

**EARNING MONEY FROM YOUR TRAVELS  
IN THE NEW MEDIA LANDSCAPE**

# TRAVEL WRITING 2.0

REVISED SECOND EDITION



**TIM LEFFEL**



*Completely revised edition of the ground-breaking travel writing book that provides a road map to success in the digital age. It dives headlong into the entrepreneurial world of blogging and digital books, while still acknowledging the real money to be made in declining print forms. Drawing on interviews and survey responses from more than 100 successful travel writers and bloggers, this is the definitive guide to creating success instead of waiting for permission.*

# **Travel Writing 2.0 Earning Money from your Travels in the New Media Landscape – Second Edition**

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# Travel Writing 2.0

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## **EARNING MONEY FROM YOUR TRAVELS IN THE NEW MEDIA LANDSCAPE**

**Second Edition**

**Tim Leffel**

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Second Edition

# In with the New: Unleashing the Writing Entrepreneurs, the Solopreneurs, and the Gig Creators

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*If you want to write the fortunes for the cookies that don't exist anymore, you may need to make your own organization, lead your own tribe and hire yourself.*

~ Seth Godin

So if old media outlets—and their nice paychecks—are fading fast, what is replacing them? As far as money goes, that's still an open question on the freelance side. Most websites don't pay anything close to what comparable print publications pay, primarily because what they are earning in revenue isn't close to what a healthy print magazine pulls in on a monthly basis. Plenty of people I know are making great money as a new type of travel writer, but most of them are content owners, not just writers.

Fair or not, the era of “user-generated content” has also devalued the worth of the written word. We're all drowning in words and can only consume a fraction of even what interests us the most. TripAdvisor has more pages posted than most other travel sites added together—and they haven't paid for hardly any of the content. Yelp's review numbers grew from 8 million to 83 million in just the first five years of the '10s. All but the fakes were posted by volunteers who wanted to rant or rave—typos and bad grammar be damned.

Then consider all the “content marketing” going on by people who only see the words as a means to an end: to get e-mail signups, get people into a marketing funnel, or enhance their authority in order to get paid speaking engagements. It wouldn't cross their minds that this is a paid service done by professionals.

Getting mad at all these people who “write for free” and devalue the work of those who want to get paid for it is a fruitless exercise. The genie is already out of the bottle and it likes the fresh air.

To survive in the new media landscape, you'd be wise to go back and study Charles Darwin. "It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent that survives. It is the one that is the most adaptable to change."

Those who are really "making it" as travel writers and feel confident about their futures are those who are adapting best to the new reality. They are finding ways to meld their skills to new demands and markets. They are antifragile, profiting from change rather than complaining about it.

That's not easy, no matter what anyone's *Make a Fortune Blogging in Your Underwear* e-book may tell you. If you're going down this road, expect plenty of detours, breakdowns, and potholes along the way. In other words, a good road trip—if you have the right attitude.

*I've seen a lot of change, and watched many old school travel writers end up sidelined because they refused to write for online publications and develop a social media presence. I've always watched popular bloggers with big numbers try to make the move into travel writing, and fail miserably because they can't write compelling travel stories, which are very different from most blog content. Hone your craft and stay on top of new trends. Attend professional development sessions, network and make yourself memorable in a good way.*

~ Sarah Deveau, freelance writer

In my survey for the first edition of this book, nearly two-thirds were still making the majority of their income from work they did for others. Fast forward five years and it's the reverse. Now two-thirds are making the majority of their income from travel content and among those who consider themselves full-time writers, 46% are making 100% of their revenue from their own content or platform. No matter where the money comes from, the equation is the same: make enough revenue to be left with a profit.

## Economics and Accounting for Freelance Writers

Making money as a writer entails understanding the same basic formula that guides all types of freelance or self-employed work:

$$r-e=p$$

That's revenue minus expenses equals profit. In the real world that formula can get much more complicated in a hurry, for example:

$$(r1+r2+r3)-(e+o+t)=p$$

That would be revenue from three stories minus travel expenses, office costs, and taxes. What's left is what you actually earned. Take it further as a full-time freelancer and you also have to factor in real living expenses, pesky costs like housing, health insurance, and food.

