

# What do I do special as a writing coach?

I just woke up to a question/discussion on LinkedIn's Promocave:

Carrie Golden, Citizen Journalist/Poetry Consultant to filmmakers at Motionpoems, Inc., asked:

*Writing coach...*

*Not sure if this group [Promocave] is the right place to post this question but...what exactly does a writing coach do to help writers?*

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I wear two hats (on one head): (1) **"court-of-last-resort" editor**, providing a last-chance no-nonsense review of what the writer is about to submit (the final final draft) for book publication and (2) a **first-step writing coach** (before much writing). So here was my contribution to the discussion that defines my view of what different do I offer as a writing coach—and why.

*[As a writing coach] I think of myself as a nonfiction "what" coach. I prod the souls [rather deeply] through six or so what's (?), then the "how's" make sense (and cents). I'm there if they need me later, more as an action guide and (sometimes) a silent co-planner of their future empire.*

**Here's a longer explanation of (2)**, if you are interested and it helps you (*sans me*) do your own early nonfiction book planning, writing, and publishing.

There's not much mystery about the steps a nonfiction writer can and usually takes to prep and submit a book for

publication. See a hundred books in libraries worldwide that address that, and I have two books that address it too: [How to Get Your Book Published in Minutes and Marketed Worldwide in Days](#) and [How to Pick the Right Kind of Publisher](#).

What distresses me most is the number of smart, organized, diligent would-be book writers who wander about, with perfectly good words and spelling, looking for something to say and, mostly, a reason to say it. Bewildered souls with hundreds of pages (at least it reads that way) of “what’s that?” copy that has no clear (or any) purpose (or buyers) presented in sweet-reading, grammatically correct prose. Their command of English is strong. (It’s worse if it’s not.) What’s missing is their grasp of elementary common sense about what a book must do to become a book...

The saddest thing is how easily that could have been prevented if they hadn’t been in such a damn hurry to see themselves and their brilliance in print (everywhere), with assumedly a fat advance almost in hand and many years of fatter royalties following assuredly behind.

**About six questions** will create the structure and map, plus point the writer to the most likely reader, why they would read it, what they would do with it, and how they just saved themselves about 75% in misdirected (or undirected) research, “what’s that?” writing, and the one thing they can’t get back, wasted time. Of course each question leads to deeper, related sub-questions which, in turn, lead to a dozen related books written (or waiting for you to write) that, combined with speaking, consulting, focus book series, perhaps audiobooks, and so on, can rather quickly create an empire based on their acquired expertise (which began with book one and is further proven and strengthened in subsequent products.)

So I guess that really makes me a **pre-writing and empire-building coach** (if being an emperor or empress is your thing).

That's the longer overview of what my kind of writing coach does. (Most of the others start when the writing itself appears. Bless them.)

Best wishes,

Gordon Burgett

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## Leading your idea in print down its most profitable path...

So you've got an **article** or **book idea** that you want to turn into both **big money** and widely-seen **expertise presence**. That's the way to think! I'd also add that the copy needn't be completely rewritten again and again, so also think **reprint, rewrite, reprint of rewrites, and more...**

Let's say you want to write about the 2016 Chicago Cubs and their playing in the coming National League baseball playoffs—and perhaps for the pennant, of all things! But, if you can't tell, or wouldn't want to tell, a baseball from a ball of wax, your idea and copy to sell again and again could be about the Trump-Clinton presidential election, kumquat delicacies from the kitchen, or driverless autos driving nonetheless on the streets!

Alas, I've been a baseball fan from/in Chicago almost since the Great Fire and the hapless Cubs haven't won a pennant for 107 years. You know us by the fetching blue, red, and white

“C” hats that we have had to hide in our cupboard for generations. Alas, this is our year, so we dusted them off and wear them on our heads for breakfast, lunch, dinner, and almost all the hours between—until October when we will know if the hex of the billy goat is true. **So I’m picking the Cubs for this empire-building article writ long...** (But if you’re reading this in the Philippines, on the Pyrenes, or in Peru, kumquat delicacies might be easier to understand...)

Let’s start with an **article** about the “plight of the Cubs” (or any fetching topic) for an American magazine. You do the usual things: some basic research to find the most interesting angles or slants, pick the best approach, and subject that idea to a two-pronged **feasibility study**—is it feasible to write and is it feasible to sell? (Go to the search box in the upper top right corner and type in **feasibility study** to see how the magazine approach works. The blog copy comes from either [How to Sell 75% of Your Freelance Writing](#) or [The Travel Writer’s Guide](#). To read those books, used and sold for a pittance, check the [Amazon catalog](#).) The feasibility study tells how to test magazines vs newspapers, who are the most likely readers, the querying process, and (for magazines), should you get a “go-ahead,” how you best present the copy for sale. (If it fits newspaper freelance buying fields too, submit the written article in final form, without a query and sent in ready-to-go fashion.) If the idea is a “go” as feasible to write and sell, send your articles to the best markets in both categories.

If the **magazine** buys your submission, you can use much of the article’s contents again (at least slightly rewritten) two ways: as a **reprint** or a **rewrite**. Then if a rewrite is bought, you can send that off to a still-virgin magazine as a reprint. With cunning, you can have several of each of these three partially-completed masterpieces filled in (completed) and in print, all paying you! (Again, go to the Search box above and write in reprints or rewrites to see step-by-step blogs with

more details.)

With **newspapers**, there are two paths: (1) you can literally sell the first copy to as many newspapers as will buy it as long as they aren't "national" newspapers (like the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, or the *Wall Street Journal*—sell them one at a time, and, after it is sold, thoroughly rewrite the piece before selling it to another "national") and (2) don't simultaneously sell it two or more regional newspapers within 100 miles of each other ("distribution ranges"). Otherwise, you can sell the very same newspaper article(s) to any other newspaper (except the "nationals") as long as they don't overlap. Just tell the newspaper editor yours is a simultaneous submission and you are selling it outside of their 100-mile circulation orb.

What more can you do with reams of unused copy parts shouting to be read? Throw all the used copy into a cauldron, add the unused gems, mix them up again, and "**topic spoke**" them to find as many of the other potential eager buyers as will shriek and pay, delightfully, to use your genius and make you rich. Check the blog search for items about "topic spoking" in the 400+ blogs waiting to be used!

How many **books** can you pluck from that cauldron (adding in other sources still untouched)? You could write/publish a book for all kinds of Cubs' *aficionados*: one for kids/young adults, one for the regular folk, another for seniors (some praying for the Cubs to win, others incredulous that they are anywhere near the top), another for the Cubs fans focusing on this year and the past two, another putting all 107 years in perspective, and so on.

And because each book requires a mound of research, interviews, anecdotes, photos, and more, you can turn this into new wealth of found and reworked copy and pluck out more **articles**, and thus more **rewrites**, **reprints**, and **reprints of rewrites**. You can also sell related **photos** where you sell copy

(check photos in Search), often the same photo repeatedly since they are almost always sold on one-time rights.

