

CHAPTER SIX

Selling Freelance Stories to Feature Sections

The definition of a freelance writer used to be “a man with a typewriter and a working wife.” Today we would amend that to say “a man or woman with a word processor and a working spouse or significant other.” The point is, freelancing is not an easy way to make a living, and never has been. But it is not a bad way to bring in the occasional check to help pay the rent or subsidize a vacation. However, every so often you’ll meet some very talented person like Neal Karlen who makes his living from freelance writing. And in these days of the larger magazine paying somewhat more respectable rates, it is possible to write important stories and be paid well for them. Plus there are the intangibles. I tried freelancing and never made a financial success of it. But I tried and will never have to go through life thinking I missed out on trying something I wanted to do. And more importantly, from every freelance article I tried, I learned. Each provided me with another story for my clip file, and I am convinced freelancing helped me move ahead of others who didn’t take chances. Am I advocating taking chances? Sure, just take a look at what happened to Karlen.

How to Approach a Feature Editor

Neal Karlen

I can still recall the exact moment when I decided to try and make my living as a freelance writer. It was four years ago, and I was

sitting in my office at the fancy-sounding national magazine where I held a fancy-sounding staff writing job.

Opening my mail one day, I came upon an interoffice envelope stamped CONFIDENTIAL. Inside was a letter from the corporate benefits department telling me how much money would be in my retirement fund if I stayed with the company until June 25, 2024—my 65th birthday.

I was 26, and had never before considered my own retirement. Now, seeing in print the actual date that I would receive my gold watch and be pensioned off, I panicked. Looking into the future, I saw my life as a series of bureaucratic promotions. One day, I knew, the promotions would end and I would begin my countdown to June 25, 2024.

Two weeks later, I was seated in the office of the magazine's editor in chief. I had just told him that I was quitting in order to become a full-time freelancer. My disbelieving editor, staring at me across his ping pong table-sized desk, reacted as if I had just told him that I was running away to join the circus.

He'd always liked me, and now seemed genuinely concerned about my welfare. He got up, closed his office door, and asked if I was *sure* I wanted to do this. Was I positive I could make a living freelancing?

"Of course," I said with that special brand of cockiness reserved for 26-year-olds who don't know what the hell they're doing.

Still, I had been freelancing for pin money for a couple of years, and already possessed a handful of what I thought were pretty snazzy clips from *Rolling Stone*, *Esquire* and *New York*. I was positive that I had enough contacts and salable story ideas to pay the rent. At that point in my life, with neither dependents nor a mortgage, I wanted to fly free without a net. "Well," said my editor with a hand-shake and a kindly sigh, "good luck."

The Cold Reality

A few weeks later, I couldn't get out of bed. Hiding under the covers, I tried to make sense of what I'd just done to my life. In one corner of my apartment sat my silent computer. In the opposite corner sat my equally quiet telephone. I had about a month left of savings, no job and no assignments. Every single one of my story ideas

had either been shot down or ignored by every single magazine editor I'd called.

My two options seemed starving to death, or crawling back on my knees to my old magazine in the hopes they'd let me start over in the mail room. Neither choice seemed too appealing. So, knowing the MasterCard secret police would soon be after me if I didn't get going, I forced myself to get up. I wandered to the phone, dialed, and affected what I thought to be a professional sounding voice.

"You know," I said to one more editor, "I've got a couple ideas I thought you might be interested in."

That call didn't end in an assignment, nor the next. Nor even the one after that. But then, a strange thing happened: the phone rang. Would I be interested, asked an editor, in flying to Hollywood in 12 hours in order to spend several days hanging out with and interviewing Cher? No, this would not be the assignment that would win me a Pulitzer. But it probably would be fun, and most definitely would help with that MasterCard bill.

"I might be interested," I said into the phone, trying to sound cool and coy. Hearing silence on the other end, I resorted to the truth. "Yes, yes, yes!" I said. "Please, please, please!"

Now, four years after I was saved from law school by Cher, I can actually say I'm making a living at this crazy business. I've occasionally thought of getting a job, but have always decided that for me, the neuroses that come from freelancing are much easier to live with than the neuroses that come from sitting in an office waiting for the gold watch. To get to that point, however, I had to learn a few things. The most important of which are:

Story Ideas: Where to Pitch Them and How to Get in the Door

Story ideas are the wampum, the currency of exchange, of the freelance trade. When you are in front of your word processor, it is well and good to view yourself with the artful reverence of Marcel Proust. But when you are making the rounds of magazine and newspaper offices trying to get a feature assignment, it's best to see yourself as Willy Loman. Like Willy, you are a salesman working on commission, traveling on a smile, a shoeshine—and the salability of your story ideas.

Unfortunately, cooking up bright concepts for an article only gets one 20 percent of the way into print. What you need is a smart

idea, pitched to an appropriate outlet. Nothing turns off editors faster than a story idea submitted by someone who doesn't really understand their publication. If you think *Rolling Stone* still prints 20,000-word counterculture screeds, or that *Playboy* buys pornographic fiction, or that *TV Guide* is written for saps, then it is time to go to the library, check out a year's worth of issues, and *study*.

If you're new to feature freelancing, the best and easiest place to break in is in your local publications. This is no time to be an elitist—a lengthy, well-written, bylined clip from a throwaway shopper is worth more in the long run to a freelancer than an anonymous blurb in the *Washington Post*.

No matter where you are, there are probably a few nearby outlets that are respectable, well read, and always open to fresh talent. In general, it's easier for a just-starting freelancer to place a feature story in a local newspaper than a magazine. True, papers don't usually pay as well as magazines. But they have an infinitely bigger newshole to fill, and are usually more open to letting someone without a lot of experience help fill up some column inches.