"Hey egghead, I'm a writer, not a math whiz," you're probably thinking. Well too bad. You had better get good at understanding your finances to be a freelancer or you won't have anything that equals "p" in that equation. (Of course if you are completely supported by a spouse or retirement income—more on that later—then you can stay blissfully unconcerned about how much you actually earn.)

In simple terms, the goal is to make more money than you spend. If you finance your trips and write for tiny publications—or are a beginning blogger—it's tough to make that formula look positive. It's noble, but in a starving artist kind of way. If you're paying for your own travels and writing, it's usually more sane to look at those earnings as gravy, a byproduct, not as your main source of income. Otherwise you'll find you are permanently in the red unless you reach a level of true success.

Here are a few things travel writers do to make the formula work out so that  $p$ =real **profits**.

1. Write for publications that pay expenses. In these situations you agree on what it will cost, you submit expenses to an editor, and you get reimbursed.
2. Go on press trips or accept hosting from tourism bureaus and hotels.

3. Cover the local region so expenses are far lower.
4. Make sure the article or guidebook project fee is at least double what will be spent.
5. Write for a self-owned publication where advertising and/or product income is higher than expenses

We collectively have to get better at understanding basic economics. If TravelKingpin.com makes \$2 a page per month on the article you wrote for them from advertising, they're not about to pay you big bucks for your article, even if it's great and even if you turn in another 99 great ones. They'll probably pay you a fraction of what they are bringing in—which in this case is only \$200 a month from your 100 articles. If you run your own site though and average \$2 a month from each of 100 pages, your revenue actually *is* \$200. That's still not much, but it's yours and it'll keep being yours every month, increasing as your traffic goes up. TravelKingpin.com is not evil. It's a business. In general terms, the site is not going to pay you more money than the revenue you generate. Their risk, their reward. If you work for yourself, you take all the risk and reap a higher reward.

If you understand this basic tradeoff, you can evaluate opportunities in a better light. JoeNobodyBlog.com may only pay you a few dollars a post. One that's more established may do a revenue share or pay you \$6 to \$15 a post. An established blog network funded by venture capitalists may pay you \$25 for 400-500 words. Keep moving up the ladder and you get \$100 to \$400 for a real article or corporate blog post. Get into the rarified air where major sites pull in millions of visitors and you start getting closer to the print world, like \$200 to \$1,000 for a quality piece that hundreds of thousands of visitors will read.

That range goes from peanuts to the monthly rent, but all of these options can make sense for the right person at the right time and I'll admit that I've done work for all of the above. Sure, I'd rather have \$1,000 than \$6, but compensation takes many forms and the dollar amount is just one of them.

In my case I took the low-paying blog posting jobs because I wanted an outlet for something specific, I wanted a valuable link back to my sites (more on that later), I knew it would sell books, or it helped me help someone who helped me. Any gig can be a good



gig if it serves a purpose for you, especially when you are just starting out as a writer.

I am also firmly in the camp that believes what Malcolm Gladwell proposed in *Outliers*: most people who are great at something have spent at least 10,000 hours practicing.

Think about that number. It equates to about three years and five months of writing eight hours a day, seven days a week. Or about five years if you work at it 40 hours a week and don't take many vacations. (And don't spend half your day sending glorified text messages on Facebook and Twitter.)

*My biggest frustration is trying to balance freelance writing for magazines with building my own blogger brand. It's an issue because monetizing the blog is a full time business, but the freelance writing market is getting more difficult because a lot of "free" sites have pulled down the pricing on many freelancing gigs.*

~ Susan Lanier-Graham, freelancer and blogger

Still, compared to some activities, 10,000 hours is not all that daunting. Clay Shirkey, author of *Cognitive Surplus*, estimates that a person born in 1960 has spent five times that amount sitting passively in front of a television. That's more than five and a half solid *years* of a 50-year-old's life. The obvious lesson: turning off the TV is a great first step in becoming a better writer.

