



The Beacon

Your guiding light for writing and publishing

Number 21, Fall 2004

Should I write for no fee?

The maddening answer is, "It's up to you." Some freelancers never accept *pro bono* work; others do. I am one who does write for nothing, but I pick my moments carefully. I am not as indiscriminate as I used to be and I have developed clear parameters that have become guiding principles. Writers must make their own decisions on this issue that are firmly rooted in knowledge, common-sense, ethics, and circumstance that best suit them.

One way to approach this teaser is to tell you how I select when or if I will work for no fee and my reasons for doing so. Promotion is my main reason for choosing visibility over dollars:

1. When I am writing a new book and want to get articles into specific print or electronic publications, which don't have editorial budgets, that my readers read. However I try to ensure that the majority of this type of article goes into paying periodicals.
2. When I want to target a specific audience to increase sales of my books and speaking services, etc. For this choice to work for me, there must be strong potential for a return on my investment.
3. When I am writing for a charitable (non-profit) organization. I write for only one and I decline all other requests. As many professionals donate their skills occasionally, and I consider myself a professional, this is the "right" thing to do for me.

In the first two situations, I negotiate energetically over my by-line and the rights that I am *giving* the publication. I want a longer by-line than the standard one sentence so that I can mention my upcoming book and the services I offer, as well as my contact information. I limit the rights to first print or electronic only and never give exclusive e-rights. In other words, I retain the right to immediately sell the piece, which I have given away, as a reprint and to put it up on my website.

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From the editor's desk

Keats called autumn the "Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness." Writers like me, who get into a creative fog when the muse is working overtime, view the fall months as a time of intense productivity when we harvest the fruits that we have been nourishing mentally all summer. I kick into high gear come September and write for all I'm worth. This year the research I have completed during the summer, stuck in the cramped archives at UBC, should transform into chapters of my new book for Dundurn. I hope so anyway!

Don't forget to do some professional development to start the season – read a book on the business of getting published, take some courses – online or in person, attend a writers' conference, or join a writers' group. You'll be glad you did for you will learn something useful everyday that will enhance your writing career.

See you at the Surrey International Writers' Conference in October....

Julie H. Ferguson

The verbal pitch

Be ready for this one! If you're not prepared, verbal pitches can be scary; if you are organized and thus confident going into one, you may just get your ms accepted. Most often encountered at conferences when you meet editors/agents in the bar or through an appointment, verbal pitches can also be needed when you phone a publisher to enquire about the name of their acquisition editor and get put through....

To avoid rambling, you need to develop, ahead of time, a zinger of an opening sentence to describe your book – just one sentence. A radio producer I know put it best, "Surprise me!" Try completing these sentences: *My book is about...* or *My book tells the story of...* Test them on your fellow writers; revise them and test again. Then you can add a couple more sentences to supplement the first. Next, compose one or two sentences about why you are perfect to write this book that include your writing achievements and expertise on the subject of the book. Test them out too. When you have the short paragraph to your satisfaction, learn it by heart and practise it – you never know!

When doing a verbal pitch, recite your paragraph and then shut up and wait. The editor/agent will then ask you questions they need you to answer. Remember they are not interested in why you wrote the book or that you have a degree in an unrelated subject.

Forthcoming events (for details see website)

- Sep 21 – **Leery of Queries?** for writers at the North Shore Writers' monthly meeting, 7:30pm, Capilano Library, N. Vancouver. Call 604-986-2009 for details.
- Sep 26 – **Word on the Street.** Free for writers and readers, around the Vancouver Public Library, 11am-6pm.
- Sep 29 – **Crack Open Your Creative Channel!** for all writers at Vancouver Community College, 6:30-9:30pm.
- Oct 6 – **Getting Published in Canada 101** for novelists and non-fiction writers at Vancouver Community College, 6:30-9:30pm.
- Oct 13 – **How to Write for the Online Market** for all writers at Vancouver Community College, 6:30-9:30pm.
- Oct 21-24 – **12th Surrey International Writers' Conference.** Join Julie for two workshops: **Brainstorming Brilliant Bios** and **I've Got This Great Idea for a Non-fiction Book!** Also sit down with Julie in the Blue Pencil Café for an encouraging chat about your writing career and work-in-progress. Visit www.siw.ca
- Oct 20, 27 and Nov 3 – **How to Craft Irresistible Query Letters** for writers of books and articles, at Guilford Secondary School through Surrey's Creative Writing Diploma program, 7-9pm.
- Oct 30 – **Crafting Irresistible Query Letters** for writers of books and articles, at Vancouver Community College, 9am-4pm.
- Nov 2 – **Writing with Power!!** and **Essay Planning and Editing** for selected middle and secondary students of SD 43, 9am-3pm.
- Nov 15 – **Bright...but Can't Write!** for teachers of SD 43, Winslow Centre, 3:45-6pm.

...no fee? (continued)

Thus I can still use/sell the no-fee article exactly as I wish.

Two other considerations:

1. I usually restrict my freebies to no more than 800 words and I often aim for as few as 500. Why? Because articles of this length are quicker to write and can be fleshed out to 1500 words, the standard length for many magazines, then sold for first rights. However, I do breach this personal parameter if the visibility is too good to miss.
2. When I was starting out as a writer, I often took *pro bono* assignments to build up my publishing portfolio and to grow my reputation as a freelancer who was reliable.

So there you have it – some ideas to assist you in selecting your own parameters for writing for no fee.

Previous issues of *The Beacon* are archived at www.beaconlit.com/beaconli/newsletter.htm



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