

The Travel Writing Magician

MINING WRITERS' GUIDELINES TO MAKE THE SALE

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INSPIRATION,
INFORMATION,
ADVICE

FOR WOMEN
WHO LOVE TO
TRAVEL

How to Make Travel Guidelines Work for *YOU* rather than the other way round.

Succeed wildly as a travel writer. Get the edge on the pros and learn to give editors what they want!

DO YOU HAVE WHAT IT TAKES TO COMPETE WITH THE OTHER TRAVEL WRITERS OUT THERE?

Jenna Glazer, author of *How to Make a Real Living as a Freelance Writer*, says you have to be **more knowledgeable than 84%** of writers and properly armed to compete with the remaining 16%.

Do you have what it takes?

Good writing? Nice presentation? A great headline? A timely topic?

All the above help, but to sell a travel article, you need one thing above all else:

You need to get into the editor's mind.

And you need to do it better than everyone else!

What the editor wants is usually contained in its **travel writers' guidelines**. Follow them to the letter, you win. Don't - get a rejection.

It's not easy to wade through writers' guidelines - *Writers Market* alone lists 6000 paying publications, and that's mostly in North America!

Provided you can write, truly understanding the guidelines of the publications you're pitching is **the one and only thing** that will get you into the editor's mind and through the publication's door.

Please treat freelance writing as a business exchange: **editors want stories to fill their pages, and you're there to do it for them**. Writers' guidelines are your road map, your business plan. Without them, you're flying blind.

I'm going to show you how interpreting guidelines accurately will put you ahead not just of the 84%, but the remaining 16% as well!



Photo: Lisa Lubin www.theworldtour.com

Travel the world
and get paid to do
it. If I could do it,
anyone can!





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On the shores of the Lac du Bourget, France



Market in Provence

Writers' guidelines hold the secret to your sale.

HOW TO DECONSTRUCT WRITERS' GUIDELINES, POINT BY POINT

Most writers' guidelines contain the following information:

- Name of publication
- Contacts
- Openness to freelancers
- Vital statistics
- How to query
- Payment timetable
- What it pays
- What it buys
- Article characteristics
- Photographs
- Rights
- Submission formats

The trick is to know what to do with this information.

What does each of these items tell you?

How can each help you to *sell your story*?

Name of publication

Something as simple as a name gives away some **extremely valuable information**. It tells you who the editors want to reach.

A magazine called *Outdoors* may be for everyone; *Women's Outdoors* is clearly for women; *Women's Outdoor Adventures* is for adventurous outdoorsy women. Take advantage of this knowledge to adjust your pitch to the publication's audience. Sounds logical? You'd be surprised how many writers ignore this basic signpost.

IF GUIDELINES SEEM CONFUSING AT FIRST, IT'S ONLY BECAUSE YOU'RE NOT FAMILIAR WITH THE THINKING BEHIND THEM.

EACH BIT OF INFORMATION IS THERE FOR A REASON.

What a publication calls itself also tells you about its ego and its image. Many have a tagline, a short descriptive phrase they use in all their promotional materials and on their website. 'Truth in Travel' is the tagline used by *Conde Nast Traveler*. What does this tell you? That if you can't get your facts right, don't bother knocking at their door. **Getting your facts correct is essential** in any case, but if I were writing for CNT, I wouldn't double-check, I'd *triple-check* every word.

Contacts

How can such a simple notion be so hard to grasp? **Get the editor's name, and get it right.** Obvious, no? If it were that obvious, fewer queries would be addressed 'to the travel editor'... No one likes getting mail meant for a predecessor, or worse, with a misspelled name. My own pet peeve is being addressed as Mr - being a woman and all. If you get something as basic as the editor's name wrong, how will she be able to trust your facts? Getting this detail right is subtle, but it impresses.

The contacts section provides other interesting information. The address, for instance: it's important to know whether the publication is US-based or Canadian or British (spellings are different) or from even further afield. Beginners are often careless about these things, convinced they're so 'hot' that details are just that, details. **Editors like to know writers pay attention to detail**, especially

since a great part of your eventual article will be filled with details...

One of the most important bits of loose information you'll find in the guidelines is the **website address**. Most freelancers will just glance at the website, maybe to get an editor's name and an email contact. They're missing the boat.

