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10 Golden Rules of Freelance Writing and How I Broke Them (How to Break the Rules and Make It as a Magazine Writer)

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10 Golden Rules of Freelance Writing and How I Broke Them

**(How To Break The Rules and
Make It As a Magazine Writer)**

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ISBN 1-59113-396-3

Published by Bob Freiday, Ft. Myers, FL, USA.

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Printed in the United States of America.

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2003

**10 Golden Rules of Freelance Writing
and How I Broke Them**

**(How to Break the Rules and
Make It as a Magazine Writer)**

Bob Freiday

In Loving Memory of "my little sister," Ellen Margaret Freiday

For my mother, Jane S. Freiday

Also For Nicole, Melanie, Shanna and Brandon

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Preface

The whole premise behind this book for both aspiring magazine writers and those who are already well-entrenched as magazine writers is: Don't be afraid to break the rules. Rules are meant to be broken. Some rules are just plain stupid. And rules tend to confine a person into a pre-defined box, and hinder creativity-- both in writing, and marketing your work.

As you will immediately notice, some of the rules that I often broke while starting out as a freelancer are actually good, solid rules that writers should generally abide by. Further, one of them, the very first one, is a rule that should basically never be broken: Never, *ever* telephone a busy editor.

Why did I include it? I cover that at the beginning of the chapter, but, briefly, I included it because it was not as critical a rule back in the days when I was starting out, which was not only pre-commonplace email-- but *pre-Windows!* Back in 1987, most people simply didn't have email. Most email was limited to inter-office or inter-corporate communications. The email that wasn't was so expensive that it was pretty much limited to large corporations, it's employees, and to at-office, on-site business use only. CompuServe, Prodigy, maybe one or two others-- they were the only service providers for this "new thing" called the Internet, and most of their clients and subscribers were corporations and perhaps a segment of rich people, or those with high incomes. The average person, however, simply didn't have email. So, aside from the telephone, snail mail was the only other option, unless you planned to

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have a steady Fed Ex, Airborne Express, or Express Mail budget for outbound contacts with editors.

So, because of this, it wasn't as big a deal to break the "never telephone an editor" rule. Many editors were used to it, back then, and it wasn't nearly as much of an insult to them as it would be today-- when most of them now have repeatedly made it explicitly clear (through writer's listings on the web and through their own guidelines, also posted on the web) that writers should never, *ever* telephone them.

We didn't have that stern admonishment "back in the old days." In fact, most editors actually listed their telephone numbers in the contact information in *Writer's Market*-- one of our only sources of market listings back then. Sure, they might say to send a query letter to them-- but they usually wouldn't say, "Don't ever, *ever* call me!"

So, yes: The first of my Ten Golden Rules that you can break-- you actually *can't* break today. But I've included it because of how much the reader can learn about "making it" as a writer by observing *how* I broke the rule, *why* I broke the rule, and how I *ran with it* once I did break the rule. There are so many lessons to be learned from that single broken rule that it's really irrelevant that you cannot really break the rule today.

The subsequent nine rules, however, *can* be broken, and each is presented with an eye towards teaching the up-and-coming writer something about breaking out of the mold, getting creative, and following your instincts. Some of the rules, like never selling all rights to an article, are solid, good rules-- generally speaking. But what I've done here is try to show how, sometimes, it may be a good idea to break one of those rules. *Each* of those rules. There are always exceptions to everything. Sometimes a rule may be an extremely good one-- but there may be overriding factors in some particular situations where it can be not only helpful, but extremely beneficial to the writer to break the rule.

With each of the examples I give on how or when it might be advisable to break a particular rule, and with each explanation of why a particular

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rule should almost always be ignored, I hope to teach writers how to get creative and break out of that mold, and *sell some articles!*

On a more personal note: I began my career as a writer by writing erotica for a few months back in '87, but quickly branched out into more serious "mainstream" freelancing. I got lucky (in many, many ways), as you will read, and quickly (within only five or six weeks of starting) found myself supporting a family of six on my full-time freelance writing income.

Bizarre? You bet it was. And I hope you enjoy reading about it.

I continued to occasionally write erotica (Hustler Fantasies, Chic Letters, Swank, Velvet... many more) to supplement my primary, mainstream writing income (School clothes! Christmas! Four kids!), and, at one point, even put my freelance writing "on hold" (or at least down a few notches) to take the helm of 12 national glossy "men's magazines" available at most large newsstands back in those days. My title was Executive Editor, and I had to conceive, plan, present, get approval on, acquire copy for, write for, acquire photos for, and paginate and deliver an average of 2 1/2 full issues every month. I also had to write all photo captions, write all teasers for the inside of the magazine, write cover blurbs and proofread my own magazines. To boot, I had to acquire illustrated jokes to fill space when an advertiser would drop out at the last minute, maintain relationships with cartoonists to keep that file three-inches thick when I needed it, and even write full-page, back-issue advertising for the back covers! It was brutal! I was almost relieved when the company moved the operations to Los Angeles (actually, Hollywood), and gave me the option of moving or quitting. Eight months of that was enough for anybody! But I mention it because it taught me a lot about what editors must deal with, what their priorities are, and how writers can either impress them or make them smirk when they read a cover letter, or a story.

