



# How Writers Waste Time by Saving Time

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When I started freelancing in 1997, word counts on article assignments could reach as high as 2,500 words or even more. With many consumer magazines paying \$1 per word, a single article could pretty much pay your rent. At the same time, a newsletter or brochure for a business could top 1,000 words—and again, that would score you a nice bundle of cash.

But the businesses and publications that hire writers have decided that readers have short attention spans, so word counts have gotten shorter and shorter. Now you're lucky if you land a 500-word department piece for a magazine, and many businesses prize white space more than copy.

In the March/April 2017 issue of *Writer's Digest* is an article by Brandon Ambrosino called “Web Writing with Substance.” He points out that when he worked for a web startup in 2014, “To drive the kind of traffic that kept investors happy, each staff writer was expected to publish several articles per day. My quota: 40 new pieces a month.”

With print assignments getting shorter, web assignments getting faster, and the competition getting stiffer...how do you balance producing in quantity (in order to earn a living) with creating valuable content (to make writing an experience that's satisfying for yourself, your clients, and your readers)?

For too many writers, the solution is to cut corners on their work. And yes, this definitely makes your job easier, but it also does a disservice to the readers who are looking for entertainment and education that will make their lives easier, happier, and all-around better. Also, whether doing this saves you time and trouble is debatable (you'll see why soon).

**Cutting corners does a disservice to you, too.** If you're like me, you write not just to earn a living, but also because you love helping other people by sharing useful information. If writing becomes nothing more than a way to make ends meet, it becomes a lot less fun.

First, some enlightening examples.

## THE CORNERS THAT ARE CUT

One of the most time-intensive, scary, and procrastination-generating tasks for writers is interviewing.

I'll be the first to admit interviewing is not easy: You need to unearth the best experts, get in touch to set up an interview, do the interview, and transcribe the recording (or have it transcribed). Not to mention many writers are scared to death of the phone, which makes the whole process extra horrid.

If we could just pull articles out of our butts without consulting expert sources, we wouldn't have a problem! But our editors, and our readers, want and need expert advice and opinions, so writing from our heads or quoting second-hand from books or websites is out of the question. What's a writer to do?

I see some writers have come up with a solution: They send out requests on source-finding services for journalists like Help a Reporter (HARO) or Profnet, not to ask for interviews, but to request that sources write their articles for them.

For example, a friend recently sent me a HARO query from a writer looking for sources for an article on productivity. Hey, I've written two books packed with productivity tips: *Commit: How to Blast Through Problems & Reach Your Goals Through Massive Action* and *How to Do It All: The Revolutionary Plan to Create a Full, Meaningful Life—While Only **Occasionally** Wanting to Poke Your Eyes Out With a Sharpie*. A perfect match!

But then I noticed the writer didn't request that interested sources get in touch to potentially set up an interview. Instead, he outlined eight questions for potential sources to answer via email. And these were not questions that could be answered in one sentence—they were questions that required article-length replies, like, “How can someone who feels overwhelmed by their schedule manage their time efficiently, while also staying sane?” At the end of the list, the writer added, “Please feel free to comment outside of the allotted inquiries to provide support to the article!”

First let's talk about whether this particular time-saving tactic serves the reader. Later we can tackle the question of what to do to instead, since we still have the problem of needing to write a lot in a small amount of time just to keep the bills paid. This is just one example of the many ways writers cut corners when they're feeling rushed, but it is an instructive one.

So: Normally you want to find the very best sources for an article, because they'll provide the most helpful, up-to-date, research-backed information for readers. (And that's your job, right?) For example, you might reach out to think tanks, authors of relevant books, universities, associations, governmental agencies, and other places where experts hang out.

With this time-saving “throw your interview to the universe” approach I described above, the sources who end up in the article are usually not the best possible sources for the article. What they are are:

1. *The sources who happen to have signed up for these source-finding services.* This isn't necessarily bad—I've used these services many times—but you have to understand that the sources who are signed up for these services have an ulterior motive; they have something to sell, whether a product or an idea.

2. *The sources who have the time and willingness to answer a lengthy list of questions via email, with zero guarantee of being quoted in the article.* Somehow I think most serious experts are a little too busy to play that game.

**In other words, you're relying on advice from sources who have something to sell, and a lot of time on their hands.**

Now, I don't mean to be a snob: Lots of people have unique and interesting tips who may not be recognized experts in their fields. But I don't think writers are using this method of sourcing out of a noble desire to give voice to underrepresented topic experts. They're looking to crank out an article, fast, and move on to the next one so they can keep the lights on, readers be damned.

Right now you may be thinking of Brandon Ambrosino's quote above about how he had to churn out 40 articles per month for a website, and you're saying to yourself, "Hey, the modern way of journalism requires that kind of interviewing."

