is the key to getting and keeping legs in this profession.

Too many of us, too often, continue to be bedeviled by two great American myths:

- "The Natural"—the person who can do it perfectly without ever trying.
- "The Discovery"—the person who finds out they have this perfect gift or is discovered to have it by some expert, probably a writing teacher.

Guilty as charged?

Hey, who isn't. We all enjoy fantasy. But the key is knowing that The Natural and The Discovery don't exist.

What does exist is our hard work, our commitment to being writers, and the peace that comes from knowing that rejections and acceptances conform to cosmic laws at work in our lives, in the offices of editors and even at home plate.

OK, Mark—batter up.

Can I combine writing and motherhood?

.....

Anonymous asked this question on 6/22/2001:

I'm a thirty-something mother of two young boys, co-owner of a business with my husband, and recent college grad (BA in English). After pondering my career options, I've decided to write. For a while, I considered writing fiction, but feel I'm more in my element as a non-fiction writer. I'm a former editor of several magazines and KNOW I do not want to be an editor again.

My question: How do I get started in the non-fiction market? I would like to write articles that deal with important social issues, but I'm not a certified expert in sociology, you know what I mean?

I'm also considering compiling an anthology of essays about a specific social issue—I know of a few people that would probably be very willing to contribute—how do I go about approaching them? Should I be trying to get an agent or publisher? What kind of payment can these contributors of essays expect?

Also, what is the best way to get into article writing for magazines? I have a book that contains many publishers, but I feel so intimidated because I'm not a "professional" writer yet. Any help you can give me would be deeply appreciated.

David Taylor gave this response on 6/24/2001:

Hi, Anon: I'd love to answer your question and to be a part of this exciting change in your life. Thanks for including me.

First, congrats on making a decision to follow your true desires for a rewarding writing career. It takes courage to do so. Your statements make me believe that you will find what you're looking for—success as a freelancer.

After teaching college writing for 15 years—fiction and non-fiction—one of the truisms I developed but usually kept to myself is this:

Most writers are born that way. It usually comes out in statements like, "All I've really enjoyed is writing." These students can deny that need and be frustrated. Or they can admit it and start getting the experience necessary to succeed. I suspect you are one of these people who have to do it.

So a second congrats—you've finally admitted what you are: a writer. Although you've probably been told to get a "real" job and that your dreams of a writer career are "too fanciful," nothing could be further from the truth. Writers, especially those who write non-fiction, are in great demand right now, and the proliferation of the web and e-mail will continue that trend, not shorten it.

Now for the practical advice:

1. <<I considered writing fiction, but feel I'm more in my element as a non-fiction writer.>>

For better or for worse, like it or not, we live in the Information Age and the Age of Connectivity. The result: our need for fiction continues to dwindle. For every fiction book published there are over 300 non-fiction books and that many more web sites. Same for magazine journalism—we've transitioned from a prevalence of fiction to almost entirely non-fiction service journalism.

2. <<How do I get started in the non-fiction market?>>

The same way every beginning freelancer without clips gets started: you get clips however you can and work your way up the ladder of those magazines in your field until you're writing for the best zines and best editors.

At first there will be rejection slips and low pay, but over a period of 1 to 3 years your career should grow until you are making one-third to one-half of your present salary as a freelancer. At that point, go full time with full confidence.

But you must be willing to pay your dues as a freelancer, to learn the basics of the type of writing you want to specialize in, start low and gradually build your clips (bylines) from better and better magazines, newspapers, etc.

3. <<I would like to write articles that deal with important social issues, but I'm not a certified expert in sociology, you know what I mean?>>

Yes, I do know what you mean. You've just made one of the important decisions you'll be faced with: to be a generalist or a specialist. Also, it's common for journalistic specialists NOT to hold field-specific academic degrees. As a journalist, you will be judged by the quality of your research, your reporting, and your writing abilities—not your academic degrees. Your job is to report on professions, people and issues—not to be a practicing member of them. That's an important distinction that speaks to the need for journalistic distance from the things and people you report on.

4. <<I'm also considering compiling an anthology of essays about a specific social issue—I know of a few people that would probably be very willing to contribute. Should I be trying to get an agent or publisher?>>

Hard one for me to answer, not knowing more about you professionally. If your former position as an editor gave you contacts in the book world, you could do a

book proposal on your own with credibility. Otherwise, I think you need to build credibility in this field as a freelancer before approaching an agent or a publisher. Agents usually do not represent the magazine work of their clients and don't represent any clients without a solid track record of publications. And book publishers who are contacted directly by writers need to see your bona fides also.

5. <<Also, what is the best way to get into article writing for magazines?>>

Buy the book *Writer's Market* from *Writer's Digest* books (www.writersdigest.com), identify the magazines you have the best chance of publishing a specific article in, buy back issues of that magazine, study them closely, submit your materials so that they fit into that magazine exactly. Do that many times.

You can shorten the learning curve quite a bit by taking advantage of professional mentoring services like those we offer on peakwriting.com. We work with you during every step of manuscript preparation and the marketing process.

Inevitably, through no lack of work or talent on your part, there will be rejections. You aren't usually privy to a magazine's planning or changes in staff or a 100 other things that could affect the acceptance of a submission.

Collect all rejections slips and immediately put them back into the furnace of your writing. Get many stories in the mail to many editors (but not the same story to many editors) and never lift your head to question your decision to be a freelancer.

Questions to you:

- Are there writing opportunities at your present job?
- Besides social issues, what other areas do you see yourself working in? Don't discount any professional experience you've had. It makes you an expert almost automatically.

Let's make this just the start of a dialogue. To give the best answer, I have to know you and have input from you.

Best wishes,
David Taylor

Do I have what it takes to be a full-time writer?

.....

ari_pelo asked this question on 6/14/2001:

I have to do a career project for school and I chose journalism. I have a couple of questions, here goes:

- what education is needed to pursue this career?
- the cost in terms of books, living expenses, tuition and time
- the prerequisites for the courses I must take, from as far back as high school
- what is involved in doing the job
- entrance/exit pay scale
- what the job prospects currently are
- what are the benefits and drawbacks of journalism?

Could you tell me also why you chose journalism as your career?

thanks!!!

David Taylor gave this response on 6/15/2001:

What are the advantages and disadvantages of being a journalist? What is the most rewarding and most difficult aspect of my career? Why did I choose it?

- **Advantages/Greatest Rewards:** Reveling in words. Seeing their effects on others. Making a positive difference in their lives. Feeling the rewards of being a professional. Fulfilling one of the most ancient roles in any culture: scribe for the tribe.
- **Disadvantages/Greatest Difficulty:** The growing disrespect generated by the shameless pandering of some mass media. Encountering the cynicism generated by the above.
- **What organization am I involved in and what is my position?**
Executive Editor, Rodale Inc.
- **What would I recommend for future journalists to do that might help them to prosper?** At the high school level, the answer is easy:
 1. **Take** the most difficult English track your school has to offer,
 2. **Commit** to a personal reading enrichment program that includes a good newspaper, news magazine, popular fiction, great works, history and biography,
 3. **Write** something everyday without thought to style or grammar or anything but just hearing your inner voice and capturing the free flow of thought on paper or screen. Write as fast as you can without stopping for 15 minutes. Every day.

4. Seek out pro bono internships at area newspapers and magazines of any type. Do ANYTHING to be there with professionals.

5. Become the editor of your school newspaper or year book. Don't be satisfied with just writing for them.

6. Go to the best liberal arts college you can get into. Don't go to J-School.

What traits does it take to succeed in the field of journalism?

An unquenchable desire to discover the truth and tell others about it, no matter what.

What do I do when I get writer's block?

Professional writers don't get the emotional type. They've learned to prepare properly, to control their writing environment and have developed tricks that allow them to plough through rough patches. See "Top 5 Block Busters" in the articles section on www.peakwriting.com.

What influenced me and when did I become interested in becoming a journalist?

I believe writers are born that way and technique is taught or gained through trial and error. Regardless, if you're going to write, nothing stops you. Not even the idiosyncratic advice from people like me.

What is the name of my company?

The print magazines I edit are (1) Rodale's Scuba Diving, (2) New Diver, and (3) The Travel Agent's Guide to Selling Snorkeling and Scuba Diving. Our web sites are www.scubadiving.com and www.newdiver.com. Our e-mail newsletter is Depth-Finder, and its home page is www.depth-finder.com.

Our parent corporation is Rodale Inc., publisher of healthy, active living titles including Prevention, Men's Health, Backpacker, Runner's World, Bicycling, Mountain Biking, Scuba Diving, Fitness Swimmer, Organic Gardening and a line of book titles including Doctor's Book of Home Remedies and Dr. Shapiro's Guide to Weight Loss.

Are there any colleges that specialize in my career area?

I think the best preparation for a career in writing is a liberal arts school that allows you to have multiple internships in real work situations.

What is my weekly salary? Yearly? Hourly wage?

A magazine called Folio: publishes annual salary averages for all magazine positions by circulation size and geographic location. That would be more helpful to you.

Are there any special skills needed to get along with your employer? Co-workers?

Respect and courtesy at all times, in all situations. Never dwell on the negative. Always assume the best about others, until proven otherwise. Focus only on those things in the workplace that make a positive difference. The rest is a waste of time and energy.

Are there any occupations related to magazine editing?

Ultimately, success is about marketing. And that is being done more and more via the Internet. Computer skills—Quark, Adobe Photoshop, Filemaker Pro, Excel, scripting in html, Perl, cgi, php, etc.—are becoming mainstream skills for today's editors. Also, research skills, especially statistical research.