Lost in this pile of print are the **directly related spin-offs**, like **audiobooks** of any or all of those books just mentioned; **focus books** about specific elements of baseball for the truly absorbed, of the past year or two or of all time, like the pitching, the records set and broken, ERAs, a projection of future years and records of new(er) players emerging in the 2016 excitement; even **videos** and **movies**, all being in print before being converted to other media. Then using the most visible of the platform builders, authors speaking about their (new) specialty from the platform: see **rallies**, **speeches**, **how-to workshops**, **seminars**, **talks**, and so on...

Every time your champion copy has your by-line attached to your super writing in a newspaper, magazine, or book, you are solidifying yourself as an **expert** in that field, building a following, and making yourself more wanted by **information and product producers**. They want to get more good items from you, a recognized “valuable and prolific source” of, in this case, baseball, Cubs, and sports ideas, information, and articulation.

The point here is that **almost any word or idea has lots of legs (and ears) and can be multiplied very profitably many times by many means**. The trick is to create interesting copy about ideas that others want to know more about that is spelled properly and has the facts, quotes, and anecdotes artfully blended into more good ideas. Most exceptional writers don't stray too far from what others want to know, and they churn a fair amount of interesting text into many articles, then books, rather than just making one sale or two before wandering off to find unrelated subjects for articles that are also sold a few times. **It's wiser and fills your coffers faster by turning your related ideas and copy over and over.**

Best wishes,

Gordon Burgett

[ More how-to writing, publishing, and speaking stuff  
at [www.gordonburgett.com/order3.htm](http://www.gordonburgett.com/order3.htm). ]

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## Some thoughts about interviewing...

*This is an excerpt (part of a chapter) from my coming book, **Interviewing**. I talk about tools and means used to interview:*

Interviewing is mostly you asking questions to a person or, rarely, a group, and receiving an intelligible response in return. When you record what you asked and what they replied, that is the thinnest skeleton of a completed interview.

That's a bit simplistic but most of the rest just adds bulk and hope to the process.

A huge percentage of my interviews have involved direct communication with my target person. **More than half were done eye to eye (really mouth to ear)**, and most of those were done when I was learning how, usually on the road last century gathering travel material. I asked and they responded, and I translated and wrote what they said into a notepad, in a kind of shorthand that spontaneously evolved (nouns mostly, other key words underlined.) It was give and take, staccato fashion, one question/a reply, segues... My goal was about five minutes, which was a long time for them and for me. It rarely lasted 30 minutes; an hour interview never happened.

Well, that sense of brevity may be somewhat misleading because

many “interviews” became conversations, and ended when it was comfortable or necessary to do so. If the other person wanted to keep talking I was usually game to do so (unless I absolutely had to be somewhere else right then—sometimes we resumed the exchange later over lunch or coffee.) Other times they just wanted someone to talk to, or were lonely, or were proud of what they had done or seen and wanted to share more of it. That was fine. Often it gave me more, better information and a deeper interview.

Occasionally I was drawn to an interviewee. I wanted to know them better, and (hard to believe) that seemed mutual. They were interesting, often passionate about some cause, and they almost always bubbled or bristled with humor. What they said was worth sharing; it was fun; they were worth knowing. A few of those contacts became lifelong friends, particularly those still living.

But mostly interviewing is fast and focused. It’s kind of a dancing duel: you extracting what you need (and hoping for more); them telling you what they want you (and your readers) to hear, hoping they didn’t say too much.

In my mind, first interviews should be courteous, painless, and fairly fast, leaving open the possibility of a later follow-up. But I don’t mention that before or during the first interview other than asking them how I might later contact them should I run into a fact or a phrase that needs clarification and asking for or verifying an address where I would send them a copy of the printed article. (If you offer, do send it.)

Most of my interviews not done eye-to-eye were done by **telephone**. Those weren’t as satisfactory because you couldn’t tell how much of what they were saying was true, a greased lie, or something in between. Nor did you ever know if the voice you were hearing belonged to the actual person you had called. (I don’t think I ever interviewed a stiff or a stand-



in, but surprisingly often they grilled me to make sure I was the journalist they were supposed to be talking to and that I was writing an article for such-and-such a publication. Everyday people took me at face (or voice) value, happy to be the one being interviewed. The higher ups were more likely to have their assistant or caretaker vet or check me out first).

Another telephone problem: the tenuous connection between you and the person you are interviewing—one wire—almost invites the other person to simply hang up or disconnect when they have said what they think you should (or need to) hear. It's a true test of your interviewing (and inventive) magnetism to be able to keep the other person focused and actively responding. Some of that is created before starting the actual interview by getting the respondent's buy-in to the importance of the exchange so what they say can reach their target listeners' or readers' ears.

My restraint to interviewing by phone was personal—and, in my dotage, still is. I grew up weaving waggish humor and pun-riddled, antic wordplay into my everyday conversation. It drove my few friends crazy. But all of that tomfoolery had to be excised when phone interviewing strangers for print, particularly when they envisioned sparks or bolts of radiated global fame emanating from the article (or even book) they would be in. It was their big moment and they didn't expect mirth or frivolity—any humor at all—then, particularly over the telephone where smiles are never seen and barely heard. So half of what I normally might have said, or how I might have said it, was verboten and probably dumbfounding. However funny, they never, ever would have laughed. They were expecting to be asked to share gems of wisdom, poignant observation, Christian guidance, and household tips. Out the telephonic window flew my witty high jinks, which left the interviewer, me (or you), nearly speechless, jocularly disarmed.

Alas, nothing is incurable when regular eating is at steak. I

immediately reverted to my telephone high school date-getting scheme of imploring (or interviewing) by script. My first 100 or so interviews (it may have been 500) were very, very tightly structured, almost every word written or typed. It looked something like this, although where you see ideas below I had complete sentences, short sentences to give them time to respond:

- \* wee introduction
- \* reminder of why I was calling and where their words would be shown to the world
- \* a question
- \* a second question—these were the most important answers in case something else interrupted the call—it happens often—and there would be no chance to finish... [more on this later]
- \* [if something relevant in their reply to my questions was said or hinted at I would ask more, prodding queries about it, to provoke more facts or brilliance]
- \* a third question
- \* [if they verbally wandered off and what they said would also interest my imaginary readers I let them wander. I only reherded them back into my imaginary readers' corral of interest when they wore out or I still had a final question to ask]
- \* fourth question (or more) if needed. See above.
- \* anything else, Mr./Ms. \_\_\_\_\_, that I should have asked but didn't?"
- \* "is there a phone number I could use to reach you if I find something I need to verify later?"
- \* "I'll gladly send you a copy of the printed article as soon as it appears—remember, printing can sometimes take months"
- \* "is \_\_\_\_\_ the address where I should send the article, in your name?"
- \* "thank you again, Mr./Mrs. \_\_\_\_\_, for the information and your time"
- \* "it sounds like a very interesting article. I appreciate your kindness and your sharing"

\* (hang up softly, breathe deeply, wipe brow, hydrate rewardingly, and type out the whole interview then or before nightly repose)

Interviewing by **email**, or even by **social media**, is fast, sometimes too public too soon, and a whole lot less expansive. Combined with **Skype** or other computer-to-computer linking, it's fairly easy and much faster to talk with others now—if they agree to talk with you.

