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**The Beginner's Guide to Freelance Writing**

**By Jenna Glatzer**

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The Big Idea

Okay. So youve figured out that you would like to write for magazines, newspapers, and e-zines. Unfortunately, so have about eight gazillion other people on this planet. Therefore, you have to stand out from the crowd. You have to sparkle. How do you do this? Simple. It all starts with The Big Idea. The first secret you must learn in this funny business is that you dont actually have to write the whole article to get a job. In fact, only bright green novices attempt to write the whole thing before selling it. What you do need, however, is the IDEA for the great story. You will use this great idea to convince editors to pay you exorbitant amounts of money via a proposal letter (called a query letter. But youll learn about that in a minute).

So, where will you find this Big Idea? Well, youve heard that wise adage write what you know. Thats a wonderful mantra for finding your jumping-off point. You dont need to stick to what you know for the specific focus of your story, but tap into your already huge vat of knowledge to find the storys basis. This is how you will become an expert. Experts are in demand. People with stories arent. What you have to do is sneak your stories into your areas of expertise. Example: lets say your hobbies and interests include fishing, watching talk shows, and traveling. Good! You are a potential expert in those areas. Jot these things down. Now comes the fun part: brainstorming.

The biggest mistake you can make in pitching your story is being too general. Never, ever send a letter to the editor suggesting an article about fishing. Not even an article about fishing in Florida. This vagueness is not appropriate for short writing. In general, you will be expected to write somewhere between 800 and 2000 words on your topic. You couldnt possibly tell us all about fishing in 2000 words. What you could do, however, is give us a comparison of twelve different lures used to catch sailfish. Or the pros and cons of joining a fishing club. Or even how the moon can tell you if itll be a good fishing day.

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So heres your first assignment. Get out your trusty notebook. (If you dont have one, stop reading and get one. Right now.) On the first page, write down a list of any and all topics that interest you. Its okay to be general here. Need some ideas to get you started?

Think through your whole day. Dont neglect anything. What do you do from the moment you wake up until the moment you fall asleep? You turn off your alarm clock. (An article about alarm clocks disrupting valuable sleep stages! Or waking up to music versus waking up to that annoying beeping sound. Or the optimal number of times to press the snooze button.) You brush your teeth. (Article: What all those touted ingredients fluoride, peroxide, baking soda really do for your teeth.) You take a shower. Maybe with your significant other. Lucky you. (Romantic showers for two.)

Moving on. You go to work. This is the most obvious area of expertise. Lets say youre a secretary. How ergonomic office equipment can save you from Carpal Tunnel Syndrome, an achy back, and a stiff neck. How to avoid screaming at your boss when hes a total idiot. Five couples (or ex-couples)

share their wisdom about dating in the office. Think about what cover story would entice you to pay three dollars for a magazine. You dont have to have the knowledge to actually write the article yet. You just have to know you can get this information later.

Next, you come home. What happens? Do you have kids? Great! A wealth of article ideas. You could write about childcare agencies, potty training, decoding teenage slang, teaching table manners youre getting the idea now, right? Run with it!

Write at least one page of general topics that interest you, then weed out the most interesting ones. Narrow it down to three or four. Then write those three or four topics on top of brand new pages. Now fill up those pages with specific article angles. Just write. Dont edit yourself. Dont judge. Just write whatever pops into your head. If you need motivation, play it like a game of Scattergories. Set a timer for ten minutes. See how many ideas you can jot down before the timer sounds.

Keep in mind that there are markets for almost any conceivable topic. Dont limit yourself to the headlines youd read in Vogue and Good Housekeeping. Between newspapers, consumer magazines, trade magazines, e-zines, tabloids, literary journals, and more, youre bound to find an appropriate publication for your Big Idea.

You want to know more about these markets? Read on!

### Researching the Markets

First, youll need a few definitions:

**Consumer Magazines:** These typically pay the best. These are the types of magazines you might find in a grocery store check-out line, convenience store, in your airplane seat pocket, or your doctors office. Types of consumer mags: mens, womens, special interest, inflight, teens, school/career, travel, health, ethnic/minority, political, entertainment, romance, religious, etc. This is the area most writers try to break into.

