

Twenty-Five Writing Secrets

By [Robert McGarvey](#)

Making a good living isn't as difficult as some of you might think. I've always believed a competent freelancer ought to earn about as much as a newspaper reporter and, nowadays, reporters, at least in big cities, aren't paid badly at all. Newspaper Guild contracts involve a number called "top minimum," which is what an experienced reporter earns. At the New York Times, for instance, that number in 2003 was \$1445 per week – about \$75,000 per year. Of course many Times reporters earn much more and also of course, most newspapers around the country pay less – but the point stands. Nothing has changed since Samuel Johnson observed that none but a blockhead would write except for money.

I won't stand here and tell you that you will get rich doing this. Very few writers do. Buy lottery tickets – odds of becoming rich are probably about as good but the effort involved is much less.

I will stand here and tell you that, by dint of cleverness and hard work, you should earn a livable wage doing this work. If you're not, you're not going about the work right which, perhaps, is where my little presentation comes in. I've assembled 25 points – secrets, I call them, but they are well understood by professional writers. Pay attention, however, because there are no segues, no bridges from thought to thought. There are only the secrets themselves to ponder.

1. Develop specialties that are in demand. It's very hard to make big money shoeing horses. Also: many writing niches have many more pursuers than there are opportunities. (Travel writing comes to mind.) Some areas are economic barrios. When I got into this business 33 years ago I did some rock reviews. Everybody wanted to be a rock writer then. I got paid in records. Records! I stopped writing about rock and started looking at other areas.
2. Develop specialties with barriers to entry – i.e., knowledge and/or connections that aren't commonplace. I do a lot of work in biotech, energy, CEOs of Fortune 500 companies, meetings, and human resources management. At least the first three – biotech, energy, CEOs – have fairly steep barriers to entry. But – these are skills, this is knowledge that can be developed. We are not born knowing about coal gasification projects. Become known for knowing things and good things happen. In just the past five years literally hundreds of thousands of dollars of work has come to me because editors are looking for somebody expert in XYZ and they come to me. Are they coming to you? If not...how can you make your expertise irresistibly attractive? Answer that and you have earned back the price of this conference many times.
3. Do you know what your skill is? My skill is taking very complicated topics – such as biotech – and explaining the highlights to an educated, professional

audience that happens to not know much about biotech. I often write for Fortune 1000 senior-level executives. Another skill I have is that I can talk with Fortune 100 chief executives – very senior people in global corporations – and I can interest them enough so that they become talkative, articulate. Writers can have many, many skills. What's important is knowing what yours are and aren't. I recall that some years ago the editor in chief of Boys Life gave me an assignment. He had been a neighbor when I was a teenager; I didn't have to do much to get the assignment. But – this work was terribly difficult for me. I incline towards a large vocabulary, long sentences, longer paragraphs. Producing copy for 10 year olds, I realized, wasn't my skill so I never did more work for Boys Life (though I really liked the magazine when I was a kid. It's a great magazine but not for me).

4. Don't waste time with PIA editors and magazines that rewrite by committee. Magazine writing, increasingly, IS a collaborative effort. This isn't an art, it's a craft. That said, some editors at some publications – as part of their indigenous process – forever demand two, three rewrites. Nothing could possibly be good enough to be accepted without extensive rewriting. Figure out which magazines these are and avoid them.
5. Don't you be a PIA, either. I've been a consulting editor at several magazines and it is shocking how many writers are PIAs. Whiners, complainers, babies.
6. Focus on dollars per day, NOT dollars per word. There are many \$2/wd pubs I will not write for because they demand endless rewrites. Conversely, there are several \$1/wd pubs I do write for because I submit my manuscript and the check comes in return mail, no fuss, no muss. Do the math: to earn \$100k, you need to earn \$400/day.
7. Get good at estimating the time an article will take to do. As assignments come in, I calendar them – I slot them into Lotus Organizer – and my goal is to be booked about two months out. If I'm booked further out than that I often have to say “no” to clients because I cannot fit them in. How do you get good at estimating time? Really, that only comes with experience. But, after a couple years of this work, you ought to be able to recognize a one-day job, a week-long job, etc. This isn't guesswork. How many interviews do you need to do? How hard will they be to set up? How slippery is the topic (do you need to do a lot of pre-interview research?). In Year One you won't know. But pay attention to your own work pace and get good at estimating. It is a key to making money in this job. Offer me a \$200 assignment that will take two days and I say, no thanks, before you are finished making the offer. Offer me a \$2000 assignment that will take a month and, again, no thanks. This is no different from a roofer. He makes money only if he can give accurate estimates. Get good at this skill. It's make or break.
8. What if you realize, partway into a job, that you grossly underestimated the difficulty and it's worth much more? Assuming this is a magazine article – suck

