

ARTICLES

LITTLE ZOTZ Writing

Adventures in

FREELANCING



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Issue #1



LittleZotz Writing Adventures in Freelancing

By Lauren R. Tharp

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Introduction

Hey there!

It's nice to meet you. My name is Lauren R. Tharp.

I'm glad you decided to download a copy of *LittleZotz Writing Adventures in Freelancing!*

Since launching LittleZotz Writing, I've received several e-mails asking me, **“How can I become a successful freelancer too?”**

I compiled this e-book with that question in mind.

Throughout this book, you'll find articles from my website on general freelancing, freelance writing, website building, networking, productivity... Pretty much everything you need to know to get started—and succeed!—at being a freelancer.

The articles I chose are a mixture of the most popular articles on my site (according to traffic results), ones readers specifically wrote to me about as having helped them, and my personal favorites.

Each of the articles in this book have been “digitally re-mastered” (edited/enhanced/partially re-written) to be even *better* than they originally appeared on my site. I've also included a few **EXCLUSIVE articles** that will NEVER appear on my website—the *only* way to read them is to download this book.

I've organized this book into convenient sections, but it can be read in *any* order. Feel free to jump around to whatever interests you most. **Everyone's freelance journey is unique.** Different sections of the book will be useful to you at different times.

Annnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnd...away we go!

--Lauren*
<http://littlezotz.com>

Freelancing in General

Handling Criticism and Naysayers as a Freelancer

"What's something everyone loves to give but hates to receive?" My riddle book says the answer is "advice," but I'd like to update that to say "criticism."

How do YOU handle criticism?



"Everything You Are Doing Is Bad. I Want You to Know This..."

Recently, an awkward conversation with an old friend made me feel like I was conversing with Dr. Janosz Poha from *Ghostbusters II* (observe the quote in my header!).

I was berated for nearly an hour about how everything I was doing in my business was terrible: From my website looking like crap to not commanding higher prices to the ridiculousness of my preferred gigs (writing articles).

Yikes!!

She said a *lot* of different things to me, but most of it boiled down to this: **Sell out.**

In order for me to live a "better" life, I would have to give up doing what I love and start going after jobs that make the big bucks...even if they would bore me to tears. Hmmm.

Later that same day Roxy “Balboa” Richardson (Muay Thai fighter/friend) re-tweeted this quote from Mr. Will Smith:



Ah. Now, that's more like it!

For me, that quote rang true: Just because starting up your own business is slow, *super hard* work, and can often be frustrating--**don't give up!** You got into this lifestyle for a reason, didn't you? Why would you go back...?

Don't sell out just for money.

As my friend Mo says, "You can always find ways to make money--you can't always find ways to make happiness. If you're happy, the money will come."

I can almost guarantee you, no matter what your freelance business is--writing, illustration, jewelry, sculpting, film, or something else entirely!--that if you just *keep at it*, the money **will** come.

Patience.

Tom Petty acknowledged that "the waiting is the hardest part," but sometimes it's necessary.

Just because things don't go your way immediately doesn't mean you should throw all your hard work out the window! Keep at it!!

Wait...Wasn't This About Dealing With Criticism??

Oh, yeah! About that...

Not *everything* my friend(?) said was bad. She actually had some pretty good marketing tips that I plan to utilize in the future.

When you get criticism, it can be difficult to differentiate the good from the bad.

Step One: Stay Calm.

Step Two: Ask yourself, "Does this *really* apply to me/my business?"

Step Three: Adjust accordingly.

Step Four: Throw out everything that doesn't apply.

Step Five: Dust off your hands and move onto the next challenge. Ya can't please everyone!

When you receive criticism, constructive or otherwise, your initial reaction might be to reply/retaliate right away.

Don't.

Sleep on it. Or at least wait a few hours.

The things you say when you're angry or hurt can damage your reputation as a professional if you share them publically. (More about that in the section on Networking!)

In most cases, how you handle criticism is more important than the criticism itself!

That's Not My Job...Is It?

When I first launched LittleZotz Writing, I would frequently get e-mails from visitors asking if I could design their website, create a flyer in Photoshop, or “whip up some background art” for their landing page.

While I was flattered that those people thought I was so artistic, none of the tasks I just mentioned have anything to do with my job.

But what does...?



I am a _____, and I _____!

For me, the first blank in that sentence would be filled in with “writer.” It’s the second part of that sentence that’s harder to fill in. The obvious word would be “write.” However, I do much more than that.

The main thing to keep in mind is this: **What do you *want* your job to be?**

Whether you’re new to freelancing or have been working for yourself for years, these are the four questions you should ask yourself about your job again and again:

1. What is it I ultimately want to be?

2. Who do I want my clients to be?
3. How much money do I want to make?
4. How much time do I want to spend working?

[Bonus Question: What's preventing you from achieving the above four? (Lack of exposure? Not enough portfolio items? Too nervous?)]

Once you're able to answer those four questions, it should be easier for you to fill in the second half of my "header" sentence up there.

It's a Fine Line

There are going to be times when someone asks you to do something for them...and you won't be sure if it's a legitimate part of your job or not. I know that sounds strange, but trust me.

As a writer, web designing is clearly *not* my job...

But what about text formatting? What about finding pictures to go along with my article? Or editing the HTML to turn those photos into clickable affiliate links?

For me, I said "yes."

...For an extra fee. (Whenever you do extra *work*, charge extra *money*—it just makes sense, right?)

You're going to have to make your own decisions on those "fine line" questions.

Just remember not to stretch yourself too thin. You don't want to risk being thought of as a "Jack of All Trades; Master of None" either!

Specialize.

And always remember that you're working for *yourself*.

What do **YOU** want your job to be?

Working from Home: The Good

Now that I work from home, I'm constantly asked what the best and worst aspects are! This section is on "The Good."



The Top 10 BEST Things About Working from Home

1. **Our cat isn't suffering from separation anxiety anymore.** From October-December of 2010, my guy and I were working outside our home...and it drove our cat absolutely insane.

Now that we're home for most of the day (my guy is a freelancer too!), even if we head out, he no longer panics thinking we're never coming back.

For those of you with "real" (human) children, staying at home will give you more time with them too!

2. **No more driving/riding/taking the bus/walking to work!** We've saved a TON of money on gasoline.

And working from home saves time! (No more accounting for "travel time").

3. **No more annoying co-workers.** As shown in my illustration above, my main co-worker is our cat. And my favorite person (my guy).

I no longer have to deal with someone in the cube next to mine cranking up their music (which was always, without fail, decidedly *not* my taste). No more office parties. No more office politics.

I'm free. Freeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!

4. **Flexible work hours.** I decide what to do and when.

I choose when and how to do my writing projects.

Plus there's cooking, cleaning, bill paying, socializing, and grocery shopping to do! It all has to be fit into the day somehow, and *I'm* the one who gets to decide how.

5. **I get to wear what I want.** No more suits, disgustingly bright polyester t-shirts (Del Taco, I'm talking to you), or uniforms in general...

If I want to dress up, I dress up; if I don't, I don't.

It's wonderful.

If I'm feeling ill and all I want to wear is my comfiest p-jams, I can. (Yes, unless I'm running a super high fever, I still work when I'm sick—I'm just that hardcore).

6. **I can get new equipment when I want/need it.** Raise your hand if you're at a job where you have to report to the hierarchy whenever you need new office supplies!

Been there, done that.

Now, if I need more pens, a stapler, or a new laptop—I go out and *get* it. No more waiting around for someone, somewhere, deep in the bowels of an office building, to remember that “Oh yeah...Lauren asked for a new computer mouse about 2 weeks ago...”

7. **I eat better.** Now that I’m at home, I get to cook all (okay, *most*) of my own meals. Which, as we all know, are healthier than going out to Jack in the Box or living off of whatever you have time to microwave in the office break room.
8. **I get to listen to the music I want to listen to.** At my last conventional job, my co-worker was more than happy to “share” her music—which I hated.

I love listening to music: It puts me in a better mood—thereby increasing my productivity by helping me to stay focused. But that only works if it’s music *I* like.

Now that I’m home, I get to listen to *my* favorite tunes. But I still use headphones if there are other people around. Just because you’re home doesn’t mean you get a free pass to be rude!

9. **All the gold stars go to me!** Ever had a co-worker take credit for *your* job well done? I have and it really “grinded my gears.”

Now that I’m the only one doing the work, I’m the only one who gets the credit. And if my work is good, I’m the one who gets the praise.

10. **Variety.** If you’re a writer (like I am) or a designer or an artist or any number of other creativity-based jobs... Your clients and projects are constantly changing.

You get to go on all these adventures from the comfort of your own home!

The idea that “you don’t have to deal with customers!” is a myth. My clients *are* customers. The only difference is I don’t have to deal with them in person anymore (and I usually get to choose who my customers/clients are!). And that is very, very nice.

Working from Home: The Bad

Now that you know all the things I consider utterly wonderful about working from home it's time to check out the icky horrible things. Every job has some. Even if you're working from home.



The Top 8 WORST Things About Working from Home

1. **Cabin fever.** All you think about at work is how you can't wait to get home... But what if you already *are* home?

Having nowhere to escape to can be *very* stressful.

Now, there are things that can help with this: For instance, don't work in your bedroom. (Create a home office, if possible!).

Keep your areas to relax and your areas to work in separate.

2. **Working from home doesn't command the respect it deserves.** As shown in my illustration above, many people don't consider working from home a "real" job.

No, not even if you make more than they do.

You'll also have to learn how to say "no." A lot.

People will assume that, since you work from home, you're free to help them move, chat for hours online, go out to the movies on a weeknight, and any number of other things. But, you're not.

Be prepared for the lesser of them to not understand and for the worst of them to resent you for it.

3. **Unavoidable distractions.** I always try to get everything done in the early morning/afternoon when our roommates are out.

Once they come home, it's loud talking, loud music, unwanted guests, and any number of other distracting shenanigans.

My significant other is an artist (and also works from home) so he understands—but if you live with anyone *else*, especially if they're one of the "norms" with an outside-of-the-house job, they're just *not* going to get it.

No, not even if you explain it to them.

4. **It requires HUGE amounts of self-discipline.** Some distractions are unavoidable or completely out of your control; however, most freelancers who complain about "distractions" when working at home are referring to their own lack of self-discipline.

Personally, if our roommates weren't around, I would not only *thrive* but probably never *stop* working. (I have to remind myself to take breaks as it is!)

There's no one breathing down your neck to get the job done which means that it's all up to you. You have to be diligent.

5. **The work hours: They never end!** I sometimes take on gigs where I work as an independent contractor with steady hours...but what about all the other jobs I do on the side? Or my own projects (like this e-book you're reading now!)?

More often than I'd like to admit, I'm writing from the moment I wake up until the moment I crawl under the covers.

6. **The final outcome is *all* that matters.** When your boss/client can't see you, they have no idea how many hours you've put in or how much hard work and research you've done: All that matters is the final product—because it's all they can see!

It might seem unfair, but can you really blame them?

7. **Even if you're supremely organized with your work area, other areas of your home may suffer.** I did my laundry on Saturday...it's now Wednesday and it's still not folded and put away. (Hey, at least it's clean!)

8. **So. Much. Pressure.** Everything...all the time...it's all up to me and only meeeeeeeee!

No job lasts forever.

If I get hurt on the job, *I'm* the one who has to pay for it.

There are no vacations, no bonuses, and no pats on the back.

It's also up to me to do all my own marketing, bookkeeping, filing, and cleaning!

It's *all* up to me.

I am my own business now.

AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!

Epilogue

When I mentioned that I was writing a section on the problems with working from home, my best friend's mom scoffed and said, "*Luxury* problems..."

While that's not exactly true (a lack of respect and heaping amounts of stress aren't what I'd call "luxury"), she does have a point: Working from home is pretty dang sweet. And, if you go back and look, my list of GOOD things about working from home is longer than the list of bad things.

I know I've got it good. However, if I weren't insanely disciplined, that might be another story.

Not everyone thrives when working from home.

