



# 10 Things I Wish Someone Had Told Me About Writing



*Many years ago I set out to support myself as a freelance writer. I didn't know any other freelance writers, so I was kind of winging it. Here are the top 10 things I wish someone had told me before I started.*

## **1) Set specific goals**

Saying "I will publish something in a magazine," is not setting a specific goal. Rather, decide to publish a specific article or type of piece in a targeted publication, within a certain timeframe. Set this goal after researching the target. If you aspire to write book reviews (a great way to get clips and to exercise your fiction critiquing muscles), find out which editor handles book reviews at the publication. Find out if they use freelance work. Ask questions about format, length, style, etc., and try to understand the editor's personal preferences. I work with an editor who is extremely easygoing, as long as her reviewers hold to one rule...only pick up books on Monday mornings between 10 am and noon. Finding out this stuff will allow you to set goals that are achievable.

## **2) Expand your writing ability.**

If you only write fiction, and only try to publish fiction, it may be a long time before you see your name in print. An editor likes to see clips, even if they are only peripherally related to what you will do for him or her...it lets them see someone has taken a chance on you before, and that you have delivered. So, write an op-ed, a letter to the editor, find out if any local non-profit organizations need newsletter articles...even if you have to practically give your skills away, the clips you receive in return are invaluable.

## **3) Take yourself seriously.**

This doesn't mean be arrogant about your skill. Rather, work as if your goal will be achieved, and do everything within your power to achieve it, to include setting regular work hours, printing business cards if necessary, and learning not to look away, drop your voice or otherwise be embarrassed or apologetic when you describe yourself as a writer. If you don't take yourself seriously, no one else will.

## **4) Learn that your way is not always the right way.**

I have gotten referral jobs, where one editor has referred another to me, because I am an "easy edit." This doesn't mean that you should not be vested in your work, but that you should realize that others can sometimes see our work more clearly than we ourselves can, and that we need to listen to them (especially if they are paying), and know the difference between fighting for your word preference and fighting for clarity or correctness. By the same token, editors themselves are not always right, and ought to listen to you if you have a valid point about a change they made...don't be afraid to stand up for your work, as long as it is for the right reason.

## **5) Family members are not good editors.**

Don't depend on your friends or family to edit your work, unless you know they are prepared to be brutally honest with you. An editor who does nothing more than pat you on the back and give you an ego boost is not an

editor that will help you. Better to form a loose/reciprocating arrangement with another writer who you trust, and work on each other's stuff --honestly.

### **6) Good enough is never good enough.**

Never settle for "good enough," when you are putting together a piece, whether fiction or non. If you think that something is merely "good enough," chances are you have not spent enough time on it. Your work needs to be as perfect as is humanly possible before an editor sees it. For every error or weak spot you are aware of, a good editor will probably find two (at least). By the same token, do not over edit. There is a point when a piece is "done." That means you cannot find any errors, no one else can find errors, and you're down to tinkering with word choice and tweaking sentence structure. At this point, you are too close to your own work to see it objectively. If you over edit, you may ruin a great piece. Stop.

Set it aside. If you have any doubts, leave it alone for a few days then give it one last pass. Then no more.

### **7) Understand the business of writing.**

If you understand the creative side, but have no handle on the business side of writing, you will undervalue or overvalue your time/work, you will sound apologetic every time you give a quote, you won't know if an editor is offering you a fair price for your work. Even fiction writers need to know what to expect by way of compensation in any given market. If you are writing a novel, a book publisher recently told me that few authors understand how books are marketed, and that publishing houses need authors who are a part of the sales team, not sitting in an ivory tower waiting to sell a million copies.

### **8) Learn everything again.**

Realize that you can always learn more about any given subject. There is no point at which you can say I know all there is to know about X type of writing. Continue to study and hone your craft. Read, read, read, and learn to read as a writer, not just a reader. You might find you no longer will tolerate many stories/articles/books -- but that's a good thing...it means you have learned to read with a critical eye, and that you are learning more and more.

### **9) Formalize your procedures.**

If you write articles, realize what routine works best for you, then stick to it, while retaining the ability to be flexible. I have a checklist for press releases, and even though I practically know the list by heart, I still run down it before sending a release out for client approval. Why? Because I get involved in deadlines, rush, and forget stuff. Formal procedures, even if just sticking to scheduled writing time, or lining your pens and paper up just so, or journaling, or running through a checklist; all these legitimize your work, help you take it more seriously, and streamline some of the less fun parts of writing.

### **10) Learn to "log line."**

In screenwriting, writers have to describe projects with log lines, a one or two line sentence that fully captures the entirety of their projects. Learn to do this for all your projects. Editors and agents need you to express yourself clearly and concisely. Why? It means that you, yourself, have a full understanding of what you are doing. When you ask someone what a project entails, and they fumble for words, it means they are not all that sure themselves what they are doing ( and even if they are, it leaves the listener with that impression). Summing up is a necessary part of the pitch process, and if you want to continue marketing yourself as a writer, you'd better be fully prepared to pitch.



Deb Courtney-Bertha is the author of Grammar Girl and active in the writing community. Visit her website at <http://www.debcourtney.com>