

# Writers' Camp

BY JENNY ROUGH

While We're  
On the Subject,  
Here's What  
Your Freelancers  
Really Want, too.

TWO AND A HALF years ago, I waltzed out of a law office and into a new career as a freelance writer. Despite that I held a JD and had five years of legal experience under my belt, when it came to journalism I was as green as a baby tree frog. I wasn't sure how to craft a query, didn't understand pitching protocol and had never heard terms like galley, FOB or masthead, not to mention I was without a single industry contact.

For guidance, I read articles—written by editors—offering tips for freelance writers. While I found the advice helpful, I also sensed a communication gap. I agree that writers should familiarize themselves with a publication before pitching, but I wonder if editors have ever attempted to page through their own magazine's back issues at the library. Small publications often aren't in stock. Larger publications are often missing, or if there, ripped to pieces with gum stuck between the pages. I'm not making excuses; I simply want to share a perspective from our side of the desk. And I sincerely thank editors who keep online archives. At the risk of hopping onto a very delicate branch, I collected thoughts from nearly 30 freelance writers who offered these tips to editors:

**RESPOND TO QUERIES—EVEN IF THE ANSWER IS “NO”** By far the biggest pet peeve among writers is unresponsive editors. We want replies to our pitches, even if they're negative. Crafting pitches is time-consuming, and a quick acknowledgment doesn't necessarily mean deciding

on the spot whether you'll buy a piece. I work with one editor who will often say, “Run this idea by me again in a month.” She also says that I'm free to try to place it elsewhere (in fact, at times she's so altruistic that she'll suggest a specific venue). Even though she may not bite, I'm grateful to know where I stand. Bill Becher, a Los Angeles-based photographer and writer, used to work as an editor and believes it's doable to send a professional reply to everyone. “It's a simple business courtesy to respond to all pitches, especially when they come by e-mail,” Becher says. “It takes only a few seconds to hit reply and type ‘no thanks.’ I suspect that a magazine's IT department could write a macro that can do this with a keystroke—call it ‘one-click rejection slip.’”

**OFFER GUIDANCE** In addition to e-mail responses, we like deadlines. And word counts. Such guidelines give us direction. “Sooner rather than later,” isn't a deadline; it's confusing. “I have an editor who keeps deadlines open, and it's pretty much a guarantee that I'll put off the assignment,” one freelance writer admits. As far as article direction, balancing a publication's needs and a writer's creativity can be a delicate act. “One editor I work with is very specific, and I prefer it,” says Carissa Sutherland, a part-time writer. “In the end, I give her what she wants and I'm edited less, allowing more of me to come through in my writing.” Regardless of whether an article's angle is writer-driven or editor-driven, one New York-based freelancer says, “There's nothing worse than being assigned a piece, agreeing on the angle, only to have the editor come back to you and tell you that they've rethought it and need you to take another angle. Um, if you're going to pay me to rewrite it, that's fine. Otherwise, it isn't.”

**WORK OUR VOICE** “The greatest editors don't try to wedge my work into something that sounds like what they are accustomed to; rather, they work to my voice,” says Amy Friedman, a columnist

who has also worked on the editorial side of the desk. Editors have their own ideas, and it is fine to steer writers and make our voice sound best, Friedman adds, but “when editors don’t realize that writers sweat blood for just one sentence—and it’s something editors should understand because it’s what they do, too—I want to scream.” In particular, she mentions an editor who understands this concept. He has worked with voices as different as her own, Garry Trudeau and Ann Landers, and “He gets that he’s working to make the best of each of us.”

**SEND A GALLEY** Let us read final copy. Giving writers the opportunity to see changes editors make before publication is helpful (for both parties), because editing copy can inadvertently make the piece factually incorrect. “Sometimes an editor might read or interpret something in the wrong way, so their changes are based on what they believe to be true, not what I actually reported,” says one anonymous writer. “Or they might be trying to cut down on words, so they replace what I’ve written, but then it slightly—or not-so-slightly—changes the meaning.” For first-person pieces, seeing the galley allows us to note if an editor has altered language and used words we would never say. If so, it gives us an opportunity to substitute the phrase with vocabulary that sounds more like us.

