



Should I Write for No Fee?

by **Julie H. Ferguson**

Author and professional speaker, Julie H. Ferguson leads live and tele-workshops that provide aspiring authors with the knowledge, skills, and confidence to approach publishers and succeed. Her workshops are available as downloadable booklets and as fully-narrated CD-ROMs through Beacon Literary Services at www.beaconlit.com, then click on Writers' Tools.

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. 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 (but not all) to assist you in selecting your own parameters for writing for no fee.

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