

# How to Buy Writing Talent (Or at Least Rent It)

Working with Freelance Writers

By

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- How do I gauge the fit between my company and the writer?
- How much of the work will the writer do? How much will I do?
- What motivates writers?
- How do I get the best work for the money and time I invest?



## Introduction

Have you ever shopped for writing talent before? Do you know what you're looking for? Which do you want the most: highest quality, fastest turnaround or lowest price? (Hint: You can't have all three.)

This article is intended to provide food for thought in the search for a writer for your marketing piece, whether technical (white paper, case study, customer success story, trade article, Web content) or non-technical.

## Buyer-Side Considerations

### ***Spend some time conversing with the writer.***

It's worth the time to converse with the writer about what she has written, how long ago and for whom. There's not as much at stake as in a job interview, so the conversation needn't be in that vein, but you're looking for many of the same things, such as common acquaintances in the industry, overlapping histories, and writing preferences.

Consider it an exercise in disqualifying the writer, if you like. You can listen for something that doesn't add up, or leaves you with misgivings about how the project would proceed. By all means, you should find out the writer's comfort zone, since you'll need to work within it:

*What do you know about our industry? If nothing, then what have you written for other industries, and how is that knowledge transferable?*

*Do you like to write technical or non-technical pieces?*

*What experience do you have interviewing content providers over the phone?*

*What do you need from me to do your job well?*

*It may take us a couple of weeks to review your drafts. Will that affect your work?*

### ***Expect a process.***

You are on the right track if you ask a writer for her process. Depending on the urgency you feel, little or no process might suffice, but a good writer will have a clear approach and process to producing the piece you want. For example:

*"I'll interview two of your subject matter experts and review any written materials you send me. Then I'll submit an outline, and request a time when we can review it over the phone or in person. Once we've agreed on the outline, I'll interview any additional subject matter experts. Within five workdays of the last interview, I'll send you a first draft...."*

Most of all, a good writer introduces an extremely valuable element to your piece: **Structure**. You may be able to discern that structure from other things she's written, and you'll certainly see it in her outlines and drafts. Readers need structure because it helps

them through the piece, and a writer who knows how to structure her engagement with you will probably deliver structure in her writing as well.

### ***Request samples.***

It makes sense to ask for samples, but it also makes sense to floss your teeth, and a lot of people don't do that, either. Whether printed or electronic, a sample should land in your comfort zone and reassure you that you're dealing with somebody who does this for a living, not on a lark.

The samples should bear some relevance to the piece you want written. If they don't, then the writer should explain why she has given them to you in the first place. If you need a writer of Web content for digital photography software, then a sample of a grant proposal or ad copy for Las Vegas timeshares is a hard stop, but a sample of brochure copy for a Web browser add-in is in the ballpark and merits further examination.

Keep an eye out for the aforementioned *Structure* when you're reviewing the samples. If you can't see it in the work the writer has done for others, you probably won't see it in the work she does for you.

### ***Offer examples***

The best way to ensure that your writer delivers something you want at the end of the process is to show her a sample of what you like at the beginning of the process.

If you're trying to imitate a competitor's paper, there's no shame in showing it to your writer. For one thing, it shows the writer what you envision. For another, it's the writer's opportunity to see whether it's the right kind of project.

Conversely, if you have a paper you do NOT want to imitate, let the writer know what you don't like about it (technique, voice, depth, flow, use of graphics) so that those traits don't end up in your paper.

### ***Gauge the technical fit.***

How close a fit does it need to be? You may be determined to find the best writer in North America on network packet inspection acceleration tools, because that's the perfect fit for your product. You may even find a writer with that level of domain expertise, but he's probably already working for your competitor. Meanwhile, you'll have passed over several other writers who could have done a very good job for you.

In the same way that you didn't always know about network packet inspection acceleration tools – but you did know about product management or marketing communications – you'll find that a good writer is a pretty quick study. He's got a nose for gleaning whatever information he needs from you to hang on the *Structure* of the piece.

