

Detailed how-to for launching a lucrative commercial writing practice.

The Well-Fed Writer: Financial Self-Sufficiency as a Freelance Writer in Six Months or Less

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Introduction

There's no scarcity of opportunity to make a living at what you love. There is only a scarcity of resolve to make it happen.

Wayne Dyer

PICTURE THIS On a Friday morning client phone call, you pick up a job writing a marketing brochure. Several hours later, the client emails background material. In a follow-up call, the client answers some questions. After a few hours reviewing the material, you get to work—on your deck, under that great shady tree, phone by your side, tall glass of lemonade nearby.

By Wednesday morning, between the client call, background reading and crafting a first draft, you have 16 hours in the project ($16 \times \$75 = \$1,200$). You email them your draft Wednesday morning, and you won't get it back until Friday.

THE PHONE KEEPS RINGING... In the meantime, you put in seven hours on a few sales sheets for a telecommunications firm ($7 \times \$75 = \525). Then, an ad for a company in Canada (you've never met them) that takes four hours (another \$300). You send it on, and bill them immediately.

Later that afternoon, a new but now-regular client calls and snags you for a brochure project the next week: 12–15 hours worth of work. That same day, one of your regulars calls, needing a few quick headlines for a store display. You've done 30+ similar projects like this. You charge your two-hour minimum, \$150, grab your mini-recorder, head to the gym, knocking out half of it on the way over. That night, sitting outside at your favorite neighborhood eatery with a clipboard, you get the rest done. You get home, type them up, and send them on, having spent just over an hour total.

That's over \$2,000 by Thursday, for under 30 hours of work, no running around and completely by phone and email. Plus, \$1,000 worth of work lined up for next week. And that's at \$75 an hour. What'll it be like at \$100 or \$125?

REALITY CHECK Okay, it's not always this easy or rosy. You'll have your share of \$500 weeks, and you may have to meet clients in person. This is no get-rich-quick thing. In the beginning, you'll be working a lot harder for a lot less, and there's a lot of prospecting, marketing, and paperwork to do. But, stick to it, develop the right work habits, and weeks like the above will come soon and often.

Good money, flexible hours, stimulating work. You control your day, your time off, your life. Do you have outside interests? *Would you* if you had more time of your own?

Want a raise? Simple. Work harder, make more phone calls, put in more hours.

This is freelance *commercial* writing: writing for businesses, large and small, and for hourly rates of \$50 to \$125 or more—depending on your experience and the market you're in. In the first chapter, we'll explore why this field makes so much sense—both for writers and the clients who hire them.

Have you dreamed of becoming a writer but never took it too seriously because after all, the words “starving” and “writer” are pretty much joined at the hip? Or are you already a writer but either working for someone else or struggling financially? This might just be your ticket.

MY STORY I'd love to tell you about how I knew I wanted to be a freelance commercial writer from the time I was crawling. Alas, not so. One journalism course in both high school and college. Oh, and at 15, I wrote a column covering little league baseball for three local papers on the North Shore of Massachusetts. That's it. Impressive, huh?

I'd never been a writer before I started this business. I'd never written anything for money. No writing training. I had no industry background and no advertising agency experience. I had no contacts in the industry, no client list. Nada. Zip. Zilch. Heck, I was a Russian Studies major in college. Given all that, while my success certainly says something about me, it says just as much about the accessibility of the opportunity.

I found that in any job I'd held over the years, I gravitated to the few writing tasks that did crop up—an occasional letter or little brochure—and typically got good feedback from those around me. Do we have anything in common there?

I always wanted to be a writer, but wasn't willing to starve at it. In the early 90's, I stumbled across Bob Bly's great book, *Secrets of a Freelance Writer*, about the commercial writing field. Who knew that many companies, for some darn good reasons (stay tuned), actually hired freelancers to handle their writing tasks? Lightbulb on. This is how I'd do it. Finally, in January of 1994, after talking myself in and out of the idea about 100 times, and alternately experiencing anxiety attacks and delusions of grandeur, I took the plunge. Cold turkey. No moonlighting.

Within three and a half months, following the strategies outlined in this book, I literally had more business than I could handle, and had indeed achieved "financial self-sufficiency" (i.e., paying all my bills). That first year's tally? 19 brochures, four video scripts, two radio spots, two 40-page technical manuals, a half dozen ad campaigns and sales promotion projects, a 44-part educational CD-ROM, and a ghost-written book for a local businessman. Oh, and 45 columns published in five local papers (just fun, "grocery-money" writing).

YOUR STORY? Is this you? Get up early, put on the suit, drive 30–45 minutes (on a good day) through glacial rush hour traffic, work in some climate-controlled windowless cubicle in a high-rise all day, deal with office politics, eat unhealthy food on the run, sit in endless boring meetings using phrases like "market space," "value-added," and "mission-critical," get stressed out, be nice to people you think are morons, leave the office late, maybe get in a rushed workout, get home by 8:30–9:00, wolf down some dinner, fall asleep in front of the TV, collapse on Friday night, run errands and do wash on Saturday, take your one to two weeks of vacation every year, and 40 more years of that.

