

The Creative Writer's Guide to Success After the MFA

NOW WHAT?

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By writers for writers.

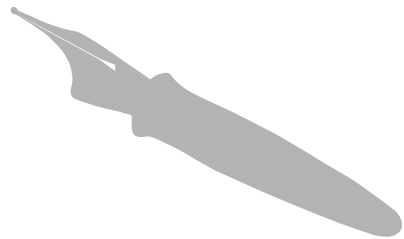
Essential wisdom, advice,
instruction, inspiration and tips
from more than 40 authors who
understand the challenge of
making writing a permanent
part of your life.

Chapter 8

MAKE ENDS MEET (WHILE YOU WORK ON YOUR MASTERPIECE)

edited by Michael Bayer

Even the most famous authors and poets once did boring, grueling or just plain odd jobs before establishing themselves as literary giants or commercial successes. This chapter explores a variety of ways writers can apply their craft to pay the bills while allowing time to pursue their own creative work and publishing success.



The Ghost Life

by Travis Baker

Tuesdays and Thursdays suck the worst. I have to get up at 5:30 to make coffee, read the sports page, walk the dog, pack my stuff and be out the door by 7:00 and hope I don't get stuck behind a manure truck on highway 202 to get to my 8:00 College Comp class in Unity. After that class I have an hour off before the 10:00 College Comp class, which I usually spend in the library, tucked into the little table under Coleridge and Collins, grading papers. After the 10:00 it's back on 202 to try to get to EMCC by 1:00 for Introduction to Communications, or, as it should be called, How to Write a Sentence with a Verb and Everything!

Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays aren't too bad because I only have two classes, the 9:00 ENG 101 class at University of Maine and the 12:30 Intro to Lit at Eastern Maine Community College. But Tuesdays and Thursdays definitely suck.

I mentioned this to Dave, my former Advisor. He took in air between his teeth.

"Yup," he said. "That's the life for awhile."

My three parking passes give me close to the door proximity at all three campuses, which is great in the winter when it's -5 without the wind chill factor.

I float through hallways like a ghost, drifting past the open door offices of the full-time tenure tracked with their stacks of books, leaning back in their well worn chairs. I wish I had a coffee mug sitting on top of a file cabinet like they do. Instead I have 152 papers to grade by next Monday and I forgot to pack my lunch.

In Unity, Brad wrote a story about how his father saved him when he fell through the ice when he was seven and then gave him a beating for doing something so stupid. At the U o' Maine, Marshall managed to connect Aristotle's model of argument with Anzaldua's "Wild Tongue". At EMCC, Shelly wrote a coherent

paragraph. There is warmth in being able to write “Well done!”
There is pride in seeing a smile.

I’m like a literary feather floating on the breeze. I have taught
somewhere around 1,700 students and learned from 1,698 of them.

I’m an adjunct English Instructor.



Is writing a job or a passion? Is it professional or personal? For many writers, these lines are blurry. Some of us have found financial success in other fields, but feel writing is our true calling. Some of us have pursued a writing career since college, and embraced all the fears and insecurities that come with that. Some of us write freelance. Some of us teach writing. Whatever a writer’s circumstances, the rent needs to be paid.

While it’s tempting to envision our lives as either world-famous authors or starving artists, such a dichotomy is both impractical and unnecessary. Even in the absence of a blockbuster book, writing can be a stable – and even lucrative – professional field if you’re willing to keep a low overhead, be flexible about the kind of writing you do, and maybe open your mind to teaching.

Many writers make the ends meet through some combination of freelance gigs, adjunct teaching positions, and grants or fellowships. This chapter highlights opportunities for writers to find gainful employment while they’re still, or always, working on their blockbuster.

Freelancing is one of the most common ways for dedicated writers to keep writing while paying the bills. It can be stimulating, gratifying and lucrative, and the MFA degree is the ultimate academic credential that allows you to market your services. Abbey Cleland describes the ideal attitude *and* aptitude that will benefit aspiring freelance writers.

Yes, I Can Write That

By Abbey Cleland

The life of the freelance writer-for-hire is not a glamorous one, even if you write for glamorous people. Have you ever seen a billboard featuring Shane Halter’s face? Would you spend a week’s pay for Shane Halter’s rookie card? Probably not because chances are you’ve never even heard of the guy.

You’ve probably never heard of Shane Halter because he is a utility player. And not just *any* utility player, but *the* go-to, “we can depend on you” utility player for my favorite baseball team, the Detroit Tigers, from 2000 to 2003. In fact, on October 1st of 2000, Shane Halter

played all nine positions in one single game—the fourth in history to do so— and still you’ve never heard of him. How unfair is that?

