

Step-by-step instructions to break into the expanding food writing niche.

Make Money as a Food Writer in Six Lessons

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Food Writer
IN SIX LESSONS



Write and Sell:
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Food Essays
Cookbooks
Recipes
Magazine Articles

**THE SELF-STUDY COURSE FOR
FOOD WRITING SUCCESS**

by Pamela White

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IN SIX LESSONS

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2006

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U.S.A.

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Ten Tips for Food Writers (that editors WANT you to know)

Several years ago I fell into food writing, almost accidentally. Almost, because I *had* been a cooking student and food explorer for years. In fact, before I started writing for a living, my kitchen was the means to my creative expression.

Once I started writing and wanted to earn more money as a food writer, I realized I needed more information, more insider information. I tried to ask food writers and editors for help but many were afraid to share for they believed that a new food writer would cut their chances of getting the prime assignments.

Bit by bit I kept asking, reading, interviewing and networking. My notes run several pages on the best ways to break into food writing, and how to get that cookbook published.

Eventually I realized I had several insider tips to breaking through barriers as a food writer but I was holding it close to my chest, just like those writers I asked for help those many years ago.

Now I'm sharing it. I wish you the greatest of success in your food writing career.

►One: Start Locally

You want to break into food writing, right? Research local papers and magazines. What are they already publishing? What are they missing out on? Pay attention and see where you fit in. Many will have sections that are short 300-word reviews of restaurants or round-ups of food-related business notes, a great place to start.

Editors know readers adore the small entertaining reviews of restaurants, fancy and casual, large and small. Break into your favorite weekly or daily by writing one short brief on that new Pan American take-out place. Write the entire piece, then submit. Don't bother querying for such a short piece. Better yet, pick up the phone for local papers. They tend to be more open to assigning stories to new freelancers.

Small papers love reviews of all sizes. Find out who's not publishing restaurant reviews and pitch your talent, knowledge of global cuisines and the need for such a column. If you are new to restaurant reviews, study your favorite reviewers whether they write for the New York Times, Boston Globe, or a weblog. Analyze what the best writers do and practice incorporating the smart blend of objective critiques with subjective passion into your own writing.

Get to know your local chefs by calling restaurants, hanging out after hours at bars, or working for a food supplier. Write profiles of chefs, interview them for their best cooking, holiday, baking, garnishing tips to share in magazine articles. Maybe someday you can collaborate on a cookbook with one of your newfound friends.

Develop a theme for a column. Pitch it to editors after you've outlined twelve or more column topic ideas plus two sample columns. Start looking for a regular assignment with weekly papers or monthly magazines. You need a hook for your column. You can tie it to trends, health issues, easy-to-prepare, or entertaining, just find a niche that is not filled by a local writer or through a syndicated column.

► **Two: Think Small**

Afraid you will never make it into those glorious glossy food magazines? Stop looking at the stylishly photographed recipes. Start looking at the front and back of the "book."

Pick up your favorite magazines (and some you just really like). Study the layout of the entire publication. Look in the front of the book (as the publication is usually called). Are there short briefs without a byline but with a dash and the author's name at the end of the piece? This is where you have the best chance to break in.

The short pieces are usually more open to being assigned by freelance writers or open to acceptances. Even magazines (like CHOW, or Food and Wine) that say they do not accept queries or use freelancers will purchase these shorties from new writers.

Study the magazine to see what to submit – do they use diet tips, food histories, information on new places to eat, cookbooks, or synopses on local restaurants? Write your own version of what the

magazines are publishing in the front and/or back and submit. It's a great way to get your foot in the door.

Don't query if the piece is 500 words or shorter! By the time the editor finishes the query letter, responds and waits for your article, she could have opened your letter, or email, read your 500-word submission, and accepted it.