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**Literary Magazines:** These don't pay much, if at all. However, what they lack in moolah, they make up for in prestige. If you're looking to jump-start your career as a fiction writer or poet, your best chance at recognition may come in the form of one of these small publications. Often published by colleges and universities, their circulation is usually regional and low. They generally seek scholarly essays, intellectually challenging prose, poetry, and book reviews. Publishers will be impressed if you succeed in placing your work in one of the more prominent journals (Cimarron Review, Ploughshares, and Story, for example).

**Trade Journals:** Pay varies greatly. Any publication that focuses on a particular occupation/industry falls into this category. This is where your expertise can shine. There are trade journals for almost every line of work, from art dealers to truck drivers. In general, your written eloquence is not as important as your research and timely knowledge for these publications.

**E-Zines:** Pay varies greatly. Simply put, e-zines are simply magazines on the Internet. The only major difference is that articles for e-zines can usually run longer than print magazines. (No printing costs, so space isn't as important an issue for e-zine editors.) Most e-zines don't pay (except by means of a byline) but this trend is changing. The most popular sites (

and Wired, for example) pay

quite well. Topics stretch as wide as your imagination.

Now that you know, learn how to contact them!

There are tons of ways to find markets that are open to freelancers. If you were paying attention, you might notice that this very website is looking for writers! Finding places to submit your work is easy if you know where to look.

First, the most important tool in a freelancer's toolbox is The Writers Market. Available at any major bookstore, this is an annual compilation of more than 2,000 magazines, 1,000 book publishers, and even specialized markets like greeting cards, script writing, and syndicates.

The next best tools are online. Lucky you! They're free. Absolute Markets is a weekly e-zine filled with market guidelines, contest listings, and marketing tips. Freelancing4Money puts out a jam-packed e-zine filled with freelance opportunities. Writer's Digest has a great, searchable database of markets. Writing For Dollars has a biweekly newsletter with market guidelines, and a searchable database on the website. And Writers Weekly lists calls for writers and market guidelines each week.

You can even run a search for freelance writers on any major search engine, and you're likely to come up with tons of listings. Try specifying if possible; add words that fit your needs. (Example: paying markets, romance, teen magazines.)

So, your next assignment is this: go back to your trusty notebook and pick out your very favorite idea. That will now be known as your Big Idea. Pick the markets that best fit your idea. Choose several. Find out if you can get a free or discounted sample copy. (Writers often can, if you specify that you

would like to query them in the future.) Request writers guidelines if available. Its considered poor form to query publications that youve never read, or know nothing about. Do your best to read at least one copy of whatever magazine or journal you plan to query. Check your library for copies if you prefer not to go broke researching.

Got it now? You have your idea, and youve found places to submit it? Great! Then you'll need to learn proper protocol for writing and submitting the Killer Query.

### The Killer Query

The job of the query letter is to entice an editor to say, Hey! Id be interested in learning more about that. Therefore, you dont want to spill all your secrets and research yet. You want to tease and tantalize. Now that youve got your fabulous Big Idea, your job is to condense (or expand) that idea into two to three paragraphs.

To illustrate the components of a killer query, here is an example of one of mine (using fictitious contact info sorry!) that landed me the assignment:

Jenna Glatzer  
(Always use proper formal letter format)  
123 My Address  
My City, State, Zip Code  
(555) 555-5555

Mr. Joe Shmoe  
(Make SURE to get a name of the appropriate department College Life 101

editor. Never address a letter to editor or submissions.)  
123 Their Address  
Their City, State, Zip Code

Today's Date, 2003

Dear Mr. Shmoe:  
(Colons are used in formal letters. Commas are used in friendly letters.)

Think company cars, expense accounts, and a spacious office with bay windows. Who do you picture running a business this successful?

(Start the letter with a zinger that captures the essence of your proposed article/story. Raise a question that will cause the reader to think, or give a visual image anything that will make him/her want to read on and find out what youre talking about.)