It also taught me that good writers are pure, refined *gold* to an editor. Believe me: They need us as much as we need them.

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Regarding my resume, I've published over 700 articles and fiction stories, if you include the erotica. If you subtract the erotic fiction and the erotic non-fiction and the erotic pseudo-non-fiction-- I've published about 500 serious articles for mainstream publishers. Simon & Schuster. Prentice-Hall. Thomas Publishing (a huge trade publisher, and publisher of The Thomas Register). Cahner's (another huge trade publisher). Woman's World. The Asbury Park Press (NJ). Executive Business Magazine. The Aquarian Weekly. And, of course, many, many others. All told, I've been published in well over 50 different publications in my 15-year career.

I hope you enjoy this book. I've tried real hard to keep it interesting, with plenty of "writer stories" to illustrate my points. If I've failed in any way, it's probably because this is my very first book. I've published many different chapters in several different books for Simon & Schuster, and for Prentice-Hall w/ Dunn & Bradstreet, but this is my first attempt at my own honest-to-gosh book, and I've had a blast writing it. I'm immediately going to start working on my next!

So, again-- I hope you enjoy it. I've done my best to make it chock-full of good advice for writers, and most especially for those who are just starting out. I hope it provides knowledge, entertains, and inspires you.

Feel free to drop me an email and let me know if you enjoyed it, and if you found it valuable. Or even if you didn't!

Sincerely,

Bob Freiday
June 2003

Ten Golden Rules

Rule #1: Never, *EVER* Telephone a Busy Editor

I'm starting with this rule for several reasons, the most significant of which is that, technically, it shouldn't be in this book. Why? Because although it was still "A Golden Rule" of freelancing writing when I brazenly broke the rule so, so many years ago ('87, '88, '89... before email became an option), it's not really a rule that you can actually break today. In fact, it's become more of a solid, impenetrable brick wall than ever before, at least as it applies to editors you've never dealt with before. Why? Again-- the advent of email. Editors (and writers) now have the luxury of email (we tend to forget what a luxury it is), and most editors have now made it clear to use mail or email only, and to never, ever telephone them. I mean... how can you possibly break the rule now? Simply put, you just can't.

Another reason for starting with this rule is that, even though it is far more relevant and unbreakable today than it was back when I was starting out, breaking this rule was the single most powerful tool I used to launch and build my career as a full-time freelancer. All the articles I was reading in *Writer's Digest* and elsewhere and all the advice I was getting from other writers was the same: "Don't ever, *ever*, *ever* telephone an editor! Use a query letter!" And this was *before* email! The only other option was "snail mail!"

Finally, I'm starting with this rule because the stories relating to this whole issue ("way back when," keep in mind) may still provide some valuable insight to up-and-coming writers-- even if the rule no longer applies. Some of these true stories are real eye-openers, and they will

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serve not only to educate writers on how you can sometimes just toss everything you've learned aside, follow your instincts, break the rules and make a bigger impact-- but also to provide a bit of an introduction to the rebel of a writer who's book you're about to read.

And please note: Although many of the anecdotes that you read in this book may seem too incredible to believe-- I assure you that every one of them is true, and that none of them are exaggerated in any way.

Getting Inspired... By a Swift Kick in the Butt!

Let's take a quick look at how I "broke in" as a paid writer. It was basically all because of an insult from a friend (that kick in the butt) and a bet.

Fade In, 1980, Barnegat, NJ. I'd been dreaming and fantasizing and, apparently, yapping about being "a writer" for quite some time, and a very gruff, to-the-point, hard-nosed friend of the family (older than me, kind of like a father figure, and a pure-blooded American Indian) had finally had enough of my yapping about it.

"You're not a writer!!" he blurted out, stunning me. "You've never published anything! Even *I've* published several chapters in the official state history of the New Jersey Indians! Until you have the balls to send a piece out and get it published-- you have no right to call yourself a writer."

I was stunned, and got into an argument with him. "I'm working on it! I'm studying the markets, and plan to send out some query letters very soon!"

"Bull- - -!!" he said. "If you wanted to get published, and if you had the balls, you'd write a piece for *The SandPaper*, or something. How hard is that!?" (*The SandPaper* is a very well done, tabloid-format weekly newspaper serving Long Beach Island, N.J. and the surrounding area.)

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I said "bull" right back, telling him that I'd never, ever write for a publication that paid only \$15 for a piece I'd have to work all day writing, perhaps two days.

Then he challenged me. "I dare you!" he said. "I dare you to go home tonight, write a story, and try to sell it to The SandPaper. So what if it only pays fifteen bucks? At least you'll be able to call yourself a writer-- and mean it!"