Ask any writer who has been at it for a decade or two and most will tell you, "I'm still improving." Most years I can say the best story I ever wrote came out last year. But I'll probably write something better this year. Then I'll improve again the year after that.

Write often, write a lot, and write about different things in different styles—that's how you become great. So those who evaluate every potential job by whether it's going to cover the car payment or not are going to lose out on a lot of valuable practice, practice that comes with immediate (and sometimes brutal) feedback.

*I was a full-time corporate accountant and technical writer, and wanted to get out of the rat race. I transitioned to freelance technical writing and sent out a bunch of travel pitches.*

*I landed regular gigs with meetings & event magazines and online at TravelGolf.com when online wasn't cool. Over time I've expanded on those to write for dozens of print and online publications and run two of my own blogs.*

*~ Diana Rowe, freelance writer and blogger*

Diana's meandering path is actually more typical than any straight one in today's media world. In an environment where it's increasingly hard to make a living from just one or two outlets—or even one or two kinds of media—hustling for multiple income sources is key.

Part of being a financially savvy freelancer is also making sure the organization you are writing for can actually pay you. Before, freelance writers didn't think much about the financial health of the publications they were writing for; you got the assignment and were happy to have the work.

Most of us have gotten burned at least once by a magazine that crashed and burned, taking the IOUs with it to the graveyard. In the new climate we have to be more vigilant about dying print publications—even century-old newspapers that once seemed invincible—and also web startups that could disappear as fast as they began.

A friend of mine wrote for a New Jersey magazine called HudsonMOD that is still in business, but partly because the publisher keeps stiffing her freelance writers and photographers. When some of them took to social media to shame the publication, at least one of the writers received a nasty cease and desist letter from a lawyer. (We're assuming the lawyer got paid just fine.)

Unfortunately this happens more often than you hear about: a condition of getting paid 50% of the back pay for my friend would have been to sign a non-disclosure agreement. In other words, "Shut up and we'll pay you half what we promised for all your hard work."

## Why Becoming a Business is Better Than Working for a Business

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*We're in a golden age of entrepreneurship, in which the earliest phases of bootstrapping have never been so inexpensive. A fledgling entrepreneur who is committed and passionate has no appreciable barriers to testing her hypothesis, interviewing potential customers, and building a minimum viable product.*

~ Dave Lerner, serial entrepreneur, angel investor, and  
Columbia University professor

There are multiple ways to make a buck at this writing endeavor and other ways to profit that don't involve a direct exchange in cash. I want to be clear, however, that nearly all the big money success stories I know are people who have complete control over their destiny. The path of running your own real business may not be the easiest or the quickest, but it's certainly the one where you're leaving the least amount of control in other peoples' hands.

As that quote at the beginning says so well, the other reason to start your own business now is that it's so cheap. Never in history have so many great tools and so many great people been available so conveniently and inexpensively. I can point to 20 things I do in my business that would have been prohibitively expensive when I started that are now very much in anyone's reach. I'm talking about hiring WordPress experts to fix something for \$10 or having ones at your beck and call for \$69 a month. We have social media scheduling apps like Hootsuite, Buffer, MeetEdgar, and ITTT (If This Then That). Although it may be hard to believe now, when I launched my first blog there was no Dropbox, GoogleDocs, Facebook, Asana, Slack, or YouTube. Skype was just getting started. There was no service that matched people who wanted to hire remote employees with those willing to do the work. As I write this, massive time savers like Fiverr and Canva are only a couple years old.

Many people look at stories of how entrepreneurs got started and assume they had investors, but that's seldom the case. In a survey of the Inc. 500—the fastest-growing small companies in the US—nearly half of them were started with less than \$5,000. For a

web-based business like ours, you can do it for a tiny fraction of that.