For example, ...

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This is an unedited extraction of part of **an early chapter of a book called INTERVIEWING**. Check future blogs for more copy about the topic.

Best wishes,

Gordon Burgett

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## [Using humor to sell your magazine articles](#)

Funny you should ask!

One rule always: some editors/publications don't use humor, so don't even try. At best the editor may open her lips to chuckle (or groan), then reconsider and toss the query. I can't tell you which such publications to avoid because I don't read them. But it used to be that the AARP magazines were humor dry. That getting old must be grim stuff. (So when I did write for them I kept surefire rip-roarers,

even tepid jests, out of my mind lest one slide down to my pecking finger and be read by the paymaster.)

I can't remember any editor who wanted truckloads of comedy dumped on their desk. They bought humor in measured bits deftly worked into actual (or near-) truths. Except the **fillers editors** who seemed to weigh jokes by the word so they could be squeezed into advertising holes. They actually did pay a pittance, when they stopped laughing—but I don't ever recall them buying two jokes at the same time. I had a colleague who sold a joke to *Reader's Digest* and included the sale in his credits in every query. One editor wrote back, rejecting his idea, and added, "I bet that *RD* joke was the only thing you ever sold." Mean editors are rare, but they can be perceptive. It was about a third of his freelance bounty.

Puns sometimes worked, but if I used one I used two so they knew it was intentional. I've sold 1,700+ freelance articles but only once did I use a full-out joke in an article, and that was about 10 or 15 words long and the joke was the article's lead! (Alas, it must have been far below my personal humor standard because I can't remember a word of it!) On the other hand I wrote a travel short about 800 words long about eating guinea pig sandwiches that were cooked on the street in Quito, Ecuador. (At least they looked like guinea pigs.) I found out years later, through a Peace Corps kid stationed near Cuenca, that one of his projects was to help multiply the stock of domesticated guinea pigs to increase the meat available on the local table. (Whatever it was, it sure tasted good.)

Here was my system of weaving humor into an article's otherwise deadly prose.

(1) Mostly I lifted deadly prose appreciably heavenward by keeping the tone light and the descriptions spry (good synonyms adorned with festive adjectives helped).

(2) I relied a lot on word play, but you have to spread it out and only do that now and then. For example, I might refer to Buffy, a wee, yapping dog, as a furry feral killer-companion or a drooling pet growler. Or a woman's date as her knight of the night. That's enough wit: the blog censors just told me to stop—they are thinking of your humor health.

(3) A funny, related thought to what is being said in a paragraph almost always ended that paragraph.

(4) It's hard to give isolated examples. Find an article that intentionally makes you laugh and highlight every funny item in it with yellow underliner. You'll see that the humor is discretely bundled in 93% topic-related facts.

(5) Just as the writer did in (5) above, if the subject had humor wanting to get out, I made the content worth reading, and let some of that humor escape.

(6) I always put some humor in the query letter, in the actual selling message, so the editor knew there would be humor in the copy that followed. I'm convinced that the humor helped sell the query. But you can't overdue it.

(7) As a friend who teaches journalism tells his wards: if you can't keep your humor in control, get a talk show!

Some loose how-to's but I hope it helps. Life's a whole lot more fun when you're part of the wit and mirth. It's even better when you get paid to share it.

Best wishes,

Gordon Burgett

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## Can you use a pseudonym for publishable articles?

Sure, I suppose in print you could call yourself Superperson or Cicero or anybody you want to. And if you own the publication, it might be fine.

In fact, there are times when I would indeed use a pseudonym. Like if I was a deacon writing porno, rest assured I'd change my name. Or if a fanged maniac was loose on the nearby streets and he was overdue on his serial schedule, I'd at least change a few letters in my surname—and apologize later.

But at least 99% of the time, or more, the question would be “Why?” The first person to ask you that would be the editor—“Why do you want to do that?” (A couple of the editors I wrote for would probably have suggested, rather than a pen name, I might disguise myself by dressing up like a decent citizen—or be inconspicuous by wearing just one sideburn.)

I know that when you write novels they want you to use the same name for the whole series. Folks buy as often as not for the author's name—they expect the same high (or low) quality for all the books in that category. However, if you use your own name to write the “Manly Man Murder Mysteries,” they will surely want an entirely different name for, say, a group of knitting manuals.

There's a financial issue too. If you're Betty Smith and your

by-line is Jennie Jones, unless the editor knows about the name replacement, your check will be made out to Jennie Jones—and that check can be a hassle to cash!

Two more considerations: (1) the editor may question your sanity if there's no reason for the writer not to be you, and (2) he/she may wonder what you are trying to hide by not taking responsibility for the copy you want released, like is it unprovable, a flat-out lie, an exaggeration beyond the pale, out-and-out libel, or too badly written to want your own name attached.

Finally, if you are trying to build up your writing reputation by increasing your volume in print, switching from Ed to Ted to Red to Betty sounds counterproductive.

So, if you want to use a pseudonym, at least clear it with the editor. They need a good laugh now and then. Tell them you saw it done on a television show.

Best wishes,

Gordon Burgett

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## [Why was your article query rejected again?](#)

Who writes **articles** in 2015?

At least **1,486,000** writers had a journal article published in 2010. Some were written by two or three authors. And that's just journals. And that was five years ago.

2,000,000 blog posts will be written today. **Today**. Another

2,000,000 tomorrow, and so on...

The difference is that articles must be accepted by someone to see light, while blogs can be your own and there's no stopping them. But if it's somebody else's blog you want to be a guest in, ugly acceptance (the kind side of rejection) rises again.

I've had about a zillion articles in print (I tell my grandkids) and I've been rejected .5 zillion times (I don't tell them). Mostly, from 40+ years, much as an editor, let me tell you why the editor wants you to go away.

1. 85 people contacted the editor wanting to be in the next issue of their publication. Only **one** will make it that day, or **8** in a magazine that month. For starters, the editor really wishes you'd just disappear.

2. But you probably won't. You think you're useless if you're not on those pages, and damnit... At least **contact the editor the way she/he wants to be approached**. If they want an old-fashioned query letter ("would you be interested in an article about...") sent by snail mail, half the war may be won by finding a stamp and a mailbox.

3. **Don't think the editor will make an exception for you** if you send a query by email. You have to get his email address for starters (you can't just send it to info@publication), and if he/she doesn't want emails from the unwashed, getting that address will be harder to find than Harry Truman's middle name.

4. **Have you even read the publication** you are hounding? Did you wonder why the editor says (Read our publication first to see...) Read it to see what they use, how many words they want, do they use humor (if not, the joke's on you)...

5. **When was the last time the editor ran an article about the very topic you want to hawk?** See if there's an index you can find through Google telling what they've published. (Whenever



I used a travel piece about Montana I got 10 queries in 10 days about Montana. We included Montana once a year because we had six subscribers from there. Did you wonder why there were almost no Montana articles in the index?)

6. If you **did read the last three issues**, did you get a sense of what the editor probably needed and wasn't in the index? Make that topic leap off the query letter for two paragraphs like an O'Henry short story (but give the ending). Just don't tell the editor that you know he/she needs that topic.