See, in our society, we don’t like to hunt about to determine who deserves recognition. No, we like it to hit us in the face, or in this case, we like the ball they hit to hit us in the mitt, should our mitt be four hundred feet from home plate. After middle school, few trophies go to the player who’s most well-rounded. When was the last time your boss patted you on the back for your charming versatility? Probably never. Because you are an adult now, and adults specialize.

Well, specialization means death if you’re new to the world of freelance writing. In order to survive as a new freelance writer you cannot hit a homerun once every ten at-bats. You just need to get on base every time, and the way you get on base is by saying, “Yes I can write that,” even if it means you go home and frantically Google: “Angstrom compensation pyrhelometer” (which I learned quite a lot about during one assignment).

Simply, freelancers are the writing world’s utility ballplayers. We must have the “can-do” attitude of a Marine and the heart of Notre Dame’s Rudy. We must be impeccably punctual and fiercely self-disciplined, for our livelihood depends on it. Most importantly, we must be style chameleons, able to articulate ideas in every tone from clinical to flirtatious, and snap between these settings with the grace of a seasoned short stop.

Now maybe you’re thinking, “Okay, I can do this. I can be versatile. I’ve got the discipline. Put me in, Coach.” Great, glad to have you. But how do you go from the bench to the freelance field? And how do you ensure you stay a key player? (Sidebar: I promise, [probably, hopefully] no more baseball analogies.)

Here’s your mission:

1. Create a killer portfolio.

While you may feel pressured to create a portfolio that is pigeon-hole-proof, meaning it wouldn’t fix you into any one niche, genre, or medium, you should feel comforted that the grand versatility you must

possess does not need to be initially presented in your portfolio. For example, my first official writer-for-hire assignment was to adapt two binders packed with interviews and notes in prose and bullet-point form into a feature-length biopic screenplay. The subject was a real-life ’60s jazz prodigy conman who, when he wasn’t playing brilliant jazz, spent most of his time in jail, or buying, selling, and using heavy drugs (which warranted his return to jail). At the time, I was marketing myself as a children’s writer, toting around an educational TV show pilot and pitch bible that would never be produced (if you’re interested, give me a call; my mom and I still think it’s quite clever). For some reason I may never understand, an independent producer read my children’s work and thought I may be a good fit to write this racy biopic. Since then, I have secured several other jobs using both the biopic feature and the children’s educational TV show as writing samples, and hence learned this valuable, albeit obvious, lesson: good writing is good writing. This lesson yields another valuable, albeit obvious, lesson: good writers are good writers. So, if you hope to secure jobs writing grants, manuals, dissertations, business plans, screenplays, treatments, poems, and editorials, you needn’t spend three years developing sample content for each niche. Simply write a few exceptional pieces and be convincing (through the confidence and composure you project in the interview) when you say, “Yes, I can write that.”

2. Tap into the invisible resources around you.

In each of our daily lives (think dinner parties, the hair salon, charity events, PTA meetings), we encounter people who at some point need to write, but do not know how or just do not have the time. While trying to avoid morphing into some shameless self-promoter, acknowledge the quiet opportunities around you, especially while you’re building your client base. Maybe you’re waiting to hear back regarding a slew of submissions you sent to your dream publications, or maybe you need a little extra cash. You truly never know when one of these random “side projects” may grow to be your bread and butter, or a one-time-only jackpot. Once, purely by mentioning a ghostwriting anecdote at a holiday mixer, I was connected to an aging multi-millionaire who hoped

to have his personal biography penned quickly. This casual conversation led to one of my most fascinating and lucrative gigs to date.

In that same respect, once you secure a job out of your realm of expertise (which, chances are, if you're good, should happen quite often), tap into your friends, family members, and colleagues as resources. Everyone likes to feel like an expert at something, and I assure you, most will welcome providing you with some insight into your topic du jour. That leads us nicely into our next task:

3. Research like your life depends on it (because it sort of does).

It can be difficult to sound convincing all of the time, right? In a single week, you may have to critique a red wine reduction sauce, write a retirement center's brochure, and polish a TV repair manual. But what if you're a thirty-something technologically challenged wine neophyte? Research. Research. Research. (And thank your lucky stars that Al Gore invented the Internet.)