I was intensely angry when I left my friend's house. My wife and I gathered up the kids and went home, and my wife knew I was really, really hot under the collar. She avoided me as I went into my den and locked myself in with the typewriter. I slipped a blank sheet of white paper into the machine, then sat there staring at it for a long, long time. Where to start? What to write about? I didn't even have an *idea*, much less any research!

I kept thinking. Then I got logical, narrowing down the possibilities. Hmmm. Let's see. The SandPaper is a weekly tabloid publication with fishing/fisherman stories, boating stories, and things like that. Also many local stories about interesting people and local businesses. (Actually, it's an extremely well done local newspaper.)

Hmmm. I got up, went out to the car, drove to the local convenience store, and came back home with last week's and this week's issues of The SandPaper. I also gathered up a bunch of old issues that were laying around my den. (Yes-- I'm one of those accumulators. I can't seem to throw away anything-- especially old newspapers. I get rid of the classifieds and the pages of auto ads and other inserts, then save all the rest, psychologically building my own research archives-- with no index, other than date, and of basically no use. Used to drive my wife crazy!) I began perusing several issues of The SandPaper, trying to think; trying to come up with an idea.

Then I noticed that there was a "guest column" which appeared in the front of the publication each week, written by guest writers who had

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something to say about something-- anything. They were full-page, always illustrated with something and, apparently, usually written quite well. Hmmm.

Hmmm, again. My mind was racing. Again, I got logical. I asked myself, "Okay-- what have I done in my life that most people have *not* done, and which they might find interesting to read about, learn about?" The reason I asked myself that, of course, is I had nothing prepared otherwise, and no research material from which to build an article. It was going to *have to* be based on personal experience of some kind.

Hmmm. I thought of racing my motorcycle at suicidal, 100-mph+ speeds down winding back roads when I was younger.

Uh, uh. No good. People would just think that was stupid, which it probably was.

Okay. What about all the car accidents I'd been in? To that point, I'd been hit by two drunk drivers and had totaled both cars and walked away. I'd also broken my jaw in my only-ever accident that was my fault, hitting a telephone pole and breaking the dashboard with my jaw. I even had photos of the car-- and the cracked dashboard.

Hmmm. Not really that interesting. Wait! When I was 16, I was a passenger in a car wherein one of my buddies (the driver) was brutally killed, his skull crushed when the car rolled over on him.

Yuck! Too gross and morbid.

What have I *done!!!*? What have I done in my life that's unique?

Suddenly it hit me-- parachuting! Sport parachuting! I wanted to call it skydiving, but I was too technical for that. It's not technically skydiving, really, until you've "freefall," which I'd never done. (They hadn't invented Tandem Jumping yet, wherein you can make your first jump as a freefall with the instructor strapped to your back.) I had, however,

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jumped out of several Cessnas and one huge DC-3 on *seven* different occasions. Now *that* was interesting-- wasn't it? I thought so, and was suddenly getting excited. It was certainly interesting enough and provided enough fodder for a one-page feature. Right?

Okay. Great. I have an idea. Let's see. Hmmm. What was unique about my parachuting experience?

Oh, yeah! It was kinda' funny. I had spent the whole day in training and suiting up and building up my confidence, and was very cocky as I climbed into the plane, feeling as if I'd totally conquered my fear of jumping out of an airplane. But as we began to race at high speed down the runway, I suddenly remembered that I'd forgotten to conquer another, completely different fear: *going up* in the airplane! I'd only been in a plane once in my life (when I was just a little kid), so it was a whole new experience in and of itself just to *go up* in the plane!

Oh, sh..! It was kinda' funny, and kinda' ruined my whole sense of confidence. But I used that when writing the piece; used it as a humorous lead-in. Another anecdote I used in the beginning of the story was when, while standing there all suited up and waiting to make my first jump, and just as I felt my confidence was up and that my fear was in control-- I saw an experienced jumper (over 1,000 jumps to his credit) almost get killed in front of my eyes! A huge crowd watched him fall and fall and fall and fall, then (just as many people were turning away because they didn't want to see the impact) he finally pulled his reserve so close to the ground that, when his chute filled with air, it deflated about one second later. I.e., it inflated, he landed, then it deflated. Talk about *close*!

[As a side note: I find it interesting (and revealing) to look back and realize what I did during the long wait to board our airplane (I was with friends). I kept staring at the guy who'd nearly been killed right in front of us all, watching him sitting on a blanket in the grass with his wife and two small children. I waited a decent amount of time, wanting to give him time to recover emotionally from that near-death experience, but finally (and I was only 18 years old at the time, basically a long-haired

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punk) made my approach and stood next to the blanket and said, "Excuse me."

He and his wife looked up, and their kids looked at me curiously. "I just wanted to ask you what happened up there. I'm about to make my first jump ever, and it kinda' made me wonder. You know?"