7. **Rejections come from these things:** no query, a query longer than one tight page, the editor has no idea what you will write about...or how you know that...or which three "experts" you will interview...if you've ever been in print anywhere...profanity and bad sex on their pages upset the advertisers...you forgot periods and commas...you signed, from your buddy!...there is clear evidence that you are insane...there is not a *got a* of appreciation for the editor giving your rantings full consideration...threats don't work before (or after) lunch...and the editor doesn't care (in fact, quietly applauds) that you will quit journalism forever if he/she doesn't give you a go-ahead.

Just in case you were wondering.

**But don't give up**—where will journalism be? There are still 1,485,999 article slots to be filled. (Also, spell the editor's name right and if you don't know about their gender, call them by their last name preceded by Editor... Editors need at least one laugh a day.)

Keep at it,

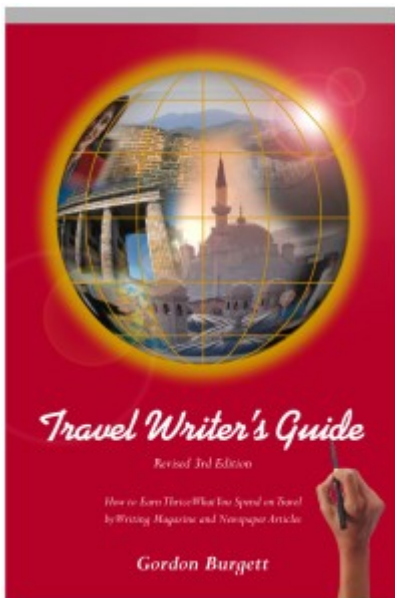
Gordon Burgett

P.S. You wonder what a legitimate professional query letter looks like? For \$5 we'll let you [download](#) 20+5 of them. Please at least rewrite these queries before you try to reuse them

again!

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## How you can sell your articles 150% of the time...



I know, **150% of the time?**

Yes, it could be much, much higher, but it seems imprudent to scare you in the title.

Let's focus on magazines here, where the pay is higher and acceptances are harder to get.

(Selling newspaper travel is easier and the possible sales ratio is higher too, but the pay is very modest. The process? Find a fetching location with something new, write a 1200-word "second" article, don't send to the nationals, and keep the submissions 100 miles from each other. A photo or two sometimes helps. Write it once and submit it simultaneously,

and since you wrote it once and if you sell it, say, four times, that's 400%. My [Travel Writer's Guide](#), available only as an ebook now, at \$10, tells all.)

With magazines there are no grapeshot submissions, the competition is tougher, the article space rarer, and you must change hats to earn that extra 50%—but often you can stick with the same topic!

Getting on their pages depends very much on how you ask. (If you don't ask the editor in advance—you just write something and send it in—your selling percentage plummets, or you're selling wee items now and then for wee pay.) For a full article you must ask the editor if you can send your masterpiece (but don't call it a masterpiece). You need a “go-ahead,” a positive response to get through the buying gate. A go-ahead isn't acceptance—yet. It says that the editor agrees to give your idea and its preparation full consideration for one of the 4-8 article slots still open for a coming issue. (The copy will probably be in print several or many months away). In other words, you write it and in the “let me see it” response the editor is saying “I'm interested enough to give it full consideration.” Not an assignment but if you do it right it's almost a sale.

What is “doing it right”?

1. Probably half of your selling time is spent pre-query, the other half is sending on time what you promised in the query. (A day late, the ship probably hasn't sailed. No apologies, but scold yourself. Late a week or more, wave goodbye—and stay out of that editor's sight for 18 months or longer.)

2. Find a topic that is irresistible for that readership. Study earlier issues to 4-6 months back. What is the editor buying? Write down six topics. Find the cutting edge, new facts, new studies, trends about to break, laws changing, a look-back 100 years, celebrities or leaders the reader must

know, what fits the season 4-6 months ahead? (Check to see that your choice wasn't on those pages in the past two years.)

3. Don't know much about it? Learn. You need facts, quotes, and anecdotes. See what others are saying—and aren't. Think like a reporter. Build a fact base, list people who are leaders in the field or are current bright lights.

4. Then write a one-page query letter that asks the editor, in essence, "Would you be interested in an article about?" Make the topic jump off the page, cite the experts you will quote or interview, tell what's new or different or what excites you as a reader, include a short paragraph about your credits (if none, say nothing) and that you can have the piece in their hands 2-3 weeks after a go-ahead. (Check my blog "**Nothing sells more articles than a great query letter**" from 3/14/2011—write the date or "query letters" in the search box at the top of this blog.)

5. One precaution before querying: see if the editor ever printed humor. If so and it's your style of writing, inject something funny in the query and in the final copy. If they don't, don't.

6. Write other query letters to other editors about other things while you await a reply.

7. If/when the editor writes back an eager response, study the last two issues, pulling apart at least one article in each. (The blog "**How to study a printed magazine article**" will help here. It appeared on 3/31/2011.) Get the idea and words together and write your piece like the authors wrote to be in print in the target magazine issue you studied. Stay in the same ballpark. If the editor gives you specific instructions or suggestions, do them. Edit and edit again: make it as light and tight as a drum. Then mail it off, as clean as a Dutch stoop. (If photos are an issue, get them off too. Ask the photo/art editor if there's a submission protocol, and follow

it.)

8. Then if that editor just can't or won't say yes, don't worry about it. They can have 100 legitimate or ridiculous reasons. Find a similar magazine, remold your query to its readership, and query again. (But only one query at a time.) That's why you don't fully research and write the article until the editor gives you a go-ahead.)

But if you score a bulls eye, super. You go the gilded nod. Write and rejoice. You only write the winning manuscript once—that's your 100%. Query letters are door-knocking. Congratulations! You've done it like the pro's do. Neither you nor they have time to do the full prep without having at least the 50% chance you get with the query and go-ahead.

**The other 50%** (which is really 100%, 200% or 500%)?

There are two paths (and a combo) into this post-sale heaven: (1) you sell the very same article described above (after it has appeared in print) as a reprint (also called second rights), (2) you significantly redesign the just-sold article (again, after it has appeared in print), then you rewrite its query letter so you can submit your redesigned article after you get a "go-ahead." You can rewrite the subject as many times as it can be configured into a distinctly unique article. And (3), you can sell reprints of the rewrites too.

The reprinting and rewriting can actually be more profitable than selling the original article, but it's seldom as exciting!

Let me share the specifics about the **"Profits from reprints, rewrites, and reprints of rewrites"** in a blog by that title printed here a few days back, 2/7/15.

I know that all of what I'm telling you works because I put two sweet daughters through grad school, plus fed several suffering wives, by doing it. Now it's your turn!

Best wishes,

Gordon Burgett

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## 4 proven ways to sell 75%+ of your freelance writing

### MAGAZINES and NEWSPAPERS

1. Here is the two-item formula for selling nonfiction copy to **magazines** and **newspapers**: (a) You sell more than 75% of your freelance writing by writing *only* when you have better than a 50% chance of a sale, and (b) You have better than a 50% chance of a sale by either querying your prospective market, and writing *after* you receive a positive reply, or by writing to markets where you can simultaneously submit the same manuscript.

