An Introduction to Freelance Journalism

Freelance journalists are self-employed writers who ply their craft for periodicals: newspapers, magazines, newsletters, journals and online publications. They share many of the attributes we associate with authors: they work for themselves, cover many of their own costs and rely on writing for a living. Where they differ is that they only write non-fiction, their work varies widely in length, they are paid per word (and generally paid quite well, compared with book authorship), and generally speaking, the costs of producing an article – such as travel expenses, pictures acquired, and other reasonable costs – are picked up by the publisher.

Having said that, journalism as a writing endeavour is also unforgiving of a number of ‘evils’: inaccuracy, over-writing and lack of immediacy.

In other words, works produced – invariably called ‘stories’ or ‘articles’ – have to be

a) as accurate as possible (within reason)

b) written engagingly and informatively, but with concision (often called ‘tight’)

c) and they have to deal with issues that have an element of currency; ie. either dealing with issues in the news, issues likely to important in the short-to-medium future, or those raised as a result of issues currently dominating the public debate.

The latter of the three is the hardest to contend with. It is something called ‘news sense’ – whether something ‘is a story’ or ‘is not a story’ in journalism. This can vary widely, and at times confusingly from editor to editor. Like book publishers, what one editor may find a most excellent concept, another may find dreadfully stale. And news sense even applies to publications with longer lead times, such as quarterlies and monthlies: editors then need to think, “Will this issue still be of interest to my readers in a month’s time? In three months’ time?”.

While this may sound a little onerous and overwhelming at first, journalism is actually a very rewarding sphere in which to work as a writer. It is a place from which many talented authors have sprung up (Mark Twain), and to which many established authors gravitate toward or return (Gore Vidal). What one writes can influence individuals, governments or even societies; it is a field where talent is often recognised, and where a writer’s work and style can receive airing and exposure.

A quick glossary: the jargon of journalism

Journalism as it is practised today has a long and respected history, and many standards have developed. But jargon that is specific to journalists and how they do their work also abounds. Even if planning to only occasionally dip into freelance journalism, it helps to understand some of the terminology so you can make sense of what commissioning editors say to you.
Don’t be afraid to use these terms: they also help to instil confidence in you as a potential freelance journalist, as it suggests you understand the field.

**story (or article):** A work in non-fiction intended for publication in a periodical. Never say ‘manuscript’.

**wordage:** The length of the story in words, although older-style editors – particularly in newspapers – may measure stories in paragraphs (see *para* below). Also known as *length*.

**interview:** a conversation you have for the purpose of acquiring information to include in your article. Anyone you speak to, no matter how minimal the information they have provided, has been interviewed.

**lead** (as in ‘to lead a dog on a leash’): The first paragraph of a story, where all of the basic elements of the story are ‘signposted’ or introduced. Also known as *the intro*.

**byline:** your name, either the name you are best known by, or a non de plume if necessary. Journalism generally frowns on anything other than your legal name. Do not use honorifics in your byline, such as Dr or Professor; these are also frowned upon, as they are thought to create a distance between the writer and the reader. May vary if you are a medical doctor and writing about medical issues.

**body text, or body:** The bulk of the story, basically, that which follows the lead. Sometimes known as the trunk.

**file:** This is when you deliver a story (or submit the manuscript), usually via email directly to the editor. You file a story, and the process is known as “filing”.

**deadline:** Self-evident, although not to be toyed with. If you cannot make the deadline, contact the editor and let them know.

**para:** short for ‘paragraph’. Sometimes called ‘graf’ by American editors. Plural are *paras* and *grafs*.

**dateline:** the place where you will be filing from; usually appears at the beginning of the trunk story, just after the headline or after the byline.

**breakout:** these are quotations from the body text of your story, often used in longer articles to break up the columns of text. They can be a quirky comment, a salient point or a phrase that encapsulates a particular idea. Also known as *pull quotes*. Magazine editors at times ask for a selection of these to be included at the bottom of stories.

**breakout box:** a smaller story standing aside from the main story but directly related. Sometimes sub-editors may extract information from a main article and corral it into a breakout box. Often used as a place for graphs, lists, trivia, etc. Also known as a *sidebar*.