It's always good to know the *whole* story before leaping into anything. Hopefully that's what I've illustrated here for anyone out there thinking about quitting their "real" job. ;)

Are Freelancers Allowed to Get Sick?

As we all know, freelancers are absolutely invincible! Freelancers never get sick. It isn't allowed! We aren't hired to fall ill, we're hired to work.

But, of course, there are a few of us in the freelancing business who are rebels... Sick, sick "rebels."



Your Body Will Betray You

All right. As much as I would *like* it to be true, it's a myth that "freelancers never get sick."

No, really. Freelancers are people too! And people, from time to time, get sick.

However, how you handle your illness can mean the difference between keeping your clients (and the gigs they pay you to perform) and losing it all.

"Head Down and Power Through"

Last week, I was sick. But I was able to keep my "head down and power through" (while listening to *Arrested Development* reruns in the background). It meant that I was taking Tylenol every four hours to stave off the fever. It meant I had a barf bag next to me so I wouldn't need to make too many time-consuming trips to the bathroom.

It also meant that I got the job done.

It was miserable and tough to get through, but I did what I had to.

If you want to get paid, you have to work.

Plus, I had plenty of time on the weekend for rest and recovery.

Taking Time Off by Planning Ahead

I'm not saying you should plan to get sick. That's just weird. I'm saying that you should plan ahead with your *work*.

For instance, for articles, I usually tell clients that I will have the order done within ten (10) days from when I receive their payment. In reality, I usually get back to the client with their finished product in three to five (3-5) days.

By allowing myself that extra time, I have a few days of “just-in-case” time! That way, if I get sick—and I mean really, *really* sick—I can take a little time off to recover before forcing myself to “power through” and get the work done.

There are going to be times when having a box of Kleenex and a bag to barf in next to your work station isn't going to cut it. There are going to be times when you just *cannot* work. Those are the times that you should take a break.

By making sure your deadlines are far enough into the future—and that you keep ahead of schedule—you'll find that you'll be able to take a day off now and then.

Your Clients Are People Too

Chances are, your clients are people. And, if this is true, then your clients have probably been sick once or twice in their lives as well. They know what it's like.

Provided you've always done good work in the past [and you don't take advantage of them (no one likes that!!)] your client will most likely understand if you need to take a day or two off.

Your client hired you to get a job done. As long as you deliver the goods—even if you had to take a couple days off—they usually won't care.

It's all about the final product.

Freelancers and the Importance of Socializing

Socializing with “normal” friends can help ebb eccentric tendencies and keep you from alienating your clients.



The Anti-Social Freelancer

Most freelancers work from home. They pick their own clients and plan their own schedules.

Unfortunately, many of us forget to schedule a little “free time” into our dayplanners, leaving us anti-social and isolated. If you’re like I am, being alone for long lengths of time can lead you to start humoring your more eccentric personality traits.

The Problem with Isolation

Isolation might not bother you. In fact, many of us enjoy being alone on our days off.

However, the problem with complete and total reclusiveness from your fellow humans is this: It starts to affect your work.

Think of it this way:

1. **Your clients are probably humans/people.**
2. **If you have no contact with humans/people other than yourself, you probably can't relate to humans/people (or at least not in a way that's considered "normal").**
3. **If you can't relate to humans/people, you can't relate to your clients.**
4. **If you can't relate to your clients, they won't hire you!**

Oh no!!

Keeping in Touch: What Can Help

I'm not saying that you have to start partying or even that you have to go out and physically see your friends every week. There are lots of ways to stay "in touch" with the human race...

- **E-mail.** Making an effort to e-mail a friend (or friends) each week—particularly one who's on the "outside"—can help to keep you feeling "connected."
- **Phone.** Same thing as e-mail, but with more talk-y and less write-y.
- **Watch TV.** No, they aren't "real" people (I'm not telling you to think of Quinn Fabray as your girlfriend or Barney Stinson as your best friend), but *real* people are watching these shows.

And by watching—or at least knowing about—what's on television yourself, you start to absorb the lexicon (most of humanity's common "slang" originates from the media) and get to know what people are talking about around the proverbial water cooler.

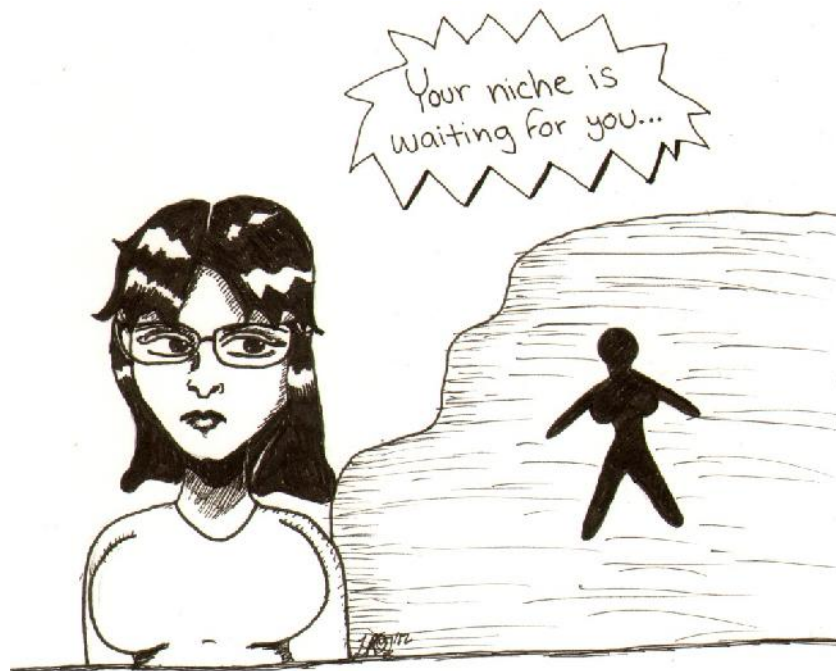
- **Know the News.** One of the first tip offs that you're "out of touch" is when you don't know the news. For instance, if I had made a comment like "If we ever catch Osama Bin Laden..." after the events of May 1, 2011, I'd certainly get more than a few funny looks.
- **Get Out of the House.** People are EVERYWHERE. No matter where you go, you're bound to run into someone. Even a simple "How are you today?" exchange with the bag clerk at the grocery store can give you some much-needed human contact.
- **Hang Out with Friends!** Hey, sometimes the classics just can't be beat!

Freelance Writing

Why Choosing a Niche Could Mean Certain Doom for Writers

*We've all heard it before: "Choose a niche and revel in your success, or stay a Jack of All Trades and surely perish!" It's been ingrained in us from the start that we **MUST** choose a niche or we might as well give up now!*

However, as a fellow writer, I would advise you to do exactly the opposite. At least for now.



How Junji Ito Made Me Realize the Horror of Niches

Several years ago, I was given a copy of Junji Ito's graphic novel *Gyo* to read. I could take it or leave it. I'm not exactly scared of fish... Who am I?--H.P. Lovecraft? Come on.

However, the "bonus" story at the end, "The Enigma of Amigara Fault," has stayed with me all these years.

I don't want to give away any spoilers in case any of you want to read it, but the basic premise of the story is that holes, shaped like human bodies, begin showing up on the side of a mountain. People are unnaturally drawn to these holes--each trying to find the hole that was specifically "made" for them.

Once they do, they force themselves inside... Wandering deeper and deeper inside their "perfect" hole.

Let's just say the story doesn't exactly have a happy ending.



I realized I was doing the same thing!

A few months ago, I was struggling to find a niche--the perfect writing slot that was "made" for me!--and I just couldn't do it. Every time I tried, it made me feel queasy. I felt like I was trying to cram myself into a Lauren-shaped hole, and that I'd be stuck in it forever.

And that's when "The Enigma of Amigara Fault" came flooding back to my memory.

"Oh, my God!" I thought. "If I squeeze myself into a niche slot, I'm going to come out on the other side looking like a--!!"

...No spoilers...

3 Reasons Why Writers Shouldn't Choose a Niche

If you're like I was and you've tried to choose a niche and couldn't, don't worry about it. Here are 3 great reasons why writers are better off NOT niching, at least not at first:

1. **Boredom.** Let's be honest. If you write about one topic day after day after day, you're going to get bored.

Maybe you've been told that "only boring people get bored," but I'm going to call BS on that one.

Of course interesting people can find ways to stay entertained, but when you're getting paid to work on something, you owe it to your client to stay focused. You can't sit around daydreaming.

And giving your complete focus to the same subject day after day...?

You get the idea.

2. **Limited Options.** If you cram yourself into a niche early on in your writing career, you could miss out on a lot of opportunities and clients you might have loved!

Your dream client could approach you, but their idea could be just slightly outside of your niche...and you'd turn them down flat!

3. **Your Writing Will Suffer.** You've probably already guessed that boredom and limited options would cramp your writing style. But when you niche, you also start to play it safe. Not only will *you* be bored, but your writing will be *boring*.

World-famous copywriter Robert Bly mentioned in an e-mail recently that the best writers work 80% within their comfort zone (niche) and at least 20% outside of it.

Allowing yourself to explore different genres will keep your writing fresh--and your readers/clients interested!

What to Do Instead of Choosing a Niche

Instead of choosing a writing niche, choose your **perfect client** to write *for*:

- What age group are they in?
- What gender are they?
- What profession are they in?
- Do they have a sense of humor?
- Are they strict or super flexible?
- What's their budget?
- What type of writing are they looking for?

Once you have your ideal client in mind, target them with your writing!

Really.

It's that simple.

"But I Will Have to Choose a Niche Eventually, Right?"

Yeah.

Probably.

But everything I just said still applies.

Back in June, I attended a webinar being held by copywriters Carol Tice and Laura Spencer on the "12 Biggest Freelance Writer Mistakes." During that webinar, the subject of niches came up. This is what Carol said at the time:

"By trial and error, the marketplace will tell you your niche. You can't figure out your niche in a vacuum."

I loved her answer so much, I wrote it down.

Eventually your perfect niche will reveal itself.

Until then... Explore!



Writing for Magazines: Submitting

I used to write articles for magazines all the time in my teens and early twenties--and got many of said articles (and short stories) published! However, it wasn't until recently that I started to get interested in magazine writing again.

It's been fun, albeit a bit nerve-wracking, getting back into it.

Read on for some of my best magazine writing tips...



Coming Up with Magazine-Worthy Article Ideas

Before you can write about an idea, you have to *have* the idea. The good news is, article ideas can come from just about anywhere!

Just to get you started, try writing down a list of things you've done throughout your life:

- What jobs have you had?
- Have you done any volunteer work?
- What hobbies have you indulged in?
- What classes have you taken in school? (Don't limit yourself to just college--think about *all* of the classes you've had throughout your life. And don't forget about

field trips!).

- What skills/life lessons have you learned outside of school? (Budgeting? Knitting? How to change a diaper? How to make homemade pickles?).
- Do you know any interesting people with unique skills?
- Do you have an interesting medical history? (Bi-Polar disorder? Hypoglycemia? Emergency bone grafting?).
- What businesses do you like the best/visit the most? (A good way to do this is to check through your bank register/statements).
- What's your favorite book/magazine/music artist?

You can come up with more questions, I'm sure; but that should get you started in the right direction.

The point of this exercise is to get your mental juices flowing. Going on a nostalgia trip is a great way to start tickling out article ideas. Trust me.

As you answer each question, you'll start to notice common themes. These are your "true" interests. ;)

Finding the Right Magazines to Write For

Next up is finding a place to get your article published!

The obvious way is to check out magazines in the book or grocery store. Or to refer to magazines you already know.

But don't be afraid to look beyond the "traditional" magazines. Also check out:

- Trade Magazines
- Online Magazines

But be wary! **Don't get tricked into working for free.** Especially with online magazines.

Know Who You're Writing To

Of course it's a good idea to know who you're writing *for* ("know your audience!"), but it's also a good idea to know who you're writing *to*.

I'm talking about query letters, of course!

