

AWWP JOB LIST

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Freelancing Through A Recession

by Mike Scalise

Congratulations. After years studying the English language at an advanced level, learning the nuances and complexities of the written word and its potential to create beauty within the pages of the literary canon, here's what you get to do: take your post-grad degree and charge head long into what the *New York Times* recently predicted will be the "longest recession since the 1930s," a job market with a 7.2 percent unemployment rate, the highest in sixteen years. Every reliable outlet for writers has been hit hard. Publishers have thinned their employee base, newspapers continue to endure layoffs in a struggle to stay relevant, and university English

without being held to the rigors of a nine to five. But in an anemic economy like this one, where an estimated hundreds of thousands now struggle just to find part-time jobs, knowing the ins and outs of contracting could be an essential way to moonlight, and keep your head above water when your day job can't quite do the trick.

FLEXIBILITY 2.0

Just as the climate for full-time professionals has shifted, so has the landscape for freelance writers. The pervasiveness of Internet outlets has pulled the rug out from under many traditional print publications,

However, that means that the market for contract work has become even more competitive, so it's important to keep an open mind and develop a flexible skill set when seeking out freelance opportunities.

"If you're trying to make a living writing for newspapers and magazines, you're probably going to have a tough time right now," says Jenny Cromie, editor of *The Golden Pencil*, a blog devoted to highlighting the most successful strategies for the modern stringer. "But if you're willing to blog, write articles for trade publications, write an occasional article for a commercial magazine, pen the occasional newspaper article, proofread books and articles, write marketing materials for the local chamber, produce some multimedia packages, try your hand at podcasting, and keep adding to the list of services you can offer to clients and publications, you'll probably continue to do well despite these tough economic conditions."

"We're at the end of a business cycle and at the beginning of a new one," says Portner, about the shift away from print media. "The next iteration is electronic, but no one's figured out where the revenue stream is going to come from." As a result, assignments for online news outlets and magazines aren't as financially reliable as their print counterparts once were, which is why Portner steers an increasing amount of his writers towards work less focused on bylines and publication. "[My writers are] writing speeches, becoming technical writers, PR writers, copywriters and editors," he says.

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Departments are tightening their budgets and instituting hiring freezes. If you plan to make a living off your well-honed craft, you may have to find new ways to do it.

Which is where freelancing comes in. The idea once carried enviable cache among writer-types: the independent wordsmith, jumping from job to job, collecting bylines

but there's a bit of a silver lining for those looking for contract work. Alan Portner, a former newspaper publisher who now runs a placement service for freelancers in Virginia called *The Assignment Desk*, says the decimated media climate has "created opportunities for freelancers because [full time] employees aren't there anymore."

Cromie agrees that carving out a specialty for yourself is the key to landing jobs. “I’m a strong believer in finding a niche,” she says. “Take a close look at your areas of expertise, interests, and hobbies, and go from there. What do you have to offer that will set you apart from other freelancers right now? For example, I happen to be a certified human resources specialist, so I write a lot of HR/business articles, and edit books about these topics as well.”

Seek out opportunities geared towards your strengths, yes, but both Cromie and Portner advise you to also do your homework. Find training seminars on focus areas like grant writing, press release writing, and web-based skills like online content management and programming languages such as HTML and CSS. Study up on your editorial style guides as well, especially for more proofreading and editing-based positions.

“We’re not all using the AP stylebook,” says Portner. His clients often require freelancers to be well-versed in the Chicago Manual of Style, the Government Printing Office (GPO) style manual, and the American Psychological Association (APA) style book for more academic-based editorial jobs.

THE SERIES OF TUBES IS YOUR FRIEND...MOST OF THE TIME

In the past, a strong résumé, a handful of articles (or “clips”), and some fresh ideas could snag you a job as a stringer, but as Cromie mentions, it’s become essential that hopeful freelancers now stake out some space online. “You need to have a website that includes information about you,” she says, “your résumé, links to work samples, and even a blog.”

However, if you, like many, lack the know-how to build a website from scratch, there are a number of free, web-based applications like Blogger and Wordpress that are as simple to use as email, and give you a professional-looking, customizable space where you can upload samples of your work and update as needed. Lately, social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter have proven to be effective ways to reach out to potential employers and clients as well.

