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The Writer's Dilemma: Should You Write For Free?

By Angela Booth

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Summary: If you're a professional writer, it goes against the grain to write for free. But it may just be the best move you ever made.

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The Writer's Dilemma: Should You Write For Free?

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If you're a professional writer, should you ever write for free? I used to be adamant that that way lies madness. However, I've changed my mind. Sort of.

I still believe that if you're writing for a major publication which accepts advertising, you should be paid, and paid well. If a magazine, newspaper or Web site charges thousands of dollars for advertising, they can afford to pay the writer for the

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content which delivers the eyeballs to that advertising. Without writers, there would be no advertising, and the publication wouldn't exist.

However, there are problems.

=> The problems with paying writers' markets

Here are several of the problems I've identified:

* Declining pay rates for writers. If you write for major magazines, you know that you're getting paid less today than you

were in the eighties.

* Stiff competition. You send your query in, and never hear. This is understandable. Major magazines receive hundreds of queries every week. If they replied to them all, the staff would never get anything else done.

* Editor churn. Even ten years ago, if you sold to a major magazine, you formed a relationship with the editor. You sold her other pieces over the next year or two. Nowadays you're lucky if the editor is still with the magazine when the issue with your article in it hits the newsstands.

* Slow payment in tough times. Even with pay on acceptance markets, you may wait months for your check.

* Wasting time. You can spend days wracking your brain and researching, to find the perfect story for a particular market, and then receive the reply, thanks, but: "We're running a story on that in our next issue" or "We've just signed a writer for that".

What's the upshot of all these problems? If you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen. I've turned to copywriting, that is, writing for businesses, rather than put up with the hassles of writing for magazines.

=> The benefits of writing for free

It makes sense to write for free if you're being paid in other ways.

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For example, as promotion. My sister and I have just partnered in a new Web site Digital—e —— Info to Go:

<http://www.digital—e.biz/> .

I've been happily writing articles to promote the site for a few weeks now. I send my articles out far and wide and hope that ezine editors and Web site owners will publish them for free. It's not really writing for free, it's quid pro quo because in exchange for using my articles, the publications include my Resource Box, which includes a link to my site.

However, beyond promotion, I've discovered other benefits of writing for free.

* You write more. This is pressure—free writing. You get to write what you like, when you like.

* You get more ideas. All this keyboard—tapping is making me more creative. I've got pages and pages of notes for articles, books, and courses.

* You enjoy writing more. It's been years since I enjoyed writing this much. Why? Because it's more play than writing.

* You're pioneering new ways for writers to make a living from writing.

=> You, the writer, as pioneer

The Internet turns writers into pioneers. You get to discover new ways to make a living from your craft. Is this easy? No. Is it fascinating? You bet.

I first became aware of the Internet in 1993–1994. In those days, getting an Internet connection was an adventure. I finally got a free connection, set it up with lots of help (there's nothing as unforgiving as a Unix command line), and discovered online bulletin boards.

Within months, I had a CompuServe account and the real adventure began. I couldn't believe the possibilities. I still can't.

There's a revolution going on. Thanks to the Internet, writers are discovering new ways to make money. They're publishing their

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books as ebooks, setting up subscription Web sites, and subscription ezines.

They get started in this adventure by writing "for free". As their following builds, they sell their work to the people who know them and trust what they have to say.

* These writers built this trust by writing for free.*

Can you make money from ebooks? You work it out. If you write an ebook on a hot topic, it takes you a month or so to write. You sell it online for \$20. You sell 200 (let's be conservative). Not bad pay for a month's work.

If you're writing professionally, it takes a change in perspective to write and not get paid for it. At least, not in a way you're used to being paid.

But writing for free can help you to discover how creative you really are.

Resource box: if using, please include

Author and copywriter Angela Booth crafts words for your business. Words to sell, educate or persuade. Contact her today for a free quote:

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Australian author, journalist and copywriter Angela Booth has been writing professionally for over twenty years. She writes business books and copy for businesses.

Thawing Your Writer's Block

By Mary Anne Hahn

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When I go through bouts of writer's block, my fingers stiffen,

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and my brain goes as blank as the snowy screen of a television on the fritz.

I don't know about you, but I picture writer's block as something cold—like the frozen engine of a car in the dead of winter, or the way your PC sometimes "freezes up" on you when your system gets too busy.

Looking at it that way actually helps to overcome it. Rather than feeling like you are grasping at fog, visualizing writer's block as something three-dimensional can provide you with both the strength to confront it, and the weapons to conquer it.

How can you thaw your writer's block of ice? Try any or all of the following:

1. Chip away at it. No need to write "War and Peace" in one sitting; Tolstoy certainly didn't. Fifteen minutes a day are all you need to give your writing dream some life and structure. Use them to write anything, anything at all—as many article ideas as you can think of, a synopsis of a story idea, a climactic scene in your novel, a limerick, a character sketch, step by step instructions for making the perfect omelet or what you would do if you won the lottery.

Have some fun with these 15-minute exercises, and you'll probably rediscover the truth in the adage that "time flies" when you do.

2. Light a match to it. By this I mean, don't think about the fact that you are not currently writing; rather, think about why you ever wanted to be a writer in the first place. Better yet, *write* about why you want to be a writer. Do you have stories burning inside you that need to be told? Or do you see writing as your key to personal fulfillment or freedom? Melt away writer's block by reigniting your passion for writing—the old daydreams, the past feelings of triumph or accomplishment when you finished a piece of work.

3. Carve a sculpture out of it. If you simply can't break it down or melt it away, make something from your writer's block of ice. As I did above, write about how you feel when you experience writer's

block, or what you think writer's block looks like. Maybe look for humor in it ("What did one writer's block say to the other?" "Nothing—it couldn't find the right words!" Okay, that's a bit lame, but you get the idea).

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Whenever writer's block tries to come between you and your writing aspirations, don't try to avoid it. Instead, face it head on. Play with it, laugh at it, scoff at it, or befriend it. Make it something that you can take into your hands and deal with.

Turn it into one more tool that you can use to achieve your writing success.

Mary Anne Hahn is editor and publisher of "WriteSuccess," THE biweekly ezine of ideas, information and inspiration for writers. To subscribe, <mailto:writesuccess-subscribe@yahoogroups.com>



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