

Freelance Writing: Some Tips

by Fiona Gibson

This briefing sheet supported Fiona Gibson's contribution to the breakout session, Ever thought about ... business writing, literature development or freelance journalism?, at **Turning the Page – Next Steps for Scotland's Creative Writing Postgraduates** which was held at Sandeman House, Edinburgh on Saturday 5 December 2009. Turning the Page was hosted by literature training in partnership with Scottish Book Trust and Cultural Enterprise Office with funding from the Scottish Arts Council.

About the author

Fiona Gibson grew up in a tiny Yorkshire village called Goose Eye. Desperate to escape country life, she left school at seventeen for her dream job - working on Jackie magazine in Dundee. This involved writing horoscopes (which she made up) and readers' true life experiences (which, er, she made up). Fiona spent her twenties in London, editing more! magazine, Just Seventeen and Bliss, before relocating to Lanarkshire, Scotland with her husband, their twin toddlers and baby daughter. In the throes of early motherhood, she decided to write a novel, *Babyface*, followed by three more novels for Hodder. Her latest, *Mummy Said the F-word*, reached the top ten in hardback. For the past thirteen years, Fiona has worked as a freelance writer, contributing to Red magazine, Marie Claire, the Observer, Zest, Prima, Mother & Baby and the Telegraph. She also writes a weekly column chronicling her family life for the Sunday Herald. When she's not writing she loves to run, cycle, draw, play tenor sax and sink into a deep bath with the door locked. <http://www.fionagibson.com/>

Getting Started

I wouldn't say it's easy to make a living as a freelance writer. But it is possible. It is also hugely enjoyable. When I talk to other freelancers about what they love about the job, they always talk about the variety, the flexibility and satisfaction of organising their own workload and timetable. So it's worth persevering – but you have to be very proactive and disciplined about it. Especially now, with more freelancers on the market, all touting for work – people who may, until recently, have been employed by magazines and newspapers. Plus, with publications having less money to spend on commissioning, there is less work to go around.

All the more reason to be extremely focused and businesslike about it. Here are some points which helped me to get started when I went freelance thirteen years ago, and which still help to keep me going now.

Who shall I write for?

You have to know not only the market and the kind of writing you are good at – but the sort of writing you can do which will *sell*.

Spend time prowling in the newsagents. Gain a good understanding of the market by studying magazines in your area of interest, plus the trade press such as Press Gazette. Know which magazines are on the up, which have a new editor and have been recently revamped. You might think you know a publication – but has it changed recently? Been re-launched to attract a different readership? Conduct your research as thoroughly as you can. This will give you a better feel for what commissioning editors are looking for right now.

While doing this, don't limit yourself to too narrow a field. For example: earlier this year I needed to boost my freelance work. I was writing pieces for general interest women's monthly magazines, but wanted more work so I bought all the health-focused monthly magazines such as Top Sante and Zest, who commissioned me to write a feature. I have also done the odd piece for homes and interiors magazines which has helped to broaden my market. So try to think laterally. You don't have to be an expert to write for a specialist magazine. I know virtually zero about interior décor (or health, for that matter!).

So ask yourself:

- **Which publications do I enjoy reading?** It makes sense to write the piece you would read for pleasure as you will understand what the reader wants from it. For instance, I read women's magazines so that's what I feel I understand. I would be unlikely to come up with a good idea for Caged and Aviary Birds magazine.
- **Can I broaden my target publications?** Don't be too specific. You may be a film buff but targeting, say, only film magazines will limit you too much. Targeting film, music and men's general lifestyle magazine opens up more possibilities. It also forces you to be versatile, keeps you on your toes and makes your writing life more fun and interesting.
- **Do I understand the readers of my chosen publications?** This is essential. Do some research if you need to. Look at the publications' websites (these often have info for advertisers – a handy way to find out the readership profile in terms of age, income etc). Also read their letters pages. All this helps you to tune in to what the reader wants, which in turn will help you to come up with compelling feature ideas.
- **Avoid the cynical approach.** I'm sure some people think, 'These celebrity magazines are all a pile of tosh but I'll have a shot at writing for them for the money.' The danger is that cynicism shows through in your writing and can come across as patronising. The people who write for these magazines – any publications in fact – generally enjoy them and have a real affection for them.

