

CHICAGO HEADLINE CLUB PRESENTS: “How to Freelance in Chicago”

FREELANCERS

Meagan Francis

Francis has been freelancing for over four years. She writes about parenting, wellness, and family life for magazines like *Natural Health*, *Yoga Journal*, *Parenting*, and *American Baby*. She's also the author of two books: *Table for Eight: Raising a large family in a small-family world* (Alpha/Penguin), and the *Everything Health Guide to Postpartum Care* (Adams Media). She can be found online at www.meaganfrancis.com or emailed at meaganfrancis@yahoo.com

Her tips:

It takes a while to build momentum, so don't give up too soon. Many freelancers report that it takes at least 6 months to a year or more of consistent effort to feel like they're getting anywhere.

Persistence and the ability to let rejections roll off your back are as important as talent and skill when it comes to making it as a freelancer.

You don't necessarily need years of experience to pitch national publications. A great idea, well-written query and solid clips—even if they aren't from big-name publications—can get you in the door.

Don't underestimate yourself! Along with persistence, confidence is a huge boon to the freelancer. It gives you an edge in almost every department, from the way you present yourself in your queries to negotiating contracts and pay and standing up for your rights if the editing process goes south. If you aren't feeling confident, “act as if” you do and you may actually fool yourself.

Focus. Either specialize or have a “beat” in a few specific topic areas, or narrow down your list of target publications to a manageable number. If you're querying every publication you can think of while also trying to research every idea that sounds interesting, your efforts will be diluted and you won't be as effective.

Freelancing depends on building strong relationships with editors. Your goal isn't just to sell this story, but to have a positive rapport with an editor now and in the future. If your idea is rejected, look at it as an opportunity to keep the conversation going. If you land the assignment, see it as an opportunity to make a good impression and hopefully it'll lead to more work down the road.

Don't allow anyone else's version of success to define your own. If you define success as writing meaty features for well-respected publications, great. If you would be thrilled just making steady money and will write whatever somebody asks you to, that's valid too. There are many different ways to be successful as a freelancer, so figure out what you really want out of your career, and make a plan to get from here to there.

Shia Kapos

Kapos is a lifestyles reporter and columnist for Crain's Chicago Business. She spent four years working as a freelancer in Chicago, writing for Crain's as well as People magazine, the Chicago Tribune, Chicago Sun-Times, New York Times, and Chicago Magazine.

Her tips:

1. Stay confident.
2. Decide what kind of freelancer you want to be--full-time? part-time? Journalism or public relations?
3. Set up a real working office.
4. Look at freelancing as a real job and set parameters for office hours.
5. Establish contact with editors—usually email is preferred.
6. Editors usually decide the pay rate—not you.
7. Know the publication you want to write for before you pitch a story.
8. Make your pitches short and offer a clear nut graf that tells them what the story will be about—editors don't have time to read lengthy comments.
9. Don't be disappointed if you don't hear back from an editor right away--or at all.
10. Follow up but if you still don't hear back, know that they're not interested.
11. Stay disciplined.
12. Don't make excuses to editors—and always meet your deadlines.
13. Keep track of assignments.
14. Put aside earnings for taxes.
15. Keep track of payments.
16. Make time to pitch stories.
17. Focus on reporting first—then the writing will come.
18. Develop a source list.
19. Don't be afraid to leave your office to report.
20. Stay confident!

Claire Zulkey

Claire Zulkey has written for publications such as the *Chicago Tribune*, *Wall Street Journal.com*, *Chicago Magazine* and *Modern Bride*. Currently she is a television blogger for the *LA Times.com* and The Onion AV Club. Her website, Zulkey.com, has been mentioned in the *New Yorker*, *USA Today* and on *Anderson Cooper 360*. She is the co-creator and host of the Chicago humor reading series "Funny Ha Ha" and this December expects to receive her Masters in Creative Writing from Northwestern University. Claire can be reached at clairezulkey@hotmail.com

Her Tips:

ETIQUETTE:

1. Be a good penpal. If you enjoy an article and you are able to contact the writer to say you admired it, by all means do. And, if somebody sends you an email complimenting you on something you've written, write back and be gracious. You never know if simply being a friendly person can lead to some advice, a recommendation, or even a friendship.
2. One good turn deserves another. If you hear about an opportunity that you can't take advantage of but you know someone who can, pass on their name. It will come back to you.