**sub-editor:** the person who will edit your story, often not the editor who commissions you. The process is known as subbing. Also known as *copy editor*, and the process as *copyedit*.

**fact-checker:** someone who reads your story and seeks to confirm figures and facts in the story. Still relatively new in Australia, but increasingly common in magazines and newspapers overseas. You may get called up by one of them seeking the source of information in your article, which may then be verified.

**edit for length:** this is what sub-editors do to reduce your story so it can fit in the available space. Also known as *trim* and *cut*.

**sub-heading, sub-header:** often used in magazines and feature sections of newspapers. Literally, a more explanatory headline under the main headline.

**newspeg,** or just *peg:* the reason for writing a story now. Why is it relevant and interesting?

**cover:** to write about an issue, or attend an event in order to write about it, eg “she covered the conference”. One writes about something, but covers a topic, issue or event. Also the front page story in
a magazine, as in the *cover story*.

**Proposal, or pitch:** what you write to an editor when seeking to interest them in a story you would like them to publish.

**Commission:** what editors do when they agree to take your story. Often verbally or via email. Always best to confirm verbal commissions with an email.

**Brief:** the instructions given by an editor to a freelance journalist on the shape and tone of the story. If straying outside this brief, discuss it with an editor and seek approval. Writing outside the brief may mean you don't get paid.

**Rate:** the amount being paid to the freelance journalist for writing the story. Usually offered as a ‘per word’ rate or a total for a complete article of a defined number of words in length. Always agree on a rate with the editor at the time the story the story is commissioned.

**Rewrite:** what editors may sometimes ask freelance journalists to do, if they have strayed from the brief, or the story delivered does not meet the promise of the proposal.

**Kill fee:** a payment made for a story which has been commissioned but fails to meet the expectations of the freelance journalist’s proposal, the brief of the editor or has been superseded by events. Usually 30% to 50% (plus expenses) of the agreed fee.

**On spec:** to write a story that may or may not be used, depending on the quality of the final article and whether the editor thinks – by the time you file – that the issue is still topical. Unless seeking to establish yourself, never agree to write on spec. Often used by unscrupulous editors.

**Contributor:** a freelance writer, someone who is not a staff writer for the publication.

**The basics: what you need**

Most of the basics writers already have. Not all are essential – the more freelance journalism you want to do, the more these come in handy. They are arranged in order of importance:

- **Computer:** Either a PC or a Macintosh model, using common word processing software that is relatively up-to-date. Microsoft Word is the dominant one, thanks to the omnipotence of Microsoft Corp; but other formats are acceptable, so long as what you submit is in ‘text only’ format.

- **Internet access:** Essential when it comes to filing your story. You will need a browser, email client software and an email address.

- **Office space:** with a desk, telephone, and all of the things a writer needs. This is a place where you can work on your stories unhindered, and from which you can telephone people as required, either to interview or to chase information.

- **Notebook:** keep track of all conversations with interview subjects, editors and anyone else you call in relation to your story. Keep meticulous notes, always date them.

- **Reference books:** A dictionary or two, a telephone book (either print or CD-ROM, or easy access to an online one), a thesaurus, an atlas and a world almanac. To a lesser extent, an encyclopaedia is good (especially the CD-ROM ones, which can be relatively inexpensive). If specialising in a particular field, it is worth investing in a dictionary for that specialty, eg. biology. Guides to writers’ markets are excellent if intending to do a lot of freelancing.

- **Newspapers, magazines:** Always have a copy of the newspaper or magazine for which you intend to write, and familiarise yourself with it.
Identifying newspaper and magazine markets

Don’t try selling an article to a publication you’ve never read. By reading it, you not only get a sense for the kind of reader the periodical is trying to reach, you also get a sense – by analysing story selection – of the kind of editor you will be dealing with.

Newspapers are parliaments and magazines are fiefdoms. In newspapers, the top editors (Editor-in-Chief, Managing Editor, Editor, etc) are too busy to do any actual editing, and have a vast cast of lower-ranking editors who actually commission articles and occasionally even edit them. In magazines, the top editor – usually just called the Editor – entertains proposals from freelancers and does the bulk of the commissioning, although not all of them actually edit.