But the Web is also host to a number of sites, like The Golden Pencil, where both job seekers and employers trade openings and offer up promising freelance leads. Member-based organizations like the Association of Independent Writers and Freelance Success offer a wealth of helpful content and job listings for a membership fee. One of the

most popular online home bases for freelance resources is Mediabistro.com, a site dedicated to “anyone who creates or works with content.” In addition to the many career-building courses they offer (like “Making Sense of Social Media” and “The WholeFreelancer”), a \$55 yearly membership gets you access to their nationwide job listings for media professionals as well as Mediabistro’s Freelance Marketplace, a searchable database where freelancers can upload their information for employers to target when seeking contractors. Mediabistro also has plenty of editorial content aimed at showing writers and editors the best way to connect with employers. Their “How to Pitch” section interviews the editors of popular print and online outlets like *Wired*, *The American Scholar*, *Slate*, and *O* magazine and scores of others about what kind of work they’re looking for from writers, and what their pay rates are. There’s also a “Pitches that Worked” series where writers share stories they successfully pitched to publications, and editors explain why they published them.

But like Cromie and Portner, Mediabistro has made adjustments to their features to better address the current economy and the shift towards less traditional work. “Some of the ways we’ve been adjusting include offering more of our courses online so that people across the country can participate and benefit from them,” says managing editor Rebecca Fox, “and there are on-demand courses that allow people to download material and use it at their own convenience.” They’ve also put a greater emphasis on online media and expanded their content to include what Fox calls “new technologies and how that can help writers do their work.” Recent articles have included “How to use Twitter as a PR tool,” “How to Get a Guest Blogging Gig,” and a “What to Charge” feature series that breaks down the standard pay rates for specialized work like web production, press release writing, and old standbys like copyediting.

If you’re too strapped to fork over the cash for access to the best of Mediabistro, there are cheaper online alternatives. At The Practicing Writer, writer and editor Erika Dreifus links to a number of tools, offers low priced e-books listing paying markets for book reviews and personal essays, and a free newsletter that lists resources aimed at the blue-collar scribe. Sites like Places for Writers, FreelanceSwitch, and Freelance Writing Jobs are tailored to freelance opportunities, and many freelancers swear

by LinkedIn, an online social networking tool not unlike Facebook or MySpace that connects contractors with both employers and each other.

But Cromie warns that while there are an increasing number of helpful online sources, writers should bring a Wikipedia-level skepticism to the validity of each job they encounter on the web, especially on job bidding sites like oDesk or even Craigslist. “There are better-paying gigs out there,” she says. “Don’t undervalue your worth and work for peanuts, even if you’re just starting out. While there are many legitimate ads, there also are plenty of individuals and companies who are unscrupulous and not on the up-and-up. Wear your internal BS detector. If something sounds too good to be true, it probably is—steer clear.”

MARKETING YOURSELF IN THE 3D WORLD

The web is a great place to start, but nothing can take the place of face time. While part of the appeal of freelancing comes from the lone wolf nature of the work, as a contractor, you’re selling yourself just as much as the quality of your writing. How do you do it? Cromie suggests freelancers send out LOIs—Letters of Inquiry—which are written versions of cold calls to hiring managers that explain your areas of expertise, and how you can assist them with your services. Mediabistro often hosts nationwide networking parties for media professionals, but Alan Portner gives his freelancers a list of local networking groups in areas other than the media, such as the Association for Computing Machinery and the Association of Business communicators, even if writers are generally uncomfortable with the “elevator pitch” aspects of the business.

“Freelancers are terrible marketers and terrible businesspeople,” says Portner, so to combat it, he offers each of his freelancers “Uncle Al’s Five Axioms” for self-promotion, which include bringing a stash of business cards to networking events, or wearing what Portner calls a “Whatzit”: an eye-catching accessory like a lapel pin that does the conversational ice-breaking for you.

“Don’t overlook local opportunities to network either,” says Jenny Cromie, who suggests that great opportunities can be found within your personal community. “Who do you interact with on a regular basis? Do they need a writer or editor? Does your hair stylist need help marketing her

business? Does the local hospital need help with its internal newsletter? Does your local chamber of commerce or convention and visitors bureau need help getting the word out about the area you live in?"

The hustle might be painful at first, but Cromie has seen it pay off. The Golden Pencil's "Successful Freelancer Spotlight" feature profiles people who have made the lifestyle work for them, and the common thread she's noticed through all of them is a fine streak of personal enterprise. That, she says, has been one aspect of the business that remains unchanged by the economy.

"First and foremost, freelancers have to cultivate their inner entrepreneur and business person," she says. "Unless you're a hobbyist or you're independently wealthy, you have to approach everything you do from a business perspective."

Mike Scalise teaches writing at the University of Maryland, and has freelanced for websites, book publishers, lawyers, magazines, independent filmmakers, software developers, and a few relatives here and there. His articles and essays have appeared in Ninth Letter, Post Road, PopMatters, Mediabistro, Zink magazine, and many others. Visit him at <www.mikescalise.net>.

Notes

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