3. The Chicago literary scene is small and friendly. Scope out readings and introduce yourself to people whose work you admire. It not only can work out well for networking, it's great just to know like-minded people to have a beer with. Plus, every time you socialize with your writey friends you can write it off.
4. If an editor or contact is blowing you off, PICK UP THE PHONE. The temptation simply to email is strong: there is always the slight chance that you might have an awkward conversation but it's much better than not getting paid/missing your deadline.

TECHNICAL:

1. Regularly back up your e-rolodex. (I download my address book from Outlook and save it to Gmail.) If your email melts down you don't want to lose everyone.
2. Put a piece of scotch tape over the hole marked "ear" on your tape recorder. I did this after I lost an entire interview with a MacArthur Genius Award winner because I hadn't plugged in the phone cord correctly. I've never made that mistake again.
3. Still, you should probably take notes when you do interviews regardless of your foolproof tape recorder technique.
4. If you're not a paper kind of person, every time you get a good idea for a story/piece, email it to yourself and save it in a folder in your email account.

WRITING ONLINE:

1. If possible, when publishing online, try to take a few hours, or preferably overnight to go back to what you've written and read it over. The appeal of instant publication can lead to sloppy writing.
2. If you're covering pop culture, especially when writing online, get connected to publicists and follow the news. There are a million bloggers and online critics saying why one particular show/album/book is good or bad, but an interview or an interesting hook will set your piece apart.
3. Promote yourself within reason: if you've written a post that you think is timely and well-written, send a heads up to a select related blogs that might drive you traffic. (But don't do this too often and don't do it to publications that have nothing to do with what you've written, or else you're just being a pest.)

GENERAL:

1. When debating whether or not to keep a steady client, if on more than one occasion frustrations with that particular person/organization have kept you up at night, then yes, stop working for that client.
2. If a source is complaining that you're asking questions that are too personal or ones they don't want to answer, say it's out of your hands and blame it on your editor who told you have to get that information.
3. If you're relatively new to making a decent income from freelance writing, see an accountant in the spring--you'd be amazed by the things could be writing off, tax-wise, that you might not be.

Dawn Reiss

Reiss is a Chicago Headline Club board member and a freelance writer, reporter and journalist. She has written for publications and outlets such as *Travel + Leisure*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Chicago magazine*, *Chicago Sun-Times*, *Chicago Reader*, *USA Today*, *Associated Press*, *Chicago Parent*, *TimeOut Chicago*, *HowStuffWorks.com*, *Cincinnati Magazine*, *Cleveland Plain-Dealer*, *Fort Worth Weekly*, and *St. Petersburg Times*. She previously worked as a staff writer at the *St. Petersburg Times* and *Dallas Morning News*, and as an assistant editor at the now defunct *DFW Sports Weekly*. Reiss has covered many major sporting events from the Super Bowl to Kentucky Derby and spent four months driving to every NFL stadium in the country on “The Ultimate Road Trip” with *The Sporting News*. Her forté is writing quirky off-beat features about everything and anything from dog sledding and ziplining in Alaska to celebrity profiles, dining, shopping, and book reviews, to business, news, sports stories. View her website at www.mediabistro.com/DawnReiss. She can be reached at dreiss100@gmail.com

Her tips:

- Building a business doesn't happen overnight. Be patient.
- Create a business plan. This is a business, not a hobby, not something that you should take lightly. Think and plan for business cards, website, office supplies, cell phone/internet access, etc....
- Review all contracts. Don't blindly sign anything. Some will give the rights back to you, some will try to take everything (IE Work for Hire – which is the worst contract out there.) Ask for another contract or cross out items that take too much away. Most freelancers who make a lot of money do it by repurposing one idea. Say you are taking a trip to Alaska. You could pitch from that one trip, the adventure angle, a first-person column/experience story, a dining story, an excursion story, a spa story, the straight travel third-person angle, tips from that trip, interview parents or multigenerational travelers even if you aren't one of them. You've got multiple ideas from one experience. The key is to spin off other ideas from the original thought.
- It usually takes six months to a year to start to make a real profit. Usually it's feast or famine. Once you start to build a strong (positive) reputation the flood gates open and you'll be inundated with calls. Then it's hard to keep up. Also most freelancers work like attorneys. You divide your day between handling clients, (ie negotiating contracts, sending pitches, etc.), marketing yourself and doing the business aspect of freelancing and actually doing the work you love (ie reporting, writing, photography, etc.)
- Be honest. Communicate with your editors. Turn everything in on time. If something happens and you need more time, make sure you ask ahead of time or discuss the situation with an editor.
- Learn the publication (or media outlet) you are pitching. Know that some editors like email, some like the phone. Some like to chat, some like to talk as little as possible. Everyone is busy, so keep that in mind.
- Be persistent. Cluster multiple ideas in one pitch and you are more likely to get one of them published.
- Join groups – freelancesuccess.com is a great online community that creates a virtual office environment where you can post questions and comments and usually get an immediate response. It's the best \$70 I've spent.
- Look at joining one of the many networking groups, SPJ (Society of Professional Journalists), AWJ (Association of Women Journalists), IWOC (Independent Writers of Chicago) or one of the many other groups.
- Read *The ASJA Guide to Freelance Writing* and *The Renegade Writer: A Totally Unconventional Guide to Freelance Writing Success*
- Attend The ASJA annual conference in New York where you can meet book and magazine editors from the best national publications.

- Look at mediabistro.com. They also have networking parties every month in Chicago. Sign up on their website.
- Keep in mind, there isn't a right way to freelance. What works for one person doesn't necessarily work for another. Some people write spectacular query letters, I personally cold call just about every editor I work with. Know what kind of person you are and play up those aspects.
- Be multi-dimensional. The more subjects you can write about, the better off you are. Learn how to write for the web. (IE meta descriptions, search engine optimization.) Take photographs. Blog. Webcast. The more you can do the more you can offer potential clients.
- Good luck! Remember there is no glass ceiling. The beauty of being your own boss is that you are in the driver's seat. What you put in is what you get out of it.

EDITORS

David Bernstein

Bernstein is a senior editor at *Chicago* magazine. Previously he was a freelance writer, frequently contributing to *The New York Times*, *Chicago*, and *Crain's Chicago Business*. His work has also appeared in *The Best of Technology Writing 2006* (Digital Culture Books) and *The Best American Crime Reporting 2007* (Harper Perennial). He can be reached at dbernstein@chicagogmag.com.

His tips: Simply put, we are always on the lookout for new freelancers. But before pitching stories, they should be aware of a couple of things: first, and maybe most importantly, they should be aware of our production schedule—roughly six to eight weeks before publication. So, if someone pitches us a story, say, in early July about an event or some such later in the month, that's really no good to us. Our July issue hits newsstands in mid-June. Second, we're always interested in hearing about fresh local people, places, and events (new books, plays, etc.) for short front-of-the-book pieces. Dining is something we typically cover in house. For features, we're mostly interested in compelling narrative stories. Service packages are also handled in house. That's it, really, in a nutshell. I think freelancers who want to write for the magazine should keep up with the magazine to know what we've covered lately.

