

The Seven Pillars of Freelance Success

Skyrocket your freelance writing career with these seven guiding principles.

BY DON VAUGHAN

Every successful writer must make their own path. My professional journey began more than 40 years ago and continues to this day. Following stints on a local weekly newspaper and two national magazines, I quit my job in 1991 to freelance full time. Over the ensuing years, I realized that certain qualities benefited me professionally, and as I embraced them, my career skyrocketed. These qualities became the supporting pillars of my freelance success.

INQUISITIVENESS

Successful writers are commonly driven by a need to know more—they have a million questions about everything. This comes in handy in a variety of ways. For example, inquisitiveness can help you generate more and better article ideas because your areas of interest are broader than most. As a result, you see potentially marketable ideas where others may not.

Inquisitiveness also helps inform the research you do—who you talk to and what you ask them. Pretend you're a reader who knows nothing about the topic you're writing about. What questions would you ask? What specifics of this topic would most interest you? That's how I craft my questions, and the responses I get from sources inevitably make the



resulting article better because they delve more deeply into the heart of the topic.

Embrace your natural inquisitiveness and use it to advance your writing career.

DRIVE

Freelance writing is a rejection-driven profession, but a strong sense of drive will get you through the negative aspects of the job and propel your career forward via new and bigger markets. It gets you up in the

morning and forces you to write when you really don't want to. It's the fuel that powers your success.

It's easy for all of us to find excuses not to write: I don't have the time, I'm too tired, there's too much housework to do first. If the excuses always win, you may lack the drive it will take to succeed on a significant scale. You might sell an article here or there, but lack of drive will keep you from making it to the big leagues and being all you can be as a writer.

Maintain drive and make it work

for you by constantly creating and pursuing short- and long-term goals. Make a list of what you want to accomplish this week and this month, and a separate list of your goals for the year, and post both lists near your computer. This is your roadmap to success—but it will take drive to get there.

If you have the drive but lack the time, get creative. Get up an hour early and write before you go to work. Take your laptop to work and write during your lunch break. After dinner, tell your family the next hour is yours, and you don't want to be disturbed unless someone is on fire or bleeding. The time is yours; you just have to find it and put it to use.

PROFESSIONALISM

In the world of freelance writing, professionalism means meeting your obligations when working with editors and sources.

With editors, these obligations include meeting your deadline, adhering to your assigned word count, and not changing the direction of an article without first consulting your editor. They also include delivering clean, fact-checked copy, and not bothering your editor with incessant phone calls or texts.

With sources, your obligations include respecting their time, contacting them when you promise you will, giving them the opportunity to fact-check quotes if the magazine allows it, and ensuring they receive comps when the article is published.

Professionalism also means not coasting once you've achieved a certain level of success. No matter how many articles or books you've published, you must treat every assignment as if it is your first and your career depends on it.

A good editor cares a great deal about the professionalism of their contributors. Writers who demonstrate a professional attitude from the beginning and maintain it through every assignment will consistently get work.

CONFIDENCE

This quality is essential to freelance success in a multitude of ways. It makes it easier to stand up for yourself when necessary, improves your negotiating skills, and makes you a better interviewer because you're not intimidated by wealth, fame, or status.

Confidence stems from a firm faith in your abilities as a writer. Improve your craft by reading others who write well. Study their use of words and phrasing, the structure of their articles, and more. Don't try to mimic them—it's important that you develop your own voice—but learn all you can and apply that understanding to your own work.

Every success you achieve will boost your confidence a little bit more, but don't let rejection make you less confident. It's just the nature of the profession. Learn from those opportunities as well.

KNOWLEDGE

It's said that knowledge is power, and that's especially true when it comes to achieving success as a freelance writer.

To succeed, especially if you are just starting out, you must study and learn as much as possible about how the profession works. You must understand the role of the freelance writer, how magazines are produced, the function of specific editors, the different kinds of articles magazines publish, the latest publishing trends, the latest social trends, who pays what, and much, much more.

How do you glean such knowledge? By talking to published writers and working editors, among others. (Conferences, many of which have moved online, can provide this kind of access.) Ask writers how they found success, who they're writing for currently, and which markets they would suggest you hit—and why. Ask editors about their editorial needs and the best way to break in. Then follow through on that information.

The latest info on the state of the industry, new trends, and more can be found via professional publications such as *Writer's Digest*, as well as blogs and websites hosted by knowledgeable industry insiders. Each year, *Writer's Digest* publishes a lengthy list of the best websites for writers. Take advantage of it.

