

Bonnie Hearn Hill

The (Expanded)
Freelancer's
Rulebook



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To Larry Hill,
*who took the class,
married the teacher,
and never lost faith in this book.*

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**THE (EXPANDED)
FREELANCER'S RULEBOOK**

INTRODUCTION

What This Book Can Do for You, & What It Can't



Never make excuses, never let them see
you bleed, and never get separated from your baggage.

WESLEY PRICE, *Three Rules of Professional
Comportment for Writers*

Every day of every year, countless freelance writers spend their time and money at bookstores, conferences, seminars and Web sites trying to answer one recurring question. What do publishers want? What they find is conflicting, self-serving, and sometimes just incorrect information.

You're told you can make \$80,000 a year as a freelancer. You're encouraged to forget about money and cherish the process. Often you're served up rehashed information that might have once been accurate. What you're reading is philosophy. What you need are rules.

When searching for a text for my beginning writing class, I came upon a new book by a published writer purporting to share the secrets of freelancing. I glanced at the introduction, then decided to check the author's knowledge in two telling

areas: multiple submission and query letters. In these and several other critical areas, he reiterated generally accepted but incorrect information that is passed along only to keep beginning writers out, not let them in. It's no wonder that most writers learn the way I did, by trial and error, primarily error.

Do you have any idea how many freelance submissions are rejected? Based on what editors and agents have shared with me, approximately ninety-eight percent. Do you have any idea why? Because most of them are not that well written and not suited for the publication to which they are submitted. Your fresh idea, your targeted query are treading water in the slush pile, waiting to be noticed.

Of the approximately thirty people in my advanced writing class, more than ninety-five percent have gone on to sell their writing. (That's about twenty-eight and a half people, so I've obviously based it on an average.) At this writing, all of my advanced students are published writers. Some may have published essays in the local newspaper or articles in trade publications. Others have published with top magazine market. A few have sold books—one for a six-figure advance. The point is that these people, from very different backgrounds, reached their writing goals, and they beat the numbers game. They might not write any better than you do, but they know the rules.

Throughout my early freelancing days, I fantasized about working as an editor, just until I figured out how their minds worked, I thought, not long enough to do any serious damage to my creativity. I began my current editing position in 1982, and in the first six months, I learned more about the editorial perspective than I had in the first ten years I struggled as a writer.

This book is the result of more than twenty years of working with freelancers. Its purpose is to save other writers the years

I wasted trying to learn the rules. If you need a book that will teach you the craft of writing, you'll discover many fine ones elsewhere. This is not a book about how to write. It's a book about how to sell.

When I became serious about writing for publication, I found conflicting information, self-serving or uninformed teachers, and overpriced promises guaranteed to teach me how to write my way to a six-figure income. The first books I read were the ones that promised to make me rich. I figured that if I could earn just a fraction of the promised income, I would be able to spend my time writing about subjects that interested me, without having to worry about the mundane realities of food and shelter.

Payment for my first article back in the early 1970s was approximately seventy-five dollars. So much for getting rich. It was only after I became an editor and began working with freelancers that I understood why so many fail. By observing the process from the editor's side of the desk—with the head of an editor and the heart of a writer—I learned the rules. And I followed them as I built a successful freelancing career.

Can I, like those carnival-barker writing coaches, claim to teach you how to make a six-figure income by writing just two hours a day? Not even. You may not want to crank out copy for 900 numbers and mail-order companies, and even if you do, you're still going to have to learn the rules to establish and build upon a relationship with your prospective editors.

Can I, then, teach you how to forget the commercial aspects of publishing and focus on the Process, capital P, maybe even convince yourself that's all you want (or should want) from writing and from life? Absolutely not.

Publication will validate you faster than anything. Selling your work, for even the smallest of sums, is essential to your

Secret. What had I conveyed to the students in my workshops and seminars that helped them find success or at least manage to go on to the next article or story, the next paragraph?

This is probably the most important thing I tell them, The Secret, according to me.

It's doable.