Let me know if you need anything else.

David Taylor

Is a college degree necessary for freelance success?

Anonymous asked this question on 5/1/2001:

I'm a 25 year old car enthusiast living near Houston Tx. I would love to work writing articles for automobile magazines. I'm college educated and I think I have a great knack for writing. But, I'm not formally educated in writing or journalism (I have a business degree). How could I break into this industry doing what I want to do? Would going back to school and getting a journalism degree be the only way? pls advise.

Also, what are some good tips I should know about magazine writing? Are there any good books out there? pls let me know.

thanks.

David Taylor gave this response on 5/2/2001:

Hi, Anon: Some good news for you: You've spent a lot of time and energy developing an expertise in a specialty, and the trend in today's magazine market (online and offline) is more and more toward vertical markets, or niche titles, and away from the big, general interest magazine.

Even more, these vertical titles (focused on a narrow interest) are often for the enthusiast market. I make my living writing and editing for one such market: recreational scuba divers. I bet there are just as many old car enthusiasts with just as much passion.

So-you've got expertise, you've got intelligence, you've got average to above-average language skills (which is all it takes to be a working pro). You've got everything you need to be a successful writer except one thing:

- **Craftsmanship.**

This simply means the nuts and bolts. How to take an engine apart and put it back together. Except in this case the engine is the article and your marketing of it.

My advice: Do not waste your time going back to school. Most professors (I was one for 15 years) have never made a living doing anything other than talking down to 18 year olds. They are usually pretty clueless about the real world. Instead:

- **Consult the pros.** We offer courses here at www.peakwriting.com. I also like the Writers Digest people. Their home study courses are taught by working professionals, successful ones. In both cases, the focus is to create a marketable manuscript and help you get it in print.

Final word of advice: Turn your enthusiasm into a living. But be prepared to have a different attitude toward your subject matter once it becomes your livelihood. I won't say anymore about that. You'll see what I mean.

Good luck. Stay in touch. Let me know anything I can do to help.

David Taylor
Executive Editor

What do editors actually do?

.....

liss_r_21 asked this question on 4/21/2001:

- 1.) What do you really do on your job?
- 2.) To do your job, which school subjects do you use the most?
- 3.) To do your job, which skills do you use the most?
- 4.) What kind of education/ special training did you need for your job?
- 5.) What tools/ equipment do you use on your job?
- 6.) What is your workplace like—are you indoors or outside; quiet or noisy area; in a laboratory or office?
- 7.) Will your kind of job still be needed by the time I graduate from college, 2008?
- 8.) Can you give me any advice on what I should study to help me prepare for a job like yours someday?
- 9.) What do you like most about your job?
- 10.) If you could change things, what would you change about your job?
- 11.) If you don't mind, what is your salary per year?
- 12.) How long did it take you to get where you are in your career?

David Taylor gave this response on 4/22/2001:

1) What do editors really do on the job?

As the former president of Rodale Press, Bob Teufel, used to say: "I'd love for the company to go to a four-day work week, if I could just get editors to come in for that fourth day."

As the executive editor I'm responsible for the conception, planning, design and production of all editorial products: two print magazines, one travel agent guidebook, subscription premiums, programming on our two web sites and an e-mail newsletter.

The secret to editing: Find out what readers want, then give it to them good.

2) To do your job, which school subjects do you use the most?

From high school: touch typing, history, English, biology. From college: all liberal arts courses, statistics, research.

3) To do your job, which skills do you use the most?

Written language skills and psychology, literary interpretation, accounting, computer programming, organization, people management, graphic design, research skills, interview skills, note-taking and memory.

4) What kind of education/ special training did you need for your job?

IMHO: The best education for my job is a solid grounding in the liberal arts.

5) What tools/ equipment do you use on your job?

Mac computers, Quark software, html programming, cgi, Perl, Adobe Photoshop, Excel spreadsheets and database.

6) What is your workplace like—are you indoors or outside; quiet or noisy area; in a laboratory or office?

Large office with 25 people, 30 computers, 30 phones, two faxes, 5 printers, FedEx Powership and lots of coffee.

7) Will your kind of job still be needed by the time I graduate from college, 2008?

The internet is the future of publishing. Be able to write for it and understand how to publish on it.

8) Can you give me any advice on what I should study to help me prepare for a job like yours someday?

Formal education is overrated. Curiosity is more important, as is a program of self education through reading and real world experience. Start now trying to get internships at magazines and newspapers and ad agencies. Learn to work on a staff, be on time, be organized, be dependable, be committed.

9) What do you like most about your job?

Creating stuff that people want to read and to use, then getting paid for it.

10) If you could change things, what would you change about your job?

More money for increased staff and increased pay for them.

11. How long did it take you to get where you are in your career?

15 years (not including undergrad and graduate schools)

Good luck. The fact that you're doing this sort of thing at your age (high school?) bodes well for you. Writing professionally is one of those careers that take a while before you really feel like you're getting somewhere. But that doesn't matter to people who are committed to it.

Don't hesitate to post follow up questions.

David

liss_r_21 rated this answer:

Thank you, very much! This helps me a lot for my report!

How do I get a foot in the door with an editor?

Anonymous asked this question on 4/16/2001:

I am one year out of undergrad and have been working in the financial services industry since graduation. But I hate it and am looking for a major career change. All I've ever consistently enjoyed has been writing. But, strangely enough, I've never been huge on writing for school newspapers and magazines and that sort of thing.

I would like to break into a career in journalism or publishing or editing but I don't know how well received I'd be with so little experience. What would be the best way for me to get a foot in? I am very confident about my writing abilities but I have nothing to show for it (aside from dozens and dozens of poems I've written and a few short stories). Also, if you happen to have any in-depth knowledge about travel writing, I'd love to hear about it! Thanks!

David Taylor gave this response on 4/17/2001:

First, congrats on making a decision to follow your true desires for a rewarding career. One of your statements makes me believe that you will find what you're looking for—a job where writing pays you a living.

Now for the practical advice:

1. Forget going back for a second degree. Higher education is highly over-rated.
2. What you need is practical training and a few clips.
3. Be prepared for the following scenario:
 - You have to learn the basics of the type of writing you want to specialize in,
 - Then you have to start low and gradually build your clips (bylines) from better and better magazines, newspapers, etc.
 - Around the time you are making about one-third of your present salary from freelance work, you'll be in a position to seek full-time employment in writing or go freelance full time.

Two questions to you:

1. Are there writing opportunities at your present company?
2. Besides travel writing, what other areas do you see yourself working in? Don't discount your professional experience in the financial industry. I can show you five jobs in NYC open right now for editors/writers in the financial services.

Let's make this just the start of a dialogue. To give the best answer, I have to know you and have input from you. But tell yourself this: you will probably HAVE TO be a writer. You can make a very good living at it. Don't limit yourself right now. Explore many types of writing.

Best wishes,
David Taylor

Can I freelance successfully while holding down a full-time job?

.....

Anonymous asked this follow-up question on 4/18/2001:

David,

I would like to thank you, truly, for your advice. You are the first person, in a long time, that has not made me feel like a career in writing is silly. I have memories of loving writing since before the third grade and it is wonderfully encouraging to think that my greatest passion in life is not completely useless and that I can be building an enjoyable career.

Here's a follow up question for you. I currently work in corp. finance which places unruly demands on all of my time. I'd love to start somewhere, anywhere, when it comes to breaking into journalism but I, literally, never see the light of day. I am uncertain about making a move from my current job simply because it is pretty secure and it more than pays my bills. I wouldn't mind taking a leap if I thought I would be able to maintain some financial security.

So the question is, with no formal writing experience, is there a way, aside from attempting to freelance, that I can write and put food in my fridge?

And, if freelancing is, in your opinion, my best option right now, can you give me an idea of how I'd go about writing my first freelance article. Do I choose to write about something I'm interested in and find a paper/magazine that will take it or do I find the paper/magazine first and then think of something that I think they may be interested in hearing about? Do you think a magazine (travel magazine) might accept an article about a personal travel (i.e., backpacking) experience of mine? (I know that was long winded)

I don't mean to bombard you with questions...I just want to find the best route to bliss (in my case, writing professionally)...Thanks a gazillion for your help!—Le

David Taylor gave this response on 4/19/2001:

Hi, Le—Your follow-up response again shows what's really in your heart. And your admission that you've been belittled in the past for wanting a perfectly reasonable and attainable and respectable career as a working pro writer is sad and maddening.

I'm sorry you've had to endure that, but it's part of the myth that surrounds writers and the writing profession. But like most of the popular knowledge about sharks, it is almost totally false.

Time crunch—No easy answers here. Heard of J.K. Rowling of the Harry Potter series? She was a mother of three living on welfare and wrote while breastfeeding her babies, on subways on the way to work, after the kiddies were asleep and she was exhausted.

When I was teaching and wanted to be a full-time writer instead, I used to get up at 4:00 AM, make coffee, rub my eyes, turn on the computer and make myself type SOMETHING for two hours every morning. I did that for three years until I had the clips, contacts and skills to go full-time.

Le—there is always time for the things you really want to do, for the things you HAVE to do.

Where to start: I highly recommend our mentoring and apprenticeship program here at peakwriting.com. Why learn things the hard way? Let us shorten that learning curve for you. Everyone on the staff here went through a period when they relied on a mentor to show them the ropes. Our apprenticeships are thorough, taught by professionals, and result in the submission of a professional ms. to a magazine you have targeted.