Unless you're trying to reach a highly technical audience with a highly technical piece, you can usually afford to favor writing expertise over deep domain expertise.

### ***Gauge the mindset-fit.***

Writers who tell you they can write anything, probably can. But will you be happy with it?

You must have a good idea of what you want to accomplish with the piece. Do you want to persuade, inform, tempt, deter, educate or warn? Your writer needs to convince you that he can convey your company's message and bring about the desired behavior in the reader, but first you need to know what that behavior is, and you need a general idea of how to elicit it.

For instance, not all *technical writers* are suited to (or interested in) writing *technical marketing* pieces, because these pieces require an element of persuasion which is generally absent from technical communications. Similarly, not all ad copywriters are suited to these pieces because of the required technical depth involved.

### ***Expect to invest some review-sweat in the piece.***

A writer will tell you, "Yes, I wrote a paper for Zogware last year and they were bowled over by it," but there's probably a lot more interaction and iteration to it than that.

Yes, you've hired the writer to write your piece, but you and your colleagues often know much more about the topic than the writer, so you may have to make corrections or challenge the particular order of material. Your organization and the writer go through this a few times and the result is what you publish.

If your writer is truly writing exactly what you're publishing, then either she's clairvoyant, you're not paying attention, or you've been working with her so long that she knows just how to please you with the first draft.

### ***Get your ducks in a row.***

To review the piece, you'll need to subject your colleagues to this interactive, iterative process, so be sure to consult them before you launch the project with the writer. A piece that languishes in a reviewer's inbox for weeks on end is a doomed piece, and you can help it avoid that fate by getting early buy-in from the subject matter experts and reviewers.

As you circulate the drafts from the writer, bird-dog your own internal reviewers. It's not really the writer's job to do that, but someone invariably has to, so plan to invest that time in the process. You should plan to have one person consolidate and reconcile comments from multiple reviewers, so that your writer does not need to prioritize them.

### ***Take a red pen to it.***

You're not going to hurt the writer's feelings by making changes. In fact, it's frustrating for a writer to get too little feedback from you, because she doesn't know how to give

you what you want. The more specific the feedback, the better. Saying “This part needs to have more customer-focus” isn’t nearly as helpful as writing “The customer realized that the opportunity to collaborate deeply with Zogware resulted in measurable competitive advantages.”

### ***Invest in the relationship.***

The first piece is hardest. You don’t know the writer, the writer doesn’t know you, and despite your mutual, good-faith efforts, it will likely require more work than anticipated to get what you want. You deserve to get what you want in the piece, but it doesn’t happen by magic just because you’re paying somebody what may feel like a lot of money.

If your writer delivers the goods; if you don’t hate her work; and if she’s willing to do her best to deliver good product, you’ve got something – actually, a lot – on which to build.

### ***Don’t be cheap.***

If the writer does extra work for you, pay him for it. Writing is hard work – all appearances to the contrary – and if you want good product, plan to pay fairly for it.

## **Writer-side Considerations**

Because you’ve been obliging enough to read this far, you’re entitled to a bonus. Here is a peek at some current thinking from writers’ forums, blogs, special interest groups and professional organizations.

### ***Assemble a portfolio and make it readily accessible to prospects.***

Collect electronic and/or printed samples of pieces you’ve done for other clients and make them *easily* available. Depending on the piece and the client, you should plan to offer samples by mail, as e-mail attachments and/or from the Web.

Your portfolio should also contain endorsements or testimonials from previous clients. Have you seen the text “Referrals available on request” on a résumé? If you’re going to write for a profession, assume that a prospect will request those referrals.

### ***Have a process ready to describe to prospects.***

Your prospect may have a preference already, but you should be able to describe in concrete detail how you plan to accomplish her goals. And, since you are a writer, you should provide this in writing.

