

# A FEW SUGGESTIONS FOR BEGINNING FEATURE WRITERS

by Tim Hanson

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A friend once confided to me that he had tried his hand at freelance feature writing -- indeed had always wanted to be a writer -- but, having failed to get published, had simply stopped trying.

“What magazines have you been sending your articles to?” I asked, thinking I might be able to help in some way.

“*The New Yorker*,” he said.

“Where else?”

“That’s it,” he said. “Just *The New Yorker*.”

That, of course, was the problem. For my friend, being a writer meant having his work published in one of the oldest and finest magazines in America. What he failed to understand or accept was that being published in *The New Yorker* is a writer’s destination -- not a starting point.

## SELL FIRST TO NEWSPAPERS

Instead of aiming so impossibly high and therefore virtually guaranteeing his failure as a writer, my friend should have cut his journalistic teeth on smaller, less intimidating markets that would have accepted his work.

Hometown newspapers are good markets for beginners and I often encourage my students to consider that option. Editors are always looking for interesting local stories to help fill their pages and if you can produce a solid, well-written piece with a local angle your first sale is more or less guaranteed. Starting with these smaller publications should not be regarded as unworthy or beneath your talents as a writer. Publishing regularly in your hometown paper will quickly generate a stack of by-lined stories for your clip file. But more importantly it will keep you writing on a regular basis, enhance your

reporting and storytelling skills and provide a generous and often-needed boost to your ego.

## LEARN TO TAKE GOOD PHOTOGRAPHS

One way to greatly improve your chances of selling features is to learn how to take good photographs. When an editor reads your story, he or she will wonder how the piece can be illustrated. Offering six or eight good photos along with your manuscript will make the editor’s life easier and thereby pave the way for you to make a sale. The photos need not be great works of art -- just well composed and in focus. Not too tall of an order, is it?

You can create these photos with minimal investment. Chances are you already have a small, digital camera. If not, you can buy one that will get the job done for well under \$200. You’ll need digital editing software, but there are several types available for free on the Internet that are very user-friendly. Even a powerful program like Photoshop Elements sells for less than \$100. Next, you should learn a few simple guidelines for taking good photographs. Your local library should have a book that covers all the basics.

Make no mistake: photography can make *the* difference in an editor’s decision to buy your piece. Not long ago, a magazine editor contacted me after I had submitted a 1,200-word article to her. She liked the story, but added: “Of course, we’ll need good, high-resolution photographs before we can run it in the magazine.” I sent her a selection of photos. In return, she sent me a check and later used my story and photos as a four-page spread in her magazine.

## WRITING FOR MAGAZINES

At some point, seeing your photos and by-lined stories in the local paper won’t offer the same

sense of achievement that it once did and you may move quite naturally to writing for magazines. And by that time, you'll be ready for the challenge. You will have refined your skills as a writer and photographer and will have learned how to successfully interact with editors. You also will have amassed a fine collection of by-lined stories that you can show editors as proof of your abilities.

### THE QUERY

When you get an idea for a magazine article, you may want to sound out the editor before you get very far along in the writing process. To do this you can write a "query letter" -- a one- or two-page summary of your idea, why it's a good fit for the magazine, how you intend to write the piece and your qualifications.

An Arizona-based freelancer once told me that he tried to generate at least one query letter each day. That way he was able to keep a regular flow of writing assignments coming in. If one magazine rejected an idea, he simply revised the story angle and the same day sent it to another magazine.

That technique might work for well-established freelancers, but many times it might be better to just write and submit the piece. For example, about a year ago I sent a query letter to the editor of a wildlife magazine proposing what I thought would make an interesting article. I never received an answer, but decided to go ahead and do the piece anyway. Some months later, I submitted the article via e-mail and the very same day received a purchase offer, which I accepted.

So, at least early in the game, I would suggest writing and submitting your articles before relying too heavily on the query. As a writer friend once said, "You learn to write articles by writing articles -- not query letters."

### WRITER'S MARKET

One reference book you'll find on the desk of most serious freelancers is *Writer's Market* -- a directory containing the names and addresses of hundreds of consumer magazines and trade journals. The annual directory, which is also available online, lists the sorts of articles each magazine is looking for, preferred word length, payment and a variety of other helpful information. If you plan to break into the magazine market, you should make sure you have a copy of *Writer's Market* on your bookshelf.

### KEEP ON WRITING

Only a very few writers make their living through freelancing. Most have other careers and write in their spare time. But you know how it is: If you stick with something long enough, you get to be pretty good.

So keep writing. And one day, you just might make your way into the pages of *Rolling Stone*, *Redbook*, or maybe even *The New Yorker*.

*Tim Hanson is an assistant professor at Francis Marion University where he teaches print journalism courses. Before joining the faculty, Hanson held a variety of journalism positions, including managing editor of The Reader's Digest Asian edition in Hong Kong, South Asia correspondent for United Press International in New Delhi and Philippines News Bureau Chief for Pacific Stars & Stripes in Manila.*