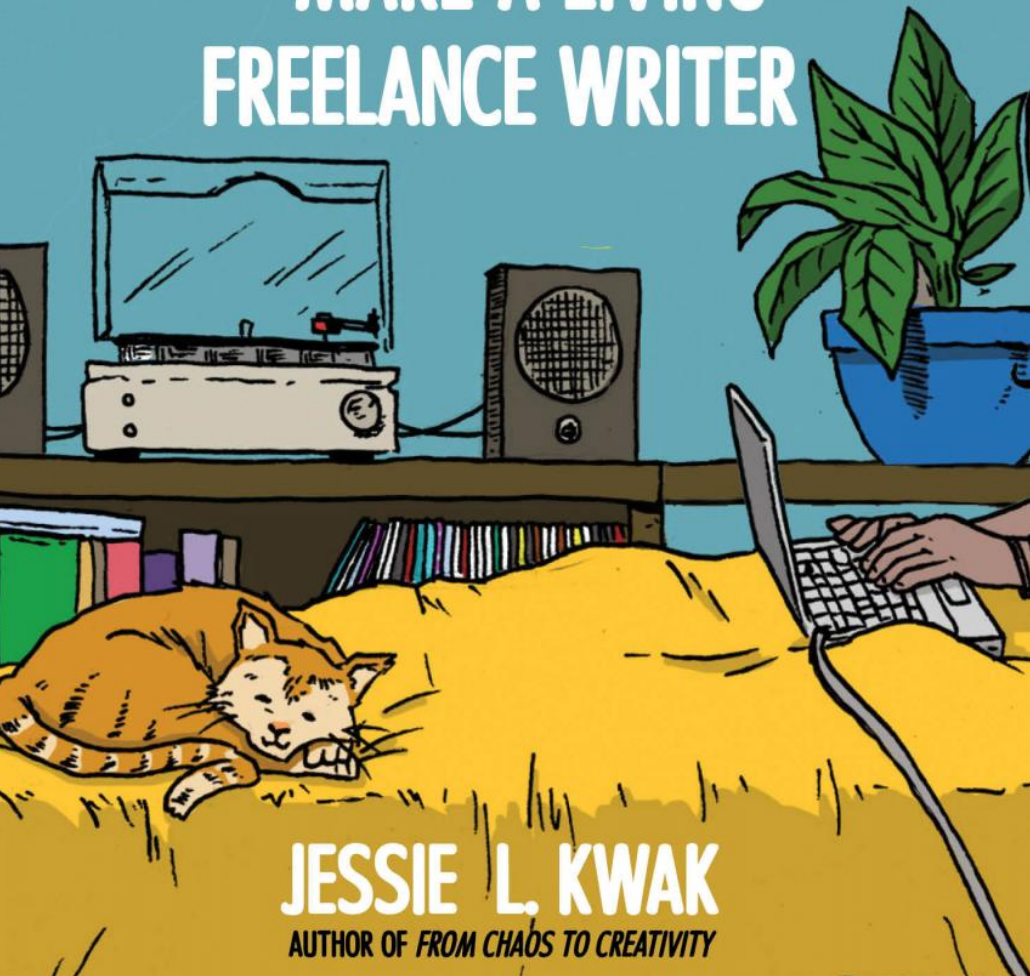
From DREAM *to* REALITY

HOW TO MAKE A LIVING AS A FREELANCE WRITER



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From DREAM *to* REALITY

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21
22
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From Dream to Reality

How to Make a Living as a Freelance Writer

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Microcosm Publishing
Portland, OR | Cleveland, OH

FROM DREAM TO REALITY
How to Make a Living as a Freelance Writer

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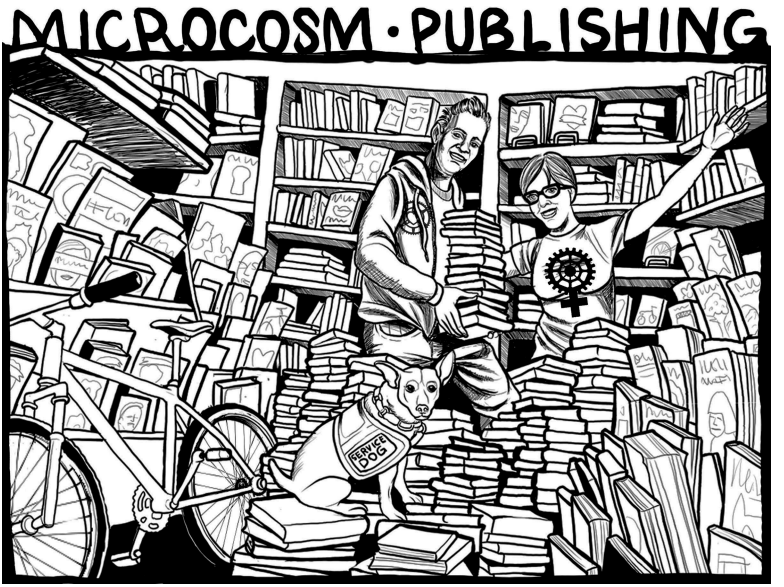

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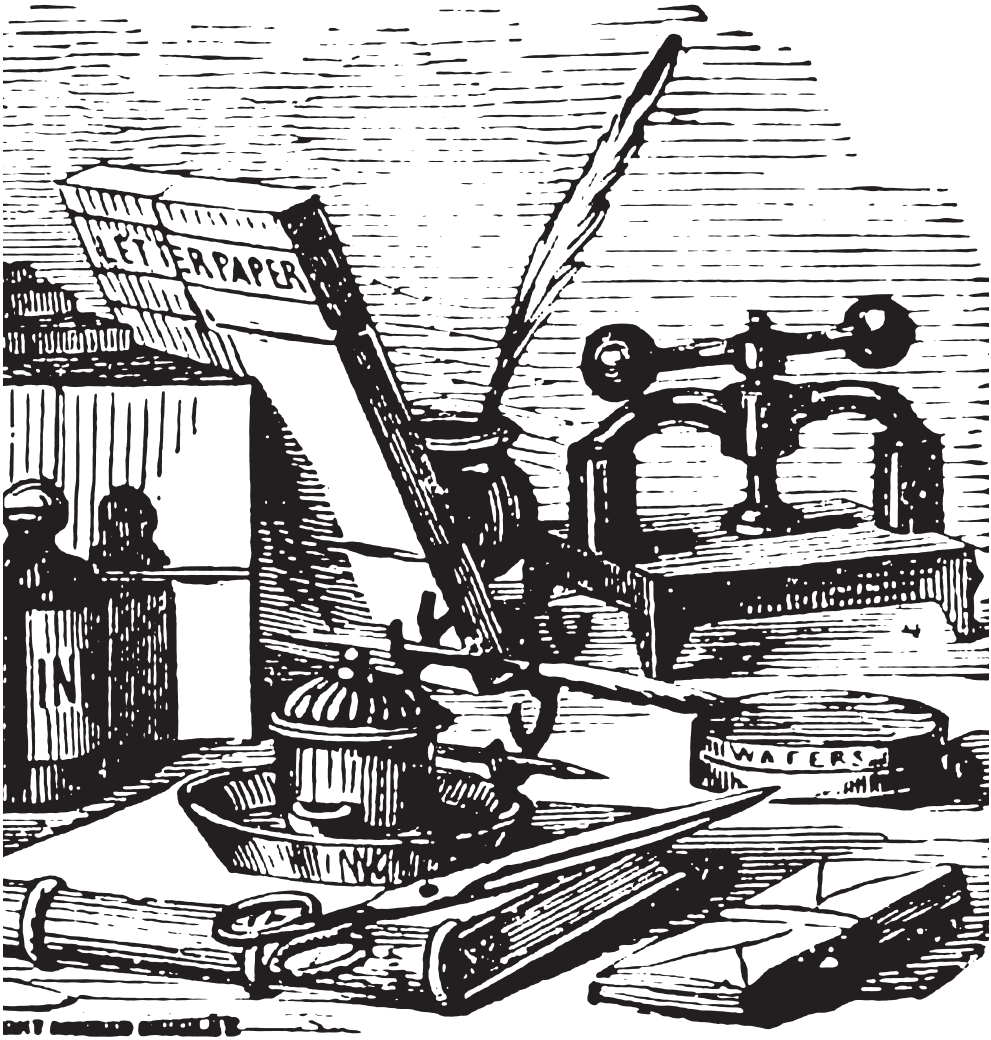
LETTER PAPER
WATERS

Or maybe you're freelance-curious and want to test the waters. Either way, I can understand why. On the surface, freelancing sounds like a magical job: You get to set your own hours, choose your own clients, and work from anywhere. And you know what? It *is* a magical job. I love what I do, I love my clients, and I love my schedule.

My business is pretty well established now, but even in those scrappy early years when the hustle was real, you couldn't have paid me enough to trade the wild roller coaster of freelancing for a desk job.

I'm just one of those people who was born a bit feral. You might call me unemployable.

Maybe you are, too, and that's why you picked up this book.

Welcome! I'm so glad you're here.

This book is essentially an expanded version of the spiel I give when a friend buys me a beer and asks me to explain to them what I do. My goal is to give you all the know-how to start a freelance copywriting business, get your first clients, and grow beyond the hungry chaos days to a place where you're living the life you'd like.

To be clear, in this book I'm talking about freelance business writing and its various sub-niches. I won't be covering how to break into journalism or magazine writing, or how to make a living with your own writing as an influencer or thought leader—those just aren't my areas of expertise. Journalists, magazine writers, and others will find plenty of useful tidbits in this book, but I can't help you with the nitty-gritty of those types of freelance career.

Why should you listen to me?

I've been a freelance copywriter for around ten years, which—in my opinion—puts me in the sweet spot for giving advice to new writers. Talk with somebody who's been freelancing twenty-five years, and her advice for finding your first clients probably isn't going to be applicable. Talk to someone who's been freelancing for only a couple of years, and their tactics aren't well-

tested. They haven't quite weathered enough ebbs and flows—nor can they talk you through the challenges of pivoting and maturing your business.

Since I started freelancing, I've dabbled in a few different writing niches, including product copywriting, blogging, website copy, search engine optimized (SEO) keyword copy, email marketing, brand journalism, content marketing, and ghostwriting. I've written in industries that sound as glamorous as travel and beer and design! And industries that sound boring as hell, like digital asset management and accounting software. I've written for business-to-consumer (B2C) and business-to-business (B2B) clients. I've written for tiny companies, Fortune 500 enterprises, nonprofits, and government organizations. I've worked for agencies, and I've been solo.[1]

I didn't start out wanting to be a freelance copywriter, though.

Ever since I wrote my first novel by hand in middle school, I knew I wanted to be a novelist. I went to university and got an English Literature degree—but I wasn't sure what to do next. I kept hearing that if I

1 Don't worry if that sounds like a lot of terms to know. We're going to talk about the wide world of freelance writing niches in the next chapter.

wanted to make a living as a writer, I should get an MFA. How would that help me make a living? Well, I was told I could teach in an MFA program!

I wanted to be a writer, not a teacher, so I skipped the MFA. I spent a few years working on my novel while traveling and waiting tables, and I exercised my English degree with the occasional pro bono writing gig for various nonprofits and theater groups.

Eventually, I decided I should start using the degree I was still paying off. I mentioned looking for a writing job to one of the regulars at the bar where I worked. Turns out, she'd been a copywriter for Expedia in a past career.

Copywriter? I asked, immediately conjuring up images of sellout writers dashing out direct mail campaigns for sleazy marketing companies. I was an English Major, I thought snobbily. Not some Communications Major hack.

The way she explained her job at Expedia, though, it sounded fun. Writing blog posts about travel while earning way more than I was at the bar? Why hadn't anyone told me this was an option?

She helped me put together a portfolio, cover letters, and a résumé, and talked me through interviewing for copywriting jobs. With her coaching, I landed my first real writing job: A full-time gig writing product copy for a children's catalog company called Chasing Fireflies.

I was ecstatic. What could be better than sitting around all day writing pithy descriptions of absolutely adorable children's clothing, books about dinosaurs, and light-up sneakers?

There was only one downside. The "sitting around all day" part.

After a few months, it occurred to me there was a very good reason I hadn't had a desk job before the age of thirty: I hate them. I didn't like being on someone else's schedule. I didn't like that I couldn't ever work from home. I didn't like reporting to someone else, or asking for time off rather than just calling around to coworkers to see who would switch shifts with me.

And, worst of all, my own fiction writing was suffering because my most creative time was being taken up writing someone else's words.

But I loved copywriting.

I started looking into freelancing. I took a few odd jobs here and there, mostly blogging and writing articles for tiny magazines. Eventually, I built up enough of a side stream of income that it was too much work for me to do while keeping a full-time job. I went down to two days a week at the desk job and picked up a gig at a local Mexican restaurant to fill in the gaps as my freelance business caught on.

Eventually, my husband and I moved from Seattle to Portland, and the safety net—maybe I should call it a security blanket—of waiting tables was gone.

I was on my own, in a new city, ready to sink or swim as a full-time freelancer. I picked up a couple of applications from local restaurants, just in case. All these years later, I've still never dropped them off.

Is Freelance Writing For You?

I'm guessing you picked up this book because you're in the same boat I was—whether itching to do something with your love of writing, or bridling at your day job. You're curious if a freelance writing career is for you.

It might just be.

Running a freelance copywriting business has its challenges and rewards. Not knowing where your next paycheck is coming from is nerve wracking. The ups and downs of landing a great gig one day and getting turned down by your dream client the next can wreak havoc on your sense of self. Finding the motivation to do the work when no one is standing over your shoulder can be tough.

There are the logistical challenges, too. As a business owner, you'll encounter bureaucratic red tape that you get to remain blissfully unaware of when you work for someone else—and in the U.S. our tax and healthcare systems are set up to incentivize you to be an employee rather than an entrepreneur.

On the other hand, you can work from anywhere! You can set your own hours! You get to pick your clients, and because projects are always changing you will rarely get bored.

