Freelancing 101
Transcript

This is a transcript of the audio seminar, edited slightly for easy reading!

You can find the audio version at www.writershuddle.com/seminars/march2012

Hi, I'm Ali Luke and this is the March seminar for Writers' Huddle, Freelancing 101.

So freelancing has come up quite a bit in the forums, and with good reason, because **freelance writing is a great way to make some money doing something that you love.**

Freelancing can potentially just be a side income that fits around your day job or your studying or whatever other commitments you've got, or it can be a whole career that's basically what you do for a living – and what I do is essentially freelancing, plus a few other things.

Freelancing is almost always related to non-fiction rather than fiction, unless you're doing something like editing or proofreading.

Most of the job opportunities out there are for non-fiction pieces, so I'm thinking of copywriting – that's direct ads and sales and so on – writing magazine articles, writing blog posts, writing newsletters. **All the stuff that you read, that comes through your letter box or into your email inbox, has to be written by someone, and often that's a freelance writer.**

In this seminar, I'm going to take you right through the freelancing process, from starting out, wondering whether freelancing is for you, deciding what kind of freelancing you might do as a writer, all the way up to the point where you might be looking at taking your freelancing full-time.

Would Freelancing be a Good Fit for You?

The first thing to think about is whether freelancing would suit you.

The most obvious question is whether you actually enjoy writing – and you're in the Huddle, so I'm hoping that you do! – but you need to enjoy it enough that it's something you want to do for at least several hours per week, potentially eight hours per day or more if this becomes your whole career.

And it might be the case that you don't choose to do freelance writing specifically; it may be that you want to edit other people's writing or do some proofreading or you pick a particular aspect of the writing process that you especially enjoy.

The next thing to ask yourself is whether you're good enough at writing. And again, you're in the Huddle, so you hopefully are – the thing to remember here is that you don't need to be Shakespeare, you don't have to be writing prize-winning prose, you just need to be able to write competently and clearly and get your message across.

So you probably are good enough, but if you've got any doubts on that, it's a good idea to show your writing to some trusted friends – perhaps especially to anyone else who's a writer or who has some experience in publishing or editing – and ask them for an honest opinion on whether you're good enough to start making money from this.

Even if you're not at quite that stage yet, writing is just a skill that can be learned, that can be developed. Don't be put off if you feel like you're not quite ready *yet* to do freelance writing – it could well be something that you're ready to do six months or a year down the line.

Then another important question to consider is whether you want to work for yourself, whether you want to manage your own business and control your own time in that way. Freelance writing doesn't just involve sitting down and putting words on a page – that's a big part of it, maybe the main part of it – but there are also other aspects that go into running a business.

These are things like finding clients, marketing yourself, having a website and keeping that up to date, managing your accounts, sending invoices, getting paid ... all sorts of things that some writers just prefer not to have to deal with.

And if you're not great at managing your own time, if you're the sort of person who needs a boss or manager giving you a lot of direction on what to do, then freelancing could be quite tough because you do need to be fairly self-directed. Obviously you'll have deadlines from clients most of the time, but even then you'll want to be getting your work done in an ordered, structured, planned fashion, rather than rushing through it in the last few hours before a deadline.

Again, these are skills that can be learned, so even if you're not great at time management right now, it is something you can work on and develop.

And then the final question to consider, when you're looking at whether freelancing is right for you, is whether you're prepared to keep learning. Because whatever your skills are like right now, you can improve. I know that I've improved a lot as a writer over four years of freelancing – and I'm still improving, and I'm still learning every day.

It's important that if you want to be successful as a freelancer that you do keep on learning and you do develop your own skills and you make time for that. That's how you begin to be able to charge higher rates, that's how you move into more specialised areas of writing (perhaps you want to do copywriting, for instance, like writing sales pages or adverts and so on).

Something else to think about just a bit at this stage is whether you want to freelance full-time or whether it's going to be a part-time thing for you, because it can be useful to know that when you're setting out, so that you're planning for the long term, and you can make sure that the way you set things up, and the way you market yourself, and the way you do business, is congruent with how you're seeing things being in a year's time.

Different Types of Freelancing You Could Do

So, I'm going to proceed on the assumption that you *are* interested in trying freelancing and that you do think it is for you or could be for you, and we're going to look at some types of freelancing.

