

## CHAPTER SIX

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# Selling Freelance Stories to Feature Sections

**T**he 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

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*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

