

**Can You Make a Living as a Writer?  
Report #120**

**by Bobbie Christmas**

*The Guardian*, a British newspaper, published an unnerving article that said most full-time writers make the equivalent of about \$1,000 a month. What's a writer to do? I can only tell you what I did, and it worked for me.

As a senior in high school in 1962, I decided to become a writer, but my father shook his head and warned me, "You can't make a living as a writer." My high school guidance teacher said, "Take secretarial courses. Maybe you can get a job in an ad agency and work your way up."

Both those folks were right to warn me. In 1962 women were expected to marry and become housewives. The few who wanted a career became teachers, nurses, or secretaries. No one had ever heard of a woman making a living as a writer.

I suspect my father thought I wanted to be a novelist, but I simply wanted to work with words, so I made a commitment to myself. I said, "I'll write anything for money."

**Leaving a Legacy**

I wanted to write a book that would be my legacy, something that would live on after I was gone. At seventeen, though, I had no idea what that book would be about, and I was aware that I didn't know enough yet to write a book.

More than anything else, though, I felt passionate about writing. Everyone's negative comments about careers for writers gave me fair warning, but they made me even more determined to fight for what I wanted.

**Building Skills**

When I entered college, I majored in journalism, the singular major at that time that had anything to do with writing. To be sure I could make a living, though, and because I was a female in the 1960s, I also took secretarial courses.

As it turned out, my secretarial skills put me a step ahead of other journalists, because we had no portable recording equipment at that time. I touted my ability to interview folks, take notes in shorthand, and type my own stories, and it landed me a good job with a sales and mergers business, where I interviewed owners and wrote company profiles. Because I was the only person on staff who had studied writing, it fell to me to edit all the reports that other folks wrote,

too. I was young and needed experience, and I was writing and editing. Cool! I worked at that company for almost seven years.

### **Extending My Reach**

In my late twenties I moved to another city and knew I once again had to promote myself, if I wanted to find a good job. I gathered my nerve and blindly walked into an ad agency to apply for a job as a copywriter. I had created a portfolio of my work, none of which had been published, but it didn't matter. The advertising director explained that the company used only freelancers, and I walked out with a trial assignment. My written words appeared in the newspaper as a two-page ad. Delight! One assignment led to others, and I worked as a freelancer for a variety of companies, no matter what I did in my full-time job. Soon my portfolio was authentic, published, and bursting at the seams, and one small agency hired me to work full time. I wrote advertising copy and did odd jobs there until our largest client hired me to handle its corporate communications. There I also learned to write résumés for employee visas. Ever the entrepreneur, I used that skill to write résumés for clients on the side.

### **Finding New Opportunities**

I was married for a short time, and women of my era followed their husbands' careers, so again I had to resign from my job and move to another city with my husband. I had a full portfolio, experience, and self-confidence by then, and based on that combination, a relocated manufacturer hired me to revamp all its literature.

In my free time I offered my services to a large printing company, and for years I wrote copy for brochures for a wide variety that company's clients.

After I had completed the relocated manufacturer's literature, I became the news editor at a weekly newspaper. Six years later, I left the newspaper to write commercials and handle promotions for a radio station. As a neat aside, the manager had me record public service announcements, so I often heard myself on the radio.

### **Spanning Fifty Years**

Companies and freelance jobs came and went. The one thing that stayed constant was my determination to make a living as a writer. I worked for large and small companies doing everything from writing internal and external communications, ad campaigns, brochure copy, and articles for newspapers, magazines, and newsletters. One company even paid me to travel all over America and to several European countries to photograph and write articles about its projects.

After decades of experience using AP style for newspapers and magazines, I moved to metro Atlanta and formed Zebra Communications in 1992. I had edited several books for friends,

which gained me experience in using Chicago style, the style that book publishers use. A shift was taking place in the book-publishing industry at that time. Book publishers were merging and forming conglomerates. With tightened budgets, publishers were releasing staff editors and using freelancers. I approached some publishers and as an independent contractor, I took on work editing their books. I also placed an ad in a national magazine for writers and soon became a full-time book doctor for publishers as well as writers. When self-publishing became popular, I was in the perfect position to help writers who planned to self-publish.

