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The Successful Writer's Handbook

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## **Chapter Six**

### **The Business of Writing**

#### **Bookkeeping Tips for Writers**

The end of the year is looming. Have you been keeping good records for your accountant? Can you quickly run the numbers he or she will require to figure your taxes? More to the point, does your bookkeeping system meet your needs on a daily basis?

If you're a freelance writer, an effective record-keeping system is essential. Whether you write letters and design brochures for businesses, collect fees and royalties for books or write articles for magazines, it's imperative that you establish a workable technique of documenting business transactions.

I'm certainly no expert in the field of finance, but I've created a method of record-keeping that has worked for me these past 29 years.

I establish columns in a ledger for tracking query letters. I log the date sent, name of magazine and title or subject of the article proposed. I leave space to log the editor's response which generally amounts to such notations as, "yes," "no," "holding," "out of business," "bad address," or "resubmit in 6 months."

My article ledger is similar only, instead of using one line for each entry, as I do in the query log, I allow four to six lines of space. Here, I write the date the article was requested, date sent, name of magazine, name of article, whether or not it was a reprint or an original and I leave a space for the editor's response, payment date/amount and any additional notes. In the remaining space, I might log the date I sent requested photos, the signed contract or a rewrite. I note whether I sent the article via email or USPS and the proposed date of publication. The more information I record, the easier it is to trace an article or to respond to an editor when he claims he didn't receive the photographs, for example.

Data pertaining to book queries, proposals and manuscripts are also logged in these ledgers.

I keep track of payments received on a separate page in one of the ledgers. These entries include date of payment, date the article appeared, name of magazine, name of article and amount paid. This is what I use to report my article earnings at tax time. This is also where I log royalty payments. I highlight these entries to distinguish them from other monies received because royalties are handled differently at tax time.

I keep a separate ledger for each of my self-published books with pages designated for book sales, books shipped with payment due, promotional books, inventory and separate pages for regular customers (local bookstores and gift shops, for example).

More editors are accepting queries and article submissions via email. But for those times when you send a query or a manuscript through the mail, always be sure to enclose a self-addressed-stamped envelope (SASE).

Here's a tip that simplifies the task of bookkeeping: Write the date on the back of your SASE as you tuck it into the envelope with your query. When it comes back with either an article request or a rejection slip, you can match the date on the return envelope to the "date sent" entry in your log for quick reference.

This year, I've added a new dimension to my bookkeeping system. I've entered the information from my query and article ledgers into a computer database where I can view the history of an article or a magazine at the touch of the keyboard. I can see at a glance which magazines I've already queried regarding a particular article, which queries have been rejected or accepted by a particular magazine and who still owes me money for articles completed, for example.

A professional freelance writer also needs to keep track of expenses. My method is to save receipts in a file folder and tally them up at the end of the year. Collect receipts for postage and shipping costs pertaining to your business, office supplies, your Internet server and Web host, stationery, books and magazines purchased for educational and research purposes, long-distance telephone expenses that are not covered by the magazine, computer and other office equipment purchases and repairs as well as membership in writing-related organizations.

Keeping good records is not only important at tax time, it's vital to the success of your writing business.

## **Recession-Proof Your Writing Business**

(Written shortly after 9/11/01, but relevant whenever the economy takes a tumble.)

Nearly everyone is concerned about the state of the economy and most of us will be affected by the downturn. It seems unfair that, at a time when writers have so much to say, publishers are producing fewer books and magazine editors are printing fewer stories.

Business drives magazines. When business revenues wane, workers are laid off and advertising slows. Without advertisers, editors can't afford to pay writers. Within the past several months, five of my favorite magazines have gone under and several others have cut back on the amount of freelance work they're using. One editor, who liked my work, generously assigned me six articles—one each for the next six issues. When I completed the job, the editor wrote an apologetic letter saying that their advertisers were pulling out and they had to cut back on the number of articles they can use in each issue. Over the last eight months, they've published two of the six with a promise to use the others as space allows.