A note on competitors

This shouldn't be a problem when you're starting out. But as you start working for more publications, bear in mind that most editors don't like you working for a direct competitor. For instance, because I work for Red, I can't work for She. As I work for John Lewis's customer magazine, I shouldn't work for Marks & Spencer. It's usually fine, and understandable – if everyone used the same pool of writers, all the magazines in that sector would have a similar voice. Magazines like to think they have 'their' writers. I know it makes it even harder to carve out a living. That's why you need to widen your target market and contact magazines/newspapers in as many different sectors as you can.

Submitting ideas

I know who I want to write for. What next?

Work up some ideas which you truly feel will be perfect for your chosen publication(s). Be realistic in your expectations; if you have no published pieces to show, they are unlikely to commission a 2,000 word main story. Suggest shorter features which will give the magazine a chance to test you out. If you have examples of previously published work, send them in with your ideas to show your writing style. You can email these as attachments with your features ideas. Don't send reams and reams – no one has time to read them. Two or three published pieces is plenty.

If you don't have any previously published work, you can always offer to write your first piece 'on spec.' This means that, if they decide it's not right for them, they don't have to pay you a 'kill fee' (usually half the fee you would have received had it been published). It's a way of offering your services on a no-risk basis.

When submitting ideas, make sure you always...

- Address the person by name (usually the features editor or commissioning editor, although on smaller publications the editor or deputy might commission copy).
- Keep a copy of your ideas on file. If they are not snapped up, you might want to re-work them and submit them elsewhere.
- Sum up your feature idea with a self-explanatory title (no point in agonising over a clever one as they will invariably write their own). Try to write it in the style of the piece – for instance, if it's a light and humorous piece, then convey that tone in your synopsis. Don't be too po-faced or formal.
- Sum up your idea concisely, explaining which elements you would include - experts' views, case studies, statistics etc. - and say what you feel the reader would get out of your feature. Sell it with enthusiasm.

- It's a good sign if you can sum up your feature idea in a nutshell. That way, the commissioning editor will instantly know what it's about too.

Most importantly... make sure you know the publication really well. Read several consecutive issues if possible to ensure that you are making the kind of pitch they are likely to go for. It means you are less likely to be met with: 'Actually, we did that last month.' Or a sniffy, 'Actually, we don't do travel pieces.'

Most common mistakes beginners make

- **Pitching by phone.** I do think it's better to email rather than use snail mail or phone. It's instant – but it still gives the features editor time to mull your idea over, rather having it thrust at them down the phone. Plus, it doesn't interrupt their day like a phonecall does. Don't ask to come in and see them or to meet for coffee/lunch – they don't have the time.
- **Pitching an idea which is completely wrong for the publication.** This happens all the time and it irritates commissioning editors no end, who like to think that would-be freelancers have studied their publication in depth. Flatter them – show them you have.
- **Sending too many ideas at once.** Too mind-boggling for the features ed. Two or three at the most is ideal. Nothing wrong with sending just one.
- **Sending generic ideas which have clearly been doing the rounds for some months.** They even smell dusty. It's the equivalent of receiving a soap on a rope for Christmas which you know has been languishing in a gift drawer since 1972.

To give yourself an edge:

- Think about what you can offer a publication that no other writer can. A personal experience? Expertise in a certain field? Your unique take on a subject?
- Try to avoid well-trodden ground. Features editors want originality – ideas which will grab their readers and boost sales.
- Use any contact or connection you have – however tenuous – as it may give you an 'in' with your chosen publication.
- Show yourself to be a keen reader and/or fan of the publication. If you have read every issue since its launch, then say so. They will be flattered and warm to you instantly.

A note on work experience

Consider doing an internship at a magazine or newspaper. It will show you the ropes and, just as importantly if you want to go freelance, give you vital contacts. Features editors are more likely to commission someone they 'know', however vaguely, than a complete stranger. A lot of interns I have worked with have ended up as paid staff on magazines, or freelance writers – one even became the editor.

Please, please, don't do any of these:

- Don't stamp 'copyright' over everything you send in. Some freelancers worry that people on magazines will 'steal their ideas.' They won't – everyone on the magazine has plenty of ideas. Even if you truly believe they will, it's not possible to copyright ideas so there is no point in stamping 'Copyright John Higgins' all over them. They will just laugh.
- Try not to take it personally if you don't get commissioned. I worked on the staff of teenage and women's magazines for fifteen years and often encountered freelance writers who would be angry if I wouldn't commission their idea. Sometimes they would accuse me of 'not giving them a chance.' Magazines are usually pretty thinly staffed, so everyone is very busy – even more so in this past year or so. On the whole, they are not in the business of giving people chances or nurturing writers. They just want to get their magazine out on time.