He smiled-- then told me all about how the little "pilot chute" (which pops out first when you pull your ripcord, grabs the wind, then yanks out the main chute so it can catch the wind) actually disconnected from the main chute and disappeared into the sky, leaving him with a perfectly good parachute inside his now-open pack, but which wouldn't (couldn't) catch the wind. Because he hated the idea of using his reserve chute (the reserve is in front of you, not on your back, and down at about hip level: When you pull that thing, it gives you a serious, sometimes painful jolt. He mentioned a friend who did that at full speed-- resulting in a kick from his own boots to the back of his helmet. Talk about back pain!), he decided he was, instead, going to manually "dig out" the main chute himself. If he could just get it out a foot or two, it would catch the wind and open.

"I was so obsessed with it, so involved, that I didn't realize how much time had gone by. Thankfully, I suddenly saw the horizon in my peripheral vision. As a general rule, if you can see the horizon with your peripheral vision-- it's pretty close to too late!"

So he finally pulled the reserve-- with about one second to spare. No kidding. But the point of this little "life story" is that, even at eighteen years old and fully fourteen years before I became a full-time writer, I was actually ballsy enough to go up to the guy and interview him. Ask him what happened. I noticed that nobody else was doing that. Perhaps they thought it would be rude. Me? I knew it wouldn't bother him at all.

So, even as a teenager, I believe I had the gut instincts and makings of a writer. Perhaps with the right guidance, or less of a cocky-bastard

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attitude, I could have been a serious writer long before I finally became one. Do *you* have that instinct?]

I also pointed out to the readers of my article that, after my seven jumps, I realized that I'd been up in airplanes eight times-- but had only landed in a plane once!! It was true! And it made for a funny anecdote to the story-- and the perfect ending. (A year or so later, my buddy and I took our girlfriends up for a scenic airplane ride as something interesting to do. As we were approaching the airport, Mr. Cocky Skydiver must have tensed up, and my new girlfriend looked at me and said, "What's the matter?" I smiled. Even then, I was too honest to worry about how it might appear. "I've been up in small planes eight times," I explained, "but I've only actually landed in one *once!* It's kind of intimidating." She thought that was hilarious! "It's not intimidating to *jump out* of a plane-- but it's intimidating to *land* in one!?"")

When all was said and done, I had an article written and polished to the appropriate word length in a few hours, and couldn't wait to speak with the editor at The SandPaper the next day. Even back then, I was not even hesitant about breaking the rules. I knew I should package up the story with a cover letter to the editor and mail it-- but, hey! She was only a few miles away!

Incredibly (I can't believe I really did this!), I called the editor, told her I thought I had a great story for that section of the publication, and almost begged her to let me drive it over so I could wait while she read it. Talk about ballsy! She was hesitant, but must have found it kind of funny, as she decided to humor me and said, "Sure. Bring it over. I'll read it while you wait in the lobby."

Funny? Looking back, I think it's hilarious!! How many writers get started this way? Probably none! It was so pathetically desperate, looking back on it. She must have thought me a fool.

But here's the big surprise ending: After I'd been sitting and waiting and sweating for about fifteen minutes, she came back out of her office,

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called me in, then told me she was "thrilled" with the piece, and would publish it in the very next issue-- due out in a few days! I was so elated! I was flabbergasted!

And I'd "gotten even" with my old friend who'd challenged me. He's a gruff, full-blooded American Indian, and he'd basically "tricked me" into finally getting published. He told me later that he kind of felt bad making me feel bad-- but knew it would put a fire under my butt and force me to finally get published. Incredibly, and much to his surprise-- it got me officially published *within 24 hours of his insult!!*

So that was my first incident in breaking the Golden Rules of freelance writing, resulting in my very first published work. To this day I believe that, had I not telephoned the editor, my story may have sat in a slush pile for weeks, maybe longer. By making that call, I created a personal one-on-one with the editor, obviously intriguing her enough to give me permission to drive my piece over to her office, as unorthodox as that was-- and as much of a fool she must have thought I was. I could never have generated that same kind of intrigue or interest by simply sending it in "over the transom," like most other writers would have done.

Finally Getting Serious

It was years later that I finally decided to "take my shot" and get serious about trying to become a freelance writer. Ironically, after I'd published the parachuting piece, I never sent anything else out for years. Why? I'm not sure. Probably because I was content in my job selling advertising for a rock n' roll music weekly, enjoying the fringe benefits that came with that (free concerts, free admission to just about any club on the New Jersey Shore and elsewhere, close friendships with many club owners, bands, band members, promoters, etc., etc.), and also because I was simply too busy. When I wasn't working, I was helping my wife with the many chores that come with a houseful of kids. Who had time for writing?

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Yes-- I was still "writing." Once it's in your blood, it stays there. I just wasn't making the effort to get published. I was writing a novel, in fact, working on it on and off over the years (and of course, me being me, and again driving my wife insane, insisting on trying to write two separate, completely unrelated novels (not even in the same genre!) simultaneously)... but I never made the decision to take a shot at freelancing, much less at doing it full-time.