However, I don't see how this new form of journalism is that much different from the old style of journalism...you know, *newspapers that have to crank out an entire paper's worth of content every single day.* I have a friend who was on staff at a newspaper, and you know what she did to

make her quota? **She worked that phone, calling expert after expert until she got one who could talk right then.** True, one of the chief criteria for an expert was that they were available when she called, but she *chose* who to call, and made sure they were respected, honest-to-goodness topic experts.

Just so you don't think I have a vendetta against source-finding services—I've used them plenty of times myself to find people to interview—here's another example: fact checking, or rather the *lack of* fact checking. When a writer is harried and rushing on a freelance writing job, fact checking is one of the first things to go. Hey, so what if you don't get those numbers exactly right or you misspell a source's name—that's what fact checkers are for, right?

For our book *The Renegade Writer: A Totally Unconventional Guide to Freelance Writing Success*, the third edition of which will be released this April, my co-author Diana Burrell and I interviewed a handful of magazine editors about fact checking. These editors *moaned* about writers who turn in articles full of inaccuracies. What writers don't realize is that some publications can't afford to have every article fact checked, and they rely on writers to ensure they're turning in clean, correct copy.

Even if a publication does employ a fact checker, **if you haven't gone to the trouble of double-checking the spelling of your sources' names, making sure calculations are correct, and ensuring that your facts are actually facts, you can be sure the fact checker will be letting your editor know.** Not the best way to land more work.

## SAVE TIME BY TAKING LONGER

I know I just laid out a giant problem, and now we need a solution—otherwise *I'm* cutting corners by writing a rant instead of a helpful article for writers, which is *my* job.

How *can* we writers balance working fast with creating writing that truly benefits our readers? After all, word counts and deadlines aren't getting any longer.

I'm going to answer that question with another question: **How much trouble are you saving, really, by skimping on your writing?**

Using the source-finding example above, let's compare.



## **1. Posting a request on a source-finding service for experts to answer a list of interview questions via email:**

First, you're faced with the lovely task of wading through the responses, weeding out the ones that won't work for you, and responding to the ones that do.

You'll probably have follow-up questions, as well, and email doesn't have the same sense of urgency that a phone call does. Take it from me, sources will take their own sweet time getting back to you. Oh, and here comes your deadline, barreling closer and closer while you scramble for quotes!

Then, in some cases, you don't get what you need at all, and have to start the process all over again. **That's the big risk of waiting for the right people to come to you, as opposed to going out and getting what you need.**

Now let's look at the second option...

## **2. Pounding the metaphorical sidewalks to find the experts who will provide the very best information:**

You call or check the websites of the authors, universities, medical centers, and other resources where your wily sources can be found. There is an element of chance because sometimes people are not interested in being interviewed for your particular outlet, or they're on vacation—so you leave messages with several places where you've located the most appropriate sources, which lessens the risk that you'll come away empty-handed.

You hear back from three of the six sources you called and set up interviews with each. My interviews typically take around 20 minutes, so these interviews would take an hour total. Additional questions come up as you talk to the expert, and you ask them and get the answers right there on the call, instead of having to play email tag.

Finally, if you type up your notes as you're doing the interview, which many writers who are fast typists do, you can save the time and expense of transcription as well.

In the end, you have an article packed with information from three of the best experts available, and you've probably spent the same amount of time you would have if you had thrown out a

request for experts to answer a set of questions via email.

**And the best part is, you got what you needed without the angst of waiting for random, potentially shady sources to get in touch**, or emailing back and forth with a key source trying to get clarification on their responses.

What about the fact checking example I outlined above? Well, you do indeed save trouble up front by skipping that step, but you'll be paying that back many times over when the editor bounces your article back covered in red, asking for clarifications and corrections—and she needs it back by tomorrow. She probably also won't hire you again, so there's that to think about as well.

## A STITCH IN TIME

Have you ever heard the expression “a stitch in time saves nine”? It means if you fix a problem immediately, it will save you a lot of extra work later. In the case of writing, a stitch in time means heading off potential problems by taking the time to research and write to the best of your ability.

Yes, assignments are getting shorter and deadlines are following suit, but sacrificing quality for speed isn't the answer. **Being careful and thorough up front actually saves you time and trouble—and it also helps your readers, and ensures your editors will come back to you with more freelance writing gigs.** Isn't that worth the extra effort?

Your Freelance Writing Success Coach,

*Linda Formichelli*

P.S. Thanks to Ava Jarvis for the inspiration for this article! It went off in a totally different direction than I had originally planned, but I so appreciate that an email from Ava sparked this idea on lazy reporting!

P.P.S. Looking for help breaking into freelance writing -- or making it to the next level? Blast off your writing career with help from a veteran freelancer with 20 years of experience. (Ahem...that's me.) You can take a look at my Freelance Writing Success Coaching [here](#).