Before you can get an article published in a magazine, first you have to appease the "powers that be" (the editor, usually) in charge of getting it printed.

Look online or in the front of the magazine. Generally, the names of the people in charge are fairly easy to find if you know where to look. Just be sure you write to the right department.

Be nice.

Don't be afraid to adapt if things don't go as you expected.

I recently wrote an article that I was planning to sell to *BP [Bi-Polar] Magazine*, but it ended up getting picked up by Julie Fast over at *Bipolar Happens* instead! And it was thanks to connections I made while attempting to get it published with *BP Magazine*.

Seeing your name in the byline will feel great, no matter where it gets published. Especially if you're used to being used for your ghostwriting services like I am.

Need a Motivational Boost?

Like I said, I had already written for magazines plenty of times in my teens and early twenties. However, I'm also in favor of constantly updating my skills...

So I took an online class with Linda Formichelli of The Renegade Writer:



I already knew most of what was taught in the class, but I still highly recommend Linda's Write for Magazines e-course at <http://therenegadewriter.com>

Linda is *great* at motivating her students--even if you're in the "cheapie" class.

Even if you've written for magazines in the past, give this class a shot. You won't regret it. Linda's lessons are brimming with positivity, humor, and over 50 pages of good advice (and super useful links & resources).

Writing for Magazines: Waiting

Now that you've submitted your article, I'm going to share what to do when you're waiting around for your acceptance or--gasp!--rejection letter.



I Submitted an Article to a Magazine... Now What?

First of all: Great job! I'm so happy you took the chance and submitted your work!

Now that you've sent your work to be analyzed by the editor of your chosen publication, there are plenty of things you can do while waiting for their reply:

Experiment with your cooking. Find some new recipes online or simply ask a friend "how did you make this?" when they serve you a great meal.

Catch up on your reading. I'm always reading at least two books. One "useful" book (This week I'm reading Robert Bly's *The Copywriter's Handbook*) and one "just for fun" book (I loved the TV mini-series, but I hadn't actually read *Anne of Green Gables* until this week). I highly recommend getting a Nook as a great way to conveniently buy & read books!

Play some video games. I own a Nintendo 3DS and play PC games. My significant other owns a PS3. Playing video games at home--or at your local arcade!--can be a great way to unwind.

Explore nature. If the weather's decent, try going outside! Go for a hike (Pro tip: Take along a friend who knows the trail!) or visit a nearby botanical garden.

Check out a museum. I used to think that once I'd been to a museum, I'd seen everything it had to offer. Now that I'm an adult I know that museums are constantly changing their exhibits! Check out their schedule and see if there's something that interests you.

Start an exercise routine. You know that you've been "meaning" to start one. Why not now?

Visit a friend. Socialization is very important for freelance writers--and we often don't get enough of it! Take this opportunity to interact with humans in person.

Reply to e-mails. Is your inbox completely empty? If your answer was "no," then this might be the perfect time to start replying to the messages you've let stack up.

Write some snail mail. Send a friend a good, old-fashioned, letter. It's a great excuse to buy some cute stationery! Or, if you're more business-minded, you could work on your direct marketing campaign.

Make adjustments to your website. I'm constantly making minor tweaks to my website. Things can *always* be improved. Are all your links working properly? Does your header convey exactly what your website is for/about? Does your front page stand alone? Have you invited readers to subscribe to your newsletter?

Take a class. Check out your local community center or community college! Sign up for martial arts training or tap dancing. Or take an online class. This month, I'm enrolled in Carol Tice's "Freelance Writers Blast Off" e-course. Last month I was in Linda Formechelli's "Write for Magazines" e-course. Next month, I'm planning to enroll in "4 Week J-School" to brush up on my journalism skills.

Pamper yourself. Two weeks ago I had my first manicure in seven years. I felt so pretty! Do something nice--just for *you*.

Balance your budget. As a freelancer, you might find yourself living from paycheck-to-paycheck and never having any money left over for emergencies. That can be extremely frustrating. Setting up a budget for yourself can help!

Catch up on cleaning. Even if you're a generally tidy person, there's always room for improvement. Could something be more organized? Is there something in your home that you've "learned to live with?" Do you really need *all* of those papers?

And, most importantly...

KEEP WRITING!!!

Come on! You submitted to one magazine and now you're going to sit back and relax?

It's great to take a small break to keep you sane, but don't lapse into laziness.

You have to *keep writing*.

You have to *keep trying*.

Even if you get back a rejection letter, don't let it discourage you.

Do you know how many rejection letters Stephen King got before he finally sold something?! A LOT!

Get yourself out there.

Get back to writing as soon as you can!

Good luck. :)

Don't Get Tricked into Writing for Free

There are a lot of people out there who try to take advantage of freelance writers. Yes, even you! Don't fall for their evil trickery!



Never Ever Write/Work for Free

Anyone who's seen an after-school special is probably familiar with the term "the first one's free." That's a good business tactic if you're selling highly addictive drugs (except for it being illegal and morally sketchy, that is); but, unfortunately, writing isn't addictive.

No, not even if it's really *good* writing.

To put it simply: If you give your client a freebie, they're going to keep expecting more freebies.

To break it down even more: **If you work for free, you will never make any money.**

Now, you're probably looking at that last sentence and thinking "no duh," but don't be fooled!

This is an easier trap to fall into than you might think!

“It’s a Trap!”

Here are three of the “traps” you might fall into if you aren’t careful. When looking for jobs, beware of clients who ask you to...

...Work “on spec.” This means that they won’t pay you *unless* they decide to use what you wrote. That might not sound too bad, but keep in mind that they might not use your writing until months (or even years!) later. Or maybe not at all!

Is that a chance you’re willing to take?

If you *do* decide to take on an “on spec” project, be sure you ask for a “kill fee” in your contract—that way, if they decide not to use your writing, you’ll still get paid at least a *little* money.

...Write “for exposure.” This is something that new writers are especially susceptible to. People out there know that new or under-confident writers feel that they have to “pay their dues” (you don’t) and they’ll take advantage of you to get some free writing.

...Send them some “samples.” Sure, sometimes clients will legitimately want to see samples of your writing (in which case you can break out your portfolio!), but most of the time this is a scam.

Many so-called “clients” cruising for samples (I see this a lot on Craigslist) are just looking for free writing that *they* can sell later. The nerve!

Get a Contract

Always, always, *always* have a contract.

Get in writing—somewhere—the terms under which you’ll be working. Do NOT work without some sort of written agreement.

Even for “small” projects!

Never:

- Accept an oral contract (over the phone or otherwise).
- Accept a handshake as a contract.
- Accept a contract over an instant message or in a chat room.

If your client doesn't agree to entering into a contract with you, then they're probably shifty and not worth working for anyway.

A good, smart, client will know that a contract protects them as much as it protects you.

It makes sure *you* will be paid, but it also makes sure that *they* get their finished product.

Don't be fooled!

Escaping the Content Mills

Every writer has to start somewhere, just make sure you don't stay there...



What's a Content Mill?

A content mill (or content farm) is, according to Wikipedia, "a company that employs large numbers of often freelance writers to generate large amounts of textual content which is specifically designed to satisfy algorithms for maximal retrieval by automated search engines."

Basically, it's a place where clients can post writing assignments and hundreds--sometimes thousands--of writers can fight over who gets to complete it. And, most of the time (as suggested above), the content is **written to please search engines** rather than actual readers.

The Pros and Cons of Content Mills

Content mills aren't *all* bad.

In my first e-book, *The Newbie Writer's Guide*, I mention Textbroker and Fiverr as places to get your start. And I stand by that. Here's why:

THE GOOD

They build confidence. There's nothing like the feeling of getting *paid* to write something. When I first decided to write professionally, asking clients for money was one of the things I struggled with most. At a content mill, I didn't have to ask--the rates were already set. This left me free to just...write. For money!

They're safe. Working at a content mill is like working with a safety net. Good content mills (like Textbroker) go out of their way to protect their writers. You can take on clients right and left and as long as you do the work, you *will* get paid. The mill makes sure of it. You don't have to chase after your clients to get your paycheck, you have a team of people to do it for you.

They're great practice. Even though you're working with a "safety net," you still get the experience of working for *real* clients. You're given assignments, and you're forced to finish them--which is the core essence of what a professional writer *does*. It's fantastic practice! Not to mention all the actual writing you have to do to complete said assignments!

But, of course, it's not all good...

THE BAD

They're highly competitive. Remember how I said there's hundreds--sometimes thousands--of writers all vying for the same assignments? The good jobs go FAST! In some content mills, there are bidding wars--writers trying to "out cheap" each other to "impress" the clients. At Textbroker, assignments are given on a first-come-first-served basis. This had me setting alarms for 3 and 4am just to login and try to snatch up the higher-paying gigs before someone else did.

The pay rate stinks. The pay really, REALLY stinks. I don't think anyone wrote about this better than Linda Formichelli did in her article, "On Writing for Peanuts" over at *The Renegade Writer*. For more about the pay rates at content mills, read her article. It's awesome (and completely accurate!).

<http://www.therenegadewriter.com/2009/11/29/on-writing-for-peanuts/>

Content mills mess with your mindset. There's definitely a tipping point when content mills stop building confidence and start tearing down your self-worth. And that's exactly when you need to leave. (Actually, leave *before* that happens, if possible!). After working for client after client who values quantity over quality--and pays pennies per word!--you start to think "Is this all there is?" You'll start to believe that \$5 an article really *is* the going rate for writing (it's not) and things will never get any better for you (they will).

Escape the Content Mill!

My martial arts teacher used to tell me: "Fight like you walk. How often do you walk backwards? Move forward!"

It's the same for your writing career.

Always move forward.

Every writer has to start somewhere.

Just don't stay there forever.

Networking

You Will Be Judged (On Social Media)

It's arrogant to assume that ALL eyes are on you... but you should be aware of how you present yourself to the eyes that ARE on you. Make sure your personal life doesn't kill your business.



Social Media Basics in 7 Steps

No matter which social media outlet you use as your platform (Facebook & Twitter are the most popular/common, but you might also like to use LinkedIn or Google+), there are a few simple things to get you on the right track right off the bat:

1. **Put a Face to Your Name.** Get rid of the default image and add a profile pic! Either a picture of yourself or your business logo would work just fine.

Personally, I like seeing a face--that way, when I interact with them, it feels more like I'm speaking with a "real" person.

If you're a "one (wo)man" operation like I am, I would go with your face; however, if you're a larger company, I would go with the logo. Just make sure you put *something* up to represent you!

2. **Link to Your Site.** The whole purpose of interacting on social media as a business owner is to get people to visit your business. Make sure you link back to

your website!

3. **A Description of You/Your Business.** Sure, you've added your picture and a link to your website--but if people don't know what your business is all about, none of that is going to matter!

You don't get a lot of room to describe what you do, so choose your words carefully. Be concise and always keep your "brand" in mind.

If you had to describe what you do in one sentence, what would you say?

4. **Actually...You Know...Post Stuff!** Having a great profile picture, links, and description mean nothing if you don't actually make updates on your accounts!

If you don't plan to keep your social media outlets updated, then you might as well not have any. (**Note:** Don't get mistaken for a spammer. Don't say the exact same message again and again or you could find yourself blocked or even banned!).

5. **Look to Your Competition.** Still not sure how to get things rolling? Take a peek at what your competition is doing!

How often do they update? What do they say when they do? What kind of reaction do they get, if any? (**Note:** If you're not sure who your competition is, the easiest way to find out is to Google the keywords *you* want to be known for and see who pops up!).

6. **Use What Works for YOU!** Just because "everyone has Facebook" doesn't mean that *you* have to too.

It's easy to feel anxious about social media. When my peers were hopping on the Google+ bandwagon, I started to get worried--however, I stuck with what works for *me* and I haven't regretted it.

Don't go after "the next big thing" just because it's new. If you hate it, you'll never use it, and you'll have wasted your time.

7. **Don't Make Promises You Can't Keep.** I've come out with some personal issues on my website and the goals I have for fixing them. But, if I *don't* make the effort (and succeed!) then I'll be branded a failure or--worse!--a liar.

