

## 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

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

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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

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*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,