As a writer, the most obvious thing you might do is to write. So, like I said earlier, that could be copywriting, it could be writing content for blogs, it could be writing articles for print magazines – it could be writing anything that's going to become part of a website or part of a printed publication.

But writing isn't the only type of freelancing that you might want to consider. Some people are excellent writers, but they prefer to keep their writing time for things like fiction or working on their own blog, and they don't want to do a ton of extra writing as part of their freelancing – so they maybe focus on editing or on proofreading.

Editing could be polishing up somebody's existing web copy. It could be editing books for other writers, so with the rise of self-publishing or indie-publishing, this is becoming a much bigger area where there are lots of individual authors who want professional editing for their books, or proof-reading for their books, so they can produce a really high-quality product.

And if you're particularly good at editing, or if it's something you especially enjoy, this could be a great area to specialise in.

The other thing you can do as a freelancer is to potentially combine some different skills. If you're reasonably good with technology, you might like to look into something like SEO copywriting. SEO stands for "Search Engine Optimisation" and for websites, it's important that they rank well in search engines for the sorts of phrases that their potential customers would be searching for ... and there's definitely good money to be made in marketing yourself as an SEO copywriter, somebody who can optimise the copy that they write to work well for ranking highly in search engines.

It may also be that you take on some other things, so you might be a writer who produces blog content, but you also upload that content into the blog. Or you might be good with design, so you work on things like brochures or leaflets

with clients, and you do the writing for those but you also handle the design side.

This is often a win/win situation for you and for your client. It means that you probably get paid more because it's a bigger project – you're handling, say, technology and writing or design and writing. From the client's perspective, they'd rather have just one person working on the project and seeing it through to completion, instead of having to farm out several bits of the project to several different freelancers.

Building Your Freelancing Portfolio

So the next step is to build up your portfolio. **Whatever kind of freelancing you're doing, you're going to need to show people some clips of your writing or some examples of your editing projects, so they've got a sense of what you can do and so they know that you've got good credentials.**

And if you've done any sort of writing in the past that's been published, whether that's maybe a guest post on a blog or a piece in a local newspaper or even in your school magazine, that can count here, that can be something that you do put into your portfolio. Ideally, though, you're going to want some stuff that you've written relatively recently, because that's probably going to be your best work.

What a lot of freelancers do, when they're first starting out, is to take on some work for free. And this is one of those issues that there's a bit of debate about in the freelancing community. Some people think that you should *never* work for free, and that working for free devalues the work of other writers. Other people think that it's appropriate to do some work for free when you're just beginning your freelancing career – because it's a chance for you to develop your skills, it's a chance to get used to working with a client, with someone who's given you a particular brief for a project, and it's a good chance to really get some nice pieces for your portfolio.

If you're looking for somewhere that you can build up a few clips and a few pieces for your portfolio, good places are:

- Blogs that you can guest post on

- Charities/non-profits

- Local press and specialist magazines

Guest Posting on Blogs

Blogs often accept guest posts. **You don't have to have a blog yourself in order to guest post, you don't have to be well known as a writer or anything like that**: you just need to write a good enough blog post that the editor wants to take it. We've had quite a few guest posts in the [Critiques section of the Writers' Huddle forum](#); if you're working on something, please feel free to post it there and get some feedback, and hopefully we can help you polish it into a really strong piece

Guest posts also work particularly well because they're published online, which means it's really easy for you to put a link to them on your writing website or put a link in an email to a potential client to show them what you've written, so they can read it and they can see it in its place on a big blog.

Charities and Non-Profits

Another place to look, if you're working for free, is at charities or non-profits – particularly anything small or local. They almost certainly won't have the budget to hire a writer. They may be relying on some volunteer in the office, and even just being able to write a few pages of website content for them, or a few sections for their newsletter, or help them with writing a letter to potential donors could be a huge benefit to them. It's also something that, again, you could put into your portfolio and you may be able to get a testimonial from them as well.

It doesn't necessarily have to be a charity, it could be any sort of non-profit company you want to support. It could be a for-profit company, perhaps if you've got a friend who's setting up a new business and they want some help with writing some leaflets or some website copy or something like that – it could be a great way to do someone a favour but also to get a great piece for your portfolio.