In newspapers, make a proposal to the editor of the section for which you would like to write. For example, “Spectrum” in Saturday’s The Sydney Morning Herald, “Review” in The Weekend Australian, “Perspectives” in The Courier-Mail, “Living West” in The West Australian. Each of these has an editor, most have a freelance budget, and they need to fill their pages with stories. Even sections that are not clearly delineated have editors who hire freelancers: world news (foreign editors), opinion pages (opinion editors), feature pages (eg “Insight” in The Sydney Morning Herald, is a daily feature page and has an Insight editor), and so on.

Some magazines also have middle-ranking editors who control small freelance budgets, but the honeypot is usually controlled by the most senior editor. In many ways, it is easier to identify to whom you are pitching with magazines; and, if you land a story and get on well with the editor, it can be the beginning of a beautiful relationship. On the other hand, if an editor takes a dislike to you, or disapproves of a story you’ve written or perhaps even your style – you may have great difficulty getting a story past them. This is not impossible: remember, editors have to fill blank pages with interesting things to read, and if you have an exclusive interview or a superb idea, they can be enticed. If you haven’t and you can’t, you basically have to wait till they move on before the drought lifts.

Broadly speaking, magazines pay better than newspapers. Magazines need stories that are different from the newspapers, and that have a longer shelf-life – especially if they are monthlies or bi-monthlies. But all stories must have an element of topicality: what you are writing about has to have some link with what is in the public mind at the time: it’s got to be currently in the news, will be in the news (a film due out next year) or should be in the news (an issue arising out of an issue currently in the news).

A word of caution: be careful about pitching story ideas that can be stolen. Always have a written record of a pitch you make (an email, fax, or letter you’ve sent, with the date). Knocking back a story idea from a freelancer and then commissioning a staff journalist (or – gasp! – another freelancer) is extremely unethical, and widely frowned upon. But it does occasionally happen – in magazines more than in newspapers.

Features, columns, reviews

In most cases, writing news stories as a freelancer is a mug’s game: news stories have to be fresh, must be sold quickly and – since freelancers are often paid by the word – can involve a lot of effort for little reward.

The most rewarding are feature articles (or ‘features’), for two reasons: they are long - more words equals more pay. But they also allow latitude in writing style, approach and topic; you can even be literary (although not ‘flowery’).

Features are long-form articles dealing with either specific topics, or a plethora of different but somehow linked topics. Its wordage (see glossary) depends on the publication: a feature for a daily newspaper might range from 700 words to 1,800 words; a weekly magazine, from 1,800 to 3,000 words; in a monthly, from 2,000 to 5,000 words. Few Australian periodicals publish features greater than 3,000 words in length, although some newspapers (The Australian Financial Review) have been
known to publish features and essays topping 8,000 words; some magazines (the now-defunct *Newton*) publishing articles longer than 15,000 words. When you consider that freelancers are paid per word, you can see why writing features is by far the most attractive.

**Columns** usually require an opinion, or personal fame. There are columns that are short and encourage a range of readers to express opinions (opinion pages of newspapers and magazines) and those that have regulars that entertain or dron on (depending on your taste). To land a regular column, one must be someone who is noted in a walk of life (accomplished, decorated, or recognised by their peers), and secondly be known to the average reader (or the average editor). Newspapers and magazines went through a plague of columns and columnists in the 1990s, but this trend seems to be shrinking back. Not generally an option for most freelancers.

**Reviews** are by far the easiest to land in a periodical, and often the most in demand – by both writers and editors. This can range from reviews of art, books, plays, movies, performances and anything cultural or otherwise that people might want to see, and therefore appreciate a précis of and an indication of whether they should bother. Good as a way of defraying the cost of buying a book or attending a performance; but remember, reviews are usually quite short (as small as 300 words), for which one can be paid very little. If you plan to make it regular, expect to attend performances and get your books for free. This allows you to review a work for its artistic merit, and not be influenced by how much you’ve just paid for a ticket.