Then something happened. The industry I was working in basically collapsed when the drinking age in NJ was raised to 21, which put the bulk of my accounts literally out of business. If they weren't put out of business, they became regular bars and nightclubs without the live entertainment, and therefore no longer needed to advertise in our weekly. Without that 18-20-yr.-old market to flock to the clubs legally, there was no financial payback in hiring live bands. So, in one signing of the Governor's signature, my whole life as I knew it took a nosedive. My income dropped to less than half of what it had been, and other things (like losing my license temporarily from one-too-many speeding tickets) forced me to swallow my pride and go back into a factory to bring in a paycheck for the family. White collar to blue collar-- in the blink of an eye.

I was devastated. Crushed. My fantastic life had all but vaporized, and my self-confidence with it. But then something else happened-- the new *Writer's Market* came out. That book, perhaps more than anything else, was a huge inspiration to me. Hundreds and hundreds of editors telling writers exactly what they needed, how to present it, how to break into their publications and get published (kind of like what Angela Hoy's *The Write Market Reports* does for writers today). I devoured that book on each of my breaks, especially lunches, while in the plastics factory, and I began to underline specific markets and dream of getting published. Because it just seemed easier and quicker (I was always impatient), I found myself looking closely at all the "men's sophisticate" publications-- men's magazines, so to speak. "Girlie magazines," we used to call them when we were kids. Velvet. Hustler. Chic. Cheri. Swank. On and on.

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Just as I was thinking all of these things, I suffered a pretty serious back injury while on the job, and found myself at home with a lot of spare time during my recuperation. I asked my wife to drive the family down to a huge flea market not far from our home, where she and the kids could have a nice day, but where there was also a writers/readers dream of a place with thousands of back issues of just about every magazine known to mankind-- at really cheap prices. There was a small little corner curtained off, and in there they offered up a whole smorgasbord of "dirty magazines."

What a gold mine! I was probably the only man in the place who wasn't really interested in the erotic aspects of the magazines-- I was thinking more along the lines of, "Wow! What a way to study the market!" I snagged four or five copies of one particular publication to study their style and what they were buying, and four or five of another. My wife gave me "that look" the first time she saw me buying about fifty or sixty "girlie" magazines (which she despised!), but I convinced her that it was all "research! Really! I mean it!"

Low and behold, my wife surprised me: She actually began to help me peruse the materials and study these markets, and help me come up with ideas that I could possibly sell to them. She was actually sitting there looking at these magazines with me-- which she'd always despised! That's when I knew that she was taking me seriously, and that she really did believe in me as a potential writer.

Hmmm. So many changes! So quickly!

And that's about the time I made the mistake of "following the rules" like most other writers. I rented a typewriter (we didn't have enough money to buy one, and had long-ago sold the one I'd used for the parachuting story many years earlier), and began pounding out three, four, five stories a day, and sending them out to specific publications. One by one, one after the other, they began bouncing back. Something was wrong. It just wasn't working.

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Hmmm. I knew, almost instantly, what I was doing wrong: I was hurrying too much. I was in too much of a rush. I suddenly realized that, with all that research material and all that "studying," I really hadn't put that time and effort to good use. I did the studying... then wrote what I felt like writing. No wonder it was bouncing back. I wasn't really targeting the work properly. So I took a deep breath, stopped pounding out material, and picked one particular publication I felt I could write for: Chic Letters. I found out that the same editor also bought material for Hustler Fantasies, so I concentrated on carefully studying (I'm being serious here! Stop laughing!!) these dirty stories. What did they have in common? What was the style, the format, the structure? Once I did that, I knew what it was: They were all in specific categories, of course-- but they also all had some kind of a clever ending.

Hmmm. I then began to work on ideas, each with a trick ending. Finally, I picked one and wrote it, then sent it out. Again, I was doing it the old fashioned way, but at least I was doing it with intelligence, now. Sure enough, I sold the first piece I sent to Chic Letters/Hustler Fantasies. I got a very dry, form-letter-type reply in the mail a few weeks later-- with a check for \$15 enclosed.

Wow! I was published! In Chic Letters!

And that's when, one more time, I immediately broke that "Golden Rule" about telephoning busy editors.

Don't telephone busy editors? Back then (and again, to warn you, this was before the advent of email, so you probably couldn't get away with this today), my attitude towards that "Golden Rule" was basically, "Yeah. Right. Uh, huh. Sure." So when I got that \$15 check in NJ, I immediately grabbed the phone and called Hollywood, CA to speak to the editor who'd bought my story. The guy who got on the phone was rather gruff, and obviously very busy. "YEAH!!?" he barked into the phone.

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And I was, like, "Well... uhmmm... you just bought one of my stories, Sir, and I was wondering if I might sell more to you. Is there a way to send you more than one at a time? What's the normal process with writers?"

And he was, like, "What!? Who in hell are *you*? I deal with hundreds of writers. What did you write?"

I told him the name of the little story, and he goes, "Oh! That one! That was great! Send me packages of twelve at a time, whatever categories you want-- but try to mix them up a little bit. I'll buy what I want, and send you a check for whatever ones I buy. Send me 12 at a time-- okay? I gotta' go. Bye!"