I don't like that word, but it's as close to The Secret as I can come. It's not a cheer-leading, "You can do it," because I don't know you. But I do know this business, and I am comfortable telling you that writing for publication is doable. And since there's almost always a qualifying *if* attached to such positive statements, here's mine. It's doable, *if* you know and choose to follow the rules.

The First Five Rules

1. Don't expect any book, mentor or guardian angel — regardless of what they promise or how much you pay them — to teach you how to make millions as a writer.
2. Know that most writers who sell on a regular basis do so because they have learned the rules of connecting with and working with editors.
3. Learn how to write. Invest in and practice using a dictionary and style book.
4. Try to aim for paying markets. Writing is a business. You're providing a product, and you need to be paid for it.

5. Expect hard work as the price you pay for being a writer, and don't give up. Selling your freelance writing is (there's that word again) doable.
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What's Next?

You don't really have to be an editor to know what's expected. You need only *think* like one. Here's how.

CHAPTER I

The Editorial Mindset



What is true of friendship
is true of editing; the understanding
must be continually refreshed.

EDWARD WEEKS

Before she left her position as editor of *Cosmopolitan*, the magazine she had virtually created thirty-three years before, Helen Gurley Brown agreed to an interview with me for an editorial trade magazine. Her style and her proactive approach to publishing had once help me shape my own career choice. I asked how she had managed, after all those years, to stay tuned to the needs of her much younger readers. “Emotions don’t change,” Brown said. “I didn’t have to go through her mind, her body and her soul with a can opener to know what she was going through.”

Of course not, I thought. If you understand your reader’s emotions, you know her needs.

Your first reader—the one you must convince that you are worthy of a larger audience—is the editor to whom you hope to

sell. You don't need Brown's proverbial can opener to know this person's needs. Just mentally put yourself in her job; understand her emotions, which are probably very different from yours.

At one of my freelancing jobs, I outlasted four editors in less than two years. "You're lucky," the fourth one told me. "The politics never make it to the freelancer. We're the buffer."

He was right. The editor had to worry about budget, but I got paid whether he was over or under. He did indeed have to concern himself with office politics. I had only to get him what he needed, when he needed it, and with the agreed-upon number of words.

I did just that, and because I understood his needs, I told him that if he ever got stuck at the last minute, I would do what I could to help him. He thanked me, and he did take me up on that offer. Boy, did he take me up on it. My eyes still burn recalling all those nights peering at a computer screen while the rest of my household sanely slept. At one point, with a two-day turnaround (which by then I had begun calling a "seven-eleven"), I pondered the wisdom of my original promise.

Later, after some sleep of my own and another grateful e-mail from my editor, it occurred to me that this magazine was listed in every major marketing source book. It paid well and, just as important, on time. The editor probably had a mountain of manuscripts on his desk full of publishable ideas from freelancers as or more qualified than I. Why did I get the assignments time and again? Because I knew how he thought. I'd proven that I understood his needs, and he felt comfortable trusting me to come through with difficult assignments, even at the last minute when an assigned author backed out.

Publications purchase freelance submissions for numerous reasons, ranging from a small staff to a need for fresh voices.

Whatever the reason, we editors and writers need each other. You'd never know that to hear what we say about each other though. When I'm with my freelancer friends, they complain about how long editors take to respond to their queries. They grouse about slow pay and impersonal communication.

When I'm with my editor friends, they complain about how long writers take to complete their assignments. They grouse about low salaries and budgets and how their workloads cheat them of the time they'd like to spend developing relationships with promising freelancers. It all depends on which side of the desk you're sitting. You're on the writer's side right now, but perhaps it's time to change perspective.

If you're a dependable writer who can deliver what you promise, you will find an editor, probably more than one, who will feel lucky to work with you. This book will cover how to make that contact and nurture that connection. First, though, try putting yourself on the other side of the desk.

An Editor Thinks *Time*.

We editors measure out our lives in deadlines. While my friends are enjoying football games and autumn leaves, I'm wondering how to make one more holiday décor story appear fresh.