My life is very different, and at some point early in my fourth year, I started realizing how good I actually had it: healthy income *and* a lifestyle others will drool over. And I'm living proof you don't have to be Type A to have all this (*and*, you'll undoubtedly be delighted to discover along the way here that I'm not a super-disciplined, aggressive, or technically-savvy guy and yet, I've done quite well).

Remember the \$2,000 week described earlier? Even lighter weeks of $\$1,200 \times 50 = \$60K$. Not all the money in the world, but if it gave you the time to truly enjoy your life and your own terms—*however* you define that—would it be enough?

100K? Absolutely possible, and likely working a lot less than in other businesses. Bust your rear for someone else for three or four years, and where will you be? More money and less time to enjoy it? Most importantly, are you doing something you like? I know, new-agey, touchy-feely BS, right? Hardly. Try it and watch your outlook on life do a 180.

“FINDING YOUR PASSION”? NOT what I’m talking about here. That’s an overrated trap that keeps people stuck in jobs they hate, waiting for **THE Thing** that’ll make them blissful and rapturous. For 95% of people out there, finding something they *pretty* much like to do *most* of the time would be a 100% improvement. Shoot for that, and from there, fine-tune toward the ideal. Am I passionate about writing marketing brochures? Please. Do I enjoy it? Yes. What I *am* passionate about is living my life my way.

Living my life my way means owning a house, driving a decent, late-model car, saving for retirement, taking a couple or three vacations a year, and staying out of debt. As such, this book is *not* about eking out a living as a writer. You can find that anywhere.

Don’t write me asking, “I just heard the going rate for a 500-word online article was \$10. How can we make a living when so many are willing to work for slave wages?” In my world, that would be akin to a high-priced lawyer setting up shop in the poor side of town and then complaining that no one wants to pay his rates.

NEW HANGOUT, NEW FRIENDS If you want to make the high wages in any craft, don’t hang out with the low-priced practitioners, or you’ll start believing that’s as good as it gets. By and large, you can forget the online venues—where you’re competing with zillions of other writers for a project type (articles) that’s relatively easy to write and where “acceptable” quality is all they’re looking for. Where writing has become “commoditized”: many competing writers can deliver the same basic product, so Econ 101 reliably dictates that rates will drop to nothing—which they have.

Go where you’re *not* competing nearly as much, where you can bring special skills (i.e., marketing savvy, exceptionally creative writing style, industry-specific knowledge, project expertise, etc.) to the table—skills that can’t be easily duplicated by thousands of others. Go where the barriers to entry are a bit stiffer (I mean, how hard is it to bid on a project online?), as that will discourage the writing “hobbyists.” When you think about it, it’s pretty logical: *Easy Access = Low Rates*.

Most importantly, go where you're not writing articles, but rather, marketing brochures, direct mail campaigns, web site content, case studies, newsletters, white papers and a bunch of other *business*-related projects. Not articles (except perhaps, high-paying trade articles). And in the pages ahead, we'll talk about all this.

“WELL-FED WORLD” Here, you won't find lists of new markets paying five cents a word. Or the latest online job site where you can bid with dozens of other writers fighting over *The Amazing Shrinking Fee* (Watch It Get Smaller Before Your Very Eyes!). Or strategies for convincing that client to pay you \$15 an hour instead of \$10 (“cuz you're worth it!”).

In our world, the discussion will be about when to bump hourly rates from \$65 to \$75, \$90 to \$100 or \$125 to \$150. Oh, and here, you get paid in 30 days, 95% of the time—with rarely the need for repeated reminder emails. What a concept.

My approach has always been to give you the tools and ideas you need to make a handsome full-time living as a commercial writer (or FLCW, *Freelance Commercial Writer*, as I refer to us throughout my books). With the emphasis on *commercial*. This is a business, and you'd be wise to consider yourself a businessperson first, writer second.

A “REAL-PEOPLE” APPROACH I'd like to think I've written a *realistic* guide to building this business, given the lazy, slug-like streak in all of us. No question, this field takes plenty of work, but as businesses go, this one is a *lot* easier than most to get off the ground. And compared with other areas of freelance writing, it's not only much easier to get into, it's much more lucrative once you do.

With an emphasis on *simple, repeatable systems*, I've created a “best-of-both-worlds” business strategy: potential for healthy financial success without killing yourself to get there. Rest assured, whether you want to work the business like a *Type A* would, or prefer (like me) to have a life *and* make a solid living, this book will show you how.

WHAT WILL WE COVER? I've made just two assumptions in writing *TWWF*: 1) that you already know you're at least a decent writer; and 2) that you want to parlay that skill into a lucrative profession. As such, I'll spend just one chapter near the end on how to actually write certain kinds of projects; the main focus of the book will be on how to build a freelance commercial writing business.

I'll be sharing with you the things that have worked for me—not the *right* answers or *only* answers. But know that what's outlined on the pages that follow is a solid blueprint for building a business of your own. Do I do everything I suggest in this book religiously? No. If I did, would I make a lot more money than I currently do? Absolutely. If you followed these guidelines to the letter, would you earn an even healthier living than I do? I'd bet on it.