In times like these, more editors request articles on spec rather than issuing a contract. They don't know what direction their publication will go in the uncertain economy and they don't want to make any promises they can't keep. Consequently, the writer is often left writing for naught.

What's a writer to do in times of economic struggle? The strategy I use is to rethink and reorganize my business. Adopt the attitude that, if things aren't going your way, find another way. Here are some ideas to help keep your writing business afloat even during the hard times:

- Woo your long-standing clients and editors. Stay in touch with them so they'll think of you when they need something done. Remind them of your skills and make a few suggestions for projects that you might do for them.
- Write about the things people need to know during times like these: how to live on less, stress reduction, healthy grieving, penny-saver vacations, quick and easy money-making tips, survival techniques,

- how to plant a Victory Garden and easy and inexpensive Christmas gifts to make, for example.
- Subscribe to several online and print writing magazines and newsletters. Many of them list jobs for writers while also keeping you updated on trends in the writing industry.
  - Go outside your comfort zone. Search out new magazines, ezines, Web sites and businesses that might need your expertise. Browse magazine racks at bookstores, study *Writer's Market* and do Web searches, for example.
  - Take on clients. There are always people wanting help writing, editing or self-publishing a book or researching their family history. Become their paid mentor.
  - Produce pamphlets to market through appropriate agencies and or/businesses—recipes for diabetics or heart patients, how to keep the faith when the world seems doomed or how to garden away arthritis pain, for example.
  - Do something entirely different. Teach writing through a local adult education program, write ads for businesses, typeset manuscripts for clients, conduct research for others or scour the Web looking for those sites that need help with spelling and grammar and then apply for the job.
  - Write for less. As one writer friend says, “When times are tough, I’m never above any writing assignment no matter how superficial or low-paying. Those little jobs sometimes lead to bigger and better assignments.”
  - Solicit businesses and publications that are thriving in this economy. Right now, greeting card sales are up, for example. People are eating more sweets and other comfort foods. American flags are a booming business.
  - Write speeches. CEOs and association leaders often hire speechwriters. If you have a knack for speechwriting, read the local calendar of events in the newspaper to find out who is speaking and where. Attend speeches and presentations. Join or visit organizations and get involved at the district and state level where you’ll meet men and women who hire speechwriters.
  - Advertise your services. Build a Web site or join an organization such as NAWW (National Association of Women Writers – [www.naww.org](http://www.naww.org)) or SPAWN (Small Publishers, Artists and Writers Network – [www.spawn.org](http://www.spawn.org)) and get Web site space where you can

receive recognition for your work. Send out brochures to local businesses or a targeted mailing list.

- Ensure greater success during difficult times by establishing and maintaining a good reputation all the time.

## Research Techniques and Resources for Writers

Like it or not, writing involves research. As a writer of nonfiction articles and books, I spend a lot of my time doing research. Most fiction writers must also do research—to learn about the town where their story takes place or to understand facets of their character’s career, for example. Even poets conduct research occasionally—to determine the color pattern of a specific bird or to find an appropriate quote, perhaps.

I guess that’s why I’m always surprised when a writer sends me a question that requires research as if they don’t know how to access the information themselves. But then, asking someone who knows is also a form of research.

Sometimes, however, I don’t have a definitive answer to a writer’s question. So, when someone asks, “How many words should I write for a mystery book?” “What steps can I take to get started as a grant writer?” “What is creative nonfiction?” “How much should I charge for ghost writing a book?” I do what that writer could do—research.

My research techniques vary according to the type of information I need. In the case of the appropriate number of words for a mystery book, my instinct told me that this would vary from publisher to publisher. I wanted to either verify or nullify my own conclusion. I queried a literary agent who handles mysteries and a couple of publishers who publish them. I learned that, while there is a range one should stay within when writing a mystery, the numbers will change from publisher to publisher. Thus, I advised the writer to stay within the suggested range, to study each publisher’s Guidelines for Writers and to be willing to adapt her mystery for the particular publisher who wants to view it.