2. You can also increase your sales percentage and income by simultaneously selling **reprints** or **rewrites** of the published material—or **reprints of the rewrites**[[Reprints, Rewrites, Reprints of Rewrites, and Resales](#)].

3. **Fiction** is excluded from this 75% claim in magazines, newspapers, and books. Nonetheless, if points made on these pages seem appropriate to selling your fiction, try them, but know that the selling ratio in fiction is very low.

4. The most important tool for selling to magazines is the **query letter**. [[25 Professional Query and Cover Letters](#)] You do

not query to newspapers (except to their magazines); you need **cover letters** to sell to them. If you are selling to big-house book publishers, at least a query letter is required. If you are niche publishing and pre-testing, you will need a sales letter, a small note, and a prepaid response mailer.

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Items in **orange** are explained in far greater detail in blogs from [blog.gordonburgett.com](http://blog.gordonburgett.com). Go to the blog and insert the highlighted word in the search box, upper right, title page. Often the search will bring up many blogs related to the topic or word you seek. For example, if you are looking for more information about “query letter” (a good thing to know about) and you type “query letter” in the box, it will probably bring up a five or ten full blogs, one after the other. Please use all of the information that applies.)

Items in **magenta** are the subject(s) of related products. The product title is in brackets after the reference. There is more information at [www.gordonburgett.com/order3.htm](http://www.gordonburgett.com/order3.htm).

For more assistance, see [www.gordonburgett.com](http://www.gordonburgett.com) and [glburgett@aol.com](mailto:glburgett@aol.com).

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## **NEWSPAPERS**

5. Usually the copy (and accompanying photos) sold to newspapers will be about **travel** [[How to Sell 75% of Your Travel Writing](#)], editorial commentary, food, reviews, and (very rarely) **columns**. That’s about all newspapers buy from freelancers. Mostly they buy travel.

6. You are more likely to sell to newspapers (particularly in travel) if your piece is **short** (600-1500 words; 1200 words is

a good target) rather than long (to about 3000 words). The longer feature articles are usually written by the **section editor**, or one from another publication.

7. You can **simultaneously submit** the same material (copy and photos) to newspapers (unless they tell you no) if they are not **“national” newspapers**—like the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Christian Science Monitor*, and *Newsday*, where you submit to them one at a time—or where the newspapers overlap in prime circulation (usually within 100 miles of each other), where you submit to *only one* newspaper at a time in the **circulation radius**.

8. Study others’ in-print newspaper articles in your target selections and write (and punctuate) like the original writers did to get in print. Focus on the **topics** [[Finding Topics That Make Your Articles Indispensable](#)], conciseness, **quotes**, timeliness, length of paragraphs, and the **writing voice** of the articles. The voice means: first person, I; second person, you; third person, he/she/it. (You mostly write salable copy in third person.)

9. Send your newspaper copy, ready to use, to the respective section editor with a cover note/page that tells the unique features in the copy, its timeliness, your **credits** (in a phrase: “I’ve sold 600 newspaper travel pieces”—don’t lie, say nothing if it’s nothing or very modest), any exceptional photos, how to get back to you—email and phone, and that you are marketing simultaneously (no nationals; to you solely within a 100-mile radius). If you are sending to a national newspaper, submit to one at a time (until bought). To national newspapers (or those few that insist), you are selling **first rights** to them only.

10. If you have the respective section editor’s newspaper email address, send your submission digitally—the **cover note/page, text, and sample photos** or link to a sample photo page. If you don’t, snail mail your submission to that editor,



and include an SASE (stamped, self-address envelope). If that editor replies by email, you then have their email address. Remember to write out the full address to the photo links.

11. Assuming your **salable photos** are .jpegs, in your cover note (a) offer to send them if they want to review them, but you can briefly describe one or two extraordinary shot(s) in the note, (b) include a b/w or color page with samples of the best 6 or so with the note, or (c) post the best you have, very best first, on a cloud or website page where they can link and peruse. Let them pluck what they want to use and pay as the piece and art are published.

12. There is no firm **photo submission protocol**, so use the publication's guidelines—or common sense. (Sometimes the guidelines are listed in *Google*—or the editor will tell you if you ask.) Let the editors decide if they will use the shot(s) in b/w or color. With the camera, seek clarity, get bright colors, focus on key items you wrote about. Remember, in newspapers, particularly for shorter submissions, the text is what they buy. (They might buy photo-first if you have an original shot of Napoleon—or something like that, or older.)

13. Newspapers pay from about \$100-225 for short items, \$200-500 for longer pieces. They pay after the submission is published. For photos, it may range from \$35-150. But some may pay less for the items above and some of the larger newspapers will pay more. You have no bargaining power here but if you sell often to the same newspaper, the editor sometimes increases the pay as your value to them increases.

14. **Do you see how selling simultaneously to newspapers lifts you well above the 75%+ goal?** If you send a sharp article to six cities all distant from each other and four buy it (some with photos), you have sold the article 400%! It's hard to top that sales ratio. What a shame that the articles themselves don't pay much more...

## MAGAZINES

15. Magazines do pay more. You usually know their **pay range** (several hundred to a thousand dollars and up) and the **size articles** they seek because most of the magazines that you will write for are found in the current-year **Writer's Market** (in print or online version). That and a ton more information is explained in **WM**, so you should have that source accessible where you write. Also, if you check *Writer's Digest Magazine* (in the library) it lists new markets every month—and updates current listings.

16. To get on the 75% magazine path find an idea you want to write about, then create a **feasibility study**. Think of the study as two boxes next to each other, both sharing the same idea. In one box you answer, “Is this topic feasible to write for X magazine?” In box two you answer “Is it feasible to sell an article about this topic?” If it's a “yes” to both, you will write a query letter to the #1 market. (See “**How to Prepare and Market Magazine Articles That Sell.**”) [[Travel Writer's Guide, ebook edition](#)]

17. There is no need for a feasibility study for newspaper direct submissions because you will know if it's feasible to write because you will, in fact, write it and send the prose to one or many markets simultaneously. And if it sells, that's your answer to the second box.

18. To answer box 1, see if and **where magazine articles appeared in print** about your topic. Find copies of those articles and study what they contain. (See “**How to Study a Printed Magazine Article.**”) [[Travel Writer's Guide, ebook edition](#)] You will likely need updated information, new quotes, or new examples to add to the information already in print. See if you have or can get access to that new information. If

nothing has been in print, study the topic and list what readers would want to read about it. This should take several hours, not weeks or years. If you have a strong sense that if you queried an editor about that topic knowing what you can provide that he/she would say “yes, then move on to box 2.

19. “Who would buy an article about this topic?” is the focus of box 2. See the many categories of publications in the **WM** table of contents and list those where your topic might appeal to its readers. Let’s say there are six such categories; list all of them. Then go to the listed publications in each category and write down the magazine titles in that category where you think the reader’s interest would be greatest. Let’s say there are two magazines in each category, so you would end up with 12 possible magazines to query before you write.