Think again. This company was the brainchild of three Boston University sophomores whose ambitions led them to thriving careers before they had diplomas to hang on the wall.

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(The rest of the first paragraph should give a concise description of the focus of your proposed article. Remember to tell why its appropriate to the publication youre querying. In this case, I was targeting a college magazine, so I made sure to emphasize the relevance to their subject matter early in the letter.)

Charles Strader, Richard Skelton, and Pablo Mondal run Net One, an Internet Service Provider. The three met in the freshmen dorms, then moved into an apartment together. Opportunity knocked when Strader, who worked for the universitys computer center, took a phone call from the owner of a hair salon. She sought help designing a website; Strader volunteered, and Net One was born.

(Again, concisely, get a little deeper into the content of the article. What is special about your story? In this case, I wanted to emphasize that these guys were college buddies who started a booming business by branching out from their humble beginning.)

Working closely with friends to build something we believe in is Mondals favorite perk. Skelton agrees. We have great trust in each other, and feel that were all in this together.

(Quotations arent necessary in a query, but its nice to give something specific to show that you have done some research into your topic, and that you have access to resources that will enable you to write the article well. I wanted to show that I had already spoken to these guys—they happen to be friends of mine—and that they would be upbeat and inspirational people to interview. You can accomplish the same effect by including a few quirky facts or survey results youve found out about your topic.)

Considering that their only capital was a computer and a small loan from Straders father, the guys feel very successful. Were not millionaires, but we have goals, and were following them, says Skelton. I think thats true success. By any definition, Net Ones roster of more than 50 clients ranging from colleges to Fortune 500 companies attests to their hard work and talent.

(Look, editor. These guys are big up—and—comers! Notice I mentioned Fortune 500 companies. This

lets the editor know quickly that these college guys arent small potatoes. It neatly ties up the opening sentence, which promised an article about guys who have a spacious office, expense accounts, and company car. Now the editor has a reason to believe that these guys actually are that successful.)

I propose a 1,000 word profile for your Students At Work section.

(Shows Ive researched their magazine. I know which section this should fit, and Ive read their guidelines to determine an appropriate word count.)

I am a full-time freelance writer, and my works have been recently featured in such publications as 201 Magazine, College Bound

(Notice I mention the most relevant magazines first. Anything youve had published that might relate to the content, tone, or audience of the proposed publication belongs here.)

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Bliss!, Working Women, and Video Librarian. Clips are enclosed.

(If you've never had anything published, don't distress. Just shut up about it. Do NOT tell anyone, though I've never been published yet, I'm a real go-getter. Less is more. If you keep quiet, they may not even think about the fact that you didn't mention your credits. Also, do not get into a diatribe describing how you edited your high school newspaper. Just a quick list of relevant writing background. See below for info about clips.)

I can provide documentation and interview notes for easy fact-checking, and could submit the completed article within two weeks.

(Optional. Some people like to suggest a time frame, others let the editor do it. In general, the editor will tell you when the article is due, regardless of your preferences. It's a nice touch to mention how you will research your article. Mine was primarily dependent on interviews, but you may wish to include the names of journals/experts you plan to quote or use for information.)

I look forward to your response.

(Obligatory polite ending. Use any variation you wish. No pleading. If you dare type, I promise to write a reallllly, realllly good article! Please hire me!, you will incur my wrath. I will hunt you down and yell at you. A lot. Just a simple, dignified ending requesting a response.)

Regards,

Jenna Glatzer

(Oh. Substitute your name and preferred signature ending. Unless you feel like sending your paycheck to me, in which case, you can feel free to use my name. Grin.)

Finally, clips! If you've had anything published or even if you haven't, but you have a few good writing samples appropriate for this type of market, include them. These samples are called clips, and they are used to show the editor that you are an intelligent, insightful, funny, clever, and/or excellent writer. Photocopy your articles straight from the publication. Just 2–3 clips.