Jacqueline Fitzgerald

Fitzgerald is an assistant editor for the *Chicago Tribune's* On the Town entertainment section, which runs on Fridays. Before joining OTT, she worked for five years as an editor and writer for WomanNews, where she wrote a nationally syndicated column on women at work and a Q&A column called "Talking With." In 2004, she was a Lisagor finalist in the feature-writing category. Previously, she was a copy editor for the paper's Business section. A graduate of Michigan State University and the University of London, she started her career at a magazine publishing company in London. She can be reached at JFitzgerald@tribune.com

1) Read the publication(s) you want to write for! It might sound obvious, but we get lots of calls pitching stories that either have nothing to do with our section or are very similar to stories that have been in the paper a few weeks or months ago. So, read, don't just browse or glance at the publication.

2) Understand that Hurry Up and Wait can be part of the routine. In other words, because of production cycles and space constraints, it's possible that your story may sit in our system for several weeks unedited. Then, on short notice, it goes through the editing process and editors may need to ask detailed questions about info you reported way back when. We try to avoid this, but it does happen sometimes. Also, there may be three or four eyes on the story so even if your assigning ed OKs it, there may be others down the line who raise questions.

3) Strike a balance between reporting and writing. Again, sounds obvious, but you'd be surprised how many stories are written with humor and attitude, but with just a few sources giving mediocre quotes OR the reporter has talked to plenty of people with great voices, but the story hasn't been carefully crafted. Also, just because you talked to 12 people doesn't mean they all have to be included -- pick and choose the best people and the best quotes.

4) Ideally, after a few conversations with an editor, a writer should be able to take the story idea and run with it. It's not usually necessary to give a ton of updates. But, if the story is taking a very different direction or there is a problem, let us know as soon as possible. We're flexible, but don't wait till the story is filed to say that it's not what we talked about.

5) Fresh, creative ideas will ensure that you get work. Stretch out of your comfort zone and brainstorm original ways to tell stories. Also, the more you can think, plan and organize your information and approach before you write, the smoother the process will be for everyone.

6) Double check facts and figures before filing. It helps to make a print out of it and go through line by line to make sure that everything is accurate.

Also, my editor, **Kevin Williams**, offers the following. He acknowledges that they are a tad harsh, but I think they are helpful nevertheless.

Handle your business. In other words, know who you're pitching and what they want. If all you have are classical music clips, you probably aren't going to have much of a shot at that metal magazine story.

Make a complete pitch, including (if necessary) photo possibilities. If you pitch a profile on someone who hasn't been photographed in 5 years, you damn well better be sure he'll be able to be shot by you.

Pitch like a grown up. Do leg work before you pitch, so that you know if the story is possible. And have details. I was once pitched a story on swing dancing by someone who couldn't tell me the locations of the clubs she wanted to write about.

Pitch the right person, and never assume that person is an idiot. If you pitch a half-baked idea and the editor shoots it down, forget about another shot.

Be flexible. An editor might like one aspect of your idea, but have an adaptation to suggest. Go with the flow.

Be an easy edit. They're words, not unalterable pearls.

Be good. Freelancing is hard work, and editors constantly get pitches from sucky writers. Be mediocre somewhere else.

Stay in contact. If you aren't responsive to e-mails and phone calls, how can deadline editing happen? It can't.

File your best effort, but don't be shocked if it comes back, and don't go into a shell with subsequent edits. It isn't your story. It's the reader's story.

Jane Hirt

Hirt is the editor of *RedEye*, a Monday-Saturday tabloid edition of the *Chicago Tribune* aimed at urban commuters in their 20s and 30s who are time-pressed and socially active. The ground-breaking paper connects each week with more than 700,000 Chicagoans.

Hirt joined the *Chicago Tribune* in 1990 after graduating from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and has held several positions in the newsroom, including national/foreign copy desk chief and national/foreign news editor. In 2002 she joined the team that created *RedEye*.