If you say you're going to do something: Do it.

Don't make the mistake of sharing your plans without following through on

them. It could be the death of your business. If you aren't *sure* you're going to put in the effort and make it happen, then keep it to yourself.

Business You VS. Personal You

I like to keep my personal social media accounts, well, *personal*. I set the privacy settings to max and only let my closest friends see what I'm up to. However, every once in a while a client will be asked to be let into the inner circle. I guarantee this will happen to you eventually too! And that's when you'll have to make the tough decisions.

The "personal" you will probably be different from "business" you... But is there a risk of "personal" you *killing* business prospects for "business" you?

For me, my personal life is so tame, I don't usually have any qualms about letting business connections see into my "real" life. Here's a glimpse at the last two picture of myself I posted on my personal Facebook page:



"Yay! New glasses!"



"Went hiking. Took a break on this awesome mossy rock!"

See? Pretty tame stuff. Nothing that I'd have to scramble to explain to my business prospects.

I'm lucky though. I live a nice "boring" life. My business pretty much *is* my life. That makes things easy!

However, if I were the type (or if you are!) to post pictures of myself drunk or half-naked or doing something completely controversial... Then I'd think twice about sharing.

When it comes to your business--especially in social media--make sure that the "you" you present is always the "**Business** you."

They're watching.

You *will* be judged.

Awaiting My Business Cards

After spending months admiring other people's business cards, I finally decided to get some of my very own.



"Cheap As Free"

I went ahead and nabbed some of the "free" business cards from VistaPrint at <http://vistaprint.com>

I say "free" because they still charge you for tax & shipping. I also ordered an additional 250 (500 in total) for \$3 more

...And I also got myself an engraved case to keep them in for another \$5. I couldn't resist! Plus, my *Death Note* wallet isn't exactly the epitome of professionalism. And I'll be able to keep the corners of my business cards from getting bent! W-what do you mean I'm desperately trying to justify my impulse purchase? Quiet, you!



The Anatomy of a Business Card

There are several articles online about what goes into [making a great business card](#). I think I hit all if not most of the marks.

Here's what I put on my business card...

What I Included:

- My Name
- My E-mail Address
- My Website Address
- My "Title"
- My Tagline (It serves as a reminder of what exactly I *do* for those who might otherwise forget)

Some Extras:

- My Facebook Page (LittleZotzWriting)
- My Twitter Username (@littlezotzwrite)
- A short "ad" for my Keyword Research services. Why? Because it's a new service and it's not exactly what I'm "known" for (articles!). I wanted to get it "out there" more and continue making more people aware of it.

What I Left Out and Why:

- My Phone Number. I included my phone number on my last set of business cards and ended up regretting it. I found out the hard way that I actually *didn't* want everyone to have my phone number. This time around, I left it off. (But I left the back of my cards blank so that I could write it in if I *did* decide to give someone my digits--I always have at least two pens on me.).
- My Address. For the time being, I work from home. I wasn't comfortable with letting strangers know my home address.

Looking Back...

It's now a few months later. I've been making great use of my business cards!

Everything I said in this article still stands. HOWEVR...

Things I'm going to do on my NEW business cards:

- Pay the extra \$3 to have the "This is a free card!" removed from the back. It makes me seem like a cheap-o penny-pincher. Which I am... But prospective clients don't need to know that!
- Change the "Now offering Keyword Research" ad to "Get your FREE Consultation!" For one thing, I'm no longer offering keyword research as a stand-alone service (I do it only if you order an SEO article). Also, there's nothing like the word "FREE!" to bring in potential customers!
- I'd add my BUSINESS phone number. When I got these business cards, the only phone number I had was my personal line. I'm in the process of getting a second phone just for my business. :)

What's Stopping YOUR Business from Going ALL the Way?

I've been struggling with something...and I think you might realize that you have too!



Forum Phobia (My Story)

I'm afraid of forums. No, there's no "specific" reason for it—which is why I referred to it as a phobia—I just *am*.

At best, I get sweaty palms; at worst, I go into a full-blown panic attack.

I can't even *think* about writing on a forum without having some sort of reaction (quite frankly, I'm having trouble writing about it right now!).

Recently a good friend of mine kept pressuring me to join writer-friendly message boards/forums. "You could make sooooo much more money!" she'd say, elaborating upon the marketing possibilities.

I ended up not talking to her for a week because she wouldn't shut up about it! (Sorry about that, ol' pal...). I would see her sign in on AIM, know she was going to start

talking about forums, and I'd get the same sense of dread from seeing her screen name that I had whenever I thought about talking on forums!

But, in the end, she was right: I *had* to get over my fears.

Forums aren't the be-all, end-all for advancing my business, but I know they can help.

That's why I signed up for a forum back in September. And why I've slowly been working up to actually *posting* there for the past few months.

I made my first real post last week. It was a huge, frightening step for me. As of this writing, I've made 10 posts total. I hope to make more soon.

It's my goal, that by the end of this year, I'll no longer have to hold my breath whenever I log onto a message board—that I'll be able to post with relative ease.

Some people would argue that I shouldn't share my personal goals/aspirations with my readers. That they'd no longer take me seriously as a professional. But I thought it over and I think that my story could help *you* too! Here's why:

What's Stopping YOU??

Is your business all you want it to be? Or is there something missing...?

We all have fears that hold us back in one way or another: In life, in love, or in business.

What's yours?

Mine was a fear of forums. Yours is probably something different. But, if it's something that's holding you/your business back...it's something you'll need to get over!



Robert the Cat has a fear of success. Or maybe just piggy banks.

Getting Over Business Fears

Start slow/ease in. I joined a message board back in September, but didn't start posting until several months later. It took time, but that's okay! Just be sure to not go so slow that you end up not doing it at all.

Do something similar that's not quite as scary. I was afraid of forums, but I was less afraid of leaving comments on Blog posts. I started my journey by leaving feedback on Blog posts/articles I particularly admired.

Get help from a friend who's familiar with your problem (and the goal you wish to achieve). I feel bad about ditching my friend for a week, but eventually we made up and I ended up *asking* her for her help (but explained that if I said to "please stop" that what I really meant was "you're making it hard for me to breathe!"). She, and another friend, helped ease me into the forum world.

Just do it already! Hey, my palms still sweat like crazy every time I log onto a forum, but at least I'm there posting! (Even if I do have to wipe down my keyboard afterward). Sometimes you just gotta pull up your britches and **GO FOR IT!**

Why You Should Never Say “Just Google Me”

Has this ever happened to you? You’re talking with someone—a fellow “professional” perhaps?—and when you ask them for their contact information or web address, they say (usually with an air of undeserved confidence), “Just Google me.”

Well, I’m here to tell you why that’s a terrible way to market yourself...



That’s Not Me, I Swear!

The girl I depicted above is a different “Lauren Tharp” my significant other found on Google.

Now, I thought her picture was hilarious. But that’s because I thought she was being sassy and satirical on an almost Sarah Silverman level of comedic trolling. A budding comedienne, if you will! Her online profile said that she was from “somewhere out of Texas” and she was fulfilling every cartoonish stereotype for the region. I figured she was making an artistic statement. Brilliant!

Then again, she might be serious!

I have no way of knowing for sure.

More importantly, if she was in any sort of business (I don't know if she is!), her *clients* would have no way of knowing... And they might be seriously offended.

So what does this have to do with *your* business?

Well, for example, if *I* had told someone to “just Google me,” they may have seen *her* picture and thought it was *me*! Here are a few reasons why:

- **Most of the people I do business with have never met me in person.** Unless I give them a direct link to what I look like, they could Google image search my name and assume any one of those *other* Lauren Tharps is me.
- **Even if I do meet someone in person, my face isn't as memorable as I like to think it is** (and neither is yours; I'm sorry!). Assuming that, after meeting you once, a potential client is going to remember your face and click on the right website is a very bad idea.
- Unless you're really *really* confident in your SEO/web presence—as in you know *for sure* that your name/website is going to be the first thing that pops up on Google—then **you're going to make your potential client dig through several other people's pages before they get to yours.** (Unless you're the only person in the entire world with your name... But even then you'd have to have some pretty good SEO).
- **Even if you *are* the first person that pops up on Google when someone searches for your name, are you confident that what shows up in the search is what you want a potential client to see?** Sure, it was funny when your friend drew that ketchup swastika on your stomach—in *context*!—but to someone who doesn't know you/your friend's wacky sense of humor that could be viewed as very offensive! (Losing you valuable business).

Taking the Time to Do It Right

Don't have time to scribble your contact information down on a scrap of paper? Come on.

And that's doing things the “old school” way. Might I also suggest...

- **Business Cards.** It's the grown-up version of handing out your name/e-mail/web address on a scrap of paper! You can get some great ones, for reasonable prices, at Overnight Prints, VistaPrints, or Moo.

- **Using an E-mail Signature.** Think you're too cool to write it out each time? Try putting your website's address in your e-mail signature!
- **Just Tell Them.** Unless you have a ridiculously long web address, chances are you can just tell them. LittleZotz.com is short enough that *most* people can remember it. **However, this is a last resort.** I'd say only 1 or 2 out of every 10 people you tell your website address to via talking (versus writing it down) will actually remember it long enough to visit. Risky.

I know it sounds awesome to tell someone to "just Google me" (like you're so important that you don't have time to be bothered with handing them a business card) but, trust me, it's worth it to take the time and do things right.

Your potential client will appreciate that you valued *their* time and respected *them* enough to treat them like they were someone special.

You never want to be too casual when it comes to your budding business.

The Difference Between a Know-It-All and an Authority

This is going to be a hard one to write without coming off negatively myself, but I'm going to take a crack at it...



Following the Riddler

I've been following someone on Twitter for the past year or so. They're extremely...well, to put it mildly, they're *extremely* narcissistic.

We're *all* narcissistic to some extent. And business owners have an additional reason to be! We need to be taken seriously, sell our products, and remain in the public "eye."

But there comes a point when self-promotion and self-horn-tooting becomes *ridiculous*.

At first I was annoyed with this person... But, just as I was about to un-follow them: I laughed.

I realized that they were so over-the-top that they reminded me of The Riddler!

Their ego is *so* enormous! Their Twitter feed is an endless stream of bragging—mostly about how they’re *so* smart and *so* much better than everyone in their field...

You can’t *not* laugh after a while!

To quote one of the Riddler’s lines from *Batman: Arkham Asylum*, “Your puny mind is no match for my own!”

Who says that?!

Certainly not someone you want to go into business with!

Being a Know-It-All VS. Being an Authority

Say what you like about Margaret Thatcher, she had a great quote leadership (and being a lady!): “Being powerful is like being a lady. If you have to tell people you are, you aren’t.”

If you have to constantly tell everyone you’re an authority in your field... you aren’t one.

People respect/admire authority. People hate/get annoyed with know-it-alls.

Afraid You’re a Know-It-All?

If you’re worried about being a know-it-all then you probably aren’t one.

However, here are the 3 main symptoms:

1. **If a Know-It-All is proven wrong, they get really, *really* angry.** It’s normal to feel slightly miffed when a mistake is pointed out. However, Know-It-Alls are usually the ones to get extremely angry, deny their mistake, and (sometimes) retaliate. Authorities are more likely to acknowledge the error and

adapt accordingly.

2. **“Me me me!!”** Authorities make a habit of sharing information that is actually helpful. Know-It-Alls toot their own horn...ALL the time. A little self-promotion is okay, but if it’s *all* you do, that’s a problem. Before posting something, ask yourself “Who is this REALLY for?”
3. **Know-It-Alls refuse to learn.** One of the earmarks of an expert is that they *never* stop learning—never stop developing their skills. Know-It-Alls will seldom, if ever, try to learn anything new. Why should they? They already “know” it ALL!

Before hitting “publish” on your latest idea, ask yourself, “Would this annoy me if I saw someone *else* word it this way?”

The Riddler is a fantastic Batman villain, but he shouldn’t be your role-model when developing your brand.