Let me step back to the past for a second. When I first started writing, I did not think I wanted to be an editor, but the job kept falling to me. I soon viewed editing as an interesting puzzle, or even better, an exciting video game. Each glitch I fixed was destroying the enemy until the next villain—or error—appeared in my path. When I reached the end, I felt triumphant. I had won! I grew to love editing, and it remains a passion of mine.

### **Reaching Goals**

Throughout my career, I never forgot my hope to write a book that would live on after me. After editing hundreds of manuscripts, I saw patterns in my clients' writing. I wrote a book that showed writers how to avoid those patterns, so their writing would reflect the fresh voice publishers seek. Union Square Publishing bought my book and titled it *Write In Style: Using Your Word Processor and Other Techniques to Improve Your Writing*. Despite its unwieldy name, the book made a big splash in 2004 when the publisher put it in bookstores and libraries across America, Canada, and Australia. I had created my legend.

*Write In Style* won several awards, including a Georgia Author of the Year Award. It sold out, though, and the publisher returned the rights to me. Years later I revised the book, updated it, expanded it, added an index, and self-published it as the second edition with an updated title of *Write In Style: How to Use Your Computer to Improve Your Writing*. Writing teachers use it for students of all ages, and readers have written glowing reviews of the book. My book helps other writers achieve their goals, as I attained mine, which gives me great satisfaction.

### **Staying Open to Possibilities**

My mantra of “I’ll write anything for money” worked. I’ve been self-supporting my entire adult life, even when I was married. I’ve bought a house alone and paid off the 30-year mortgage in 16 years. I have traveled the world and sometimes was even paid to do so. I’ve been able to deduct some of my vacation expenses, too, when I sold articles based on my travels.

My point is this: If you want to make a living as a writer, it is not only possible, but also fun and rewarding. To guide you on your path, here are my suggestions:

#### **1. Be Flexible.**

I did not limit myself to being a novelist. I opened myself to all sorts of projects. All my experiences educated me and helped me write the book I'd always wanted to write. It turned out not to be a novel, but a nonfiction book on creative writing.

## **2. Never Stop Learning.**

I had been named the editor at most places I'd worked. I had been the one to give the final word on issues of grammar and punctuation, and I thought I knew everything. I was in my late thirties before I worked at a company with an editor above me. When I saw the errors the higher-up editor found in my work, I was shocked. By the time I became the department manager, I was a much better editor, because of that man.

If you ever have a chance to work under a good editor, leap at the opportunity and reap all the knowledge you can from that person. If you hire an editor to edit your book, use one who will explain the changes made to your manuscript, so you will learn through the process.

Although people often tell writers, "Write what you know," I rarely knew much about the subjects I was assigned, but nothing stopped me. The Internet has made research a snap, but even when research was difficult, I dug out the information I needed. As a fringe benefit, I became a more well-informed person.

## **3. Keep Expanding Your Horizons.**

Freelancers land more assignments, sell more articles, and get paid more, if they provide photographs with their articles. I bought a good camera, learned how to capture print-worthy photos, and added photography to my skill set. Later I had to buy a digital camera and learn how to use it well, to keep up with technology.

I've watched technology evolve from manual typewriters to the current computers and computer programs. While other freelancers limited themselves or went out of business, I kept up with technology and expanded my horizons, skills, and abilities, so I could keep making a living as a writer.

## **4. Stay Out of the Way of Your Ego.**

I had been giving seminars for writers for decades, until I believed I could give every seminar myself. After a while I avoided attending lectures by other presenters. When I pushed my ego aside and sat in on sessions by others, I realized that I always learned something new or was reminded of something I had forgotten. Now whenever I'm invited to speak at a conference, I listen to other presenters, too, and I walk away educated, empowered, and inspired to write even more.

### **5. Be Frugal.**

Writers' income varies from month to month. To stay solvent, tuck away a portion of every payment you receive. You will need it for taxes and for savings. In lean times, you will need to draw on your savings. In plush times, rather than blow your income on a luxury item, you can spend a little, but you should save a lot. Rainy days will come, but if you keep pushing yourself, promoting yourself, reaching the right people, and honing your skills, plush days will come, as well.

Regardless of obstacles, naysayers, and challenges, once we find our passion, we should follow it. Words were my passion, and I have spent my career getting paid to play with words. I am so passionate about what I do that although many people my age have long been retired, I'm still going strong. I have no reason to retire from doing something I love.

I hope my information inspires you to follow your passion, do what you love, and make a living as a writer.

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