She can be reached at JHirt@tribune.com

Her tips:

- I look for dependable freelancers who never miss a deadline. Even one flake-out can taint a freelancer's ability to get more work.
- Get to know the publication and its audience and pitch only stories you think would fit.
- Be clear about your assignment; send a follow-up e-mail restating the assignment and ask for confirmation. If reporting leads you to a different story, check with your assignment editor before taking that alternate path.
- Turn in clean stories; every error is a big deal and even small grammatical errors lead editors to suspect shoddy reporting.
- After you've established a relationship with a publication, be persistent with your pitches; the most successful freelancers pitch often. If a publication accepts none of your pitches, however, it's probably time to move on to another publication.
- Many beginning freelancers want to start by writing columns; that's an unlikely first assignment.
- Be completely up-front with your sourcing.

Sue Ontiveros

Ontiveros is the deputy features editor at the *Chicago Sun-Times*. She's been with the paper for 23 years and oversees Lifestyles, Food, Travel and Sunday Show. She is looking for free-lancers to write for the Lifestyle pages. She can be reached at sontiveros@suntimes.com.

Her Tips:

Read the publication/section you want to write for so your story ideas fit that publication/section.

Make sure you have the editor's name spelled correctly. If you can't spell my name, what is going to give me confidence you'll be able to get the names spelled correctly in your story? And please, spell the name of my publication correctly, hyphen and all.

Don't send your story in in some wacky font or weird color. It's your words I am interested in, not that you found the fun keys on your computer. Plus, often weird fonts mess up in our system and are unreadable. Then I have to ask for the story again, which is annoying.

If I ask for 600 words, don't give me 900 and say, just trim what you want. I asked for 600 words because that's what I want, not the extra task of culling the absolute most important facts from your story.

Get your payment form in when you turn in the story. So many times I have to beg people for their payment forms. I can't pay you without the form.

Leah Pietrusiak (Time Out Chicago, Out There editor)

Leah was born in Chicago, grew up in Oak Park and went to school at the University of Wisconsin-Madison where she earned a degree in environmental/science journalism. Back in Chicago, she started writing artist profiles and community-interest pieces while editor at a small newspaper called Citylink; she worked briefly as the web editor for Venus magazine and freelanced for the Reader before being hired by Time Out Chicago. As the Out There editor she's always "out there" digging up random city color stories, coercing interesting strangers on the street to talk to her, and brainstorming new ways to touch on last-minute news bits. She's interviewed well-knowns like naturalist Jane Goodall, horror-director George Romero, and Jefferson Airplane frontwoman Grace Slick; and she still writes stories with an environmental and community-based bent—like the "end" of Critical Mass, and follow-ups on turning the elevated Bloomingdale rail line into a park. She lives in Humboldt Park, where her grandparents still reside.

Her tips:

Clips and a resume are fine, but well-pitched and well-researched ideas are better. Editors can't know everything that's going on around the city—that's one of the main reasons we depend on freelancers. So you were talking to this one guy who's going to build a ship for Earth Day made partly out of plastic bags? There's a lot of people doing interesting things that the media don't get press releases on. So pitch it—and when you do, show that you're familiar with the particular section. For instance, I would love it if a freelancer e-mailed me and said that this plastic-ship guy could possibly make for a longer story—or maybe a subject for the "5 minutes with" section. Some section editors I've talked to say they're willing to give someone with little writing experience a shot if they've shown that they're smart enough to recognize and pitch a good story.

Start small

Each week, the Out There section is made up of smaller items like "What's up with that?," "10 bucks well spent" and "It happened here." These are shorter write-ups that don't necessarily need a time peg—just someone to wonder "what's up" with that abandoned phone booth on the corner, spot a kitschy buy around town for under 10 dollars or research some good old Chicago history (and ideally follow up on what's actually happening at that location now). Again, it's showing that you're familiar with the publication, and being proactive in finding appropriate content. And pegging an item to a holiday/season/anniversary, etc is even better. One of the best "10 bucks well spent" pitches I ever got was for a Moses action figure pegged to Passover.