You can make really good money as a freelance copywriter, too. It might not happen overnight, but it's totally possible to make a six-figure, full-time income as a freelance copywriter. I average around $60,000 each year from the freelance side of my business, which takes

up around 50 percent of my work week. Most seasoned freelancers I know charge at least $80 to $100 per hour, and even when I was fresh out of the gate, the lowest-paying hourly jobs I took paid me $35 per hour.[2]

All that to say, this is a completely viable career option—but being a freelance writer is not for everyone. It requires a certain level of comfortability with the swings of fortune. It requires decent writing skills, of course, along with a thick skin when your work gets torn apart by clients and editors. It requires you to make your own luck and to learn how to lasso the muse and bribe her with coffee. It requires you to put in some long, often frustrating hours.

If there's one thing I want you to know about freelance writing, it's this: You're not just changing jobs, you're becoming a business owner. Being a good writer with a thick skin is only a piece of the puzzle. More than that you'll need to develop all of the accounting, invoicing, marketing, forecasting, sales, and other business skills that go along with starting a business.

Still with me?

2 We'll do a deep dive on setting rates in a later chapter.

Awesome. This book is meant to do more than inform you about your options—my goal is to get you kickstarted into action. At the end of every chapter, you'll find a Take Action section that rounds up the main action steps for each chapter. Think of them as mini homework assignments to get your freelance business off the ground.

Let's dive in.

CHAPTER 1: WELCOME TO THE WIDE WORLD OF FREELANCE WRITING

The backs of cereal boxes. Billboard advertisements. Those flavor text quotes on board games. Greeting cards. Electronics manuals. Wherever you see words, it's likely that someone got paid to write them.

That person could have been an in-house copywriter, but it's equally likely that those words were written by a freelance writer.

If you're just starting out, this should be an exciting prospect! After all, there are literally hundreds of different business writing paths to choose from. But it can also be a bit overwhelming, so I'm going to start us out by breaking down the different types of specialties to help you find a direction that sounds interesting to you.

Choosing a Niche

If you're like many freelancers, you'll probably start your career as a generalist, writing about a wide range of industries and in a wide range of styles. As your career matures, you'll probably start niching down into the Venn diagram sweet spot of your expertise, your skill set, and what lights you up.

You'll start to find your niche: a specialization in industry/topic, content type, or—most commonly—a combination of those two.

For example, I have two niches.

1. Ghostwriting business books for coaches and consultants.

2. Content marketing (blog posts, e-books, case studies, newsletters, white papers) for business-to-business (B2B) software-as-a-service (SaaS) companies.[3]

3 One term you'll see me use throughout the book is business-to-business (B2B), which is businesses that sell directly to other businesses (for example, an accounting app designed for construction companies). They have slightly different marketing needs than businesses that sell directly to consumers, or business-to-consumer (B2C) (for example, an accounting app designed for personal finance).
B2B businesses often have higher marketing budgets because their products are more expensive, which makes B2B a pretty profitable niche for freelance writers.

In both cases, I specialize in a type of content (ghostwritten business books and content marketing projects) for a specific industry (coaches/consultants and B2B SaaS companies). I know other freelancers who specialize in niches like:

- Website copy for small businesses
- Email marketing for cybersecurity SaaS companies
- Search engine optimized (SEO) blog posts for dentists
- White papers for big legacy tech companies
- Flavor copy and editing for role playing games

When I started freelancing, I honestly didn't know what I wanted to write. I simply discovered through trial and error that I enjoyed some projects (ghostwriting and content marketing) more than others and that they tended to pay pretty well. I realized that I enjoyed working with certain types of clients (coaches/consultants) and in certain types of industries (B2B SaaS) more than others. Once I figured out what I liked doing—and what paid the best—I started intentionally steering my career in that direction.

Why Choose a Niche?

Doesn't that limit the number of clients you can work for?

It seems contrary, but specialization actually opens up more doors to business. Many clients are only looking for a specialist who knows about their industry—or at least is an expert in the type of content they need written—and they may shy away from hiring a generalist copywriter. Plus, the more well-known you become in a certain niche, the more you'll find prospects knocking on your door, rather than the other way around.

You'll also earn more as a specialist because A) you can start to charge more per project and B) you can write faster because you'll need to do less research, which improves your effective hourly rate.

We'll talk more about choosing a niche in a second, but for now let's take a look at what types of things you might specialize in.

Freelance Writing Niches

When it comes to the types of topics you could end up writing about as a copywriter, the sky's the limit. I've been paid to write about everything from brewing and high-end apartments to identity verification software and office automation.

You might write about finance, cybersecurity, retail, travel, hobbies, marketing, agriculture, relationships, fashion, pets, government, real estate, education, accounting, city politics, cycling, sneakers, photography, sales, change management, network systems. Any industry you can think of has a need for writers who specialize in things like the following:[4]

Technical Writing

Taking complex, technical ideas, descriptions, and procedures and translating them into words the average human can understand. Technical writers need to have a strong understanding of the product as well as excellent communication skills to get the point across quickly and clearly. A lot of technical writers I

4 This list is meant to give you examples, rather than being exhaustive. Note that there is a fair amount of gray area between all these categories, as well.

know have experience in the industry they're working in (for example, engineering, software development, manufacturing).

- User manuals
- Technical white papers
- Procedure manuals
- FAQs
- End-user documentation
- Assembly manuals
- Other technical documents

Copywriting

Persuasive writing with a goal to get your audience to take action right now—most likely to buy or donate. If the buyer's journey goes (roughly) from "discovery" to "research" to "decision to buy," these types of copywriting projects fall near the decision point of that journey. It's a more market-y, sales-y type of writing than technical writing, where it's more important to have skills around persuasion and buyer psychology than technical knowledge of a product. It's pretty easy to

teach a good copywriter what someone's product does—at least enough to write a sales page.

- Website copy
- Ad copy
- Product copy
- Email sequences
- Buyer guides
- Sales pages
- Video scripts

Content Marketing

Educational or entertaining writing meant to build reputation and authority, with the intent of leading to a sale in the future. Going back to the buyer's journey I referenced above, content marketing projects are aimed at the discovery and research phase, which means they're a much softer sell than the copywriting examples I just gave. Rather than writing "Here's Why You Should Buy Our Paint," you're writing blog posts on "Ten Top Shades of White for Your Kitchen," or "How to

Clean Paint out of the Carpet," or other topics related to the product you're ultimately trying to sell.[5]

- Blogging
- Case studies
- Articles for custom publications (brand journalism)
- E-books & nontechnical white papers
- Social media posts
- Newsletters

Business Writing

General communications for a business. While the projects I've just been talking about are meant to be read by the consumer, these types of projects are generally designed for internal use, or to be shared with external business partners. Most of these projects will be for bigger companies, though small businesses also need things like press releases, sales collateral, and business plans.

- White papers

5 I have written these articles. Who knew there were so many shades of white paint?

- Reports
- Press releases
- Sales collateral & pamphlets
- Business plans
- Prepared speeches

Other Specialty Writing

Everything else that doesn't fall into the categories above. As I said, anywhere you see bits of text, someone had to write them. I know freelancers who specialize entirely in writing résumés for job hunters, curriculum for trainers, and grants for nonprofits. I've made good money writing property descriptions for real-estate agents and rental agencies—as well as ghostwriting books for coaches and consultants. There are endless ways to specialize when you start freelancing!

- Résumés
- Legal briefs
- Grants
- Ghostwriting (books and articles)

- Curricula
- Greeting cards
- Property descriptions

Finding Your Niche

As a new freelancer, it's easiest to get traction if you specialize in a content type, like blogging, product copy, technical white papers, etc. That allows you to get good at one form of writing at a time and leverage your expertise in that form to get experience across many different industries.

The exception is if you have a deep domain knowledge of one industry—for example, if you're a university instructional designer who's decided to go rogue. Then you can leverage that industry experience to land a wide variety of writing gigs with educational technology (EdTech) companies, universities, and other companies and organizations in the education space.

Either way, don't dwell too much on finding the perfect niche right off the bat. I've seen too many beginning freelancers waste months (or years) hemming and hawing over their positioning, rather than just

getting to work and seeing what type of writing they enjoy.

I've also seen beginning freelancers say no to perfectly reasonable gigs because it wasn't the sort of writing they saw themselves doing in five years.

To which I say, good news! You probably won't be doing that sort of writing in five years. Your business will grow and evolve, and your clients will evolve with it. In the beginning, think of finding your niche like an experiment. Don't wait for the perfect opportunity to come around—just try a job. If you like it, look for similar companies and similar work. If you hate it, move on once the project is done.

You're a freelancer! You have the freedom! You can always fire clients that aren't a good fit. You can always change your direction. The power to define your career is now in your hands.

Carving Out Your Path

When I started freelancing, I didn't have much in the way of a portfolio or experience to build on. I had a bunch of nice clips from the children's catalog company

I wrote product descriptions for, but other than that I was a blank slate.

I scoured job boards and landed a collection of gigs writing descriptions of high-end apartments for a rental agency, blog posts about fashion for a hipster website, product descriptions for a cycling catalog, and reported articles for a magazine aimed at restaurant owners.

No clear niche there—I was a generalist, trying my hand at any job that would take me. (But, you'll notice I was leveraging my past experience to get those jobs: I could write product descriptions, I had fashion industry experience, I was a cyclist, and I had worked in restaurants.)

I started to realize that I enjoyed blogging more than writing product descriptions, and the steady income of being assigned weekly blog posts for a company rather than the cycle of pitching magazines. I began to concentrate my expertise in one type of project: blogging.

It didn't take me long to find out that some blogging clients pay better than others, once I landed a job with a company that sold restaurant point of sale (POS) software. (I got that restaurant POS blogging gig because

I leveraged both my newfound expertise in blogging plus my experience working in restaurants.)

They paid me nearly four times the rate I was being paid writing about fashion for the hipster website because they were selling a multi-thousand dollar software product to other businesses, rather than forty-dollar beard grooming kits to consumers. I was thrilled to realize I'd found a new sub-niche: I could pitch myself as a blogger for B2B SaaS companies.

The world opened up.

There are B2B SaaS companies selling everything from inventory management tools for online retailers to learning management systems for corporate learning and development programs.[6] The best part is that most of these companies have the same problem: They have an abundance of product people and engineers who can talk your ear off about the product's technical specs, but none of them can write for a lay audience.

I vividly remember an interview I had with a client I picked up after I'd been specializing in blogging for B2B SaaS companies for a few years. "Do you know anything about digital asset management?" he asked me.

6 And, yes, I have written about both of these topics.

I laughed. “Absolutely nothing,” I confessed. “But I know how to research, and I know how to write for your small business audience. I’m sure your product team can fill me in on what I need to know.”

He laughed, too. “That’s fine. We don’t have a shortage of people who understand the product. We have a shortage of people who can explain it to our audience.”

The reason I’m telling you this story is not to convince you to follow my steps toward B2B SaaS, but to illustrate your superpower as a freelancer.

Research and flexibility.

Get good at writing a specific type of content like the ones I listed above (blogging, grant writing, product descriptions, sales pages) and speaking to a specific type of audience (small and mid-sized business owners in my case), and you don’t need to have a huge, in-depth knowledge of the particular industry. In fact, having an outside perspective can be a benefit because you’ll ask questions people who are in the weeds wouldn’t think to ask.

Where Should You Start?

You might already have an idea of what niche you'd like to specialize in. Or you might feel like you've just been blindfolded and spun around five times, then handed a baseball bat and told to swing it at a moving piñata.

The good news is that—unlike with the piñata—there's not a right direction for you to aim. Some directions will be more fruitful for you than others, though. Here are a few questions to help get you started.

What background experience do you have?

List out your jobs, volunteer experience, and any interesting life experience. Break down every item, asking what skills and experience you can leverage on both a micro and macro level.

You ran a preschool out of your home? That gives you experience in early childhood education, parent psychology, educational toys. Maybe you could even add educational technology or curriculum design to your list of skills. And, of course, you know a thing or two about time management and running a small business!

You worked in a bike shop? You definitely have experience in the cycling industry, outdoor sports, and retail. You might have used a POS system, managed an online store, or learned a thing or two about human resources and management. Or, maybe you've got an edge to write about public policy and urban planning.

Mine each job and experience for potential writing samples. Email newsletters, social media, reports, blog posts—even if your job title wasn't "Writer," your job probably still yielded a few clips you can use as samples.

What topics are you interested in?

List out anything you think you have the expertise and interest enough in to write about. Then, with every topic, start listing websites and businesses that might need writers.

For example, if you're interested in travel you could write for any number of travel magazines and websites. You could write for travel companies: airlines, travel agencies, hotels. You could write for the businesses that sell to those travel companies: SaaS companies, logistics companies, catering companies, whoever makes those tiny soaps.

Keep in mind that the more popular and exciting the topic, the less lucrative it will be. Everyone wants to write about their trip to Spain (and is willing to do so for next to nothing), so it's tough to find travel writing markets that pay well—especially for a new writer.

On the other hand, few people are clamoring to write blog posts about shipping logistics for an audience of hotel owners. You can charge good money for that.

But wait. You got into freelance writing to write about things that interest you—like travel! Not shipping logistics.

If you're a curious person, you might be surprised by what you become interested in. As a B2B SaaS writer, I'm really not interested in digital asset management or accounting software. But I *am* interested in what it takes to run a small business. No matter what software I'm writing about, my audience is entrepreneurs and small- and medium-sized business owners—and I find my role as an educator to them really fascinating and fulfilling.

What are you good at writing?

Are you a master of short, pithy descriptions and puns? Do you love zeroing in on the exact right word? You'd probably do well as an ad writer or website copywriter where every word counts.

Do you lean towards long, lush descriptions and enjoy telling stories? You might look into content marketing: blog posts, e-books, and case studies all need us wordier writers. Do you like to really understand a product or topic and break it down into clear explanations? You'd probably thrive as a technical writer.

You don't even need to land your first gig in order to start experimenting. Try your hand at a few different styles of writing to find out what you like best. Write a fake newsletter for your favorite local game store, write a sample blog post about patio furniture, rewrite that confusing manual that came with your printer.

Bonus: If these writing exercises turn out well, you can always stick them in your portfolio as samples.

What can't a robot write?

People have been rumbling for years about how AI is coming to take over all the writing jobs. I didn't think that was possible at first, but my mind has been changed as new AI writing tools hit the market.

Some of them are disturbingly good, and they're only getting better.