Newspapers and Magazines

And then, another option to look into, is newspapers and magazines – so I'm thinking here particularly local press, maybe free newspapers that you get delivered, and specialised magazines, maybe ones that are only available by subscription – they're too small to get into regular stores. And these sorts of publications often don't pay, but if you can say you've been published in print, it is a mark of credibility for many people and for many of your clients that will mean something.

If you're focused more on editing or on proof-reading, you may want to ask around amongst some writer friends to see if you can do someone a favour, perhaps edit a short story for them, or edit a blog post, or edit some website copy.

If you want ask in the Huddle for members who might be able to use your skills, please feel free. Maybe even see if there's some way you can offer a skills exchange – so if there's someone in the Huddle who can do something on the design or technology side of things and you can do some writing or editing for them, that can create a really nice situation where you can both support one another as you're just starting out.

Creating Your Website

We've looked at whether freelancing is right for you, and we've looked at how to build your portfolio by working for free. The next step is to create your website.

If you're going to freelance online, in particular (and a lot of writing work is now online) then it's crucial that you have a website. There really isn't an option on this, because clients are going to expect it. When you talk to people, they'll want to be able to go somewhere where they can see your testimonial, your portfolio and your contact details and so on – and a website is such an easy way to do that. It's a 24/7 showcase for your work; people can access your website any time of the day or night, and they can access it from anywhere in the world.

And it may be that you just choose to work with people who are local to you, so you're really specialising in writing for companies in your area, for instance – but if you want to do any kind of online work, there's nothing stopping you working with people who are on the other side of the world.

Most of my clients are in America; I've got a few clients in Australia as well, and some in the UK, but my work is really very international. I think it would be a lot harder for me to make a living if I focused on only doing writing for people who were in the local area to me, which is Oxford in the UK.

With a website, you're going to have new prospects visiting your site every day, especially if you've put some time into search engine optimisation, or if you write a blog and do some content marketing. It's just a great way to bring people into your field of influence, so that they start to know who you are, they can trust you, they can check you out online before they contact you.

It's also a good way to save some time, because if you publish your services on your website, or your rates, or some details about what you do, then it saves you having to reply to lots of emails from potential clients, with people asking you for some extra information on who you are and what you do – they can just get all that from your website, and that lets them decide whether they're a good fit or not, before they contact you.

Your website is also a great way for you to look professional, without you having to spend a lot of money. It's really easy to set up a website nowadays and it will cost you probably about $10/year for a domain name, that's really not a lot. That's a .com domain name – *aliventures.com* is a domain name, *writershuddle.com* is a domain name, and you can just register one of those, $10, and that's yours for a year.

When you put together your website, you can use software like WordPress – which is a blogging platform, but which also works really well for just a static website that you don't necessarily update very often.

[There's a mini-course in the Huddle about setting up a blog](#) which you can use to help you get started with WordPress*.com* which hosts the site for you and which will give you a domain name with "wordpress" in it for you to use for free (though you've also got the option to buy your own domain name).

Whatever you go with in terms of setting up your site, there's some important pages you're going to need to include:

- Home page

- Portfolio

- Testimonials

- Contact

Your Home Page

Your home page is what people see when they go straight to your URL, so if you go writershuddle.com, you see the home page for the site, which is actually the page full of information that you probably saw before you signed up. If you go to aliventures.com, the homepage has the most recent blog posts showing on it.

Different sites will do different things for their home page. For your site, assuming that it's focused on your freelance writing, you want your home page to clearly explain what you do, to give people some pointers to the other pages on your site – so to encourage them to check out your portfolio or to encourage them to get in touch with you through the contact page and so on.

You don't have to have a lot on your home page. It may be that you choose to have a blog, in which case you have blog entries showing up on the home page, but you don't necessarily have to do that. It could be that you want to use your home page to point people towards some of the other things you do.

If you want an example of a blog which has a static homepage – one that's not the recent blog entries – then go to Copyblogger.com because they relatively recently updated their site so that the home page points towards some of their products rather than just showing their blog posts.