It is so incredibly easy now to launch something as a test and have it look totally professional that it's almost crazy not to try. There are people launching new ventures every day from a laptop that are making more than their previous salaries ever did just by solving a problem or meeting a market need. Much of the time this is done with an information product comprised mostly of...content. Which mostly requires...writing.

See the resources section at the end for the things I've listed above and plenty more, but don't get hung up on the tools. The ways to launch and execute will keep evolving. The market needs will change, requiring regular adaptation. What won't change is the need to buckle down and get it done. Ideas are everywhere. The hard part is showing up and making them happen, day after day.

I started this chapter with a quote from Seth Godin and I'm going to end with another one. If you're running your own show as a solopreneur or business owner, you probably ought to have his blog at the top of your weekly reading list and be looking at every post. He also offers a free podcast series on iTunes called The Startup School that will be 10 of the best-spent hours of your life if you want to launch a real business. He gets his ideas across a few paragraphs at a time, without a lot of wasted words. That's a good model for any writer.

*Just because you're good at something doesn't mean the market cares any longer.*

*The Marx Brothers were great at vaudeville. Live comedy in a theatre. And then the market for vaudeville was killed by the movies. Groucho didn't complain about this or argue that people should respect the hard work he and his brothers had put in. No, they went into the movies.*

*Then the market for movies like the Marx Brothers were making dried up. Groucho didn't start trying to fix the market. Instead, he saw a new medium [television] and went there.*

~ SethGodin.typepad.com

## Developing a Niche

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*It is impossible to produce superior performance unless you do something different than the majority.*

~ John Templeton, legendary investor and mutual fund company founder

There was a popular business book out last decade called *Blue Ocean Strategy*. The core point was that you can get all bloodied trying to fight in a crowded market, but if you can create a whole new market that didn't exist, you're sailing in your own blue ocean. The successful examples of this are around you every day: Apple, Google, CarMax, Netflix, Twitter, Dropbox, and GoPro for a start.

It's hard to create a new market in this travel field, but it's not all that hard to focus on one thing and do it better than anyone instead of trying to be a generalist pen for hire. Just being a general "travel writer" puts you in a bloody pool and you'll have a hard time getting higher wages than anyone else doing the same thing.

Becoming known as the expert on independent boutique hotels in Italy is a different story. You can count your competition on one hand. The same goes for single-track biking in New England or kayaking in Belize.

Brad Olsen of CCC Publishing has published four books with *Sacred Places* in the title. He *owns* that market. Joan Petersen of Ginkgo Press has a dozen *Eat Smart In \_\_\_\_\_* books that cover Mexico, Peru, India, Sicily, Brazil, and other great food destinations. She certainly doesn't have to prove to anyone that she's an international cuisine expert.

While being a jack of all trades can make sense for some people, especially part-time writers, not having at least one specialty can be detrimental in the long run. If you write about anything or any place, you are putting yourself into a very big sea of similar writers and the only way you can stand out is to be a far superior or more professional writer. I know a few successful feature writers who get away with this because they are so good at what they do

and have such a great track record that they are able to be generalists. Whatever assignment comes their way, they can cover it well: luxury Caribbean this month, budget Bali next week, the architecture of Barcelona next. They are curious enough and observant enough—and talented enough writers—that they can make any of these stories sing. Even for them there are some assignments they just won't take because they'd be too bored with the subject matter. They know their skills, but also the limitations of their interest.

Many beginners make the mistake of looking at the most popular blogs, some of them very general, and thinking that's the model they should follow. But those popular ones are personality blogs that were started years ago—in some cases 10 or 15 years ago—when the field was less crowded, and they have 10,000 hours of work put into them already. They're the General Electrics and Coca-Colas of our world. Do you want to compete on that playing field?

For most of us, we need to be identified with something specific to get assignments from editors, to sell books, or to build up a following on the Internet. This can be as general as European train travel or as specific as wine tourism in France on the destination side, as general as family travel with teens or as specific as kite surfing on Lake Tahoe on the “how to” side. The more general the subject, though, the harder it is to stand out.