Newcomers can get the best of both worlds by investigating the Sunday magazine supplements of their local papers. They usually pay better than their daily editions, and are often open to giving neophytes a chance.

Mind you, it's not that the people running these magazines are necessarily kindhearted. Rather, their interest in fresh talent usually stems from the fact that most Sunday supplements are understaffed for the amount of copy that they have to produce. Further, their editors often have trouble getting stories out of their already overworked colleagues in the daily newsroom. And so, they need lots of freelancers, and lots of freelancers' ideas.

Ideas Are Everywhere

And where can you get suitable, colorful feature ideas that haven't already been covered to death? If no interesting and undiscovered local phenomena or characters pop into your head, a good place to head once again is the back issue section of your library. There, look through the recent life-style, trend and pop culture sections of *People*, *Newsweek*, and *Time*.

Did a small story run last year in one of these publications on people in Los Angeles who are hiring psychiatrists for dogs? Perhaps

by now there's such a practitioner in your city. Was there an item about how more and more women are paying alimony to their ex-husbands in New York? Maybe it's happening where you live.

If you still come up dry, check the news blurbs for your state that run daily in *USA Today*. Editors at the local magazines often don't know what's going on in outlying areas—and the *USA Today* blurbs often provide a wealth of potential true crime and human interest stories.

Though it's a cliché, the best single way to come up with ideas is to keep your eyes open as you conduct your daily life. Last year, for example, I was assigned to do a profile of Patty Hearst by a well-known women's magazine. Hearst's press agent, the most powerful and notoriously unpleasant woman in the business, insisted that I come into her office to be checked out. When I reported to the press agent's headquarters, I was verbally insulted, then forced to listen to her conduct her nefarious business over the phone for an hour, then insulted some more. No, she finally said, Patty Hearst was not interested in the magazine I was representing.

So I didn't get that story. However, ten minutes into the agent's first torrent of invective, I realized I did have *another* story, a *better* story—namely, a first-person account of what it's like to sit in front of this powerful person as she does what she does for a living. *Spy* magazine gave me full rein to tell the tale, and it remains one of my best received stories ever. The moral? Stay awake.

So say by now you've come up with a feature idea or two. The next step is getting the idea to someone who can assign you the story. Here, the key element is making personal contact. Do you know anybody who is an acquaintance or colleague of an editor at the newspaper or magazine? Call that person and ask if he or she minds if you name-drop when you write the editor, à la "Dear Editor X, My friend, Joe Smith, suggested I write you concerning a couple of story ideas that I thought would be appropriate for your publication."

Even if you don't have a name to drop, send a brief letter introducing yourself to the articles editor, along with a handful of clips. Don't send in a formal query letter yet—just ask if they might be interested in hearing your ideas. If they write back and say no, you've saved yourself the trouble of writing a query. If they say yes, you're halfway home. If you don't hear from them—a likely scenario—you now have an excuse to call the editor two weeks later. In any case,

you've made personal contact, and the editor is much less likely to let your correspondence mildew in the slush pile.

The Query Letter

If you don't have clips, then you'll nearly always have to send along a formal query with your letter of introduction. Even if you do have clips, publications usually require writers trying to get into their pages for the first time to send along a written description of the story that they would like to do.

Every freelancer I know hates writing query letters. After a while, when you know enough people at enough magazines, you'll be able to pitch stories over the phone. But whether you're pitching verbally or on paper, the main thing to remember is to make the query short and to the point. Don't get cute, fancy or carried away with descriptions of your lead. Simply describe what the story is, how you plan to get it, and how many words you think it deserves. If you're writing, never let your query run more than a page, and whenever possible, make it shorter.

Beyond that, there is no formal standard or template for writing queries. I have spent several days crafting thoughtful, well-written queries, and had them ignored for months. I've also scribbled down seat-of-the-pants ideas in an editor's office, and had an assignment in 15 minutes. Just use your own voice, and *get to the point*.

Also, don't flood an editor with ten story proposals at once. Instead, try to get the editor interested in one or two solid ideas. If those bomb, try a couple more in a couple of weeks. Then try a few more a little later. If you query smartly, something will eventually hit.

Also, don't be afraid to tackle the national magazines. True, the chances are infinitesimal that a newcomer will be assigned a long feature by one of the major publications. But that doesn't mean you're shut out. Many of the biggest magazines run short feature, service or regional pieces written by freelancers. Though these pieces are difficult to get at first and don't pay much, don't sneeze at the opportunity.

For instance, the first thing I wrote for *Rolling Stone* was a 300-word bylined blurb on a convention of Mr. Ed fans. Within less than a year, I was writing cover stories and major features for the magazine. At *New York* magazine, my first assignment was to write 200

words on the funeral of a local radio celebrity. Not long after that, they gave me a 4,000-word feature.

Whatever you do, whether you're trying to break into a national or local market, persist. Politely!

After the Assignment

Okay, you've landed a story. You've agreed on an acceptable fee, have a realistic due date, an approximate word length for your assignment, and are in a general agreement with your editor on what this article is *probably* going to end up being about. You've done the necessary reporting, and have begun writing. What should you keep in mind as you near that dreaded deadline?

First off, you should remember that editors are looking for writers who are going to make their lives easier. They may work with a prima donna if he or she is sufficiently well established, but what they want from a newcomer is reliability.

That means not being late. Not turning in a story that is three times longer than it's supposed to be. Not changing the complete focus of an article without at least discussing it with the editor. Not telling the editor that if he moves one comma, you're taking your name off the story.

