

# Freedom With Writing

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## **How to Get Freelance Writing Jobs from Community Newspapers**

This article will show you exactly how to get writing jobs from community newspapers. If you're looking for more freelance writing work, these papers represent a very real opportunity. There are thousands of community papers in nearly every city and town in the country. Keep reading to learn how to get published and paid by these papers.

As the newspaper industry continues to struggle and online news expands, many small, local newspapers are not just treading water, they're thriving. That might be because a particular community has an older demographic; in many places, publications have embraced the fact they have something other outlets do not – they can offer extremely local, personal coverage about a community and its people.

That's not to say these papers haven't had challenges. Many small newspapers, like their larger counterparts, have been forced to cut back. That's where freelancers can become an invaluable resource.

### **What's it all about?**

Community papers can be very different from online operations, magazines or even large newspapers. In many small newspapers, reporters and/or editors do much more than their counterparts in bigger publications. In my case, I was responsible as a reporter – and later, editor – for all of the general news and features for a twice-weekly paper, took all of my own photos, edited and rewrote submitted copy, laid out the printed news section and updated the website – every single week.

What does that mean for you? Well, if you have writing skills and more – photography, layout and design, even blogging or updating websites or social media – you would likely find yourself in even more demand than someone who just wants to write and nothing else. If you don't have experience in those areas, however, don't get discouraged. For those people open to learning new things, small community newspapers can be an ideal way of adding to your skills arsenal. The more you can offer can directly impact how much you can make, as well as your ability to diversify your freelancing. Community newspapers are a way of expanding your skill base and get paid while doing it.

### **What's the pay?**

You're likely not going to earn hundreds per story freelancing for community newspapers. Depending on the market, you could make between \$20 per story up to perhaps \$50 or more. Location may determine that price more than anything.

However, this is a case where quality can determine quantity. Do a good job, make your deadlines, keep lines of communication open and be easy to deal with and you will likely find your niche, which means you'll have plenty of work. Ten stories at \$35 per story is still \$350 – and that's not too bad, many times for an hour's work or less.

### **How to begin**

Before you approach anyone, take a look at your immediate area and how far you're willing to travel for a small newspaper to cover events and other happenings. While there are certainly opportunities to work for community newspapers in far-reaching areas, I would recommend looking close to home first. After all, that is your community – the fact you are a part of it is a valuable asset to a local newspaper. It is also a great way to keep your costs low, particularly at the start, because you are not spending money and valuable time traveling all over the place.

And, that's going to be a given – if you really want to make this work, you will need to be willing to be “on the scene.” Assignments for local, small newspapers can take virtually any form – hard news, features, sports, photo opportunities, editorials. While many things can be handled by phone and online, what local newspapers oftentimes need is someone who will be where the action is happening. You never know what can happen or if a photo might be a great addition to a story. You might be asked to cover a city council meeting on a Tuesday night, a library function on Thursday afternoon or a school carnival on a weekend.

Once you've determined your personal “where,” it's time to find newspapers in those areas. This can be done in several ways – from looking at newsstands at local markets and convenience stores to searching online for papers in the city you're interested in. Another resource can be the state or local press association, which many times have lists of member publications online, including their location and contact information.

Just as you research a story, at least some of your potential success with a community newspaper can also be determined by research – before you ever get your first assignment. Look at the paper and get a sense of what it covers, as you determine the editor's name and contact information. It might be one newspaper covers a fairly large geographic area, while other cities might have two papers.

### **Getting that first assignment**

So, how do you get that first assignment? Pitch a story idea. It doesn't have to be a major investigative piece. In fact, a catchy feature – perhaps a profile of a local character, a high school band contest or a chamber of commerce event – could be of more use to the paper's editor. One thing community newspapers always need more of are photos. Offering a story that includes them is always a plus.

Send an email to the editor introducing yourself and briefly outlining your story idea. Offer to write this story or cover something where there is a need. Because the full-time employees of these publications so often do so much, make yourself available – there are simply times (say, when the paper is on deadline) that a reporter can't go shoot a ribbon-cutting or a chamber luncheon. That's where you come in.

### **Keys to success**

Remember that deadlines for these newspapers can be incredibly short and, as these publications are very locally-centralized, it can be very difficult for an editor to find a replacement for something that hasn't panned out at the last minute. One of the fastest ways to lose an editor's trust is to miss a deadline or submit something that isn't what they assigned. A freelancer is most valuable to a community news editor when they help “fill in the gaps” the editor and/or his or her staff can't get to. If you prove that you do what you say, let them know quickly when you do have an issue and turn in a quality product, it's likely you'll find your services in high demand.

## Reap the rewards

It's great to get high-paying assignments, and there may come a time when taking a job for community news rates doesn't make sense. However, sometimes something's benefits can go far beyond the short-term financial reward. With community newspapers you can find great people to work with who reward your hard work with loyalty – in the form of more and better assignments, references to other editors and more. You might start with three or four jobs a week and find yourself, just a few months later, having to turn down work because you're so busy – all as you have the ability to work close to home, tell the stories of your community, your neighbors and friends and truly make a difference for people you know. That's a pretty incredible feeling all on its own.

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