

Writing for Magazines and Newspapers

A freelancer's guide – from Lindsey Dawson

writer, editor, speaker, author

• As you prepare...

1. **Research the market.** Study the magazines and newspapers to get a feel for the sort of material they want.
2. **Know why your story is right** for a certain publication so you can pitch it with clarity and confidence, whether verbally or in writing. You need to be able to say, "I have a story that I think would be great for you."
3. **Make the right approach.** Find out how your target editor likes to get submissions – phone, fax, email or snail-mail.
4. **Cultivate relationships.** If the editor won't talk to you, get friendly with their PA. They can work wonders in reminding bosses that you're waiting to hear back.
5. **Be persistent**, but not pesky. Some editors take a long time to get back to you. It may be no reflection on your ability. It's just that they're busy, or inefficient! If they don't respond in a reasonable time, then move on, sending a polite email to say you're now enquiring elsewhere. That may galvanise them into action... or not. But at least you've politely advised them, leaving the door open for some future deal if you want to try them again.
6. **Think visually.** Don't forget about picture opportunities to accompany your story. Magazines are hugely visual. Work on your photographic skills.
7. **Think outside the square.** Are you an artist, too? How about a comic strip? Editors are hardly ever hear from people with good graphic skills.
8. **Work ahead.** Be aware of how far ahead you have to work for monthly mags (like maybe eight weeks ahead of publication date). Writing a Christmas story? You need to be doing it in August or September.
9. **Cast your net wide.** Use special times of the year to spark ideas for stories – anniversaries of big events (as in disasters or momentous occasions), birthdays or death days of famous or fascinating people, Anzac stories, Mother's Day pieces etc.
10. **Want to be a columnist?** Everyone wants to write a column, but they're very hard to sustain, especially on a weekly. Be sure that if you embark on this, you can keep it up with quality and class. Don't send just one to an editor when you're prospecting – you need to have a bunch of four or five written in advance to demonstrate your ability to keep coming up with new ideas.
11. **Be "wired"**, alert, open to ideas. Pick up possible topics from TV, movies, the internet, but most of all, listen to the chat that goes on when people are sharing coffee, wine and food. If your friends are talking about something over a table, there's a story to be written about it.

• Once you're under way...

12. **Just do it....** If it's a small story, just write it rather than go through the process of being commissioned first. It's easier for an editor to accept your piece if it's there in front of him/her.
13. **...but don't waste your time.** If it's a big story, do gauge the interest level of your target magazine ahead of time. There's no point in embarking on hours of work if a magazine already has someone on the job covering the same subject.

14. **Write well!** Of course, make your writing crisp, direct, informative, accurate and cliché-free. Make your opening sentence count.
15. **Meet deadlines.** It may sound obvious, but it's astonishing how often people are late and just expect editors to cope.
16. **Do what is required.** If they ask you, ahead of time, for 1000 words on a subject, don't give them 2000.
17. **Check each magazine's style** to reduce the amount of time an editor has to spend on preparing your story for print. Do they use double quote marks or singles? Do they call women by their first names or surnames? Look for other style-points and try to conform.
18. **Get back to people.** Return phone messages, emails, etc promptly. There's nothing worse than slow responders, especially in these times of instant communications. If you're emailing editors, set up your "signature" at the foot of your message, with all your contact options.
19. **Be easy to contact.** If sending your work on paper, always add your contact details at the head or foot of your story, not just on your covering letter. That way, it's simple for sub-editors to get back to you with queries.
20. **Check spellings!** Common errors include 'loose' instead of 'lose', 'desperate' instead of 'desperate', 'expatriot' instead of 'expatriate', 'unphased' instead of 'unfazed'. Don't rely on your computer's spell and grammar checkers. Get a good dictionary: the Reed Dictionary of New Zealand English is excellent.
21. **Be professional.** Don't get hung up on niceties like "First NZ Rights". Editors of national mags will always expect that you're presenting them with fresh material, and in this small market will know if they've seen the story before in any other major magazine. Always advise, however, if your story has already appeared in, say, a regional newspaper or small magazine. They probably won't care, but need to know.
22. **Be patient.** Submit a story to one editor at a time. Send it to two and you run the risk of having two mags say yes. Then you'll have to tell one or the other that they can't have it after all. The bottom line is you've wasted their time: they may never use you again.
23. **Respect privacy.** In "sensitive" stories (say, about abortion or sexual abuse) establish up front your interviewees' preference re anonymity. The media want real names where possible for greater credibility. But always respect people's rights in this area.
24. **Get things right.** You can't do too much fact-checking. Ages, spellings, names of places – it's so important to get them right, both for the publication's reputation and yours. Editors quickly back away from contributors they can't trust to be accurate. And no one, you included, wants to be sued for libel, so never write anything that can't be substantiated. Follow the old journalistic maxim – "if in doubt, leave out".

• Afterwards...

25. **Say thanks** after publication. Don't be schmaltzy or over-effusive, and don't do it every time. Just see it as a way of cementing relationships. If you're top-of-mind for editors, they're more likely to think of you next time there's a story to be done. And it gives you an opportunity to pitch another idea at them, too.
26. **Don't be precious** about your work, even if the sub-editor has almost completely re-written it. They're the experts and know their market best. Heavy editing happens to everyone, so don't ring up and moan. It may be, for instance, that a late-placed advertisement has meant your 1000 words has had to be cut down to 500. It's different if they've made errors, in which case you must, of course, assert yourself. You may also need to negotiate on

payment if you've been commissioned to write a certain number of words, and a subsequent reduction in word count is caused by factors outside your control.

27. **Make sure you get paid.** Find out what you're expected to do re payments – filling in tax forms, sending invoices etc. They're so busy they'll probably fail to tell you.

• In general...

28. **Think laterally.** There are plenty of newspapers and magazines out there. What's your area of expertise? Gardening, sailing, health care, parenting, computers, financial planning, salesmanship, fitness? There are publications focussing on all these areas. Editors are always looking for knowledge-holders who can write with authority and flair. Boring experts are everywhere! Be an *entertaining* expert.
29. **Create a congenial workspace** for yourself. Write in a space that suits you. Writing can be lonely, and if the words won't flow at home, change your location -- do whatever freshens you up, whether it's going to the gym, taking a walk, or taking a notebook to your favourite café where you can be surrounded by buzz.
30. **Keep trying.** It's a tough business and only those who persevere will succeed. You may not earn much money, but nothing beats the thrill of seeing your name in print.
31. **Read, read and read some more.** Every writer needs to be an ardent reader, both to check up on what's going on out there and to pick up new ideas.

Editors love people who are:

- familiar with their publication
- responsive to their needs
- fast, accurate and focused
- pleasant and courteous to deal with
- able to generate fresh ideas
- good at producing clean, readable prose
- happy to make changes

Editors hate people who are:

- off-target with their ideas
- constantly in need of coaching
- careless with the facts
- unwilling to take "no" for an answer
- unable to come with new ideas
- over-sensitive to criticism
- sloppy with spelling and grammar

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