To answer your strategy question: at your stage (starting out) you need to target a magazine first, study it, really get inside the head of the editor, then write something that fits.

Regarding your idea of a personal experience travel piece—that's usually the first idea beginning travel writers have (it's natural) but there is very little market for such pieces unless your last name is Theroux.

If I were you, I'd:

- Sign up for a freelance non-fiction feature course with us here at peakwriting.com
- Ask for a teacher with some experience in writing or editing for financial publications
- Work through the course (in the mornings before work, on your lunch break, at night instead of watching TV—any time you have 30 minutes) everyday.
- Use your expertise and current position to give you credentials (important in non-fiction) to back up an article for a financial magazine.

I think that's your best shot. But go with your gut. That's where the truth is.

David Taylor

Will I make more money as a generalist or a specialist?

Webguy asked this question on 8/8/2002:

Should I be a generalist who writes on a variety of topics or a specialist in a certain area like parenting, health and fitness, women's issues, collectibles, finance, etc.?

David gave this answer on 8/8/2002:

There are arguments for each. And you'll get different answers from different people.

My vote: Be a specialist.

It's the most important trend in American magazine publishing in the last 30 years, with the number of specialty publications increasing and the number of general interest magazines continuing to shrink.

Being a specialist is how you also become the kind of insider that editors are looking for. Your best bet, in my opinion, is to become immersed in a single area that fits your personal interests and background, then gradually build a name for yourself covering that beat. Think of your favorite non-fiction magazine writers—what area are they associated with? I bet they can be classified into a genre that they focus almost exclusively on.



Chapter Two

Insider Stuff You Should Know

How do editors acquire stories?

Fitzzy asked this question on 7/6/2002:

Do editors mainly assign stories to staff writers instead of freelancers? I've been getting an awful lot of rejections.

David gave this response on 7/7/2002:

Sorry about the rejections. No matter how much we tell ourselves not to take them personally, they still sting. That's okay. Just remember: the only difference between a published writer and an unpublished writer is that one has given up.

First, the bad news: Most story ideas are generated by the editorial staff and a cadre of outside freelancers writers called "contributing editors," who write regularly for the magazine. In a sense, you have to be an insider to know what story ideas work for this group, what stories have been done or are going to be done.

Now, the good news: There's a way to get inside. You purchase six or more of the most recent issues and study them. You get inside that editor's head. You learn to propose stories that fit exactly the kind of thing that inside group usually comes up with.

And that's the basis of what we teach you at peakwriting.com. We help you focus on a single market, analyze it, and write something that fits. Your goal is to signal to the editorial team that you are one of them. Two desirable things can then happen: They'll listen to your story idea attentively or they might even give you one of their ideas to work on.

Do freelancers really have a chance at most magazines?

Flybynight asked on 2/26//2001:

What percent of a magazine's stories are written by freelancers, what percent by staff writers?

David answered on 2/28/2001:

There's a general answer and a specific answer.

Most of a magazine's contributions are by regulars, either on staff or regular freelance contractors. It's simply good business: An editor can't afford to take too many chances with the money he/she has and the ability of writers to produce the goods on deadline. That doesn't mean you can't break in. You can. Editors are always in need of fresh ideas and writing. When you submit something that rings those two bells, you will get noticed. I guarantee it. But submitting a fresh idea that an editor can use in a specific place in the magazine requires study and intuition that are only gained through hard work.

The specific answer can often be found in *The Writer's Market* (Writer's Digest Books), where you'll find descriptions of thousands of magazines. Many of the descriptions clarify what departments and features are most open to freelancers and how much of the total magazine is contributed by freelancers.

Do I have to query first before sending in a manuscript?

.....

Nathan223 asked on 9/2/2002:

Should I query an editor first or just send in the completed manuscript?

David answered on 9/2/2002:

Query first, usually. Two reasons:

1) Doing so signals your professionalism. Editors know that, in most instances, professional freelancers don't write stories and send them to people they don't know and who aren't necessarily interested. It's a waste of everyone's valuable time.

2) Querying first shows a respect for the editor and an understanding of his/her job. It takes only a moment to read a query letter and make a decision. With a full manuscript, the editor has to spend time to figure what's going on, then worry about whether or not the manuscript was requested (we forget!), if there is a legal obligation to return it and any art work accompanying it. In other words, a pain in the hard drive.

During the past eight years as an executive editor, I can count on one hand the number of times I read an unsolicited manuscript and decided I could use it. Both times, it was luck.

What's the best way to submit a query?

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Miriam asked on 6/2/2002:

What's the best way to submit a query by mail? How soon after should I follow up to see if the editor liked it?

David responded on 6/2/2002:

The best way to submit a written query is professionally. That means:

- Addressed to a named editor on the masthead; on your unpretentious letterhead
- • Folded neatly in thirds
- Accompanied by a SASE (self-addressed, stamped envelope)
- Supported by relevant clips.

Then wait up to two weeks. Then wait some more. Don't call unless it's a timely story that needs a timely response. If an editor hasn't responded in month, send a brief follow-up query and forget it. Obviously, he/she wasn't interested. Don't take it personally. Move on.

More tips:

- Most editors consider fax queries unappealing. Send an attractive letter.
- Email queries are becoming popular. I love email queries. They can be efficiently and fully dealt with in a few keyboard strokes.
- Never query by phone unless you've been invited to.
- Query only one publication at a time with your story idea. If you ever send out simultaneous queries, have both accepted and you are found out, you will likely not get that assignment or any others from those editors. An editor's willingness to trust you is probably more important than your writing skills.
- Keep it short. A half page is better than a full page. Editors value compression and freelancers who can say things in as few words as possible without a lot of "gee whiz" attitude and breathless prose.

How much should I research before writing my query?

.....

Tracy asked on 5/23/02:

How much research should I do before sending in my query?

David answered on 5/24/02:

The flip answer is: as much as it takes. Realistically, you should do most of your research, if not all, before sending the query. Reason: You want to be sure that you have the story you say you do. If you get the assignment, then get into the research find out the story isn't there or has changed substantially, you will lose the editor's faith and trust. Good research is never a waste of time. It's money and facts in the bank, ready to be withdrawn for that story and possibly others.

What's the most common mistake freelancers make when contacting an editor?

MBruno asked on 11/1/2002:

I want to write for a certain magazine. What mistakes should I avoid when contacting the editors?

David answered on 11/1/2002:

The most common mistake is, hands down, laziness. Here's what I mean—

Most often the writer has not thoroughly studied the magazine and taken the time to hone a story idea that fits it. Most editors find it pretty insulting to be contacted about a story that clearly shows the writer has never actually read past the cover or didn't do so attentively. This point cannot be emphasized enough:

To break into a magazine, you must write something that fits. It must fit the magazine's philosophy and slant on its subject matter, its voice, its department and feature formulas, its everything.

What are my obligations during the fact-checking process?

.....

Marcel asked on 9/21/2001:

I've sold an article! Now the fact-checkers are calling me right and left. What are my obligations? How much time do I have to spend doing this?

David answered on 9/21/2001:

Mucho congratulations on your sale. Now, cement the next sale to this editor by cooperating fully, quickly, and meticulously in the fact-checking process.

As a freelancer, you're the brick layer. Your words are your bricks. Your job is to follow the master blue print and put the exact number of bricks exactly where you're told to.

The quickest way never to get another assignment from that editor is to argue about requested revisions or fail to supply requested fact-checking materials. You can and should ask for clarification and even offer your own point of view, but never argue.

In the end, it's the editor's budget and magazine, not yours. Same is true for the amount of editing that is done on your own manuscript by the editors. It's their money and their magazine. If you don't like the way they work, move on to a place where you are more comfortable. Simple as that.

Should I get a byline or a tagline?

Freakingout asked this question on 5/24/2001:

When I agreed to write a filler for a national magazine, the editor and I discussed a by-line. Although the page my work will appear on usually doesn't have by-lines given, he assured me (because I asked) I would get one. The article is finally getting to see print after nearly a year. Should I mention the by-line or not?

David Taylor gave this response on 5/25/2001:

Unless it's a long sidebar, usually you get a tagline, not a byline, for fillers, boxes and the like. A tagline, if it appears, is usually at the end of the sidebar, flush with right margin, and set off by an e/m dash and in italics:

This the text of your filler for a national magazine.
it will be inside a box usually set off with a rule,
which is a thin line.

—*WordFreak*

Should you mention the byline/tagline to your editor? I wouldn't. It might come off as vain and amateurish—pros usually think in terms of pay and prestige of the publication, and have long gotten past the thrill of seeing their name in print. At least that's what you're supposed to pretend.

Also, you don't really need it. It IS your published work, whether or not it has a byline/tagline. When you use the published filler as a clip, you will send it in along with other materials that will be clearly identified as yours. Besides, having a byline/tagline on it does not change the piece's length, its purpose (filler) or its quality.

IMHO—drop it. When you get paid, thank the editor for taking good care of you, then hit him/her with a hot idea for another filler or even feature.

David

How do I decode journalism jargon?

.....

skinnypunx@..., a user from 4anything.com, asked this question on 9/14/2001:

I am praying that you can help me. I am new to journalism. For a class I am taking, they are asking me to come up with a headline for the article.

1 "Hed: 1 line of 45 counts and a 1-line, 60 count deck."

2 "Hed: 2 lines of 24 counts, and a 2 line deck with 36 counts each line."

OK. Here are my questions:

WHAT IS A COUNT? Is that a word? AND WHAT IS A "DECK?"

Can you give me examples to help me out?? I would be so appreciative!

Thanks so much!

