

FREELANCE ARTICLES

by John Moir

The Greek mathematician Archimedes once said something along the lines of, “Give me a lever long enough, and I can move the world.” After more than 15 years of freelancing, I have learned that Archimedes’ dictum also applies to building a career writing articles for magazines and other media. Astute freelancers use *leverage* to progress toward ever-better assignments.

Here’s how it can work.

Seven years ago, an article I wrote received a first-place award for nonfiction from a writing conference at the National Steinbeck Center. Several magazines had already rejected the article, but suddenly—with the award in hand—the piece had leverage. Within two weeks, an editor at a national magazine snapped it up. The prize also drew the attention of an agent and eventually led to a book deal. That award served as a fulcrum that moved my writing world, propelling my work to heights I’d only dreamed about.

Leverage takes many forms: It can be your professional background, a unique experience, publication in a big magazine, or perhaps a writing award. In the competitive world of freelancing, having something extra to help capture the attention of busy editors is a powerful asset.

These days, leverage is more important than ever as digital publishing roils traditional print journalism.

AT A GLANCE
Send to: Specific editor (never “acquisitions editor”)
Include: Query letter

But despite the industry’s turmoil, freelancing opportunities still abound. For every print publication that’s cutting back on acquisitions, there are new opportunities to be found on the Internet.

Here are my best tips for submitting articles that will enable you to leverage your way toward better assignments at major publications.

SUBMISSION TIPS

Research your potential subject up front. Editors almost always buy nonfiction articles based on a query letter. With a query, you don’t have to write the article until you have a contract, and the editor can provide input on the article’s direction before it’s written. But in order to write a compelling query, you need not just an *idea* for an article, but a thorough grasp of your material. The trick is to conduct just enough research to craft a persuasive pitch. That said, my preference is to err on the side of additional research. In the long run, it usually saves time—and helps avoid awkward surprises.

Research your market. Once you’re confident you understand what your article would need to cover, begin a second round of research to determine the best publishing opportunities. Start with publications where you have a realistic chance of acceptance, which for beginning freelance journalists often means smaller, regional or niche publications. When you have potential targets in mind, comb their submission guidelines for specifics; in this genre in particular, they’re often gold mines of information that will be invaluable in tailoring your pitch to a specific publication. Finally, search the online archives of your target publications for articles on your topic; if you discover that a magazine has published something similar to your proposed piece in the past year or two, it’s best to try elsewhere.

Spend ample time on your query. Sure, it sounds straightforward: Write a one-page, three- or four-paragraph query letter that opens with an intriguing hook to pique an editor’s interest, and follow that with a succinct description of the article’s key points. Conclude the query with a summary of your writing credentials and pertinent previous publications or honors. One page doesn’t sound like much, but query letters take time. To impress an editor: polish, polish, polish.

Direct your query to a specific editor, and send it via e-mail unless the submission guidelines specify otherwise. If you’re not sure which editor to send it to, I’ve found it helpful to phone the magazine and ask the receptionist for this information.

Remember that rejection is not personal—it’s just the way things work. When an editor says no, immediately take two steps: 1) E-mail the editor a short thank-you for considering your piece. 2) Maintain your momentum by immediately sending the article to the next market on your list.

When an editor says yes (Woohoo—this is the payoff for all the work you did researching and pitching the piece!), be sure to clarify the deadline, word count and pay rate for the assignment up front. Use the query letter plus any suggestions from the editor as your template for writing the article. If you find there’s good reason to diverge from this in any significant way, it’s best to let the editor know well ahead of deadline. Similarly, if questions about style or content arise as you’re writing (e.g., “Is writing in first person acceptable?”; or, “Can you use white spaces for narrative breaks?”), check with your editor. When in doubt, ask. Then, when you submit the completed piece, see if the editor will allow you to include a short bio and link to your website at the end.

When you succeed in doing all of the above, don’t forget to celebrate! Upon the article’s publication, reward yourself for your accomplishment. Despite the inevitable twists and turns, writers with perseverance and professionalism have an excellent chance of leverag-

ing their way toward increasing success in marketing nonfiction articles. That’s good news, because this approach is still the best way I know of to write on topics about which you are curious or passionate—and to do it on your own terms. **WD**



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