Your Portfolio

So as well as the home page, you'll want to put your portfolio up. **That means linking to some pieces of your writing and perhaps providing a short excerpt from each piece**, maybe giving a few details about the project, particularly if it

was something quite in-depth, talking about how you were involved and what you did.

You could also give a screenshot if it was a piece that was published online, or scanning in the piece from a magazine or a newspaper just to give your clients something visual so they can really see your writing in its context.

Your Testimonials

Then another good page to have is testimonials. **Any nice words, basically, that have been said by satisfied clients – whether or not they were paying clients – can go onto this page.**

This could be as simple as someone sends you an email saying "*Thank you for your work*" and how much they enjoyed working with you and that your writing has really made a difference to their company.

Or it could be that you specifically ask people for testimonials and you get them to write perhaps a few sentences or a paragraph about the experience of working with you. And ideally it's great if you can get permission to use people's names and maybe even their photographs on the testimonials, because that helps convince potential clients that you haven't just made those up and that the people giving the testimonials really do exist.

If your clients have a website themselves, or a Twitter account, or some sort of online presence, you might want to link to that as well from the Testimonials page.

Your Contact page

The final page that you need to have is Contact details. Make it really easy for people to get in touch with you. Be very clear about how they can do that.

I would definitely put my email address on the contact page – I know some people don't like to do that because it can result in getting a lot of spam, but it's frustrating for potential clients if they can only contact you through an online form. Often people don't trust that the form has gone through and reached you, or they want to send you an attachment, or for whatever reason they prefer to communicate directly by email.

It's up to you whether or not you include a phone number. I prefer not to, especially as I work with people internationally, so I don't really want phone calls at all hours of the day or night. Some clients will want to speak to you on the phone, and having a phone number on your site can make you look more reputable. So that's really up to you on that one – personally I only give my phone number out if people request it by email.

On the subject of email, it's important that your email address looks professional and gives the right impression. For me, the best email address to have is something which is "@" your site's name. So I'm *ali@aliventures.com*. I'm not aliluke@gmail.com or aliluke@yahoo.com or anything like that.

If you can't use your website name, I think Gmail is a good option because a lot of people use it and it's seen as a fairly serious email provider. If you've got a hotmail or a yahoo address, that can give the impression that it's just your personal account, especially if the name that you've got before the @ is not your actual name but more of a nickname or something funny – it's just not the best impression to give to your clients.

Establishing a Social Media Presence

The next thing to consider, once you've got your website set up, is social media. It's up to you whether or not you want to have a social media presence. Some freelancers prefer to concentrate on what they're doing – the writing – and have a website where clients can contact them. They maybe do some blogging, but they don't want to get involved with Twitter and Facebook and Google+ and so on.

Personally, I think if you're writing online in particular, social media is a great way to make some links with other writers and with potential clients. Twitter, in particular, has also been a really good way for me to build up some of those professional links with writers and editors and so on. It's just great to have that network of fellow freelancers: if I have a question, it's easy for me to get some advice from other people who are writers.

So the main social media networks that are useful as a freelancer are:

- Facebook

- Twitter

- LinkedIn

Facebook is great because it's got a very wide user base, and when you're getting a start as a freelancer, Facebook is an easy place for family and friends to spread the word about your freelancing – and it may also be that it helps you get in touch with some old friends or friends of friends who can use your services and who otherwise wouldn't find out that you were freelancing at all.

Twitter is great for meeting other writers – there's a strong writing community on Twitter, maybe because we all procrastinate too much! It's definitely a good way to build up some casual connections. Twitter is quick and easy to get involved with. You can jump in and send a few tweets, pop in when you have a few minutes to spare – you don't need to spend a lot of time on it. You don't need to spend hours building your profile because there's really not too much you can put in there.

And then LinkedIn is a bit different from both Facebook and Twitter and some of the other social networks because it's very focused on business, and on professional links and contacts. It's not a network that I use a great deal because most of the people I work with are individual writers – they're not companies, and they don't tend to be people who are looking for someone through LinkedIn. They're people who I've build up a casual connection with through my blog or through my Twitter account.

But if you are working with businesses or with people who are in quite traditional professional roles – so perhaps you're doing some writing work for people who are lawyers or they're bankers or they're just somebody who wouldn't use Facebook or Twitter but they would use a professional network – then LinkedIn is a good place to build a profile. LinkedIn also lets you list testimonials and so on very easily, and you can ask for a testimonial – they call it a *recommendation* – from people who you are in touch with.