David Taylor gave this response on 9/15/2001:

Careful, these things can differ from workplace to workplace, school to school. But generally, a count includes:

- all letters
- all spaces
- all punctuation

Example:

Clinton to Gore: Go For It!

is a 28 count (two spaces after colon)

A deck goes beneath the main hed and, in newspaper journalism, summarizes the story. It also teases the reader sometimes.

Example:

CLINTON TO GORE: GO FOR IT! (HED)

**Vice President severs ties with mentor, declares himself a free man.
(deck)**

Here are some URLs for you

- URL: <http://www.cais.com/makulow/vlj.html>
- URL: <http://www.moorhead.msus.edu/~gunarat/ijr/>

- A comprehensive site including information on journalism listservs and Usenet groups as well as writing and editing help.
- URL: <http://www.arcade.uiowa.edu/gw/journalism/>
A massive site of journalism and communication sources arranged by subject.
- And some important reference works:
- Webster's New World Dictionary of Media and Communications (Knight Reference P 87 .W45 1996)
covers jargon, technical terms, and slang in marketing, journalism, advertising, graphic arts, and printing.
- Taft, William H. Encyclopedia of twentieth-century journalists New York : Garland, 1986.
- Kent, Ruth Kimball, The language of journalism: a glossary of print-communications terms, 1st ed. 1971. BUTLER REFERENCE R030.7 K413

Your question also bring up another important point for all writers, whether in magazines or newspapers: It's always your responsibility to know the jargon of the genre in which you hope to publish. And nothing can cause an editor to lose faith in you (and not give you an assignment) than not knowing the basic terms of communication in your profession.

To provide you those terms is the whole idea behind the "Writer's Glossary on www.peakwriting.com.

Who should pay the postage for requested submissions?

.....

Anonymous asked this question on 6/26/2001:

I got the go ahead from an editor. We spent 20 minutes on the phone but I forgot to ask, when she asked me to make sure the subject of my article sends her 6 of the play houses she makes, who pays the postage? Can you tell me if the editor does, or me? I asked the subject and she agreed to send them, so how do I do this.

Hope you can help.

David Taylor gave this response on 6/27/2001:

Since the editor specifically asked to see these houses, normally the editor would pick up the postage. But they would be handled as part of your freelance invoice once your story is accepted. That's when you send in an invoice for your creative fee and expenses.

Questions:

1. Is the editor paying your expenses?
2. If so, what is the limit?
3. What will be the cost of sending in these six houses and will that put you over your limit?

If the editor is paying your freelance expenses, then a simple e-mail should suffice:

"Dear Editor, I checked with my subject about the cost of sending the six houses you requested. The postage will be \$XX for UPS/FedEx/Airborne/USMail/Etc. delivery. If this is fine with you, I'll simply add the postage to my expense report."

Avoid phoning again. Most editors, especially me, hate the phone.

Can I use fiction techniques in non-fiction?

.....

Anonymous asked this question on 6/16/2001:

Dear David Taylor,

Can you use fiction in nonfiction writing? The reason I ask, is because my editor told me that my writing is too dry and I should spice it up.

David Taylor gave this response on 6/18/2001:

Fascinating question. In the past, the answer was a resounding NO! until a book was published in 1969 called "Armies of the Night" by Norman Mailer.

It signaled the birth of "New Journalism," which blended a non-fiction event/story with a heavy reliance on fictional techniques and some fictionalization. Other practitioners were Tom Wolfe, Hunter Thompson and more.

The answer for you is: You can use fiction techniques, but you shouldn't fictionalize (make things up) when writing non-fiction.

Fictional techniques include:

1. Dialogue. By arranging real quotations as dialogue in the manner of fiction writers, you can better create the sense of immediacy and innate interest readers have when they see words between quotes and arranged as a conversation.

2. Characterization. By observing your subjects and trying to give them breath and life as the fiction writer does (including telling habits, dress, peculiar speech patterns), you can make them more alive on the page.

3. Plotting. You can structure your writing so that a conflict is established (between ideas, between authorities, etc.) and then rises to a peak, then is resolved.

As you can tell, it's easy to look at the many other elements of fiction (figurative language, scene setting, etc.) and find a reasonable way to apply it in non-fiction. Indeed, that's what today's best non-fiction writers are doing in the long-feature format.

Another idea: post some of your writing that needs spice here on peakwriting.com, and get comments on it from us.

David Taylor

How long should I wait after submitting before contacting the editor?

.....

Anonymous asked this question on 6/9/2001:

An editor called me—three days after I mailed my query—and said she was interested in my idea but needed more information. We spoke for a few minutes then she said she'd get back to me. How long a time is reasonable for me to wait to hear from her before I pitch other magazines?

David Taylor gave this response on 6/9/2001:

I'd say that time is less of a consideration right now than making sure that the line of communication stays open so that you know what her final decision is: to give you an assignment or not.

I suggest writing a follow-up email or making a follow-up phone call, both of which are acceptable since the editor has called you. Simply ask if she has had a chance to make a decision yet on your proposal and say that you are excited about possibly working for her and that you are looking forward to her response.

Since an editor has taken the time to call you, she was more than likely interested and has the obligation to follow up on her phone call to you.

If you have no response in 3 business days of trying to make contact, consider it a negative response and move on.

And never take rejections personally and do not shut the door on this editor or any others in the future. You do not know what may be happening in that person's office or at her magazine that prevented her from following up in the manner she would've liked to. Business is business. Always be open to it. Put your personal emotions aside.

David Taylor

Anonymous rated this answer:

Dear Dr. Taylor,

You certainly are dedicated. Your answer to what I felt is a perplexed question has put me at ease. Since she doesn't have email, I would drop her a note. Thank you, thank you.....

Will an editor steal my ideas?

.....

WordDancer asked this question on 6/10/2001:

David,

I will wait the three days as you suggested. But. Have you ever had the feeling when talking with an editor that that person may have called to fish for information? This happened with the editor I mentioned in my last question to you. She asked an awful lot of questions, yet never said anything about giving me the assignment, right then and there. Said she'd get back to me. Am I paranoid?

Thank you for your time and effort on my behalf.
Mae

David Taylor gave this response on 6/10/2001:

Hi, Mae:

Are you being paranoid that the editor may steal your idea? More than likely you are. At only the lowest level of publications does anything like that ever take place. It's hard to imagine that anyone with such an obvious lack of ethics could make it to the middle and upper levels. If you want to send me the editor's name and publication in a private email I'll tell you what I know on a specific basis.

I'd say that the editor was doing her job by probing your idea for a possible fit in her lineup. She was trying to get to the meat of the story and find an angle on it that would work for her readership. That's my guess, and it is certainly what I do, especially if the query letter was tempting but lacked detail.

It's possible your query letter could have been stronger. If you want to email me that, I'll critique it, too. Writing a good query is an art by itself: not too much or too little, not too aggressive or shy, not too gimmicky or plain. The best way to get a handle on what would be a good query letter for a specific pub is to devour that pub: its style, subject range, slants, voice, attitude toward readers, etc. That'll put you in the editor's mind and that's where the deal is closed.

WordDancer rated this answer:

Gee, what would us budding writers do without experts like you. Again, I have been enriched. Thank you so much, David.

What's a slush pile? How do I get out?

dremery asked this question on 9/22/2001:

I have written my first feature article for a national magazine and got a call from the editor that said the article was in the consideration pile. That's not the same as the infamous slush pile is it? What do the odds look like for this, and is there anyway to increase the odds of them buying it?

David Taylor gave this response on 9/23/2001:

Odds? I don't know. That would depend on the magazine and how many freelance over-the-transom features they buy per year.

Improving the odds? Yes, you can: By not being a pest to the editor. Give her 4 to 6 weeks, then a short note asking about the story's status. If there's still no response, forget about it and send the ms. elsewhere.

If the editor initiated the call to you, then you should be hopeful. If you called the editor and was told it's in the pile, don't hold your breath. It's probably the slush pile.

This situation raises the question of why writers take the time to research and write a piece that possibly no one is interested in looking at. I understand that sometimes it's best to write a full manuscript before sending out queries. But to actually send in a cold manuscript to an editor who has not expressed any interest in it—well, I just think it's a waste of everyone's valuable time and that's there's a better way of going about it:

Query first.

How do I prepare for my first interview with a subject?

giulia76 asked this question on 5/11/2001:

I have just been asked to do an interview of a music personality for a web site. I have absolutely no experience with interviews, and I must come up with a line of questioning in two days.

Do you have any pointers on how to conduct a great interview?

Please help.

Thanks,

Giulia

David Taylor gave this response on 5/11/2001:

Happy to help.

I've been fortunate enough to have done a few celeb interviews, including the late Jacques Cousteau, Gene Hackman, Jimmy Johnson, Derek Jeter and Jake "The Body" Fienstien. A few do's and don'ts I've learned:

1. Do not under any circumstances act like a fan or let on that you are impressed by their celeb status. They hate that. Act cool and professional—all you're doing is a job. Treat them as you would a local politician you're interviewing: "Good day. So nice to meet you. Thanks for taking the time to sit down and talk . . . etc." Act NORMAL.

2. Prepare: Research. You absolutely cannot read enough, listen enough or watch enough about them. Their own works, other interviews, critical reviews, biographies, all their artistic output, etc. The better prepared you are, the better you will come off as a professional interviewer, and the better job you will do, and the more likely you'll be asked to do it again.

3. Prepare: Your questions. It's okay to write your questions ahead of time. But then try not to look at them again until the end of the interview. Seriously. The biggest mistake you can make is to let a series of pre-fab questions prevent you from engaging in genuine give and take with your subject.