The prospect wants to know what you need and when, what you’re going to give back, and when. Naturally, your process and sequence may need to be flexible, and some parts won’t work for every client, but at least you’ll have a point of departure. As any professional would, do what you say you’re going to do, when you say you’re going to do it.

Few things build a prospect's confidence faster than having a process, and few things undermine it more thoroughly than not having one. Not only that, but it also helps you separate the tire-kickers from the serious prospects.

***Put a written agreement in place before starting work.***

Whether you have your own or use one provided by the client, wrap a clear statement of work in a legal agreement, sign it, and have your client sign it.

A written agreement is for setting people's minds at ease, not for agitating them with anxiety. One side of the coin says you're doing this in case you ever have to go to court, but the other, more practical side of the coin says you're doing it because people forget what they've said over the phone, lose e-mail, and don't take the same notes as you. The agreement ensures that, from the outset, everyone has the same expectations for process, length of the piece, timeframe, cost, number of review cycles, and so forth.

Most professional writers would rather sweat the details of working out an agreement and getting it signed than work without one. Remind the client that the written agreement is as much for his protection as it is for yours.

***Ask for a down payment.***

The down payment is the client's way of reserving your time, and it's your way of ensuring that, if the project gets canceled, you've received some money. You may agree with the client to start work before you've received the check, but specify a date or milestone by which you must receive it.

Some writers also specify a "kill fee" – the right to retain the down payment and/or bill for any time invested up to that point – in their agreement, in case the project is canceled.

***Do as much of the client's thinking (and work) as possible for him.***

You can't do all the work on the client's side of the project – find resources, set up interviews, revise drafts, chase internal reviewers – but you can anticipate some of the needs with far-sighted questions:

*Will this piece need regular updates?*

*Would you like me to contact the interviewees myself?*

*Do you need me to do the desktop publishing?*

*What is your deadline and what milestones are there along the way?*

*Who is the target audience and how well do they know the subject?*

*Do you plan to have the piece translated? For distribution in which countries?*

*Do you plan to print the piece on paper?*

*If you plan to keep the piece as a PDF, do you have a standard configuration?*

*Do you have layout samples you can show me for the version you'll publish?*

Your client is in effect outsourcing the project to you and may forget to pose questions that would be second nature if the project were to remain internal to his company.

### ***Do some homework.***

Sympathetic people say that there is no such thing as a dumb question, but there are plenty of vexatious ones, and they often come from people who haven't done their homework or haven't asked for background materials before the interview. It's too easy nowadays to research your client's history, product, service or market, so do your best not to pose to a subject matter expert a question whose answer is easy to find on the Web or from your business contact at the company.

### ***Don't be greedy.***

Your client is relying on you to tell her story. It often takes a bit more work than anticipated, but the story is important to the client, so don't be afraid to work hard for the money.

Each project should demand your full attention and be treated as if it were your top priority. If you can't do that because the budget is too low, you're better off turning down low-paying work than to accept it with a bad attitude. Sloppy work can travel just as fast as, if not faster than, your premium work, so consider every piece portfolio-quality material.

## **Everybody's Considerations**

### ***How much will this cost me? How much should I charge?***

Both writers and their clients wonder about this, which means that like everything in life, it's subject to negotiation. As of the date of this paper, here are a few benchmarks and ranges:

- \$1.00 - \$1.25 per word
- \$50 - \$150 per hour
- \$3000 - 6000 per white paper
- \$300 - \$750 per article

Obviously, your mileage will vary based on word/page count, number of interviews, amount of research expected, the writer's experience, and the division of work between you and the writer.

## **Conclusion**

It's helpful to think of buying writing talent as an *investment* rather than as an *expense*. A good writer does more than get a job done: He adds value and helps you impress yourself upon the marketplace.

You're investing in one piece, and it's a down payment on a potentially long-term relationship. The more the writer knows about your business, products, services, employees and processes, the greater value he can add in future projects.

Keep these observations in mind in your relationships with writers. You'll get more out of them, and they'll do more for you.

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