4. Always appear to be in high demand.

Now, we don't have to get crazy with this one. No need to answer your cell pretending to be your fictitious, over-worked assistant, but number four should not go overlooked, either. No one wants to hire anyone who seems too eager for the work. If the potential client, publication, or employer discovers you are *always* available, they may assume others don't acknowledge your talent. This won't work in your favor, especially when you're just starting out. Also, on this note, should you maintain a "day job" while dipping into the freelance marketplace, it's best not to share this with the potential employer. If you expect to be paid professionally, then you must appear to be pursuing this as your primary profession. (Note: Some feel "freelance" is synonymous with "part time." This is a dangerous misinterpretation. "Freelance" simply means that you work for different companies at different times rather than being permanently employed by one company. To avoid confusion, I have come to refer to myself as a "full-time freelance writer.")

5. Always appear happy to write a variety of content in a variety of media.

No one likes to hear the prom queen complain about being asked to the dance by too many fellows, right? Doesn't exactly inspire sympathy. Some will find your freelance writing life to be a glamorous, creative way to make a living, and, as mentioned earlier, it is not. Not at all. So keep the whining about "today I have to write about this," and "tomorrow I have to write about that," to yourself. Your friends and family members won't want to hear it, and your potential employers *definitely* won't. Vent to your writer friends. We are your tribe, and we know what's really "behind the curtain": sweat, blood, pulled hair, vats of coffee, etc.

We get that sometimes upon hitting the final "send" button, you'll fight a tear, as you'll regret having to say goodbye to a topic that you enjoyed exploring so very much. We get that other times, you'll be forced to create incentives to fulfill the pettiest interim deadlines. At those moments, it doesn't matter that you can work in your pajamas. The assignment is miserable, which means your little writer life is miserable. Just yesterday I said aloud to myself: "Two more pages and you get to watch *Downton Abbey* and eat half a sleeve of Girl Scout Samoas." Do what you have to do (within reasonable means) to complete both your favorite and most dreaded gigs, and always keep in mind that, either way, they come and they go.

6. Never short-change yourself.


Most successful writers will admit that writing has always come somewhat naturally to them. It's understandable that one could feel uncomfortable monetizing what comes naturally. To make matters worse, by and large, we writers are a brittle, highly opinionated, highly insecure lot—a population predisposed to self-scrutiny. It may feel funny to demand \$100+ an hour. For heftier, more complex and more time-consuming projects you may even have to propose some serious flat compensation figures. I'm telling you now, do yourself a favor and get over any reluctance immediately. Most people cannot write, though they can acknowledge when something is poorly written, and then

there's a whole population of others who can write well but simply don't have the time. If relevant, don't balk at mentioning in your pitch that the potential employer could probably do a fine job tackling the writing of the project herself but that her time would surely be better spent focusing on different aspects of the business. This way, you acknowledge her intelligence, while emphasizing the time-consuming nature of the work—double win for you, especially if you charge by the hour.

Years ago, a friend of mine demanded to know my base pay. She flinched when I told her \$80 an hour. “What are you, a frickin’ neurosurgeon?” she said. (She’s not my best friend.) Two distinctions must be made, and I hope you find this comforting: 1. *Unlike* neurosurgeons, at slow times freelance writers may work just five hours a week. And, more importantly, 2. *Like* neurosurgeons, the freelance writer is a high demand professional who provides a unique, rare skill, oftentimes with very short notice. Value yourself, value your skill, and don't work for anyone who doesn't.

So, should you create that killer portfolio, tap into the invisible resources around you, research like mad, appear busy *and* happy, and demand you remain valued all the while, I think it's fair to say you're doing everything in your power to excel in the wild freelance marketplace. Just remember to keep the phrase, “Yes, I can write that,” on the tip of your tongue, and who knows, maybe you'll end up like unsung utility ballplayer Shane Halter, doing what you love from all different angles in the field. Would that really be so bad?



uccessful freelancers must be curious and resourceful. Independence has its special privileges, but it also requires that freelance writers have the drive and determination to keep learning and keep their plate full of assignments. Just as a writer needs readers, a freelance writer needs clients. Sarah Sleeper provides practical tips to keep your freelance business thriving.

The Business of Freelance Writing (Or, I Have an MFA, Now How do I Earn Money as a Writer?)

—Sarah Sleeper, MFA

When I went to college, some twenty-five years ago, my goal was to become a writer, and possibly a literature professor or literary critic. One way or the other, I envisioned a literary future. After earning a degree in English, I made a key decision, one that I credit for bringing me much joy as well as professional success. I decided I would never take a non-writing job.