The website is absolutely key to figuring out what a publication is about.

You should **never** submit a query or story to a magazine with which you're not intimately familiar. **Always read the magazine first.** Since buying back issues is expensive, use the website to browse archive copies. Find out what's been written up lately - and what hasn't. Where are the gaps? Find them and use them. It's an absolute no-no to query with a story idea just covered a few issues ago. All that tells an editor is that you're sloppy or worse, lazy, and that you haven't done your homework. You probably won't do better for anything else, either.

Freelance opportunities

Guidelines will usually tell you how much of a publication or site is staff-written. If a magazine gets 100% of its content from freelancers, the field is wide open. If only 10% is freelance written, you're facing some **steep**



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Caribbean seaside bar: quiet daytime

Show off your skills in smaller sections and pretty soon you'll be landing the big-time assignments.



Priorities and editors change. Stay informed.

Payment on publication means you only get paid once your article is published. That could be in a week, a year - or never.

competition and should reconsider, unless you're already known to the editor or your reputation precedes you. In a similar vein listings often tell you how many stories a publication buys from freelancers each year. **The higher the figure, the better for you.** Choose a publication with a good track record of buying from freelancers.

The guidelines will also tell you which sections of the magazine are most open to freelancers, especially new ones. *National Geographic Traveler*, for example, accepts two types of freelance submission: features and departments. The departments are shorter, so you'll have a better chance of breaking in.

Backpacker's guidelines tell you 50% of the magazine is freelance written. Better yet, they tell you how to break in: try the smaller departments first. Many magazines and websites have smaller sections that tend to be more open to new writers. Of course nothing stops you from submitting ideas for a feature, but **you want to minimize the competition** if you're just breaking in. Show off your skills in these

smaller sections and you'll soon be landing larger assignments. Don't be fooled though - these sections are often quite hard to write. They're shorter so every word counts. Don't take them lightly.

Vital statistics

This tells you about circulation, age, frequency and reader profile. These facts are among the most important to the freelancer.

The higher the circulation of a magazine, the greater the competition for editorial space. You'll have to be terribly clever to break into high circulation publications - you'll be vying with seasoned writers

for editors' attention. That's why most writers prefer to start small.

Age tells you how long a publication has been around. A brand new publication might

be more inclined to take a chance on a beginner. Editors like to grow their talent and taking on someone promising at the start means they'll be able to develop a strong relationship - the writer will learn to deliver exactly what the editor wants. Building relationships is what



Central American transport: not everyone drives a car



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Floating markets in Asia



We all want that full-length feature story with the front cover byline. The more we pay attention to writers' guidelines and give editors **EXACTLY** what they want, the closer we get to that front cover.

freelancing is about so if you see a new publication, hurry up and pitch.

Frequency tells you how often something gets published. Is it weekly or monthly? Some publications come out every two or three months. **The more frequent, the better your chances** of getting published so go for the ones with the greatest frequency - at least monthly. That's the advantage of electronic publishing: websites can 'roll' stories and buy articles regularly. They don't have a set number of pages to fill and can accept submissions anytime. And by the way, make sure you **check out a publication's website** - it may have a different set of guidelines, may pay sooner, and have a greater need for stories - yours.

Knowing who your readers are is essential to your writing. Young or old? Male or female? Urban or rural? American or European? You'll be using a different writing 'voice' depending on your audience. There's no point in

sounding erudite if you're writing for a hip fashion audience, nor is cool going to get you far with a professional readership. Get the voice right and editors will pay attention. They'll feel you know the publication and its market, and that's what they want.

How to query

If you're asked to query first before you submit a finished article - and that's the case for most major publications - put as much thought into your query letter as you would into your piece. Maybe more. If an editor doesn't know you, your query letter is all he'll have to go on. **If you can write a good query, chances are you'll write a good story.**

Magazines and websites have to sell themselves to their readers, so you'll first have to sell yourself to them. This means **clear, crisp, compelling copy** - not a list of name places or travel aspirations. Your query should contain a strong pitch for your story,

usually with a grabbing headline and an original story angle. This process is in fact so important that entire books have been written about how to query a publication.