My advice would be, if you're not currently on any social networks, to have a think about what might be a good fit for you personally and just to join one and focus your efforts on that one place.

If you're already on Facebook, maybe consider joining Twitter or joining LinkedIn as another place where you can connect with people. Or look for ways to use your Facebook presence more actively – so that might be setting up a specific page for your business rather than using your personal profile for business-related stuff.

Finding Your First Paying Clients

Once you've got your website in place, and maybe your social media accounts, the really big step you need to take is to find your first paying clients. **This is the make-or-break situation for freelancers, because if you can't get paying clients, then you can't really go much further.**

It can be quite daunting – I know it's really scary when you first put yourself out there, when either you're applying for some freelancing gigs or you're building up some contacts and asking if there's anything going.

Where can you find your first clients? This is something I get asked a lot. A good place to start is with your current clients – maybe email round friends and family, let them know what you're doing, and say to them *"if you know anyone who wants a writer"* (or an editor, or whatever you're marketing yourself as) then can they put you in touch?

Usually, people will be happy to help. The only situation in which you might not want to do this is if your freelancing is something that you don't want to share with people around you. If you're freelancing around a day job with the hope of eventually quitting, you may want to be careful how much you reveal to your colleagues, or to friends who have contacts within your workplace.

Job Boards

Something else you can do is to look on job boards, and on sites like elance. This is where quite a few freelancers try to start out. The problem is that elance and other big job sites have a bit of a reputation for low pay – so you

might find *some* freelancing gigs that are decently paid, but you'll also be up against a lot of competition from writers in the developing world who can charge much lower rates because they've got a far lower cost of living.

It may be a better option for you to look at more specialised job boards – they don't necessarily list so many things, but they're more likely to be on target for what you want to do, and they're more likely to offer a decent rate of pay. Some sites have a list of jobs – ProBlogger has a [jobs board with blogging jobs listed](#). The site [Freelance Writing Jobs](#) lists jobs which they pull together from sites like Craigslist and so on, and sometimes they'll put a bit of commentary on those, or group them, so that it's easier to find what you're looking for.

Then another great way to get in touch with clients is through blogging, whether that's on your own site or whether it's guest blogging on other sites, because this can bring people to you. If somebody's read several of your blog posts and really enjoyed them, they might be willing to hire you as a writer, or as an editor.

Guest Blogging -> Paid Blogging

Guest blogging can even turn into a paid gig. Several of the sites that I write for today – that I've written for over the past few years – were ones that I started out guest posting on. **Because the editors liked my work, because I'd built up a relationship there, I was able to get a paying job once they had a slot available.**

So don't necessarily bank on that happening, but it is something to be aware of, that sometimes a guest post or any other piece of free content can lead to a situation where you're being paid for your work.

Advertising Locally

Something else you can do is advertise in your local area. I know I said earlier that I personally prefer to work internationally, and that works for me because I'm very focused on writing online – but some people do prefer to work with somebody who's local. They might want to meet with you face to face, they might want to be able to talk to you on the phone easily without having to

consider time zones and so on, and it may be the case that when they google for something, they type in their local area – so it could be that people google for "Oxford + freelance writer".

Then, if you're focused on your local area in both your website copy and in your advertising, you may well get some good clients and some good word-of-mouth testimonials that bring more clients to you.

Really, there are lots of different ways you can go about looking for your first clients. It is a hurdle that needs to be jumped – to find that very first paying job or first few clients – **but it does get easier over time because as you start to get a few clients, there's a good chance they will recommend you to friends**. You'll also be able to build up a bigger online presence, whether that's more Twitter followers or more blog readers or more posts on other blogs. You'll find that more and more people come to your door.

Working With Your Clients

Once you've got some clients, the next thing to look at is how to work with them. I've been very lucky with my clients – I've always really had a good working relationship with pretty much everybody I've worked with, certainly 95% of my clients.

Something you need to do, before you go too far, is to be very clear about your rates. **Know what you want to charge.** You don't necessarily have to put that on your website, but you do need to be able to give clients a good quote when they get in touch.