Now-- if I'd never made that phone call, I'd never have known to send "packages" instead of single stories. My next package was 12 little stories, and he *bought all 12!* Instead of a \$15 check in the mail, I got one for \$180. My wife and I couldn't believe it! I sent out another 12, of course, and the editor kept buying and buying and buying-- an EverReady-Bunny editor hungry for Quality Trash!

Don't be Afraid to Ask Favors-- and *Network!!*

After a few rounds of that, I broke the rules again and, one more time, dialed Hollywood.

"*WHAAAT!?!??*" the unpleasant man answered.

I explained who I was again, and he was a little friendlier, realizing he was on a gravy train with me. He'd bought close to fifty little stories from me in barely two months. As delicately as possible, I explained that I was the father of four kids and hoping he might be able to point me to an editor who bought "larger pieces for higher pay," with, of course, a promise not to stop sending *him* material, as well.

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He immediately gave me the name of an editor at a much larger publishing company in the men's adult market, and said to me, "Tell her I sent you. She pays, like, one-fifty or two-hundred a story, I think."

I quickly telephoned the editor (no names, please), and she proceeded to tell me that she was "real busy" but "definitely looking for writers."

"Call me at home tonight," she said, surprising me. "Here's my number."

I called her at home that night, we spoke for well over an hour, and she gave me two immediate assignments worth \$200 apiece-- and oodles of seasoned advice about how to write a good piece (these were no longer small little "letters" and "confessionals" for the small rags, but full-length (3,500 words) feature fiction for her glossy national magazines (she was the editor of several).

BINGO! Four-hundred bucks in business-- 'cause I'd broken the rules *twice* and telephoned *two* editors, rather than contacted them via query letter. (Again, bear in mind that all of this was happening in the days before e-mail was widely available.)

Expanding My Horizons-- Towards Mainstream Freelancing

Right about the time I began writing regularly for the editor who paid \$200 a pop (and shocking the heck out of my wife that there was this much money in freelance erotica!), I was perusing PC Magazine and read in John Dvorak's column a fascinating little story about something that very few people had ever heard of: Computer Virus.

What? Interesting. Intriguing, I thought. I read the story, realized that *this* could *definitely* be something *any* editor at *any* business magazine might be interested in hearing about, so grabbed my Writer's Market and began flipping through pages trying to find a reasonably mid-range publication that just might take a shot with a writer who'd never published anything "major" for a mainstream publisher. I didn't want to mention my erotic writing, so I knew I had little to tout regarding writing experience.

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Anyway... I decided to break the rules again. But, this time, I decided I wanted to break *two* rules. Of course, I was now used to breaking the "don't telephone busy editors" rule, but now I wanted to do something I'd always read in writers magazines and elsewhere that writers simply shouldn't do: Offer to write a piece "on speculation."

**Rule #2:
Never Write "On Speculation" -
Always Get A Commitment**

My thinking was this: It was highly unlikely that I'd ever get the assignment with no experience writing about business and management, nor about computers or software. I was fighting an uphill battle, but suspected I had "the key" to getting my first honest-to-gosh "mainstream" assignment with a nationally-distributed business publication.

I was hungry, in a hurry, and enthused about this idea. So I grabbed a legal pad, wrote down the editor's name and phone number, wrote a few notes about what I wanted to say to the editor when I got her on the phone, locked the kids away in the bedroom dungeons upstairs with my wife assuring me she'd keep them out of the way, and picked up the telephone. To this day, about 16 years later, I can still remember a paraphrased version of that conversation:

"Hello. Sorry to bother you, but I promise to be quick. I'm a freelance writer in New Jersey, and I just found out about a shocking situation in the computer world that I thought you and your readers might be interested in. I was hoping I could run it by you real quick?"

I had the editor's interest immediately. "Sure. What's up?"

I explained about the story I'd just read, and how this "virus" had infected the computers at Lehigh University's computer lab in Pennsylvania, that

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it had completely erased all of their hard-drive materials, and that many experts believed that it was possibly the most dangerous thing facing business today, and that all managers and supervisors who used computers needed to know about it. (Her publication was a Simon & Schuster/Prentice-Hall newsletter called "Supervisor's Bulletin.") I also told her that what I'd like to do is contact the head of Lehigh University's computer lab (the victim of the virus hit) and interview him for the story. "He'd be perfect," I said, "because he's both the victim *and* a computer expert."

NOTE: I already knew, from the Writer's Market listing, that this publication bought only interview-based stories. All stories had to have at least one interviewee. So the last part of my sales pitch, I knew, was important.

Now it was time to close the deal, and I got ready to pull the rabbit out of the hat and "make the close." I explained to her that I was just an "up and coming" writer, but that I had full confidence I could write a good story for her. I then used my Trump Card-- telling her that, because of my lack of experience with publications like hers, I'd be more than willing to "write the piece on spec," meaning that there would be no hard feelings if she didn't buy it. "I just don't want to pursue the story and write it with your publication in mind unless I know that you're actually interested in the article, and that you'll definitely buy it if it's up to your standards."