Queries usually have a few things in common: they are brief (a couple of paragraphs) and sharp. The query's job is to grab the *editor's* attention, while the article's introduction - or lead - is designed to grab the *reader's* attention. They should be quite similar. If you can **grab the editor's attention**, she'll be convinced your article can pull in the reader. See how important the query is? A few more points you should mention in the query are the availability of photographs, your expertise in the matter (what qualifies *you* to write this piece?) and when you expect to submit it if accepted.

Most guidelines tell you how long it takes them to report back on a query. Some report back in a few weeks, others can make you wait months. Go for those that have a quick report-back policy. That way, your story won't be gathering dust on an editor's desk while you twirl your thumbs (more about this below when we discuss Rights).

Key to your success - in addition to quality - is quantity. The more stories you have doing the rounds, the better your chances of a sale. And yes, selling is what this is all about. Your wonderful piece won't do anyone any good sitting on your hard drive.

Payment timetable

This may appear insignificant but it should be one of the major factors in your freelance submission. Watch for whether a publication pays *on acceptance* or *on publication*. Stay away from the latter if you can.

Payment on acceptance means just that: as soon as your article is accepted, you get paid. Payment on publication means you only get paid once your piece is actually published. That might be in a

week, a year - or never. Some publications are kind enough to tell you when that actually is: 'Publishes ms (manuscript) an average of 6 months after acceptance.'

But **priorities and editors change** and next thing you know, a magazine decides it no longer needs your prose.

That's why some publications offer what is known as a 'kill fee' - what they pay you if they kill your story after committing to publication. It can range from 30%-50% of the original negotiated payment. Unfair? Sort of. At least **you get some money** for your hard work. On the other hand, you get a lot less than you would have on publication. Killing a story is relatively rare but it does happen, so be forewarned.

What it pays

This *is*, after all, what we're after. We all want to work for \$2 a word but we won't start there. Most often (but not always), **the lower the pay scale the better your chances**. So low-paying publications are a good place to break in.

There's another good reason for trying to break into smaller or low-paying markets and that is to **collect 'clips'**, clippings of your published articles. Any major publication that doesn't know who you are will at some point ask you for clips. If you don't have them *and* you're an unknown, your chance of making a sale is pretty low.

So a good way to build up your collection of clips is to **work for lower-paying or easier to crack markets**. You have to start somewhere.

Guidelines usually list a range of fees. Here's rule of thumb #1: the better-known you are, the more you get paid. And here's rule of thumb #2: the longer the piece, the better the pay. Fees may be negotiable - or not. Don't try to negotiate until **the editor has already demonstrated a strong interest** in your story! Initially, you'll probably be offered a flat fee for your piece. That fee may

(and should) go up as you become better-known as someone who delivers what the editor wants, when the editor wants.

Some publications also pay more for articles they assign than for those that are shopped in the door, so **read the fine print** (you should always do this in any case).

Guidelines also tell you **whether a publication pays your expenses** on assignment. This will only happen once you're a known quantity, so don't worry about it. It would be a stroke of luck indeed to have your expenses paid as a neophyte freelancer!

What it buys

A single magazine or website may need a variety of articles: short pieces, how-to, narrative, investigation, review, feature, interview and more. **The greater the variety the better your chances.** Large publications may have different editors for each section so a rejection by one editor may turn up as an acceptance somewhere else. Do yourself a favor - **follow up a rejection with a new submission**, either to a different section in the same publication or to a new publication altogether. Never sit on a story!

Guidelines will also tell you about the publication's voice - whether it buys stories written in the first person, or prefers personal experiences for example. Some editors will ask you for a breezy, conversational style, while others want formal, factual, academic. To get the sale, **understand the voice and style** and stick to them.

In my experience practical makes perfect. Save the wistful narrative for your book or blog, unless they specifically ask for a literary piece. Give them practical tips they won't find anywhere else, laced with **accurate information**, detailed maps, timings or other things that make travel easier. If you stumble upon an offbeat celebration or

location, write about it. A good way to endear yourself to an editor is to give her *more* than she bargained for, not less. Always over-deliver.

The mainstay of most travel publications is the **feature story** - the one that pays best and is the most prestigious - the one we all want to write. Depending on the publication a feature can range from 800 words to several thousand. I once wrote a 10,000-word feature!

