
Freefall into Freelancing

Pull the Literary Rip Cord and Soar

By Debora M. Coty

A short time after I began writing two years ago, I was standing in the lobby of my church (yes, this encounter actually took place in church!), speaking with a friend. As friends often do, she inquired about my new "writing hobby."

Bubbling over with excitement on the coattails of my third magazine article acceptance in as many months, I had just begun to fill in the thrilling details when we were cut off by an acquaintance (who I later learned was a frustrated wannabe writer). She happened to overhear our conversation as she was walking by and abruptly halted to inject her unique perspective.

"Excuse me," Ms. Buttinsky said, doing just that. "Did I hear you say you've begun *writing*... as in *being published*?"

"Yes," I replied, naively expecting congratulations for my accomplishment.

"What exactly qualifies YOU to be a writer?" she asked, with a look on her face that brought back memories of my irritated mother asking ten-year-old me if my filthy room was clean yet.

Without waiting for my reply, she continued. "Did you major in journalism in college?"

"Um, no..." I said, wondering where she was going with this.

"Were you an English major?" Her words were crisp and well enunciated.

"Not exactly," I answered sheepishly, beginning to feel as if a heat wave were rolling through the room.

"How, then, are you qualified to be a writer?" she asked, crossing her arms and cocking her head to one side.

Flabbergasted, I looked at my friend, who was looking back at me with her mouth hanging open. With sudden inspiration that must have been from God (considering the surroundings), I nodded my head and replied, "You're right. You're absolutely right. I'm *not* qualified to be a writer. But you know something really funny? There are *three editors* out there who *think* I am!"

There have been many more editors since that interesting interchange who *think* I'm a writer, qualified or not. In fact, I've had fourteen pieces published in magazines,

trade journals, and anthologies in the twenty-two months I've been freelance writing.

I had no idea this was unusual or even better than average until I attended my first writers' conference and was shocked to meet dozens of people who had been writing much longer but had little, if any, published work. They were asking *me* how to break into the business.

I'm no expert, but I do work hard and possess a minimum quantity of common sense. Could it be that a person *can* make it as a freelance writer, even if not as "qualified" as some?

The answer is "yes, absolutely!" The following three simple guidelines will help *you* freefall into freelancing:

1 Be Prepared

Don't expect to jump into a freefall from the freelance airplane without doing appropriate research.

When the last of my chicks left the nest for college and I finally had time to pursue my writing dream, I did two very important preparatory things. First, I gathered all the "how-to" materials I could find on the writing industry, the genres I was interested in pursuing, writing styles, market information, and basic grammar/punctuation review. Then I studied.

What's the difference between a character-driven and plot-driven story? Do you haggle with an editor over fees? How do you write a query letter? When is it appropriate to use a dash, semicolon, or those three little dots...? (I thought they were called *eclipses*!)

Next, I put out feelers and found a mentor through a friend of a friend—an experienced writer who was willing to share "inside" information with me and answer my myriad of questions. Austine helped me immeasurably in the beginning and still serves as my "writing buddy" today. We encourage and bounce ideas off each other, critique work, and share marketing information regularly.

2 Be Fearless

My first few stories practically burst out of my brain onto the paper, but then came the problem: where to market these? I knew what I liked to read and was intimately acquainted with several magazines to which I had subscribed for years. Those were my long-term marketing goals. However, I knew I had to break into the

pony leagues before stepping up to the plate in the major leagues. I was fearful about appearing too amateurish to editors. How could I warm up my literary swings for the tough pitching?

Writer's Market and *Christian Writers' Market Guide* (my chosen genre) were chock full of the information I needed. Their listings provided specific needs for each magazine, contact information, and pay rates. I obtained writers' guidelines from each magazine I targeted as a potential buyer and tailored my piece according to the required word count and format. I found writers' conferences and magazines such as *The Writer* and *WRITERS' Journal* priceless sources of market information and trends, as well as excellent teaching tools for fine-tuning my craft.

