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HOW TO BE A FREELANCE WRITER

People think freelance writing is a fun profession in which you hang out in sweatpants, write about your thoughts and feelings, and wait for checks to roll in. I'm here to disabuse you of that idea (well, except for the sweatpants; that really happens, and it's dreamy). To me, freelancing (especially full-time) is about cultivating an *off-the-charts* level of personal organization, spending a lot of time on accounting and invoicing, and investing **tons** of time upfront on creating a website and determining rates. And, yes, you may also get to do some fascinating creative activities and projects. In addition to publishing feature and travel stories, film, and book reviews, I've written for chocolate, tequila, and furniture companies.

I created this document because nice people contact me all the time asking for advice about getting started as a writer and making it as a freelancer. Since I can't have coffee with everyone—but enjoy being helpful—these are my top 12 tips. If the below sounds doable, and you've got rock-solid organizational skills plus a touch of ADD, freelancing could be for you!

- 1. There's No Magic Website:** I think people hope to hear there's a secret website containing a list of articles and copy just WAITING to be written. It doesn't exist. The truth is, freelancing involves a lot of hustle.
- 2. Read Everything on Freelancers Union:** Lots of great tips. <https://www.freelancersunion.org/>
- 3. Don't Quit Your Day Job (Yet):** The freelance lifestyle is difficult and often unstable. I recommend doing it alongside either a full- or part-time job. That'll enable you to take relevant projects, and say "no" to terrible clients.
- 4. If You Just Quit Your Day Job Anyway, Read This:**
 - If you don't have a portfolio site, set one up STAT with your clips (screenshots of blog posts, social media, newsletters, articles, web copy, etc). Some templates and sites are: <https://pressfolios.com/>, <https://wordpress.org/> and <https://www.squarespace.com>
 - Make sure your site's SEO is good (Google "SEO best practices"). Fix broken links. Do all you can to make it easy for those seeking your skills to find you.
 - Send messages to your network (with clips/site), saying you're available for writing projects.
 - Go to industry events every week.
 - Get inexpensive business cards. (Moo.com works just fine.)
- 5. Don't Work for Free:** It hurts you and other writers fighting for livable rates. (Fiction and essays can be an exception here.)
- 6. Guard Your Time: It's a Precious Commodity:** Since I spend 20 hours/week on nonbillable tasks (accounting, marketing myself), the rest of my weekly time must be efficient. I don't do many weekday friend-lunches or TV binging. Time is money.
- 7. Try Community-Centric Remote Working Sites:**
 - PowerToFly.com: <https://www.powertofly.com>
 - Cloud Peeps: <http://cloudpeeps.com/>

c. We Work Remotely: <https://weworkremotely.com/>

8. Don't Work without a Contract: Without one, you've got no payment guarantee. An email can serve as a contract, but I prefer a signed document. Contracts should include fees, timelines, revision rounds. Google for templates or use this: <https://www.freelancersunion.org/blog/2011/09/12/use-a-contract-every-client-every-time/>

9. Take Time to Establish Your Rates: This is consuming, but worth doing thoughtfully. Per-word rates can run from \$.25/word to \$2/word. Copywriting can be billed at hourly or project rates. These articles can help.

<http://blog.cloudpeeps.com/how-to-determine-your-rate-and-communicate-your-value-as-a-freelancer/>

<http://www.the-efa.org/res/rates.php>

<https://www.freelancersunion.org/blog/2015/12/14/charging-hour-how-calculate-your-rate/>

10. Financials:

- a. Personal budget: Make one. Set aside savings each month to build a 5–6 month safety net.
- b. Taxes & accounting: Set aside 30% of each check or risk getting a huge bill at year's end. Pay quarterly estimated taxes using this sched. <https://www.irs.gov/pub/irs-pdf/f1040es.pdf>
- c. Find an accountant who can deal with freelancer/contractor tax issues.
- d. Getting paid: Use time-tracking/invoicing software. I like [Harvest](#).

11. Getting Magazine/Bylined Work:

- a. If you want magazine/byline work, join MediaBistro (\$55/year), which gives access to “how to pitch” articles. <https://www.mediabistro.com/career-advice/go-freelance/how-to-pitch/> When pitching, make sure your topic is relevant and hasn't been recently covered.
- b. You can bid on jobs on [Ebyline.com](#). (Free for writers.)

12. Getting Writing Work that *Doesn't* Involve Pitching (I.e., Copy, Content, Editorial):

- a. **Network:** (It's not a dirty word; just communicating with folks with similar interests)
 - i. Even though writer-editor types tend to relish their alone time, networking is crucial. Cultivate whatever extroversion you can (events, etc.) to get yourself “out there.”
 - ii. Contact your “soft” network (i.e., not close pals, but amiable former colleagues).
- b. **Use LinkedIn:**
 - i. It can help you find creative ad and marketing agencies in your area.
 - ii. Search for relevant groups to join, i.e., LinkedIn for Journalists; marketing groups.
 - iii. Post links/articles so connections think of you as an industry thought leader.
- c. **Editors:** Consider joining EFA for the JobList. \$180/year. <http://www.the-efa.org/mem/membership.php>

* That's my Level 1 knowledge! If you want to pick my brain further, or ask more specific questions, I consult on these topics, and you can book my time here: <http://gretchenkalwinski.com/coffeetalks>

My Bio: I'm a writer, editor, and strategist who's been freelancing since 2005 and full-time freelancing since 2014. I've written copy, articles, and brand-content for *Time Out Chicago*, *The Chicago Reader*, *Imagination Publishing*, Orbitz.com, Vosges Haut Chocolat, Crate & Barrel, PayPal, American Library Association, The University of Chicago, and TransUnion. I'm involved in the literary arena: I earned my M.F.A. in Creative Writing from Northwestern University, and now edit and coach authors (both for Curbside Splendor Publishing and independently). I've launched a literary blog, edited a weekly culture mag, and worked as a content consultant for a Fortune 500 company. I'm currently writing an e-book for a startup, among other projects. Email me for more info at gretchen.kalwinski@gmail.com or check my site at www.gretchenkalwinski.com.