Listen and respond as if you are simply having a conversation with someone interesting. And if you don't find them interesting, if you can't at least in your mind during the one-hour period of the interview, make them the most fascinating person on earth, then you are in the wrong job. You HAVE to.

At the end of the interview, just take a moment to review your notes and questions to see if there's anything else you need to touch upon. Don't be afraid of the pause when you do that. Don't be afraid of any pause. They're actually much shorter than you think and pause give you both a chance to reflect and move ahead with confidence. I actually believe handling a pause with confidence puts you in more command and control.

4. Prepare: Know your readers. That's right. You can't prepare good questions unless you get into the minds of your readers, your audience, and know the kind of questions they would most want to hear the answers to. You are their proxy in that interview. You must be their mouth and brains and smile. Know your readers inside out and represent them honestly and you can't go wrong.

5. Start light. Know some recent facts about your subject and start with just light questions: "You just finished a project with Greg Allman—how did it turn out?" "I hear you just returned from Hawaii—did you do any scuba diving or hula dancing?"

6. Climb the pyramid. I try to keep in mind a triangle/pyramid: starting light and ascending to the meaty questions readers most want to know the answer to and may even be a bit uncomfortable or challenging, then winding down to some closing chit-chat.

7. Observe time limits. Make it clear at the outset you know this person has set aside only 45 minutes for the talk and you promise to get them out on time. Then when time is up, find a place to say, "Thank you again for chatting. I know the readers of XYZ magazine are going to enjoy hearing this conversation." Shake hands and get gone. Don't linger. Don't ask for autographs.

8. Take notes AND use a tape recorder. Place recorder in an unobtrusive place and simply say, when you are ready to begin, say, "OK, I'm going to start recording now, if you don't mind." Don't make a big deal out of it.

9. Make eye contact, listen intently and respond appropriately. Don't continually look down at your notes, the tape recorder or your list of questions. Not making eye contact makes it seem like your more interested in your lap than in them. And celebs are used to commanding complete attention. Most will accept nothing less.

10. Enjoy. Interviews are a rare treat to get to know the real person behind the persona. This is a privilege. Recognize that, respect it, and enjoy it.

David Taylor

How should I prepare for my first writing—job interview?

Amanda@... asked this question on 4/28/2001:

I am in the UK and have an interview in a few days at a newspaper as a marketing and promotions writer. Can you give me some information on the job and how to get on at the interview. Any help would be most appreciated.

David Taylor gave this response on 4/28/2001:

Hi, Amanda—the specific duties of that position can vary widely from place to place.

I highly recommend that you contact the newspaper before your interview and ask for a job description. They should have one or at least be able to give you one verbally. If they can't, what does that say about their ability to define your job duties in order to measure your success or failure?

Once you've got the job description, brainstorm, research by looking at the work being done in competing newspapers, then be prepared to offer some exciting ideas/enhancements or at least be able to speak to your expertise in each area.

Good luck. Be yourself. Don't put on a show. Know the dress code for that office. Don't under dress, try not to overdress.

When I interview potential employees, the key things I look for are:

1. Someone who listens and understands before speaking.
2. Someone with good social skills (I'll be working with him/her up to 60 hours a week!)
3. Someone with a well-rounded education and overall intelligence. I can teach the technical stuff.
4. Someone with ambitions and plans to get there. My favorite interview question: What do you see yourself doing in 10 years?

I notice you have some typing/spelling errors, and I know this is just the Internet. But it is a red flag for me. Be sure that whatever self-prepared documents you take in are 100% error free.

Press credentials: How do I get some?

stacilayne asked this question on 4/28/2001:

Do you know how one goes about getting press credentials? I've just started writing movie reviews for Cinescape (prior to that I did book reviews for them) and they told me they could hire me as a stringer if I had press creds. I could also go to film screenings (they aren't particularly interested in after-the-fact reviews). I didn't want to seem stupid, so I refrained from asking the editor how... so I'll be stupid here! Care to educate me? :-)

Also, is it possible to make a living doing reviews, or is it just another coin in the freelancing kitty?

Staci Wilson

David Taylor gave this response on 4/28/2001:

Hi, Staci: Press credentials, fortunately or unfortunately, are easier to get than a driver's license or gun license. Of course, you can order them over the internet these days:

<http://www.ifpo.net/pressclassic.html>

Don't let the name, International Freelance Photographers Organization, fool you. They'll be happy to sell you what you need for \$60US.

The more traditional way to get press credentials is through the newspaper where you work. The publication most likely gets credentials through that particular city's public information office, usually a part of the mayor's office. Freelancers such as yourself can apply for credentials through that office, too, but you'll need clips more than likely.

In case you live in NYC, here's their web site for ordering press credentials online:

<http://www.ci.nyc.ny.us/html/nypd/html/dcpi/presscred.html>

Can you making a living writing reviews? George Bernard Shaw did. But then, he was George Bernard Shaw. After doing it myself and helping my students do it, my advice is this: You are ready to go full-time freelance once you are making no less than one-third of your present income via freelance assignments.

Hope that helps.

David Taylor



Chapter Three

Legal & Ethical Issues

Are fam trips unethical?

***Anonymous* asked this question on 6/5/2001:**

A while back you helped me understand the difference between a press tour and a FAM trip. I submitted a story idea to a newspaper. The editor wants the story—but, he says he cannot pay if it was a FAM trip or press trip. I'd like to write it for free. What do you think?

David Taylor gave this response on 6/5/2001:

Hmmm . . . a bit sticky. First, I've never heard of a similar policy (not paying a freelancer because he or she was on a fam trip). I suspect it is peculiar to this editor. I don't know the editor, and my policy is always to assume the best about someone until proven otherwise. So, for now you can assume that the editor truly has an ethical concern here. On the other hand, it could be about his wanting to save money and take advantage of a first-time freelancer. That would be the cynical view, and I'd hold off on that, giving the editor the benefit of the doubt for the time being.

Next step: ask the editor for some further explanation as to why having participated on a FAM trip (which did not involve his newspaper) disqualifies you for pay. There's a contradiction at work here: on the one hand, he considers your work worthy of publication, although your research included a fam trip. Yet those same words aren't ethical enough for you to be paid for them? I don't get it, but I'd be open to his explanation.

The only thing I can think of that might be going on is that the editor is running your story as a puff piece or "advertorial"—in which case you wouldn't be paid by the editorial dept., you'd be paid by the advertising dept.

On the whole, I think writing for free is a bad precedent to set for yourself. This is a business. A serious business. You want to be taken as a serious writer, one whose craft is legitimate, whose skills are manifest, and who has every right be paid for application of those skills and the time you take to craft something for publication.

Frankly, if a freelancer ever sends me a query and offers to write for free, I automatically reject it without reading anything else. It's a clear signal he/she isn't a pro yet.

On the other hand, you have to start somewhere. And a clip IS a clip. No one else has to know (or should want to know or even has a right to know) how much you were paid.

Your call. Gather some more explanation from the editor about this policy, then go with the thing what you're most comfortable with. But ask yourself this: if you give this piece to him for free, what can you expect to be paid for the next one?

I'll be anxious to hear what you find out and how this comes out.

David Taylor

What's the difference between a fam trip and a press tour?

Anonymous asked this question on 5/24/2001:

Good morning,

I'd like to know the difference between a FAM tour and a press tour.

I've been published several times, but have just taken my first press tour. A friend said I took a FAM tour. What's the difference?

David Taylor gave this response on 5/24/2001:

What's the difference between "fam tour," "press junket" and "press tour"? Not much in my experience. Fam tour is the term heard most often from PR agencies trying to promote their travel-service clients, and it is short for "familiarization."

Press tour is the more traditional term. It is heard outside the travel industry and commercial promotions game. For example, the Army may arrange a press tour of its frontline positions in Afghanistan, or a press tour of a new battleship or the newly remodeled White House wing.

Be careful of any agreements you sign before going on a fam tour. Some agencies want you to guarantee them positive editorial at a certain minimum number of words, within a certain time frame. At our magazine, we do not accept fam tours to a destination we plan to write about. To do so would compromise our ability to write objectively.

Do I need permission to quote or use screen shots?

.....

lauramaery asked this question on 5/8/2001:

I have a publisher whose lawyers have asked me to get PERMISSION to take screen shots from Web sites to accompany site reviews.

I recoil at this request, but am not sure whether I am on solid legal ground.

Do you know what the state of the law is on whether a screen shot is the legal equivalent of a photograph?

And if you know of no precedent, can you tell me whether your publications would seek permission before publishing a screen shot?

If you don't have a policy, then this is my question: Would you seek permission from, say, a restaurant you were reviewing before publishing either the review or a photo of the front of the restaurant?

I am certain that in asking permission, I will be asked by the people I'm reviewing to send them the text of my review. If they consider it unfavorable, I am betting that permission will be denied. Arrrggghhh...my tummy hurts!

—LauraMaery Gold
lmg@writerspost.com

David Taylor gave this response on 5/9/2001:

Laura: First, we review web sites in our magazines (Rodale's Scuba Diving and New Diver) and on our web site (www.scubadiving.com) and we do not ask permission to print a screen shot to accompany a review.

If I wrote a book about web sites and included screen shots, I would not need permission. I can even include screen shots of magazine pages if I'm writing a textbook or review that discusses elements demonstrated in the screen shots.

There is a "fair use" provision of copyright law that allows you to quote up to a certain number of words in a review without permission, to show a picture of a book's cover, etc. This is also the case with web-related publications.