**The proposal (or pitch)**

Unless you are fresh out of university, or a novice writer and just starting out, *do not* write an article “on spec”. Articles written speculatively require the same effort, expertise and polish as those that are commissioned; the only difference is that you may not get paid for it. If a painter does your living room, you do not expect to pay him only if you like the final result; so it is with writing. Publications that seek contributions “on spec” are often unscrupulous, and may not only steal your idea, but also your words, telling you the story you submitted cannot be used – and then publishing it under someone else’s name.

Occasionally, you will come across editors at reputable periodicals produced by respected publishers who may nevertheless ask you to write an item “on spec”. This is usually a sign the editor lacks the courage to commission something new or to experiment with new styles and new writers. This type of editor often prefers to only publish ‘new’ and ‘experimental’ styles, or new writers, that “name” publications – largely overseas - have already published (such as *The New Yorker* and *The Observer*). Don’t yield – just go somewhere else, preferably their direct competitor.

A story proposal or pitch is designed to elicit a commission (see glossary above). It’s what are you ‘selling’ to an editor when seeking to interest them in a story for publication. It should be brief, sharp and leave the editor wanting more. You should also give an estimated word length. Here’s an example of a pitch to a foreign magazine that raised a commission:

*A prehistoric treasure trove of extinct marsupials have been unearthed in desert caves beneath the outback of Australia’s Nullarbor Plain, a find described as one of the most significant ever. It includes the first complete skeletons of marsupial lions, as well as short-faced kangaroos and a wombat the size of a small car, who appear to have been entombed for up to 1.75 million years.*

(500-750 words)

This pitch, just 66 words long, describes the basic elements of the proposed story, with just a hint of excitement. Story length is a guess, based both on the wordage you need to cover the topic, or the length the publication normally gives to such pieces.
The commission and the brief

Once an editor agrees to a story, and tells you so — usually in writing — you have been commissioned to write the story.

They will outline wordage (see glossary) and give pointers on the style they would like, as well as some of the points they would like covered. This is the brief, and it is essential you stay within it. If you deliver a story that bears no resemblance to the pitch that you made, nor to the brief you received, the most you are entitled to is a kill fee; you will also lose the respect of the editor and probably never write for them again.

If a story changes — and at times they do, for good reasons — alert the editor as soon as possible, and propose changes. Don’t be afraid to pick up the telephone and talk to an editor; sometimes the difficulties you encounter, or the changed circumstances, lead to a much better story.

Payment

This is always the area writers like least to talk about. A good time to discuss payment is at the commissioning stage, when an editor has already decided to commit to you and needs your story, and therefore you have a little leverage.

The main points are a) rates, b) agreed length and c) payment terms. The rate is the payment per published word you will receive for the article: this is usually close to or above the National Freelance Rate set by the Australian Journalists Association section of the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance union. In 2009, the rate was $860 for an article of 1,000 words or less, and 86¢ per word thereafter (rates are updated every year). Some media outlets pay a straight fee for a minimum length story: this is also known as the rate.

The agreed length is not only the number of words you must deliver, but also the number of words you will be paid for should the article be trimmed or shortened for any reason by the publisher. Hence, if commissioned to write 1,200 words, you should be paid $860 plus $172, for a total of $1032 (made up of $860 for 1,000 words or less, and 200 words at 86¢ per word). If the newspaper or magazine cuts the article to 1,000 words, you are entitled to be paid for the 1,200 words commissioned. But try not to overwrite (most freelancers do); if you are asked for 1,200 words and you deliver 4,000, your story may be killed altogether, or sent back for a rewrite. And if it is trimmed to 1,000, you may only get paid for the 1,000 published (because you failed to deliver to length, and forced the editors to invest time and effort in bringing it down to the agreed length).

Finally, the payment terms. There are two basic models: “pay on acceptance”, and “pay on publication”. On acceptance means at the point the editor has received your story, has read it, likes it and tells you so — in other words, does not request any further work from you, such as chasing more facts, adding a few extra quotes, or a rewrite. This means you are free to send your invoice directly to the editor for the agreed amount.

