

Confessions of a Free-Lance Writer

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I'M OF THAT RARE breed, a full-time free-lance writer. There are less than three hundred of us in the United States. Becoming a full-time free-lance writer is the easiest task in the world. Remaining a free-lance writer is another story.

All you need is a typewriter (which may be rented if necessary), ten cents' worth of manuscript paper, a notebook, two packages of envelopes, preferably Nos. 11 and 12, a book of stamps and you're in business. Legally you need no special qualifications, no diplomas, no degrees, no examination, no union membership, no license, no occupation permit.

Naturally staying in business is something else. How long you stick to it and how much you make depends on many factors, but mainly on your own determination and willingness to learn. You don't have to be particularly intelligent.

Free-lance writing gives one all the freedom in the world, insofar as hours, place of employment and being one's own boss are concerned. On the other hand, I know of no more exacting profession or business.

I have seen men and women, with much more writing ability than I possess, fail as free-lancers mainly because they could not conquer the problem of working. The free-

lancer meets all the temptations in the book to deter him from his job. Overcoming these temptations is more difficult than the actual work.

A long time ago I read somewhere a quotation from some noted authority on writing in which he encouraged beginning writers by asserting that there was a market for every good manuscript. The problem confronting the beginner, however, is reassurance that his manuscripts are good. I have further words of encouragement. The fact that I have sold as of today 7,604 manuscripts is glaring proof that there is a market for manuscripts which are not so good.

Some editors, hoping, I presume, to be of some encouragement to writers who don't make the grade with a manuscript, take the time to write across the face of the rejection slip, "Sorry." That used to inspire me tremendously, until one day it dawned upon me that the editor possibly referred not to his personal feelings but to the quality of the manuscript. Today that word "Sorry" leaves me in a quandary.

Newspaper reporters, desk men and associate editors of magazines are the logical men and women to graduate to full-time free-lancing, but the very nature of their jobs throws a tremendous handicap in their paths at the outset. Throughout their editorial experience they've been told when to go to work, how many hours to work and when to quit. Being removed from under that supervisory authority suddenly leaves the average would-be free-lancer in much the same position as an automobile without a starter. Here the beginning full-timer faces his first and most vital test. If he can force himself to adopt and abide by regular hours, as though some journalistic Scrooge stood immediately back of him with a horse-whip poised, he probably has it made—with one other major provision: He must know where to sell his manuscripts.

It was not until I discovered quite by accident that there were some other periodicals in addition to the *Post* and the *Digest* that I sold my first manuscript. That was to a regional hardware journal which paid me \$3.50 for it.

There are in the United States alone about 2,500 periodicals that buy manuscripts regularly or at least occasionally from free-lance writers, if they can get what they want.

It is not enough for the free-lancer to have a list of all manuscript markets. He should know something of the specific field covered by numerous markets and of the particular manuscript needs of these markets. Of the 2,500 manuscript markets open to the free-lance writer in the United States, I believe I am fairly familiar with the general needs of at least one thousand of them and I have sold to over 834.

Studying new markets is a fascination to me. I find a new off-trail magazine more interesting, regardless of its contents, than the latest sex novel; a change of editorial policy more intriguing than an international spy serial. That's because I have trained myself to study manuscript markets and have subconsciously made a sort of game out of selling to additional publications.

The full-time free-lance who, like me, is not particularly smart must utilize his ability to study manuscript markets, ways of tailoring a story to fit a market and develop a story sense if he is to overcome his lack of genius and make a living as a full-timer. It is not as difficult as it sounds.

The average person who fails as a full-time writer does so because of laziness or obstinacy, not for lack of ability. I know a man, now past middle age, who is what the critics in artistic circles call a brilliant writer. Four times to my knowledge he has chucked whatever mundane job he held and launched a full-time writing career. Four times he has been forced by

the realities of economics to return to some other mundane job.