By definition, my experience is limited: big city, sales background, full-time startup *and* by cold calling, a generalist, etc. Over the years, however, I've heard from thousands of people with vastly different stories, circumstances, strategies, niches, backgrounds and geographic settings. I've incorporated their stories here.

DIFFERENT SITUATIONS, DIFFERENT ANSWERS In the pages that follow, in addition to general “how-to” detail for anyone anywhere, we'll cover:

- Building the business in a small town or rural area
- Doing it part-time while working at a full-time job
- Leveraging different backgrounds into profitable writing businesses
- Building a business as an AHM (At-Home Mom)
- Building it with cold calling, email marketing, networking, and/or direct mail
- Carving out niches in nonprofit work, case studies, white papers, direct response copywriting, associations, and many others
- Building a web site to promote your business
- What to charge and how to get paid
- Powerful networking strategies that go beyond the “meet 'n greet”
- Starting and maximizing the potential of a writers' group
- What it takes to earn \$125 an hour—and beyond...

All the folks represented by the stories you'll read here have one thing in common: they're quietly exploding the stereotype of the “starving writer” and making handsome livings with their words in the vast and profitable zone between poverty and seven-figure novel advances. Their accounts are filled with great ideas for *anyone, anywhere*, in any situation.

Translation? Just because you're a fearless cold caller doesn't mean there's nothing worth reading in the cold-calling section. Just because you built or can build your business full-time doesn't mean you should skip the chapter on part-time start-up. Just because you're building the business in a major metro doesn't mean the chapter on small town/remote area startup won't hold any value for you. Trust me, the part-timers and smaller market/rural area folks are tough, smart and resourceful.

YOU'LL LOVE THIS... Because I know that most writers are creative types with a predictably primal aversion to "sales" and "marketing," I've devoted an entire chapter to painlessly and enjoyably developing that crucial sales and marketing mindset (with a chapter heading of "Learning to Love S & M," you know we're going to have some fun...). Grasping these cornerstone concepts will enable you to confidently build your own business while making eloquent contributions to the writing needs of your clients. And do it all with far less effort and angst than you might imagine.

This book is, at best, a few chapters in the big juicy story of "well-fed writing." As you read it, I want you to keep asking, "What other writing opportunities might be right under my nose?" *TWFW* doesn't have all the answers, but I think it's got a lot of good ideas. We writers like good ideas—especially ones that can make us a lot of money.

TWFW is just the beginning of the conversation in many ways, not the end. Check out a few pretty killer resources available at www.wellfedwriter.com that won't cost you a dime. In May 2002, I launched *The Well-Fed E-PUB*, my monthly ezine, chockfull of strategies, success stories and tips from FLCW's around the globe. The "E-Newsletter" link will lead you to archived issues, and laughably-priced past-ezine compilations to get you up to speed in a hurry.

In March 2008 (in typical techno-phobic, "late-adopter" fashion), I started *The Well-Fed Writer Blog*, which has spawned wonderful dialogues that serve as mini-knowledgebases on a variety of subjects. Subscribe to them both on the site, and while you're poking around—and speaking of knowledgebases—check out the *WF KnowledgeBase*. Between these three always-evolving resources, I make sure that I'm right beside you as you move ahead with your business.


And There's More...

The book you're holding in your hands is just the largest chunk of the total resources you have at your disposal as you set out on this profitable path...

SIDE DISHES

When you're combining two roughly 300-page books into ONE 350-page book, just doing an editing job of biblical proportions only gets you so far. You still have to offload some content—which I've done, to a special link on the web site called *Side Dishes*. Throughout the book, you'll see references to www.wellfedwriter.com/sidedishes.shtml; it's a "side-door" link—to be used by those who've bought the book, but it's not advertised on the site. At that link, you'll find a veritable cornucopia of goodies that complement the content of this book—and at no extra charge. But, alas, my charitable spirit only goes so far...

THE DELUXE WELL-FED TOOL BOX

Whenever you see this icon  throughout the book, it means the item just discussed appears in my separate ebook, *The Deluxe Well-Fed Tool Box*, an exhaustive cut 'n pastable compilation of tools, articles, and reports to dramatically streamline and simplify your path to financial self-sufficiency.

In some cases, you'll see the icon when the item in question actually appears in the book (e.g., a simple contract, expanded cold-calling script, etc.). This is done so you can cut and paste/print out your own copy of it. See Appendix C for the full contents (as well as a description of yet another waaaay cool tool, *The Well-Fed Writer Time Line*). Yes, they are separate purchases, but at prices so reasonable as to be truly laughable.

Finally, throughout the book, you'll see several abbreviated references:

TFWW: The Well-Fed Writer

FLCW: Freelance Commercial Writer (how I refer to those in our field)

E-PUB: The WELL-FED E-PUB (my monthly ezine)

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So, why even be a FLCW? Why is this a good career direction for decent writers? My, my, my, there are *so* many good reasons. Let's go take a look...

Detailed how-to for launching a lucrative commercial writing practice.

The Well-Fed Writer: Financial Self-Sufficiency as a Freelance Writer in Six Months or Less

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