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Writer's Rip-Offs

By Angela Booth

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Summary: Writers are prime targets for scammers. Here's how to avoid the most common scams.

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People who want to write form a huge market. According to Writer's Digest magazine, ten per cent of the US population want to be writers, and I assume that the numbers are similar in other countries.

And where there's a market, there are scams. All over the world, you can see vultures' eyeballs light up with dollar signs, can't you?

If you're an aspiring writer, you can avoid becoming fodder for vultures very easily. All you need to remember is: *writers get paid to write*.

Let's look at some of the most common scams.

=> The "We're Looking For New Writers" Scam

Professional hard-working agents and editors don't need to look for new writers. Ever. They don't have the time, because as soon as they hang out their shingle, writers find them. This applies to book and screenplay agents, and magazine, book, and Web site editors. Once writers find them, there aren't enough hours in the

day to read, advise, and make deals for the writers on their lists.

So when you read "we're looking for new writers" a big warning light should go for you. This is your signal to run as fast as you can in the opposite direction.

If the person displaying "we're looking for new writers" purports to be agent, it means that there's a rip-off involved. Usually the so-called agent will ask you for money. Perhaps to edit your book, or to send your manuscript to editors, or some other silly reason. Remember Writers Get Paid To Write.

A legitimate agent may ask you to cover out of pocket expenses, like photocopying and messenger fees before she signs a deal for you. I don't approve, to be honest. Fees like this are just the cost of doing business, and if the agent wants to represent you, she should cover them. (Ask yourself whether you really want an agent who can't cover her own office fees.) However, some legit agents do ask new clients who aren't earning to cover these charges. I'd recommend that if you're asked, you tell the agent to take them out of the first deal she makes for you. Up to \$100 in expenses is reasonable.

If a magazine or a Web site displays "we're looking for new writers", come on. This is the publication's way of getting free content. If you're an established, published writer, and you're using this venue to promote yourself, then you may want to use the venue in a quid quo pro fashion. I send out free articles almost daily to Web sites so that I get a higher profile on the Web, and to promote Digital-e.

But if you're a new writer what "we're looking for new writers" means at a magazine or Web site is: "we don't pay money". Of course you need clips, but write for venues which pay. Your clips will mean more. If you're a new writer, you can't afford to write for free ---- you won't learn anything. And you can't afford to write for promotion, because you have nothing to promote.

=> The "Contest Entry Free" Scam

Stay away from contests run by people and organizations you've never heard of.

Not all contests are scams. Some writer's organizations run contest for their members, and charge a small entry fee, and these are legitimate. If you're a member of a large writer's organization, or buy a writer's magazine, and they're running a contest, relax, enter, have fun with it, and good luck.

One proviso: make sure that you get something out of your entry. Will an editor from a large publishing house request a submission from you if you win? Will you win money? (Remember: *writers get paid to write*.)

However, if it's a contest run by an organization you've never heard of, and they want you to pay \$25, \$50 or \$100 dollars, and assure you that your poem or short story will appear in a book of "Best" entries at some date in the future, and this is your great opportunity to see your work in print, ignore them. It's a scam.

=> The "Book Editor or Book Doctor" Scam

Never pay for editing. Never pay for a book doctor.

Remember: *writers get paid to write*.

When you sell a book to a publisher, they pay the editor. That's why you approach major publishers, because they hire good editors. A good editor is a writer's dream, because a good editor can make your work much better, and can thereby teach you to become a better writer. Being edited is painful, but it's a huge opportunity to learn.

If you've sold a book to a publisher, and your editor feels that the book needs major structural help, your editor may hire a book doctor, after consultation with you. A book doctor can help turn

an already good book into a great book.

However, again, remember: *writers get paid to write*. You don't pay for the book doctor. The publishing house pays, up front. They may want to deduct the book doctor's fees from your royalties, and you can negotiate that with them. But you pay nothing up front. You're doing the writing, remember, and after the book doctor has recommended revisions, YOU are the one who'll need to write those revisions.

If you're an unpublished writer, have no agent and no publisher, and someone calls themselves a book doctor or editor and wants money from you, tell them to take a hike. You get edited for free, once you sell your book.

=> The "Vanity Publishing" Scam

Vanity publishing is when you pay a publisher to publish your book. Generally thousands of dollars. The vanity publisher assures you your book will be reviewed, and will be in all the book stores. He's lying.

Self-publishing on the other hand, is legitimate. If you're self-publishing, you pay a printer a few thousand dollars to print a thousand books, which you intend to sell yourself, either on your Web site, or by traveling around book stores with the books in the trunk of your car, or by selling at fairs, or when you give talks, or when you give a seminar. If you self-publish, more power to you. Self-publishing is a time-honored tradition, and many writers have taken the self-publishing route to fame and fortune.

Vanity publishing is different. In vanity publishing, the publisher assures you that as well as arranging to have your book printed, the company will distribute it. If you hear this, you're about to get scammed. Run. Remember *writers get paid to write*.

How do you know you're being ripped off? Remember: *writers get paid to write*. If you don't get paid real money, you may be getting scammed.

How do you foil the rip-off merchants? Some ways:

* Write a lot, every day. You learn to write by writing;

* Trust your instincts, but use the Internet, especially Google.com, to check out people (agents, publishers, editors) you intend going into business with ---- remember, publishing is a business, not a charity;

* Learn something new every day;

* Love writing. If you love writing enough, all the rip-offs in the world can't hurt you.

Good luck with your writing.

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Writer, journalist and author Angela Booth has been writing for print and online venues for over 25 years. She also writes 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, 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).

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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