► Three: You Don't Need to Know How to Cook To Write a Cookbook

Does this make any sense to you? Well, it does to agents and publishers. Find a chef to collaborate with. You will need an idea. After all, you have to contribute something. But once you have your theme – Tea Parties, Chocolate Cakes, Mexican Gourmet – you can approach a chef and allow her to develop recipes. Your job will be to organize, test and write the recipes into book form.

If you don't need to know how to cook, then what do you need? You need a hook to get a publisher and an agent. What do you know that no one else is writing about? Think hard about this then doublecheck your topic at the bookstore and online. Unless you already have a food television show, you (like the rest of us) will have to sell yourself and your idea to get your book published.

You also need patience. Think three years from proposal to publication. Why does it take so long? A good publisher is going to insist you take your concept, sharpen it, fine tune it, and make it work. (Not to mention the time it takes to test those recipes).

► Four: You Must Have an Agent (And the Secret to Finding One)

Unless you have good, dependable contacts in the publishing world, you must have an agent on your side working to get your cookbook published. For starters, writers are rarely taken seriously if they don't have an agent. Agents also bring legal expertise and earn their money by protecting your rights and maximizing your income for each sale.

So where will you find these agents?

Go get a cookbook. Open it to the acknowledgements written by the author. Read down to where it says, "And special thanks to the best agent in the world, Lulu McGee."

Yes, it's that simple. Get the names of cookbook agents from the cookbooks themselves. Next, do a Google search on the names. This will provide you with contact information, addresses, websites, and most likely, lists of other cookbooks for which they've acted as agents.

You want all this information for when you write your proposal letter that you'll send to the agent you are trying to woo. Let the agent see you know which authors she's worked with and the books she was responsible for getting published. Take more time to see which of these cookbooks went to which publishers. Look for small cookbooks (or cookbooks with a small audience) that go to small publishers. This shows that your agent-to-be will know where to sell your book.

When writing to the agent, repeat, repeat, and, again, repeat why you are the **ONLY** person who can write this book. Write a detailed proposal, including an outline of your cookbook. It should be around 25 pages and list what will be in the cookbook, chapter by chapter. Include one or two entire chapters - with recipes - to show that you know your stuff. And in case the agent forgot how great you are at some place in your proposal, you better keep writing about how you are the **ONLY** one to write this cookbook. Include education, experience, personal background. List your credentials throughout your proposal.

Give the busy agent at least six weeks to respond to your cookbook proposal.

Let your agent present your cookbook idea to a publisher.

Give your proposal as much thought as the book you will be writing. The proposal is the blueprint. The more information included and the better it is written, the easier it is for the agent to see if it is suitable as is, what needs to be revised and if she wants to take you on as a client.

Your proposal should be 25 to 55 pages, double-spaced (so there's room for your future agent to write notes). However, your sample chapters should be single-spaced.

► **Five: Do Not Confuse Love of Eating with Being a Food Writer**

It is better to be a good writer and then learn about food. You can love food, you can eat food, but writing about food is more than cooking and dining out. Food writers are writers first. So be a great writer first and learn how to write recipes later.

Big magazines have test kitchens and develop their own recipes. For magazines like 'Saveur,' "Food and Wine," and "Gourmet," most recipes come from the source – the subject of the article or the restaurant, or local traditions.

Smaller magazines will test freelancer's recipes. Even smaller ones do not test recipes so be extra careful when writing for them (it will say in the writer's guidelines if they do not test recipes submitted). Always check magazines' writer guidelines so you do not waste your research and effort to pitch a slew of recipes to Saveur when they aren't going to buy them under any circumstance.

"Write what you know"...follow this rule. "Use first person"...adapt this rule to the publication. Find your own voice by writing, writing and rewriting. Read as many food magazines, culinary books, and websites as you can fit in each week.

► **Six: Memoirs are HUGE Now**

Not only are memoirs big business, but food memoirs are breaking out as a sub-genre. Think Ruth Reichl's autobiographies, essays in "Saveur," stories in "Gourmet."

