Magazine Writing: How to Become a Successful Freelancer

Tips on the Inside Track
What You Need to Get Published
Writing a Compelling Query Letter

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Magazine Publishers of America
Most magazines rely on freelance writers to provide at least some of their magazine’s content, from short “filler” pieces throughout the issue to longer, more in-depth feature articles. But how do you break into freelance magazine writing? And what does it take to succeed?

**Breaking Into Freelance Magazine Writing**

Rewarding, glamorous, and stimulating, freelance magazine writing is also one of the toughest fields to break into. You’re up against some of the brightest minds in the world. To succeed as a freelance magazine writer requires sharp journalistic insights, quick response, and dedication. You can enter the magazine writing field in a number of ways. They include:

- **Interning or working at a magazine:** American Society of Magazine Editors (ASME) offers a well-known summer editorial intern program ([www.magazine.org/editorial](http://www.magazine.org/editorial)). Internships that span all areas of the magazine business are also available on MPA's Job Bank ([www.magazine.org//careers/Job_Bank/](http://www.magazine.org//careers/Job_Bank/)). Both programs offer unique opportunities to establish relationships with editors and magazine professionals from a wide range of publications. For a full-time magazine position, [www.magazine.org//careers/](http://www.magazine.org//careers/) provides up-to-date job listings.

- **Become an expert in a particular field:** Even if you’ve never been published, you have a chance to catch the attention of a major magazine if you can provide something more experienced writers can’t, such as access to inside information on a relevant topic, professional expertise, a local story that the national press hasn’t covered, or a unique perspective on ordinary events.

- **Persistent and targeted submissions:** If interning at a magazine or gaining sought-after expertise is not an option, you can follow the steps that thousands of successful freelance writers have taken:

  1. Get clips (pieces published) to show editors when submitting story suggestions
  2. Research the magazine thoroughly before making submissions
  3. Generate ideas for stories
  4. Write query letters
  5. Follow up with editors

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1. Get Clips

Magazine editors want to see examples of your work when you approach them with a story idea, so start writing for local publications, student newspapers, or websites to get your name out there. Make copies (digital and hard copy) and keep a file of your work. Organize the file by type of writing. For example, an article on fall fashion is quite a bit different from business or marketing content. It is important to be able to match your clips to the article ideas you are proposing.

When editors look at samples of your work, they are primarily interested in your writing style and mastery of journalism, rather than where the sample was published or how much you were paid. Therefore valuable first clips can result from offering to write for an organizational newsletter, your community newspaper or websites with editorial oversight.

2. Research the Magazine

Read as many copies as possible of the magazine for which you want to write to understand its market. Take note of the publication’s different departments, columns, and fillers—You will be more likely to get an editor’s attention if you pitch an idea that perfectly fits an existing format. Generally speaking, new freelancers are more likely to break in with a small blurb in the front of a magazine rather than a 5,000-word cover feature.

In addition, you may have better luck getting an editor’s attention at a smaller magazine. Buy copies of hobby or pet magazines, or magazines relating to something you know, scrutinize them for technique, then create a compelling story idea.

Also part of this research is finding the correct person to contact with your story idea and what form of query he or she prefers: e-mail, fax, or a mailed letter. An essential part of getting published is getting your submission into the right hands at your target publication.

3. Generate Ideas

One good idea is never enough—to succeed in freelance magazine writing, you need to be able to generate dozens of ideas for articles at any given moment. In addition to arming yourself with lots of enthusiasm and story proposals, you’ll need enduring perseverance to get published. After all, your first 10 ideas might be rejected. But how do you overcome rejection? Just keep coming up with new twists. Also, if one magazine rejects your idea, it does not mean another one will. And once your idea is turned down from one magazine, you may submit it to another. View your rejection from one magazine as a call to action for a submission to another publication.

Try to keep your story pitches timely. Link them to recent books or hot issues. Offer to write about things you are uniquely suited to research. Keep an idea logbook and add to it each time something piques your interest.

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4. Write Query Letters

The proper method to approach an editor at a magazine or website is by sending a query letter. A query letter is a one-page proposal in business-letter format offering to write a specific piece for a particular magazine, addressed to the appropriate editor by name. Rather than sending the completed article, nearly all editors prefer that you first send a short note that explains what you want to write, why it’s right for them, and how you are qualified to write it.

Most magazine editors receive queries via e-mail, although you can send a query letter by mail or fax depending on your target magazine’s preference. When querying via e-mail, it is suggested that you use one of these formats to send your clips:

- Copy and paste text into the bottom of your e-mail
- Send the editor links to your work at other sites
- Create your own website as a “calling card,” posting several of your articles online to show editors

Do not send an editor an e-mail attachment unless it has been requested. More often than not, it will be deleted, sight unseen.

What to Put in Your Query Letter

Begin your query letter with a strong “hook.” The first sentence or two should capture whatever is most unique, interesting, shocking, funny or informative about the article you’re proposing.

In the next paragraph or two, tell the essence of what you want to write. Why is this an interesting topic? How will you uncover the unique angle that the media has not already reported on? Include the answers to the classic journalism questions—where, when, what, why, how and who.

In the next paragraph, state exactly what you plan to deliver (for example, a 1,000-word feature article with a short sidebar, or a 500-word profile with photos). If you know which section your piece would fit, mention it here. If you know which experts you’ll quote, or if you’ve already got interviews or research done, include this info as well.

The final paragraph is the “about you” section. If you have relevant writing experience or advanced journalism degrees, mention them here. If you do not yet have experience, do not include this information.

Finally, enclose two to three clips of your writing. Clips are photocopies of your published work. If you have never had anything published, you may enclose one or two unpublished writing samples.

5. Follow Up With Editors

Always follow-up with editors, whether it be to inquire about your submission or to thank them for their consideration after a story idea has been rejected. Typically, freelance writers develop relationships with magazines that use their work regularly. This relationship can be established—the key to your success as a freelance magazine writer—through effective follow up.

A Career in Freelance Magazine Writing Awaits... Now that you know the secrets to becoming a freelance magazine writer—work at a magazine, develop an expertise or send your ideas to magazine editors—your only challenge left is to make it happen. If you remain organized, determined, and show a savvy insight into the magazine and what its readers want, you will gain the attention and trust of editors. And when that happens, your entrance into freelance magazine writing—a career that is creative, challenging, and immensely rewarding—is assured.