Here is what one web site says about fair use and the internet:
<http://builder.com/Business/Law/ss15a.html>.

Second, although you can ask permission to use a screen shot in a review, and although the site being reviewed can ask to see pre-publication copy, you are under no obligation to do so. If they want to give permission, fine. And I suppose there's a goodwill element in asking in the first place. But there is no connection

between giving that permission and having the right to see pre-publication copy, which is a dangerous habit to get into in most instances.

David

Can I be sued for libel when writing fiction?

TServic asked this question on 1/16/2001:

I am researching material for my first book. This is my first venture into the writing world. My vocation is not even close to this project. I am a complete novice.

I want to write a book on a person who lived over a hundred years ago. He was somewhat of a character and from what I've been able to come up on him, the information would make a great story and maybe even a better movie. My problem is this. Even though he was written about several times and was in the public eye for several years there is very little information about his personal life. After six months of part time research I am feeling like there may not be enough on his personal life to fill in a good book or movie. I have been unable to even come up with any present day relatives.

The answer to my problem would be to fill in areas of his personal life with fiction. Can this be done? Are there any disclaimers that would have to be mentioned about the accuracy of the life events? Would any long lost relatives be able to cause a problem on any of the fictional events? I'm sure many books and movies drift back and forth between truth and fiction, but I'm a little unsure how to proceed without knowing the legal implications for libel. Thanks for your help
Bill

David Taylor gave this response on 1/19/2001:

Bill: Yes, there are indeed legal implications—severe ones. Let me try to help you sort them out. You have essentially three options: movie, historical fiction; historical biography (non-fiction).

1. Movies and life rights. Before a producer would touch a property on a real-life figure, there would have to be some sort of "life rights" agreement in place with the actual person or their estate. Producers pay for the right to tell about a life. In return producers usually have the right to change elements of fact in order to make the movie. This is why you see the phrase "based on a true story" under the title. The work has some basis in fact, but the viewer is also being warned that not everything they're about to see really happened.

Before you write your screenplay, I highly advise that you either acquire the life rights or have a very clear notion that you could acquire those rights if a studio wishes to option your work.

Same for any book you wish to adapt for the screen: get the option on it first, before you start writing.

2. Historical Fiction. So long as you have at the beginning of the book the usual disclaimer—"This is a work of fiction. Any similarity to real people, events or places is purely coincidental"—you should be OK. All the names must be changed. In this case, you would be using the real person's life and times as the BASIS of the fictional work. You are correct: this is done quite often.

3. Historical biography (non-fiction). Here you must be as accurate and truthful as possible, to the extent that you (and your publisher) could defend your work against an accusation of libel in a court of law. The key is truth—so long as what you write is true, any libel suit against you will always fail in an American court.

My article was killed. Now what?

Anonymous asked this question on 7/25/2001:

Last September I got a call from a national magazine wanting my story. They gave me 200 words. I submitted it and they paid me \$250. In the contract it said that I could not publish the piece again until it appeared in their publication first. Trouble is, there was a problem when they tried to confirm information. The piece has still not appeared. So, do I still have to wait for them to publish the piece?

I know this may sound like a stupid question but when one doesn't know—one doesn't....

David Taylor gave this response on 7/25/2001:

You need to determine if they have killed the piece (decided they don't want it) or if they still have plans to run it, with revisions or whatever.

If they've killed it, you are free to do what you want with it.

If they are still exercising their option to run it (holding it for future publication), you have to wait until they do so as stipulated in the contract you signed. Some contracts put a time limit by which a piece must have appeared. If it hasn't appeared by that date, your contract with them is terminated and you are free to market it elsewhere as a first rights story.

BTW: No such thing as a stupid question.

David

What must I know about libel to avoid legal problems?

.....

Anonymous asked this question on 7/19/2001:

What are the non-fiction writer's restrictions in using real names of people in a disparaging way? How far can you go legally? Can you change the names and be safe? Public figures seem to be fair game but how about government agencies and their employees?

David Taylor gave this response on 7/19/2001:

You have just touched upon one of the most complex issues that a journalist has to face. It's also an area where you can't afford to make mistakes. You are exactly right that public figures are treated differently, so are public officials. But the differences can be fine.

Luckily there is a guidebook for you and all of us: it is the Libel Manual portion of The Associated Press Stylebook and Libel Manual. And if you want it, you got to pay for it. You can order it from the AP's web site. Accept no substitutes:

<http://www.ap.org/pages/order.html>

Here is a brief guide to libel and slander.

- **Libel.** Can be personal libel or trade libel (involving a product, service or company). Libelous statements are published statements that are false, damaging and malicious.
- **Slander.** Same as libel, but in spoken rather than written form.

It is a tort (a civil wrong) to libel or slander another person.

How do you know if you've done so? How do you avoid doing so? There are three tests that any libelous suit must meet in order for a plaintiff to prevail in a libel or slander case.

1. Untrue. In order to be libelous or slanderous, the statement must be substantially untrue. If the statement is substantially true, then it is not libelous, and the case is over.

2. Damaging. In order for the plaintiff to prevail, the statement must have caused real and substantial harm to the person or business. The plaintiff must show clear evidence of the harm done.

3. Malicious. The plaintiff must also show that the defendant acted maliciously, with intent to harm. This most often takes the form of the person knowing the statement was untrue, but publishing it or broadcasting it anyway.

So from this very rudimentary explanation, you can deduce that the best way to avoid a libel charge and to defeat it, if it goes to trial, is to:

To Avoid Libel

- Only write which that which is true and can be shown to be true through your meticulous research and note taking.
- Keep ALL research for a period of years, depending on the statute of limitations where you are.

In sum, you can say or publish whatever you wish in our open society—so long as it is true.

Can I quote from another magazine's article in mine?

.....

Anonymous asked this question on 6/19/2001:

I found a great quote in a woman's magazine. Should I give credit to the mag. and the person they quoted too?

David Taylor gave this response on 6/19/2001:

Three answers to your question:

1. If you're writing professionally for publication, no. You should get your own quotes. Quotes from secondary sources are not good journalism, except in a few special instances.
2. If you're writing for college, yes. This is the sort of thing that often passes for "research" in a college writing course, although some profs do not allow consumer magazines to be used as sources.
3. Whenever you use a quotation, it should always be sourced not only to the speaker, but also to the speaker's identity and qualifications on the subject:

Example:

According to John C. Fine, author of The Hunger Road and a former UNESCO official, "Over 1 million children starve to death each year, and 6 million live in what the we describe as absolute poverty."



Chapter Four

Writing for the Web

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What's the difference between writing for the web and writing for print?
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JoeBob asked this question on 1/22/2000:

I've got my first assignment writing for a web site. What should I keep in mind when writing in pixels instead of for print publications?

David gave this response on 1/23/2000:

You're exactly right in assuming that there are key differences. Reading habits on the web are turning out to be remarkably different and point to a new kind of literacy that web writers need to learn about and deal with.

Here's my take:

The most successful web writers have honed in on the key differences between writing for print and writing for the web. Web prose must contain:

- **Highlighted keywords.** The primary way this is done on the web is with hyperlinks. But other important techniques include variations in font and point size, type color, background shading, and others.
- **Hyperlinks throughout.** The web reader knows that not everything needed is on a single web site and values the writer that branches him out into the web to explore and deepen his knowledge.
- **Objectified language.** This is language boiled down, simple, without hyperbole, straightforward.

- **Chunks.** In other words, web writers use bullets, numbers, boxes and other devices to break up the screen into discernable and digestible chunks.

Chunking allows readers to scan an article (its chunks) and read only the parts most interesting and relevant to them. It is a type of customization that is being driven by the demand for personalization on the web and Internet, and it signals an important advance in helping readers and web-page viewers to process complex information.

Generally, chunking is achieved by a combination of three methods: visual separation, visual progression and visual differentiation. Visual separation most often means the use of white space to frame chunks. Visual progression refers to giving sequence to chunks via letters, numbers, colors, horizontal and vertical arrangements. Visual differentiation relies on the use of various type styles, sizes and color shading to make each chunk graphically distinct.

- **One idea per paragraph.** Users skip over any additional ideas not contained in the opening of the paragraph.
- **Half the word count.** On the web, wordiness isn't a luxury. Say it once, say it fast, and get out of the way.
- **Meaningful subheds.** Never has the old rule—"Be clear before being clever"—been so important. Users are looking for information and you have only milliseconds to give it to them before they're off.