Other suggestions for TimeOut Chill Out section...

Chill Out covers all things related to fitness, nutrition, health, yoga, spas, psychology and wellness in Chicago. I am always looking for a fresh, interesting, fun way to tell a story (charts, graphs, Q&As, etc). New products/openings/events, and/or ones that are cleverly pegged to a season/holiday/time of year work best. Round-ups around a theme are a good place to start brainstorming, but you need to think about how the story feels Time Out-y. Is there a stunt element? A clever way to grade the experience? A surprising way the info is organized? No problem if the idea is not completely thought out, but I need at least enough info to understand why it's timely/newsy/Chill Out. and if you have multiple ideas—that's great!—please send them all in one email (lplosser@timeoutchicago.com)! To look at recent stories, go to www.timeoutchicago.com and click on Spas, gyms & health on the left hand menu.

We look for....

Critics' picks (new health/beauty products, services around town, brand new gadgets that are super cool and cute)

Just opened (new health centers, gyms, spas, etc)

Tool boxes (a tool or gadget that improves your life--could be fitness, nutrition or health-related)

Road tests (try something wacky that has an urgent/timely feel...in the past, staffers tried boosting their steps by wearing a pedometer for a week, body hair trimming (we had a guy staffer try), etc.

Bargain blisses (an amazing special or deal you've heard about that warrants more than a small listing)

Openers (longer articles....can be a write-through on a unique topic, a Q&A with a newsy expert, visually-driven ideas like product roundups, timelines, annotated images, e

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Other editors who are looking for freelancers:

Pioneer Press

Sheryl DeVore, Pioneer Press Managing Editor for Home & Design, Health & Family, Food, and North Suburban Focus, is looking for freelancers to write for these four sections. Freelancers should go on line to www.pioneerlocal.com and click on Lifestyles and view these sections to see what kinds of stories we publish and the format. Those interested should send a resume, two clips and an email or letter to:

Sheryl DeVore
Pioneer Press
3701 W. Lake Ave.
Glenview, IL 60026
sdevore@pioneerlocal.com

No phone calls, please. Freelancer must be able to visit source and help with photo assignments. These sections go into the North Shore and Lake County, Illinois papers.

Carol Goddard, Pioneer Press Senior Editor, News, is looking for freelancers to write news and local features for the North Shore papers. She may be reached at cgoddard@pioneerlocal.com or Pioneer Press, 3701 W. Lake Ave., Glenview, IL 60026.

Crain's

Contact: Andrea Hanis, Assistant Managing Editor, Crain's Chicago Business 312.649.5456
ahanis@crain.com

Andrea manages the Business of Life section. She looks for freelancers who can write stories about interoffice relationships and lifestyles trends and issues.

City Search

Contact: Valerie Moloney, City Editor, Citysearch Chicago, vmoloney@citysearch.com

City Search (whose competitor is Metromix.com) offers comprehensive City guides in 75 word descriptions. She is looking for edgy ideas like cool bathrooms and crazy cocktails. They cover everything including: shopping, spas, bars, restaurants, hotels, events and autobody shops. It's a comprehensive guide to the city "I'm the lone city editor, so I'm always open to ideas," Moloney says. The pay range \$20 per brief \$75 restaurant review, plus \$150 for expenses. \$50 round-ups for scenes. Occasionally she also hires freelancers for fact-checking. She usually gives freelancers 2-3 tries, if they don't get an idea she moves on to other. She assigns a month out and expects freelancers to meet deadlines.

Calling All Photographers...

RedEye's photo department seeks well-rounded, general assignment freelance shooters. The ideal candidate is able to compose strong creative portraits and think on his or her feet in news situations. High ethical standards are required; video experience is preferred.

Please send resumes/portfolios to cagnello-dean@tribune.com or Chase Agnello-Dean, Photo Editor, RedEye, 435 N Michigan Ave. 4th floor, Chicago, IL 60611