Your Freelance Website

Creating an About Page

You may have heard that a website's "About" page is the "second most viewed page" on any given site--and that it makes your website more "legit." But what goes into making a truly great About Page?



The 6 Key Elements of a Great About Page

Do you remember *Nick News*?

When my family had cable for a short period in the early 1990s, I was exposed to that show. And, of course, I immediately turned the TV off to go outside or read a book. It was boring.

BUT...It did get one thing across very well: **The Five W's**. Who, What, Where, When, and Why.

Later "How" was added to this list, making it WWWWWH. Which looks like a noise you'd make when you're severely uncomfortable but trying to hide it for the sake of your friends (holding back a large fart, perhaps?). But, I digress.

The point is, a truly great About Page includes these elements:

1. **Who** you are.
2. **What** you do.

3. **Where** you're located. If you're a purely online business, this isn't as important ("Where" for you could simply be a link to your contact form!). However, if you have an actual/physical business establishment, it's of *utmost* importance!
4. **When** you started and/or **When** you're available or open for business.
5. **Why** someone should hire *you* instead of the other guy!
6. **How** you do what you do. If you're selling a product, this is an important one. No one wants to buy a product that they don't know how it works/what it does.

Too Long VS. Too Short

This is something you'll probably have to tinker with until you get it "just right." It's a trial and error process, but, don't worry, you'll get it.

My own about page was much too short originally.

I said who I was and what I did and figured people would wander around my website and find out the rest on their own. Oh, how wrong I was! Most people thought I was some form of web-designer. Oh, dear...

At first I thought it was a fluke. But as I kept getting the same questions again and again, I realized it was a problem with *me* and *my* About Page; not with them and their reading abilities.

So I made it longer.

In my case, I ended up adding a Frequently Asked Questions (F.A.Q.) section. It's been a great help. I no longer get confused "Do you do web design?" e-mails and instead get e-mails from people who want my *writing* services! (Hooray!).

When your website visitors are no longer confused about who you are and what you do: You probably got it right.

Bonus points if they start buying your product/services!

All About You?

My last tip for creating an About Page is to not be *too* self-indulgent.

Yes, your About Page is a great place to "brag" about what you do, but remember: Always keep your customer in mind!

This is an About Page for your business. Try to keep your personal life out of it as best you can. Always present the "you" that's related to your work.

But don't be afraid to share your personality! After all, they're on that page to get to know *you*! Have fun with it. :)

The Three Elements That Make a Great Testimonial

If you do good work, people are bound to say good things about it. That's just the way things work. And you're probably going to want to show off some of those "good things" people have said about you on your Testimonials Page.

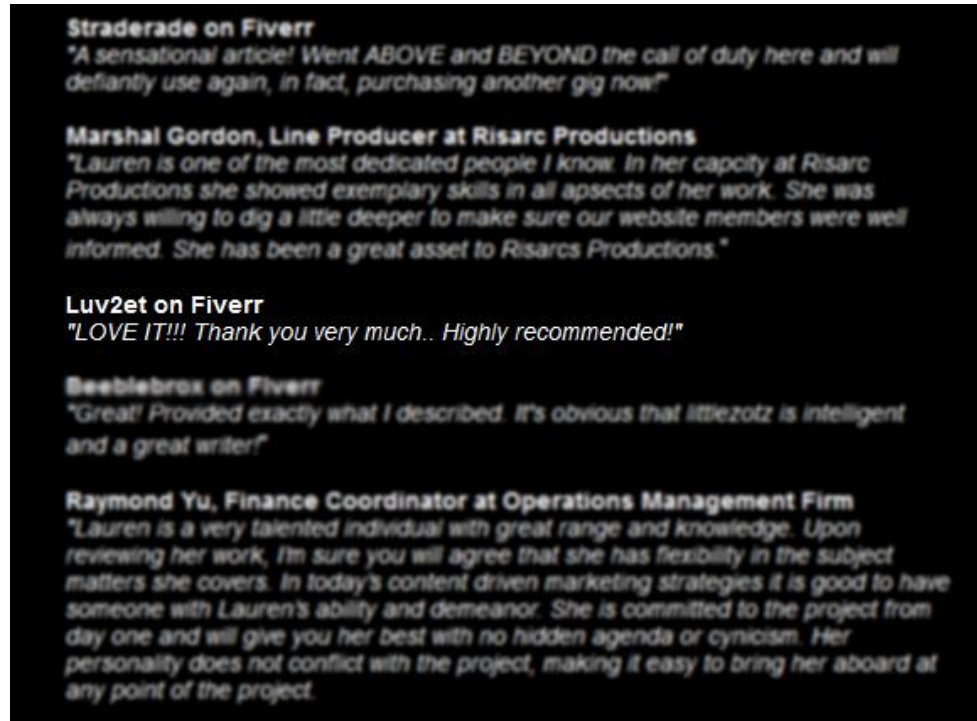
But are all Testimonials worth sharing...?



The 3 Elements That Make a Great Testimonial

1.) **They're Specific.** The best testimonials are the ones that say something specific about you, whether it's about your product ("sensational article writing!" or "writes terrific press releases!") or about *you* as your character pertains to your business ("Lauren is fast!" or "Lauren goes above and beyond!" or "Lauren never skimps on the research when writing an article!").

On my old website, I had this comment up in my Testimonials section:



Obviously that person was extremely happy with my work! But what work did I do for him? To be honest, I can't remember myself! (And that Testimonial isn't giving any hints!). Because of this, I've removed it from my current Testimonials page. I'm happy he was so happy, but there's no reason to share it publicly beyond this article.

2.) They're Real. It's a huuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuge "no-no" to have fake Testimonials on your website. And, like most lies, they'll be exposed for what they are sooner or later!

If you do good work, people *will* say good things about you. Be patient. If your work is up-to-par, you'll be getting good, *real* Testimonials in no time!

3.) They Say GOOD Things. This is probably the most obvious tip of all, but I have seen strange "Testimonials" on websites before, so I thought I'd bring it up.

Thankfully, this hasn't happened to me (Knock wood!), but if you get a comment along the lines of "Your work was okay but it could have been better. I guess I got what I paid for. Cheap rates..." then you should really reconsider using that comment as a Testimonial! Sure, it praises your "cheap rates," but the rest of it is actually, well, putting you down. Why would you want to advertise that?

Testimonials are like the grown-up equivalent of grades. Just remember: A's get a spot on the fridge; C's do not.

How Do I Get Testimonials?

Many of your clients will provide a Testimonial automatically. However, if you feel you've done an exceptional job for your client and they haven't written up a Testimonial for you, there's something really simple you can do to help the process along: **Ask them for one.**

As the saying goes, "One good turn deserves another."

If you did as good a job as you think you did, your client will probably jump at the chance to say good things about you. Just remember that they're people too. If they get busy and forget, give them a gentle nudge.

Good luck!

How Poor Navigation on Your Business Website Can Ruin Your Customer's Experience

(This article was originally written for Adam Warner, <http://wpprobusiness.com>)

Poor web navigation on a business website can be extremely detrimental to potential sales. However, developing usable navigation for your business website doesn't need to be a daunting task.

With the help of WordPress, building business websites that are visitor-friendly is now a simple task even for the least Internet-savvy beginner.



Easy Navigation: More Important Than You Might Think.

Website navigation refers to the buttons someone uses when visiting a website to get to each area—"Home," "About," "Contact," and so on—of the said website.

As one might guess, they're the buttons that help a visitor "navigate" their way through the website.

Now, think being on a boat without a navigator, or going for a road trip in your car without a map (or GPS system): you'd be lost. It's much the same for your customers if they visit your business website and it's been built with a poor, or hard to use, navigation system.

Potential customers who are lost or confused usually don't stick around.

According to Usability.gov (an official U.S. Government Web site managed by the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services), “**Approximately 50 percent of potential sales are lost because users can’t find information and that 40 percent of users do not return to a site when their first visit is a negative experience.**”

Don’t let your business website or business blog fall prey to these same errors!

Things to Keep in Mind When Building Your Business Website’s Navigational System:

- **Include your navigational menus and buttons on every page of your website.** Few things are more frustrating to a potential customer than clicking on an interesting-looking button only to have no way to return from whence they came—or explore *other* areas of the site.

Bonus: Not only will including easy-to-use navigation on every page of your website help your customers when they’re visiting, but it will also help *you* with your Search Engine Optimization (SEO)!

- **Avoid Flash navigation.** Yes, Flash can make a very visually attractive website. Unfortunately, Flash-based websites are also nearly invisible to search engines. And as far as website navigation is concerned, the fancy effects are often confusing and take extra time to load.

The last thing you want to be associated with in the fast-paced business world is a frustrating, time-consuming website!

- **Text is King!** When making navigation menus, website builders (especially those new to the subject) often struggle with whether to use text buttons or picture buttons.

Use text.

Pictures can be fun for a personal or artistic website, but for a business website—where communicating with customers quickly and clearly is of utmost importance—it’s better to eliminate any guesswork.

For instance, using a photo of a mailbox as a navigation button: Is it leading the customer to a contact page? Inviting them to sign up to a mailing list? Such confusion can easily be avoided with text-based buttons. A button that simply says “Contact Page” with no ambiguous imagery will almost always be well-received.

How Your Business Website Can Benefit From WordPress

First released in 2003, WordPress has since been downloaded over 12.5 million times!

Everyone and their neighbor have heard that, when it comes to building websites, WordPress is *the* Content Management System (CMS) to get. And, although praised for its “ease of use,” not all of us find that to be true.

Those of us who are not computer-orientated, or Internet-inclined, can feel overwhelmed when trying to build a website on our own—even if it’s with a well-made and efficient program that everyone on the block raves about!

That’s why WP Pro Business was created.

Adam W. Warner speaks clearly and concisely, avoiding jargon and defining any possibly unfamiliar terms along the way.

Having learned from personal experience, Adam knows how difficult it can be when you first start out on a website-building adventure; and now he and the WP Pro Business team is passing on that knowledge to you.

From the planning stages, to choosing a domain name, to actually building your very own online business website: WP Pro Business is there for you.

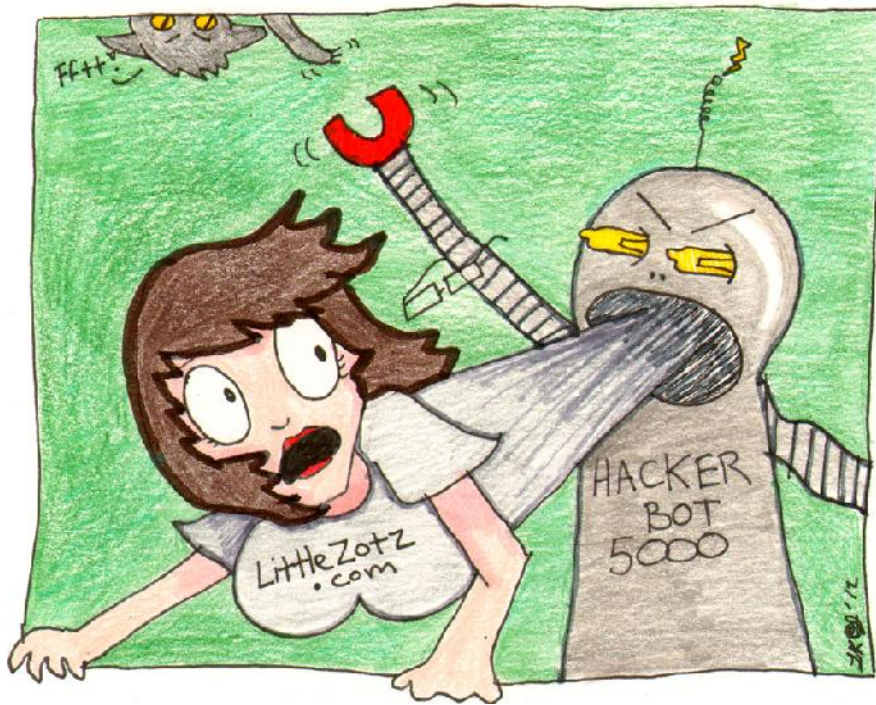
Whether you already have your business website set up and are looking to better it, are completely new to having your business online, or are simply looking into getting into the exciting world of WordPress; Adam W. Warner and the WP Pro Business team will help you navigate your way through it.