When you're assigned a deadline, don't say, "That's my Uncle Howard's birthday. We're planning a big party in Dubuque." (I swear to you, people really do make equally unwise remarks.) Say, "I can handle that," and be sure you mean it. Uncle Howard will love you just as much when you visit the following weekend, and you'll love yourself even more for being a finisher.

Most freelancers, this one included, would lead less-complicated lives if they remembered that the deadline is the last

Southwest Writers Conference in Albuquerque this year, and I'm hoping you might be willing to look at my article, "Guide to the Seamless Screenplay."

No, you didn't say you were going to be in Albuquerque. You simply implied it. If you are planning to attend, you could add: *I hope to see you there.* Either way, you've gotten the editor's attention with more than the touted canned query letter.

The Internet

Many feel that the Internet is going to change the way books are sold and made. I hope they're right, and we'd all better hope that online access will also help bring the archaic practice of article and short story submission into the current, as well as the next century.

I like the speed of querying online, and I love the lack of SASES. Many editors now invite on-line submissions. But how can you say how wonderful you are in a few short sentences? I'll address online etiquette in greater length at the end of this chapter. In the meantime, here are some basics.

- Provide the important information first.
I am a published writer specializing in travel, and I'm hoping the enclosed article on sailing sites on Catalina Island might be of interest to your readers.
- Don't attach the article or clips unless the guidelines encourage you to do so.
- When you're sending an e-mail query, be certain this is an article worthy of the immediacy. Is it timely? Are you

qualified to write it? Is this the editor's preferred method of contact?

If you get a go, you'll love the speed with which such a query can be accepted, evaluated and in print.

The Writers' Conference

Many, many writers connect with editors at conferences. I've seen a homemaker sell her first essay for \$1,500 at a conference. I've seen deals made behind the scenes that metaphorically curled even my hair. I've learned industry gossip, been inspired by success stories. In short, I believe that every serious writer should attend at least one writing conference — not a user and loser Podunk, Calif., conference, but the real thing.

My favorite is the Southwest Writers Conference in Albuquerque, N.M. It's five hundred-plus people, the top editors and agents in the country, and pure energy.

If you don't have the funds to fly to Albuquerque this year, consider something closer to home, but make certain publishing professionals will attend. The last thing you want is a bunch of has-beens and never-weres who want to tell you how they did it while they try to sell you their books nobody else would buy.

Here are some solid guidelines for making your way to and around a conference.

- If possible, attend with a friend. You'll be able to cross-promote each other to the editors you meet.
- If you attend alone, make a friend ASAP. Ask what she/he has written and wants to achieve as a result of attending the conference. Try to connect with someone who's as serious about writing as you are.

possible. This will provide you with more options later when you decide what to paraphrase and what to quote directly in your finished article.

Write as You Go.

Finish your interview, hang up the telephone, and write—right now—while it’s still fresh. Create a working title and lead and plug in facts and quotes as you go. This way you’ll see where the holes are, and you won’t have to sit down the night before deadline with a stack of scrawled notes.

“But I do better under pressure,” you say. So do I, and so do any number of masochists. But we aren’t writing for the rush of adrenaline; we’re writing for the person on the other end. There’s an editor depending on you to deliver. Don’t set yourself up for failure.

Copy the Format.

Organize and format your story so that it looks like everything else the magazine prints. Some publications use short, punchy titles followed by subheads. Others use long titles. By studying the publication, you can determine which, and you can provide the same.

As you are well aware, editors are busy. Picture this person on deadline, trying to fit a jumble of words into the available pages. Along comes your manuscript, complete with appropriate subheads and suggested sidebars. I’ve had editors practically promise to name their next child after me for supplying something as simple as a subhead.

On the converse side, don’t try to reinvent the magazine, no matter how sincere your intentions. The worst thing you can

do is suggest improvements to an editor, especially in the area of format.

If the Editor Asks for a Rewrite, Comply. Nicely.

This probably won't happen if you've been communicating, but sometimes the editor may decide the article should be longer or that an additional source needs to be included, or, at worst, that the article needs a major overhaul.

One of my colleagues rewrote an essay bemoaning family budgets for a national women's magazine because the editorial board, not the editor, felt the tone made the writer sound spoiled. After one rewrite, the article was accepted.