Putting it all together:

If you can see the differences in the following paragraphs, taken from Jakob Nielsen's "Alertbox" site (www.useit.com), you're ready to write for the web:

Site Version	Sample Paragraph	Usability Improvement (relative to control condition)
Promotional Style (control condition) using the "marketese" found on many commercial sites	Nebraska is filled with internationally recognized attractions that draw large crowds every year, without fail. In 1996, some of the most popular places were Fort Robinson State Park (355,000) visitors, Scotts Bluff National Monument (132,166), Arbor Lodge State Historical Park & Museum (100,000), <u>Carhenge</u> (86,598), Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer, (60,002) and Buffalo Bill State Ranch Historical Park (28,446).	0% (by definition)

<p>Concise Style word count reduced 50%</p>	<p>In 1996, six of the best-attended attractions in Nebraska were Fort Robinson State Park, Scotts Bluff National Monument, Arbor Lodge State Historical Park & Museum, <u>Carhenge</u>, Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer, and Buffalo bill Ranch State Historical Park.</p>	<p>58%</p>
<p>Scannable Layout same text as control condition in a layout that facilitates scanning</p>	<p>Nebraska is filled with internationally recognized attractions that draw large crowds of people every year, without fail. In 1996, some of the most popular places were:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fort Robinson State Park (355,000 visitors) • Scotts Bluff National Monument (132,166) • Arbor Lodge State Historical Park & Museum 100,00) • <u>Carhenge</u> (86,598) • Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer (60,002) • Buffalo Bill Ranch State Historical Park (28,446) 	<p>47%</p>
<p>Objective Language using neutral rather than subjective, boastful, or exaggerated language</p>	<p>Nebraska has several attractions. In 1996, some of the most-visited places were Fort Robinson State Park (355,000 visitors), Scotts Bluff National Monument (132,166), Arbor Lodge State Historical Park & Museum (100,000), <u>Carhenge</u> (86,598), Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer (60,002), and Buffalo Bill Ranch State Historical Park (28,446).</p>	<p>27%</p>
<p>Combined Version using all three improvements together: concise, Scannable, objective.</p>	<p>In 1996, six of the most-visited places in Nebraska were:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fort Robinson State Park • Scotts Bluff National Monument • Arbor Lodge State Historical Park & Museum • <u>Carhenge</u> • Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer • Buffalo Bill Ranch State Historical Park 	<p>124%</p>

Can I publish the same story on my web site and in print magazines?

.....

Anonymous asked this question on 6/12/2001:

I will be au pairing in Germany for one year while I save money for a backpacking excursion. I plan to write a bi-weekly column while there about my experiences as an American girl in Germany and as an au pair.

My intention is to publish the column on my own web site and at the same time publish it in various magazines and newspapers. Can I do that?

David Taylor gave this response on 6/16/2001:

No, that would be considered unethical. If someone pays you good money for your words, you have to let them have what they paid for: the right to be the exclusive first-time publisher, or whatever you paid for.

If your stories appear in a publication and you don't get compensated, then you have a little more ethical wiggle room. Just be sure that your editors know what you're doing and are fine with it.

However, I'm not sure you should be looking only at magazines and newspapers as paying outlets. Lots of web sites need lots of copy these days.

I think a possibly even more fruitful area would be the teen market: As an au pair, you are probably a teen or in your early 20s. Teen zines publish a lot of PEs or personal experience, 1st person stories. You have a unique slant: how is a teen's life in Germany different than in America? How does American culture influence German teens? How are German teens' attitudes toward sex, parents, education, dating, etc. different than their American counterparts? What elements of the German teen scene would American teens be fascinated to hear about?

So, my advice: Take a digital camera with you and a laptop. Upload pictures (lots of 'em) along with your stories to the web and then get in touch with web sites that are travel and teen related—preferably both.

And especially since you will have the ability to upload daily and weekly, this sort of project should find a home on a teen-related web site. Also, make it interactive as possible: allow teens to ask you questions, suggest places for you to go and to write about/photograph, conduct interactive interviews, set up chat groups, etc.

Remember, newspapers superceded magazines because they were daily. Radio superceded newspapers because of the human voice. TV superceded radio because of the moving image. And the internet is superceding TV because of interactivity. Explore and exploit that facility.

What opportunities are there for travel writing on the web?

.....

rmnt asked this question on 6/1/2001:

I am planning to work and backpack my way around the world and was wondering if it is possible to get a magazine or newspaper to provide some sort of sponsorship in return for a type of daily dairy I could send each day via email or something. A sort of daily column you could say.

Is your ability to write really important? Or could I just write a journal and have one of the writers working for the particular newspaper or magazine adjust my entry?

Any advice on how to approach companies on this and to make my writing successful would be much appreciated.

Thank you.
Kind regards
Aafke Remant

David Taylor gave this response on 6/2/2001:

Interesting question. There have been very famous examples of this sort of field reporting in the travel writing genre, beginning in England in the 19th century. Today, you see it most often on the web, where the correspondents send daily updates from the field via wireless modems, satellites, digital cameras and the like.

So there is one part of your answer: your best shot on landing this kind of assignment is, IMHO, from a web property.

A second part of the answer: which web property? What you're doing is adventurous, so I'd start with the web sites focused on off-beat, adventure travel for a twenty-something audience. You'll need to do some research as to which web sites fit that profile.

The next step would be for you to study the writing found on the target web sites and make sure what you do fits their content slant and especially their voice and attitude. Having a "tude" is very much a part of writing for the web today.

How to make your writing successful? Read the greats. In your case, I'd highly recommend Tim Cahill for his powers of observation and his humor and his distinctive voice when it comes to adventure travel. Nothing sells better than humor. Also try Randy Wayne White and Bill Bryson.

Is your ability to write really important? Another interesting question. There is an inverse correlation between the power of the content and the need for good writing. Even if I was semi-literate (and some think I am) I could sell the story of my secret torrid affair with Hillary Clinton in the Lincoln bedroom. If I had THE secret to becoming a millionaire or if I had discovered THE secret of immortality, no editor would care about my grammar.

Short of those kinds of topics, yes, you must be a good writer. BTW, Shakespeare spelled his name 9 different ways during his lifetime and John Keats was dyslexic. So don't get hung up on the trivial parts of writing. The important aspects of style are:

- authenticity
- honesty
- specificity
- directness

Like dribbling in basketball, grammar is a part of writing but it's not the most important part or the one that requires the most knowledge, power or skill, nor the one that gets the most applause, nor the one that wins games.

Best of luck,
David

How can I prepare for a career in writing for the web?

cowboydj asked this question on 6/2/2001:

I am just out of my second semester of grad school in Counseling, and have decided to pursue a writing career instead. I am particularly interested in content editing/New Media and other jobs that involve writing, editing, researching and the Internet. Though I am a very talented writer and have a BA in journalism, I have few clips or references left from the days when I was actively freelancing.

Can you give me some direction on how I can best prepare and market myself for these positions? It's frustrating knowing that I have the talent and experience needed to do these jobs well, but lack the resume credits to convince employers to give me a chance. Any thoughts?

Thanks for you help...
cowboydj

David Taylor gave this response on 6/3/2001:

cowboydj: This is a fascinating question in that it calls into question the role of the freelancer in the New Age of web journalism. I've never had the chance to sit down and think through this question and have enjoyed doing so. The experience has helped me see some key differences between freelancers for the print world and for the web. Here are some that struck me as important, in no particular order:

1. Web freelancing doesn't just mean articles. Thinking back on the successful web freelancers we've employed at scuba diving.com and newdiver.com, these freelancers have offered us programming, not just a one-shot article.

We have Bill Toomey's daily "Sherman's Lagoon" cartoon, Dive Safety Tip of the Day, Weekly Quiz, a week's worth of coverage of a new freedive record in Cabo San Lucas.

Yes, there are some web sites that still use a print model: Salon, Slate, etc. But mostly what I'm seeing is programming models, not one-shots of content.

2. The best web freelancers do their own programming: html, Java, cgi scripts, digital images and the rest. They offer a package, not just ASCII text.

3. Web freelancers are highly specialized. The internet has broken down all the walls—political, national, social, economic. As a result, people are coalescing into Internet "tribes": Small groups of users closely knit by their special interests and beliefs.

Some tribes you belong to are short term (car buyers) and some are long term (a hobby like scuba diving). But I think it will be difficult to find enough work without having one or more specialties.

Specific advice to you:

- Work on turning your professional expertise (graduate work will qualify you as a credentialed professional) into your freelance specialty.
- Learn the basic web programming tools.
- Spend time finding web sites that fit what you have to offer.
- Become an expert in your field and let people know that you are.
- Join one of the free career bulletin boards like monster.com.
- Remember that the most powerful writing is the most authoritative. You have a remarkable opportunity to combine two of your loves and strengths: communication and psychology.



Chapter Five

Selling Your First Book

I've got a great idea for a book. What should I do now?

Stephen11 asked this question on 11/7/2001:

I am looking for advice. I have been to over 1,100 places in the Washington DC metro area by public transportation and I am thinking about trying to publish my information and make it into a book. I would like to know what is the best way to go through this task. My dream would be to publish a book which would list the 1,100 things which I have done in the Washington DC area by public transportation. I would like it to be something simple and something people would like to read. My only problem is I don't know where to go from here. What can you suggest to me.

Thank you
Stephen11

David Taylor gave this response on 11/7/2001:

First, I think you have an excellent idea for a book about one of the world's most touristed cities. Second, there's no way of knowing it's a good idea until you complete step one of writing a book proposal: market research. In other words, is there a need for this book?

Step One: To answer that question you must ferret out all similar books in print. If there are few like yours, you're in great shape. If there are a number of similar ones (and there probably will be), you need to study them for how you can make yours different—therefore adding a value to yours that the others don't have.

Step Two: Write a formal book proposal. There are several acceptable formats. You can see one for free on the www.writersweekly.com web site.

After you've written your proposal, you need to shop it around. There are three options here:

1. Get an agent and let him/her work their publishing contacts to shop it around.
2. Send it yourself to the acquisitions editor at publishing houses that do this kind of book.
3. Self publish it. This is the route I recommend for previously unpublished authors.

With today's ebook publishing, print-on-demand technology and the power of the Internet that allows writers to successfully market their own work, there is no need for you to wait. Get your work out there. Get reactions to it. Learn what your readers want and don't want.

Do I need a co-author?

Anonymous asked this question on 8/15/2001:

I am trying to write a book about my early childhood. I suffered as a child unspeakable acts of abuse. I want to write it more to open the eyes of our government and its officials about how little punishment is given to persons who abuse others, physically, mentally and sexually.