One very important lesson I learned early on: Do NOT be shackled by low pay rates. View nothing as beneath you, and consider each publishing experience as a step up to the next level. I received three cents per word for one of my early pieces and was rewarded with a nice clip to add to my repertoire—bait helping me to land a much bigger fish on the next expedition.

I had no clue as to what to expect from my first writers' conference, so I went loaded for bear. I was astounded at the number of writers who came empty-handed or poorly equipped to market their manuscripts. I had a whole suitcase full of published clips, my yet-to-be-submitted work, and several book proposals I had carefully put together based on a "how-to" book from the public library.

I had received an advance list of the editors and publishers to be in attendance, so I looked up each Web site and/or *Writer's Market* information, and earmarked which of my articles would be appropriate for each publication. I signed up to meet with as many editors and publishers as time allowed, and came away with one article accepted for publication, three accepted on speculation, some valuable feedback from editors who read my submitted work in my presence, and excellent ideas to augment my book proposals.

The contacts I made with the editors, speakers (all high-profile, successful writers), and fellow conference attendees have served to boost my career in objective and subjective ways. I have received encouraging e-mails from several editors, and fellow fledgling writers keep me posted on the newest markets and writing contests, many of which I would not have heard of otherwise.

Another suggestion that will save you bundles of time and encourage writing enthusiasm (which tends to be squelched by rejections slips): Read the magazine you hope to write for to get an idea of the specific interests and "feel" of the magazine. Editors are as different as wildflowers in a field, and you can pick up subtle hints about their blossom scents by reading articles they've already edited and approved.

When in doubt as to whether your article will precisely fit a particular magazine, be fearless and submit it anyway. Obviously, it needs to be generally appropriate (don't send a cat piece to a dog magazine), but I've had several pieces accepted

that I really didn't expect to fly. You never know which way the wind of change may be blowing in an editor's office.

3 Be Persistent

At first, I was timid about submitting my work, and mortally afraid of those dreaded rejection slips. After a shoebox full, I realized that they are simply part of the industry and mustn't be taken too personally.

Often, the rejection isn't due to the quality of the work, but because the editor recently accepted a similar piece or it just doesn't fit in with their monthly theme. Sometimes, a rewrite will be required, and it is best to approach these with a gracious spirit and open mind (even if you have to fake it). That editor is much more likely to accept your work again if he views you as amiably cooperative.

Once I was asked to do two rewrites on an article over a period of fourteen months. I complied, only to have the editor inform me that she had decided not to use the piece after all. After wailing and gnashing my teeth for an appropriate period, I capitalized on the relationship I had established with her while working on the first piece and boldly bypassed the query stage to submit a totally unrelated manuscript, which she promptly accepted.

Just as jockeys have to put up with "horse-poo" as a vocational hazard, we writers must learn to tolerate rejection notices and simply step over the piles to persevere in the pursuit of our goals. Just wipe the nasty off your boots and keep going.

I read about a number one-ranked professional tennis player who says after each winning match, "I made too many unforced errors; I will do better next time." I've heard seasoned, successful writers say that we'll never get to a point when "we have arrived." There is always another mountain to climb.

Local writers' groups and regional or national writers' conferences are excellent ways to equip ourselves for the long hike uphill. We receive invaluable training, both general and personalized, and objective feedback from those who actually read our work. Your mother may read your work, but her responses of "Oh, you are SO brilliant!" or "It's perfect just as it is" may not be helpful in furthering your career with non-biased editors.

I smile as I look back on my first cover letter, written two years ago. I misspelled "freelance." I could have sworn there was a hyphen in there. If a 45-year-old, non-English-major novice holding down two other jobs, running a household, and playing in two tennis leagues can succeed as a freelance writer, so can you.

After all, you have an excellent head start—you know how to spell freelance and you're reasonably sure what an ellipsis is....

Debbie Coty writes from Seffner, FL Recent writing credits include; The War Cry, Whispers from Heaven, OT Practice (an occupational therapy trade journal), and others. 