People won't just want to know what your hourly rate is, they'll want to know how much their whole project is going to cost. A good way to do this is to have an hourly rate for yourself but then quote for the whole project.

Setting Your Hourly Rate

Your hourly rate is really up to you – you can charge as little or as much as you want as a freelancer. There's probably a good optimum point where you're charging enough that you're getting people who are serious about hiring you and people who will be good to work with (rather than people who want a

very cheap job and are expecting the world for a few dollars) ... but you're not charging so much that no-one can afford you, or that people are expecting a quality of work that's beyond what you can deliver.

A good starting hourly rate might be, say, $30/hour if you're in the US or about £20/hour if you're in the UK. That might sound quite a lot if you're used to a full-time salaried position – but bear in mind that you can only charge your clients for the time when you're actually working on their particular project. So there are going to be a lot of hours where you have work to do that isn't something you can bill for – things like your marketing, keeping your website up to date, answering emails and so on.

Giving a Project Quote

Then, ideally you want to be able to give people a project quote rather than just your hourly rate. So there are two reasons for this. One is **that clients aren't really concerned about how many *hours* the job's going to take you, or how much it's going to cost per hour – what they want to know is just how much it will cost overall.** So let's say they've brought you a short ebook to edit, it's 5,000 words, they don't really want to know that your hourly rate is $30/hour, they want to know how much it will cost for the whole ebook. So that's from your client's perspective.

The second thing, which is from your perspective, is that **you don't want to be in a position where you're getting more and more efficient and you're earning less and less money.** Because as you become a better writer and a better freelancer, you'll probably find that jobs take you slightly less time than they once did.

Maybe right now it takes you two hours to write a blog post, but in a year's time it could be that you could produce a post that's just as good in an hour. And obviously you don't want to be in a position where you're earning half as much money because you're getting paid per hour.

So the best thing to do is to have your hourly rate in mind, and wherever it's reasonable and convenient to do so, to give people a project rate – so to say to them, *"It's going to be $500 for me to edit your whole ebook"* or whatever it might be.

And that way, if you finish early, if you're efficient, then you get paid slightly more per hour, which is great. On the downside for you, if it takes you longer than you expected, you're going to be getting a bit less per hour – but from the client's perspective it means the price doesn't change, that they know how much they'll be paying.

Something you do want to do here is get used to giving accurate quotes. **It's perfectly appropriate to ask to see a sample of somebody's writing before you give a quote for editing it, for instance, or to ask for a full brief on a particular project before you give a quote for doing some writing work.** Otherwise, it's all too easy to make some assumptions about the project, to think that things will perhaps go a little more smoothly than they will.

I would always suggest giving yourself a bit of margin for error, so quote slightly higher than you think you will actually need in terms of time taken. So if things perhaps don't go completely according to plan, you're still getting a decent rate for your work.

Adjusting Your Rates

Keep in mind that you can change your rates. If you've only got them on your website, it's really easy to update the page. If you've not even published them on your website, then no-one needs to know what your rates were last week – they'll just know what they are when you give them a quote.

You're not tied to your starting rate for ever, you can always put it down slightly or you can put it up a bit, you can adjust it as time goes by, until you get to a good point where you're happy with what you're earning and you're happy with the amount of work you're taking on for that money.

Setting and Meeting Deadlines

So the next thing to think about after rates is deadlines, because normally when you start out a project with a client, they'll want to know how much it's going to cost them and when it's going to be done by.

When the Client Sets the Deadline

Sometimes they'll come to you with a firm deadline in mind, so they'll send you an email saying *I need this back by the end of the week, can you do it?* It's really your call on that. It might be the case that you can do it easily, and you take it on, and you charge them your usual rate.

It could be the case that you can do it but only if you work some evenings, and that may mean that you want to charge a bit extra. That's perfectly reasonable, and if the client really does need it back in that time frame, they'll be willing to pay extra. If they don't really need it back that quickly, they may well say to you *Oh, its fine if it takes another week.*

When You're Setting the Deadline

If the client asks you to tell them when you can get it back to them, so they haven't got a specific deadline, they just want a sense from you of timeframes, then make sure you give yourself some margin – because problems can and do come up.