**KEEP THE CONTRACT IN CHECK** When I was in the legal field, I spent two years almost exclusively buried in contracts. If there’s one thing I learned during the drafting, reviewing and negotiating of these legal documents, it’s this: Contracts are over-lawyered to death and they don’t need to be. In most cases, a simple one-page agreement laying out the assignment topic, deadline, word count, rights purchased and pay will suffice. Most importantly, the terms should be reasonable. For example, it’s one thing to hold writers responsible if we libel someone, but it’s not acceptable to hold writers responsible for editors’ errors.

**PAY US** Writers agree: Too many publications offer abysmal pay rates. Maybe we need to negotiate higher fees, but

publications also need to stop paying peanuts. One of my first assignments involved co-authoring a book. I was so excited about the project that I (stupidly) said I’d write my half for free. The client considered my suggestion, looked into my eyes and said, “I believe in the concept of *quantum meruit* [as much as deserved].” Then, he offered \$10,000. He did the right thing. Publishers should offer fair compensation, as well as reimburse us for expenses. If you require photos to accompany the article, factor that into the fee. Writers have mortgages to pay, groceries to buy and kids to put through college. Payment in the form of promises to “link” us or promote us “like crazy” doesn’t cover those bills. Speaking of bills, “if there’s someone we’re supposed to hound for payment besides you, let us know who that person is and how we can contact him or her,” one freelance writer says.

**BE HONEST ABOUT BACKLOG** A travel writer once told me she sold a piece to a parenting magazine and then found out, after the article was finalized, the fee negotiated and the contract signed, that the publication had a three-year backlog for the column. The magazine paid well—on publication. Waiting 36 months for the writer’s invoice to be processed for work she’d already completed wasn’t feasible, and, fortunately, the writer was able to void the contract, submit her piece elsewhere and amicably part ways with the editor. Obviously, evergreen content may be pushed out longer than timely inventory, but simply being forthcoming about backlog and when a piece will run can save both parties a lot of headache.

**MAKE YOUR EDITORIAL CALENDAR ACCESSIBLE** Writer’s guidelines, editorial calendars, information about which sections are exclusively staff-written and which are open to freelance contributors—this is a wealth of knowledge to writers and we appreciate it when it’s readily available, such as posted on the magazine’s website. “Knowing what magazines need at a given time is extremely helpful when developing pitches,” says freelancer Nora Zelevansky. Writer Beth Morrissey concurs: “Make it easy for us to please you and we’ll happily

agree.” Once an article is assigned, style guides are helpful, too, Morrissey notes, because style preferences can vary from publication to publication.

**PROMOTE US** Including a small write-up and accompanying photo on a contributors’ page is ideal for writers, but even a one sentence bio line is greatly appreciated. Bio lines are beneficial to writers because it gives us the chance to market ourselves by listing our websites, promoting our books and mentioning other articles. But bio lines are also beneficial to the magazine’s readers because they personalize the article and help the reader connect with the author.

**PITCH US, TOO** Oftentimes, “Editors are awfully demanding without equal reciprocation,” one anonymous writer confesses. When it comes to drumming up article ideas, many writers agree that both sides should be engaged in serving and receiving. “I love it when editors assign me stuff,” says Amy Nazarov, a Washington DC-based freelance writer. “I wouldn’t expect it off the bat, but after I’ve, say, pitched 10 stories and written five for one editor, it’s nice when it turns into a two-way street and ideas start coming from her side.”

**GIVE PRAISE (AND A COPY OF THE PUB)** “Great job!” “Perfect!” “Nice work!” These phrases are music to our ears. Of course, it’s necessary to give honest feedback and call attention to our mistakes, but don’t forget to let us know when we’ve done a good job, too. “Writers spend an awful lot of their time getting rejected, so it really brightens our day—and attitude—to know when we’ve delivered exactly what you expected,” says Allison Winn Scotch, a New York-based freelance writer. Finally, adds one writer, “When our articles run, it would be absolutely fantastic if editors sent us a copy of the magazine.” **[FPO]**

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