I'm telling you this not to scare you off (come back!!) but to make you think critically about what kind of writing you want to do. Many entry-level freelance writing jobs are things like writing search engine optimized (SEO) articles and website copy. You know, those articles that are stuffed with variations of the same keywords over and over in order to rank high in Google.

Within a few years, AI is going to be able to crank out a low-quality, keyword-stuffed SEO article, no problem.

That shouldn't worry you, because you shouldn't be looking for those jobs, anyway. The pay is generally abysmal ($10 for 1000 words!), which means that today most of those posts are being written by writers living in countries where the cost of living is minimal.

Focus on finding a niche that relies on the ability to tell stories, interview experts, explain complex topics, and expertly wordsmith. Then lean into developing yourself as a writer, and you won't have to worry about the robots taking your job.

Do You Need a Degree?

In short, no.

I have a BA in English Literature, but since I started freelancing no one has ever asked me about it. Presumably some clients have noticed it on my LinkedIn page, and it didn't hurt when I was applying for that first in-house copywriting job.

As a freelancer, though, clips are more important than degrees. Potential clients don't care where you went to college; they want to see that you can write an engaging email blast or an effective press release.

That said, it doesn't hurt to look into courses and certifications to help you learn the ropes of freelancing and give you a bit more credibility when you're getting started. But they're not generally necessary.

Check the Resources section at the back of this book for some reputable courses and certifications you might consider.

Take Action

—Spend an hour brainstorming what niche you might like to explore. List out your past jobs, your hobbies, and your interests, then break them down like the examples above into different areas of expertise that you might leverage as a freelance writer.

—Start brainstorming all the different industries and websites that are related to those areas of expertise.

—Start paying attention to the ones that sound most interesting, and create a short list of potential target clients you'd love to write for.


PLANS
WORK
TESTS
Dreams

CHAPTER 2: GETTING STARTED

I was tempted to put this section at the end of the book because—just like with choosing a niche—I see too many beginning freelancers get stuck in the weeds of getting their business set up.

Yes, you need a website, you need a bank account, you need a business license. But working on those things can be a form of procrastination. Prospecting for clients, applying for gigs, networking—those things tend to be out of the comfort zone for most writers. It's way more comfortable to spend hours tweaking your website theme, and it's easy to tell yourself that you need to get the color scheme just right in order to land that first client.

Everything in this chapter is important, but what's most important is throwing yourself into the fray and finding those first clients. You can figure the rest of this out as you go along. But it does make sense to put a chapter titled Getting Started at the beginning of the book. So let's dive in. Skim through, take some notes,

take some action—but be honest with yourself about whether or not you're procrastinating or actually making progress on your business.

Here's what you need to get started as a freelancer, listed in the order of importance.

- ◌ LinkedIn profile
- ◌ Business license
- ◌ Business account
- ◌ Invoicing system
- ◌ Website

LinkedIn

LinkedIn launched in 2003, and it's been the monster social networking site for professionals ever since. Something else may take its place, but for now it's unmatched in terms of utility for you as a new freelancer.

Why? Because LinkedIn is basically a search engine that recruiters and marketers use to find freelancers of all sorts. You need to be listed in that search engine.

Almost all of my best clients are people who found me on LinkedIn, or who came referred by clients (who

found me on LinkedIn). In the last two years, only one client is an exception to that rule: I applied to a Craigslist ad he posted eight years ago, and we're still working together because he rocks and has been willing to raise the rate he pays me along the way.

Don't worry—you don't have to spam strangers or spend hours posting or thumbs-upping random people's random comments. You just need to take an hour to make sure your LinkedIn profile is up-to-date and optimized with keywords to make it easier for people to find you in search. (For example, if you're a technical writer targeting companies that develop iPhone apps, use those types of phrases as keywords.)

LinkedIn changes up its user interface regularly, so I'm only going to hit on the sections that are most important to our purpose (getting found in a search) and leave the common sense ones like education to your common sense. I recommend searching LinkedIn for working writers in your niche/industry and taking inspiration from what they do.[7]

7 Quick caveat! If you're currently working a job where you don't want your employer to know you're starting to freelance on the side, be more careful with this. Check your settings to make sure you're not blasting updates into the feed, and be a bit more subtle with your optimization.

Cover photo and headshot: Use a professional headshot and cover photo that shows a bit of personality and/or a sense of the industry you're working in.

Name, pronouns, and title: LinkedIn by default will use your current job title, but you can edit it to say whatever you like. I recommend using the keyword people will be typing in to find you. For years, mine was "Portland B2B SaaS copywriter and ghostwriter." Currently, it's "Fiction and Nonfiction Author | Business Book Ghostwriter." If you're the technical writer I mentioned above, you might use "Technical writer for iPhone app developers" as your job description.

About: Write a quick bio that explains the writing services you offer, the types of clients you work with, and your background and experience. Use your keywords here! For example, "I'm a content marketing copywriter for B2B SaaS companies, based in Portland, OR." Or, "I help iPhone app developers educate end users with clear, concise technical documentation."

Featured: Here, you can showcase recent projects in your portfolio or highlight your services. Use this area to reiterate your keywords.

Experience: This is basically your résumé. Use it to highlight your writing experience and expertise to potential clients—and don't forget those keywords! For example, your actual title may have been "blog writer at FashionSite.com," but you can certainly be more descriptive and put something like "Freelance B2B Blogger—retail content marketing for a fashion startup." Use the description of each position to include clips (and keywords!). Every time you land a new writing gig, add it to your experience.

Recommendations: These are certainly nice to have. You can reach out through LinkedIn to ask a past supervisor or client to write you a quick testimonial, and don't be shy about what skills or expertise you'd like them to highlight. Say something like, "I'm looking to work with more grant writing clients, specifically in the field of social justice, so if you could highlight my experience around that it would be fantastic!"

Connecting with people on LinkedIn

One thing to note is that LinkedIn's search is skewed toward connections. If a marketing director searches for "Freelance cybersecurity white paper writer," the

top results will be people in their first- or second-degree network.

This is why it's advantageous to connect with as many people as you can—but please do so without being obnoxious.

Start by connecting with everyone you know personally and professionally. It's polite (and more effective) to send a quick note with your invitation—especially if you're not sure they'll recognize your name immediately.

Because I recognize the value of a large network (search results), I say yes to anyone who sends me a request who doesn't look like they'll spam me about whatever product they're selling. I still only request connections with people who I know personally, however. The exception is if we're in the same industry—if I see someone whose title says they're a freelance ghostwriter, B2B writer, marketer, or designer, I'll send them a request with a note about how I like connecting with other writers/professionals in the B2B SaaS content marketing space.

Which is true! I love connecting with other writers. Consider this your invitation to shoot me a LinkedIn request mentioning that you read this book.

Business License

This is going to sound like waffling, but because business requirements vary from country to country, state to state, and city to city, I'm going to recommend you give this one a google.

In most cases, you can report your freelance 1099 income on your personal taxes along with your employee W2 income. If you're just freelancing as a side hustle and making a few thousand dollars at most, this might be enough—depending on the laws where you live.

If your goal is to go full time with your freelance business, however, you'll definitely need to make sure your licensing ducks are all in a row.

I highly recommend checking with an accountant who works with freelancers and small businesses in your city. They can make sure you're meeting all local requirements, and advise you on what kind of business structure (sole proprietor, LLC, S-Corp) will work best based on how much you think you might earn.

An hour's appointment won't be as expensive as you think, and the peace of mind will be well worth it.

Business Bank Account

From your very first freelance check, practice keeping your freelance and personal finances separate. We'll talk more about business finances and paying yourself in Section 5: Business Nuts and Bolts, but for now, get yourself a business bank account. They're simple to set up, and generally free if you go through a credit union.

Invoicing System

You need a way to invoice clients for the work you're doing, but this doesn't need to be complicated. Not at first and not even later on unless you're sending a ton of invoices.

The bare bones method is just exporting a PDF from your Word template and sending it as an email attachment. Clients can then send you a check, do a bank transfer, or pay through PayPal or with a credit card. (Though those last two mean you take a hit on fees.)[8]

8 If you're working with clients located in a different country, you may need to jump through a few extra hoops. Talk to your bank about the

You might upgrade to a simple invoicing tool like PayPal invoicing, FreshBooks, or whatever new low cost freelance invoicing software has hit the market since I wrote that sentence. Or, you might use a more burly integrated invoicing/accounting system like QuickBooks.

What you choose will depend in part on how many invoices you're sending and what the other accounting needs of your business are. For example, if you're set up as an S-Corp, you'll need access to more robust accounting tools than if you're a sole proprietor.

This is another great question to ask during that hour you've scheduled with an accountant.

Website

I put building a website last on this list, but I honestly don't even think it belongs in the Getting Started section. That's because I really don't want you wasting hours researching the difference between WordPress and Squarespace when you should be prospecting for your first clients instead.

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requirements for doing a wire transfer (which should be free for you). Once you get your bank set up with that international client, you shouldn't have a problem getting paid by them going forward.

Except in rare cases, the only people who will look at your website will be people you sent there. Maybe you sent them a link to your portfolio page after you met them at a networking event. Maybe they clicked your URL after finding your LinkedIn profile while searching for "freelance résumé writer."

Unless you're putting in years of audience building, very few people are going to stumble upon your freelancing website. (This is true for me, even ten years into the business.) And since this book is for people who want to get business clients fast, rather than building an audience for their own work, I recommend not worrying too much about your website.

Set up a bare bones one-pager with a clean-looking template where you can show a touch of personality, explain what services you offer to which types of clients, and link to items in your portfolio.

Speaking of—don't you need a portfolio to get started? That's definitely helpful! We'll talk about building out that portfolio as you grow your business in the next section.

Take Action

—Go set up your LinkedIn profile right now, honing your copywriting skills by artfully weaving keywords into anywhere you can reasonably put them. Be aspirational! I don't care if you've never written a product description in your life, if you want to land a gig writing catalog copy for outdoor apparel brands, change your job title to "Product copywriter specializing in outdoor apparel website and catalog copy."

—Spend some time politely connecting with people you know and hitting up a few key folks for recommendation requests.

(IMPORTANT! Remember that if you're starting a freelance business on the downlow, you need to check your LinkedIn notification settings and be more subtle in order to not alert your boss.)

—Once you feel good about LinkedIn, find an accountant and set up an appointment. Then, ignore the rest of the stuff in this chapter and move on to Chapter 3. You're not allowed to tweak colors on your website or spend hours designing a pretty invoicing template until you have a lead on the line.

CHAPTER 3: GETTING YOUR FIRST CLIENTS

Alrighty. Now that you've scheduled a call with an accountant and sprinkled some keywords into your LinkedIn profile like glitter, let's talk about the real starting line for your freelance business: getting those first gigs.

Most freelancers go through two distinct phases of attracting clients. In Stage 1, most of your time will be spent knocking on the doors of prospects and trying to get themt to hire you. In Stage 2, clients will start knocking on your door.

Obviously, Stage 2 is pretty nice. You're spending less time prospecting. You're also spending less time trying to convince a prospect that you're the right person for the job, because by the time they reach out to you, they've already vetted you. They might still be interviewing multiple writers, but you've made the list! And as you start to build your reputation, you'll notice that more prospects are looking to hire you specifically by the time they get in touch. Your reputation will have

so dazzled them that they won't have another writer in mind.

That's a fantastic feeling, and I promise you'll get there if you put in the elbow grease.

But for now, let's talk about the grind that is Stage 1. While you might get a few useful hits from recruiters on LinkedIn once you spruce up your profile, most of your first clients will come from hitting the metaphorical pavement. You'll find them by tapping into your network, expanding your network, cold outreach, applying for job listings, and through creative agencies and freelance marketplaces.

It'll probably be a slow roll at first, especially if you're starting from scratch with no real background in writing or industry experience. Outreach is a numbers game, and maybe only one out of every hundred people you talk to might hire you.

I say this not to discourage you, but to give you something to aim for. Right now your task isn't to land a gig (which is out of your control). It's to reach out to one hundred people (something you can totally control). Start yourself a spreadsheet or a tally on the whiteboard,

and go tell one hundred prospects that you've started a freelance copywriting business.

This will pay off, I promise—and sometimes in weird ways. I've gotten emails out of the blue from people I got crickets from two years earlier, who had moved to a new job and had kept my outreach email on file. Once, I got an email from someone who got my business card from a colleague who'd met me at a networking event almost three years prior.

You never know how these interactions will pay off, so don't let the rejection in Stage 1 get you down. Focus on the things you can control right now: presenting yourself professionally and reaching out to as many people as you can.

Building Your Portfolio

One of the first things a prospect is going to ask you is if you can send them any relevant clips. Which is a problem if you don't have any clips. Getting a portfolio together is one of the biggest hurdles you'll need to overcome when you're first getting started—but don't worry. We'll get you sorted.

Do include anything that's remotely professional. You might have a pretty solid collection if you've done some writing work at previous jobs, but if you don't get creative. Your travel blog, random newsletter emails you wrote at your last job, book reviews you wrote for a fan site, customer service FAQs you created when you managed a pizza joint—grab those clips wherever you can find them and polish them into a presentable format. As your portfolio grows, you'll start dropping out less professional and less relevant clips.

Don't include short stories, fan fiction, your ranty political blog, or other things that aren't relevant to the type of writing work you want to do, or the type of clients and industries you want to work with.

If you don't have *anything* to work with, no worries. We'll talk about that in a second.

Just like you did when looking at your past experience to start brainstorming niches, take each piece in your portfolio and try to look at it from as many directions as possible.

How can you leverage that fundraising letter you wrote for a nonprofit featuring a recent success story about homeless trans youth? It shows you can write:

sales and fundraising letters, for nonprofit clients, about social justice issues, case studies….

How can you leverage the website copy you wrote for your cousin's jewelry store? It shows you can write: website copy, for small businesses, in the fashion industry, business-to-consumer, product descriptions….

Slice those early portfolio clips as finely as possible in order to get inspiration about what types of gigs you can start seeking out.

Here are the seeds from which you'll start to grow a solid portfolio:

Past jobs: Some jobs are more likely to yield good clips than others. I didn't have any clips in my pocket from the years of waiting tables (unless you count the hundreds of notepads I filled with shorthand about people's burger orders), but you might have written emails, reports, or even just pithy quips to go on the A-frame sign outside your coffee shop. If you were in customer service, there's a good chance you wrote emails with step-by-step instructions for customers (technical writing!). When I was the house manager of a regional repertory theater, I used to have to file a nightly report, which I always

tried to make entertaining as possible. Those would have made great clips if I'd kept them.