- it up, finish the work, and learn the lesson. If it's a lengthier project, by all means, consider engaging the customer in a discussion about raising the fee.
9. Set annual, monthly, daily financial goals. Also: create an economic forecast that REALISTICALLY projects income by source for the year. (Realistic means based on past performance.) Keep updated income tallies. I use Microsoft Excel to track accounts receivables and also to project out 90 days cashflow/outgo. I never don't know where I stand financially.
 10. Get good at detecting B.S. There are many time-wasters out there who will tantalize you with promises of huge projects – that somehow never manage to be funded. A person could stay very busy, making no money chasing these dogs. Do not be another person's training wheels. If they haven't done it before, let them get experience elsewhere. Yes, there might be an "expert" for instance with whom you might choose to collaborate on a first book. Different story. What I'm warning about here are the folks who approach you with, say, an idea to produce e-books on business practices for distribution to podiatrists. Sounds clever? Absolutely – but has this company done anything remotely similar before? If the answer is no, bar the doors and shout out, nobody is home!
 11. Every year or so, fire your least profitable client. Big companies are implementing what's called top grading – which is a procedure that grades employees and weeds out the bottom rung. They get fired, to be blunt. The goal is to wind up with only all-stars. We can do something similar. Analyze clients – money paid, hours worked – and dump a loser. In 2001 I parted ways with a client that in 2000 had generated \$50,000 for me – and it had produced like amounts for the 10 years beforehand. But we had grown bored with each other; it was time to split. (It didn't help that I thought the editor in charge of what I did is dumber than dirt and too mean to recognize this personal deficiency.) Did firing 'em hurt me? Nah, it made me stronger. Take a deep breath and just fire your least profitable client. Note: I do not advocate doing this until you are operating at roughly 100% capacity. Dumping an unprofitable client at the point frees you up to find more profitable work.
 12. Research once, sell often. This may be an era when "all rights" sales are common, but even then you are selling that article, not the knowledge and contacts you built up in writing it. How can you leverage that knowledge to make re-sales – not just once but again and again? Always be mindful of the rights you are selling and never sell more than necessary – but recognize that more publishers are demanding greater ownership of the articles they buy and that is the way it is. Don't fight losing battles.
 13. Make yourself useful to editors. Don't fight with them. Don't be a prima donna. I am to a magazine editor as a plumber is to me as homeowner. My income is directly dependent on how much satisfaction I deliver to my editors (customers). What's a writer's biggest enemy? Ego. You need ego to be a writer in the first

place but to be a successful magazine freelancer there are many places and cases where ego needs to be set aside. Don't argue with customers. Don't make them "wrong." Find ways to give them what they want while still giving them what you want to give them. Of the many writing secrets, tips, techniques I have learned this may be that hardest to mastery but in its mastery lies the key to happy prosperity.