Your food memoirs, whether for book publishing or for magazines, must be unique and personal. Forget the essay about your dinner party disaster, first cooking attempt, or favorite meal. Make it good. Study the magazine to make sure it is appropriate for that particular audience. When pitching your food memoir article, let the editor know why you are the one to write it. Exotic, world-traveling, truly poignant struggles are what editors are looking for.

A digression: when I started teaching freelance writing classes for a work-at-home mothers' website, eight out of ten students started the class by saying, "I have this funny article about my pregnancy. Who will pay me the most for it?" I always wanted to tell the truth: YOUR MOTHER. Unless your pregnancy story is unique, for example, a 60 year old mother gives birth to her quintuplet grandchildren, no one is going to pay for it. Look for a compelling story. Same goes with food writing.

► **Seven: Editors Won't Steal Your Ideas, BUT...**

New writers often worry about sending out query letters for fear that an editor will love the idea and "steal" it, paying someone else to write it.

It is a rare possibility, but in reality it is basically impossible that writers have truly unique ideas.

More often, if an editor loves your idea of an article on smelt fishing on the Monterey coast but you have no clips to show you can write it, he will pay you a smaller fee for the idea and assign it to someone else for a larger fee.

One way to avoid this, especially when starting out, is to pitch article ideas on the topics you are expert on. If you only know coffee beans, but you really, truly know coffee beans, start writing query letters to food magazines about coffee – cooking with coffee, roasting your own beans, how to use your espresso machine, how to break the coffee habit, benefits of drinking coffee.

► **Eight: Crossover into Food Writing from Other Genres**

Get out your notepad and start brainstorming for ideas. Start with where you are. Are you knowledgeable in history, religion, science? Find a way to join food with those topics.

Think: food and religion; food and history; food and science; food and economics; food and humor. What foods do different religions use during high holy days? How can a science teacher incorporate cooking and baking into the classroom for a hands-on lesson in chemical reactions?

All through the year, use holidays to break into food writing. Keep thinking of holidays and food as a key to open up your food writing career.

With holidays, be prepared for a lead time of up to two years. Yes, some magazines and newspaper food sections know what they will be publishing for the next 24 months. Remember, photos and artwork have to be done seasonally. It's hard to find a pumpkin in May, so fall recipes will be photographed in September or October of this year to be published in October of NEXT year.

► **Nine: May None of Your Pitches Be Bad**

What constitutes a bad pitch?

Asking the editor for ideas. "I live in Chicago. What would you like me to cover?" "I'm traveling to Prague. Would you like information on restaurants there?"

A pitch for short shorts. If an article is only 300 words, just send it in. You'll spend more time on the query than on the actual submission. Help yourself by just writing the piece.

What's good?

Pitch a story, not a topic. Don't pitch an article on small wineries in the Thousand Islands; pitch a story on the struggles and successes of one family and the winery they started five years ago.

When planning trips arm yourself by studying twelve months of the magazines you want to pitch. Know what they buy and look for those types of stories as you travel.

Pitch what you know that no one else does. Think of all those ethnic cookbooks and ethnic food articles. Most of the authors are drawing on family traditions and history.

► **Ten: Etcetera**

- The big food magazines are all different. Don't pitch one idea to all of them. Show you know the magazine you are pitching to by studying at least one year's worth of issues. Study (or know) your market!

- Pitch small stories first until you get your foot in the door. Most assignments go to writers the editors have already worked with.

- Look for magazine columns that have different bylines in each issue. This means they are written by freelancers and are open to you.

- Want a magazine job? Start as a freelance writer. Get to know the editors. Then when there is a job opening, they will look through their pool of trusted writers as possible candidates for the new staff writer, or associate editor position.

- Editors agree – more important than studying the culinary arts is to study one year (or more) of the magazine you want to write for. Visit libraries, subscribe, buy back issues...just study the market.

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