Personal writing: Have you written blog posts, guest articles, hilarious family newsletters? Not every piece of personal writing is going to make a good portfolio piece, but you may have a few gems in there to show to clients. This is particularly true if you're trying to demonstrate expertise in an industry that you're passionate about, like nutrition, parenting, travel, food, gaming, mental health, yoga, etc. Personal essays and blog posts can make a good demonstration of your knowledge.

Mock samples: Remember last chapter when I told you to practice writing a few types of things to see what you might like? You can totally use those as portfolio pieces if they're good. When I applied for the children's catalog company job, I didn't have any copywriting clips. But I did have a brand new niece who I'd been sewing clothes for. I put together a page of sample product descriptions of the clothes I'd actually made, which demonstrated that I could write in their house style, and I had a deep knowledge of apparel.

You might write a sample blog post or press release or technical FAQ—or whatever the gig is you're applying

for. Just be honest with the client that you wrote the piece as a sample. They won't be hung up on whether or not it was actually published, so long as it demonstrates your writing skill.

Pro bono work: I already told you never to work for exposure—but it's a completely different thing to work for clips, especially if you're first starting out. Volunteer to write a newsletter or grant for a nonprofit you believe in. Trade your copywriting skills for product or services with a friend who's starting a new business, or reach out to a small company you love and volunteer to rewrite their website copy in exchange for a recommendation.

You're not undervaluing your work in these cases—you're trading it for something of value: cold, hard proof of your writing skill.

Finding Clients

Your Network

Past employers. Family friends. Old coworkers. Colleagues on your cyclo-cross team. Your dentist. Your mom's dentist.

When you're first starting your freelance business, let people around you know, and ask them (politely) if they have any leads for you. Don't hound people or put them on the spot for a referral, but also don't underestimate the value of sending your Aunt Hazel a quick email to say, "I'm starting a freelance business specializing in writing website copy for small retailers, and I would love it if you could keep an ear out for anyone who might need my help. Hugs and kisses!"

Networking Events

This is also a fantastic time to start expanding your network. One of the best things I did for my early career was to attend as many networking events as possible. Not only did it introduce me to one of my best Portland friends (Hi, Melissa!), but I met tons of other freelance writers, creative agency employees, and potential clients.

I know.

Most of you are going to want to stop me right here. You're a writer—you like spending long hours in solitude! You're starting a freelance business because you don't want to see other people, not even coworkers in your

office. And now I'm telling you to go rub elbows with complete strangers?

I'm totally telling you to do that.

Honestly, networking scared the hell out of me the first few times I did it. Eventually, I started to realize how much I enjoyed talking to strangers—especially in a networking setting. It's actually kind of brilliant. There's no awkwardness about whether or not you should go talk to someone, because the answer is yes. You're all there to talk. There's no stress about what to say, because you're all there to answer the exact same questions for each other: "What do you do?" and "How can we work together?"

I'm a total introvert, and I came to enjoy networking. I've listed some places to find networking events in the Resources section, and here are my tips to help you find the fun in it.[9]

Think of it as **research.** You're a writer, so try treating networking like a scavenger hunt for interesting facts you can use. Aim to learn something curious from each person you meet, and keep a running list of factoids

9 A great resource on networking for introverts is Karen Wickre's book, *Taking the Work Out of Networking: An Introvert's Guide to Making Connections That Count.*

and quirks. You can also use networking events as an opportunity to practice your interview skills, because even if you're not a journalist, interviewing is one of the most valuable skills you can cultivate in your writing career.

Practice your elevator pitch ahead of time. The most awkward part of any networking conversation is answering the obligatory, "So, what do you do?" Practice your two-sentence elevator pitch in the mirror until it comes natural and you can breeze through it, then you can get on to having an actual conversation.

Be a hero by approaching someone first. It took me a while to realize that I wasn't the only shy person in the room. Sure, some folks are natural extroverts, but a lot of the people at a networking event are just as nervous as you. If you go say hello first, you're the hero who started the conversation.

Wear a statement item. This is honestly my favorite networking trick. Wear something that you know people will compliment you on—maybe it's a pair of fantastic shoes, a tie with dinosaurs on it, or designer glasses. Dying your hair a fun color also works, depending on the industry you're trying to break into.[10]

10 I have dyed my hair pink from time to time, and I have *so many* more

Wearing a statement item is a natural icebreaker, and it gives other people an opportunity to spark up a conversation that doesn't start with, "So…what do you do?" I have a chunky blue turquoise necklace that gets comments without fail. Whenever someone compliments it I say, "Thank you! A friend of mine made it for me when I was living in Venezuela." That opens the door to a bajillion more interesting follow-up questions and conversational prompts than talking about our jobs or the weather.

Always follow up. After the networking event, jot down all the interesting things you remember about all the interesting people you just met, and follow up with them appropriately within the next day or two. Connect on LinkedIn and shoot them a "Nice to meet you!" email with a little bit more about you and an invitation to continue the relationship.

For example, maybe you got a card from a project manager from a local ad agency. Email them to say, "Hi! It was great meeting you this week at the X mixer. I was browsing Y Ad Agency's site and noticed you work with Z Company. I [actually used to work at Z Company/ love using Z Company's product/have written in Z

conversations with strangers when I have pink hair. It's like people automatically assume I'm more outgoing than I am.

Company's industry]. If you're looking for a freelance writer, I'd love to chat more."

Or maybe you met a more established freelancer and were hitting it off with your shared love of collector edition LEGO sets. Email them to ask if you can buy them a coffee and ask a few questions about breaking into the business.

Cold Outreach

The next terrifying thing I'm going to ask you to do is cold outreach, via phone or email.

When I think back to my early days freelancing, I can still feel the cold sweats I broke into whenever I had to call someone. It was bad enough when we had an appointment. But calling someone out of the blue? I hated it.

But I did it anyway, because cold outreach—when done politely—can be a great way to get your name in front of potential clients.

I did a lot of cold calling when I was starting out, but I'm going to suggest that now it's more acceptable (and polite) to stick to email. Ten years ago, I was an elder

millennial calling boomers, but now that us phone call-hating millennials have taken over more of the hiring roles, you're probably better off with an email.

I get emails on a daily basis from people who do cold email outreach really badly. People who say, "Why don't you hire me for $500 a month to write fifteen social media posts for you. Just click this link to schedule an appointment so we can chat more." And then they send me a follow up email every day for the next week.

Those people suck. But you're not gonna be that person.

You're just going to send a short email introduction to the marketing director at your local hospital and say that you are a local freelancer specializing in the healthcare industry, and do they ever use freelancers? If so, here's a link to your portfolio, have a nice day!

Most of these people will not respond to you. Some will delete your email, some will file it away for future reference, some will forward it to a colleague. If they don't respond, don't worry about it. It's okay to send a follow-up email a week or so later, but I would stop at that. Don't be a nuisance.

If you like the phone and do want to cold call people, awesome! I recommend writing out two brief scripts: one for the voicemail, one for the off chance someone answers. Introduce yourself, ask if they hire freelance writers, and then offer to email a link to your portfolio. If you have their email address, I'd recommend following up with that portfolio link email as soon as you hang up the phone.

Here are my original scripts from the Stage 1 days of my business:

Voicemail

Hi, my name is Jessie Kwak,[11] and I'm a freelance copywriter. I'm calling to see if you ever work with freelancers. I've written in [x industry]. [Brief reason why I'm a good fit.][12] If I sound like a good fit, you can give me a call at [phone number]. Again, my name is Jessie Kwak, and my phone number is [phone number]. You can also check out my online portfolio at www.basslineeditorial.com. Thanks, and have a great day!

11 Yes, I literally wrote my name in the script because I was petrified that I'd forget or mispronounce it.

12 For example, if I was reaching out to a restaurant POS company I'd say, "I've written for publications like Independent Restaurateur and Beer West, and I spent seven years as a server working with a wide range of POS systems."

Follow-up or Cold Email

Hi [NAME],

My name is Jessie Kwak, and I [called you earlier today/am writing] to talk about [company's] copywriting needs.

I have experience writing catalog copy, sales and marketing collateral, and web copy for business clients in the hospitality, restaurant, travel, and apparel industries. My writing has also appeared on LearnVest, Forbes.com, SellRest, and GovLoop, as well as in magazines like *The New Brewer* and *ParentMap*.

Here are a couple of clips that seem in line with [company's] portfolio:

[Bullet list with links to three relevant clips]

You can find my full portfolio on my website: basslineeditorial.com.

I appreciate you taking the time—I'd love to talk with you more about how I can help out.

Cheers!

Jessie

Job Boards

Besides networking and reaching out to interesting prospects, you will also find some of your first gigs on job boards.

There's a lot of junk on job boards, but there will be a few gems among the folks wanting you to write 2500 word articles for $50 or "exposure."

One of my longest running clients came from a Craigslist ad, but these days there are a lot more specialized job boards and newsletters that curate job listings specifically for freelancers. I've listed some of the most reputable ones in the Resources section.

When sorting through job listings, watch out for ones that promise great exposure, say the gig will lead to more work, or claim to be perfect for students or stay at home moms. Translation? "We don't pay much, or at all."

Also watch out for anyone who is blatantly asking you to submit a competitive rate—they're hiring based on how little they can pay rather than the quality of your work.

When you're sorting through jobs, I recommend only applying for gigs that you feel like you're a shoe-in for.

Let me be clear. I'm not encouraging you to self-reject for jobs or discount your skills—you'd be amazing at any of these gigs! I believe in you. But also understand that because there's so much competition for these jobs, you can waste a lot of time applying for ones that are only marginally a good fit for your skill set and experience.

Every job you apply for takes one of your most precious resources: time. I'd rather you concentrate your energy on putting together a résumé, cover letter, and killer samples for a job you have a great chance at landing rather than running frantically in every direction.

Job Placement Agencies

Job placement agencies can be an excellent source of steady work for freelance business writers, especially in the beginning. A few specialize in matching business clients with creative freelancers like yourself. To start working with one of these types of agencies, you will generally apply through their site, go through an interview process, and then get occasional emails from your contact when jobs come along that are a good match for your skill set.

Some of these jobs might be regular freelance gig work, while other opportunities might be more long-term, in-house contracts. (These types of opportunities can potentially lead to full-time copywriting work, if that's what you're looking for. As a purely feral freelancer, I've always avoided them.)

If an opportunity comes up that you seem like a good match for, the agency will connect you with the prospective client, and you will work with that client directly (after an interview). In some cases, the agency will step out of the way, and you'll work with and get paid directly from the client. In other cases, your paycheck might come through the agency itself, and your contact at the agency will manage your business relationship with the client.

These agencies make their money by charging companies for job listings, or by taking an administrative fee off your cut. You should never have to pay a fee to get an interview with the agency.

When evaluating an agency like this, you should be able to see a list of their clients on their website. That can help you evaluate if they are a legit company you want to work with. Do they work with clients in the industry

you're trying to break into? Do they work with clients you recognize?

There are pros and cons to working with a job placement agency. On the one hand, they have access to opportunities you may not be able to find on your own. Many companies will go directly to their matching service rather than posting a job online. On the other hand, you're probably not going to make the best hourly rate here. (Though, keep in mind that some of these agencies will actually pay you as a W-2 employee rather than a 1099 contractor, which means they are shouldering some of the tax burden. We'll talk more about freelancer taxes in a bit.)

When you're just starting out, though, these job placement agencies can be a great way of getting your foot in the door.

Creative Agencies

The other type of agency you might end up working with is a creative agency where you are hired as a freelancer by the agency itself to work on projects for their clients. The difference between working for a creative agency as opposed to being matched through a job placement

agency is that instead of you working directly with the marketing team at the client company, you are working with the marketing team at the agency.

Some of my favorite clients have been creative agencies. If you can find a good team that you click with, it can be a fantastic way to have a steady stream of well-paying work without having to track it down yourself. A friend who's now a project manager for an agency I used to work with said they pay freelance writers a range of $40 per hour to $100 per hour, depending on their experience level—and I know they keep their writers pretty busy.

Along with big agencies that have dozens or hundreds of employees and freelancers, you'll also come across one-person creative or editorial agencies that hire out work to freelancers. For example, I've worked with freelance web designers who contract out copywriting, as well as marketing strategists who hire writers, editors, and social media folks to execute on the content marketing projects they recommend to their clients.

You'll likely connect with agencies at networking events, and they're fantastic businesses to target for cold

outreach. Google "creative agency [your town/region]" for a good starter list.

Subcontracting

Subcontracting is when you take on part of a project working underneath another freelancer. For example, if you have a prospect that wants ten blog posts a month, but you only have time to write half of them, you might subcontract out the other half to a freelancer you trust, acting as an editor on the project to make sure the voice is consistent and quality is there.

(Ethically, you shouldn't subcontract out work without your client knowing you're doing it. Some contracts also explicitly forbid subcontracting, so definitely check on that.)

Subcontracting is a good way to grow your freelance business beyond your own personal capabilities, because you can take on bigger projects and earn a good payday managing those projects without trading your limited hours for dollars.

At this stage in the game, you'll more likely be taking on gigs that are subcontracted out to you—which is a great reason to network with other writers!

If you are approached to subcontract for another writer, be sure the situation is on the level and that you're comfortable with it. For example, if they make you swear to secrecy so the client doesn't find out, that's a pretty big red flag.

Subcontracting can be a great way to dip your toe into a new niche, because you're taking advantage of another freelancer's industry cred to gain some of your own. I once subcontracted for a friend whose cybersecurity client suddenly had a much bigger project than he had originally agreed to take on. He brought me on with their permission to handle a discrete section of the project, and he acted as an editor and intermediary.

Not only was it a fun project, but I got experience working both for a cybersecurity SaaS company and writing launch emails, both of which were nice additions to the portfolio. Also, this friend was more established in his business, so he was able to get a higher pay rate for me than I might have gotten on my own.

Freelance Marketplaces

These days, there are multiple freelance marketplaces where you can list your services and find clients. Fiverr and Upwork are the two giants in the space as I'm writing this. I recommend treating the sites with caution. They can be a decent place to find some clips when you're first starting out, but aren't the best place to build a profitable freelance writing business.