*To be successful you have to know the subject matter your audience wants to read. You just can't write about everything in the world without a focus on some aspect of it.*

~ Jim Ferri of NeverStopTraveling.com

As the media gets sliced and diced more ways and also gets more competitive, editors are increasingly looking for writers who have something special to offer. As Sean Keener, CEO of Boots'nAll says, “Find a niche that you are passionate about. Don't follow the crowd. Define what makes you unique.”

This doesn't mean that the wine tourism in France person can't write about B&BS in Vermont or the Lake Tahoe windsurfing person can't write about Ecuador, but neither one can switch

specialties every two months, continually ditching the old one for good. I can write about luxury travel just as easily as budget travel at this point in my life, but with books out about cheap travel, I have a much easier time getting noticed and quoted in the media for the latter. Editors actually call me with assignments sometimes, solely based on my visibility in this subject area. If they want an article about kite surfing, they're going to call that specialist instead.

*If you are second—and you are smart—you can learn from the first person's mistakes. But by the time you are the 15<sup>th</sup> or 16<sup>th</sup>, you probably cannot add much that's new. If you do something for the 15<sup>th</sup> time and do it dramatically better, that's incredibly rare.*

~ Ester Dyson, venture capitalist, in Inc.

So, what are you an expert at, or in what area could you easily become an expert? Think long and hard about this and make sure it's a subject or place that you care enough about to cover in detail for years on end. Turn off the electronics and take a hike—literally. Get out of the office and find someplace quiet to think. Take a lesson from Pixar: they didn't come up with all those terrific movie ideas sitting around a conference room. They always headed to a cabin 50 miles out of the city to do their most important creative thinking.

This thought process is important because the focus needs to connect. There's no sense in becoming the European river cruises expert if you don't like ship cabins or hanging out with retired people. You don't want to become the Minneapolis travel specialist if you hate the cold and want to move south as soon as possible.

Specializing is especially important in the blogosphere. Starting one today about general family travel or restaurants in Paris would be an exercise in futility unless you already have a huge following as a book author or TV show host. It's too hard to stand out from the pack. Find a niche that's not so crowded already or choose a truly unique way to cover that place/subject. For Mariellen Ward it has been solo female travel in India and that continues to pay off no matter which way the media winds blow:

*My income has changed drastically. Previously, I made most of my money from freelance writing and editing contracts. Today, I make most of my money from work related to my blog. In the future, I think I may make money as a brand ambassador and consultant.*

~ Mariellen Ward of BreatheDreamGo.com

Darren Rowse, who runs the popular ProBlogger site, succinctly explained in one particular post why a niche is so important. I'm paraphrasing a bit here, but these are the key reasons:

1. **A niche blog attracts more readers naturally.** People come back because they care about the subject and want to learn and interact.
2. **A niche blog is easier to monetize.** Specific topics draw specific advertisers and those ads get a more favorable reaction from readers.
3. **Niche blogs do better in search engines.** If you're all over the map, Google doesn't know what your site is about. If you specialize, it's more likely to be seen as authoritative.
4. **Niche blogs build credibility and profile.** Experts draw attention from the media, from people who want to hire experts. Who has ever said, "Get me a generalist on the phone"?

In its most obvious form, this can be about a place. Search "Jim Cheney" at TravelWriting2.com and you'll see our interview with a guy who only writes about the U.S. state of Pennsylvania, on UncoveringPA.com. Almost every blogger I've quoted in this book comes up short when compared to the traffic generated by the niche blog DisneyFood.com.

ModernHiker.com is a popular site that's mostly about hiking in and around the major cities of Los Angeles and San Diego. National Parks Traveler covers—you guessed it—traveling in U.S. National Parks.

Some get even more specific than that. There's a blog about traveling with autistic children (AutisticGlobetrotting.com) and some very successful ones covering a specific island or town block by block..



