



Do You Have Lots of Problem Clients?

This May Be Why

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I know a writer who, every time I communicate with her, unleashes a litany of complaints about her clients:

"Client W asked me to write a free sample as a test before hiring me, and then ran my piece on his blog without my permission!"

"Client X said I did a bad job and he's refusing to pay me, even though I did everything he asked!"

"Client Y said they wanted to hire me to write an article and the due date would be [insert date three days from now], but I still don't have the assignment specs and now she's ignoring my calls and emails!"

"Client Z has had me doing revisions on this website copy for the past four months...even though the contract specified two rounds of revisions!"

This baffles me. I've been freelancing full time for 20 years, and I have had *one* client try to skip town without paying, *one* magazine I'm fairly certain stole an idea I pitched them, and a *handful* of clients who asked for an unreasonable number of revisions. Oh yeah, and one client who had me crying in the parking lot of a Longhorn.

I've done my fair share of grumbling to my writer friends, but the vast majority of my clients have been, if not delightful, at least *okay*. Why is this other writer so unlucky?

In the TV show *Justified*, the character Raylan Givens said, **"If you run into an a\$\$hole in the morning, you ran into an a\$\$hole. If you run into a\$\$holes all day, you're the a\$\$hole."**

This brilliant insight extends to the writing field as well: If you find that the majority of your clients are problem children, it's time to take a hard look in the mirror:

Maybe *you're* the problem child.

HOW YOU ATTRACT PROBLEM CLIENTS — AND HOW TO STOP IT

You may believe writing clients are a troublesome lot, and that's just the way it is. But based on my own experience, and the experiences of most of my writer friends, that's clearly not true. So why do some writers seem to get all the hard cases while others sail through their writing careers fairly ding-free?

1. YOU RELY ON JOB BOARDS AND BIDDING SITES TO GET GIGS.

What kinds of writing clients do you think advertise on job boards and bidding sites? What kinds of writing clients do you think have the time and inclination to sift through thousands of applications from writers who are falling all over themselves to submit the lowest bid?

Here's a hint: They're probably *not* well-respected businesses and publications that are willing to pay writers what they're worth. And they're probably not savvy businesses that understand how to attract, work with, and maintain a stable of professional writers. Because if they were, they wouldn't have the time or the need to scour the internet for discount writers.

Typically, the higher you go up the income ladder, the higher quality clients you'll find. Yes, they pay more *and* are easier to work with!

You might be trying to help out businesses that don't have two nickels to rub together — which feels like a noble thing — or you might think you're not good enough to reach for better clients. But whatever your reasons for relying on job boards and bidding sites, know that that's where the problem clients live.

2. YOUR ONLINE PRESENCE ATTRACTS LOSER CLIENTS.

Nothing will draw problem clients more than a portfolio full of clips from other problem clients. As my friend Carol Tice of the "Make a Living Writing" blog likes to say, "**Work of one kind attracts more work of the same kind.**" What that means is, any client looking for deep-discount writers will drool with anticipation when they see your portfolio full of their cronies — and we've already established earlier that these tend to be the clients from hell we all want to avoid.

If all of your samples and credits so far are from content mills and bidding sites, don't feel bad. We all have to start somewhere, and it's wonderful that you have any credits at all, because many beginning writers don't. Here's a way to transform those samples from jerk-attractors to a serious-looking portfolio: Try to find out where your writing eventually ended up and then list *that* as your credit. For example, if you wrote an article for a content mill and it was published on a popular website, list the popular website as your client, not the content mill. Then, start going after better-paying work.

Another tip: **If you're constantly fielding emails from low-ballers and prospects asking you to write for exposure, head off these tire-kickers and time-wasters by posting your (desired!) rates on your website.**

However, do not just stick a cut-and-dry price onto every type of writing you offer because that might also scare away clients you *want* to work with; for example, maybe you're willing to accept a little less money for easier gigs, or for clients whose missions you're passionate about.

Instead, add price ranges to your site. For example, your price range for articles may be 50 cents to a dollar per word, and you might charge \$600-\$1,000 for a landing page. Then, you can add in verbiage along these lines: "The exact price will depend on the complexity of your project and how quickly you need it. Get in touch with details about your project and I'll send you a quote."

Believe me, when problem clients see those prices, they will move on to the next writer post haste.