On publication means when the story appears in print, is published online (or airs on radio and television). This is not usually a problem with newspapers and frequent periodicals (such as weeklies), but can be onerous with monthlies, bi-monthlies, quarterlies and annuals. Even with weeklies and monthlies, an editor may withhold publication for weeks and months, until they feel “the moment is right”. This is why, whenever possible, seek payment ‘on acceptance’. It also guarantees your work is paid for should a periodical close (as has happened to many a freelance writer). In such cases, pursue payment from the publishers in the same way phone companies do: by insisting they owe you money, and sending them repeated invoices as if you expect them to pay. Often, you can be pleasantly surprised.

Freelance rates

Despite freelance rates being set by a national union of journalists (see Payment above), not all
publishers pay them. Or, more to the point, they know what the going rates are, but will try to haggle and get you to undercut them – even those editors working for multi-billion dollar Australian-based international publishers (most foreign publishers do not quibble). It’s often worth holding your ground, as editors usually crumble at the first sign of resistance (and then make it sound like they are doing you a favour, or making an exception for you). Never believe lines like “but that’s our rate” or “our rates can’t be changed” – this is almost always untrue.

At times, you may have to undercut the freelance rate in order to get a story you are very passionate about and which you would really like to place in a particular periodical: if so, do this once, and once only for that particular publication or editor. Otherwise, go to another periodical (such as a direct competitor of the underbidder). If your idea is good, it will find a home.

The one element of the National Freelance Rate most freelance writers seem flexible about is the minimum payment rule, ie. $860 for 1,000 words or less. Some just charge the per-word rate (86¢/word) for the number of words they write in a story, if less than 1,000 words (eg. 800 words = $688).

Copyright

Do not sign away your copyright. Unlike staff writers and staff journalists, freelance writers have untrammelled rights to exploit their works. If you publish a feature article in a print magazine or even an online website, the master copyright for the article continues to be held by you – both for republication in the same medium, or for re-use in other mediums. This means you can republish the same article again and again in other periodicals, other countries and other mediums. And it means that if someone wants to make a book, a film, a board game or anything based on your article, you control the rights and get paid for it. Examples include “The man who knew too much”, a feature in *Vanity Fair* magazine that became *The Insider*, the film with Al Pacino and Russell Crowe; *The Orchid Thief* by Susan Orlean, which arose out of an article in *The New Yorker* that became the movie *Adaptation*; and *The Hot Zone*, also a book from expanded from an article that later became the movie, *Outbreak*.

Many periodicals still commission freelancers without discussing the issue of copyright; in such cases, all is well - the writer retains copyright, and the law backs them up. You can only lose copyright by specifically giving it (or selling it) in writing.

Some editors mischievously commission works from freelancers, then quietly mail them a ‘standard contract’, which in the small print tells them that once they are paid for the article, copyright passes to the publisher. If you receive such a contract, you have two options: decline to write the article altogether (most editors fold immediately and agree to withdraw the document). Or you can cross out most of the agreement, and write in bold letters: “First Australian rights only. All other rights retained by the author”. First Australian rights mean exactly that – you’re agreeing to provide the editor a one-time only licence to publish your article first in a medium in Australia, be that a magazine, a newspaper, a website or a tea towel. It then allows you to sell the article to an American or Canadian magazine as “first North American rights”, then “First British rights” and so on.
Further reading

These guides to freelance markets are published annually, and have the names of periodicals and their contact details, names of editors and insights on what they take and what they pay, as well as some basic tutorials.

Australia: *Australian Writers Marketplace*, Queensland Writers’ Centre, $49.95 (www.awmonline.com.au)

USA & Canada: *Writer’s Market*, Writer’s Digest Books, $46.95 (www.writersmarket.com)

UK & Ireland: *Writers’ and Artists’ Yearbook*, A & C Black Ltd, £14.99 (www.writersandartists.co.uk)

Online

Australian Society of Authors
www.asauthors.org

American Society of Journalists and Authors
www.asja.org

Australian Journalists Association section of the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance
www.alliance.org.au

National Writers Union (USA)
www.nwu.org

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