Of course, unforeseeable problems arise. If, for any reason, you know you can't get your story in on time, call your editor as soon as possible. If he or she was counting on that story for a particular issue, the editor will need to fill that space—and will be happy to have the news now, rather than two days before the article was supposed to go to press.

Recently, for example, I succeeded in pitching a full feature profile to *GQ* on Bill Musselman, the controversial basketball coach of the Minnesota Timberwolves, an NBA expansion team. Musselman was a fascinating character, but the demands of putting together a new team forced him to cancel several interview sessions.

I was in trouble. The article was scheduled for the issue that would coincide with the start of the basketball season, and my deadline was nearing. Musselman kept canceling, and I kept fretting, trying to figure out how I was going to write a colorful profile with so little information.

Finally, a week before the story was due, I called my editor. I had only done one feature for *GQ* before, and was sure this would

now be my last. My editor listened to my song-and-dance, paused, and said, "Well, if you don't have it, you don't have it." She gave me another month, and then a warning: "It better be good."

Temporarily off the hook, I began breathing again. That afternoon I set about doing whatever I had to do to pin down the wily coach. And yes, in the end, *GQ* gave me another assignment.

All of these caveats might make freelance feature writing seem like a pretty horrific business. Unresponsive editors, nonpaying payroll departments, killed stories, impossible deadlines, disbelieving fact-checkers—at times, I must admit, I've thought about throwing in the towel.

Then, I remember how much fun it is to be your own boss, have your words and ideas in print, and observe people and places that you'd never experience if you were stuck working in the corporate widget factory. It's a wonderful way to see the world or your town, and then get paid to let other people see it through your eyes.

To make a full-time living, I often end up having four or five stories in different stages of production going on at once. What I do to make sure that I don't get burned out, blasé or cynical—which is my definition of a hack—is to make sure that I absolutely love one of those articles. Love, not for the money, nor for the prestige of the magazine it will appear in, but because the story itself fascinates me.

For example, one of my favorite profiles appeared in *Manhattan, inc.* about an old-time New York politico named Jerry Finkelstein. A back-room fixer, he was a character right out of Damon Runyon who had never agreed to talk for publication before. "The reason I'm trusted," he told me is "because I keep my mouth shut around wiseguys."

It took me three months' worth of tri-weekly, off-the-record breakfast meetings before I could convince him to talk. It took me another three months to get him to start telling me the juicy details of where the bodies were buried.

The reason I kept at it wasn't because of the money. If I calculated how many hours I spent with Finkelstein, compared to my fee, I would undoubtedly find out that I would have been better off financially working at Burger King. But the story was one I couldn't resist—and one I couldn't have done had I been stuck in some office somewhere watching my retirement fund grow.

Someday, of course, I'll probably want that pension fund, not to mention dental insurance. When that happens, I'll go back. In the

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meantime, I just keep thinking of the question my editor in chief asked me that day four years ago when I told him I was quitting my staff job to freelance.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" he asked.

"Yes," I still answer.

Neal Karlen is a contributing editor to *Rolling Stone*, and a former associate editor on *Newsweek's* national affairs staff. His work has also appeared in *GQ*, *Esquire*, *Spy*, *New York*, *Mirabella* and several other national publications.

He's collaborating with Henny Youngman on *Take My Life, Please*, the comedian's autobiography which is to be published by William Morrow and Co.

A few people like Maralyn Polak of the *Philadelphia Inquirer* magazine have long-term freelancing relationships with a newspaper—in her case, providing interviews to the paper's magazine each week for 15 years. In the future, as newspapers continue to look to cut costs, they will probably take more freelance material simply because freelancers don't need to be paid higher full-time wages and benefits. The best markets are with the larger papers. Aside from their Sunday magazine sections (those that are still around) the papers' daily feature section, sometimes called the Style or Life-style sections, are probably the next most fertile place for freelancers.

In the piece that follows, Mary Hadar, assistant managing editor of the *Washington Post's* Style section, tells how one great newspaper works with freelancers. Although each paper makes different arrangements and has different needs, much of her advice, especially when she talks about accuracy, is universal.

What a Newspaper Feature Editor Wants From Freelancers

Mary Hadar

An editor views an unknown freelancer with mistrust and suspicion. No matter how compelling the story idea, no matter how gracefully phrased the query letter, at the back of the editor's mind linger the questions: Does this person have the reporting basics? Will she be objective? Will he get me sued?

Thus the uppermost value for a successful freelancer is accu-

racy. Double-check your facts, your spellings, your titles, your quotes. Take no shortcuts. Fail in other areas, but if you fail at this one, you won't be invited back.

Next on the checklist is authority. A newspaper has probably asked you, rather than a staffer, to write this story because you have a special knowledge—of the subject matter, or the players, or simply of the geographic location.

Your story should be imbued with this knowledge. Let the reader see you know what you're talking about. A special knowledge of a subject makes you more valuable to the newspaper.

The *Washington Post* Style section, for instance, has a large, carefully selected stable of writers on staff whom we will send to cover stories of major importance. But we maintain a continuing relationship with a New York freelancer, Judd Tully, who covers all the major art auctions. This is particularly useful to us during the big sales each spring and fall at Christie's and Sotheby's, but it also comes in handy for the odd, newsworthy auction during the rest of the year.

Judd has made himself an expert in this field and has established reliable contacts with the auction houses and many of the key bidders. We occasionally call on him for takeouts explaining why the market is acting the way it is and how this affects the public at large. He, in turn, pays special attention to any Washington angles in the events he's covering.

The relationship makes sense for the *Washington Post* for two reasons: a) Judd knows more about the subject than our reporters and b) it costs us less to pay Judd for these stories than it does to send a reporter to New York and put him or her up at a hotel.