I've also heard the story about numerous writers who lost assignments and contracts because they wouldn't change a word.

Ask Enough Questions.

It's your responsibility to make sure that you understand what the editor expects. If you frequently are asked to rewrite, you're not communicating, and the relationship will probably not last very long.

Ask for Feedback.

An editor who's already purchased from you will be more likely to tell you what did and didn't work as well as share likes and dislikes. Most editors do not comment on less-than-perfect manuscripts, for two very good reasons. (1) Either, the writer becomes your new best friend and calls to say the revise "you requested" is in the mail, and you will publish it now, won't you? Or (2) the writer calls to say you're a jerk, with no idea what

Ten Classic Crashes

Herewith are the ten all-time worst excuses for missing a deadline.

1. *My computer crashed.* You can't believe how many times we editors hear this.
2. *My car crashed (and on the way to mail this, at that).* It could happen, but if you'd been serious about delivering the article, would you have waited until the last minute to turn it in?
3. *My contact crashed.* You're so cool that you didn't even try for the interview until one day before deadline. Now you find out that your big source is spending the month in Jamaica. If this were a TV game show, you'd be hearing a big buzz right now.
4. *The cat crashed (and woke up shredding the story).* Sure, and the dog ate your homework. One writer (I swear) actually claimed that his bird pecked the article to shreds while trying to make a nest. Even if it's true, don't embarrass yourself by repeating the story. Stay up all night if you must, and write another one.
5. *My grandmother crashed (and she's never getting up).* I know one editor who got that funeral excuse three times — from the same writer.

6. *My wrists crashed.* You'd think carpal tunnel syndrome was approaching epidemic proportions. This excuse has now eclipsed the flu as the most common deadline illness.
7. *My Rolodex crashed.* Telling the editor that you lost her address is not a suitable explanation for missing a deadline.
8. *My Federal Express delivery crashed.* I can count on half a hand the number of times I've had to trace a lost Fed Ex package.
9. *My priorities crashed.* One of my editors told me she was called, on deadline day, no less, by a seasoned freelancer. He told her he was "just swamped," with other jobs which, "frankly pay me more." He expected her to be pleased that she would receive the story by the end of the week.
10. *I crashed.* This isn't the sixties. Your allergies, breakdowns and drug busts are no excuse to miss a deadline. Keep your personal problems personal. Just meet your commitments.

constitutes good writing, and you'd better look both ways, baby, before leaving your office tonight. If an editor gives you feedback, don't resist. Say, "Thank you."

Let the Editor Know You're Available.

A short e-mail or written note when the article appears is also appreciated. Don't be shy about querying an editor who has bought from you.

Unless the editor has indicated otherwise, try to pitch one query at a time. A list of possible topics waters down the impact of each. The editor decides to look at it later, because it's too complex for an immediate decision.

Let It Simmer.

Once you finish the article, resist the impulse to rush to the nearest post office. That manuscript you wrote in the heat of passion is now ready for a cold editorial eye. Yours. Take your time and sit on the piece for a while. You'll be amazed what you discover when you come back to it after a few days.

The Rules of Follow-Through

20. Start your article when it's assigned, even if the deadline is far in the future.
21. Don't assume the source will be available at the last minute.
22. Determine in advance if you should find your own sources.
23. Also inquire about length and focus of the piece.
24. Investigate the possibility of finding sources online.

25. Although the Internet is fine for research, don't mistake an online chat for an interview.
 26. Include a list of sources and contact information with the manuscript.
 27. Conduct a telephone interview.
 28. Take notes as direct quotes.
 29. Write as you go, from the first interview on.
 30. Copy the publication's format, right down to the subheads.
 31. If possible, give your story time to simmer.
 32. If asked for a rewrite, comply.
 33. If you disagree with the editing job, don't expect it to improve with future articles. Move on to another editor, another publication.
 34. Invite but don't expect feedback.
 35. Let the editor know that you're available for future assignments.
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What's Next

Next, we'll look at a subject many writers are convinced they don't need—revision.