When you're sending queries by e-mail, you can paste the text of your clips into the body of the e-mail (never as an attachment!), or you can direct the editor to one or two website URLs where she can view your articles.

### Interviews and Profiles

I know, you feel weird about this one, right? You're uncomfortable calling someone or visiting a business to ask a professional to take precious time out of their day to help you research your article.

Well, buck up, little camper, because most professionals absolutely love to be interviewed. They jump at the chance, for a few reasons. These are the reasons to keep in mind when you feel small and silly

for asking: It shows you respect their opinion and/or job. It gives them opportunities for publicity of their business. It gives them the chance to brag to friends that they are quoted in a magazine. It gives them something to frame and show clients. Finally, someone is recognizing their genius and taking an interest in their work. They're usually wannabe writers, anyway, and they will be just as happy to pick your brain to find out how you got the job.

Before you approach experts:

Make sure you already have your questions mapped out, at least briefly. What exactly do you need to know from this person? What could this person tell you that no one else can? Avoid yes or no questions. Ask open-ended questions that could lead to lengthy responses chock full of great quotes. Also, have a synopsis of your planned article ready, so you can tell your expert what you're writing and how they can supplement your knowledge.

How to approach experts:

Get on the phone. Have your idea condensed into 2–3 sentences, so you can quickly explain yourself to whomever answers the phone.

Hello. My name is Jenna, and I'm writing an article about the rise in vegetarianism among young women in Nevada for Youth In Nevada Magazine. I know Dr. Spuds is a well-respected nutritionist, and I'm hoping she would be willing to answer a few questions on this subject.

At this point, the secretary will say, Hold, and make you listen to elevator music while she summons the boss. Or she'll take down your number and have Dr. Spuds call you back. Or it will be Dr. Spuds herself, and she'll say, What do you want to know?

Your options at this point are (1) Ask questions over the phone, right then and there. Make sure you check to make sure your expert is not pressed for time before you begin. (2) Set up a phone date to conduct the interview. (3) Ask if you can meet in person. This is good almost necessary if the person will be the focus of your article. If the person is being used just to add a few quotes, you don't have to meet in person, because it's unlikely you'll ever need to write. Dr. Spuds wrinkled her brow and stared into her pea soup as she explained that young women are becoming more health-conscious. (4) Trade e-mail addresses and send over a list of questions. This approach isn't usually the best, because it doesn't allow you to react to, and build from, information you gain in answers to previous questions. However, if the publication will not reimburse you for long distance phone calls, and you have to conduct a lengthy interview, e-mail exchanges are acceptable. Just make sure you specify a due date for the responses. Be reasonable to give the expert a week to answer all your questions.

### The Sales

Okay, you sent out your killer query, and you got a phone call from an editor with the big news: you got the assignment! Congratulations, you! Go on and do a little dance of joy, then crash back to reality with your new mantra: GET IT IN WRITING. Make sure the editor tells you that a written contract is forthcoming in the near future.

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If you've researched your market, you probably already have an idea of the pay rate, but be sure to cover this ground in that initial phone call if the editor fails to mention it. Important things to remember:

### On Publication vs. On Acceptance

You not only need to know how much you'll be paid, but also, when you'll be paid. Many markets want to pay you on publication. This can be a problem, because many magazines and journals have long lead times. (Translation: a long time between when they assign you the article and when it actually ends up in print.) If you write an article in January, and it doesn't get published until November, you probably won't see a check until December. Do you want to wait a year to get paid? Can you wait that long? This is a point you absolutely can negotiate. Ask for payment on acceptance. If this is refused, it gives you a little leverage to work with on the other issues, which are

### Kill Fees

If you get the assignment, and, for whatever reason, an editor decides not to print your article, you can negotiate for a kill fee. This is a percentage of the sale price. If you are offered \$200 to write an article, you may get a \$50 kill fee. It's a well-known fact that big publications kill articles all the time. Some editors admit to assigning 10–20% more than they could ever fit in the magazine. They do this so they can pick and choose from the final products, or so they can see how things fit once the layout is complete. Some articles will be pushed back to other issues, and some will just be trashed.