Geographic Needs

A major feature story in another part of the country would most likely be assigned to one of Style's regular reporters. But if time were of the essence, we would be more likely to call on a freelancer who lived in that area.

Similarly, if the story we were looking for were on the short side—say, 25 inches—we might consider it more cost-effective to farm it out. Enterprising freelancers have sold us stories on regional writers' conferences, World Series fever, local productions that were bound for Washington. A freelancer in Paris, Peter Mikelbank, supported himself quite nicely in 1989 by writing a host of entertaining

pieces about the French bicentennial celebrations. We kept buying them because he utilized that rarest of feature commodities: humor. He wrote about guillotine chic ("Parisian fashion to die for") as well as the invention of the brassiere ("arguably France's most uplifting cultural achievement of the last century.").

All things being equal, we would like our freelancers to show some flair in their writing. Most of our staff writers have distinctive voices that make their pieces identifiable even without their bylines. But a little voice goes a long way, so don't fall into the trap of overwriting. Much can be told by simple details, judiciously selected. Particularly with emotional stories, you're better off letting the accumulation of facts evoke the emotion.

Finally, there is one month when the *Washington Post*, and most other newspapers, are most receptive to freelance ideas. That month is August. Nothing's happening and half the staff's on vacation. The knowledgeable freelancer will stockpile those August ideas and shop them around when the days become sultry. The remaining ideas should be saved, of course, for that most dreaded of weeks: the one that falls between Christmas and New Year's.

Mary Hadar has been assistant managing editor in charge of the *Washington Post's* Style section since August, 1983. During this time she has won three consecutive Penney-Missouri awards for producing the best feature section in the country. Hadar joined the *Washington Post* in 1977 as a copyeditor on the Style section. In 1979, she became night editor of Style. Prior to coming to the *Washington Post*, Hadar was foreign editor of the *Jerusalem Post*. She has also worked at *The (Baltimore) Sun*.

What a Magazine Editor Wants From Freelancers

Leonard Witt

As an editor of a regional magazine with no full-time writers on the staff, I am totally dependent on freelance writers. My situation is typical: Magazines everywhere need freelancers, and editors are always searching for better stories. Even in metro areas as large as Minneapolis and St. Paul, there are never enough great stories to go around. We have two city magazines, two alternative newspapers,

and business publications all vying for the same freelancers' time. And the best of the freelancers are also writing for national publications.

The best way for a freelancer to break into the market is to be good or at least to be smart. Being good means having excellent writing and reporting skills. Being smart means realizing your talents might not yet be developed enough to write full-length features, but recognizing ways to break into print.

In our magazine, *Minnesota Monthly*, we run a section called "Monitor." Just about every magazine has some type of up-front feature. Often they are quick paced, relatively light reading to add balance to the longer features. Most often they provide one piece of information. In an upcoming magazine we will run a piece on a Prairie School-designed home that is opening soon to the public in Minneapolis. A visit to the house, a look at the press releases, short interviews with the principals involved, and presto—a quick 250-word, brightly written story is done. It will not pay a lot, but it shouldn't take long to write either. In *Philadelphia Magazine*, another regional, a writer turned a quick piece on homeless people going to see the art films at the public library. Both stories are quick and done in a style that just about anyone can imitate. As a freelancer you just have to capture the style and start selling. We need you.

Also in our book is a section called "Vitae," that reads a bit like a long résumé. The subject is always an interesting person, someone not necessarily worthy of a longer feature story. The story itself is broken into Who, What, Where, How and Why sections. It's another place a writer doesn't have to be an expert stylist or have years of writing to make a sale on. In the back of the book is a section called "Just the Facts," not much more than an interesting listing of facts that varies from month to month on subjects ranging from pontoon boats on Minnesota lakes to the making of the Pillsbury Doughboy. Any novice in the Twin Cities interested in breaking into our market should be studying those features and writing for them. The front of the book material and those two features alone account for almost 100 stories a year, many of which could be done by freelancers. Look at other magazines; most offer those same type of opportunities to smart but not necessarily great writers.

If you have a specialty in food, entertainment, books, health, education, media, restaurant or theater reviewing, we need you, as do all magazines. But we only need you if you have proven yourself

to be a dedicated reporter and writer. You have to know your specialty and have to know how to present it to a lay audience. Throughout this book writers tell you to start at small publications and work your way up. As an editor I tell freelancers who call me to send clips of the work they have done. If their style fits what I am looking for I will call them immediately. It doesn't matter to me what publications they have written for. All that is important is the example of their writing in front of me. If it is great, I will be on the phone to them in a minute setting up a lunch or office meeting. Later, if a writer backs up those clips with a great story, as freelancer Jim Thornton did for us recently, I might just start negotiating to put him or her on a retainer as a contributing writer. We need great writers.

For the main features, I stay awake nights worrying that the material coming in might not be good enough. We always want it to be better.

How do you become good enough? You study the markets, find out what the editors want. Study the best stories (don't try to emulate all the stories, just the best. Frankly, every magazine has its dogs that are run out of necessity rather than choice.) Once you see what genre of stories the magazine uses and have studied its style, ask yourself if you want to write these kinds of stories and if the style fits your expertise. If so, begin the process of contacting editors. Sending a query letter like the one at the end of this chapter is the best method, and if the editor doesn't know you, supply examples of your past stories.

To excel in freelance magazine work you will need to be a good reporter, a good researcher, a good interviewer, a writer with a voice, a writer who uses description, a writer who is organized. In other words, you have to be very, very good, and you have to be willing to work very hard. And if you are going to write for magazines, you also have to be dedicated. You must care about the things you are writing about. You will probably not make a financial killing, but those people who write for my magazine do make a difference in the community. They do get read and they do have a wonderful showcase for their work.