For one, they are not home to the best-paying clients. For another, if those sites go out of business, your entire platform vanishes overnight. And finally, you're automatically competing on price the instant you sign up. Ideally, you want prospects to decide to hire you based on your qualifications first, and rates second.

Of course, if you're starting out and don't have any clips, these websites can help you cut your teeth. Use them strategically, then get to work building a business that commands top dollar and doesn't require reliance on somebody else's platform that could go under at any minute.

Do keep in mind that if you find a client on Fiverr or Upwork, the terms of service (TOS) requires you to keep working with them through the site. You can go out and

find your next client on your own, but you can't move off the site with the existing client without risking getting banned or fined. Read the TOS extremely carefully on these sites.

Getting Clients to Find You

At some point about three years after I started freelancing full time, I realized that almost every client I was working with was someone who had sought me out, rather than the other way around. After years of applying to jobs, cold calling, emailing, networking, and generally clawing my way up the hill, this was an incredible realization.

In Stage 1, I had spent at least 50 percent of my time chasing after the next gig. These days, firmly in Stage 2, I haven't actively prospected a client in years. I spend all that saved time investing in other areas of my business (like writing my own books). I even take vacations sometimes!

I want to be clear that I know many freelancers in Stage 2 who are still actively prospecting—because their business game plan is to proactively go after better and better clients. My business game plan (at the moment) is to cut my freelancing hours to 50 percent or less of

my week so I can invest time in writing fiction and nonfiction for myself. So I'm happy to let my freelance business coast a bit so long as I'm still landing enough work to pay the bills.

In sum, there are a lot of ways to run a freelance writing business.

But whether you want to keep being proactive about prospecting or scale it back, let's talk about the three main ways clients find you, and how to start building those into your business.

LinkedIn

Yep, I'm talking about LinkedIn again. That's because it is my number one source of inbound leads, by far.

- Be sure to keep your profile updated as you take on new projects, and tweak those keywords as you develop your niche.

- Make the occasional announcement when projects you're proud of are published, and make it absolutely clear that you're taking on new clients (and what types of clients you're looking for). At this stage, you're probably not

working full-time anymore, so you won't need to be as coy about tipping off an employer to your budding freelance career.

- As you settle into a niche, you might even start publishing content on LinkedIn's blog that showcases your niche expertise (either content type or industry). Or, publish these pieces on your own site and excerpt them to LinkedIn with links back to your site.

Referrals

Referrals—when a past client recommends your services to a colleague—can be another incredible source of inbound leads. That's because these leads are already inclined to like and trust you. After all, someone they respect recommended you to them! These leads are also more likely to say yes to your rates, because they'll be primed by their colleague as to the quality of work you do, and therefore the level of fee you charge.

Make it a habit to always ask for referrals and testimonials when you finish a job. (Or after a few months if you're in an ongoing contract.) Whenever you finish a project with a happy client, shoot them an email

to say something like, "I loved working with you on this! Can you do me the favor of writing a quick testimonial that I can put on my website and LinkedIn? I'm looking to land more awesome clients like you, so if you know of any one who needs [type of writing work[in [type of industry], I'd appreciate you sending them my way."

Thought Leadership

"Thought leadership" is a fancy term for looking smart on the Internet in order to build your reputation and drum up business. It is an excellent way to bring in high-quality leads.

There are two broad categories of thought leadership content marketing for freelance writers: unpaid (writing you do purely to market your business) and paid (gigs you take on because they'll get your name in front of potential clients).

Unpaid thought leadership consists of those projects you take on yourself: blogging, getting on podcasts, starting a podcast, writing for high-profile publications in your industry, being interviewed for articles, writing a book, etc.

Again, I've told you not to work for a client who promises you "exposure." But if you're strategically writing pieces to attract potential clients, it can be valuable to contribute to a big-name publication that doesn't pay writers (like Huffington Post, Forbes.com, or well-regarded industry sites). You might also write articles on a blogging platform like Medium or start your own newsletter.

Just be clear about what you're getting out of these efforts, and make sure the writing you're putting out there is high quality.

Paid thought leadership consists of gigs you take with clients that have your byline on them: blogging, articles you pitch to paid publications, e-books, etc.

A lot of my early inbound leads came from this category of thought leadership—prospects saw an article I wrote as a blogger for another company in their industry then approached me to see if I could do the same thing for them. In fact, one of my best clients found me because the sales SaaS company I wrote for posted one of my articles on LinkedIn. He read it, sent me a message, and we've been working together for years. (And you thought I was done talking about LinkedIn.)

Not all the work you do for clients will have your byline, so you should always clarify whether or not that's the case before you take the gig.

You should also charge more for work that is white labeled (written in the generic voice of the company with no byline) or ghostwritten (written in the specific voice of a person with their byline) because you're not getting the potential for passive marketing that comes from your byline being on a piece.

I mean, if you charge $450 for a 500-word white labeled blog post, don't voluntarily offer a client a discounted rate if the piece is bylined. But if the rate they offer is still within your range and the gig seems interesting, consider that your name on the piece gives you additional value.

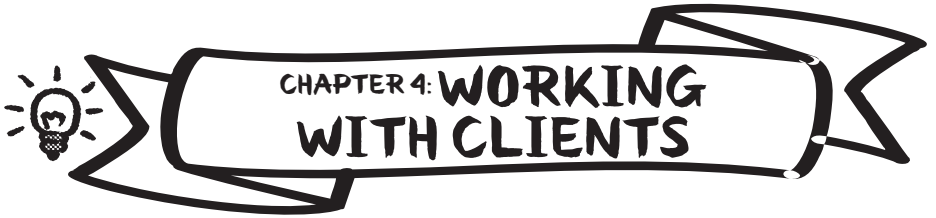
Take Action

—Sign up for three (yes, three) networking events in your town or region, print up some business cards, and go make friends!

—Gather a list of one hundred potential clients—individual companies, industry websites, creative agencies, job placement agencies, etc.—and start working your way down the list either cold calling or cold emailing. You can generally find the right contact person (marketing director or editor) on LinkedIn.

—Start building your portfolio. Hunt down every potential clip and have it on hand to send to a potential client.

—As a bonus, you can start posting your portfolio clips on a website that you can send potential clients a link to—but please don't get stuck on this stage. I'd rather you spend your energy trying to land that first interested client and then scramble to put a portfolio together for them when they ask. Freelancing is all about building the plane as you fly it.



Now that you've got those first prospects on the hook, your next job is landing the gig, then establishing a productive working relationship that benefits you both. You've got this.

Landing the gig

Acing the Interview

While the initial qualification conversation you have with a prospective client will likely be in written form (email or messaging apps), I recommend getting qualified prospects[13] onto a phone or video call as soon as possible. This interview conversation is as much a chance for you to vet the client as it is for them to meet you. Do they sound like somebody you would want to work with long-term? Do they seem to have their act together? Are they upfront with you and respectful?

13 "Qualified" meaning 1) you're reasonably sure their project is a good fit for your skill set/interests, 2) they can afford you, and 3) they don't sound like a total pain in the ass.

This is the opportunity for you both to ask questions.

The client will ask about:

- Your business and experience. Be prepared with a brief overview of your background and in particular how it relates to the type of work you'll be doing with the client.
- Your process. Clients like to hear how you typically work on a project like theirs. What inputs (research materials, interviews, style guide, etc.) do you need to get started? How long does it take you to turn in the first draft? How many rounds of revisions do you offer? How do you invoice?
- Your pricing. What do you typically charge for a project like this? It's totally fine to give a wide range at this point and tell them you'll follow up with a more specific quote via email once you've had a chance to review. This is a good tactic if the thought of negotiating pay over the phone makes you nervous.

Pro tip: If you're not meeting in person, feel free to write all these things out and keep the script in front of you

during the call as a reference—I did that a lot in the early days.

You should ask about:

- Their business. What on earth do they do? Who are their major competitors, and what makes them different?
- Their audience. Who are they selling to, and how is their product or service solving that audience's problem?
- The specifics of their project. What, exactly, are they hiring you to do? How quickly do they want it done? What is the scope of the work?
- Their pain points. What core problem are they hoping you can solve for them? This can help you gauge how serious they are and how valuable this project is to them. I've found the best way to get them to open up about that is asking, "Why are you looking for a freelancer right now? Why is this project a priority now?"
- Their past experience working with freelance writers. This lets you know how much hand holding you might have to do.

- Their existing [marketing materials/blog posts/website copy]. How is your project going to fit with what they're currently working with? Do they like what they have? (Yay, you can emulate it!) Do they hate what they have? (Hmm. Do they have any examples of things they like better? Are they expecting you to be a magic bullet that fixes everything?)

- Whether or not they're interviewing other writers. This can help you determine how much energy to put into landing the gig. If they emailed fifty other writers they found in search results, you might want to be a bit more frugal with your time when it comes to jumping through hoops for them.

Sending the Proposal

End the call by outlining the next steps, which generally are that you will send a proposal (and portfolio clips) via email or they'll send you a bit more information so that you can finalize your proposal. Be prompt here. If you aren't going to be able to email over the proposal and clips that same day, be sure to let them know when to expect that email.

Sometimes at the end of the call, a prospect will be fired up to work with you and won't need to read through your proposal. They might just ask you to send over a contract (or offer to send their own, if they have a standard contract they use with freelancers).

This is great! But even if you're not sending a formal proposal, be sure to summarize everything you discussed in the email where you send the contract. (As my husband likes to say, the "e" in email stands for evidence.) Put everything in writing so there's no confusion about what you agreed to.

Your proposal can be in the body of an email, or you could fancy it up as a PDF attachment formatted with your company name/logo/etc. I recommend keeping a library of your older proposals on hand as templates to save you time. I have an Evernote folder labeled Prospect Conversations, where I jot down questions and answers from interviews and save the proposals I send. That way when a similar client pops up, I can quickly refer back to the older conversation.

Your proposal should include:

- Project details and timeline

- Your fee, payment schedule, and expected deposit
- The deliverables and expectations (what you're turning in to them, how many rounds of revisions are included, how often you'll check in, or anything else you discussed)

If you don't hear a response to your proposal within a few days, follow up. I will normally follow a couple of times if a prospect goes radio silent after our call, but if you don't hear back after your second follow up, it's best to assume they got sticker shock or were talking to other freelancers and didn't have the professionalism to let you know that you didn't get the gig. Brush it off and move on.

Sample Proposal 1

Here's an actual proposal email I sent to a blogging client a few years back. We hit it off in the phone call, so this proposal is formalizing the deal rather than closing the sale. As you can see, I used this email to set expectations for our working relationship.

The contract I sent along with this email detailed the pay rate per blog post, but if I was to give Past Jessie some advice I'd tell her to include it in the email, as well.

Hi [NAME],

Thanks again for getting in touch—it was awesome to talk to you today. This sounds like a really interesting project, and I'm looking forward to getting started.

I've attached my basic contract. Let me know if that works for you, or if you'd like to see any changes.

I also wanted to hammer out a basic workflow to start us off.

Generating ideas: I'm happy to write to your post ideas, pitch you my own, or a combination of both. What most often happens is I'll pitch roughly 50 percent more topics than we plan to write for a month (so if we're doing four

per month, I'll pitch you six ideas). That way you have plenty of ideas to choose from—and you can always shoot back other ideas you'd rather me write about.

(After talking with you, I can tell you dig how important it is to be consistent with your blog—I'll hit every deadline on my end, but I can't do that if I'm waiting for topic approvals and edits.)

Deadlines: After you've approved topics, I'll get to work. We can set a weekly deadline (Tuesday or Thursday would be my preference).

Edits: Once you get a blog post from me, check it over and make sure it's on target. Send me any suggestions or edits, and I'll get it turned back to you ASAP. I want to make sure you're ecstatic with my work, so I don't have a "maximum revision" policy. I expect it'll take more rounds of revisions starting out.

Payment: I invoice at the end of every month for work done that month, with net 30 terms. Let me know if you'd prefer something different.

A couple of questions:

- Do you have any favorite blogs whose style you admire? For example, breezy conversational,

informative and factual, lots of lists, more opinion pieces, etc.

- When I'm looking for sources, are there any you'd recommend? Any I should avoid (i.e., a competitor or industry black sheep)
- How would you like me to submit the post to you? As a Word doc? Google doc? Enter it as a draft in your website's CMS?

Thanks, [NAME]—I know this email got a bit long, but I wanted to make sure we covered all the bases. I'm looking forward to seeing the materials you'll be sending my way.

Cheers!

Jessie

Sample Proposal 2

This proposal is more "closing the deal," sent to a client after we'd had a call and I needed some additional information in order to give them a quote. The project in question was writing the curriculum for an internal cybersecurity training course for a mid-sized manufacturing company.

Hi [NAME],

Thanks again for sending all that over. I went through the wireframes and research notes to come up with a rough outline (attached) to help me understand the content and time requirements.

For this scope of work, I'm proposing a $1200 flat fee. This includes additional research and fact checking, writing all content outlined in the document (introduction, conclusion, and four modules—including infographics, etc.), as many rounds of edits as needed to get it polished and perfect, and final proofreading of finished copy once it's designed.

As far as timeline, I recommend that I write the Intro and Module 1 (one week turnaround) and have you approve that before writing the rest (one week turnaround from approval of Module 1).

Does that sound like it's within your timeline and budget?

Looking forward to working with you! Let me know if you have any questions.

Cheers,

Jessie

Coming Up With a Quote

Figuring out what to charge for a project is still one of the most stressful parts of freelancing for me. You want to charge what you're worth—but you also don't want to completely run off a client by bidding way too high.

I'm going to go more in-depth about setting rates when we talk about finances in the next chapter, but I want to point out a few things specifically around sending a proposal to a client.

Most freelancers have a range within which they're willing to work. There are times when you want to bid more competitively, towards the lower end of what you're comfortable earning. For example, if you're just starting out, trying to break into a new niche, or if you just straight up need the work. On the other hand, if

you're flush with work and your bank account is full, you might throw out a "shoot for the moon" rate because you don't actually need the work. If it sticks, congratulations! You now have a new top rate, and you can drop a lower-paying client. If it misses, no worries. You didn't need the gig.