14. Focus on pubs that have high earnings potential. Last year one pub paid me \$38200. Two others paid me over \$20k. Two others paid me around \$10k apiece. All counted, I wrote for 10 organizations in 2004. I have no interest in clients that will produce perhaps \$1000 in revenue for me. I want steady producers, customers that will generate at least \$5000. How do you know such outlets? Look through a half-dozen issues. Do you see the same freelancers month after month, or an ever-changing roster? Concentrate on pubs that use the same stable. Yes, they might be harder to break into – but once you're in, you are in the money.

15. Today's email brought this...

"Hi Bob -

You have done so much extra work for us, talking to every person under the sun and adding stuff at the last minute. We really feel like you went way above and beyond the call of duty, and we would love to give you an extra \$1000 for your efforts. If you would send me an invoice I'll send it right out to be paid."

Mind you...I'd already billed \$10,900 for this work.

I'm recounting this not to pat my own back...but to make a coupla points. (a) Editors and publishers WANT good work and they are HAPPY when they get it. Don't make this into an adversarial relationship. Make it collaborative, win-win. (b) Work hard, keep your nose clean, listen to the customer, make their lives easier and...let the good times roll. (c) For those who wonder how to build continuing relations, there it is. That customer has brought me substantial work since 2002 – probably \$75,000 in four years. Will they keep coming back? What do you think?

It's not about the money -- be it \$1 or \$1000 -- but the nature of the relationship. My suggestion to folks who want to build careers is to try to get to a place where every client you have is this grateful. If they're not...work better or get different clients. Not all have the budget flexibility to dole out bonuses -- but MANY do and ALL have the ability to throw perks at writers they want to cultivate a relationship with (e.g., gut assignments, some travel, etc). But...bonuses aren't the point. Being top of mind is. How do you get there? Starting points are believing it's possible and understanding that it's necessary. Many writers, alas, aren't even on that starting line (and they wonder why this job is so hard...for them).

16. Develop relations with editors who will bring work to you. Marketing – sending out queries – takes time and is about as productive as cold calling. When there's no work, do it but set as a goal getting out of the query game. How? Find editors who will bring a steady stream of work to you. Many, many pubs develop a majority of ideas inhouse. Become a “go to” writer for those editors by being reliable, on deadline, etc. In any sales job, “repeats” – return customers – are critical . Without them a writer will find this to be very difficult work.
17. Do you have any editors who are personal friends? If you don't – get some. In the late 1970s, when I began to get serious about this business, I was fortunate to make friends with several editors. We drank together, we went to dinner, I went to their weddings (I still remember a great one at the Comedy Store on Sunset, circa 1980). Over the year I have heard from the very lips of editors what they like about freelancers, what they despise, and how to succeed at this business. For the first 15 years I was in this business I probably knew no other freelancers. Yes, there is power in freelancers pooling information and knowhow – but I know my close relationships with a number of editors has put a lot more dough in my pockets. And it's not just about friendship. It's about gaining greater insight into the minds of editors. In big business a sales mantra is, get close to the customer. It's no different in a writer's micro-business.
18. Get in your customers' heads. How can you be more valuable to them? How can you be a top of mind solution for them? Think the way they think and the answers are obvious. Note: to many editors, some writers are “problems” – sloppy copy that strays from the assignment, delivered late. Be a solution, not a problem.
19. Here's a thought some may (or may not) find useful: long ago I found the best way to develop stories was to find magazines I liked and then develop ideas I thought the editors might like.

An alternative is find an idea and then shop it...but, to me, that is like developing a white paper...and then trying to find a corporate sponsor.

Simpler is know the intended home and develop pitches for it.

That's how I made my 1st national magazine sales in '78, to OUI Magazine. (Then part of Playboy.) I really liked the pub, it's arrogant hipness, etc. I sent off a short, over the transom...they bought it! (It was a weird piece about a pro wrestler named George the Animal.) I sent another idea...they assigned it. More & more. Within a year I was a Contributing Editor (and, heavens, I'd only been a fulltime freelancer for a year).

Understand a market. Learn to think like it. Get inside the customer's head. Successes follow.