Remember, to get published in magazines it takes smarts, hard work, skills and talent. Any one of those will get you published somewhere. Putting them all together will get you published everywhere you send in stories.

Look in most newspapers and you will see a ton of syndicated material. If the paper is a large one such as the *New York Times* or *Los Angeles Times*, instead of buying syndicated material, it will be selling it to papers around the country. Although individual newspapers don't pay much money, a syndicated piece can, if it is good enough, be sold to many newspapers. Since the syndicate acts as a middleman, it takes a healthy split of the profits. As Dan O'Toole points out, newspaper syndicates are a tough market, most lucrative for authors who are already selling to magazines and then recycling their material through a syndicate. But as you will see from his examples, syndicates will buy if you provide the right story.

Feature Writing for Newspaper Syndicates

Dan O'Toole

Newspaper syndicates represent a small, highly specialized market for the freelance writer. They're not a market for the novice. In fact, the market is so tight that even established freelancers will have trouble placing their work with a syndicate. Most syndicates that offer one-shots to newspapers (a "one-shot" is a feature that is sold once rather than on a continuing basis) have only two or three slots available to freelancers on any given week. The financial arrangement is usually a fifty-fifty split of sales. Thus, smart freelancers use syndicates as a tool for squeezing extra dollars out of an already published story.

A syndicate one-shot editor is looking for stories that sell themselves, stories that are intriguing and not easily duplicated by a newspaper's staff. Previous publication is a plus, because phrases such as "in this article from *New York* magazine" or "written for the *Los Angeles Times*" are great selling tools. Stories can range from three-to-five part series, two-part articles, to single articles.

Most series offered by syndicates are five-part excerpts from newly published books. A syndicate editor will only accept a series from a freelancer if the topic is one that is an irresistible read for a newspaper editor. One memorable syndicated series written by a freelancer for the *Los Angeles Times* syndicate was "The National En-

quirer Capers," in which a former stringer for the tabloid recounted several bizarre adventures he experienced while gathering information for inquiring minds. Among them were a narrow escape from the clutches of the Secret Service during a raid on Ronald Reagan's trash, the infiltration of a nuclear power plant, and hijinks on Capitol Hill when an attempt to catch a Congressman in the act of taking a bribe backfired and resulted in a keystone cops-style chase all over Washington.

Another successful series looked at the big buck buys and leases that occur in the world of celebrity real estate. It revealed that Barbra Streisand paid nearly \$6 million for a barn and that Roseanne Barr pays \$20,000 a month to rent a Beverly Hills house.

Single Articles

Syndicable single articles come in many shapes and sizes. Most common is the life-style or trend article. A few that have done well in the market include an article on how tabloid TV—Geraldo Rivera and Oprah Winfrey, for example, exploits crime victims by making them public spectacles, an article about 40-year-old Yuppies having their first babies in an effort to delay the aging process, and an article about some of the bizarre methods churches are using to lure un-churched Yuppies into their flocks.

The celebrity profile always sells, especially if that person is or will soon be in the news. Recent celebrity articles that did well were an article in which Joanne Woodward told how she and Paul Newman have sustained their 31-year marriage despite their intense professional rivalry, one in which TV actor Fred Dryer revealed his unique formula for success, and a third in which Chris Evert unveiled her plans for a post-tennis business career.

Perhaps the easiest story to sell to a syndicate is the "geewhiz" story. "Strange But True From Science," "Game Show Horror Stories," "Exploring the Unexplained World" and "The World's Weirdest Clubs" are some recent best-selling titles.

Opinion articles are a special case in syndication. They absolutely must be previously published, preferably in a major newspaper. And the writer must be a recognized expert on the subject being written about. No newspaper editor is going to publish an article about the Middle East by Joe Sixpack.

Travel, business and humor articles can also do well in syndication. But again, they must be really unique to be salable.

Syndicating a Column

A freelancer's chances of landing a column with a syndicate are slim indeed. Most syndicates develop one or two new properties a year, and generally they are by writers with established reputations in the field they are writing about—Henry Kissinger and Jeane Kirkpatrick on politics, Lee Iacocca on business, Jim Murray on sports, Edith Lank on real estate, etc.

Syndicate editors normally receive 50 or more submissions a week, many more than they can comfortably deal with. To increase your chances of a sale, you should write a cover letter telling the editor why your submission will sell itself to newspaper editors.

As with any other freelance submission, always include a self-addressed, stamped envelope; if you don't, your rejected submission could end up in the round file. Always put your name and phone number in one of the upper corners on every page of your piece. In syndication, if your piece is going to be accepted, you're going to get a phone call, not a letter. And most important of all, when you're selling that syndicated article to a magazine, make sure you retain second rights. If you don't, the magazine may make its own deal and successfully market your article to a syndicate before you have a chance to do it yourself.

Dan O'Toole is the special series editor for the *Los Angeles Times* Syndicate. He purchases articles and book excerpts for newspaper syndication.

Several writers in this book (and I'm among them) advocate taking chances with your writing when you are starting out. If you are a feature writer, your only power is going to come from writing better than the people around you. You want to find a voice. You want to develop a style of your own. You want to distinguish yourself from the writing masses. One place to accomplish some of these goals is the alternative press. Of course, what follows is not mainstream advice, but then Sandra Shea has spent most of her life outside of mainstream publications.

Don't Forget the Alternative Papers

Sandra J. Shea

"Alternative" is a concept that died in the '80s. The idea of anything existing and thriving outside the mainstream was obsolete the minute the mainstream collapsed its boundaries to include almost everything in the universe. Rock songs, drugs and Russia are all former alternatives. Now they only serve to prove the notion it's a small world after all.