I recommend that you always quote a project rate to a client, rather than giving them an hourly rate. First, because you'll be charging way more an hour than a W2 employee would, so telling them your hourly rate could make them balk. Second, because you'll get faster the better you get, and you shouldn't get penalized for improving on your skills.

The exception to this is creative agencies, who will often want you to bill them on an hourly basis. I make sure to clarify that I'm billing them a certain number of hours for a project (essentially, agreeing on a project fee measured in hours rather than dollars). For example, five hours at $100 per hour for a 500-word blog post.

In any case, be sure to clarify the target word count of the piece that you're quoting, and note that anything outside of that scope will have to be renegotiated. Don't get locked into a low quote because you assumed "blog

post" meant 500 words and your client assumed it meant 1500 words. Put the scope of the project in writing.

Negotiating the Fee

It's wonderful when you have a client who just accepts your rate and signs the contract. (Though if everyone is happily accepting your rate, it's a sign you're charging too little.)

If a client pushes back on your fee, it could be that they're cheapskates who will never pay you enough, and you should let them go frustrate another freelancer. But they could also be rad clients with tight budgets, and it's worth it for you to work with them on price.

While it's fine to negotiate the fee, never negotiate your value. What I mean is, offer them a lower service package, rather than just discounting yourself. If they can't afford your standard grant writing package, maybe you offer them a scaled-down package where a bit more of the work is on their plate, but you still help them get it across the finish line. If they can't afford your normal case study rate, maybe they can conduct the customer interviews based off of your interview templates, and

then you can write up a discounted case study based on the transcripts.

In fact, if you're sensing price sensitivity during the phone call, you might consider offering a range of packages in your proposal. Along with your standard package, write up a higher-priced package with extra bells and whistles and a lower-priced package that's scaled back in scope. People tend to pick the middle package, so this can be a great way to put your pricing—and the value of your work—in context. Extra bells and whistles tend to include additional wordcount, interviews, SEO keyword research, or writing social media posts that go along with the main project.

If you really want to land the gig, you might also note that you're open to negotiation in the proposal, with a line like, "If you're looking at other freelancers, I appreciate an opportunity to revise my bid."

Contracts

They love your proposal and are happy with the fee? Rad! Time to get that contract inked.

Please, please don't work without a contract. Even—especially!—if you're working for someone you know. Not only is it a convenient reference for all the project details, but it also is just the professional thing to do.

Some clients, like creative agencies or larger companies, might have a standard contract they use with freelancers. Others might ask you to provide your own contract, so it's good to have something on hand.

What needs to be in the contract?

Project details: Scope, deliverables, and timeline. If you're entering into a bit more freeform long-term working relationship—for example, if they want you to write a range of website copy, blog posts, etc. as they come up—then you can note that details of specific projects will be agreed upon via email.

Payment details: Pay rate (which, if it varies project to project, you might also note will be agreed upon via email), payment terms (30 days is standard), how you'll

be paid (check, bank transfer), and late fee (5-10 percent of project fee will be added to invoice after 30 days).[14]

Standard clauses: Intellectual property rights (who owns the finished copy—generally the client if the project is work-for-hire), confidential information and nondisclosure, conflicts of interest disclosure, terms for termination of the working relationship, warranties, limitation of liability, governing law, independent contractor assurance.

The Freelancers Union (freelancersunion.org) has some excellent resources for coming up with a standard contract, as well as to help you understand your clients' contracts. It's also worth it (and surprisingly affordable) to have a lawyer review your standard contract or a contract from a client.

14 We'll talk about getting money from late clients in a later chapter. Making sure you have a late fee clause in your contract is one tool, so make sure it's in there even if you trust the client.

Contract Red Flags

Ideally, your client is happy to sign the contract you provide. But if they prefer to work with their own, give it a thorough study before signing it. You especially need to watch for these red flags:

Non-compete clause: This clause states that you can't work for another business that offers competing services, sometimes for up to five years after the project is completed. Obviously, this is a terrible thing to sign if you're a freelancer, because your goal is to specialize in working for similar businesses.

Lack of payment terms: You absolutely need to have payment terms in the contract, or you'll have no power when it comes to chasing a late payment.

Ownership of IP: Read through this one closely. In most cases, your client absolutely should get ownership of the final copy you produce for them in a work-for-hire situation. But some of these clauses get a little grabby and need to be scaled back.

Indemnity clause: Is the client dumping all the blame for potential lawsuits brought about by your copy on your shoulders? Definitely not okay.

If you find red flag clauses in a contract, it doesn't mean the client is shady. In a big company, especially, the person who interviewed you probably hasn't ever read that contract—they got it from the legal team. Just point out the problem(s) and see if you can negotiate a revised contract. I haven't had trouble getting any changes made to problematic clauses when I've requested them.

If you have any questions, it's seriously worth paying for the 30-60 minutes a lawyer would spend looking it over.

Getting a Deposit

Do you need to get a deposit before starting work? Yes and no. Some freelancers absolutely won't start until they see anywhere from one third to half of the total project fee hit their bank account. This is good practice but also something I've rarely done—and have yet to be burned by.

Some clients, like creative agencies, don't do deposits as a rule. Other projects, like blog posts, are so small that—in my mind—it doesn't make sense to request a deposit.

Asking for a deposit is partly about guaranteeing payment (especially if this is a new working relationship) and partly about reserving time in your schedule. Whenever I've taken on a new blogging client, it doesn't carve a huge amount of time out of my schedule—and if they don't pay that first month's invoice, I'll hold off delivering any new articles until they become current. I've had to chase late payments plenty of times, but I've never been burned.

With larger projects—say, ghostwriting a 65,000 word business book—I do require a deposit in order to schedule the time in my calendar. That's because A) it's a big chunk of cash and B) I'm going to say no to other potential work during the months I've scheduled to work with that client. If they back out, I'll end up with a huge gap in my expected income.

Should you ask for a deposit? Yes, if it's going to be a big financial risk to hold time without monetary proof that the client is serious about working with you. Maybe not, if the project fee's not that big and you're not necessarily holding space in your schedule for the client.

Walking Away from a Prospect

Most prospects are going to be perfectly lovely, professional people when you give them the benefit of the doubt. Somebody who strikes you as rude in the initial phone call may be pleasantly communicative via email, pay promptly, and eventually you'll develop a rapport with them. Somebody who seems disorganized before you started working together may be whip smart and on top of it once you get going.

People have bad days, people word things poorly, and people don't always put their best foot forward. I've watched new freelancers blow up potential working relationships over perceived slights that, when they told me about it later, seemed like business as usual to me.

That said, you will also run across some jerks. If you do, always be the adult in the room and don't be afraid to politely tell them to get lost. Consider this your permission to walk away from a project negotiation if it's giving you a bad feeling—there are plenty of other clients out there.

Here are some of the red flags that should make you reconsider signing that contract.

Asking for excessive free samples: You should never do free work in order to get a gig.[15] You might agree to write a few sentences of product copy, or suggest some blog topics as part of the proposal—especially if you don't have much of a track record or clips—but if a client asks you to do a sample project before hiring you, counter with a proposal to do a small PAID sample project before signing a larger contract.

They try to bully you into taking a lower rate: Negotiation is part of business, of course. But if a client comes back with something along the lines of "Our last freelancer worked for way less," or "We could find someone off Fiverr to do that for half the price," run away. They're not going to treat you with any more respect once you sign the contract! And definitely don't fall into the trap of doing unpaid/lower paid work now in exchange for work in the future. A common line from bad clients is, "If you do this project for us cheap, there's a lot more work coming your way." It's never true.

They refuse to sign a contract: Working with a contract is completely, utterly standard in the industry. Which means that if someone refuses to sign one, you should

15 The exception to this rule seems to be for freelance editors, who generally offer a few pages of sample editing as part of the proposal.

wonder why. Cut your losses and move on to the next prospect.

They expect immediate responses, and text/call outside of working hours: If a prospect isn't respectful of your time during the negotiation phase, they won't be respectful once you're doing work for them. Obviously, you should respond in a timely manner, but be wary of a prospect who seems to have unreasonable expectations when it comes to response times.

They're in a rush: Prospects who start out in a rush will remain in a rush as clients. They'll get things to you at the last minute and expect you to turn them around over the weekend. They'll suddenly change expectations and expect immediate revisions. If they're always in crunch time, it's a sign that they're disorganized on a deeper level, and they'll expect you to make that your problem.

Sometimes a perfectly good client will find themselves in a pinch and really will have an emergency. Maybe their last freelancer dropped the ball or their in-house copywriter is out sick. In that case, a legit client will understand when you charge them a rush fee of 25-50 percent of the total project fee in order to push aside other things in your schedule for them.

Like contracts, rush fees are totally standard in the industry. Anyone who pushes back on your request for a rush fee on a quick-turn isn't going to value your time later on down the line.

Rocking the Gig

You've got the contract signed, and the deposit (if you asked for one) is in your bank account. It's time to get to work rocking this gig.

In the early days of my career, I was blown away by the number of clients who praised me for meeting the deadline and turning in copy that didn't need much editing.

I was floored. Weren't meeting the deadline and turning in decent copy literally the only two things in my job description? I'm not sure what kind of slackers I was competing against for those early gigs, but I don't want you to be one of them.

Be a professional. Do what you say you'll do, communicate well, turn in the best copy you can, and always underpromise and overdeliver.[16] If you can't

16 When you're starting out, I recommend having a friend check over your drafts (you can trade beta reads with another freelancer), or using a tool like Grammarly or Hemingway Editor to give your final draft that extra gleam.

make the deadline your client wants at first, it's okay to push back and suggest a deadline that will actually be doable for you. Most clients aren't in as much of a hurry as they think, and it's better for you to take the time to do the work right and meet the deadline that you agreed on—or turn it in early!—rather than having to ask for an extension or turning in something that's not as good as it could be.

Setting Boundaries with Clients

Keeping up your end of the bargain and being a professional is just one part of rocking the gig. The other thing you need in order to have a good working relationship with your clients is strong boundaries.

It's super important to set boundaries with your clients from the get go. It may feel like you desperately need this job, but remember that your clients also need you. If they're a client worth keeping, they'll understand how to respect the boundaries you set for them.

Communication: When do you respond to emails, texts, etc.? Do you mind if a client calls you out of the blue in the middle of the day? Are you cool with a text or two over the weekend? Do you prefer all communication via

email? Any and all of that is great—just let them know how they should or should not get hold of you, then train them about your expectations.

Scope: The scope of the project should be laid out in your contract, but that doesn't mean clients will keep to it. Don't let scope eat into your hourly rate by agreeing to do "just one more little thing" for free. If you agreed to write a 1000-word article with three interviews, and now they want you to interview five people, or also write the social media copy, it's perfectly legit to respond, "That sounds great! FYI, that will increase the scope of the project by $X amount. Is that still something you want to do?"

Personal life: Over time, some of my clients have become friends. We share details about our lives and families on a deeper level than I normally do with clients—but as long as there is a working, contractual relationship, it's important to be careful about blurring the line between the personal and professional. Stay mindful of what you share.

It's a good idea to post your policies and terms on your website, then refer clients to those policies at the beginning of the relationship.

Building an Ongoing Relationship

One of the best things you can do for your freelance business is to cultivate long-term relationships with great, well-paying clients. It helps even out the ebbs and flows of your finances, and reduces the amount of time you spend hunting after the next gig.

Certain niches lend themselves to this more easily. A lot of large clients will need regular writing—like weekly blog posts and newsletters, quarterly case studies, or just a random assortment of writing and marketing projects. Creative agencies are a great source of steady work, too.

If you specialize in one-off projects like writing website copy for small businesses or ghostwriting business books, you probably can't rely on getting regular work from the same client. That's not necessarily a bad thing if you've got a steady stream of referrals and new business from word-of-mouth and networking.

At some point, if you've found a good client who's got plenty of projects to keep you busy, you might even find yourself working for one client more or less exclusively. I recommend that you proceed with caution in that case. Even my favorite clients—the ones who pay me the best and bring me the most exciting projects and text

me photos of their dogs—go through dry spells. Even the biggest, most reliable company could go through a reorg and decide to cut their freelancers. Business goals change, industries shift, and your steady stream of freelance work can vanish overnight.

Personally, I get spooked if any one client is more than 50 percent of my yearly income. The lifeblood of a healthy freelance career is having multiple streams of income so that if one vanishes, you can still pay the bills while you're drumming up more work.

Firing a Client

What if you don't want to build an ongoing relationship with a client? Maybe you're just too busy to keep working with them, maybe they're not paying you as much as your other clients, maybe you're getting bored of the work, or maybe they're just a pain in the ass and you're over it.

Time to fire them.

How you go about this depends on what your ultimate goal is.

Raise your rates: One surefire way to phase out excess clients is to raise your rates across the board—but be careful with this tactic. If it's just a matter of pay (e.g., you'd happily keep working with a client if they'd pay you 50 percent more), then go for it and see if they stick around. But if you're really done working with them, don't just raise your rates and hope they go away. Nothing's worse than being stuck working with a client you hate because the pay is too good to say no. (We'll talk more about how to raise your rates in the next chapter.)

Pass them on: If they've been a perfectly lovely client but you're just too busy, bored, or high-priced to keep working with them, you can recommend them to another freelancer. I usually get in touch with a few people ahead of time to see if they're interested in a potential gig, then offer to make the introduction when I send the breakup email. Most clients are very understanding—and grateful that you're keeping them in good hands. I usually offer to keep working for the next month or so while they get their next freelancer up and running.

Cut them loose: If they're not a great client, please don't inflict them on one of your colleagues! It's perfectly acceptable to simply let them know you're terminating the working relationship—you don't need a reason

why.[17] No need to burn bridges here, even if it's been a rough relationship—you never know when your contact (or one of their less pain-in-the-ass coworkers) might get a job at a better company and reach out again. I usually say that my schedule has gotten too full and regretfully I need to let them go.