Somewhere in the guidelines the editor will tell you how long your piece should be. Don't even think of submitting something longer or shorter than what is requested - you may think you have the perfect story, but the editor will only think you can't follow instructions.

Finally, editors often tell you what they *don't* want - advertorials, first-person stories (with the word 'I' laced throughout), sex, politics, religion, self-promotion... It varies. Read these sections carefully, because few writers do. By giving an editor exactly what she wants, you'll be ahead of the pack. You'd be surprised at how many writers, even seasoned ones, continue to hand in exactly what the editor **doesn't want** in the misguided belief they 'know better'.

Photographs

Many editors pay extra for photos. In fact, some have **specific guidelines for photographs**.

If you can point and shoot, choose publications that pay for pictures - you can often double your earnings for little extra work. In fact, some publications won't accept manuscripts without photographs or illustrations. These days you don't even have to pay for film or development, so it's a shame not to take advantage of this new technology to make extra money. A word of warning though: if they pay for photos, it means **they expect quality**, not a cellphone snapshot.

Magazines that accept digital submissions will tell you exactly what they want. Do they want you to

email a few samples? Provide them with a web address where they can see your previous work? Lightboxes or CDs? Initially an editor will ask you for a sample and will then request either high-resolution digital shots or 35mm slides, depending on their needs. To get ahead of this pack, **read photographers' guidelines well before you leave on your trip.** You don't want to be sorry you left your old reflex camera behind, do you?

Any photographic submissions should include some information: a caption, your own name and contacts, and a copyright notice. You can paste a label on the slides or add text right over the digital image. A note about submitting photographs: make sure you not only own the copyright, but have **permission from the subject** (as in a signed release form if required by the magazine) to use them. A release form is simply a form that a subject signs giving you the right to use the photograph in various contexts. While not legally required if the photograph is used for non-commercial and editorial purposes, many outlets will insist.

Submission formats

Read this section c-a-r-e-f-u-l-l-y! You'd be amazed at how many people don't... If you don't send your story in the requested format (as an attachment, pasted in an email for example, double-spaced...), there's a good chance it won't get read - period. Editors often delete anything not formatted properly. Drastic, but why should they have to do the extra work? They have better things to do than to format your article to be able to read it. In any event, it will simply be proof that you can't be counted on to follow instructions and for an editor, that's the kiss of death.

There's another kind of submission editors talk about - simultaneous submission. Many publications don't allow it. In other words, if you submit a story to them for consideration, **you may not submit it anywhere else** while they are

leisurely making up their minds. If they only respond in six months, your story will be out of circulation for that long. Break this rule and you could get blacklisted by the publication. The way around it is to have a number of stories in circulation at the same time. That way, while one is on the back burner, others are being evaluated - and accepted, you hope.

Rights

Guidelines will tell you which rights the publication is buying. This is a complicated area, especially these days when print and electronic rights are often negotiated separately. Since recycling stories is a key strategy for making money, **don't sign away all your rights** unless it's one of the biggies, like *Conde Nast* or *National Geographic* - somewhere you're desperate to appear.

There are different rights and it can be complex. First-serial rights means the magazine is the first to publish your piece - you, the writer, keep all other rights. Once published, you're free to resell your piece anywhere. Plenty of other outlets - which of course pay less - will buy second or reprint rights to articles that have already appeared elsewhere. It's a great way to make additional money and get more bylines without doing an iota of extra work beyond the query letter. One-time rights mean just that - they get to use your story once and then it's yours to sell again. All rights means you lose your rights forever. I can't see why anyone would ever agree to this unless you have been specifically commissioned to write a piece and this is in your contract.

If you can possibly avoid it, **don't sell print and electronic rights simultaneously.** Many publications still have the old-fashioned idea that they can make money on you twice while you only get paid once. In some cases you'll have no choice but where you can, negotiate. If they want to put

your piece up on the web, they should have to pay more. Splitting the rights will generate more money for you.

Sometimes you'll have no choice - policies can be set in stone and unless you've discovered a new continent, negotiating will be to the benefit of the publication. That's when you'll have to decide what's worth more to you, the money or getting published.