While most publishers and editors will tell you "alternative" is an outdated word to use in relation to their newspapers, in fact, the alternative press is about the only alternative-anything left. I can't, for example, think of an instance of Knight-Ridder or Gannett wanting to make one part of their chains.

The secret to the alternatives? As George Bush would say, it's the vision thing. Most of the surviving, successful alternative papers are still being published by their founders. Take a ride in the way-back machine with these guys, and you find them in their early days to be bright, passionate and driven. Driven not only by a mission, but by a feeling of being outside of things and by a commitment to maintain that position. (Outside, after all, is where art happens, although I doubt anyone thinks much about art where newspapers are concerned.) Suffice it to say, people with strong personal visions know they are rarely ever going to feel like a jolly brother or sister in the happy family of man.

Anyway, they published their newspapers. Weirdoes found a natural home there. Some of them were brilliant. Some could write. Everybody had, if not fun, at least an interesting time. Because ideas lived. People discussed them, sometimes in very loud voices. People cared.

It was the modern-day equivalent of putting on a musical.

Come back to the 1990s: the founders are a little older. But they are still there, either in body or spirit or both. Weirdoes still are attracted to the papers. Fortunately, some of them can write. Screaming discussions can still be had. People still care about ideas. That's the most remarkable thing—very talented people still put in long, underpaid hours toiling at these places with shoestring budgets

trying to meet impossible demands. The demands, while impossible, are completely seductive: make it different. Push yourself to do it better so it *stands out*. So it's not like every newspaper on the stands. All of this, of course, is not only heaven for a staff full of driven, talented people with their own vision, it can make for a very good newspaper.

Let Your Voice Be Heard

It is youth's duty to misbehave. It is not their duty to dissipate their energies over a series of boring town meetings thinking they are learning about being writers. They will learn about the inverted pyramid. But they can do that anytime. As writers, their job is to find *their* voices and let them be heard.

Alternatives let them do that. Because if alternatives are doing their job, they are always looking for opportunities to beat the dailies at stories by doing them first or doing them better.

How do we think about doing them better or first?

One of the luxuries we have is time: A weekly schedule leaves a lot of room for time to report, to write, to shape a story. Time is the most oft-cited distinction between weeklies and dailies, but there's more.

Only Connect

Another luxury of alternatives is their ability to identify completely with their audience. It's partly a function of the readership of the alternative press, wherein you have a bunch of people fairly narrowly defined by age, interests and other demographics. You don't have that luxury on dailies, who by their nature must appeal to a wide range of people, from fifth graders to 95 year olds. So alternatives provide room to carve out a clear voice and address people directly.

The ability to identify with the readership is also partly a function of being an editor who considers herself a reader first, an editor second. If it doesn't connect with me, it won't connect with the reader.

How do things connect with me? There are a few things I look for:

Out of an average of 10 to 15 queries that come in over a given week, the majority may be okay stories, fine in their own right,

judged by their own merits. Most conform to typical standards in query-writing. But the best ones make me think: this person has something to say.

For example, let's take a typical query:

Recent legislation suggests that Massachusetts car insurance rates will continue to rise. I'd like to do a story to find out why, and maybe talk to some residents around the state to gauge their reaction.

My response: go ahead. But do it for some other paper. Here's another one:

Few bad tastes rival the unsavory one you get licking the envelope that contains your car insurance payment. Another \$269.12, gone for good. Probably more than a thousand bucks in premiums for the year. Even if you drive in Boston, chances are you won't get your car smashed, stolen, or burned enough this year to get back as much money as you put in. Mostly, the cash seems to disappear into some mega-corporation's bank account.

What's going on here? I'd like to find out.

This is a much more compelling query, because here's someone who has something to say, suggesting a story that will connect with the reader.

Connecting With the Reader: A Different Spin

The eternal search for a different spin eventually uncovers that manna for alternatives (and good publications everywhere): people with skewed views of the world. It's supreme manna when a sense of humor is attached.

According to my unofficial survey, at least 50 percent of those who have entered college have left wanting to be a writer. Of that number, 27.8 percent want to be a humor writer. Which is usually a good thing. When people claim they want to be humor writers (or their cousins, satire writers) they often have something to say. They probably won't necessarily end up as humor writers, but if they keep writing, chances are they will be strong stylists.

Not that alternatives go out searching for humor writers to nurture, although they should. But they do look for wise asses, who tend to make good writers.

Connecting With the Reader: The First Person

Another popular misconception in journalism is objectivity.

I happen to abhor the first person. (Perhaps a better way to say that is "The use of the first person should be avoided.") It's easy to get people to quit writing in first person when they shouldn't. But one of the hardest things is getting people to use it when they should. I'm referring specifically to writers who have had drilled into them that they must eschew their own feelings and write an objective piece without realizing that sometimes, the third person is just a device to hide behind. For example, I once spent many weeks and countless hours getting one young and gifted writer who usually scrupulously avoided the first person to write a personal account of his stand on animal rights.

I thought he'd do a good piece not only because he grew up on a farm, but because it was the last story on earth he wanted to write. His resistance suggested he had a lot of confused feelings on the issue, but he clearly had thought a lot about it, and therefore had something to say. He ended up writing a powerful, moving piece.

I advise this with extreme caution, though. In fact, here's a rule of thumb: If you really really want to write about a painful, powerful or evocative event in your life, don't. It will only be very good if you are scared to write about it and have to be forced.