How do you know if you're onto something? Try the old entrepreneur's trick of condensing that specialty or blog into a short "elevator pitch." If you can summarize your specialty or your blog's slant in a couple of sentences at a cocktail party, you're probably on the right track. If you search variations of that on Google and have a hard time finding good information, you know you can zoom to the top of the rankings rather quickly. Do a test and see if you can build an audience. It's low risk but could have a high reward.

What would you like your future bio to say? Could you explain *that* during a short elevator ride or a cocktail party introduction? Figure it out, then find a way to make it happen. Work hard to dominate that subject matter by putting the readers first. Then you just have to worry about the imitators.

*There are now a ridiculous number of people starting blogs in my niche every single day—and deciding to write a 150-page book on the subject. You have to be able to prove you care MORE about your subject than everyone who shows up hoping for free travel. Becoming a profitable business that can write off (at least a portion of) the travel you choose makes you more trustworthy and authentic than everyone who showed up yesterday.*

~ Shelly Rivoli of [TravelsWithBaby.com](http://TravelsWithBaby.com) and related book

## The Part-Time Expert?

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It's perfectly fine to develop your niche as a part-time freelance writer. Many well-known bloggers have a day job. Many guidebook writers don't depend on that pay to cover their annual expenses: they lead tours, they have a flexible office job, they work for an NGO abroad, or they do seasonal work of some kind the rest of the year.

Plenty of the travel writers you see on press trips or at conferences are not full-time writers. If you attend a Society of American Travel Writers meeting, you'll find that a large number of the people there are of retirement age. They don't need to do this for a living. They're doing it because they enjoy it.

More power to them. They might only make \$25 writing an article for a low-paying web publication or a small weekly

newspaper, but they're traveling around southern France or the Caribbean for a week on somebody else's tab, so that doesn't faze them. Telling them they shouldn't work so cheap is going to fall on deaf ears. They're having a blast.

If this really bugs you, find another profession to pursue. It's the reality of the marketplace and it's only going to become more common as print work dries up.

If you are in a position to be a part-time travel writer, with no concerns about the financial payoff, then in a way you are the ideal candidate for a happy career as a freelancer. You can get more assignments, take more trips, and enjoy yourself more while traveling than someone who actually has to make it all pay the bills.

I don't have any hard data on this, but I'd guess from experience that the majority of travel writers going on press trips regularly are either supported by a working spouse, have another job that pays the bills, or are retired. So if you are one of the above, join the club. It's a happy club to be in.

For part-timers with no money concerns, breaking in is pretty easy. There are a zillion small print publications and websites that pay nothing or a nominal amount that may as well be nothing. Some of them actually have a sizable audience. You may not earn money, but you'll earn some form of glory. The coverage may be enough to get the interest of a media relations person handing out press trip spots or at least some local party invites.

On some other sites you'll toil away in obscurity, especially if you join up with one of the content sweatshops cranking out listicles and listbait multiple times a day. These are good for writing practice and the occasional bottom-feeder press trip invite, but not much else. If you're going to crank out as much content as they usually want, you're much better off in the long run starting your own site and owning the content forever.

You may find, however, that being a part-time blogger is tougher than it sounds. There's much more to it than writing the text, from adding media to WordPress administration to interview calls to trip coordination to social media promotion. As Heather Cowper of Heather on Her Travels says, "It's tough not having enough time to do everything I would like while holding down a full-time job as well as blogging." There are a lot of sad travel blogs out there on life support, barely hanging on, because the owner

hasn't really put much of their heart or muscle into it and postings just show up randomly now and then.



*Completely revised edition of the ground-breaking travel writing book that provides a road map to success in the digital age. It dives headlong into the entrepreneurial world of blogging and digital books, while still acknowledging the real money to be made in declining print forms. Drawing on interviews and survey responses from more than 100 successful travel writers and bloggers, this is the definitive guide to creating success instead of waiting for permission.*

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