



Beyond the Book



A Resource on Writing and Publishing from Copyright Clearance Center

beyondthebook.com

Portrait of a Freelancer

Freelance writers cherish their independence, but freedom from the shackles of a nine-to-five job comes with a price — financial instability.

According to a survey that was discussed during a recent Copyright Clearance Center teleconference about freelance writers and their careers, most freelancers are women and make less than \$50,000 a year. The teleconference spotlighted how freelancers typically view their work, and offered a chance for writers who called in to air their gripes as well as to hear suggestions about some of the thorniest problems facing them.

“The writing skills you develop in journalism are prized in the commercial sector...”

Christopher Kenneally hosted the conference call symposium. Kenneally, himself a freelancer for 15 years, is Director of Author & Creator Relations at Copyright Clearance Center of Danvers, Massachusetts, a not-for-profit organization that supports copyright compliance and offers educational programs for writers.

“As I like to say, I ate what I killed,” Kenneally commented about his years as a freelancer for the *New York Times* and other publications. Over the years, “It always seemed to get harder rather than easier.”

Part of Copyright Clearance Center’s *Beyond the Book* series on writing and publishing, the teleconference focused on a 2004 survey of more than 500 writers by **Doresa Banning**, who conducted the research during her master’s program in journalism at the University of Nevada. Banning, a guest expert on the teleconference, is a longtime freelancer and an editor at a Montana literary and arts magazine.

“The average freelancer is about 49 years old, white, female, married, with at least one child, and highly educated,” said Banning. One myth the survey exploded is that female freelancers tend to

be stay-at-home moms. In fact, “the average age of the children the respondents had was in the 20s,” said Banning. “These are mature people, mature professionals.”



*Doresa Banning,
Freelance Writer*

Banning found that most freelancers in her survey live in or near the major centers of media and business: predominantly the mid-Atlantic states (the New York area), the West (Los Angeles and San Francisco), and New England, followed by the Midwest and the South. One participant in the teleconference said that she had moved from Madison, Wisconsin to Chicago, just to be near potential clients.

Most freelancers have left secure jobs in magazines, newspapers, or public relations. According to Banning, more than 90 percent considered freelancing a long-term career.

Kenneally zeroed in on what the survey reveals about the mindset of the freelancer. “There were an overwhelming number of people who said that despite the stress and the strain and the job pressures, and the work load fluctuations, and getting people to pay you, they were pretty committed to this career,” he said.

Robert Garrett, a Boston freelancer for 20 years, was a guest on the teleconference who described himself as a “happy camper” through much of his career. The autonomy and flexibility of freelancing, he said, has given him the creative freedom to author and edit several books and to choose the type of assignments he wanted in journalism.

And yet, at age 56, Garrett said he is now actively looking for a full-time job and the security of a regular paycheck. During the last few years, he said, his freelance business suffered as he devoted his attention to caring for an elderly parent and to renovating and selling the family house.

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“I think of other freelancers who have had a divorce or sick kids,” Garrett explained. When freelancing, “You don’t have the safety net that there is on a regular job, because when your focus goes away from keeping all these different saucers in the air, your clients basically just turn elsewhere.”

Even so, Garrett declared that if a permanent job did not materialize soon, he was prepared to build up his freelance business again.

“The key is to get at least one steady, reliable client as an anchor,” he said after the teleconference. “The writing skills you develop in journalism are prized in the commercial sector. One strategy is to do business writing, and get the higher pay rate working part-time for one or more companies, doing newsletters, market research, public relations, whatever it takes – and to use that type of work to fund your lower-paying but more creative writing. It’s a difficult balancing act, but I have done OK in the past.”

The low rate of pay for freelance journalism is a top concern that came to the forefront both in the survey and the teleconference. While a dollar-per-word is a coveted rate that experienced writers seek, the pay is often lower than that.

Garrett pointed out that it isn’t unusual to make at least \$300 a day doing corporate writing. By contrast, the Boston Globe paid him about that amount for an assignment that took the better part of a week.

Editors came in for a lambasting during the teleconference. Responding to a caller, Banning cited the response of freelancers in her survey who depicted editors as “everything from unresponsive, incompetent, fickle, self-centered, difficult and unreasonable to unprincipled.”

During a period when Kenneally’s stories were “sailing through the *New York Times*,” he encountered an editor at another publication who appeared to feel that her job was to make freelancers endlessly rewrite stories. “If you’re being paid a dollar a word and you’re rewriting the story four times, it really gets down to a quarter a word,” he said.

While freelancers often feel reluctant to say no to any assignment, Kenneally’s advice is to avoid such editors. “The bottom line is that freelancing is a business.”

Banning’s survey shows that query letters were by far the primary way freelancers obtain work. The second way was to be assigned by an editor they already had a relationship with, and third was by word-of-mouth and networking.

Email queries have clearly made life easier for freelancers. Yet the host of the teleconference and his two guests agreed that cultivating an ongoing relationship with an editor was crucial to success. The goal, said Kenneally, is to be “treated as a colleague rather than some sort of vendor. You want to have that collegial relationship.”

Garrett noted that editors are swamped by “tons of emails.” Meeting an editor, he said, visiting him or her at the office, can be a more productive way to develop a solid relationship. “The human touch is still in vogue.”

Success Takes Work – And Time

- Novice writers would do well to gain experience “in some sort of media job to understand how the industry works,” said Banning. Banning herself spent two years on staff at a newspaper before going freelance.
- One way to break into corporate writing is to freelance for a business journal and give your card to people you interview for articles. If you do a professional job on assignments, it allows you to showcase your skills—and one day possibly get work from your contacts.
- The Web has opened a new market for selling, and reselling, articles. Freelancers should be aware of their rights in contracts they sign with any publication. “In some contracts, the rights will revert to you after a certain period of time, a week or 30 days,” said Kenneally.
- *Featurewell.com* is a Web-based organization that takes a “reasonable” fee for helping writers resell their work.

Copyright Clearance Center, as the world’s largest not-for-profit provider of copyright compliance solutions, is committed to supporting compliance through a wide range of innovative licensing services and comprehensive educational programs. ***Beyond the Book*** is our educational program connecting authors, publishers, and others with experts on the latest business issues facing today’s dynamic information content industry — from initial research to final publication and beyond.