CHARITY

By charity, I mean paying it forward once you have achieved a certain level of professional success.

Like the oft-quoted Blanche DuBois in Tennessee Williams' classic drama *A Streetcar Named Desire*, I have benefited greatly from the kindness of others. My first book project resulted from a recommendation by a magazine editor with whom I was working at the time, and I ended up writing five books for that particular publishing company. More recently, a web editor with whom I had worked frequently gave my name to a friend at the Encyclopedia Britannica. I was asked to do a handful of short articles for the Britannica website as a test, and soon found myself deluged with work that was both fun and well-paying.

I try to be equally charitable by introducing new writers to editors when they have good ideas to

pitch, and referring them for specific assignments when appropriate. Not only does helping colleagues in this way make me happy, but it helps me professionally because I look good in an editor's eye when I send a talented new writer who brings fresh ideas and a strong work ethic.

Paying it forward in this way commonly results in additional karmic benefits when those I assist turn around and help me with similar referrals once they've achieved their own success. It's a win-win for everyone.

PERSEVERANCE

This is the single most important pillar to freelance success. If you don't quit, you will succeed. That is something I emphasize over and over to students in my freelancing classes.

That fact may seem painfully obvious, but you'd be surprised at the

percentage of new writers who quit at the first sign of rejection. They may be talented wordsmiths, but they get a rejection letter or two, come to believe they are wasting their time, and move on to something else. Had they persevered, their first sale might have come from their very next pitch—but they'll never know.

I'm proof of the importance of perseverance. I had long dreamed of contributing to *MAD Magazine*, so when an editor there contacted me based on my work for *Weekly World News*, I jumped at the opportunity. But *MAD* was a very difficult market to crack. I pitched and pitched and received many funny rejections, but I just couldn't seem to make that first sale. Then one day, an acceptance! That first sale didn't make subsequent sales any easier, but it did prove that if I kept at it, good things

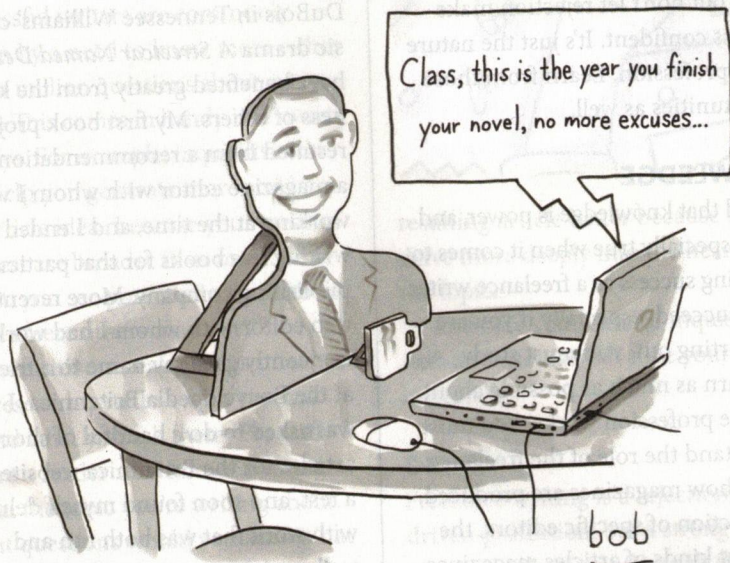
would eventually happen. I ended up selling around 15 articles to *MAD* over the years, and am proud to be one of the Usual Gang of Idiots, as the magazine affectionately referred to its contributors.

I had a similar experience with *Boys' Life*, the monthly magazine of the Boy Scouts of America. I pitched consistently for a year, with no assignments to show for my effort. I sent one final pitch, with the intent that if it, too, was rejected, I would move on. I didn't get an immediate response and ended up forgetting about the query—until I heard from an editor a full year later asking if I was still interested in writing up that idea. I said yes, of course, and the door opened wide. Future sales were much, much easier.

In addition to keeping you motivated and on track as you approach new markets, perseverance will help you as a writer in other ways. It will make you a better researcher because you won't settle for the easy gets; you'll work harder to find the very best sources for the articles you write. And perseverance will keep you at your computer, writing away, when deadlines loom.

Make "I will not quit!" your mantra, and success will find you.

Worth a Thousand Words



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