

Making the move from a newspaper to “*writing for hire*”

BY ABBY LUBY

I’ve been working as a freelance reporter for almost two years and there are great advantages to being your own boss and calling the shots. But “writing for hire” can be tricky and I’m still learning the ropes.

Many of my first stories for a local newspaper were on environmental issues where I live in Westchester, New York, a suburb of New York City. Among the most challenging articles were (and are) about the Indian Point Nuclear Power Plant, just a few miles from my house.

Writing accurately is time consuming and there are no real shortcuts for getting the bona fide facts. You interview people, get background and quotes, read the research, talk to more people. By the time you’re ready to craft a story you’ve amassed several thousand words, including lots of stuff you didn’t ask for. A very small percentage of all of that will end up in your story. The real shocker: once you see the byline and get the check, the amount of work required might plunge your hourly rate to that which you might not have initially accepted.

When I started to freelance and wanted to impress editors I didn’t know, I spent the extra time to make sure my stories were clear and concise. But as time went on I needed to find a way to work efficiently enough so I could make a decent hourly rate. Time is money, no doubt, and although it took me a while, I learned that the most important thing with any assignment was to make sure from the get-go that I understood exactly what the editor wanted from my story. Whether I pitched a story idea or one was assigned, I made sure to connect with the editor first – before that very first interview, before notes were penned on the pad.

I found that emailing, although preferable for most editors, didn’t entirely work for me and, if possible, I would try to follow up on the phone. It allowed an exchange of ideas and maybe more stuff percolated up that might change the original gist of the story. This seemed to save time and agitation that can come with doing re-writes. Generally, that means more work and sometimes not more money.

Early on when I didn’t talk to my editor, I would write a story I “thought” the editor wanted. Many times, after the first read, they came up with a different spin. It meant re-working and rereporting the story. More interviews, maybe more research. Sometimes, it meant a lot more work, and if I didn’t ask for a re-write fee, editors often didn’t offer it.

Most publications have boilerplate freelance contracts, some have contracts specific to each assignment. If I’m signing anything these days, I check for re-write fee clauses and a kill fee, a lower fee paid in the event that they don’t use the story.

If no contract is involved, initially negotiating a “per-story rate” with an editor who is stressed under deadline requires a bit of finesse. While you need to be amenable, you can’t forget that you’re doing this to make a living. At first I agreed to write articles at the rate offered in order to get a foot in the door with the

publication. But later on, when I had a more clear idea of the work required to complete the assignment, I would explain how much time I expected to spend and would ask for a higher rate.

Sometimes it worked; sometimes it didn't. I learned that I needed to decide if writing for a publication on their terms was worth it for me. If not, I had to learn to move on.

There are many ways to save time. Here are a few examples:

—I used to think I had to talk to as many people as possible to get the best story. But with a little research I was able to whittle down my interview list to the essential folks.

—I've also learned to keep my interviews short, getting only the information and quotes that I need. Now, when it seems difficult to cut short an interview (some persons, once they have the ear of a journalist, pour out all sorts of information) I politely interrupt, begging off because of a deadline, something everyone understands.

—I've improved my organization. Being organized is a 'must,' so you can quickly get your hands on a phone number or email address. In the last two years I've amassed a rather extensive source list. Electronic rolodexes help, but I have the old-fashioned metal rolodex with paper cards with as much cross referencing as possible. For me, it just seems faster to flip through the cards. Also, actual paper files with notes and contact information from previous stories that you may revisit are great to keep on hand.

One of the greatest things about freelance writing is setting your own schedule, especially if you're a parent or work another part-time job. The downside is that working alone can make you feel isolated.

When I first started freelancing I had just left a full-time job at a weekly paper where I enjoyed the camaraderie and support of the staff. After leaving I missed that connection and for me, today, having a similar amount of human contact kind of keeps things in balance. Now I try to have lunch with a friend once a week, take an exercise class – mainly to counter the long hours of sitting at the computer. I also try to interview as many people (as time allows) in person and connect with other journalists in professional groups at regular meetings when I can. It helps tremendously – there are a lot more of us out there than you think.

Abby Luby is a freelance journalist for The New York Daily News, The Real Deal and writes regularly about the Indian Point Nuclear Power Plant for the North County News. She is a regularly featured art critic for the Stamford Advocate/Greenwich Time and writes features for Valley Table Magazine, among other area publications.