When asked to define creative nonfiction, I turned to a couple of sources: *Writer’s Market* and the Internet. *Writer’s Market* has a fairly complete glossary as well as abundant information for writers. And the Internet houses an endless supply of data.

There are five main sources of research today: books, articles, the Internet, professional experts and the ordinary individual with the right sort of experience and/or knowledge.



You can find information and potential experts in books and articles. And you can find out about those books and articles on the Internet. With some Web savvy, you can locate Web sites overflowing with facts, statistics and expert sources as well as individuals to interview on a variety of topics.

Many writers complain, however, “But I can never find what I’m looking for on the Internet.” Often these people are lacking the three assets they need: research skills, curiosity and lots of patience. While you’re developing these qualities, you can benefit from the following research guide.

In order to search the Web, you must first access a search engine. In the space provided on your screen, type the address for the search engine you wish to use. The most popular search engines include Altavista, Yahoo and Google. To access any of them, you would type [www.altavista.com](http://www.altavista.com), [www.Yahoo.com](http://www.Yahoo.com) or [www.google.com](http://www.google.com).

Once the search engine screen is displayed, type your subject in the space provided and wait for a response. While the Web site with the information you seek sometimes appears right away, other times you’ll have to try several different word combinations before you score.

Look through the list of Web sites that appear and click on the one you want to visit. You’ll be quickly swept away either to the site that houses the material you wanted or someplace totally unrelated. Be prepared to visit a lot of wrong sites before the right one comes along.

Be specific when choosing your search words. Use descriptive words. If you don’t succeed with your choice of words, try another. Use different spellings. Let’s say you want information about caring for baby rabbits. Using *rabbit* as a search word, might bring up a variety of sites unrelated to your interest. This list will include children’s books about rabbits, how to show rabbits, various breeds of rabbits, how to get rid of rabbits in your garden and so forth. Instead, you might want to type in, *birthing rabbits* or *baby rabbits* or *bunnies* or *caring for baby rabbits*.

More clearly define your search by using quotation marks. Let’s say that you want historical information about the Florida Keys. As an experiment, using AltaVista.com, I typed in *Florida Keys* and received 228,213 listings. Of course, the majority of them had nothing to do with my interest. So I used

quotation marks: “Florida Keys” and received 117,796 listings. That was more manageable, but I wanted to refine my search more. I typed “Florida Keys History” and got just 151 more focused site listings. This technique is a real time saver, believe me.

For a more successful search, use the singular version of a word, type in “cat” instead of “cats,” for example. Here again, make it clear whether you want to find articles about cat behavior (“cat behavior,” “cat personalities,” “cat traits”), the number of feral cats in America (“feral cat statistics,” “feral cat colonies in America,” “wild domestic cats”) or a list of cat names (“cat names,” “naming a cat”).

Experience and practice will help you to fine tune your searches.

Remember, though, there are no regulations for Web sites. Anyone can start a site for any purpose and provide whatever information they want. It’s your responsibility as a researcher to double check the information you receive.

There are numerous ways to find experts on the Internet. Here are a few:

- Use a search engine to locate an expert by topic, horticulture (horticulturist), animal psychology or psychologist or wildlife photography (photographer), for example.
- Find experts listed in online articles related to your topic.
- Search university staff Web pages to find experts for a variety of topics.
- Locate the names of author experts at [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com).
- Search for author contact information by author name, by publishing company name or by book title, for example.
- Locate nonprofessional experts through message boards. Type in “your topic + message board.” For example, “parent message board” or “pet message board.”

Here are a few sites for researchers:

[www.yearbooknews.com](http://www.yearbooknews.com). Type in your topic and get a list of experts and contact information.

[www.inernetstats.com](http://www.inernetstats.com) Provides statistics and the results of surveys related mostly to business.