Take Risks

A few years ago, we produced a special section on AIDS, from the standpoint of how the disease was affecting human relationships and the way people negotiated them. Sober, well-reported pieces ranged from AIDS' effect on gay and straight relationships to the relationships between hookers and clients and between the porn industry and their customers. But the most memorable piece in the package was a short up-front humor piece called "A Girl's Guide to Condoms," probably the first piece to focus on this symbol of the most significant yet mundane change in the intimate relations between men and women for decades. Because it was a story related to AIDS that also happened to be funny, it was risky. But it worked.

For a profile of a candy factory, another writer played with the voice of the piece to the extent that it slowly deteriorated from that of an adult to that of a kid. By the end, she was writing in the voice

of an 11-year-old. It could have bombed or been stupid, but in this case, the risk was also worth it, (if I do say so myself).

Newspapers and magazines have been around for a long time, and their traditions — from the inverted pyramid to the five Ws — are firmly established. Alternatives are relative kids on the scene, so they are more fluid. What they offer is freedom, and the opportunity to take risks — even to misbehave. In creative terms, that means elevating the ordinary by finding a new way to look at it. Which ultimately makes for good newspapers. And good writers.

Sandra Shea wrote this as features editor of *The Boston Phoenix*. She has spent much of her working life associated with alternative newspapers — in addition to *The Phoenix*: in Connecticut (the *New Haven Advocate*), in New Hampshire (the *New Hampshire Times*), and in California (*The San Francisco Bay Guardian*). She is now features editor at the *Philadelphia Daily News*.

End Words

Afterthoughts: More Points to Remember

1. Neal Karlen mentions that when you're trying to sell a story, dropping names of people who know the editor never hurts, and the truth is it may not. But don't think that just knowing someone will sell a story. It won't. It might cause the editor to spend more time looking at your query, but only good ideas, well presented, will sell. In the long run in this business, it isn't who you know, or even who you are, but rather how good the stories are that you produce.

2. Neatness does count. Magazine and newspaper editors get tons of unsolicited query letters. Ones that arrive neatly typed and well organized get points over those that come haphazardly stuffed in an envelope. A dot matrix printer is okay, if the ribbon is in good order. Don't send letters with crossed out typos and poor quality photocopies of previous stories. Take the extra time and money to get them done properly at a place with decent photocopying machines. In other words, make yourself look professional.

3. Here is what one magazine editor likes to see arrive on his desk: A query letter on good quality letterhead stationery with name and address. If the writer is new, an introductory letter, copies of

previously printed stories, and a short, well-thought-out query letter. Be sure to put in your phone number. It is amazing how often, when an idea is truly compelling, the editor will get right on the phone and make contact.

4. On the other hand, as a freelancer you must learn to be patient. Rarely do things work at the speed you would like them to work. You send in a query, and it often will sit on an editor's desk for days or even weeks. There is a good chance it will get rejected. You'll have to send it off to another editor. Again another wait. If it does get accepted, the finished story might sit again. Often editors will be so busy putting out the present magazine that they have put aside future stories. Finally it is read, then it might be sent back for revision. More time passes. If it is a monthly, it could be several months before you see your story in print. But that is the writing life. The first letter to an agent suggesting the idea for this book was sent out three years before the book finally got into print.

5. If things take this long, should you send out multiple queries to various editors? Books on freelancing are divided on the subject, but it is often impractical for writers to keep sitting on story ideas. Unless you know that editors are fussy about multiple queries, (e.g. editors for directly competing publications) I would send them out to more than one place. It is best to tell the editor you are doing this. But at least one writer in this book admitted privately that he sends out the same query to several publications at a time and never has been caught. The reason: Rarely does more than one editor accept an idea.

6. What happens if you get a query or, God forbid, a finished story rejected? Cry. Okay, don't cry. Bust up some furniture instead. Do what you must to work out the pain and frustration of rejection. Then resubmit it somewhere else or rewrite it. Don't give up on it immediately. One story that recently was rejected by *Minnesota Monthly* later showed up in a law journal and then in a city paper. The writer could have just trashed it. He didn't.

7. What happens if an idea or story eventually gets nowhere? Move on to another story. If you let rejections paralyze you, you belong in another business. All writers have had plenty of rejections and probably a few poorly written stories in their pasts. Those who have succeeded learned by their mistakes, but did not dwell on them.

SELLING FREELANCE TO FEATURE SECTIONS

8. Since we are on the subject of time, it is very important for freelancers to be aware of deadlines and publishing schedules. Something written for a newspaper feature section can be written and in print in a day. Monthly magazines, on the other hand, often demand that stories be finished months before publication. Even if they want to get something timely in the magazine, it will probably have to be submitted at least a month before publication. So if, for example, you are going to cover a onetime event in July, most monthly magazines will not want it. After all, it would have to be a fairly super event for anyone to want to read about in October. On the other hand, you might be able to sell an annual event for the next year. Yes, you have to plan that far ahead.

9. Once you have established yourself as a freelancer and have developed a specialty and style, let editors know that you are available to accept their assignments. Your specialty or specialties can be anything: the outdoors, theater, architecture, home design, crime, sports, politics, general interest. Every editor wants to build up a stable of dependable writers with a good track record and is always looking for new talent.

10. Keep alert to editorial changes at all publications. They happen with great frequency. Contact the new editor with a letter. Congratulate him or her, then introduce yourself. Present your specialties, even if they don't fit in with the magazine's past. Include past story clips. Each new editor brings a new mind-set to the magazine or feature section. Your ideas might be exactly what the editor wants.

11. Have some moxie. Study a magazine or newspaper feature section. See what you think is missing. Can you fill the niche? For example, if you are a food writer and see a magazine that could use food coverage but doesn't have it now, make a pitch. You have nothing to lose except some time.