Check ‘em out at <http://wpprobusiness.com>

Website Security

You've Been Hacked!

*Well, maybe **you** haven't been hacked. But I was. Twice. And no, I didn't pass out my password to anyone. To be honest, I thought I was pretty safe. I mean, who'd want to hack **my** website? You'd be surprised...*



I Thought I Was Safe

No, really! I thought I was safe!

I never told anyone my password. I used CRAZY passwords and non-related usernames. I kept up with the WordPress updates. My theme was free (granted, not *as* safe...), but it was an "official" WordPress theme and it was very well reviewed. And I chose my plug-ins wisely as well.

Basically, I used what's called "Common Sense" security.

I honestly thought it would be enough. I mean... **I** love my website (and I hope you do too!), but who would want to hack it? I'm not exactly famous (yet!).

Why me?

But, wouldn't ya know it, I was hacked. Twice! The first time wasn't so bad. The second time: Devastating.

My entire site was gone!

They'd broken into my theme and left me with nothing but a blank, white screen. And it was an update day!! (Talk about rubbing salt in the wound!)



After I regained control over my website, I had this version up temporarily while I worked things out... I was embarrassed by how unprofessional/terrible it looked. :(

This isn't an unusual tale. It could happen to you too.

Don't Take It Personally

Unfortunately, it's pretty common for WordPress websites to get hacked. Don't get me wrong: I love WordPress. It's fun, easy to use, and has nearly endless possibilities! And it's *great* for boosting the SEO (Search Engine Optimization) of your website.

In fact, the better SEO you have, the more likely you'll get hacked. Many modern "hackers" use bots to look for websites with fair to good SEO and launch their attack from there.

So...take it as a compliment!

It's not personal.

When I was getting hacked, I kept bemoaning "Why meeeeeee?!" I thought I'd done something to piss someone off. I kept wracking my brain trying to think what I could have done or said to make someone hate me.

I was very confused.

Thanks to my **forum phobia**, I don't really speak out much online (except here, obviously). I knew that it was impossible for everyone to *like* me, but I didn't think I'd done anything that would make someone *hate* me enough to want to ruin my life by taking away my livelihood!

But it still hurt to think that there might be.

Knowing that it was a faceless robot attacking me rather than a "real" person was a bit comforting, but no less annoying. And no less detrimental to my business.

I knew I had to take action!

Some Things That Can Help

1. **Don't Panic!** I know that's going to be tough, especially if you depend on your website for money. But panicking will make things worse.
2. **Backup Your Files.** Backup your files (*everything* on your website!) often. I was immensely grateful that I was so consistent about backing up my files when I'd lost everything. It allowed me to restore everything with relative ease. No starting from scratch for this gal! I recommend Backup Buddy: <http://ithemes.com/purchase/backupbuddy/>
3. **Treat Yourself to a *Real* Theme.** Yeah, I like free stuff too, but, truth is, the free themes just aren't as secure. I know, I know. It's a bummer. But shelling out for a more secure framework and theme to go with it is *well worth it*. I recommend StudioPress. <http://studiopress.com>
4. **Keep Using Common Sense!** Just because "common sense security" can't protect you from *every* type of attack doesn't mean you should stop using it! Keep your passwords to yourself, always.
5. **Get Yourself Some Security Plug-ins.** Make sure you protect your website with trusted security plug-ins. Get a few of them. They each do different things, so having more than one will protect you from more than one angle. It's like when you scan your computer for viruses, and then scan it again for malware.

6. Get This Book:



I guess this step is optional, but, for me, this book saved my website!

WP Pro Simple Security is easy to understand (even for those of us who aren't completely "web savvy") and provides a ton of great advice, including a list of which plug-ins to install and how to use them most effectively.

My website still gets attacked from time to time. My plug-ins alert me when it happens. But, so far, I haven't lost control. And, man, that feels good.

Protect yourself! You'll be glad you did.

Recovering from a Pharma Hack

In June 2012, I was the victim of a vicious pharma hack. It wasn't the first time my website was hacked, but it was definitely the worst.

It was tough, but I'm prepared to talk about what happened, how I fixed the problem, and what I'm doing to recover my business.



What Happened?!

The Initial Signs...

Around May, my traffic started to peter out. I expected this as it happens every year. The combination of Mother's Day, Memorial Day, and general "preparing for summer" tends to make people forget my website exists. It's the same drop in traffic I experience right before the "big" holidays in the winter. It's completely understandable.

However, when things didn't pick up again when they usually do (about mid-June onward), I started to get worried!

What was going on? Did I do something wrong? Did people just not like me?

What happened?!

How I First Saw the Hack

AKA Why My Phone is Magic



It was just pure luck/chance that I finally saw the damage done to my website.

I was out and about and I wanted to see if my latest post had uploaded all right. Since I wasn't near my "real" computer, I checked it on my phone...

...And that's when I saw it.

All over my website!!

"Buy Viagra!"

"Buy Wellbutrin!"

OH NO!!!

None of this could be seen from my computer browser, but, for whatever reason, it was visible to my phone. And, unfortunately, to the Google robots.

What the Robots Saw

AKA How My Website Became a Google Pariah

My worst fears were becoming my horrible reality: Google hated my website.

I was nowhere to be found when I typed in the keywords I have previously been ranking well for. And when I typed in "littlezotz.com," Google came back with the message "This website has been compromised."

I knew for sure that I wasn't imagining what I'd seen on my phone when Google Fetch returned with the same results.

I felt horrible.

I not only felt humiliated, but I was filled with all sorts of anxieties. Not only was this hack warding off future clients, but I'd betrayed the trust of my current clients!

When people come to my website, they expect a safe, friendly experience--not an advertisement for boner medication!

In order to protect my readers, I hit Facebook and Twitter to warn them away. And I put my site into Maintenance Mode.

Website Security

The True Cost of Being Cheap

I have a confession: I'm incredibly cheap.

I've been called a "miser" by close friends.

In fact, the original reason this Blog has hand-drawn illustrations with every post is because I was too much of a skinflint to pay for stock photos! (Just my luck that the illustrations caught on!...And I happen to like drawing them).

It's partly my personality, partly from growing up poor, and partly something completely beyond my comprehension. Maybe I read too many Uncle Scrooge comics as a child. Who knows!

So when I read in *WP Pro Simple Security* that I could get website security with a few free plugins, I installed them, dusted off my hands, and moved on with my life. DONE!

...But free plugins can only go so far...

I hit the **WP Pro Business** forums and asked for guidance. Renowned WordPress expert Adam Warner himself signed on to assist me.

Free plugins from trusted sources are a great fundamental step in preventing website hacks, but "no website is completely safe."

I was going to have to invest in something more heavy-duty!

Sucuri

How My Website Was Saved!

Per Adam's suggestion, after I couldn't get rid of the hack on my own, I signed up for some website security at <http://sucuri.net>



I couldn't believe the services these guys provided! AMAZING!!!

Not only did they believe me when I said there was a problem (unlike my webhosting service--and I'll get into that in a moment), but they were able to fix the problem **WITHIN HOURS!**

They were friendly, professional, and went above and beyond the call of duty. I asked a ton of questions and they answered every single one. Without treating me like an idiot.

Not only are they scanning my website every 4 hours, but they provided me with several new ways I could protect my website on my own in my spare time.

They also wrote into Google on my behalf and got my "compromised" status removed!!

Wow.

Head to their website now! It's at <http://sucuri.net>

Go get yourself some of their awesome security. I'm not kidding! I *hate* spending money, but they are worth EVERY PENNY of the \$89.99/year they're asking for--and more!

Changing My hosting Service

AKA Why Green Geeks is Terrible

When I first started my website, I asked a fellow writer friend which hosting service she was using. She turned me to Green Geeks and, at \$4 a month with unlimited space, I was sold. (This goes back to my being cheap...)

However, there were problems from the start.

I have a huge list of grievances with this company, but my main one is this: **Their customer service is TERRIBLE.**

They have a live chat service, but, unless you're talking to "George," it's completely useless. Every time I asked a question, their response boiled down to "figure it out yourself."

When I was hacked the first time, I let them know, and I (stupidly) asked for help. Their response was telling me "don't tell anyone your password next time" (I DIDN'T!) and giving me a form letter with a list of "prevention steps." Nearly every time I spoke with these people, they were evasive at best and downright rude at worst.

When my site was hacked again last month, I went to them again--not expecting help (HA!), but wishing to warn them in case my website compromised anyone else on their server.

They reacted with annoyance, told me they didn't see anything wrong with my website (even though I provided them with screenshots of my Google Fetch results), and proceeded to bombard me with an advertisement for their *own* "website security" service. Which I thought was tacky, and a little suspicious.

That was the last straw.

I'm currently in the process of changing my hosting service.

I'm moving my site over to Rydia.net.

I didn't use Rydia originally because I thought they were for artists only, and that they didn't host WordPress sites. Well, while they do cater mainly to the artistic community, they *do* host WordPress sites now.

For their customer service alone (You're awesome, Dormando!!), I would recommend this host. That, and my significant other has been using them for over a decade with no problems.

The Aftermath

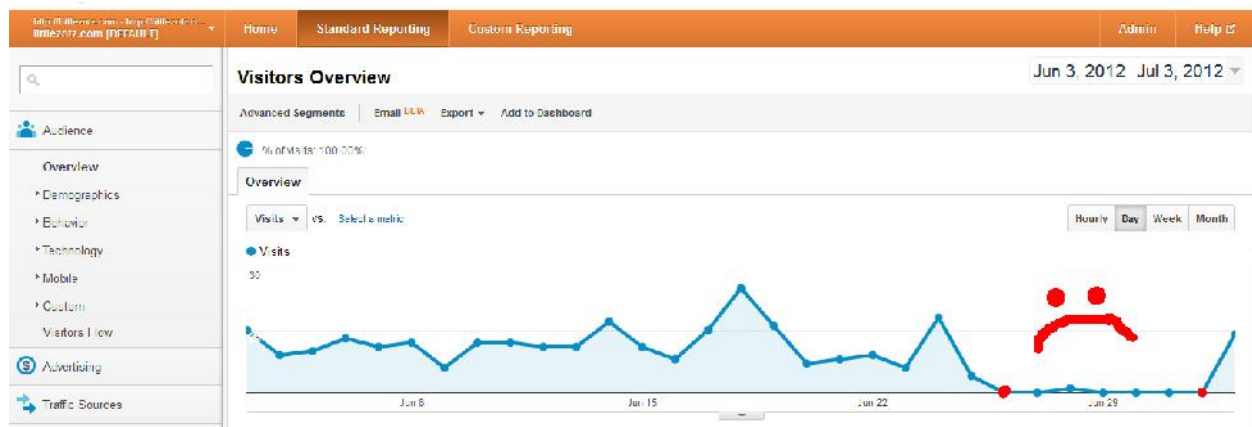
"Come Back, Everyone! It's Okay Now, I Promise!"

I mentioned at the beginning of this post that my traffic took a major hit.

Here are some screencaps of my Google Analytics results, as compared to previous months:



That sound you hear is me sobbing.



My traffic was less in June overall, but the big gap of “zero” was after Google had blacklisted me and during the time I’d put my site into Maintenance Mode.

OUCH!!

That's going to be hard to recover from.

Moving Forward

Looking on the Bright Side

On the bright side, in the time that I thought my traffic had dropped because of something I had done personally, I made a lot of improvements to my website. And even though I know now that my traffic drop wasn't from something I did, I'm going to *continue* to improve my website!

My website has an overall cleaner look, easier navigation, more information, and is just overall...better.

I also used the time without my website to submit to magazines, work on my poetry, and create a brand new buffer of Blog posts.

