

# Freelance Survival Tactics

How to maintain independence, uphold standards, and have food on the table—at the same time.

I'M one of a small band of crazies—fewer than 1,000 nationwide—who make our living as freelance writers, producing and hawking our wares as talents permit and markets dictate. Yet my labors and the problems I confront are not so different from those of millions of other Americans who work for themselves. In the struggle for independence, we are all freelancers.

The life of a freelance can be chronicled in rhyme. He or she seeks romance . . . often takes a chance . . . affects an independent stance . . . awaits invitations to the dance . . . sometimes prefers to live in France.

The term “freelance” goes back to feudal times when a roving knight might rent out his spear and skills to the highest bidder. As a rule the knight was short on cash and long on pride. His loyalties were inner-directed rather than institutional; he was part of the lonely crowd.

According to my 1928 *Webster's International*, a freelance is one “who acts on his own responsibility without regard to party lines or deference to authority, as a writer who assails now one party or set of opinions, and now another. . . .”

Wielding a free lance in the Middle Ages probably entailed the same glories and heartaches that it does today. In theory, the knight could go around slaying whatever dragons caught his eye or incurred his displeasure. He could protect the weak, defend heretics and rescue damsels in distress.

In practice, though, the poor fellow had to make a living with his spear—to sting for his supper—which meant that the wars he fought and the enemies he impaled were not always of his choosing. The lord of the manor, with his

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bagful of gold doubloons, set the agenda and aimed the spear. One can be certain that the castle proprietor granted his reluctant vassal as little leeway as possible. “I’ll supply the ideas,” he might have told his knight. “You just put them into wars.”

Freelancers can still go pretty far just by repeating or cleaning up other people’s ideas, especially the ideas of power and wealth. Years ago I was offered \$30,000 plus expenses and royalties to write a small book about the Shell Oil company. The only problem I had with the proposition was that it’d been made by the Shell Oil company. I turned down the offer, but its size served to confirm some advice I’d been

given once by an elderly freelancer as we sat side-by-side in a dingy Philadelphia barroom. “Son,” he said, “never charge a client what you think you’re worth. Charge him what you think *he’s* worth.”

The trick in freelancing is to hold one’s convictions dear, along with one’s standards of excellence, even if compelled to sell one’s talents cheap. William Allen White said it was the duty of an editorial writer to convert “his private prejudices into public issues,” but White owned the *Emporia (Kansas) Gazette*, a convenient medium for his message. And he had friends in high places. Theodore Roosevelt became his boom companion; Herbert Hoover was a frequent house guest in Emporia.

By way of contrast, the beginning writer’s professional assets are likely to be restricted to a ream of recycled paper (speckled), an old typewriter (the “r” sticks), and one or two dubious connections in the publishing world. Most of the bully pulpits in America are occupied by the rich and their servants. That is why freelancers, whatever their vocations, often come in out of the cold. They get jobs in corporations or in government agencies and live happily, if unadventurously, ever after. Chance helped me to do it the other way around. I had newspaper jobs in Chicago and magazine jobs in New York. Then I ventured out into the cold.

My break came in 1962 when a shrewd publisher mercifully fired me. The event shook me up—I’ve never been much good at judging my own performance—and I had no idea what to do next. My wife came to the rescue.

"You keep saying you're a writer," Diane insisted. "Why don't you try it?" She apparently preferred a happy spouse to a full larder.

Well, why not? A friend in New York told me to go see Howard Cohen, the editor of *Pageant Magazine*. *Pageant*, you may recall, was a digest-size, low-budget monthly that ran about three-dozen short articles each issue. I discovered later that Howard's problem was finding passable writers willing to work at the magazine's niggardly rates. Beginners were welcome.

At Howard's request, I wrote down five paragraphs, each embodying a different article idea, and mailed them in. When I called on him a few weeks later—taking a rickety freight elevator up to his attic-like office—Howard immediately dismissed all five ideas, but he suggested a sixth. "Have you ever thought about Asian flu?" he asked.

"Lots of times," I said, sniffing an assignment.

"Would you be willing to write about it?" When I assented, Howard smiled for the first time. It was a grin of gratitude. "I've spent two years trying to persuade somebody to write this piece," he confided. "You're the first person who's shown any interest."

