

CLIMBING THE LADDER TO SUCCESS AS A FREELANCE WRITER

One of the most frequent questions audience members ask as I speak to groups about writing and publishing is “How can I become a freelance article writer?” Of course, there’s no single magical way that can guarantee success. And it doesn’t happen overnight. Like anything else worth achieving, freelance success comes from building your skill and your reputation step by step. I call it “climbing the ladder.”

Very simply, you pace your submissions to the size of the periodical, whether magazine or newspaper. The likelihood of acceptance is best at the smaller periodicals that serve your immediate region. You begin by compiling a portfolio of your published articles. As you reach for larger and more prestigious publications, you will have something of value to show those editors.

Choosing a Topic

The next question heard most often from novice writers is “What do I write about?” You are surrounded by potential subjects, but as a freelance writer, you have to keep your eyes and ears open to find them. At any given time, there probably is a dominant issue that concerns you and your neighbors. Express your opinion about it in a short essay. Perhaps there is a specific angle that interests you, but hasn’t yet been written about.

You may be a sports devotee. Why not profile one of the stars of the local high school team? Or interview the coach, and write about his concerns and hopes for the team. Perhaps you’d like to profile a city official or possibly the head of a department whose work is vital to the community, but who seldom makes the news.

Reach out for one of the town’s leading business persons, request an interview, and profile him/her. Contact one of the area’s largest companies and request a tour of the facility. But first do a little research to help you understand the industry in which it is involved. Businesses thrive on publicity, and they will welcome your inquiry and the article that hopefully follows.

Pay some attention to the physical attributes of the region in which you live. Is there something unique about which you can write? Something with historical significance? Or an unusual natural site?

As a high school youngster growing up in my hometown in northern New Jersey, I wrote about our falls. A little research revealed that our own Passaic River Falls was the second highest cascade east of the Mississippi, outdone only by Niagara. That led to a second piece on Alexander Hamilton's encampment at the foot of the fall during the Revolutionary War. The third piece that grew out of this research was the discovery that Pierre L'Enfant, the designer of our nation's capital, had designed a series of spillways that powered the factories that were developing alongside the river.

Reaching Higher

So you see, there is never a dearth of subjects to be written about by anyone who is willing to exert some effort to find them. With those stories in your portfolio, you have the clips to convince the editor of a larger magazine—perhaps statewide—that you are professional and he/she can be confident in accepting your proposal for an article.

Followed consistently, that pattern can help you move from local periodicals up the ladder to national success. It should be obvious to you that attempting to start from the top would be unwise. You would be unknown to an editor who must be concerned about your ability to write well and report accurately. When giving an assignment to a writer, an editor must also be confident that the manuscript will be completed on time. Deadlines are critical.

Bear in mind that circulation of a magazine or newspaper depends upon its content. An article on an issue that is current stands a good chance of acceptance if it has substantial content. But equally important is writing about a topic that has real meaning to you, perhaps a hobby or a sport. If you can develop your own unique approach—we call it a “hook” in the industry—so much the better.

Despite the shrinkage of print publications in recent years, there is no limit to the topics you can choose because there is always at least one and usually lots more publications that are devoted to that subject. You will recall last week we talked about periodical directories like *Writer's Market* and *The Wooden Horse*. These directories will help you find the perfect match for your article. But don't rely exclusively on the information the directory provides. As helpful as that

is, it is still vital that you review copies of the publication and study them. Your library probably has a file of recent back issues that you should review as well.

In last week's column, we also spoke of the way a writer reads a magazine. It is very different from the casual review of the average reader. You are studying it like a professional, searching for every hint you can find that better informs you of the editor's preferences and the makeup of the readership.

Trade Journals

Trade journals are one of the periodical categories most neglected by inexperienced writers, yet their editors are always seeking informative articles on the subject of their specialty. Style and writing ability, although welcome, are far less important to the editors of these journals than is content. That doesn't mean you can turn in a sloppy, poorly written manuscript. It means only that the journal editors are willing to polish submissions if they contain information that will be beneficial to their readers.

You may choose to write about the field in which you work or in which you specialized during your active career if you are now retired. Be certain, however, to update yourself on the latest developments in the field. That's particularly important for retirees who have not kept up with the latest trends since they left active work.

Connie Emerson, author of *The Writer's Guide to Conquering the Magazine Market*, points out in her excellent book, "Trade publications continue to be the undiscovered market for freelancers." It is an excellent way to gain more clips for your portfolio that supplement the local stories you have published, for these are national magazines, even though they restricted to a specific subject.

Journals exist that cover most hobbies and sports activities. As a long-time hobbyist, you may very well want to write about your passion. Sports magazines cover all aspects from the business of sports to management and coaching to more general articles written for the spectator population. Once again, check the directories and then study copies of the specific magazines you plan to target.