She agreed immediately! "That sounds fair. I like that idea. No hard feelings if I don't buy it, though-- right?"

We both agreed. She told me that, if she bought it, she'd pay 10-cents/word, which she paid all of her "new writers." The story would be targeted at between 1,500 and 2,000 words. I sent a story that turned out to be 1,875 words, so my first "real" paycheck from a "real," honest-to-gosh serious publishing company was for \$187.50. And, once again-- I'd done it by (oops!!) ***breaking all the rules!!***

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After I'd delivered the story via mail, she telephoned me and told me that she loved my article and was definitely going to publish it. (!!!) I was so thrilled. My first national publication that wasn't erotica. And it was Simon & Schuster/Prentice-Hall! I mean, it just didn't *get* bigger than that! She told me a check would be in the mail within the week (shockingly!), and I received the check in only a few days. I mean--wow! I liked the way *this* company operated! (Like I said earlier, I got real lucky in many respects at the early stages of my career.)

The editor had offered to send me several back issues of her publication so I could study it for style and content, and to come up with ideas. It was an open invitation by the editor to query her in the future-- and she never made so much as a peep about my having telephoned her instead of using email. She didn't mind telephone queries at all. Strangely, I later realized that this busy building filled with bustling offices with hustling editors polishing content for two issues each month... was filled with editors who downright *preferred* to be queried via telephone. It was much easier, quicker, and with zero paperwork. I.e., "Hi. Got an idea for you." Editor: "Great! Shoot!" And that's how it turned out they liked to work with writers. It was a writer's dream come true.

So, after a few days of studying the back issues she'd send me, I decided to call the editor back with another article idea. She liked the idea, and "bought it" (gave me the assignment)-- this time *not* on speculation: It was a standard assignment, like any of her other writers would get. I'd proven my ability to deliver a good product for her, and I was now "on her list," as she put it, of regular contributors.

BINGO!

[I should note that, later, I realized that I had a super-hot "new" topic in Computer Virus, and one that would interest managers in just about any type of industry, not to mention small business owners who did their own computing, and were now expanding into this "newfangled thing" called The Internet. I ended out selling stories on the topic to quite a few other publications, including The Toms River Observer (NJ), wherein I used

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my head and first found a Toms River-based computer consultant in the yellow pages (I lived in Ocean County, so it was no big deal) and interviewed him so I'd have a local angle. That helped sell the piece, I'm sure. I also sold even more Computer Virus features to several other Prentice-Hall publications, including Security Management, Word Processing Clinic, and a few others. Frankly, it sickens me to look back and realize that I could have sold an easy one-hundred stories about that - but I was too caught up in learning new industries and writing about those. Just a pointer: When you realize you've really hit on a hot topic that nobody else seems to be writing about-- jump on it!]

After a few articles with the editor of Supervisor's Bulletin, I decided to network like I'd done with that gruff editor in Hollywood. I mean-- why not? She was one of how many editors at Simon & Schuster/Prentice-Hall? She had to know somebody else who needed a good writer. So I called her up, asked her if she knew of any other editors who might happen to be looking for a dependable writer, and she said, "Oh, sure! There are *so* many editors in this building!" Then she gave me the names of *four other editors* who she thought would be interested in working with me. She also gave me another assignment over the phone, to boot!

And that, ladies and gentleman, was the catalyst which truly launched my career. I could barely keep up with the work after that, parlaying one sale to one editor into a new assignment with a new editor, and on and on and on-- 'till I found myself writing for *over a dozen editors in two locations!* Then, later, after I'd figured out what parts of this conglomerate (finally bought by Paramount, then gobbled up by Viacom) were Prentice-Hall, and which parts were actually Simon & Schuster, I found myself working with half a dozen *new* editors in a third location in a completely different state! (New York City, to be exact. All the others were in Connecticut.)

All because I broke the rules-- and because I'd *networked!!* (much more about networking later, in Chapter Eleven)

Some Rules Simply Make No Sense

To this day, I don't understand this whole rule about never writing "on speculation" for an editor, and only writing when you've got a serious commitment.

Of course, serious writers and journalists with oodles of experience definitely shy away, for example, from an editor (no matter how large the publication) who refuses to send a contract or make a commitment on a particular article. Such a refusal or hesitancy on the editor's part just smells of trouble to the experienced writer. If he/she is serious about the assignment, why is he/she so hesitant or stubborn about a contract, or for giving an assignment with a firm commitment?

But I'm not talking about situations like that. I wouldn't write "on spec" for an editor like that, either. However, if there was a publication that I suspected would never give me, with my particular experience, a traditional, solid assignment for an article for them, I would, in fact, consider offering to write a piece on speculation for the editor-- with the following conditions: The editor has expressed serious, valid interest in the article; the editor has agreed that, providing everything is delivered on time and up to the expected standards, he/she will treat it like any other assigned story-- and buy it.