A person gets more time for shoplifting than scaring a child for life.

Do I need a co-writer or someone to help me articulate the abuse and the damage it has caused?

Thanks,

Lena

David Taylor gave this response on 8/15/2001:

Hi, Lena: I think you are actually proposing two books and need to choose which one to write first.

Book #1: a personal memoir in the vein of Maya Angelou's "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings," which brings home the unspeakable horror of such abuse by taking readers on a hellish ride through it themselves.

Her book of true personal experience and other books in this vein raise the consciousness of readers, help them understand the great damage that can occur, and generate a sense of outrage. The reader can then use the experience of the book to vote, voice opinions, and personally interact with other victims in a more effective, enlightened way.

Book#2: a social study of the status of child abuse in our culture, the rate at which it happens vs. the reporting of it and, more importantly, a documentation of what happens to the victimizer and the victim in the judicial system.

Both kinds of books are substantial undertakings. I wonder if you can also start smaller with a series of articles in magazines and newspapers that can help you begin the research and writing that will be necessary.

Having a co-writer is feasible for Book #1, but let me voice concerns about some cold realities: Personal books about the abuse the author suffered have been done quite a bit lately, often by celebrity-type people. Any potential publisher would want to know how your story is different and what it would add to the corpus of work already done in this area.

There are also other outlets for the concern, anger and even rage that I bet you feel: activism in your local community about the legal issues and even volunteer work with the victims of abuse. Working in these areas would also provide a wealth of perspective and experience on which to draw when writing about this topic in Book #2.

When do I need an agent?

Anonymous asked this question on 6/16/2001:

I have enough material for a book. Is writing the first few chapters then looking for an agent the best way to go, or should I write the whole book?? Also, how much does an agent get? Where can I find one?

David Taylor gave this response on 6/18/2001:

I think you should do both:

1. Write the first two or three chapters, send them to an agent or a publisher with an outline for the rest.
2. Continuing writing the rest of the book as you continue to look for an agent of publisher.

If a publisher is interested in your book, at that point you can get an agent.

- How much does an agent get? At the level of a first book, probably 15%. But the most important thing for you right now is to write a great book that people will want to read.

Where can you find agents? Look in the back of The Writer's Market (www.writersdigest.com) and tons of them on the web. Read the descriptions closely to find one you near you, someone willing to work with someone at your level, and someone with some experience in your field (medical, diet, self-help, biographies, etc.).

A question you didn't ask but implied: Do you really need an agent?

No. Not right now. What you need is a great idea well executed that finds an unfilled niche.

One of the crucial elements of any book proposal (which you should send to relevant publishers) is the "Market Study" portion. In it, you detail what other works are extant in this field and how yours will be different. Without demonstrable knowledge of the major works in your field and without a different slant for yours, the proposal is dead in the water, regardless of whether you send it to an agent or directly to the publisher.

So, you don't have to have an agent. But is one recommended? Yes. They have contacts with publishers and want to help you make your book saleable as possible. An honest one will be honest with you about your book's merits and shortcomings. Listen closely. Like a personal lawyer in a divorce case, they fight for your best interests in contract

negotiations. But at the first-book level, the contract will be pretty standard and not much to negotiate about.

BTW, after you get your first book published, agents will knock on your door.

Should I sign an "all rights" book contract?

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BJSiss asked this question on 9/10/2000:

As a first-time book author, should I agree to sign an "all rights" contract just to be on the safe side and help my work get in print?

David gave this response on 9/10/2000:

If you do sign it, you'll definitely be on the publisher's safe side, not your own. An all-rights contract leaves the author very few of them: no reprint or anthology rights, no digital or other media rights.

In fact, unless your contract states that rights revert back to you at some point, an "all rights" contract means that you can never use your work again for many years.

Beginning freelancer magazine writers are often forced to accept all-rights contracts in order to nail those crucial first bylines. But I don't think a book author should do so. Your words have value. Some publisher thinks so. Your own your words. You should strive—politely, professionally and in good faith—to retain as many of your rights as you can. Yes, first-timers often have to give up more, because the publisher is taking more a risk on you. But you don't have to give away the farm.

Do I need a copyeditor?

FancyLetters asked this question on 5/22/2002:

I received a book ms. back from an agent who told me to hire a good copyeditor. What does that mean?

David gave this response on 5/22/2002:

It means that he or she found lots of stylistic and proofreading errors. It also means that other authors who try to do their own copyediting and proofing are likely in for the same sort of letter someday from an editor.

Copyediting is the art of editing a manuscript for punctuation, usage, grammar, style (clarity and conciseness) and sometimes fact-checking. Usually not content. And I assure you, just because you're a decent writer, that doesn't mean you're worth a flip as a copyeditor.

To paraphrase Flannery O'Connor: "A good copyeditor is hard to find."

When you do, pay them. They can make your manuscript look and read professionally. The good ones are worth their weight in microchips.

Unfortunately, many a freelancer must sometimes serve as his or her own copyeditor. That means getting a book to learn this very special skill. Turning in a poorly copyedited manuscript usually means automatic rejection. If the mechanics aren't right, how much faith can an editor have in your reporting?

How do I protect my art work when sending it in with a book manuscript?

ChrisMac asked this question on 10/10/2002:

I want to send in art work to accompany my book, but I'm hesitant to do so. What if some of it is lost or damaged? What do the pros do?

David gave this response on 10/10/2002:

Two words:

Delivery memo.

If you are submitting original photography, you should include a delivery memo, which lists each image being delivered with a notation that corresponds to the same notation for the actual image, the use being made of the images, and any other previous agreements.

The delivery memo also asks for a signature from the employee who receives the photography or art work to ensure all images are present and not damaged. A copy of the signed delivery memo is returned to you.

All work—photographic and text—is best delivered by a service that tracks and ensures your creations: FedEx, Airborne Express, UPS, etc. A delivery memo only accompanies photographic work that has been commissioned and requested, not over-the-transom materials. The memo specifies the value of each image and places liability for loss or damage on the recipient.

Should I get model releases to protect myself from lawsuits?

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ChrisMac asked this follow up question on 10/12/2002:

Some of the original art work I asked about has pictures of people that I took myself. Should I have gotten model releases?

David gave this response on 10/12/2002:

More than likely, yes. Here's the rule:

If the identity of the individual can be discerned from looking at the image, then you should secure some kind of release from that subject. If the subject is unrecognizable, then you're probably okay.

A model release is a consent form signed by a photograph's subject that gives you permission to publish the photograph without invading that person's privacy or copyrighted image. Professional models often have strict limitations on how and how often their image can be used.

Should I give up e-rights?

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Sallygirl asked this questions on 2/13/2001:

A recent book contract stipulated that I had to give up E-rights? That was a new one for me. Should I?

David gave this response on 2/13/2001:

Not without a bit of a fight. At least try to keep them and as many other rights to your work as you can.

E-rights—the electronic rights to your work (its digital form that can be published via the Internet on web pages, in e-mail newsletters, CD-ROMs, e-databases and so forth)—are now fully protected thanks to several recent court cases.

The courts, including the U.S. Supreme Court, have made it clear that an author's e-rights are distinct from any other copyrights and not automatically granted to a publication unless an author expressly gives up those rights.

That said, e-rights are currently being sold for very little, usually 5% to 25% of the amount paid for first publication rights. With many publications, e-rights are expected without further compensation.

What's the difference between proofs and "galley proofs" and such?

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TSavas asked this question on 3/11/2002:

What's the difference between proofs and "galley proofs" and such? I hope to get to review some of them of my books some day. Should I insist on seeing proofs? What are they exactly?

David gave this response on 3/11/2002:

Tom: It's inevitable. If you work hard enough and long enough, it will happen. And getting a set of proofs in your hands is a glorious day. Your book is finally a reality like it's never been before.

Proofs are text sent to a typesetter and returned to the publisher as "**first proofs**" or "**galley proofs**" (named after the long sheets of paper they used to be printed on).

Galley proofs from magazines usually omit art work and captions or other graphical elements. However, galley proofs from book publishers today closely resemble the finished product. Proofs are provided by publishers in batches to authors and editors as they are completed so that proofreading can commence.

"Second proofs" or **"page proofs"** are a second set of pages that contain the requested revisions as well as all art elements. These proofs are what the published page will look like.

"Printer's proofs" are proofs sent by the typesetter or prepress house to the printer.

"Film proofs" or **"bluelines"**, or simply **"blues"** (because they are usually printed in blue ink) are sent by the printer to the publisher for one last look. If an error or problem (page smudge, incorrect order) isn't caught here, it will appear in the published form.

Who acquires permissions—the author or the publisher?

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NorthStar asked this question on 12/02/2001:

I'm planning on using some copyrighted material in a book manuscript I'm preparing. Should I go ahead and be getting permissions to use that material or is that something the publisher takes care of?

David gave this response on 12/02/2001:

It's your job. Permissions are a release, giving someone the right to use copyrighted material. This job is usually the author's, including any copyright fees that must be paid. Usually the publisher supplies the author with guidelines for obtaining permission and blank permission request forms.

Find Freelance Jobs or Hire Freelancers on Truelancer. Truelancer is a curated freelance marketplace with thousands of top rated Freelancers. It is simple and quick to Post your job and get quick quotes for your Freelancer requirement. Get Free Quotes. Hire Freelancers and Experts. Compare Freelancer. Reset All. Nothing to compare. Find Best Freelancers with great Skills. Freelancer are highly skilled and talented.