Exercises

1. Find as many local publications in your hometown as possible. Even in moderate-sized towns you will find shoppers, daily newspapers, suburban newspapers, statewide papers, outdoor tabloids, religious publications, parenting tabs, women's papers, gay

issue papers and advocacy papers for just about every organization. Write a little synopsis about each, describing its apparent audience, its quality of writing, and its tone. Most will not be very well written, but if you find one that catches your attention and matches your interests, go to it immediately. This could be your best chance of breaking into the market.

2. Find a city or regional magazine in your area. Analyze it from cover to cover. Study the masthead. Does it have any staff writers? Now look at the short pieces that are not staff written. Make a list of ten ideas. Pick the one you think is the best of the ten. Do a little research about it. Now type up a query letter directed to one of the editors on the masthead. You have now taken your first official step as a freelance writer.

3. Now it is time to write. Write. And write. Keep a journal. Write interesting letters to friends. Write every day. Every day. And keep querying editors. Write articles even if you are not sure there is a market. This goes against all advice, but if you are new to this profession you will need to polish your skills, and the only way to polish them is to write. Eventually, it will pay off.

Further Reading

1. *Writer's Market* edited by Glenda Neff (Writer's Digest Books). A comprehensive listing of freelance markets, payments and guidelines for writers. A must for every freelancer looking for the best markets for his or her stories. Updated annually.

2. *Basic Magazine Writing* by Barbara Kevles (Writer's Digest Books, 1987). An excellent look at all phases of writing and selling magazine articles. Much of the information, like querying editors, is transferable to freelancing for newspaper feature sections.

3. *The Complete Guide to Writing Nonfiction* by The American Society of Journalists and Authors (Harper & Row, 1988). More than a hundred professional freelancers share tips on all aspects of nonfiction writing, from researching to selling.

How the Pros Do It

Writing Sample Number 6

Unless you have personal contacts, you will have to rely on query letters like professional freelancer Steve Kaplan does when he approaches a new market. In fact, he says, each time he has broken a national market he has done so with a query letter.

In looking for potential places for his stories he uses sources such as *Writer's Market*, but he also says, "I use my eyes. I go to magazine stores." For example, when looking through *Family Circle* magazine he noticed a feature called "Women Who Make a Difference." He filed that away in his mind, knowing someday he would find a woman who made a difference, and indeed he did in Sue Watlov Phillips, who helped transform shelters for homeless people.

As he always does for editors who don't know him, he did plenty of research before putting together the query. Then he wrote it, in this case with a very specific market in mind. And he sold the editor and eventually the story. When I read the query I thought it might be a little long, but it did exactly what a query should do—it set up a sale. Here is an excerpt from his query letter.

A Query Letter That Found a Story a Home

By Steven Kaplan

Stephanie Abarbanel, Editor
 Women Who Make A Difference
 Family Circle
 110 Fifth Avenue
 New York, NY 10011

Kaplan matched his idea to a specific editor and a specific department of the magazine. No shotgun approach here.

Dear Ms. Abarbanel:

Sue Watlov Phillips has just returned to her tiny and very cluttered office in a Northeast Minneapolis church after a grueling four-day trip to Washington, D.C., and three state capitals. Phillips is much in demand by legislators these days, because she is one of the few people in the U.S. who actually has a workable solution to the problem of homelessness.

Makes Phillips come alive by putting her in motion. Immediately the editor knows why Phillips is important.

The pilot program she devised has been so successful in

Gives specifics to back up that she is doing something important.

Started out as a lowly volunteer. The editor hears Phillips talk.

Certainly sounds like an amazing feat.

Giving a title allows the editor to visualize the whole package.

In essence this is an outline of the story. Editor can quickly see how it will unfold.

If you have the freelance credits, let them be known. If not, try to give other sensible reasons why you are qualified to do the article.

The editor considered and eventually bought and ran the story.

re-integrating the homeless back into society that it has been adopted for use by the entire state of Minnesota and is now being copied by 28 other states across the nation . . . a possibility she didn't even dream of when she first volunteered at her neighborhood shelter, back in 1983.

. . . She volunteered to serve coffee and doughnuts at the shelter and was horrified at what she saw . . . "People, entire families were forced to sleep on cots on our church floor," she recalls. "It was shocking and appalling to me. I decided that I had to try and do something about it."

What Phillips did about it was to listen . . . They told her that temporary shelters kept them out of the cold, but what they really needed was a home they could call their own for long enough to get their lives back together again.

Out of those beginnings, Phillips devised the Elam Baptist Transitional housing program which has since become a model for the nation. Elam's success rate is nothing short of astounding: almost 90 percent of the homeless people who go through the program end up with a steady job and living in their own homes. . . .

We would like to do a story about Sue Phillips, perhaps entitled *The Volunteer who Found 10,000 Homes*. Phillips is a living example of how one concerned volunteer with a good idea can literally improve the lives of millions . . .

The story would tell how Sue discovered the homeless problem; how her new idea grew from paying attention to her "clients" rather than the shelter professionals; the difficulties in getting her church, and then government, to provide assistance to attempt a new concept; and finally the national triumph of her ideas.

We are a journalist team, writer and photographer, who are contributing editors of, and frequent contributors to *Mpls./St. Paul* magazine. We have published in many national magazines including *Horizon*, *Family Circle*, *The Robb Report*, the *Los Angeles Times Sunday Magazine*, *The World and I*, *Writer's Digest*, *Atlas*, *Prime Times*, *Changing Times*, *MD*, *Vista* and many others.

Many thanks for any consideration you give this article suggestion.

Sincerely,

Steven Kaplan

Larry Marcus