And for two decades I never did. My goal was to make a living as a writer and I did it. I have been a journalist, a ghost writer, a corporate writer, a marketing writer, an editor and a writing teacher. All along I honed my writing skills, striving to learn as much as possible from my superiors and my fellow writers. Writing for a living was excellent preparation for earning an MFA.

We MFAs tend to equate “writer” with “literature.” And of course, we're right to do so. But don't limit yourself. There's a universe of non-literary writing work out there that can stimulate your brain, satisfy your creative spirit, hone your writing and editing skills, and pay your bills. It's a mistake to think that you compromise your artistic standards by doing non-literary writing. The truth is that any professional writing you do—for a corporate client or a mainstream publication, for instance—will make you a better artist.

Even though it's write-for-hire work, approach every article, press release and brochure as a story. As a professional writer with an MFA, you know the importance of taking readers through the beginning,

middle and end of a narrative. That's how you keep their interest and that's what will set your writing apart and garner you repeat clients.

Cultivate an open mind

Successful freelancers are willing to try many types of writing. Everything from television scripts, to web site content, to local newspaper articles, to advertisements in magazines, to computer manuals—all can be written by freelance writers. Many companies hire freelancers, so don't assume that the software company you admire or the charity you support wouldn't hire you to write its press releases or newsletters.

The Internet has only multiplied the opportunities for freelancers. Popular magazines publish their content online, but also publish special online features and blogs to complement their printed material.

Online communication means it's completely reasonable for you to apply for a writing job in Germany, or Japan, or anywhere else in the world. The Internet opens up a universe of possibilities for freelancers. It's possible to write for a newspaper in Washington D.C. from your office in San Diego, or to write for UNICEF in New York, from your home in Connecticut.

Freelance Writing Jobs

Here are some types of writing worth your consideration because they often come with nice paychecks attached:

1. **Press releases**—Company news, financial announcements, new product launches, personnel/executive changes, award notices.
2. **Advertising copy**—Special sections in newspapers and magazines (“Special Advertising Section”), copy for classified and display ads, copy for brochures and flyers, copy for television and radio ads.
3. **Corporate web site content**—From the home page to the “About” page, companies need well-written online copy to attract and retain business.
4. **Internal corporate magazines and newsletters**—Did you know that most big companies print these types of publications? Often they

are glossy, 100-page magazines. Sometimes they're small black-and-white mailings. Companies publish feature articles, Q&A interview pieces, editorials, industry news, biographies and more.

5. **External corporate magazines**—Usually glossy, slick publications distributed to customers, potential customers and anyone in the corporation's particular industry. They publish feature articles, Q&A interview pieces, editorials, industry news, biographies and more.
6. **Annual reports**—A bit specialized because you must have solid understanding of financial fundamentals, but can be lucrative.
7. **Case studies**—From a one-pager to one-hundred pages or more. These require in-depth knowledge of the company and often the same type of knowledge about its competitors. Can be lucrative.
8. **Corporate books**—For marketing purposes. Sometimes ghost-written for CEO/CFO/CIO or the like.
9. **Non-profit documents**—Fundraising appeals, donor letters, pamphlets, web site copy and on and on and on.
10. **Editing of all of the above**—You can find a satisfying combination of writing and editing jobs. Doing a bit of both is good for your brain and helps improve your writing

Even if you've never published before, your MFA gives you an automatic credential and credibility as a writer. Be fearless! Be creative! Approach companies in industries you like, know about, want to learn more about. Think big! What's the worst they can say? You're a writer; you'll survive rejection! Just keep trying. Disney? Apple? Intel? Successful local companies? Give them a shot.

It's hard to know what to charge when you first start out, but I'd encourage you to ask for a professional rate, enough to allow you to support yourself. If you charge too little, your potential clients may not value you or take you as seriously as they should. Early on in my freelance career, I might have accepted a few hundred dollars for a short article in a local magazine. As you gain experience and publication credits, your rates should increase. You will earn the right to charge more over time as your skills and reputation improve.

You must be prepared to negotiate. You must believe in yourself as the writing expert, worth the fees you charge. Eventually, for specialized writing, such as corporate work, it's reasonable to picture yourself making \$1,000 to \$2,000 for a 1,000-word article, \$10,000 for a 100-page book, \$1 to \$2 per word for a 500-word blurb, or \$60 to \$100 per hour for hourly work. Business writing tends to pay more than journalism. You may find that you can earn more money writing press releases for companies than feature articles for your local newspaper.

