

Boost Your Writing Business by Diversifying

Spread your writing wings and reap the monetary rewards

By Susan Johnston – July 7, 2008



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With advertising dollars down and editors at many print publications tightening their budgets, some freelance writers are finding fewer opportunities to write for traditional media. But with a little ingenuity, it's still possible for freelancers to make a decent living in a down economy. We talked to several freelance writers who have found creative ways to supplement their writing income using related skills.

Fact checking

Although some publications have fact checkers on staff, others farm out that responsibility to freelancers. [Abigail Lewis](#), a California freelance writer and part-time editor of *Valley Life* magazine, took on fact checking responsibilities as part of an editing and proofing gig at a magazine. She says would-be fact checkers should be dogged, detail-oriented, and discerning.

"Sometimes you have to sift through the information to determine if what the source is saying is accurately reflected in what the writer wrote," she explains. "And, I take Wikipedia with a grain of salt. Sometimes it can send me to better sources, but I would never accept something on Wikipedia at face value."

Brooklyn-based science writer [Sarah A. Webb](#) started fact checking as an intern at *Discover* magazine and also worked for a year as a freelance fact checker at *Popular Science*. Webb points out that editors look for similar qualities in writers and fact checkers. "They're looking for people who are responsible and meet deadlines," she says.

Of course, fact checkers also need to be good problem solvers. "If something is incorrect, you want to find a way to make it accurate in a way that pleases the writer and your editor," she explains.

Though Webb has shifted away from fact checking to focus more on writing work, she adds that "fact checking work can be good training and a nice extra flow of income, particularly for new freelancers or people early in their careers."

Editing and proofreading

If you're patient and detail-oriented, then proofreading could be a good side gig for you. [Schraepfer Harvey](#) is a writer and editor in Somerville, Mass., who earned a certificate in editing from the University of Washington Extension program. He's carved out a niche proofing catalogues and other marketing materials for clients including REI, EF Tours, Joslin Diabetes Center, and Northeastern University.

Most of Harvey's gigs are on-site and involve looking at page proofs, which are then passed on to the graphic designers. "If a writer decides to pick up a proofreading gig [it helps if the person] has a basic knowledge of the software," he says. "You don't know have to know all of the commands, but you should know what limitations or possibilities there are with the software. It'll help you get along with designers if everyone [speaks] the same language" Usually this means having a familiarity with desktop publishing programs such as Quark or InDesign.

Often, Harvey points out, a gig that's advertised as copyediting or proofreading will involve both skills. (*The Chicago Manual of Style* details the differences between proofreading and copyediting.) Either way, he says you have to "stay on track and keep an eye on the prize" so you don't get too wrapped up in modifiers or syntax and the client gets their piece printed on time.

Adding Artwork

Artistically inclined writers might find a creative and cash-generating outlet in photography or illustration. Mary Bergin, a travel writer and photographer based in Madison, Wisc., notes that editors often prefer her photography to stock images or the slick marketing photos submitted by the destination's public relations department. She says that many "editors do not want to use what everybody else is using [and that] the more remote the location, the less available the artwork is."

Bergin started out in newspaper writing, where she had staff photographers to help her. When she made the switch to freelance travel writing six years ago, she taught herself photography because "editors expect good artwork to be available to illustrate the text. Income from photographs has been a nice surprise." She's since taken several photography classes to learn about composition, photo processing, and other skills.

In addition to selling her photography to accompany her articles, Bergin finds that her photo skills come in handy to document the places she visits. "[I'll take] photos just to remind myself of what I've seen. Sometimes if I'm being rushed through a location like a museum and there's pertinent text, I'll take a photo of the text and read it later."

Other writers earn extra money with editorial illustrations. Los Angeles-based freelancer Dennis Nishi had taken some art courses during college and decided to market himself as an illustrator, too. His original intent was to sell editors illustrations to accompany his articles, but now he mainly writes and illustrates different pieces.

Nishi used his connections as a freelancer at *Men's Fitness* to sell illustrations from his portfolio to the magazine's art director. "I was already inside, so I could talk to them in person," he says. Since then, Nishi's illustrations have appeared in *The Washington Post*, *The New Republic* and *The Chicago Reporter*.

He's also managed to leverage the contacts he gained through illustration to find new writing markets. "It's worked out on occasion where I can use one to get into the other," he explains. "You don't necessarily have to have an art degree [to sell illustrations]. You just have to be able to promote yourself and have a good portfolio."

Moderating Blogs

With the more media outlets launching blogs, there is increasing demand for people to monitor and moderate those blogs. Australian freelance writer Fred Pawle landed a gig moderating blogs for *The Australian*, where he has several contacts.

"If blog moderating isn't a growing area of publishing, it should be," Pawle says. "The grammar of the comments posted on most blogs around the world is deplorable. Worse, some are seriously defamatory. Without a moderator, most blogs would be unreadable and occasionally legally sketchy."

He adds that "a good moderator can step in and prevent the debate degenerating into personal acrimony, which would easily happen on blogs written by political pundits." According to Pawle, spending three days per week moderating the blogs from his home in Sydney is "very handy, because it's a guaranteed income but doesn't impose too much on my freelancing pursuits."

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