20. Because you can only query one magazine at a time from your 12 possible candidates, you must **prioritize** the 12. Put the most likely first and the least likely last, and sort the rest in between. What criteria do you use to prioritize the list?

21. If you want to top a 75% sales plateau, then when the editors of those magazines pay for articles is the most important criterion. So put all of those that “**pay on acceptance**” (this information is in the **WM**) at the top of the list. Paid freelancers only query editors who pay on acceptance since that means if they accept your manuscript, you will be paid right away or within a month (when they churn that month’s checks). The other editors “**pay on publication,**” which means your finished manuscript (and photos) will sit in that editor’s “to use” pile until it fits, and then you will be paid after it sees print, which means another additional 60 days to get your reward. Even worse, those that pay on publication usually pay less, and a rare few forget to pay at all.

22. So once you know when your 12 possible markets pay, list

the pay on acceptance publications on top (say six of them), with the remaining six that pay on publication on the bottom. Now ask the second question, "How much do they pay?" The highest payer of the first six candidates goes to the top of the list, the lowest payer is #6. (Don't worry about the last six on the list right now.)

23. There are two more criteria that could move your target markets up or down. One asks, "What **percent of freelance material** do they buy?" The other, "**How many issues do they publish a year?**" Clearly, you'd rather be considered by an editor that uses 95% freelance copy than, say, 5%. The same with a magazine that comes out weekly rather than annually—it buys 52 times more copy! Resort the top six into their most desirable order—for you.

24. Now you are ready to query. You will write a **full-page letter** asking the editor of the top magazine on your prioritized list if she would be interested in an article about \_\_\_\_\_. (The query letter will make the topic jump with excitement and the editor jump with hope to get your writing genius on her pages.) If, in truth, the editor says "yes, let me see it," that's almost as good as putting the money in your bank because the "**go-ahead** (and write it)" is given seriously, with the expectation that you will provide ready-to-go copy that fits in the slot saved for you. But if the editor says "no," however kindly, you will move to #2 on your list, read its write-up in the *WM*, and send its editor a query letter (often adjusted some to meet that new readership's needs). You keep moving down the top six until you are out of "pay on acceptance" rejecters.

25. Why not just continue down the list of publication editors for this new article? It's not worth the time for the risk involved. You will sell your reprints (or reprints of rewrites) to the bottom six. That's what they often, sometimes only, buy. Better yet, you can sell reprints (or second rights) simultaneously as long as you tell the others that

yours is a **second rights** sale.

26. A couple more points. Let's say the first "acceptance" editor wants your article. Have you lost the buying potential of markets 2-6? No, just approach the topic from another slant or create another article idea from that topic, and query about that possible article. In other words, you can **rewrite that first topic** and query letter and start it down the selling ladder to those "pay on acceptance" editors that are still uncontacted. And what if you do that all six times and all six editors buy their own unique articles? Bingo, you just sold the same stretched idea 600%, rather than 75%. (And you're still not done because each of those six articles can be sold as reprints of the rewrites! Heavens, you may get rich with just five or six different, fecund ideas!

27. But we are getting the cart in front of the horses. All we have done is have a kindly editor say that he/she wants to see our article—**on speculation**, which means, no obligation. So we still have to write one or many excellent articles that the editor(s) must embrace, buy, and use. Still, a "go-ahead" from most editors means a sale as long as you provide (in the article) what you promised by the date agreed, and perhaps also with the promised photos.

28.. Which means enough late-night oil, **interviews**, **facts** found and verified, **anecdotes** generously inserted—whatever is needed to make the article hum in print. It also means close scrutiny of the target magazine to see what that editor wants on his/her pages before you write. Thus, if this query-led system is followed, **almost all magazine articles suggested and written will be sold** since you will not write them without a prior "go-ahead." And with the reprint and rewrite fall-back sales, you should be **far ahead of your 75% goal**.

## BOOKS

29. It used to be that selling any percent of your freelance writing through book publishing was as likely as having your books come out of a cloud. Guess what? Now it's simple to publish 100% of your freelance book writing—you can just do it yourself. And it can sit in a cloud to sell once it's written and prepped. Who knew?

30. Less than a decade back the chances of the Big 8 or 5 or whatever the number was of the big-house publishing firms picking up a random freelance book was like 1:1000. Even with agents or even with a solid writing reputation. Then you sent query letters with attachments.. You may as well have been sending pick-up laundry chits.

31. These days it's hard to figure any strong case for going first to the big houses (which simply aren't so big anymore nor are they so appealing). They pay poorly, it can take months or years for the book to appear, and their bookstore allure has faded as the bookstores themselves have disappeared. It's kind of upside down now. **Freelancers publish the book themselves** [[How to Get Your Book Published in Minutes and Marketed Worldwide in Days](#)] and they earn a fast and decent return. Then if it smells of success the big houses will get in line to pay for the product—and often all the additional products that writer/publisher can create. So why would a freelancer go back to the earlier days when a big-house sale meant a meager royalty, poor sales, payment a couple of times a year, and no control?

32. If we are talking sheer percentages, you write a book that others want to buy; get it **proofread**; hire artwork and covers and some selling postcards; **get the book designed**; print some in-house stock to sell directly; save the final copy in .pdf, and send it to **Create Space** and **LSI** to get it **POD** printed and

sold commercially through their giant selling machines, like **Amazon** and **Ingram**. In the meantime, you convert the original text into .epub, modify the covers a bit, and you create an ebook to sell yourself, at **Kindle**, Nook, Kobo, **Smashwords**, and elsewhere. And all the while you worm your way into the social media world to churn up some fan interest.

33. There are two ways to sell 75%+ in the regular book world now. The new open publishing world I described in 29-32. And you can do it the old way too. You sell the book to the big houses or other publishers pretty much the old way: you send queries and packages and proposals, alone or agent-aided, and you don't write the final book until you are contract-protected, then you wait for the book to appear. **That's a 75%+ approach.** Hard to imagine 25% of the publishers wouldn't honor your contract.

34. But here's the problem, even if you freelance and produce one book and you have another produced by an established publisher under contract (which is 75%+ twice), there's no guarantee that any of that will make enough money to keep you fed, much less famous and prospering. So despite the fact that you bat 100% selling the copy that you create, and you do it many times with paperback and digital versions, all sold by **six different publishers** (plus you), most of the self-published general market books don't make much money. They don't even do much to imprint a perception of your expertise. Stir in platform-building, branding, You-Tube, Facebook, and all the rest and can still be a big disappointment.

## **NICHE (BOOK) PUBLISHING**

### **and EMPIRE-BUILDING**

35. Let me share the **best way to sell 100% of your freelance book writing** and make reliable money **while you simultaneously build an empire** that will feed, clothe, and support you very well for a long time. It can be built around your book or books—or you may not have to write much copy at all. You might use others' expertise and writing, plus your editing, managing, and publishing skills, as the core of his **niche publishing**. [Niche Publishing: Publish Profitably Every Time]

36. It's not the writing or publishing, per se, that distinguish niche publishing. It's the existence of a **niche**, or tightly-linked group of people, that share common needs, interests, and lifestyle. For example, Chicago Cubs fans are a long-suffering niche. So are dentists, Norwegian ancestors in Wisconsin, and meat cutters. The niche often has a vocation, hobby, focus of interest, ethnic bond, social communality (like octogenarians or octogenarians in Tulsa), an ailment or cure (like prostate cancer survivors), or membership (in the Moose or in almost any thing or group.)