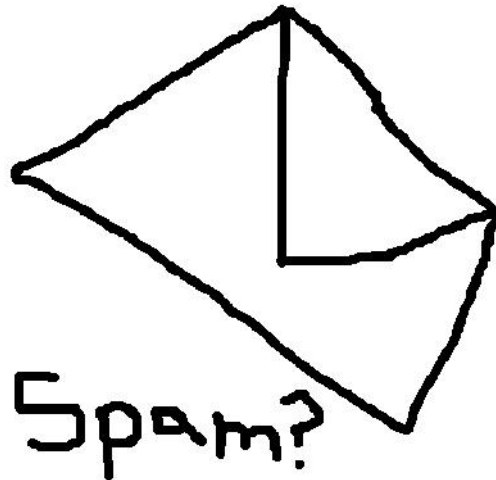
I'm truly sorry about what happened.

Please come back?

Inedible Spam

To some, Spam is a delicious(?) salty meat. To most of us, spam is the bane of our inbox's existence.

Being able to recognize spam for what it is can be crucial, in some cases, to keeping your identity and bank account intact. But reducing spam mail altogether is a vital first step to having an organized and efficient inbox.



Recognizing Spam

Most of us know not to send money to help an African princess, or to buy “enhancing” drugs from an unknown source without a prescription, but spam has gotten trickier these days.

Many spam e-mails look very legitimate and try to gain access to your most private information by posing as real companies such as PayPal or eBay. These spam mails/scams are also known as “phishing” e-mails.

The Big Tip-Off: When an e-mail lands in your inbox asking (for “verification purposes,” of course...) for you to fill out a form with your account name, password, address, card number, expiration date, and sometimes even your social security number... Alarm bells should go off in your head! 99 times out of 100, this isn't a real company: this is someone trying to steal your identity. Oh, they'll “verify” your credit card all right—by spending all your money!

Some Precautions:

- **Never give out your credit card info or social security number in an e-mail.**
- **Never click on an unknown link.**
- **If you suspect the e-mail *could* be legitimate,** air on the side of caution anyway. Instead of clicking on the link in the e-mail, go straight to the source. For instance, if you get an e-mail from “PayPal” saying that your credit card needs updating, don’t follow the link in the e-mail—take the time to type PayPal’s address into your browser. Trust no one but yourself.
- **Don’t click reply.** Sure, most spammers use fake e-mail addresses, but the ones who don’t will take that reply (even if you’re complaining) as a signal that your e-mail address is indeed “real” and that there’s not only a real person on the other side (you), but that you’re reading their mail.

While you may be sad that you didn’t actually win that free vacation (or iPad or PS3 or whatever), you can’t get lots of money for no work (don’t I wish!), and there’s no quick fix to repair your bad credit—you’d be a lot *more* sad if you took the bait and lost your identity.

Reducing Spam in Your Inbox

You may never elude spammers completely, but here are a few tried-and-true tips for reducing their numbers:

- **Don’t give out your primary/personal e-mail address to just anybody.** Be selective.
- **Create a second “junk” e-mail address.** You can use this address for signing up for online offers (make sure they’re legit), online forms, short-term correspondence, and anything else you don’t want clogging your “real” e-mail’s inbox (an overabundance of Facebook notices, perhaps?).
- **Don’t post your e-mail in a public place.** If you post your e-mail address on a forum or other public area online, you’re bound to attract a few spammers.
- **Turn them in!** If you get a “phishing” e-mail (one of those e-mails that looks legitimate), most major companies have a place to report these e-mails now. For

instance, if you can an e-mail from “eBay,” you can report it by forwarding it directly to eBay (spoof@eBay.com).

If you find a fake website that is trying to steal personal information, report it by emailing the URL to phishing-report@us-cert.gov

Organization & Productivity

Meeting Deadlines While Avoiding Burnout

There are a lot of things that cause stress in a freelancer's life: Finances, searching for clients, illness, and deadlines are just a few. Let's take a look at that last item—deadlines—how do you meet them without getting overloaded?



Their Deadlines Are Not Your Deadlines

Would you hire someone to do a job the night before it was due? Of course not. You're probably thinking, "That would be unreasonable." (And you'd be right!)

However, as a freelancer, you're bound to have a client or two who think you have an endless amount of time on your hands.

In my experience, every client thinks they're your *only* client.

But, remember, they're your *client*, not your boss. YOU are your boss. So YOU get to set the deadlines.

No matter how badly you need the money, never feel pressured to take on a "rush job" if you feel you can't complete it to perfection. Sacrificing quality for speedy delivery can come back and bite you in the butt in the long run. You also don't want to put yourself

in a position with a client where they consider your “rush job” turn-around as your “norm.”

Note: It’s perfectly within your rights as a freelancer to charge an extra “fee” if a client insists on a rushed deadline. Just remember: **You do not have to accept the project if you don’t feel right about it.**

Meeting Deadlines While Avoiding Burnout

Here are eight of the things that I do to meet all of my deadlines without losing my sanity. I have confidence that you can make these tips work for you as well! :)

1. **Write everything down.** Longtime readers know that I’m a huge fan of using a dayplanner. Seriously though. Write *everything* down.

Take notes of important details, take notes of not-so-important details, just make sure you write it all down.

2. **Stay organized.** And by that I mean, stay *mega* organized. Give each of your clients their own folder. Keep your files in the “real world” organized too.

3. **Give yourself a buffer.** Always tell your client that their assignment will be done 3-5 days longer than the project will actually take you to complete. If you fall ill or if an emergency pops up unexpectedly, you’ll be grateful for the extra time.

4. **Set two deadlines.** There’s the deadline you tell your client and then there’s the “secret” deadline that you tell yourself.

Try giving yourself a “Try to get this done by...” deadline that lands well *before* the actual project is due. Getting the work done *now* means less work you’ll have to do later.

5. **Take a day off.** I try to take Saturdays off “no matter what” (and Sundays too, if I can get away with it!). One of the quickest ways to “burn out” is to not take any time off.

Take a break. Relax. One day off isn't gonna kill you.

6. **Work through the weekend, if you have to.** I try to schedule deadlines to land on Mondays or Tuesdays so that, if I have to, I can work through the weekend.

Things happen and sometimes you have to work through the weekend. Just don't make it a habit! (See Tip #5!)

7. **Back up your files.** Nothing causes deadline stress quite like actually finishing the project and then having a computer error wipe everything from existence.

BACK UP THOSE FILES!

Don't wait until you "have the time." Do it now. You never know!

8. **Don't overbook yourself.** Well, well, well! Look at you! You've gotten super popular and everyone's eager to utilize your services. Congratulations! Just remember: don't overbook yourself.

Never take on more work than you can handle or you'll risk compromising the quality that got you those primo clients in the first place!

Planning Your Days Using a Dayplanner

Even if you have a fantastic memory, you might get confused if you're juggling too many balls at once. I know I do! And there's nothing quite like that chill of terror that comes with suddenly waking up at 3am and saying "I forgot to do _____!"

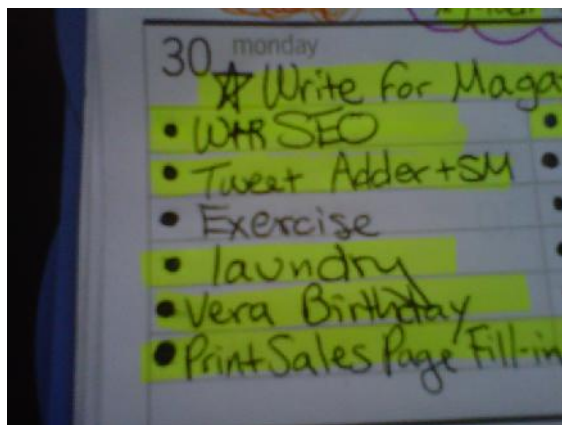
That's why I write down my day-to-day tasks in a dayplanner. It works for me and it may work for you as well!



A Glimpse at my Private Life: A Day in the Planner

All right, all right... I'm not exactly the most private person there is; however, no one but my significant other (and myself, of course!) has seen the inner workings of my dayplanner.

Not so anymore! Here is a peek at a page out of one of my most precious work tools:



That's actually only a small section of one of my planner's pages (my planner is 10x8"). And that first entry had a lot more tasks than what's shown there! Looking at my planner, you probably noticed a few things:

1. **I write down menial tasks as well as "important" ones** – I have two reasons for this. One reason is that I sometimes get so busy; I forget to do even the simplest things. The other reason is explained in the section below ("given" tasks).
2. **The entries are highlighted** – They didn't start out that way! I only highlight the tasks that I complete successfully.
3. **I love my planner.** Okay, maybe that's not something that you can see, but it's true—and important!

Find a planner that suits your personality and not only will you use it, you will love using it.

My Patented Tips for Dayplanner Success

Everyone has their own way of doing things. As you get used to having a dayplanner, you'll probably come up with your own methods for using it efficiently; however, here are a few things that I do that may help to get you off on the right foot:

- **Choose the right planner for you** – I suggest one without too many bells & whistles. For instance, I've seen planners with Velcro tabs and/or zippers... Personally, I wouldn't use one of these. If your planner isn't easy to access, you probably won't use it very often.
- **Write down a few "given" tasks.** I always write down a few super easy tasks that I *know* I'm going to complete successfully that day. Like cooking dinner or scooping out the cat litter box. It's a "given" that I'm going to do these things, but having them written down in my planner gives me a.) Something easy to do when

the rest of my tasks are “too hard” or unappealing and, b.) Gives me that same sense of getting-things-done satisfaction when I cross it off my list as successfully completed.

For me, if my planner were composed of nothing but super hard or un-fun tasks, I would feel defeated before the day even started! Having a few “given” tasks can be a great way to “warm up” to the bigger, more important, stuff.

- **Remind yourself of due dates ahead of time!** If you have something important due, don’t just mark it down on the date it’s due (though you should do that too), give yourself a reminder in advance. You don’t want to turn the page in your planner and get a nasty surprise!
- **Write it down as soon as you think of it.** Or at least try to! Your planner can’t help you to not forget if you forget to use your planner!
- **Leave some space for fun.** “All work and no play...” Well, you know the rest. Make time for yourself!

How to Avoid Drowning in E-mails

How many e-mails do you have in your inbox right now? Chances are you said a number higher than “zero.” Probably much higher. So what can you do to deal with an ocean of e-mails? Read my tips below!



Make a Date with Your Inbox

There are two types of e-mails that I respond to immediately:

1. E-mails from work/a client.
2. E-mails from my mom (What can I say? She worries if I don't write back).

Everyone else can wait 'til Friday.

That's right, every Friday I have a standing date with my e-mail inbox. I take her out to dinner, we have a nice chat, and then I go through and reply to all the e-mails that have stacked up throughout the week. (One-third of that last sentence was true).

Why this system works:

- **Your clients/work will always get swift replies.** That's just good business!
- **It increases productivity during the week.** Instead of spending your hours replying to all your e-mails, you'll be spending your hours actually *working* on stuff!

- **You won't go into "e-mail overload."** Trying to reply to/please everyone at once can make you feel overloaded. Which can lead to procrastination... Which could mean that those e-mails *never* get a reply!
- **It's kinda nice to save all your "friend" e-mails for the end of the week.** After spending the bulk of the week dealing with business e-mails, it can be sort of a special treat to finally sit down and see what your buds have to say.

Remember: If it were an emergency, your friend would call you—e-mails can wait.

3 More Tips For an Empty Inbox

1. **Delete, Delete, Delete!** Use your delete button. You know which e-mails don't even need to be bothered with. Get rid of them! (Or unsubscribe!)
2. **Know when to stop replying.** Have you ever had an e-mail come back that just says "That would be fine" and you say "okay" and then the other person says "okay?" You don't have to write back to everything.

Recognize the end of the conversation when it comes along. (This bothers me with text messages too. I hate it when I say something and I get "k" as a reply). Not only does this waste your time, but it's likely to annoy the other person as well!