Keep in mind when you do business writing for corporations, you are probably doing “work for hire.” That means the company will own what you write and you relinquish your copyrights. If you write journalism or literary work, make sure the publication contract does not give away your copyrights. You may be presented with a contract that asks for all rights, but you should negotiate. You can get more information about contracts from The National Writers Union, www.nwu.org.

Where can I get jobs now?

As you strike out as a freelancer, try local and national publications. Search online databases. Look into big companies and small ones, non-profits, professional associations, marketing firms, radio and television stations, e-zines, blogs and trade journals. Try querying consulting firms, research firms, PR and marketing firms. Be as creative in your job search as you are in your writing and you will find jobs!

Your MFA community can also be an excellent resource. When you're looking for work, mention it to your peers. Someone might know of a job or freelance gig that would be perfect for you. Put the word out that you are on the market. Post it on Facebook and LinkedIn. Talk about it in your writers groups and with your friends. Spend plenty of time online, researching the possibilities and examining your options.

Try consulting firms:

- www.accenture.com
- <http://www.pwc.com/us/en/index.jhtml>

- <http://www.mckinsey.com/>
- http://www.deloitte.com/view/en_US/us/index.htm

Try research firms:

- <http://www.gartner.com/technology/home.jsp>
- <http://www.forrester.com/rb/research/>
- <http://www.idc-fi.com/>

Try PR and marketing firms:

- <http://www.edelman.com/>
- <http://www.burson-marsteller.com>
- <http://fleishmanhillard.com/>
- <http://www.ketchum.com/>
- <http://www.ogilvy.com/>
- <http://www.yrgrp.com/>

Spend time on professional sites and job sites. In addition to those below, there are professional sites, organizations and publications for just about any industry you can think of, from horseback riding to microchips to fitness to medical device manufacturing. It's up to you to do the research.

- National Press Foundation... <http://nationalpress.org/>
- Authors Guild... <http://www.authorsguild.org/>
- Association of Writers and Writing Programs... <http://www.awpwriter.org/>
- American Copy Editors Society... <http://www.copydesk.org/>
- National Writers Union ... <http://www.nwu.org>
- Society of Professional Journalists... <http://www.spj.org> and <http://www.sdspj.org>
- American Society of Journalists and Authors... <http://www.asja.org>
- Journalism Jobs... <http://www.journalismjobs.com>

- Media Bistro... <http://www.mediabistro.com>
- Publishers Weekly... <http://www.publishersweekly.com>
- Poynter Online... <http://www.poynter.org>
- The National Press Club... <http://press.org/>
- Writers Market... <http://www.writersmarket.com/>
- American Society of Business Publication Editors
<http://www.asbpe.org/>
- Elance... <http://www.elance.com/>
- All Freelance Writing... <http://allfreelancewriting.com/>
- Freelance Writing...
<http://www.freelancewriting.com/freelance-writing-jobs.php>
- LinkedIn... <http://www.linkedin.com>

The last word

You have your MFA. You were already a writer, but now you've got the diploma to prove it. Go forth and write! Write your poetry and your stories and your essays. And if you want to be a freelancer, do it. It's completely possible to live a literary life and make a living, too. You might find happiness as a part-time poet and part-time journalist, or as a novelist and ghostwriter, or as an essayist and corporate editor. You can create your own combination of writing work that works for you.



Adjunct teaching at the college level can be incredibly rewarding, incredibly frustrating, and everything in between. The experience isn't easily encapsulated. As featured in the opening of this chapter, Travis Baker employs a prose poem style to articulate the elusive, yet profound rewards of adjuncting. And, like freelancing, adjuncting is one of the most common ways for writers to attain gainful employment while maintaining the time, flexibility and energy to keep up their own creative writing. Talk to a hundred adjunct instructors and you'll hear a hundred opinions, but here Ioanna Pettas Opidee distills the adjuncting experience down to its bare essentials.

Surviving the Adjunct Lifestyle: Advice from the Cliff's Edge

—Ioanna Pettas Opidee, MFA

Before I earned my MFA in Creative Writing, I got an MA in English. To pay my way to that degree, I worked as a “graduate assistant,” teaching freshman composition courses in return for tuition remission, and I fell in love with teaching.