I've done this with more than one editor, and it has never failed me yet.

I did it with my very first "mainstream" sale to Prentice-Hall's Supervisor's Bulletin so many years ago, and I'm convinced the editor would never have given me the assignment had I not offered to write it on speculation. You have a much better chance of piquing an editor's interest if you offer to write the piece on those terms. I mean-- what have they got to lose? And the editor most likely isn't going to give the go-ahead (even on-spec) if he/she has zero interest in such a story. This "tool," this "trick" is to be used when you're pretty sure you have an on-target idea for a publication you believe wouldn't otherwise give you an

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assignment. You only do it out of necessity-- when you're pretty darned sure that the editor would otherwise never assign you the story.

I did it when I had a story I just knew I could write for Woman's World. I knew the editor of Woman's World would never give a standard assignment to a business writer who had zero clips in the realm of woman's magazines or tabloid-type publications, so I telephoned her, made my pitch, and offered to write the piece "on spec." She knew what I meant: If I did a good job, she'd buy it. If I blew it, she wouldn't. Because the story was "right on the money" for the publication's "True Love Story" section, and because the editor could sense my confidence and enthusiasm, and because I'd piqued her interest-- she said okay. I wrote the article in one night, and had a check for \$300 in my mailbox a few weeks later.

I did it when I wanted to write an erotic, full-length fiction story for Swank, which paid \$350 when I was averaging \$200 for my stories. Again, the editor sensed my enthusiasm and confidence, thought about it, and said, "Well, sure. Go ahead and write it and send it to me. If you do a good job, I'll not only buy it-- I'll give you another assignment. I could use some good fiction writers." Once again, I wrote the story, sent it in, got paid \$350, and now was on the editor's "list" of writers he could depend on for a full-length fiction piece (which can be harder to write than you might expect, erotica or not). I became a regular contributor for a bit, and published probably six or seven stories for him. I simply got too busy, after that.

I did it again when I wanted to write a nice, bylined feature for a monthly, glossy New Jersey business publication (now defunct) called Executive Business Magazine. I'd become hungry (starved!) for a bylined piece, having published hundreds of non-bylined pieces for some time. (Too boot, my only stories with bylines, erotica, had fake names! Almost everyone who publishes erotica uses pseudonyms, so you don't get the same thrill as when you see your own name there.) I also knew that "Executive Business Magazine" would look great on my business-writing resume, and also had discovered that quite a few influential

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business people in New Jersey were reading it. The byline and exposure alone were worth the trade-off, money aside. As it happened, the magazine paid very well-- \$500 for my first story.

I called the editor, introduced myself, pitched my idea (an article about PC-based Database Management Systems (DBMS) and their potential impact on even small businesses, due to the shocking power vs. affordability ratio.(These complex, intricate, super-powerful "systems" were really just software!) She loved my idea, and agreed to let me write it "on spec," which perhaps I didn't have to offer, in this case, because I was, in fact, quickly becoming somewhat of a computer expert. But I did, and it worked out fine. In fact-- she chose the finished piece as her Cover Story that month, which was a real boon to the resume! A cover story in a respected glossy business monthly? Wow! I honestly would have written that piece for nothing, considering the huge personal benefits in that particular byline.

(Then again-- isn't there some rule somewhere? Never, ever write for no pay? Gee. Perhaps I'd better crawl back into that box!)

Each of these anecdotes should teach you one thing if nothing else: Sometimes it is, indeed, worth "breaking the rules." I've never, ever been burned by offering to write a story on speculation. Not once. Maybe I've been lucky, but I think it has far more to do with *the quality of the articles* I later submitted! Always, always, always deliver what you promise! That's the most critical advice that I can give to any writer.

Of course, my "luck" with never having been burned on an "on spec" assignment also had something to do with the care I took in deciding when, with whom, and where I would use that particular "tactic." (Don't ever forget: That's what these "things" we're talking about really are. They're sales tactics that you can use to "make sales," which means getting assignments from editors. You can tell, if you're attentive, when an editor is serious about wanting to publish your article if you, in fact, deliver a good finished product. Conversely, you can also tell, if you're attentive, if and when an editor is just humoring you or downright

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yanking your chain. But if you're careful, this can be a good sales tactic when you know for a near-certainty that there is no other way you can possibly convince the editor to give you the assignment.

Perhaps that's why it's called speculating: You take a chance on an editor, and he or she takes a chance on you. It's a gamble. If it pays off, everybody's happy. If it doesn't, only you, the writer, loses-- and it will probably be your own fault, for not delivering the product you promised.

Don't be afraid to break the rules, and don't be afraid to take gambles. If you are confident that you can deliver the product (your article) as promised, it's a good bet that the editor will live up to his or her promise, as well. That's certainly been *my* experience.

In summary: Just *go for it!!*

Valuable tips on how one pro writer makes big sales.

10 Golden Rules of Freelance Writing and How I Broke Them (How to Break the Rules and Make It as a Magazine Writer)

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