A word on the web

A new world of web writing is evolving but it rarely warrants its own guidelines. There are individual guidelines for websites that pay for web-only contributions, but **it's still a wide-open field**. For the time being, web markets are mostly offshoots of print publications and those that are stand-alone mostly pay a pittance, when they pay at all.

What goes for magazine guidelines usually applies to the web as well, with a few marked differences: web pieces are as a rule shorter than their print counterparts - readers don't want to scroll down interminable windows; web stories are filled with links - the equivalent of a magazine sidebar; writing for the web is a different art in which pleasing the search engines (like Google and Yahoo) is at least as important as pleasing human readers.

TO SUM UP...

I hope I've made my point by now: **if you follow the writers' guidelines, you'll get the editor's attention**. Remember, part of the challenge is becoming more knowledgeable than the 84%, but that's not enough. You want to beat the remaining 16%!

To do that you will have to get into the editor's mind and put yourself in her shoes. Here are the questions she'll be asking as she reads your piece:

- Is my name spelled correctly? My title accurate? Is it properly punctuated? Is it clean, easy to read?
- Will this story appeal to my market (gender, age, economic background)?
- Is the pitch (query) compelling? Does this feel new? Fresh? Original?
- What does the story 'look' like? Does the voice sound comfortable? Is the author someone my readers will be happy spending some time with?
- Does this writer seem easy to work with? Is she already making demands?
- Is the length appropriate, not too long and not too short?
- Are there enough facts? Do they seem thoroughly researched? Has the writer interviewed experts? Do the sources appear solid?
- Will this story fit into one of our columns or departments? Is there space for it?
- Are there any good photos with it? Does the writer have the right to use them? Is all the photographic information available?
- Has the story arrived as it should? Does the email attachment open easily? Is the layout clean and simple?
- Will my readers *read* it? Does it have information so compelling, so well-written they'll have no choice?

And that, in a nutshell, is your challenge.

If you don't know the editor personally, the only way you can put yourself into her mind is to absorb the publication's guidelines, word for word. Understand them as though you'd written them yourself. If you do that, you'll be ahead of just about anyone who tries to make a living by selling their writing.

Where can you find travel writers' guidelines?

...INCLUDING A FEW YOU DON'T HAVE TO PAY FOR

You'll find the most exhaustive list of travel writer's guidelines in the Writer's Market, either the print version or online at www.writersmarket.com. But it comes at a price - US\$ 5.99 a month or US\$ 39.99 a year for the electronic version, or pay US\$ 29.99 (or less, because you can often get it on special) and get the book, revised each year.

Another paying directory is Travelwriters.com, which provides listings for some 700 paying travel markets. Its price is comparable to the Writers Market at US\$ 39 for the year.

If you don't want to chance these yet, start smaller and cheaper - there are plenty of free writers' guidelines online. You won't find everything, but many individual publications have their writers' guidelines **up on the web**.

My goal isn't to give you a comprehensive listing - or I'd be writing the Writer's Market - but a small sample so you can get a sense of what editors want from you:

Air Canada's [En Route](#) magazine
[National Geographic Traveler](#)
[Outside](#)
[Voyager Magazine](#)
[Wanderlust](#)

For travel websites that pay (a little), try [BootsNAll](#) , [Transitions Abroad](#) or [Go Nomad](#).

Each of these magazines and websites is different, so each requires a different approach.

I've only listed travel magazines but remember, plenty of non-travel magazines have travel sections too!

A number of sites on the web have been **trying to aggregate writers' guidelines**. It's not an easy job - there's research, fact-checking, sorting, categorizing... so free directories aren't exhaustive. Still, they're a good place to start if you want to taste a few guidelines without biting off a big chunk. Try these two: [Freelance Writing](#) and [Writers Write](#).

A final word...

Writers' guidelines are at the heart of the freelance travel writing world. Editors tell you what they're looking for, and you provide it. **It's a simple business transaction.**

Too many beginners ignore writers' guidelines, convinced their prose is so scintillating it'll fly right through any editorial restrictions.

Not true! On the contrary: ignore guidelines at your own risk. Follow them scrupulously and practice your writing - and you'll have a better than good chance of getting published. And paid.