





The Case of the Ideal Freelance Writer

Clues for finding real talent.

By Melanie Padgett Powers

I once made the mistake of hiring a new freelance writer because she was a friend of my co-worker. I thought I was playing it safe by assigning her an easy feature. But when she turned in the draft, I was dismayed to see it was mostly quotes strung together. The lead was weak. There was little context, no narrative storytelling, and few transitions between the quotes. I had little faith that she had the skills to repair it, so I rewrote the article as best I could. By not doing my homework, I inadvertently created a headache — and extra work — for myself.

For most magazine publishers, finding talented and reliable freelance writers is critical. You rely on them to effectively craft the content that attracts and keeps the attention of your readers (and if you're part of an association, your members). Identifying skilled freelancers who can embrace your organization's brand, mission, and tone requires true detective work. Here's how to use your sleuthing skills to track down writers who will deliver quality content on time and on point.

Talent Instantly Recognizes Genius

Word-of-mouth is a good place to start. Ask co-workers, colleagues, and friends at other publications and organizations — whose opinion you trust — who their top writers are. Ask for referrals on reputable industry listservs and in select Facebook groups. And ask other freelance writers you're already using who else they recommend. (Reassure them that you're only looking to expand your list of available writers.)

You can also put out a direct call for writers on social media. Be clear about what you're looking for, such as experience in a certain industry. LinkedIn, as a network of professionals, is a good platform. Post a call to your profile, and search for "freelance writer" or "content writer," or for a specific type of writer, such as "financial writer." On this platform, you'll be able to quickly check out candidates' experience and, likely, review some of their work. The same search on Google can unearth more potential candidates.

Online freelancer platforms like Fiverr, Upwork, and WriterAccess might be tempting resources, but keep in mind that you get what you pay for. At low cost, it's rare to find quality professional writers. If you're going to try this route, make sure you can effectively assess candidates' qualifications and skills before getting in too deep.

Nothing So Important As Trifles

Once you have a list of writers to review, follow the clues

to determine whether there's a fit with your organization. Start by asking candidates to provide writing samples. Check out their websites and online portfolios. Your intuition should quickly tell you whether someone is talented and has a writing style you like. Beyond that, look for the type of articles you need. Do you want someone who can weave a compelling narrative feature, ghostwrite a succinct blog post, or draw an interesting portrait of an individual? Some writers can write in a variety of styles, while others are more skilled in one or two areas. Their portfolios should highlight their respective areas of expertise.

For your next clue, look for samples in the writers' portfolios that match your publication's tone. Are you looking for a breezy, humorous tone, or a serious, academic one — or something in between?

When you've narrowed down the search, dig deeper. Ask writers for references and pursue your own as well. Reach out to publications they have written for. Use LinkedIn, which points out if you have connections in common. Don't hesitate to contact them.

Ask references about the writer's talent and skills, of course, but also whether he or she easily meets deadlines (with no excuses or unnecessary extensions), turns in strong first drafts (or needs several rounds of edits), is easy to work with, and simply makes the editor's job easier.

Don't ask a prospective writer to take a writing test or write something "on spec." Think of it this way: Would you ask a plumber to work for free so you could assess his or her skills before hiring for a bigger project? If you feel strongly about writing tests, offer the writer a small fee for taking it.

Talking to a new-to-you writer on the phone can help ensure you find someone who understands your industry and needs. Trust your gut — a writer who looks great on



paper may not be the best fit once you talk through all the details.

Be sure your writer-in-question will adapt to your requirements. When it comes to sources, for example, traditional journalists are accustomed to finding their own sources, but associations and alumni publications often provide them. And there's your review process. These types of publications often require writers to show all or part of their drafts to their sources before publication. This is typically forbidden in journalism and may shock some freelance writers at first. Explain your requirements upfront to make sure the writer is willing to follow your process.

Lastly, don't be afraid to take a chance on writers new to freelancing and/or the industry. And consider diversity. Writers who come from varied backgrounds can offer new perspectives, improving interview questions and bringing a fresh voice to your publication.

The Game Is Afoot

Once you have put in the hard work to amass a handful of solid writers who are a good fit for your organization, don't lose them. Treat them right and pay them well, and they are apt to continue writing for you.

The best editors are clear about each assignment. They provide a few paragraphs explaining exactly what they expect. They provide the sources and contact information at the time of the assignment — not making promises, like “I'll get it to you next week,” which create delays. Contracts are not a must, but it should be clear in an email conversation that you both agree to the word count, deadline, and fee.

Writers will expect some follow-up questions and edits after they submit their initial drafts. However, adding sources or asking writers to add substantial sections or sidebars should come with additional payment.

Fees vary among writers, depending on the industry, their skills, and their experience. Magazine assignments are often paid by the word, but that can be influenced by the nature of the project. There's a big difference between a 2,000-word magazine feature with multiple sources and a less-time-consuming 500-word member profile with one interview.

I don't recommend paying by hourly rate because it's hard to determine how many hours a writer needs for a given project. More experienced writers can often work faster, while less-experienced ones may need more time. The same hourly rate for both means you're paying more for less experience.

For package projects, consider a project rate. For example, four new blog posts every month or five case studies for your website. Explain the project and ask the writer to offer a proposed rate as a starting point.

It seems so obvious now that I made a huge mistake hiring a newish writer based solely on the tip of a co-worker I barely knew. In my rush to find someone who could help me, I actually created more work for myself. Instead of setting aside the time to assess the person's skills and fit for our magazine, I skimmed a few writing samples and jumped in.

Learn from my mistake. Invest the time and effort into searching out freelancers who can provide the strong content you need — writers with whom you can build lasting, fruitful relationships. You and your organization will be better off for your diligent efforts.

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