20. Don't believe people who tell you the business is slow. There is so much work out there right now, but there always is work out there. Even in 2001, the worst year I recall, ever, I earned \$78,000, entirely from magazine sources. (I also moved from California to Arizona and bought a house in Arizona. That took a lot of time.) In '01 I even did some work I probably wouldn't otherwise had time to pursue, such as a long piece on the Rutgers philosophy department's rise into global eminence; that was for Rutgers Magazine and I got paid but the hourly rate was low. Didn't matter, tho. I had the time that year and it was fun work. My larger point: even when everybody complains about an assigning drought there is paying work to be gotten by people who beat the bushes. In '01 I wrote for many magazines I hadn't written for before – Emerging Business, Web Services Journal, House of Business, Midwest Express. They didn't necessarily pay my usual rates but money talks and, in '01, I kept the pipeline full. But I tried to focus on articles that would enhance my value. For Midwest Express, for instance, I did a couple features on biotech, for under \$1000 each. That's maybe a quarter a word. But there was a reason. I wanted to learn about biotech and, since then, I have earned perhaps \$50,000 writing advertorials about it for Harvard Business Review, the New York Times, Fortune. Take low-paying articles when they lead to something better.
21. Make yourself easy to find. Put up a simple website. Much work will come because an editor sees your piece in XYZ Magazine and wants to contact you for an assignment in ZYX Magazine. Help them find you. My biggest client found me when she was searching the ASJA online member directory. An agent found me by looking at the directory at Publishers Marketplace. Much other work came to me by editors who first looked at my website. Be easy to find and people will come to you. Even the biggest outlets might come to you. The New York Times, for instance, saw an advertorial I wrote for Harvard Business Review, tracked me down on the web, and offered me a \$15000 assignment. It happens.
22. Referrals are very, very important. Editors do make referrals – just as I as homeowner make referrals about painters, general contractors, etc. Editors often are friends with other editors and they swap names of writers. When an editor does refer you, be generous in your thanks. No need to send a gift – many people wouldn't want anything – but do send thanks. Encourage this behavior and you'll see more of it. I got my first assignments to write advertorials for Fortune in part because an editor I knew referred me to the hiring editor at Fortune.
23. Writers, too, refer other writers to editors – when they are booked up or don't want a particular assignment they will pass along names of writers. An editor at Imagination – a Chicago custom publisher –called me last summer because a writer he used often referred him to me. That referral has put at least \$10,000 in my pocket. Some years before I'd referred the editor of a then new magazine published by Cisco to that same writer; I believe he still writes for it, five years later. What goes around comes around. Be generous in referring work to others –

but also be selective. You want your word to count not to be discounted. Refer good people readily. Avoid referring the less talented.

24. Be flexible about where you work. By all means, pursue big name magazines – but recognize that some of your most lucrative customers, longterm, are likely to be lesser known and trade magazines. Be flexible too about types of work. In '05 I project the following streams:

- o \$35k advertorials (leading biz pubs)
- o \$20k consulting (on a philosophy project)
- o \$75k magazine writing (mainly for custom pubs, trade pubs)
- o \$10k writing for inflights
- o \$20k for a marcom project re big pharma

Roughly half my income this year will come from non-traditional sources. It IS possible to earn \$100k doing nothing but magazine work. Last time I did that was 2000. But it is easier – takes less time – when there's a mix of higher-paying gigs as well as magazine writing.

25. What does making \$100k mean? Nothing, really. The bigger issues are: are you setting and meeting personal goals for income and the kind of work you want to do? Approach freelancing as a career and good things follow. Many writers are neither professional nor competent and then they wonder why they aren't prospering. Treat this as a job and prosperity will follow.

N.B. This documented was created as a speech to be read at a writers conference. Various technical complications precluded that from happening – but the document itself has a life on the Internet.

Copyright 2005 by [Robert J McGarvey](#)