

A cut above: How to become a true editorial professional

How to get work

Eleanor Stanley

Being an editorial freelance has a lot going for it. You can work when and where you want, run errands when it suits you, choose which projects you want to take on ... in short, you are the master or mistress of your own destiny. Unfortunately, this wonder-lifestyle isn't quite so idyllic if you can't actually pay the mortgage. So, it seems only fitting that the inaugural article of this new column on professionalism should go back to basics and look at how to get freelance work.



Planning

To many freelances, getting work simply means contacting in-house editors. But before you even think about

displaying your wares, there's some important background work to be done. Even if you just want some part-time proofreading, there are questions that you need to be clear about:

- What kind of work do I want to do, and for which kinds of organizations?
- How much work in this field is actually available to someone with my experience?
- How much do I want to earn?
- What fees will the market bear, and what is my 'bottom line'?

To answer these questions, you need to take time to examine your motivations, strengths and needs, research your market and get networking. Use every contact, professional body and online discussion forum you can to arm yourself with the latest information about working in your chosen field. That way, when you finally make contact with your potential client, you will know that you are offering something that they actually need, and you will sound as professional as your competitors.

Making contact

Having done your homework, it's time to contact potential clients. First, narrow your search down to, say, 50 organizations that you'd like to work

for. Then, phone their switchboards to find out the name of whoever commissions editorial freelances. Without that name, your letter may well simply end up in the bin. If the switchboard operator doesn't know who is responsible, ask to speak to someone else – preferably an editorial assistant rather than Human Resources. Try to avoid speaking to the person in question at this stage.

Next, put together a letter, with an individually tailored CV, introducing yourself, explaining why you are particularly interested in working for them and highlighting your unique selling points (specific experience in their field, or the ability to turn around jobs at short notice, for example). If you've been passed their name by a colleague, mention this in the first sentence to draw their attention. Print your letter on good-quality paper, and handwrite the envelope. Everyone likes receiving a letter that looks nothing like a bill.

Around a week later, phone each person you have written to, and ask if they have had a chance to read your letter. Try to sound friendly, engaging and interesting. Your message should be 'I love what I do, I like your organization, and I could make your life much easier'. What it should most definitely not be is 'Feed me!' – however badly you need work, don't sound desperate.

This procedure is simple but it does work. The letter is far less likely to work without the phone call, and vice versa. You probably won't get work from everyone you contact, but the more closely you research

potential clients' specific needs, the better the response will be. Once you've started receiving commissions, mention the names of your existing clients when you approach other organizations. This helps potential clients feel that you are 'tried and tested' by their peers.

Ongoing activity

Winning new clients is particularly crucial for new freelances, but it's also an ongoing part of the freelance life. I've not yet met a freelance, however successful, who will sit back and let the commissions roll in without making some kind of proactive effort from time to time. But this isn't just because they need the work. If all you do is respond to the contents of your email inbox, you're not in charge of the direction of your career. By taking a strategic view of who you would like to work for, and periodically reassessing what skills you'd like to offer them, you can make sure that your career progresses on to bigger and more exciting things. That way, you really are in charge of your own destiny.

Useful tips

- Accept offers of in-house work, at least for a short period. It's a good way to get to know your clients and develop new skills.
- Seek ongoing jobs that offer regular payment – for example, editing a monthly newsletter.
- Consider accepting some 'bread-and-butter' jobs that pay well – this gives you the flexibility to take on more interesting jobs that pay less.
- If you have a quiet patch, don't panic and undersell yourself – instead, use the time to shape your plans for the future.

About the author ...

Eleanor Stanley is a writer, editor and personal coach. She is a member of the NUJ, an associate of the SfEP and an Approved Consultant with the National Council for Voluntary Organisations. Visit her website at www.eleanorstanley.co.uk.