The chief reason for his repeated failures was obvious to everyone in the writing business except himself: he simply refused to conform to the needs of the editors to whom he wanted to sell. When he held a regular job, he was told what he was supposed to do and how he should do it, and the thought never occurred to him to perform the work backward from the way he was told. And yet the moment he stepped over to the ranks of free-lancers, he asserted his vehement individualism; and his individualism did not conform to the needs of the editors.

He wrote what he wanted to write, then started looking for a place to sell it. He seldom found it. Now and then one of his manuscripts attracted the attention of an understanding editor who took the time to criticize it and suggest changes which might make it acceptable. If this man had been holding down a job he would have accepted a friendly criticism of his work and advice as to how to improve it without a thought of rebellion. But instead of rewriting his manuscript as recommended, he would write several pages justifying the way he had written his story and intimating that the editor wouldn't know a good manuscript if it slapped him in the face.

The man has an excellent choice of words, he makes sentences that sing and he knows it. In fact, he falls in love with everything he writes so completely that he considers it a sacrilege to move even a comma. Consequently, when he does rarely make a sale, it is to one of the so-called "little" magazines which pay modestly or more often with copies of the magazine carrying the story. He considers publication in such a magazine with five thousand circulation an accomplishment, whereas he snubs proffered help of the editor of another journal with circulation in the mil-

lions—because, he says, he refuses to prostitute his art.

Of course I have neither the soul of nor even the tolerance toward such an "artist," and perhaps that is why I consider a manuscript that entertains 4,000,000 readers more artistic than one which is so evasive and plasmatic that only a chosen few can understand or appreciate it.

I'm what the artistic boys call a "hack." I admit it. Some people called William Shakespeare a hack too, not that I consider myself either the contemporary or the equal to the Bard of Avon. The point is, whether or not a writer is a hack depends largely on the point of view. Personally, I consider most successful full-time writers hacks, in the broader sense of the word. To me a hack writer is one who has his feet on the ground to the extent of taking the time and trouble to learn what an editor wants and works to the best of his ability to conform to his wants.

A literary artist works a month on a piece and has it published in *Prairie Schooner* and receives several copies of the magazine in payment, and in the eyes of some he's a literary genius in the making. I sell a story to *Building Supply News* for six cents a word or to *Popular Mechanics* for ten cents and I'm a hack. If by some rare stroke of luck I have something reprinted in the *Digest* for fifty or seventy-five cents a word, then I'm a lucky hack.

It all depends on what a writer wants out of his writing. Personally, I've always enjoyed writing. It's the only job I ever tackled that enabled me to do exactly what I wanted to do and still make a living out of it. Obviously a writer who has a Great Message for a tottering world or feels that America is wallowing in a literary morass and only he and possibly a few others like him can save it from artistic suicide is not going to be happy merely writing manuscripts and receiving checks for them. I am.

I even have some doubt that I shall ever pen the Great American Novel, but I have no doubt that I can write pretty much what I want to write—because I have learned to want to write what editors buy—and live comfortably somewhere between the cellar and the garret.

I suppose you might call me a “Five-and-Ten” writer. I work on the theory that a steady flow of small checks is to be desired in preference to large checks intermittently. For instance, as of today I have out 164 manuscripts—this number of pieces to be bought, paid for or returned. If past records hold, slightly more than 99 per cent of those manuscripts eventually will sell somewhere, although quite a number of them will be “homing pigeons” for a year or more before they catch editors in weak moments. I sold a short article last month on its 41st trip out, four years and seven months after I wrote it. The check barely paid the cost of postage and envelopes I used to send it on those 41 trips, but the sale boosted my morale higher than if I had sold the thing on its first trip to a twenty-cents-a-word market.

In a sense, every full-time free-lance writer is a manufacturer; but he differs from the average manufacturer in that he not only manufactures his merchandise but is his own sales manager, bookkeeper, personnel director and retailer. He has a distinct advantage over the usual manufacturer, however, in that he has virtually an inexhaustible supply of his raw materials at no cost whatsoever. All the more than 600,000 words in the larger dictionaries are his for the taking.