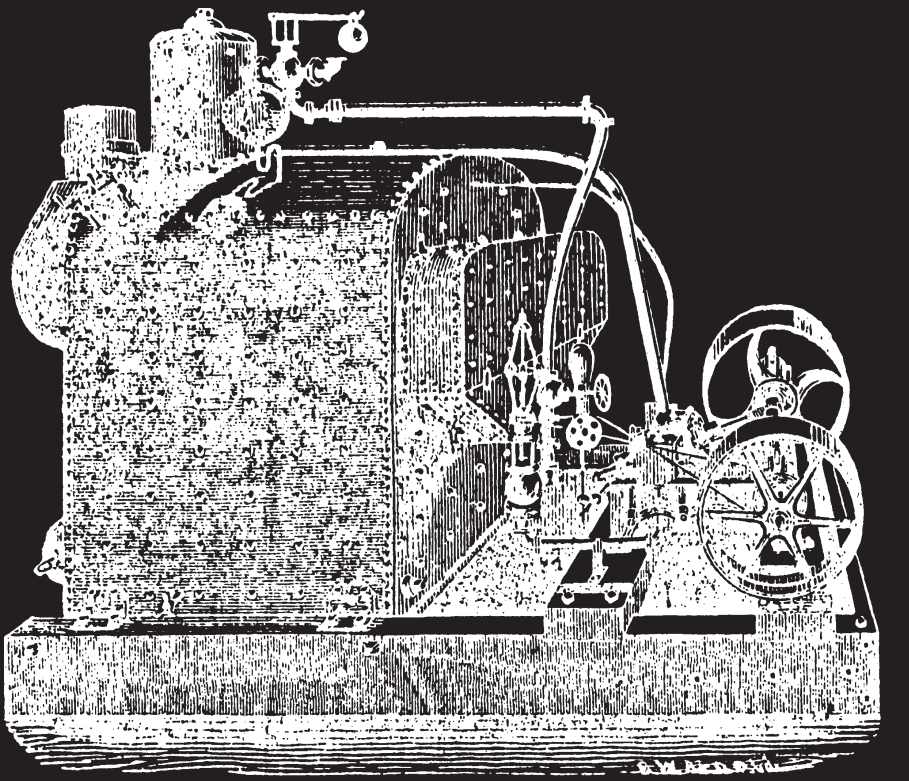
However you approach firing a client, be a professional and give them a reasonable amount of time to adjust to your departure (or rate change). For example, a few weeks before the end of a current project, or a month out if you're on a retainer or ongoing contract.

17 Double-check the termination clause in your contract to make sure you can walk away at any time, for any reason.

Take Action

—Start a file to collect all the information you'll gather as you start developing working relationships with clients: proposal templates, rate sheets, sample contracts, and interview questions. Include your own proposals/rates/etc., as well as sample ones you find on sites like FreelancersUnion.org. If you've been making friends with other freelancers, ask them to share sample proposals, rates, and contracts as well.

—Ask a friend to practice interviewing you over the phone, so you can work on polishing your pitch and saying things like "I charge 75 cents to a dollar per word for blog posts, depending on the complexity" without panicking.



CHAPTER 5: BUSINESS NUTS AND BOLTS

I saved the best stuff for the end—finances! rates! managing the ebbs and flows! invoicing! Some of these topics might sound a bit intimidating, but remember that running a business is basically just experimentation. Approach it curiously, with a plucky combination of elbow grease and playfulness.[18] You'll be okay.

Setting Your Rates

I already told you I recommend quoting prospects a project fee rather than giving them an hourly rate in your proposal. But you should know your target hourly rate because it will help you come up with that project fee. And—if you're like most freelancers I've spoken with—your hourly rate should be a lot higher than the number that's in your head right now.

That's because when you're calculating your hourly rate, you need to account for all the non-billable time

18 Except for taxes. Please approach taxes less playfully, more with a professional accountant at your side.

in your schedule. When I was first starting out, it felt ludicrous to set a target rate of $50 per hour—I was coming from making $25 per hour waiting tables, after all. But when you realize that most freelancers only spend half their working hours on billable projects, that $50 per hour rate works out to the same effective wage that I'd earned as a waitress.

You'll use your hourly rate as a tool to come up with project fees. For example, if you know it takes you ten hours (including interviews, drafting, and edits) to write a 750-word case study, and you're aiming for an hourly rate of $100 per hour, you should quote $1000 for that case study.

If you're dealing with something a little more amorphous in scope—like an e-book—then you can use the word count (and a per-word rate) to help you come up with a project fee. When I'm giving a broad quote on something like that, I generally tell clients a range of per-word rates depending on how long the project is, how much outside research I'll need to do, and how many interviews are required.

It's difficult to tell you exactly what you should charge because it varies so much based on industry,

type of writing, and experience. But I will tell you this: aim for at least $50 per hour, or 50 cents per word (even if you're not getting those rates right away). You can go up from there, but anything less and you won't be able to earn a living wage.

It's tough to recommend an evergreen resource for setting freelance rates, but several organizations and websites occasionally do surveys. Googling "freelance writer rate survey" will net you the most recent reputable one.[19]

Earning Your Rates

Will you be able to charge your target hourly or word count rate right off the bat? Maybe not, if you're just starting out with no prior writing clips or industry experience. Just keep earning those clips, charging more with each client, and tracking your time to make sure you're not losing money by spending more of your hours on a project than a client is paying for.

You'll start to get a feel for your pricing as you go. Did that prospect say yes way too quickly? Maybe you quoted

19 As of this writing, freelancer Ashley R. Cummings has fantastic 2022 survey results on her site: ashleyrcummings.com/news/how-much-should-freelance-writers-charge.

too low—so be sure to charge the next person more. Are you having a terrible time landing clients, or are people ghosting you after you send them the proposal? Maybe you don't yet have the experience to command the rates you're quoting.

Note how I phrased that: "You don't yet have the experience to command those rates," rather than "Your work isn't worth those rates."

You may totally be a good enough blogger to charge $1 per word, but it might take you a year or two of getting clips under your belt to demonstrate that to potential clients.

When I was getting started ghostwriting, I wasn't landing my proposals. I would send out quotes that—according to my industry research—were in the mid- to low-range, and…crickets.

Now that I've gotten some strong experience, I'm getting enthusiastic yeses to the same rates that my early prospects used to balk at. My rates are still a great deal compared to what more experienced ghostwriters charge (especially given my skill level; I don't feel comfortable tooting my own horn about much, but I'm a damn good

ghostwriter). But I need to get a few more projects under my belt in order to pull off a higher rate.

If prospects are bouncing off your high rates, figure out what you need to do to command that rate. Do you need to pick up a few lower-paying gigs to pad out your portfolio and demonstrate your skill? Do you need to start content marketing to establish yourself as a thought leader in the industry? Do you need warmer leads or better referrals? Do you need to take a course or get a respected industry certification?

Don't lower the value you place on your work. Put in the effort to make sure other people see your value and understand that your services are worth the price.

What Are Others Charging?

Building a network of other freelancers is another great way to help figure out your rates, because you can send them a quick email and ask what they charge. For example, I rarely do website copywriting. In fact, most of the time an opportunity pops up for me, I pass it along to a friend who does a killer job—especially for B2C businesses. When a B2B SaaS marketing company came to me last year with a website copywriting project,

though, the opportunity was such a good fit that I decided to take the gig myself. I emailed that friend to ask what she charges, and got some fantastic pointers in order to land the job.

Get comfortable talking about money with your colleagues. I know talking about salaries is traditionally uncomfortable, but I firmly believe that the more transparent all of us freelancers can be, the more we take our own power into our own hands and protect ourselves from being taken advantage of by clients.

Not to say that all clients will try to take advantage of you. When I first started working for one of my favorite creative agency clients a few years back, my first project was going to be writing a series of blog posts along with two other writers. When I quoted $325 per blog post (which was $25 more than what I quoted my last client), I got a surprising response.

"To be perfectly transparent," the project manager said, "the two male writers we're also working with quoted us a much higher rate than that. So that's what we'll pay you, as well." And then he named a dollar amount that was nearly twice what I'd quoted.

No shade to those two guys, who are great writers. But they'd confidently quoted almost double what I did, and they certainly weren't any better writers than I was. Another client could have taken advantage of my ignorance in order to save a bunch of cash.

Talk to other freelancers about money. It's good for us all.

You can also give it a google to see what nuggets of wisdom the internet has for you—but be careful with who you're getting your information from. There are a lot of articles normalizing ridiculously low rates. Check the Resources section for reliable sources of freelance writer wisdom.

Raising Your Rates

I've already mentioned raising your rate for every new client you take on. If you calculate one project rate at 25 cents per word and get it, quote the next prospect 30 cents per word. If you made $45 per hour working for your last client, quote the next one at a rate that will earn you $55 per hour.

Early on in my career, I set myself a rule that I would raise my blogging quote by $25 per post for every new

client. The good ones said yes, and the result was that after a few years I was charging literally ten times as much as I had been when I first started out. (In part because I found better clients, in part I had built up that blogging and industry cred, like we just talked about.)

The hitch with this is that eventually you may end up with clients who are paying you a lower rate than other clients. You can fire them (refer to the last chapter), or you can try to bring them along with you as your prices increase. If you're a good writer and constantly improving your craft, they probably know they have been getting a good value out of you and will be happy to pay more to keep you around.

It's good practice to raise your rates with clients on a regular basis—I recommend using the new year as a nice excuse to raise prices across the board. You could also use the one-year anniversary of when you took that client on, but choosing the new year lets you get all your rate-raising conversations out of the way at once.

For ongoing work, email your clients a month or two before you plan to raise your rates (i.e., October if you're going for a new year rate increase). Simply let them know in writing what your new rate will be and when it will go into effect. If it's a relatively minor amount (around

10 percent), then you shouldn't get any pushback. When the deadline comes around, just start invoicing them at the new rate.

For project-by-project work, you have a couple of choices. If the rate increase is relatively minor (around 10 percent), you can wait until you're negotiating the next project to announce that your rates have gone up since you last worked together. If you're planning to raise rates by a hefty amount, you might want to let them know ahead of time so they can budget for it—or hunt for another freelancer if they're not going to be able to afford you anymore.

Managing Your Finances

Like any business, running a solvent freelance writing business requires a bit of financial planning. Don't worry, you don't need an MBA—you just need to set aside a few hours here and there to do some admin and keep an eye on your finances: check your invoices, check your bank account, categorize transactions in your accounting software, pay any bills that aren't going out on auto pay, etc.[20]

20 If you're new to business finances, I highly recommend the book *Profit First* by Mike Michalowicz. It's a straightforward and, dare I say, entertaining read.

Do yourself a favor and pencil admin tasks into your schedule regularly to avoid losing track of important details or missing things.

Paying Yourself

You got paid for that first gig! Awesome. Don't cash that check for rent just yet, though—deposit everything you make freelancing in your business account. Get into the habit from day one of treating incoming paychecks as your business's money and paying yourself a regular salary out of that pool.

The first benefit of this is it helps shield your personal and household budget from the ebbs and flows of freelancing—where one month you make $500 and the next you make $10,000.

The second benefit is that it allows you to see how much of a runway you have before you need to start stressing about landing new (or better-paying) gigs. I like to have three months' worth of my salary saved in my business account at any given time. If it dips too far below that, I need to get into prospecting mode. If I have more than that saved, I have a lot more leeway to say

no to a gig that isn't a great fit and to spend that time growing my fiction business instead.

Figure out how much you need to pay yourself in order to make personal expenses every month, then set an automatic transfer to come out from your business account to personal account every two weeks, or on the first and fifteenth of the month.

(With certain business structures, such as an S-Corp, paying yourself as an employee is actually a legal requirement.)

Paying Taxes

The way you pay taxes as a business is different than when you were an employee. Instead of dealing with taxes at the end of every year, you need to make sure you're staying on top of your quarterly tax payments. (Again, with a different business structure such as an S-Corp, you'll be paying taxes slightly differently. This is a great thing to ask your accountant about in that meeting you scheduled with them a few chapters back.)

As a freelancer, you will also be paying more in taxes than when you worked for an employer. That's because your employer was paying half of your tax

burden before, and as a freelancer you are now your own employer. That means you're in charge of both your personal portion and the employer portion. It will vary for everyone, but standard advice is to save 30 percent of everything you make for taxes.

Set this aside in a savings account, and don't—don't!—touch it. Make it a habit every time you deposit a check to transfer that money over immediately so you don't forget.

At the end of the year, I highly recommend hiring a tax professional to help you file your return. Even if you've been doing it yourself for years, filing freelance taxes is a slightly different beast, and a tax pro can help walk you through it. For only a couple of hundred dollars, they'll probably save you money by helping you write off things you hadn't thought of, give you advice on what to do differently in the coming year to minimize your tax burden, and make sure you're staying compliant.

Paying Expenses

The lovely thing about a freelance writing business is that it doesn't have much overhead. You don't have to buy a bunch of inventory or rent a storefront—all you really need is a working computer and a business license.

That said, you will have some expenses as you get your business going.

- Website hosting
- Software subscriptions (Office, invoicing, transcription, editing, etc.)
- Ergonomic office setup (if you're going to spend hours sitting or standing at your desk, it's highly worth investing to make sure you're comfortable and healthy)
- Professional development (conferences, professional associations, education, and courses)
- Co-working space (might just cost a cup of coffee at your local coffee shop)
- Research (books, movies, media subscriptions related to your writing business)

Chasing Down Late Payments

One frustrating—but common—thing you might find when you open your books for some quality admin time is outstanding invoices. In an ideal world, every one of your clients will pay the moment they get your invoice. In the real world, you sometimes (often) have to chase down late payments.

For the most part, late payments aren't malicious. Your client probably forgot, or just didn't prioritize getting you paid. In rare cases, you might have to fight tooth and nail for your payment. (There were probably other red flags about the client before this, as well. Cut them loose once you get that check.)

Here's what to try, in order of escalation.

Resend the invoice: Normally, this little reminder is all it takes. If you have a late fee in your contract, you can add that to the invoice when you resend it. The client may or not pay the late fee when they finally pay the invoice, but in my mind that doesn't matter. The late fee is just a tool to get them to pay more attention in the future.

Send a check-in email: If they ignore your re-sent invoice, send a quick check-in email. If you're working for a bigger company, your contact person might not be the same person who pays the invoices, so they might not know that you haven't yet gotten paid. Just ask if they can check in on the outstanding invoice for you.

Pause work: Still no payment? If you're in an ongoing contract, now's the time to let your client know that you won't be able to prioritize any more of their projects until their account is current. Again, if your contact isn't the same as the payments person, this will probably get them to light a fire for you.