37. This might be easier to envision by using an example. To keep it simple, let's use ultramarathoners, and let's make that nationwide. And let me invent typical components of a niche and ascribe them to the poor sore-legged ultramarathoners (who share in common long-distance running, longer than a marathon, often 50-mile or 100-mile runs). They can be done by either sex and any age, though it's not likely they are teens or under or very rarely 65 or older.

38. What makes niche publishing profitable is that members of the niche and supporters about the niche topic can be easily contacted. Core ultras, let's say, are members of a national association (UOA, Ultramarathoners of America) and smaller associations in, say, 40 states (Minnesota UOA, etc.) The associations have a national convention, 18 have state conferences, and they informally gather at the dozen major races a year. They also have a national newsletter, office holders in the larger units, a **membership address list**



(digital and standard direct mail) and a surprisingly large group of ultra aficionados and supporters who sell products and services (like special shoes, attire, diet and health additive programs, insurance, and much more. And as long as I am creating a model group, let's say there are 25,000 members and possibly 2,000 others who sell products and services to ultras, plus many thousands of marathoners who regularly show interest in expanding their own running challenge.

39. To show you what a niche published book might be like in this niched setting, let's say Bob has been an UOA member for 10 years—and, in vocation, he's a life-style nutritionist. Over the years he has created an ideal diet-supplement-training program that has been very enthusiastically used by a dozen of his local group members, plus it has become widely applied by marathoners in his region. Let's just call it the DST for Ultramarathoners (or DSTU).

40. Bob wants to write a book, sell it to ultras and marathoners nationwide (he calls it DSTM for marathoners), and he'd like to expand the book into **classes**, perhaps **podcast/video** components, a practice logbook and **workshops**, **speeches**, and **breakout sessions**. He would also like to **expand his product base** to include distance-running shoes, attire, special caps, and related diet and supplement components.

41. His **strategy** is to create the book first, and in its distribution (and early promotion) he will quickly expand into making his video/podcast programs and logbooks available. From his niche book he will roll out his **empire** to include speaking widely once the book is printed and promoted, and from speaking spread into workshops and classes. As he creates his buyer contact base (mostly through free subscriptions to a bi-monthly ultra newsletter) he will promote his product base. His long-range goal is to expand these activities into the DSTM group, for marathoners nationwide (even perhaps worldwide).

42. An aside here. Bob in our example can both be the expert writing the key book that helps practitioners meet important needs or solve frustrations and then build his own empire from the expertise recognition that his book brings him. Or if Bob wants to create his own empire doing the other activities we've mentioned, including publishing the book, he can hire an expert to write the book (that Bob might also edit and distribute) that his new ultramarathoning publishing and product company can grow from. Thus Bob wouldn't really be using his running expertise—freeing any niche publisher to do the same about any topic. In fact, Bob could publish a string of ultra books using as many experts as members of his publishing family. How would the experts earn money? They would receive royalties (often 10% of the net received) plus they would get the speaking fees, and perhaps a special discount on their own books (or all the firm's ultra books) sold **back-of-the-room** at the programs. A last thought, he could run parallel publishing programs in the ultra and marathoning fields, allowing him to double or multiply his empire-building base while the experts create the core books.

43. But the most appealing element of a niche publishing book is that it can be **pre-tested** (the format, price, contents, author, and **purpose**) on a sample list to guarantee its financial viability before any part of it is written or major production expenses are incurred. [[How to Test Your Niche \(Publishing\) Market First](#)]

44. Bob sees that the size of the ultra market (its contactable members) is 25,000, and that the three other ultra books have cost \$19.95, \$24.95, and \$49. He decides to conduct a direct mail pre-test with 210 Nth-selection addresses from the ultra association mailing list. He figures that the entire pre-test might cost him a maximum of \$700.

45. For the pre-test he needs a clean-looking **one-page information sheet** (with a reduced book cover on it) that includes the book's title, subtitle, table of contents, a

small photo to accompany Bob's bio, an fact box (with ISBN, format [cloth bound], and the estimated number of pages and cost), and selling content copy that explains the book's purpose and its benefits to readers/users. He also prepares a **one-third page greeting note** and a **return postcard** with two key questions, each followed by yes or no: would the card receiver be interested in purchasing a book about... and if so, would he pay \$ X for the book. In this case X would be three different prices: 70 packets would have \$19.95 on their info sheet and on its mail-back postcard, 70 would say \$24.95, and 70 would say \$29.95). The postcards would be addressed back either to Bob or (better) the name of his new niche publishing firm (like Ultramarathoning Publishers of America). Bob would also prepare a #10 envelope for each packet, stamp them, and adhere the direct mail address to the outside of the packet.

46. So Bob mails all 210 packets and in 20 days he has almost all of the replies he will receive. By day 20 he has received the following responses from each of the three price levels sent 70 recipients: 13, 10, and 7. So the potential buy income would be, respectively: \$92,768, \$81,196, and \$74,875. (The calculating example in the 10-buyer case would be  $10/70=14.3\% \times \$24.95 \times 25,000 = \$81,196$ ).

47. The most profitable rate would be \$19.95 which would bring in \$92,768. Thus, if the preparation of the book and the mailing of the full 25,000 packets cost 50% of the gross income (here, \$92,768) this book would result in a profit of \$46,384.

48. It would be a modest empire with a kitty of \$40,000 or so. But remember that Bob intends to expand into classes, videos, logbooks, workshops and speeches, ultra accoutrement, and diet and health additive programs. Plus a **free digital newsletter** to control his customer list and for bi-monthly promotion.

49. But what isn't visible here is a huge market sitting right below the ultras: the U.S. marathon market, where indeed his

book might apply as is or rewritten, and the other items should also be salable. How big is the marathon market? There were 541,000 finishers in US marathons in 2013 (despite the terror attack at the Boston Marathon). And the average entry cost is \$75, but trending up to \$100. A determined niche publisher might tooth on the ultramarathoners to test the market and response, then quickly back into the marathon world—and keep both going if there are common themes.

50. That's it. **How you can sell 75%+ of your freelance writing.** At least three systems (or four, depending on how you count them) that will keep you off the no-income paths and close to where money can be earned and multiplied by wordsmithing. All of this stuff works—if you do!

My best wishes,

Gordon Burgett

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## [How to make editors vomit...](#)

I'll tell you how in a second. A more important question is, "If you're trying to put your kids through college by churning out magazine articles, and hoping to sell a couple of reprints from every original piece that you got in print, why in the world would you even put "editor" and "vomit" in the same hemisphere?

But that's exactly what I did. Worse yet, that editor used me and the heinous article idea for years to show new writers what not to do if they wanted to make a penny by appearing on

his pages!

This must have been 40 years ago (surely before you were born). Even then I was the world's worst sailor because I got seasick in bathtubs.