When you get commissioned

You will probably be sent a copyright waiver form which means that the publication buy all rights and can syndicate your work to other mags/newspapers – you will receive a share of the proceeds. (As far as I can see, this hardly ever happens). Don't get all cut up about this – it's the way big publishers have worked for decades. There is no point in demanding a different sort of contract, or announcing that you want legal advice. They just won't use you, especially if you haven't worked for them before.

Apart from the Sunday Herald and DC Thomson (who only buy first British rights, then pay you again if they re-use your piece), every magazine I work for insists on buying all rights. They won't pay your invoice until you have signed and returned your form. I'm sure it's different if you are a big name, famous writer – then you would retain your copyright. But most jobbing freelancers have to accept that this is how publishers work and not get all hoity about it.

Should I get an agent?

No need if you'll be writing solely for newspapers and magazines. No commissioning editors I know of expect to deal with agents – they want to talk to the writer direct. Agents charge around 15% commission and tend to deal with books, film scripts and other longer works. In fact most agents won't take on writers who are working solely in journalism as the amounts concerned are too fiddly for them to deal with. Anyway – you don't need one!

A note on pay

Every publication has its going rate. Sometimes you are paid by the word, sometimes a flat fee depending on how many pages your feature will take up. If you really must, you can try to negotiate upwards but it will put them off you if you're starting out. Sometimes they will pay a little extra if you have had to do a mammoth amount of research.

Re-writes and 'tinkering'

Often, after you have submitted your piece, it will be sent back to you for a little light 'tinkering'. Don't freak out. About half the pieces I write come back for some kind of surgery – either minor or major. Of course, it's hideously dull if your feature keeps bouncing back for further tweaks – you just want your cheque and to get on with the next one. However, it's better to seem amiable and professional at this stage so you gain a reputation of being 'good to work with'. Then they will commission you again and you'll build up a relationship – becoming one of 'their' writers. They will probably still ask for re-writes, though!

Deadlines

You want to be known as a great feature writer – but it's just as important to be professional and reliable too. I usually put a 'fake' deadline in my diary two or three days before the actual one, in case of a minor disaster (sick children, computer blowing up etc.). Obviously, sometimes you have to work right up to the deadline, and I don't mind that occasionally. Burning the midnight oil now and again gets the adrenalin going – I quite enjoy the thrill of it.

Don't expect glowing appreciation for your feature. Sometimes, you might be lucky to receive a quick two-word email as thanks – but often there's just a big fat silence. It will just appear in print, and you'll be paid – so you'll know it was a job well done.

Finally, some other things that help me:

- Having a pinboard in my workroom covered with notes and cuttings that are relevant to the features I'm writing.
- Planning what I want to achieve every day – people to pitch to, pieces to research and write – so that time doesn't just fritter away.
- Getting out for a run/cycle to shake off that bleary chained-to-the-computer feeling.
- Reading a feature aloud (when no one else is at home).
- Keeping all my feature ideas on a file on the PC with notes and dates – so I know who I've sent them to and when. After a few weeks I might refresh them and send them to another, similar publication.

Find a writing buddy

This past year has been tough for freelancers. About a year ago, a close friend came up from London – we are both freelance writers and tend to talk endlessly about work. This time, we decided to set up our own mini-support system – our Monday Missives. So every Monday morning we email each other, detailing what we have managed to achieve during the previous week and what we aim to get done in the forthcoming one. There is something about having to report to a friend, and be accountable, that's incredibly motivating. We have also shared contacts and run half-baked ideas past each other. Sometimes, I'll have an idea but don't know who it's right for, and my freelance buddy can offer an objective view. We also commiserate when our ideas are rejected... but mostly it's all very positive, and has made me a lot more driven in the last year. Freelancing can be a lonely business so I'd really recommend this.

PS. Failing that, you could set up your own freelancers' support group on Facebook – but be wary of FB's horribly distracting tendencies. As one of my FB friends keeps messaging me: 'Get on with your work...'

Some useful links

National Union of Journalists (see freelance section for resources, directory etc.) www.nuj.org.uk
NUJ Freelance Fees Guide <http://www.londonfreelance.org/feesguide/index.php>

© Fiona Gibson
December 2009