### Bios

We like them. Those are the little blurbs that often follow an article, giving short biographical information about the writer, and sometimes an e-mail address or phone number. Ask for one if you can.

### Sidebars and Photos

Those are the little factoids or columns that rest next to the main article. For example, in an article about exercise, you'll often see a little chart on the side that tells how many calories are burned by doing specific exercises (riding a bike, climbing a hill, etc.). If you can suggest sidebars, you can often get extra pay. Same goes for photos. If you've got a decent camera and a good eye, offer photos for a few extra bucks.

### To Spec or Not To Spec

Especially as a novice writer, you'll sometimes get asked to write an article on speculation. This means that you'll have to write the whole article and submit it without a contract, or any promise of payment. It's a bone of contention among professional writers, because almost no other field works this way. Its

never do the job, and then I'll decide if I feel like paying you. Only in this crazy business. Harrumph.

That said, I advise you to take spec assignments in the beginning. Once you're established, you

shouldn't need to do this, but in order to build up your resume and your clips, you need to get published. So go ahead and submit on spec, and go ahead and do a few free/nearly free pieces for the experience.

Before submitting anything, though, make sure you know in advance what the terms will be if the editor does use your piece. How much will you be paid? What rights will they buy?

Even many of the big markets have adopted the practice of requesting pieces on spec. They do this because they can get away with it. Because there are thousands of wannabe writers out there who will beg, borrow, and steal for the chance to be published. So, if you want to compete, sometimes you'll have to suck it up and accept this. Once the publication accepts one of your spec pieces, you'll be a much more likely candidate for an outright assignment next time.

### Rights to Write

There are several kinds of rights a publication may buy:

**First North American Serial Rights**The newspaper or magazine has the right to publish this piece for the first time in any periodical. All other rights belong to the writer.

**One-Time Rights**The publication buys the nonexclusive right to publish the piece once. The writer can sell the same article to other publications simultaneously.

**Second Serial Rights (or Reprint Rights)**Also nonexclusive. Gives the publication the right to reprint an article that has appeared elsewhere.

**Electronic Rights**Covers CD-ROMs, e-zines, website content, games, etc. Get in writing which electronic rights are specified— First Electronic Rights, archiving rights, etc. Most publications ask for the right to archive "indefinitely." You can try to negotiate for a fixed term (i.e., archiving rights for six months).

**All Rights**Pretty self-explanatory. You can never sell this piece to anyone else again. Try to avoid this one. Most publications ask for First Serial Rights.

**Work-For-Hire Rights**— The publication has come up with the idea and assigned it to you, and they will own it, lock, stock, and barrel. They own the copyright and don't even have to give you credit. It may be sliced, diced, repackaged, re-sold, etc., and you won't have any claim to it beyond what you were originally paid.

**TV/Motion Picture Rights**Also self-explanatory. Almost always exclusive.

### Recycling Your Big Ideas

This is the bread and butter of freelance writing. Its also called re-slanting. Once you've got the Big Idea, don't waste it by only using it once. Use the information you've gathered and come up with off-shoot ideas. Slant it to appeal to different markets.

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You're afraid because of the issue of rights that we just discussed, right? (No pun intended.) Well, you have nothing to fear, provided the new article is sufficiently different in content and intended audience. If you've managed to sell your article to a major national magazine, it is considered poor form to try to sell a re-slanted version to another national magazine.

However, if you're dealing with regional, specialized, or small publications, there should be very little overlap of intended audience. Therefore, an editor from *Alabama Aristocrats* would probably never know if you sold a re-slanted version of your piece to *Guitarists Today*. Even if they did know, they almost certainly would not care.

It is standard and accepted practice, for the simple reason that it is darn difficult to make a living as a writer. If you have the choice between making \$100 for selling your piece to one small publication, or making \$1000 by selling altered versions to eight different small publications, which would you choose?

Re-slanting an article is easy, since you've already done the bulk of the research. Scrounge up a few new quotes, and use the information you left out of the first article. Focus it on the new desired market.