So you can imagine my delight when I read about a new medicine about to be released that stopped motion sickness dead in its tracks—if the secondary effects didn't kill you first.

In those days I wrote about anything that interested me, then I matched it to publications likewise pervasively affected. I figured there must be a zillion flatlanders with my affliction, so I smelled a windfall in sales from a zesty article about the newest motion sickness medications, fattened with anything I could find about how effective earlier "potions" already on sale were.

Then the Internet was probably used for fishing. The first research you did was in the library, where I sniffed around for several hours, first to see who else had beaten me to the idea and was already in print. If there weren't too many of them and they had usable facts, that was a blessing. It was a time-honored tradition to build (or borrow) from your competitors' printed material.

Nothing in print! I could hear the cash register clanging. So I took to the telephone to find "experts," some self-declared, who were on the front line of action to get the needed quotes and cutting-edge, state-of-the-art facts that editors so loved (as long as you paid the dime, yes dime, to do the phoning.)

Most of us who worked magazines, with newspaper spinoffs, took the same path: a good magazine sale, two or three magazine spin-offs with different slants, some newspaper simultaneous submissions, maybe even a book if the topic was electric. (Most weren't, and books took forever to write. Anyway, spending months wading through seasickness was a no-go for me.)

Somewhere I had gathered enough checkable truths and found several related ideas for by-product shorts or follow-up pieces. The linchpin in this big-money-making scheme was an electric one-page query letter that made the editor virtually beg me to have it to her in three days (that never happened). But if she said, "Let me see it," that was tantamount to a sale, and usually the first firm step to several offshoot pick-ups. (I could call my daughters and tell them to buy their textbooks.)

So I wrote up a dandy, hot-in-the-hands one-page query and sent it to the first editor of the six or so on my marketing list. I spent time on that list. Who were most interested in preventing motion sickness? In-flight magazine editors. The biggest lines paid the most. Off went the gilded query...

Usually it would take a week or two for the reply. (There was no rush because the stamps were only three cents.) But this reply had wings. He couldn't wait. I could almost feel the big bucks in my hands! He was probably holding up the next issue so he could slip it in.

I can almost remember reading his reply word for word: "Is this a joke? An article about motion sickness in an in-flight magazine? It almost makes me vomit just thinking about it. Rest assured that if any of our passengers got past the first paragraph the pilot would hear a chorus of retching clear up to the cockpit." And that was it. No thank you, no best wishes. I guess it was a no. He didn't even suggest that I send it to his competition!

There was a point there but it took several shocked days for me to start laughing!

When you draw up your marketing list you have to think: why would the editor of those publications want to share your spine-tingling prose and gripping revelations with their readers?

So if there's even the faintest whiff of nausea in the air, you'd best just save your 3-cent (or 49-cent) stamp!

P.S. But I did sell it to two general-interest magazines and one newspaper. I don't think the anti-*mareo* medicine worked either. I kept my eye out for it, for obvious reasons, but it seemed to have faded, as did my million-dollar windfall from anti-seasickness articles.

Best wishes,

Gordon Burgett

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## Humor: How and how much can you use in freelance articles?

Sometimes (actually, often) absolutely none. No joke: even provoking a smile by a touch of word play will release you to the path of penury. The editor won't buy it, and she probably won't look at future queries from you either!

Why? Because either the topic (death, disaster, rape, and so on) won't allow it or because somebody sometime decided that that publication will be not be a carrier of mirth, probably forever.

Don't avoid those publications if your writing means eating. Send serious queries and non-risible copy and spend their payment (probably not much of a laughing matter either). Don't try to change their mind, as it is. Stay away or get in line.

Focus your funny-pen on the rest. I sold way more than 1,700

freelance pieces to almost any kind of rag that was sold on paper. I didn't count but maybe 30 total were all humor, the "funny piece" that, under 1,000 words, could quickly fill an extra page when ads fell short. (I can't remember ever querying any of those. What would I say? "Do you want to read something really funny?" At best, the editor would say, "Send it to me. I'll decide if it's funny." So I just sent it, with a cover note.)

That left about 1,000 articles that loosely fell into the "humorous" category, some just barely, some so witty they made me laugh all day and thrice on Sundays.

**"Humorous" means that there was humor sprinkled judiciously (maybe riotously) throughout the article.** (You couldn't just pack four tall tales of jest into the lead, then lumber through a Sahara of text for the rest of the piece.) You wrote humorous copy into the query letter too so they knew what to expect. And the humor was at the same level and the same kind throughout. (Noisy slapstick or thigh-slapping jokes usually don't work, but they never do when squeezed between painful puns. Pick your poison, then dilute it and sprinkle evenly.)

If humor was obvious, the editor would expect a title with some humor, plus a lead and conclusion gently containing the same ingredient.

**You have to remember that the humor is the seasoning,** like mazzarella cheese scattered on top of spaghetti—or is it pizza? The editor is buying a subject (sometimes with a specific angle or slant), and the humor, if added, is to make the telling better and lighter.

If the editor wanted 1200 words about nose hairs, or the fading of seminaries, or how to have fun in Finland, any mirth I cared to inject into my telling about that topic was extra. It almost always came out of the topic or referred to it. Not side-slapping bon mots dropped in like aliens at a wedding.



**Also, the humor didn't have to incite raucous guffaws every time (or ever).** It had to bring a smile to the more intelligent readers. Four or five smiles might be enough. They were easiest to get with clever word play, or witty quotes, or the juxtapositioning of two unlike things. But there had to be enough of them, regularly, so the reader (and editor) didn't think they were accidental miscues that the editor didn't notice.

Every time I wrote a humorous piece (which was every time when the topics were funny) was a gamble that the flat-faced expository devotees (my rivals) were afraid to try. Simply, not all editors think what you write is funny (even if you can include a dozen testimonials to its guaranteed hilarity). The risk was less if the topic itself was well covered and interesting (which has to be your minimum standard anyway). Some editors might reject the humor, but most would edit it (pluck it out), let you know, and use it anyway.

Why would I write and send humor at the risk of certain starvation? Because most of the editors wanted it, sought a "funny piece" every month, and once I had proven that I could do it, it got me many more query "go-aheads," and sales. It also made reprints much easier to sell. Even rewrites, queried elsewhere, later, were easier to adapt and sell—and reprints from them too. (That was important because then I earned more from reprints and rewrites.)

I haven't told you how to write with humor here because it's so much related to the topic that I can't figure how to do it in a blog. But I don't have to. Find any "funny" article in a magazine or newspaper (they are still the best freelance markets) and study and study it. Circle anything funny (or meant to be) and see why it's funny, where it is in the article, and how complementary they are in tone. Study the lead and conclusion, plus the title. Since that article is in print, it's a successful model to build from. Try it yourself again and again and you'll catch on. See you in print, my

funny friend.

Best wishes,

Gordon Burgett

P.S. I explain the full process in a much earlier book which is still (sometimes) on Kindle's used book list: **How to Sell 75% of Your Freelance Writing**. Most of the process is also explained in the [Travel Writer's Guide](#), plus how to make good money writing and selling travel articles. Humor helps there too.

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