3. YOU DON'T HEED THE RED FLAGS.

Sometimes we *know* before we work with a client that they'll be one of those irritating, scammy, creepy, or abusive clients we want to stay far away from...and yet we silence our intuition and say "Yes" to the gig. **We writers need to learn to trust our gut and turn down work we know will have us tearing our hair out.**

Years ago, I was approached by a new magazine that asked me to write an article on "diners."

Yep...a 1,000-word article on "diners."

I don't know about you, but that sounds a lot more like a book to me. In fact, it sounds like an entire series of weighty tomes. So I asked, "What aspect of diners do you want me to write about? How the diner industry is doing now? The diners in a specific region? Running a diner? Unusual diners?" The editor hemmed and hawed and couldn't seem to provide a clear answer.

The vague assignment topic, plus the editor's indecision, gave me the uneasy feeling that these people didn't know how to run a magazine. I predicted many, many painful rounds of edits as it dawned on the editor that you can't write a 1,000-word article on "diners," so I turned the assignment down.

A few months later, the writers' forums lit up with complaints that the magazine was going out of business before it had even printed its first issue, and the company stiffed dozens of writers out of their money.

Besides vague assignment specs and waffling editors, a few red flags to watch out for are:

- Clients who refuse to tell you what pay they're offering, saying they'll decide when they see your finished assignment.
- Clients who refuse to provide a contract, or to let you provide one.

- Complaints from other writers online.
- A company that trumpets the fact that they pay on time. (On-time payment isn't a "perk." All ethical businesses pay their bills on time.)

I couldn't possibly list all the danger signs. But you know what? **I'll bet anything you get a gross feeling inside when you're communicating with a client that will be a major pain to work with,** just as I did when asked to write an article on "diners." Heed that feeling.

4. YOU'RE AFRAID OF GOING BROKE.

Why do so many of us ignore blatant, flaming red flags, and take on clients we know will have us punching pillows and crying in public places? **It's because we're afraid that if we turn down an assignment, the mighty gods of writing will strike us down for our arrogance and we'll never get another gig again.** We're trained to believe that we need to take on every assignment someone throws our way, and to do it with a smile. Hey, it's money, right?

But slaving over low-paid gigs from demon clients has more unfortunate consequences than you may realize: While you're taking assignments from problem clients to keep the lights on, you're watching your savings *dwindle* because these clients drain your time and energy with unreasonable

demands and incessant rewrites...while paying peanuts. Even worse, all too often these clients disappear when it's time to cut you a check, which is not the best thing for your bank account or your motivation.

Lots of people go broke and live through it. Fortunes are lost and fortunes are gained. **Stop fearing an empty bank account so much that you become a slave to the whims of cruddy clients.**

5. YOU PLAY THE DOORMAT.

I hate to sound like I'm blaming the victim here, but **some writers behave in a way that just screams, "Clients, take advantage of me!"** It's the virtual version of having a "Kick Me" sign on your back.

Here's how not to play the victim, so you stop attracting problem clients: Don't agree to write a "free sample" without the assurance of a paid assignment. If a client refuses to pay you after you've fulfilled your side of the bargain, sic a collection agency on them (if it's worth the hassle), or at the very least warn other writers and alert writers' organizations about the delinquent client. When a client asks for yet another round of revisions, ask to revise the contract to give you extra money for doing the extra revisions.

In other words: Stand up for yourself! **Soon, you'll start to give off a "don't mess with me" vibe that you sometimes need in the crazy world of freelance writing.** Not in a bitter, angry way, but in a calm, confident way that clients respect. Clients stop seeing you as a desperate, people-pleasing scribe begging for scraps, and start seeing you as a professional service provider on par with their lawyer and accountant.

No writer wants to believe they played a role in a terrible client experience. We want to cry to our writer buddies on forums about mean old Client X and have them gather around in support, shaking their fists at this jerk of a client. **But sometimes in TV there is truth: If you're always running into problem clients, look with clear eyes at the situation to figure out whether you're part of the problem.**

Then, fix it...and feel pride that you're evolving into the kind of writer who attracts only the best clients.

Your Freelance Writing Success Coach,

Linda Formichelli

P.S. Tired of the overwhelm, and just want to know what steps you can take right now to earn more money faster as a freelance writer? Looking for support, accountability, critiques, and advice from a veteran freelancer? Contact me to set up a [Freelance Writing Success Coaching](#) session today!