3. **Use the phone.** I'm not a fan of the phone (I prefer writing), but some of my clients swear by it! And, I gotta admit, some situations are easier to clear up with a quick phone call than a long string of e-mails... And it saves space in your inbox!

Let's Talk About Procrastination

Well, I've put this off long enough. It's time to talk about procrastination!



What is Procrastination?

Oh, come on. You know what procrastination is. It's the exact opposite of "never put off 'til tomorrow what you can do today."

Procrastination is putting things off.

Way off.

We all do it! (And that's not just me being presumptuous; there have actually been studies on this).

My Name is Lauren and I'm a Procrastinator

I was recently made aware of a **Procrastination Survey**. I took it. I scored a 69 out of 100 which meant that I "rank in the top 10%-25% of the population in terms of your level of procrastination." Yikes!

And, to be honest, taking the survey was a form of procrastination itself—since I was supposed to be working on something else at the time.

But if I'm such a horrible procrastinator, how do I ever get anything done?

How I Get Things Done:

- **Stop lying to yourself.** When you say “I’ll feel more like doing it later” will you *really* feel more like doing it later? Probably not. So why not do it now? And don’t tell me “I work best under pressure!” Believe me, I’ve used that excuse before too.
- **Take baby steps.** You don’t have to do your project all at once! Break the task down into smaller segments.
- **Be organized.** I like to use a dayplanner. You can use a notebook, a calendar, Post-It notes, an organizational computer program, or whatever else it takes: Just make sure you make a plan—or at least a sketchy outline of a “plan”—and try your best to stick to it!
- **Be neat.** I’m talking about your work area. If your desk is so messy that you can’t *find* the project you were working on—how do you expect yourself to actually get it done?
- **Don’t take on too much.** Often, the reason people procrastinate is because they don’t know their own limits. If you take on too many tasks at once, you’re bound to put at least a few of them off.
- **Set deadlines.** Even if your project doesn’t have a strict deadline, set one for it!
- **Treat yourself!** When your cat or dog does something extra good, you give them a treat, right? Do the same for yourself when *you* complete an especially difficult task!

Higher Education & Freelancers

Higher Education: My Story



After high school, I shuffled off to community college.

I hated it.

I dropped out.

I went to a pretty tough “magnet” high school and I was burnt out with school. In fact, high school pretty much made me *hate* school. I needed a break.

In my time off, I wrote a screenplay. I had some interest, but, at that point in my life, I wasn’t mentally or emotionally “ready” to take the plunge to be a *real* writer just yet.

Okay, I admit it: I completely freaked out. (Fear of success?)

I stashed my screenplay in a box, never to be seen again.

It was around time that one of my co-workers at my crappy minimum wage job convinced me to join Bryman College with her.

For those of you who don't know, Bryman College was a trade school that taught people how to be Medical or Dental Assistants. She went into Medical. I went into Dental.

I was lured in by the promise of a steady paycheck. For the rest of my life.

Now, I've never had a cavity. My trips to the dentist always involved getting my teeth cleaned, being told how awesome I am, and being given a toy. I had no idea that the smell of bone being drilled was so...nauseating.

So that was one problem.

Student loans and medical bills ultimately did me in.

I had health problems, I was working at a crappy minimum wage job, and I couldn't afford to pay. My credit took the hit.

I returned to community college. I took a couple of classes. Dropped out.

I tried to get back into writing.

I thought "I'm ready this time." I wasn't. I did a few articles for *The Pulse*—the official news magazine for Comic Con—and then freaked out again.



Me as Lara Croft with actor Dan Roebuck

I still wasn't ready to call myself a "writer."

I feared freelancing.

The idea of living "paycheck to paycheck" for the rest of my life was terrifying.

I was willing to stick with my minimum wage jobs. They might not have paid much, but they paid *steady*.

But, every once in a while, I would get a wild hair and decide to "better" myself with schooling. I made a few more trips to community college.

My last stint at community college lasted from Fall of 2007 to Spring of 2009.

It wasn't so bad. I met a few good friends there, including one professor that I actually like, respect, and continue to keep in touch with. I took classes that I thought would be interesting (IPA, Anatomy, Anthropology) or useful (Writing, First Aid, CPR). I wouldn't say my last trip to community college was a waste of time, but it went nowhere.

All of my schooling went nowhere.

And I was *good* at school. A's and the occasional B grade, that was me. I didn't like school, but I was good at it.

I wasn't dropping out again and again because I wasn't doing well. I was dropping out because it just wasn't *right*.

You don't "need" school to be a writer. You need to *write* to be a writer.

If you love school and you really, really want to go: More power to ya! Good for you.

My aunt loved school very much and she was one of my favorite people. I won't hold it against you.

But, if you're going to school just to get your parents (or someone else) off your back, or because you think you "have" to go to school to succeed, then stop right there, Buddy! I'll have none of that!

Stop making excuses and start writing.



The LittleZotz Writing Team!

This Post May Offend You

In this post I'm going to talk about college. And what I have to say may offend you.



You Don't Necessarily Need College...

In the previous chapter, I made a fairly “bold” statement: You don’t need college to be a writer—you need to write.

And while most of the reviews for my e-book have been overwhelmingly positive (woo!), I got one reader who was offended by my views on formal education and said, “**saying that you don't HAVE to go to school to make it in life is counter-intuitive to every sane message that we are given.**”

I decided to take that message as a good opportunity to make my opinion more clear...

College VS. Learning

This is the reply I wrote—for all to see, not just the reviewer who wrote to me in private:

Thank you all for your feedback! This has all been very helpful and enlightening. 😊

One thing I'd like to mention... I was sent a PM this morning by a reader who felt my views on formal education weren't, well, "sane." I stand by what I wrote: You do *not* need to go to college to become a professional writer. And going to college because you think you "have" to (or are being "forced" to by someone else) is, in my opinion, going for the entirely wrong reasons. My view on formal education is *not* entirely negative (as the reader seemed to worry)--I mention a person in my life, my aunt, who absolutely adored higher education and I have the *highest* respect for her. If she were alive today, I would encourage everyone to go talk to her. I wish she was.

I knew that stating that you don't "need" college was going to ruffle some feathers. But it's true. And my views on formal education have nothing to do with my views on *learning*. **NEVER STOP LEARNING**. This is something I've mentioned a few times on my website/Blog, but I guess I should have made clearer in my book. Even if you don't go to college, you *do* need to keep learning. I learn new things all the time! In fact, I wrote an e-mail to a client yesterday that I wouldn't have been able to write a year ago--or even three months ago!--had I not continued to *self* educate. 😊

Anyway, I thought that this person brought up a *very* good point and I wanted to address it publicly rather than just reply to said person specifically. Thanks!

It's Never Too Late

Contrary to popular belief, the doors *never* close on college. You don't have to decide right now whether you're going to go to college or not. It isn't like the game of *Life*--You *can* change your mind down the road and decide take a different path. In fact, you might be more prepared (both mentally and financially!) for formal education when you're older!

My aunt that I mentioned above went back to college and got her doctorate's when she was 50. And she went on to do many **great things** before she died.

Whether you decide to go to college--now or later--or not, it's all perfectly fine. Just remember: Never, ever, stop learning.

5 Great Reasons to Love Online Classes

Over the past couple months, I've been taking a lot of online classes. I'm not a huge fan of "school." So why am I such a supporter of online classes...?



My Experience with the Traditional Education System

To write this post, I took a look back on all of my previous educational experiences.

I had always been an over-achiever. When I had a chance for a free period, I filled it with an extra class. I did every extra credit assignment. And I always got good grades.

I was good at school. But I didn't like it.

From Kindergarten to 12th grade, I had a total of 49 different teachers.

Of those 49 teachers, 12 of them were great, 17 of them were absolutely terrible, and the remaining 20 ranged from "okay" to "in another 10 years, I won't even remember this person."

12 out of 51 "great teachers" isn't good. If it were a test, it would be a little over 23%. That's an F. A big F!

But it's no secret that you lack control when it comes to your education in elementary, middle, and high school.

What about college?

For me, college was more of the same.

I took a different approach to college: I didn't go after a particular degree—I just took a multitude of classes that I thought would actually be useful. Which actually worked out pretty well...sometimes.

Of that “multitude” of classes, in my opinion, only 5 of the teachers actually taught me anything.

I had just as little control over my education as I had growing up. Only this time it was costing me money!

I have *had it* with “traditional” education—“higher” or otherwise!!

The 5 Best Things About Online Classes

1. **YOU Choose Your Teacher.** The one thing that I never had any control of was who I got as a teacher. Even when I was in the position to choose my own classes, there wasn't any way for me to know who the teacher was ahead of time. With online classes, you can usually speak with the teachers ahead of time—or at least get to know them through their work.
2. **Know the Syllabus Ahead of Time.** In my experiences, most online classes put their syllabus up online for everyone to look over *before* signing up. No more worrying about exactly what you're getting into!
3. **No Books or Extra Materials to Buy.** When I went to college, there were always “mandatory” books to buy (and I only actually used 3 of them!). It was expensive and unnecessary. With online classes, the materials are always included with the class—no hidden fees or useless “extra” materials to buy after starting up.
4. **You Go At Your Own Pace.** Yes, the actual classes are usually on a schedule (unless you're taking a *completely* DIY version of the class), but the work can be done at your own pace. You aren't doing it for a grade—you're doing it for *yourself*. And, in the end, you're the only one you *really* have to report into.
5. **The Classes are Actually Useful.** Another way of putting it: The classes are more specialized. With online classes, you have a lot more control over exactly

what you're learning. Not just who and when, but the actual subject matter. And there are so many choices!

Some Online Classes I've Taken Recently

Here are a few of the classes I've taken recently:

[Write for Magazines](#) with Linda Formichelli – Magazine Writing 101

[Marketing 101 for Freelancers](#) with Carol Tice - A free DIY marketing "class."

[Freelance Writers Blast-Off](#) with Carol Tice and Linda Formichelli – Marketing for Writers (A More Advanced Version of the Free Course)

[Work Less, Earn More, and Make a Difference](#) with Jo Foster and Janine Ogg – Business School

None of those are affiliate links.

I've always been a fan of *learning*. And, as a business owner, it's more important than ever to continue learning and continue updating my skills.

If you feel the same way, you might want to consider trying online classes. :)

Psst! If you would *like* to use an affiliate link for any of those classes, I've put them up on my Affiliate page at <http://littlezotz.com/littlezotz-writing-affiliates/>

Final Thoughts

About the Author

My name is Lauren.

I'm the owner of **LittleZotz Writing**.

Now, I could go on to talk about myself in the third person and say something like “Lauren R. Tharp is a talented writer who has been frequently published in magazines and on the Internet.” Which, although a bit immodest, would be absolutely true!—But, come on, we both know that I'm writing this myself. Do I really need to speak like Doctor Doom to command authority?

I'm a Hypoglycemic. I'm allergic to soy (which is in almost everything, by the way—even gum!). I'm an avid reader, a casual gamer, a terrible artist, a former martial artist, a cat owner/mommy, and I can make a pretty mean sandwich (the trick is to not skimp on the meat!).

Mostly, I'm a writer.

I've been writing as a “hobby” and a “side job” for over a decade. In August of 2010, writing became my sole source of income. Hooray!

I love it when a client comes to me with an idea—or just a *speck* of an idea—and I'm able to take that idea and bring it to life through my writing skills.

I work mainly with small online businesses looking to become “big” online businesses. I work with ambitious entrepreneurs looking for the perfect “voice” for their brand. I work with dedicated professionals who aren't afraid to have a sense of humor.

I work with frustrated webmasters who long to give their website visitors quality articles—both fun *and* informative!—to read.

I work with people like you.

Head over to my website at <http://littlezotz.com> for a **FREE Consultation** on your next project!

Or say “hi!” to me on Twitter – <http://twitter.com/littlezotzwrite> - or Facebook - <http://facebook.com/littlezotzwriting>

See you soon!

--Lauren*

PS: Thank you SO much for downloading this book! I know I said it in the introduction, but I really do appreciate it. You’re the best. :)

Credits

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