[www.pollingreport.com](http://www.pollingreport.com) For trends in public opinion from politics to health to sports and family values

[www.grammarow.com](http://www.grammarow.com) for grammatical help

[www.dailyglobe.com/day2day.html](http://www.dailyglobe.com/day2day.html). The Daily Globe offers an extensive list of events to help spur those ideas and to help in fleshing out the details in a novel.

[www.about.com](http://www.about.com) has a large database where you can look up numerous topics.

[www.infoplease.com](http://www.infoplease.com) is the Information Please site.

While Web research may seem overwhelming at first, with practice and persistence, you'll soon come to rely on this means of research. Hang in there and you, too, will become a skilled Web surfer.

## Your Web site

Do writers need Web sites? They do if they have something to sell or a message to share. And I guess that includes just about every writer.

Your own Web site means exposure to a segment of the population that you may not already be reaching. It's a place where potential clients, publishers and editors can learn about you and your work. And you can sell your self-published books through a Web site.

But what should a Web site include? How do you design one that's effective? Following are some tips for creating a Web site that successfully portrays the message and purpose that you want to express.

1: **Research other writers' Web sites.** View these sites to determine what features might appeal to the visitors you hope to attract

2: **Strive for clarity.** Make sure that those visiting your site know at a glance what it's about. If you're selling books, state this on your home page. If you're advertising your editorial business, post your services front and center. Perhaps you want to create a Web site where editors and publishers can view samples of your work. Make this clear on your home page.

3: **Keep it Simple.** While conducting Web site research, you'll find some interesting site designs with some unusual color combinations. Before succumbing to the unconventional, consider how it will impact your audience. Will your visitors be able to read yellow words dancing across the page over a turquoise background sprinkled with black polka dots? Will they wait for the little pencil figure to recite your latest poem before navigating your site? Don't try to be so clever that you defeat your purpose.

Make it easy for folks to navigate your site. I suggest repeating your list of contents on every page, for example.

4: **Build a strong first impression.** Your home page should be inviting while luring visitors to other areas of your site. If your home page is blah and has no explanation or promise of interesting things to come, busy Web surfers won't bother to look any further.

5: **Exceed visitors' expectations.** While you don't want to clutter up your Web site with unnecessary material, you certainly want to respond to your visitors' needs. If you're selling books, for example, show pictures of them, include a synopsis of each and provide an author bio as well as ordering information. If you're promoting your editorial services, a bio/resume, references and your photograph would be appropriate. A site designed to showcase your work to editors and publishers should also answer all of their potential questions. You might post your current bio, previously published work, work in progress, letters of recommendation and your photograph.

6: **Advertise your site.** Having a site is only the beginning. In order for it to be effective, you must invite people to visit. Your Web site designer can help you get linked to the most important search engines. You'll also want to exchange links with Web sites expressing themes complimentary to yours. Spend a couple of hours each week seeking out good link prospects.

And tell people about your site. Include your Web site address (URL) on your letterhead and business cards. Add a *signature* to your outgoing emails. A signature is a message that you can have automatically placed at the bottom of each email you send.

Who should you get to design your Web site and how much will you have to pay? When I asked Web site designer and SPAWN Webmaster, Virginia Lawrence, Ph. D this question, she said, "You can get the kid next door to do it for a couple of pizzas or you can spend a million dollars or any amount in between." The minimum you can expect to pay an experienced professional to design a basic Web site is probably around \$500.

Of course, you can build your own site and there are programs to help. Lawrence recommends HotMetal. She says, "A lot of people like Dreamweaver." But she suggests that beginners stay away from FrontPage. She says, "It creates pages with all kinds of unnecessary extra junk."

Another option is to do what I did and arrange for a Web design student to build your site as a class project. It was a win-win situation. I have a very nice Web site and the student earned a good grade while learning a trade.

Some writers' organizations offer free or reasonable Web site space for their members. SPAWN is one. That's Small Publishers, Artists and Writers Network. [www.spawn.org](http://www.spawn.org).

Do you need a Web site? If you're a working writer, the answer is probably, "yes."

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