For example, I could sell an article about the health benefits of meditation to a fitness magazine. A few alterations, and that same article becomes *Religions Encouraging Meditation* for my local newspapers Society pages. Then it becomes *Meditation Makes You Smarter* for the college market. Then, *Meditate Your Stress Away* for a working woman's magazine. And I didn't even mention all those new age/holistic publications. What a field day!

With just a few more questions posed to your trusted experts, you've got a whole new article. And, look! You're becoming an expert yourself. This is how you begin to find your niche a few specific subjects that you feel comfortable writing about. Ah, soon those journalists will be coming to YOU with their questions.

"The Extras"

Once you've gotten a few assignments, and feel that you've really embarked on this as a potential career (or just a part-time income-booster), you'll want to think about the little extras.

A nice touch: get yourself some nice letterhead. Splurge a little with your second or third paycheck and invest in professionally printed letterhead. Presentation does count when submitting your correspondence to an editor. Avoid cutesy clip art of quill pens and inkwells.

Also, an invoice. You should always include an invoice with your completed article. Often, the person you submit the story to is not the same person in charge of sending you a paycheck. By including an invoice, you can be reasonably assured that the billing department will have a record of what terms were agreed upon, and when they are supposed to pay you.

Receipts: Hold onto your postage receipts and your writing-related supplies. If writing is your profession, then these can be tax write-offs. Also, if you are able to negotiate it, editors will often reimburse you for any expenses you incur while on assignment once you are an established writer.

Submit your phone bill (with the reimbursable call/s circled), your book receipts, your travel expense receipts, etc. along with your invoice. Make sure these terms are specified in your contract.

You're ready? Good! Get out there and get 'em, slugger. Good luck!

Jenna Glatzer is the author of **MAKE A REAL LIVING AS A FREELANCE WRITER**, which comes with a **FREE** editors' cheat sheet directory! Check it out at

. She's also the

editor-in-chief of

, the most popular online magazine for writers.

## **Ways For A Writer To Make Money**

**By MalaMaal.com**

71 Ways For A Writer To Make Money

GENERAL WRITING:

1. Copywriting for television commercials
2. Copywriting for radio commercials
3. Copywriting for newspaper and magazine ads
4. Professional letter writing
5. Creating plots for other writers
6. Writing correspondence courses
7. Travelling writer
8. Newspaper feature writing
9. Writing for weekly tabloids
10. Writing humour
11. Writing greeting cards

12. Writing witty sayings for bumper stickers
13. Writing fillers for newspapers and magazines
14. Ghost writing
15. Script writing for movies
16. Scrip writing for television
17. Writing plays
18. Resume service
19. Writing non-fiction

**FREELANCE WRITING FOR:**

20. Daily newspapers
21. Professional journals
22. Consumer magazines
23. Confessional magazines
24. Poetry magazines
25. Fiction magazines
26. Farming-dairy-poultry- livestock journals
27. Technical journals
28. Manufacturers' trade journals
29. Retail trade journals
30. Sports magazines
31. Teenagers' magazines
32. Children's magazines
33. Gag magazines

WRITING A NEWSPAPER COLUMN ON:

34. Crafts
35. Art
36. Celebrities
37. Street interviews
38. Travelling
39. 25, 50, 100 years ago today
40. Local street names
41. Gossip column
42. Personal problems
43. Gardening
44. Cooking
45. New products
46. Child care
47. For teenagers
48. Children's question–and –answer
49. With humour and jokes
50. Sport
51. Pets
52. Shopping
53. Cars
54. Hunting and fishing
55. Do–it–yourself

PUBLISHING:

56. A newsletter
57. Sportsmen's bulletin
58. Bulletin for the handicapped
59. Apartment bulletin
60. Club bulletin
61. A tourist guide
62. Restaurant guide
63. A home–business guide
64. Part–time and free–lance help directory
65. Teachers' yearbook
66. Small newspaper
67. Magazine

MISCELLANEOUS

68. Proof reading
69. Free–lance editing
70. Become an author's agent
71. Teaching English

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