"Any interest" was surely an understatement. I was wild about Asian flu.

It took me two months to complete the research and write the article (2500 words). The fee was \$300. If I continued at that blistering pace for a full year, I would earn \$1800.

The lessons to be learned from that experience were manifold. First, beggars and acolytes can't be choosers. Howard was lord of the manor. He could point my spear in any direction he chose.

Second, it wasn't a foolish direction. Asian flu may not have been my highest priority, but at least it was an honorable subject. The article did no one any harm; it even provided one or two useful pieces of information. Unlike knights of yore, today's freelancers cannot afford to wait for the next Crusade to come along. They have to keep working and earning. Just doing no evil is sometimes good enough—and it's harder than you might think.

Third, editors are like everyone else: they have their peculiarities, their endearments, their little obsessions. Freelancers should relax long enough to find out what's likeable about their clients, and what their clients really want. (I liked Howard a lot.)

Fourth, I shouldn't have taken so

long to finish the assignment, though the excessive amount of time was understandable: being a beginner, I was afraid to risk a mistake, an awkward phrase, a misplaced semi-colon. What I lacked was a sense of proportion. After all, Howard was getting paid to clean up my prose and spare me any large embarrassments. And my piece was only one of 432 that *Pageant* would publish that year alone. In short, freelancers and other solitary producers for commercial markets can starve from feelings of self-importance.

Fifth, the most difficult lesson of all: the article I was so proud of then strikes me now, on rereading, as barely adequate. From this I conclude that beginners seldom exceed their contractors' expectations. They show more promise than competence. I also conclude, happily, that the more one writes, the better one writes. There is no substitute for on-the-job practice. Merely talking about writing won't do. I know—I've tried it.

Finally, inept as I seemed, I'd already had the benefit of several years' journalistic experience—not a bad way to begin. Those early jobs permitted me to learn the rudiments of my craft and to make mistakes at other people's expense. Budding entrepreneurs take note: the road to independence is paved with apprenticeships.

Freelancers depend for sustenance and consolation on strangers and loved ones alike. I am in perpetual debt, for instance, to the trio that liberated my modest Muse: Diane, Howard and the man who fired me. The only way I know of repaying them is to keep trying to write clean sentences that approach the truth. It's a calling like any other, which is to say that it is socially useful once in awhile. Writers can't reform society any more readily than can artists, plumbers or computer programmers, but if they keep spotlighting its defects, society may occasionally feel bound to reform itself.

Because freelancers think they can do well by doing good, they are highly exploitable. While the cost of living has steadily climbed, writers' fees have remained depressingly stable. Editors tend to shower their writers with praise

rather than coin. They get away with it because there are so many writers and so few outlets for their work. Besides, the praise is welcome.

If the fees seldom fluctuate, the number of assignments can vary sharply and distressingly. They range from floodtide to drought. The prudent freelancer will devise antidotes for this feast-or-famine syndrome. An editorial consultantship, a part-time rewrite job, a monthly column in a periodical—these and similar retainers can provide a hedge against those arid stretches when the telephone never seems to ring; and, on those rare occasions when one's cup runneth over, they can give a writer the courage to say no to an editor offering still another assignment.

An assignment, in any case, can create as many fiscal problems as it solves, especially if the job entails travel. As often as not the writer must pay for the travel out of his own exchequer, getting reimbursed only after his manuscript has been accepted. This odd arrangement requires a certain amount of financial wizardry. Credit cards and checkbooks must be judiciously juggled. I know of one east coast freelancer who opened a checking account with a bank in Honolulu; that way she got two weeks of grace before her checks cleared.

From time to time some of us talk of organizing a union that might generate bargaining power in editorial offices throughout the land. But it is probably just a dream. For one thing, many writers double as editors, making them simultaneously the exploiters and the exploited. For another, freelancers and their markets seem too varied and dispersed to meet the demands of solidarity. Where would we organize? Against whom would we strike?

Finally, it must be admitted that the freelance temperament, with its delusions of knight-errantry, is unpromising union material. The knight-errant, says my trusty dictionary, "traveled in search of adventures in which to exhibit military skill, prowess and generosity." I can't speak for our prowess and skill, but when you consider our ratio of earnings to effort, our generosity seems beyond dispute. □

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