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## 7 Things They Don't Tell You About Freelancing

### Here's what we wish they taught us in J-school

By Alisha Tillery – August 8, 2011



After moving to New York City to become a writer, Alida Nugent found out things weren't quite the way they appeared on *Sex and the City*. In "[Carrie Bradshaw Math](#)," a post written on her blog [TheFrenemy.com](#), Nugent summed up the would-be-life of the fictitious character, pitting her daily diet of designer pumps and fancy dinners against some real-life price points.

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Nugent's post, which was published by [Gothamist.com](#) and [Refinery29.com](#), was written out of frustration and confirmed what other writers already knew: Freelancing comes with a price.

"I feel like [Bradshaw's] lifestyle was sort of insane," says Nugent. "Maybe other people realized \$800 dollar outfits aren't what happen when you freelance write -- because it's not. Don't be fooled!"

While freelance writing can be extremely rewarding (making your own hours, the high of that first byline), there are some definite downsides. Here's what we wish they taught us in J-school.

#### 1. Freelancing is a full-time gig.

If you thought freelancing was easy, think again. When you're not writing, you're coming up with new story ideas, maintaining your personal website, tweeting to build a following, or attending industry events to increase your network. Mashaun D. Simon, a former contributor to *Black Enterprise* and [TheGrio.com](#), admits to his own misconceptions about the business. "It seemed like a lot of fun and freedom and gave me exposure," he says. "I did not expect it to become as much of a struggle as it has been. Freelancing is a business within itself, and, in order to be successful, one has to be on top of their game."

Bené Viera, who has written for *Juicy* and [GlobalGrind.com](#) adds, "You really have to treat freelancing like it's your 8-to-5 job. You have to wake up in the morning; you have to have pitches; you have to send a ton of pitches to various publications and hope that you get a reply back."

So, follow up with editors and pursue new leads. Establish your own business hours and don't take personal calls during the day. You should maintain a constant flow of work, even after pitches are submitted.

**"Freelancing is a business within itself, and, in order to be successful, one has to be on top of their game."**

#### 2. You may have to get a "real" job.

That's right. Until you can sustain yourself on assignments alone, chances are you'll be doing something other than just writing every day. The media industry is constantly changing, so today's freelance journos are dabbling in related fields to build skills, as well as supplement income.

"I have recently come to realize that in order for me to be the success I want to be and financially stable as I need to be, my sources of income need to come from diverse places," says Simon. "So, I am in the process of truly making

myself a business."

Viera, who also takes on editing projects and works as a substitute teacher in New York City Schools, warns writers to beware of the inherent inconsistency in the profession. "You may have five pieces for one month and then go three months without writing one single piece. I think you have to be multi-talented and think outside the box and utilize your skills. It's what you make it, really."

### **3. You still have a boss: your editor.**

While freelance writers may not literally punch a clock, their editors still call the shots. Sometimes, a story will require a few rewrites before it's approved, or maybe you're working with several editors simultaneously. Successful scribes accept the fact that the end product may not always look how they intended. Freelancing may be a solo gig, but it still entails lots of collaboration.

Janelle Nanos, senior editor for *Boston Magazine* and writer for *Marie Claire* and *Forbes*, knows the tricky relationship between writer and editor all too well. She suggests that writers speak with their editors in advance about the publication's expectations and be receptive to constructive criticism.

"Sometimes writers really need their hands held if a story is unique to fit the publication," she explains. "You sort of have to be able to fit the needs of every editor you're working with and go in with an open mind."

Sherri Williams, a contributor to *Heart & Soul* and *Ebony*, adds that the relationship with an editor is just like one with any supervisor, so first impressions are important. Build a good reputation now, and it could lead to more assignments in the future. "Don't miss your deadlines," she warns. "They need to see that they can trust you."

### **4. You may be chasing your checks... or not get them at all.**

Waiting on a [back payment](#)? Welcome to freelancing. Many writers have horror stories of never being compensated, being asked to work without a contract, or even having to take publications to small claims court for their wages.

"You don't want to get there," says Nanos. If you're wondering when you'll be issued payment, don't panic and don't ask your editor either, she advises. "Asking the editor is probably going to seem like you're a little bit anxious."

Instead, consult with the business manager who oversees payment or refer to your contract to see what the payment terms are. For example, a magazine may not issue payment until 30-45 days after publication. So, if you're working on a piece in January for the April issue, you might not see any money until May. However, if a significant amount has passed and you still haven't received payment, contact your editor.

"Letting an editor know, if you've already reached out to the business manager, that you haven't heard anything is certainly one way to do it because they can light the fire, and make sure that things are moving accordingly," says Nano.

## **"I think you have to be multi-talented and think outside the box and utilize your skills. It's what you make it, really."**

And, no matter what the editor promises you, don't (read: never) work without a contract. "Everyone's looking to get that first clip, but make sure that it's a reputable place, somewhere you feel like you're going to be paid and respected as a writer," adds Nano.

### **5. Pitching will become your life.**

Because good pitches result in assignments and income, writers are always thinking ahead for hot topics that fit the publication and its sections. "Learn the publication. Most magazines have different pieces which can recur with every issue," says Nanos. "The key is knowing what those pieces are and writing your pitch to fit that section of the magazine. Be upfront about it: 'I read the last few sections, I thought this would sync up well with what you've been doing.'"

After a lengthy career in daily newspapers, Williams had to remember to pitch stories that would entice readers months ahead, instead of daily. She suggests studying a magazine's editorial calendar, usually found in its media kit, to find out what kinds of stories are published throughout the year. "Dig deeper for trends to make the story more current and fresh."

### **6. You might need an accountant.**

When the money starts rolling in from assignments, it might be best to let a professional tackle those 1099's. "One of the top reasons to get yourself a quality tax preparer or accountant is their ability to maneuver your deductions," write Joseph D'Agnes and Denis Kiernan in *The Money Book for Freelancers, Part-Timers and the Self-Employed*.

As an independent contractor, expenses for items necessary to perform your job, such as office space, furniture, computers, travel expenses and magazine subscriptions can all be deducted on your tax return.

"TurboTax can only do so much," says Nanos. Make the investment.

### 7. You're not in this alone.

Sorry, Candace and Carrie, but this gig typically involves more stalking of editors than stomping in Louboutins. But, for those brave enough to forge a career as a writer, there are some awesome connections to be made and resources to rely on.

"I wish I had known about *Writer's Market* in the beginning," says Talisha Dunn, writer for Patch-Crofton. "This book helped me discover what my niche was and learn how to expand writing opportunities. It comes out every year and is very expensive, but the advice and resources are priceless."

There's also the [Freelancers Union](#) for help with late payment issues and sites like [Ed2010](#) that post full- or part-time gigs if you're looking for something to tide you over between projects. And, after reaching out to Williams for an interview for this piece, I learned that she landed a story in *The Source* after reading mediabistro.com's "How to Pitch" section. "I pitched in April, and my story will run in August," she says.




Make life easier for yourself by accepting the downsides of the profession now and finding ways to overcome them. Stave off deadbeat clients by only working under contractual agreements. Be prepared to spend possibly more time researching new ideas than writing about them. If tax season turns out to be a nightmare, get an accountant to ensure the best return, and, by all means, nurture that relationship with your editor and don't burn bridges.

Says Simon, "You cannot just sit around and wait for opportunities to come to you."

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