



Writing copy for the Web

What you should know about a variety of online freelance assignments

NOTHING HAS been more of a mixed bag for writers than the World Wide Web. On the one hand, the Internet has undergone explosive growth as a marketing and communications channel. This growth has created a huge demand for freelance business writers to write copy for the Web—from Web sites and banner ads to ghostwriting e-newsletters and blogs for corporate clients.

On the other hand, the transition from printed page to screen as a primary publishing medium has made writing somewhat less critical and therefore less valued. When you're spending \$40,000 to print this year's annual report, you take pains to make sure the writing sparkles. But when you're putting up a Web site in a hurry to meet a tight deadline, you don't worry so much about dotting every *i* and crossing every *t*, because you can go back and fix it later.

So finding the most lucrative online writing assignments is tricky. Some writing projects that pay well offline, like articles, are strictly a minimum-wage deal online. Other projects, like landing pages (I'll explain in a minute), can pay eye-popping rates.

Writing business Web sites

Smaller companies may ask you to help them create a small Web site from scratch. If they're a local mom-and-pop business, budgets are likely to be limited. But a well-heeled small business that recognizes the importance of having strong copy on their Web site might be willing to pay a few thousand dollars to have you write a small Web site of half a dozen pages or so.

You can charge more for your Web copy when you write search-engine-

optimized (SEO) copy. This mainly involves the strategic use of keywords in your text, the purpose of which is to raise the page's ranking in Google or another search engine. Your client might also ask you to help him determine which keywords to optimize his site for, which you can do with tools like www.spacky.com and www.wordtracker.com.

According to freelancer Ed Gandia, writers can charge \$500 to \$800 per page for SEO copy. That includes the copy itself, title tag, description tag, optimized headers and keyword research. Of course, this fee range assumes that there are multiple pages to write. If you are only writing the home page and perhaps one or two other key pages, the per-page fee goes up.

Heather Lloyd-Martin, CEO of Success-Works, says clients pay \$500 to \$1,500, or even \$2,500, per Web page for search-engine-optimized copy. The high end of the fee range is reserved for primary pages on the Web site, such as the home page or "About the Company" page. Fortune 500 companies and other large corporations are the most likely to have the budgets to pay top dollar for Web copy.

Another common online writing request from clients is asking you to handle their pay-per-click (PPC) ad campaigns, particularly using Google AdWords. These are brief online ads in which the copy length is strictly limited: a headline of 25 characters, two lines of body copy with 35 characters each, and a URL link of up to 35 characters.

It's difficult to charge high prices for extremely short copy, so your fee for writing three to five PPC ads might be

\$500 to \$1,000 for the series. If you handle the logistics of managing the ad campaign on Google for your client, you can charge up to \$3,000 and perhaps, on top of that, a commission equal to 10 percent of the "ad spend" (the amount of money the client pays Google).

Landing the top Web assignment

In my own copywriting business, the top-paying Web copywriting assignment I handle is writing "landing pages." A landing page is a long-copy sales letter posted on the Web. Its purpose is to sell a product directly from the Web, usually some kind of information product (e.g., an e-book or video training program).

The real money for writers in e-books is not in ghostwriting them for clients; it is in writing them for yourself and marketing them online.

The success of landing-page copy is measured as the "conversion rate"—the percentage of visitors to the landing page who order the product. The conversion rate can range from 1 percent to 15 percent or more. The higher the conversion rate, the more orders the landing page generates, and the more money your client makes with your copy.

Even a beginning copywriter can charge \$1,000 to \$3,000 or more to write a landing page. Experienced pros get anywhere from \$5,000 to as much as \$10,000, and some also collect a small percentage of revenues generated.

For free tips on how to maximize conversion rates on the landing pages you write, visit my Web site www.thelandingpageguru.com. You can also get my landing page seminar on video at



Business Freelancing

www.writewinninglandingpages.com, which you may want to spend some time reviewing, since it's a good example of how to write an effective landing page selling an information product.

Clients who hire you to write their landing pages may also ask you to write e-mail marketing messages to drive traffic to those landing pages. Take a look at their previous e-mails before giving a price quote. Some marketers, myself included, use short "teaser" e-mails of only a few paragraphs to drive visitors to the long-copy landing page. You might charge \$500 to write a teaser e-mail. Other companies like long copy in their e-mails, and these can go for \$1,000 or more per e-mail message.

The worst-paying project

The worst-paying online writing assignment is writing articles for Internet marketers and other businesses with Web sites. An Internet article is typically shorter than a magazine article—usually no more than 300 words.

Why do businesses need articles? The articles that run in their e-newsletters and that they submit to article directories contain links back to the company's Web site, so they help drive traffic to that site. In addition, the more content you have on your Web site, the higher your Web site will rank in search engines. Therefore, companies routinely hire writers to write articles, also called "content," for their Web sites.

Unfortunately, with the advent of www.elance.com, www.guru.com, and other job sites for freelancers, competition among writers at the lower level of the craft has become fierce, and writing articles for the Internet has largely turned into a commodity service. There are some writers on Elance, usually living in India or other places with plentiful cheap labor, that charge as little as \$5 to write a 300-word article. Yes, these articles are pretty bad. But many small businesses either can't tell the difference or don't care. So unfortunately, there is

little money to be made in writing online articles.

Is there an e-book in your future?

In the lingo of Internet marketing, an e-book is content published as a downloadable PDF file. Many freelance writers are attracted to the idea of writing e-books, so let's look at what's involved. To begin with, e-books are much shorter than traditional books, yet sell for higher prices. While a 200-page trade paperback might be 80,000 words, a 50-page e-book is about 15,000 words.

Most Internet marketers who hire freelance writers to write e-books for them pay anywhere from \$300 to \$900 per project. It is almost always a work-for-hire arrangement: The e-book is copyrighted in the client's name, and he—not you—owns all the rights.

However, the real money for writers in e-books is not in ghostwriting them for clients; it is in writing them for yourself and market-

ing them online. Writing and selling simple information online is the most lucrative opportunity to emerge from the growth of the Internet. I know many writers who earn thousands of dollars a week selling e-books online on topics covering major consumer purchases (e.g., how to buy a used car), money-saving techniques (e.g., how to beat a speeding ticket), career advice and home-based business. And that includes me: As I was writing this column, online sales of my e-books were more than \$9,000 in a single week.

Blogging

There are three ways to make money blogging. The first is to post your own blog and sell advertising on it. Google offers a program, called AdSense, where it places ads on your blog. You are paid a certain amount for each click the ads on your blog generate.

Blogs are inexpensive to create. The time required to set up and maintain one is minimal. But it could take years for your blog to gain popularity. Advertisers won't invest in blogs until they've proven themselves as high-traffic areas.

Several professional blogging companies, such as 451 Press or DotVentures, will hire writers directly. This is the second method and a great choice for inexperienced bloggers. Professional blogging companies represent hundreds of businesses looking for content, often ghostwritten blogs for CEOs and other top executives. As an employee of a blogging company, you will be required to submit a specific number of posts each month. The blogs will vary in topic and length, and you are paid per post.

Your final option is to contact companies directly. Many companies don't have the time or resources to create and maintain their own blogs. That's why freelance bloggers are in high demand.

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Most companies are delighted to use part of their advertising budget to pay a blogger. If you are willing to contact them, you could easily be on the payroll of four, five or even six companies.

Most bloggers can expect to start out making \$2 to \$10 per post when employed with a professional blogging company. Or, as a freelance writer, bloggers average \$1,000 a month from each company they are contracted to blog for. However, because blogging is a new venture, everything is subjective. With the right determination, \$5,000 a month from a single company is conceivable.

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