Once I “manufacture” a manuscript, it becomes a piece of merchandise in my “stockroom,” which is my manuscript record file. I offer this piece of merchandise to the prospective buyer who will pay the most for it. If he does not buy, then I continue offering it until, somewhere down

the line, somebody eventually buys. The selling price may be only a fraction of the original price-tag, but like the manufacturer, I believe in selling my merchandise—if not at the original asking price, then at the price it will bring on the open manuscript market. This market is determined by my knowledge of publications, what they will buy and what they’re willing to pay for my product.

In further reference to the “Five-and-Ten” writer, my attitude makes for safety if not fame. I prefer to have out ten manuscripts which have a good chance of selling at \$50 each than one that may sell for \$500. Thus I remove much of the gamble from my business and eliminate the awful highs and lows of the profession.

Last year my checks ranged in size from \$750 from *National Geographic* to one dollar from a regional farm paper. The only five-figure check I ever received was one on which I counted the two final zeros after the decimal point. That probably will be the only kind of five-figure writing checks I shall ever receive, but that is of small consequence if enough of those of two figures come along.

Obviously to keep from 150 to 175 manuscripts in the mails requires considerable writing. I have never known a full-time free-lance writer who made a go of his profession unless he had formulated some sort of working schedule. One man may work a certain number of hours a day; another may work on a daily wordage basis, while still another may consider basically the money he potentially makes as the measuring-stick for his daily production. Whatever the yard-stick, having a wife who nags when you slow down is helpful if not essential.

Personally, I work strictly on a word basis. I have a quota of two thousand words a day, 25 days a month. If a month has more than 25 working days in it, theoretic-

cally I have a holiday. Actually, I usually am so far behind with my quota that I must work those spare days and some Sundays to maintain my daily average.

When I first started writing my quota was three thousand words a day or 75,000 words a month; but in those days editors were not so temperamental about what they wanted and it was possible to peddle quite a great deal of tripe. Some people who read my stuff today maintain that this same situation still exists.

At any rate, both fiction and articles must be tighter and better-written today, and it takes me longer now to obtain material for and write two thousand words than it required 20 years ago for three thousand. Fortunately, two thousand words today sell for approximately four times as much as three thousand words brought twenty years ago, even from the same basic markets.

Living in a small town, I naturally am handicapped for lack of writing material at hand, but fortunately my wife and I like to travel, so we spend about 75 per cent of our time roaming around the country wherever we please and writing about the things that attract us. Fortunately, also, enough attractions are evident to enable me to turn out my two thousand words daily.

Purposely I have refrained from taking on any definite commitments which require that I write a certain amount each month for anyone. I could make more money by lining up with several publications on a sort of retainer basis, whereby I would supply an agreed number of manuscripts monthly in return for a specific check. A friend of mine made \$16,400 last year on that basis.

To me, such an arrangement robs freelancing of some of its glitter. The more

commitments, the more the writer must conform to the month-to-month orders of his editors. He ceases to be purely a freelance.

We travel wherever we please, remain as long as we wish. There is something to write about wherever we go. As an indication of the material available for manuscripts, I have sold 38 articles based on subjects in my present hometown. Its population is less than nine thousand. For general purposes of estimating the material in the average community, however, I figure one good story for every one thousand people. By scraping, obviously the writer may dig up much more than that.

Of my fifty thousand words monthly, roughly 70 per cent are non-fiction, the remainder fiction—mainly for juvenile, religious and adventure magazines. I avoid concentrating in any one field of publishing or type of writing, which may be wrong but it's safe. I knew a writer who, a few years ago, made over \$20,000 writing western pulp fiction. Today he holds a job which pays a modest weekly stipend. The pulps underwent a near-fatal slump and carried all the writers who depended on them down with them.

Specialization short-cuts the building of a reputation as an authoritative writer and it makes money; but woe be the specialist who puts all his words in the same publishing basket, when the field of his specialization undergoes a slump, as most publication groups do at one time or another.

Give me variety. It may not build a name for the writer but it keeps him popular at the corner grocer and may even earn a pleasant nod from the banker, not to mention his personal popularity at his own fireside.