



How to succeed in business writing

Our new columnist, an expert copywriter, lists 8 money-making strategies

MOST AMERICANS haven't heard of me or read anything I've written. I've never made the bestseller list or talk-show circuit. Neither *Esquire* nor *Playboy* has run an interview with me. Madonna isn't a fan of my work, and Oprah has no intention of recommending me to her book-club members. In that way, I'm a lot like most writers. A lot like many other subscribers to *The Writer*. Perhaps a lot like you.

But there's one thing that's different. And that's the fact that, unlike the average journeyman writer, I've earned a six-figure income as a freelance business writer for 24 consecutive years. I tell you this not to brag but to convince you that my advice on making more money as a freelance writer is worth paying attention to. After all, why would you listen to tips on increasing your writing income from someone who earns less than you do?

In this new bimonthly column for *The Writer*, I want to show you how I make a more-than-respectable income from freelance writing—and more important, how you can, too. I intend to share with you methods by which ordinary freelance writers—not superstars, not literary geniuses, and not people whose work hits it big largely based on luck—can earn an income even a lawyer, dentist or doctor might envy.

In this first installment, we start with broad principles and big ideas: the methods, attitudes and actions that can help you create a steady income as a freelance business writer. You'll handle a variety of assignments—everything from annual reports to Web content—for corporations and small businesses, both local and national. And you'll have

fun doing it, too.

OK. Here are the 8 most important things I know about making great money as a writer based on more than a quarter century in the trade.

Ditch the poverty mentality. When I've told people that I am a freelance writer, nearly everyone I've met—including other writers!—has assumed that I am just scraping by and must be supported by a working spouse.

Sometime in the past, the cliché of a writer starving in a cold garret while banging away at his great American novel became a romantic image, which many writers and nonwriters alike embraced. But there is nothing romantic about earning slave wages or not having enough money to pay the bills.

When you earn through your writing double or triple what your next-door neighbors make in their 9-to-5 jobs, it's a wonderfully liberating feeling. Not only are you doing what you want, unlike them, but you are also getting paid handsomely to do it.

My late father always told me money is unimportant, but I disagree. My colleague, writer Ted Nicholas, says there are four things required for a happy life: good health, relationships, a rewarding career and money.

Ted is right: Money is extremely important. People who don't have money and don't make much money spend an inordinate amount of time thinking and worrying about money, which distracts you from your writing.

Don't count on luck, because most of us never win the lottery. Lots of

writers daydream about becoming the next Stephen King or J.K. Rowling. But it rarely happens.

Becoming a wealthy writer by having your book zoom to the top of the best-seller lists is like playing the lottery. Yes, it can make you rich. But the chances of your winning are about on par with the chance that Jupiter will crash into the sun today.

A more sensible strategy for writers who want to earn above-average writing incomes is to think of freelance writing as a business, not as a game or as a lottery.

The average person desiring a financially comfortable life does not, if she is intelligent, make buying lottery tickets her job or profession. Yet that is essentially what you are doing when you pin all your hopes or dreams on your unpublished novel or unsold screenplay, without having something to fall back upon.

The realistic person aspiring to material wealth and comfort has a plan: She either gets a well-paying job or starts a small business. In business writing, you are essentially a one-person company

whose service is writing. You sell that service to a roster of clients and earn a handsome living doing so. It's regular work, and done right, it can be incredibly lucrative.

Have an income goal and a plan for achieving it. Your income goal should not be vague—"to be rich" or "to make a lot of money." You should have a specific dollar figure as your target annual income.

How much should that target figure

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be? Something that you can realistically hope to attain in a few years—high enough to be ambitious but not so high as to be discouraging.

Figure out how much money you need to live comfortably and make double that amount a starting point for setting your income goal. If your expenses are \$40,000 a year, your writing business should gross at least \$80,000 annually. That's an extremely ambitious goal for traditional freelance writers, but a modest and achievable goal for freelance business writers; a recent survey by copywriter Chris Marlow (www.freelancersbusinessstore.com) shows that more than one out of five freelance copywriters earns an income of \$100,000 or more a year.

Become obsessive about your personal productivity. Dentists have a saying: If you're not drilling and filling, you're not billing. Dentists, highly paid though they may be, are hourly laborers who only get money when they are working with clients.

With the exception of royalties and other passive income (I'll get to that next), we writers, like dentists, are also laborers who get paid only when we work. Therefore, the more writing you do for your clients, the more money you earn (assuming a consistent level of quality in your work). Top-earning writers, with rare exception, got that way because they use their time to maximum advantage. Double your output, and you can double your income.

Generate passive income. Writing is labor-intensive, and when you are a freelancer, you are the one laboring. To reduce your workload to a reasonable level while maintaining a high income is more easily attained when you have some passive income.

Passive income is money you earn from something you have already written, not by writing more. For writers, sources of passive income can include book royalties, performance-based incentives (e.g., you get a percentage of

the increased sales the client realizes from your marketing campaign) or product sales (e.g., writing and selling e-books online).

Know something and become known for knowing it. The late Paul Sarnoff, a prolific book and newsletter writer specializing in gold, once told me that if you have specialized knowledge you will never go broke.

Too many writers know only about writing. Your earnings will improve if you also master a subject, niche, industry or technology to write about.

Beginning writers ask me whether they should study journalism, English literature or communications in college. I suggest they study geology, economics, biochemistry or another subject they can make a profitable living writing about for business clients. For instance, a degree in biochemistry and deep knowledge of the field can help make you an in-demand freelance writer for pharmaceuticals, an extremely lucrative and large business-writing niche.

Let lucrative writing pursuits finance literary ones. It seems that, unfortunately, the fun and easy writing projects are mostly low-pay or no-pay; while the difficult and sometimes challenging writing projects are the ones that pay the highest rates.

If all you do is the low-paying, "fun" projects, your writing income will remain modest. My suggestion is a balance. Do some business writing for clients to pay the bills. Use the money from these jobs to support your avocation of writing plays, poems, short stories or novels. My rule of thumb is an 80-to-20 ratio of business freelancing to literary writing, because it keeps your writing fresh and your finances flush.

Have fun every day. There are many professions more lucrative than freelance writing. For instance, many free-

lance writers consider \$100,000 a year as the goal to strive for, the dollar figure that means they are really making it as a writer. But on Wall Street, a stockbroker who earns \$100,000 a year in commission is nothing special, and is likely at the bottom of his office in terms of production.

I never tell people to go into freelance writing as a way to make big money. If money is of primary importance to you, and you don't much care what you do to earn it, then be an orthodontist, investment banker, accountant or attorney.

But for some of us, we can't imagine doing anything else except writing.

The problem is that traditional freelance writing—articles and books—usually doesn't pay very well. By freelancing for business clients, and pursuing the other commercial-writing opportunities we will explore in this column, you can have the best of both worlds. You can spend your day writing, and you can get paid handsomely for doing it.

OK. These eight suggestions lay a broad framework for doubling or tripling your freelance-writing income this year. In my next column, we'll delve into the specific ways to make your dreams of making a steady income as a freelance writer come true. Whether your goal is to quit your day job and become a full-time freelancer or just make a nice spare-time income to pay for that new boat or vacation home, I'm here to help you increase your writing revenues this year.

Robert W. Bly

Robert W. Bly is the author of more than 70 books, including *Secrets of a Freelance Writer*. He has written copy for more than 100 clients including Network Solutions, ITT Fluid Technology and Intuit. He also taught business-to-business copywriting and technical writing at New York University. Web: www.bly.com; e-mail: rwblly@bly.com.

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