It might be the case that something else really urgent comes in or there's some kind of personal crisis or you get sick or whatever. You don't want to be in a position where you have to contact a client and tell them that you're not going to be able to make the deadline that you promised them. So it's always a good idea to give yourself a few extra days and to plan to get the work done before then. **No client in the world is ever going to complain that you turned something in *before* a deadline!**

I'll often say to people "*I'll get it to you by the end of the week*" – and I'll plan to have it done on, say, Wednesday. And if it's done on Wednesday, I can send it to them early, and everyone's happy. But if for some reason stuff comes up and I can't do it until Friday, I still get it to them by the end of the week and they're still happy.

Using a Contract (or Getting Things in Writing)

Alongside rates and deadlines come contracts. Now some freelancers don't have a specific contract that they work with, and sometimes freelancers will just sign the contract that the company they work with is using as standard.

It's definitely a good idea to get things in writing, even if that just means setting out very clearly in an email the basic details of a project – things like the rate that you're charging them, when you expect to be paid by (commonly it's net-30, which means 30 days from when you send the invoice).

Usually, you might invoice after you've completed a small project – or you invoice half upfront, half afterwards, for a bigger project. And again there's no rule on how exactly you should do this, there are no legal constrictions on you here, so it's up to you to decide what's appropriate in terms of what you want to put into your contract.

Personally, with things like blogging, I don't use a contract. I know the people I'm working for, I know they can be relied on to pay me very promptly, and I know that even on the few occasions where payment might be a bit late, I can just follow up with them and they will get the money to me. So I trust them. We have a handshake agreement, I guess, and I make sure we have things in writing.

If I'm working with someone who I've never worked with before, or if it's a big job, then I will make sure that we've got more in writing or that I've taken half the money up front.

If you do want to put together a contract, you can just look online for some sample freelancing contracts – [here's one from Jodee Redmond of Freelance Writing Jobs](). But it's not absolutely essential if you're just working on a small job or if it's with somebody who you trust.

Sending Invoices and Getting Paid

The next thing is, once you've completed the work, to send an invoice and to get paid. **Now, like I said, in some cases you might ask for half the money up**

front; that's perfectly okay and normal for freelancers to do, especially if it's a larger project. You could even ask for the money in several payments, and those might be tied to particular project milestones. So you might want a third up front and then a third once you've delivered the first draft and then a third at the end. This is really something for you and your client to negotiate together.

You can put together a simple invoice to send, and it doesn't have to be complicated. It just needs to give things like your address, your client's address, the amount that's to be paid and how they can pay. I've got a sample invoice template you can use here, so you might want to check that out.

Something else you can do, if you've got PayPal, is to generate an invoice through there, or there are pieces of accounting software, like FreshBooks, that you can use for invoicing.

If possible, it's nice to offer multiple payment methods. I usually take payment by PayPal because it's the easiest way to get money from international clients, but if people are in the UK, I'll take a cheque (and if it's a larger job, I'll take a foreign cheque if necessary). I can also take direct bank transfers. So try to give people options and maybe let them know what your preferred method is if one of those options is easier for you.

Normally, people will pay on time, in my experience. Some freelancers charge interest if a payment is late – personally, I just follow up until I get the payment. But it's rare that I need to do that. Bear in mind that emails do sometimes go astray, or a client might be away on vacation, so do follow up if 30 days have gone by and you haven't had any payment – and keep following up if necessary.

Considering Full-Time Freelancing

Assuming that your freelancing goes well, that you get some good clients, and maybe even some recurring gigs so something like blog posting (where you're writing a piece every week or two) or a client who wants newsletter copy written, or something on a regular basis, then you may well get to a position

with your freelancer where you're preparing to go full-time ... or at least considering going full-time.

There's quite a bit you might need to get in place for this, if you're currently working in a full-time or even a part-time salaried job.

Establish an Emergency Fund

One thing that I did when I was getting ready to take the plunge was to build up an emergency fund; I started doing this before I told anyone at work that I was thinking of freelancing. I saved up some money every month, and put that into a savings account, because I wanted that to be there for a safety net, so that if I didn't get enough clients in the first few months, the money was there and I could cover my rent and food and bills and basic expenses.