Send an attorney's letter: Still not hearing anything back? Seriously? Have an attorney draft a letter for you and send it to your client.

Small claims court: If the outstanding amount is sizable, it might be worth pursuing legal action through a small claims court. Be sure to weigh the cost of this against the sum—if we're talking a few hundred dollars, it's probably not worth it.

With larger projects, it's important to give yourself some insurance against nonpayment. This goes back to the contract phase, where you ask for a deposit before

you get started and outline a payment schedule where you get paid at certain steps along the way.

For example, when I'm ghostwriting a business book, I get one third up front to secure time on my calendar, one third when I turn in the first draft, and one third when I turn in revisions (or a certain amount of time after turning in the first draft, if they don't get back to me with timely revisions).

Another form of insurance is holding back a final deliverable until payment clears. This is a common practice for designers—they won't send you the high res files until you've paid the final invoice. Some freelancers have a clause in the contract that ownership of the work doesn't transfer over until the invoice is paid, which can at least help give you a legal edge in case you get to the attorney's letter or small claims court stage of this process.

Personally, I've only once had to go beyond sending a check-in email (or two) in order to get paid. The case where I did pause work was on a big website copy project where my client was on a short deadline. You can bet the marketing team got me paid quickly once I stopped turning in copy.

Managing the Ebbs and Flows

Change is the nature of the freelance beast. Some months you'll be overrun with projects; others you'll send emails into the ether without a peep in response.

Some of this is seasonal—especially with bigger companies. A few years ago, when almost all of my clients were big corporate types, I started panicking when all the work vanished during the month of December. What had I done wrong? Nothing, it turns out. Come January, my inbox was brimming with projects again—the big dogs apparently all tend to go dark over the holidays. Now, I go with the flow and schedule my own breaks when I know most of my clients are also slow.

When it comes to work-life balance, I like to think of it as a continuum rather than a scale that must end each day in equilibrium. Sometimes I'm in a Time of Hustle. Sometimes I'm in a Time of Ease.

These phases can last weeks at a time, or they can last years—particularly when it comes to the Time of Hustle. When you're getting traction in your freelance business, you'll spend a lot of time in this phase. There are a few reasons for this. First, you're probably not yet getting paid what your time is worth, so you're having

to juggle more clients than is optimal in order to pay the bills. Second, you're probably having to spend a lot more time rustling up new clients and growing your business.

As your business matures, you'll start commanding an hourly rate that lets you take on fewer clients, and you won't be spending as much time prospecting them. You can keep the pedal down and keep growing your business, or you can ease up and cut your hours while still earning a comfortable amount.

The best way to smooth out the financial impact of ebbs and flows is to be frugal with your expenses and pay yourself a modest salary, like we discussed above. That way your personal income isn't affected by your business income, and you can be a bit more relaxed.

There are ways to logistically smooth out the ebbs and flows, too.

When You're Slammed

Take a deep breath. Understand that you're in a Time of Hustle, and that there's a light at the end of the tunnel.

Sometimes you just need to hold on until a project (or three) wraps up and you can breathe again. Sometimes

you have to make your own light. Maybe you need to fire a lower paying client. Maybe you need to push back against a too-tight deadline (most clients will understand).

When you're slammed, it's okay to put other things on hold. Let others around you know that you're underwater. Ask for help from your family or partner. Don't beat yourself up for ordering takeout, or skipping that workout. You'll be through this soon.

That said, if you're constantly in a state of being overwhelmed by work, you need to take a step back and figure out how to fix it. You're the most precious resource in your freelance writing business, and if you burn out, your business fails.

Maybe you need to be better at saying no. Maybe you need to be less of a perfectionist. Maybe you need better support from the people around you.

If you find yourself hating your working conditions, have a frank conversation with your boss about it. (You are your boss.) Then put on your boss hat and troubleshoot how Boss You can make lasting changes that will support Writer You for the long term.

Boss Jessie and Writer Jessie have had some *tough* conversations over the years about overscheduling and burnout, and I'm finally starting to be better about self care. Here are some of the things that have helped:[21]

Leave Slack in Your Schedule: Things will inevitably take longer or come up at the last minute. If you don't leave some breathing room in your schedule to absorb them, you'll throw yourself into a chaos overwork tailspin. It helps to physically schedule tasks and projects into a calendar rather than working off of a running to-do list.

Work Regular Hours: The joy of freelancing is that you can work whenever. The curse of freelancing is that means you can end up working evenings and weekends if you're not vigilant. That might be necessary to get your business off the ground in the early-day hustle. It might happen from time to time when a client has a rush project—but never treat it like the norm. Taking time off refreshes you and gives you the stamina to do your best work.

Schedule Founder Time: Schedule an hour or so each week to work *on* your business rather than scrambling

21 For more ideas on managing your schedule and self care, check out my book *From Chaos to Creativity*.

along inside it. Take yourself for a hike, or out to coffee with your journal and evaluate how things are going, plan for the future, and get a bird's-eye view of what's working and what's not. You need clarity to break unhealthy work cycles and plan a better future for your business and self.

Invest in Ergonomic Equipment: A treadmill desk, sit-stand desk, ergonomic keyboard...It's worth spending money to make the place you work more comfortable. I finally realized this after spending months in physical therapy to deal with yet another flare-up of wrist pain. I was balking at spending $250 for an ergonomic keyboard, but I'd spent far more than that on doctor's visits. (And I haven't had wrist pain since.)

When Work Dries Up

When you're in a slow season of client work, it's a good time to invest in your business. Take a course and learn a new skill. Spiff up your online profile and polish up your portfolio. Work on developing a project like a book or course to start building recurring income into your business. Fill your calendar with networking events and coffee dates to keep your professional relationships strong and drum up new work.

However, a Time of Ease doesn't feel so relaxing when you've got a dwindling bank account and no work on the horizon.

One good way to refill your plate is to email past clients that you loved to let them know you're looking for work. Just a quick, "I hope you're having a lovely summer so far! I have a gap in my schedule for the next few months and wanted to reach out to you because I enjoyed working with you so much to see if you had any other projects that would fit in that timeline. Or if you know anyone who could use a good writer."

Position yourself as doing them a favor, rather than asking for help. You're not writing to them because your bank account is running on fumes but because they were so special you thought of them right off the bat as soon as you had a free spot in your oh-so-busy schedule.

Keeping in touch with all clients is a great practice during quiet times because even if they don't need you right then, they're more likely to remember your name when they need someone in the future. Or—as has happened to me countless times—they take a job with a different company, or their colleague in a different department needs a freelancer.

Trust Yourself

The last piece of advice I want you to internalize about the ebbs and flows of freelancing is that they are a completely natural part of the business.

When work is flowing, you can count on it ebbing. When you're stressed about the ebb, you can count on work returning. Trust me. I've been through this cycle for ten years. Some months I might make next to nothing, other months I might make five figures. It all evens out in the end.

If you're still excited about the prospect of starting a freelance writing business at this point in the book, congratulations. You've got the sort of mercenary, chaotic, good soul that it takes to make it.

Some of us are just unemployable—and that may be you. You might see that safe, reasonable path of traditional employment and run screaming in the other direction. Some unemployable people found software startups. Some become speakers or consultants or yoga instructors or start Etsy shops or start touring with their band.

Some become writers.

It's a completely non-glamorous, self-directed hustle—and it's absolutely the best. If the thought puts stars in your eyes, then put down this book and go find your first client.

You've got this.


RESOURCES

Information and Resources for Freelance Writers

- Freelancer's Union — resources, advocacy, networking events, insurance help
- Freelance Writer's Den — paid community with tons of training; worth getting on the waiting list
- American Writers & Artists Institute (AWAI) — resources, training courses
- Make a Living Writing — blog, resources
- Ed Gandia's B2B Launcher — podcast, website, and training for B2B writers
- The Writers' Co-op with Wudan Yan and Jenni Gritters — podcast
- The Write Life — blog
- Copyblogger — blog, training courses
- Jacob McMillen — blog, courses
- Ashley Gainer's Ink Well Guild — blog, podcast

- Hubspot Academy – free courses and certifications
- SmartBlogger — blog
- BlackFreelance — courses, community, resources for Black freelancers
- Mandy Ellis — blog, excellent pricing guide
- Network After Work — networking events around the U.S.
- Who Pays Writers? — crowdsourced list of publications that pay writers
- Where to Pitch — index of publications that work with freelancers
- WritersofColor.org — directory of freelance writers of color; Twitter feed is a great resource for paying jobs

Job Boards for Freelance Writers

- FreelanceWriting.com — Morning Coffee eNewsletter

- MakeALivingWriting.com — lists of paying markets
- FreelanceWritingGigs.com — daily blog roundup of jobs
- ProBlogger.com — job board
- BeAFreelanceBlogger.com — directory of paid blogging gigs
- BloggingPro.com — curated list of job postings
- LinkedIn.com/jobs — job board
- JournalismJobs.com — full time, part time, and freelance journalism jobs
- Behance.com — job board for creatives

About the Author

Jessie Kwak is an author, ghostwriter, and freelance marketing copywriter living in Portland, Oregon. As a writer, she sends readers on their own journeys to immersive worlds filled with fascinating characters, gunfights, and dinner parties. When she's not raving about her latest favorite sci-fi series to her friends, she can be found sewing, mountain biking, or out exploring new worlds both at home and abroad. She is the author of supernatural thriller *From Earth and Bone*, the Bulari Saga series of gangster sci-fi novels, and productivity guides *From Chaos to Creativity* and *From Big Idea to Book*. You can learn more about her at www.jessiekwak.com or follow her on Twitter (@jkwak).

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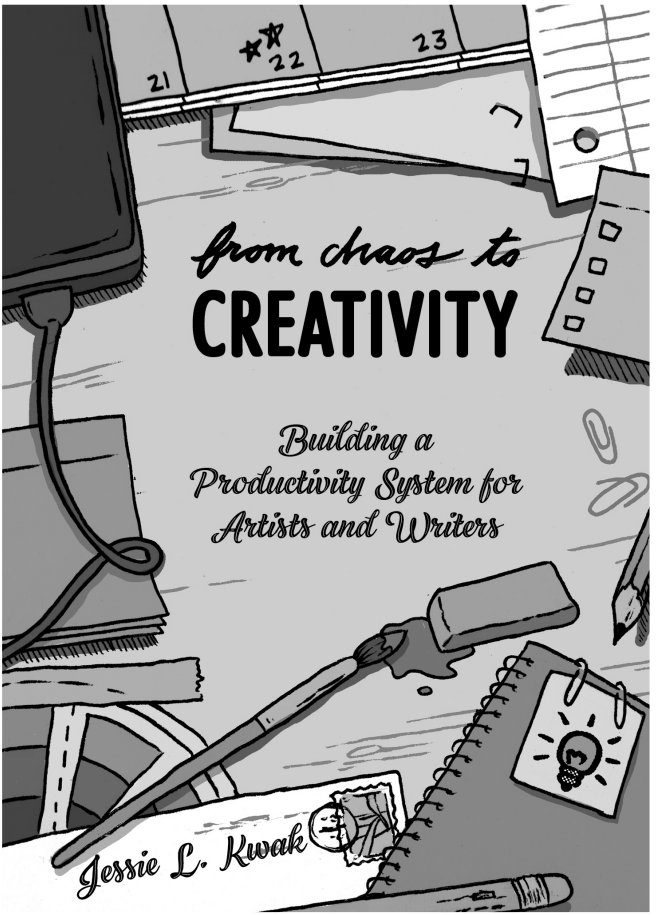

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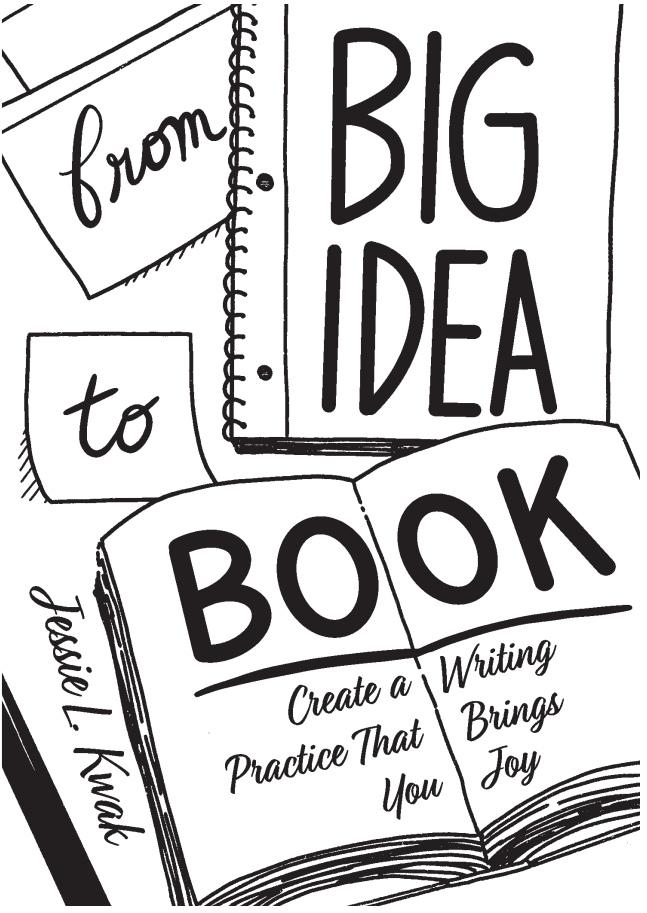
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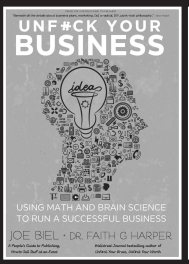

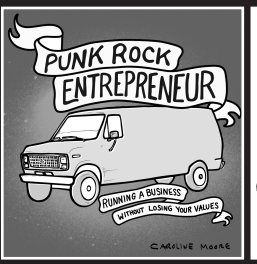

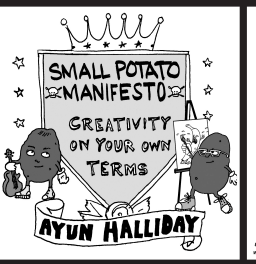

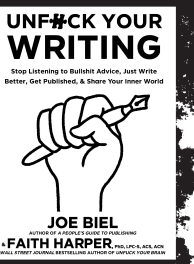

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