



You're Writing Too Much

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I field a lot of emails from writers—and I mean *a lot* of emails—lamenting that they're not getting enough freelance writing jobs.

I love connecting with serious writers, but sometimes I can see from the very first email they send me why they're not having any success.

The biggest problem? **Writers who write too much.**

YOU'RE THE BOOK *AND* THE COVER

Frequently I receive emails that contain loads of personal information about the writer.

I learn that the writer is moving to a new city, recently had surgery, owns three poodles, and has a funny last name because the Ellis Island official misspelled it when their grandfather emigrated to the U.S. from Poland. I wade through the letter, wondering why the sender is telling me all this—and finally, near the end I'll discover the real reason for the message, such as, "How can I find restaurant trade magazines to pitch?"

I understand that writers want to reach out and share details about their lives and their troubles with me because I'm a writing coach. I get it! The only real consequence when a writer overshares to me is that it can take much longer to get a response. I tend to put off answering, because it takes time and effort to decipher the email to figure out exactly what the sender wants, and how/whether I need to respond to the personal details.

But when you send a missive filled with TMI to a prospect, it tells them a few things that make it less likely they'll hire you for a freelance writing job:

1. You don't respect the prospect's time.
2. You can't write in a concise way.
3. You're unclear on what information is important to the task at hand.
4. Depending on what personal details you share, you may be sick, broke, or stressed, which means you may not be able to complete an assignment on deadline.

Prospects judge everything you send them, from an emailed question to a full-fledged pitch, to figure out what kind of writer you are and whether they want to work with you.

Is it fair to be judged worthy or unworthy by a potential client based on a single communication? After all, we all know what they say about judging a book by its cover.

As a writer, you *are* the cover. You're pitching yourself as a writer, and most of your communications with writing clients are, well, in writing. Which means, of course, prospects are going to judge everything from your subject line to your closing. They can't help but do that.

THE DEVIL IS IN THE DETAILS

I understand the temptation to over-share: We freelance writers love telling stories; it's why we became writers in the first place. On top of that, writing can be a lonely profession, so we're often tempted to spill our guts to the nearest warm body, no matter who they are.

And, truthfully, including personal details in your pitches and other communications can sometimes help you get gigs. For example, I once mentioned in a pitch to a huge marketing agency that I lived in Concord, New Hampshire. The department head responded that she had

attended a boarding school there as a teen, and we had some back-and-forth about the town. She then offered me several assignments over the next few months, including one that earned me a couple thousand dollars over a weekend. If I hadn't included my town in the pitch, would I have made that connection? Maybe not.

The thing to know is, **some details are inherently less risky and more relevant than others.** Mentioning where you live, other clients you've written for, or the fact that you root for the same football team as the prospect, if they mention that on their blog: OK. Mentioning in your pitch to a real estate firm that you're having trouble typing because you just had hand surgery, that you like long walks on the beach, or that you collect teacups: Let's just say I can imagine the prospect snorting in impatience and round-filing the pitch.

However, as always, it depends on what you're pitching. If you're writing about new treatments for carpal tunnel, you'll want to mention you suffer from it yourself. If you're pitching an article for a collectors' magazine, go ahead and tell the editor about your teacup collection. If it's relevant to your pitch and bolsters your credentials in the topic, it's fair game. Otherwise, think twice before sharing.

ANOTHER SENTENCE, ANOTHER SNAFU

Every unnecessary sentence you add to your communication with a client is another chance for you to lose the gig.

Needlessly mention your volunteer work for a liberal organization, and you risk alienating a conservative editor (or vice versa). Bring up your interest in manga apropos of nothing, and you risk that the client will think you're too juvenile to write for his *very serious* business. You never know who you're dealing with, and we humans tend to fall prey to knee-jerk reactions, so why take the gamble?

This point is key if you're pitching a business or magazine where you're way outside of the market's demographic. Say you're pitching a teen magazine and you're 70—you probably don't want to share details about your life that reveal that fact. If you're pitching a parenting magazine, you don't want to inadvertently include particulars of your life that show you don't have children,

unless it's somehow relevant to your query. (I wrote for parenting magazines long before I had a kid, but I made sure the editors I pitched never knew it. Once I befriended some editors I learned the dirty little secret that many parenting editors also don't have kids, but they wisely don't advertise that fact.)

EDIT LIKE A WRITER

All this may feel like you're hiding your true self in order to get gigs. We writers are all about the truth!

But do you tell supermarket cashiers about your obsession with office supplies, or share the particulars of your sex life with your accountant? If you don't divulge these details to strangers, do you consider it hiding your true self?

It's not hiding...it's understanding that everyone doesn't need to know everything in every situation.

To put it in a writing context: Many fiction writing coaches recommend that authors create life histories for their main characters. When were they born, what was their childhood like, what's their favorite food and least favorite color? The writer gets to know her characters like her own family.

But—and this is a big but—the writer does not then assault the reader with an info dump in the first chapter. She uses the details to inform the plot and the characters' motivations and actions, and doles out information on a need-to-know basis. Much of the information in the characters' extensive backgrounds will never see the light of day!

And so it should be with us. We all have rich, full lives complete with rainbow-filled highs and dreadful lows, past histories and present problems. This is what makes us who we are; our life situations and past experiences inform our decisions and actions every day.

However, like the writers we are, we need to edit. We need to decide which of this personal information is worth sharing with others, especially in a business context.

IT'S NOTHING PERSONAL

The point of this article isn't that no one cares about you or your life. The point is that your pitch is a writing audition, and clients need to see that you are able to discern what is the most important information, that you can write tight, and that you can keep the client's goal in mind as you write.

Save the details for your memoir, give your clients what they want—and you'll prosper both creatively *and* professionally.

Your Freelance Writing Success Coach,

Linda Formichelli

P.S. Check out the upcoming [third edition of *The Renegade Writer: A Totally Unconventional Guide to Freelance Writing Success!*](#) This is a completely revised and updated edition of our classic from 2003 that's helped thousands of writers launch their careers, and it will be available in both print and e-book formats on April 4. The e-book version of *The Renegade Writer*, 3rd Edition, is also available to preorder right now on [Amazon](#) and [Kobo](#). And psst...the book comes with a special free gift!