Develop Your Skills

Another good way to prepare to go full-time is to really build up your skills. That might mean getting some books on aspects of business, or aspects of writing. Bear in mind that both are important skills to develop. You could be an excellent writer but terrible at doing business and that's probably not going to make for a successful freelancer. You could be great at business but not very good at writing, in which case you'd really need to ramp up your writing skills. I'm guessing, though, that most people in the Huddle will be in the position where they've got more writing experience than business experience.

So you might be looking at books on subjects like time management, you might be looking at things on doing your accounts, or marketing yourself or on something like running workshops or delivering presentations if that's something that you want to do either as paid gig or as a way to market yourself.

Building up your skills can also mean on the job experience: taking on some different types of freelancing, perhaps, really making sure that you feel confident about your freelancing before you're in a position where it needs to be paying all of your bills.

Build a Strong Network

You'll also want to have a good network of contacts – so that means knowing other writers, people who could potentially pass work on to you, if they get an enquiry that wasn't quite right for them. It means knowing some editors, having some testimonials, feeling that you've got the support of other freelance writers and people in your general area before you take the plunge into full-time freelancing. That may mean going to some conferences; it might mean attending some Twitter chats at specific times, so that you join in with people. It could mean making the effort to keep in touch with somebody who's perhaps just been an initial contact for you.

Tell Your Family/Friends

Something else that needs to be done, and which can be hard, depending on your personal circumstances, is to talk to the people around you (family primarily, but perhaps also friends) and let them know about your plans.

Unless you live on your own and have no dependents and nobody who's in any way affected by your financial circumstances, then you're probably in the position where you've got a partner or kids. You might just have parents or siblings who aren't going to be directly affected by how much money you have in the bank, but who might be concerned by your plans or interested in your plans, or they just want to know what's going on with you. So you do need to talk to them and let them know what you're thinking about in terms of the freelancing.

Don't let people dissuade you from something that's your goal or your dream. If you really want to freelance then, frankly, no-one can stop you. If that's what you want to do then you should go for it. But you do want to be able to present this to people who are important in your life in a way where they can hopefully support you. And that might mean explaining why you've taken the decision to freelance, or demonstrating to them that you've got the skills and the contacts (and perhaps the money saved up) that you can do it, and that it's not going to be a problem.

Resign from Your Day Job

And then the final step, if you do decide to go with freelancing and leave your full-time job, is to tell your workplace, to let your line manager know and to hand in your resignation letter. You may have mixed feelings on this: it could be the case that you're sorry to be leaving but you know it's the right step for you. It might be that you're really thrilled to be getting out of your day job and you can't wait to see the back of it.

But whatever the situation, do try to part on good terms. You never know when you might want to get a reference or testimonial from somebody at your old workplace. You don't know who your colleagues might know – some of my earliest clients were people who I'd actually worked with in my day job, and a few other clients were friends of people who I'd worked with.

It is important that, whatever your feelings about leaving work, you do part on good terms and you don't burn any bridges.

Your Next Steps

We've gone through things quite quickly because I wanted to give you an overview of what's possible and what you need to get in place if you're going to be a freelancer.

It might seem like quite a lot to take in but the key thing to remember is that you can build up gradually. You don't have to decide to start freelancing today and hand in your letter of resignation tomorrow. You have as much time as you want to explore freelancing, to try things out and to see whether it's for you. And there's no shame in trying it out and changing your mind, deciding that freelancing isn't actually the path that you want to follow.

If you're looking at taking your first steps into freelancing, a great place to start is by deciding what you're really good at and what you would love to do. That might be writing blog posts. It could be editing people's fiction. It could be proof-reading – it might be that you're really great at spotting typos. Whatever your particular skill is within writing, try to focus on that, and then start looking for some ways in which you can get some real, solid, experience.

It may well be that you've already got some great experience in those areas, and you might be able to get back in touch with people who can provide you with a testimonial or who can give you permission to reprint a piece that you wrote for them, as part of your portfolio.

It might be that you need to find some people who'll be happy to take some free work from you and to give you a great testimonial in return.

If you've got any questions or if you just want a bit more advice on how to get started in your particular circumstances, then please feel free to post in the Huddle and let me know, and let other Huddlers know, and we'll be very happy to help out.