This despite the fact that it was a classic sink-or-swim scenario. I received the mandatory textbook for the course about two weeks before my 45-50 students did, most of whom were just about three or four years behind my 21-year-old self in their schooling, and some of whom were old enough to be my parents. In terms of productivity, I did everything wrong—I stayed up all hours of the night, grading papers, planning lessons, to an unhealthy degree of obsessive perfectionism. I released my classes fifteen minutes early almost every period because I remained pretty shy about public speaking, but to make up for it, I spent an exorbitant amount of time conferencing with every single student. At the end of the semester, I received some validating—yet revealing—student evaluations: “Ms. Pettas is the best teacher I ever had” (which I found sad); “Ms. Pettas cares so much about all of her students” (which I found excessively true); “Ms. Pettas is always there to help. Even if you email her at 3 a.m., she'll respond within five minutes” (which concerned my faculty advisor a great deal). In short, I was driving myself crazy; I'd embarked on the road to burnout . . .

I wasn't there yet, though, and I wanted to keep teaching. I loved being able to test out an idea together with my students, to help illuminate the value of doing so, collaboratively; I loved coaching and motivating them through the processes of reading and writing, and deeply examining those processes together along the way. So near the eve of my graduation, when my faculty advisor asked what I thought I might do next, I said, "I think I'll try to adjunct."

"Oh, no," she said, "you don't want to do that." As a specialist in working class literature, I think she was particularly alert to what it means to be overworked and underpaid—as many an adjunct certainly is and may feel. She shared horror stories of her friend who motorcycled across New York City every day to teach eight classes at four different colleges just to make ends meet, riffing a stack of student essays like a machine processing bubbled-in Scantron sheets.

But it didn't matter. I wanted to teach, at the college level, and I wasn't in league for a full-time position, so I applied and was hired by three local universities, beginning my now-six year career as a part-time professor. A year in, I enrolled in an MFA program. While earning that degree, I worked as "graduate assistant director" of the school's composition program, in return for portionable tuition remission, and I learned a great deal about how writing programs are run, and how adjuncts are hired and managed.

At one point in all this time, I did reach bitter burnout—an intensely unpleasant experience for me and for those around me—and I quit teaching to waitress full-time. It was remarkable—and frustrating—to me that I could earn roughly as much teaching college courses as I could working a job I'd been doing since before my parents and I invested in three relatively expensive degrees (I attended Boston College as an undergraduate). On the other hand, there are interesting, and rewarding, crossovers between waitressing and teaching—particularly in the realm of *service*. (Teachable moments abound, too, when you can dispel certain notions and assumptions about servers and their levels of intelligence, education, and ambition.) At the end of the waitressing shift, though, there are no papers to grade; I could focus on my writing. And it was empowering to be able to make the choice to step out of

the teaching cycle, to reflect on where my career was headed and what I wanted from it—what sort of balance I wanted to strike.

But I missed the classroom too much and returned after only one semester away. Since then, I've managed to crawl back up the hillside to a healthier equilibrium. From this state, and based on my own experiences and observations, I will try to offer a few thoughts on the matter of how to "survive" as an adjunct, in hopes that some portion will be useful to others.

1. Remember why you do this.

I teach because I'm a writer. I write, in large part, to learn. Teaching, for me, is a key source of learning, as it likely is for most teachers. I learn from my students—from the questions they ask, from the knowledge and insights they bring, and from the process of trying to understand and articulate what I know about a subject, or don't.

In more practical terms, I teach as an adjunct because it affords me the flexibility to write during the day. It frees me from a 9 to 5 schedule that I've found to be a drain on my creativity. But more importantly, I spend most of my waking, working hours thinking, speaking, and learning about reading and writing. While, admittedly, this in itself can be draining—can, in excess, drain the well of energy we can devote to these activities—I find that it ultimately creates a sometimes mysterious, often serendipitous synergy in my work and life.

Those are just my reasons, though. Whatever your own, I think it helps to keep those reasons (which will likely change and evolve) top of mind, especially in those dark, lonely hours when you may ask yourself—as you glance across the hall at the full-time, tenured colleague who earns triple what you do per class, or as you glare at a towering stack of student writing portfolios—"Why am I doing this?" My suggestion is: Try to answer that question for yourself, every time you ask. If you don't like the answer, it might be time to try something else.

2. Remember that it's a choice.

This leads directly into another thought that I've found helpful: Remember that you're not stuck. Or, perhaps, you're only stuck if you *feel* stuck.

One of the major drawbacks of being an adjunct—the often semester-to-semester contracts—can, in certain circumstances, be an advantage. You have the freedom to do something else, to *choose*. Full-time and tenured professors do, too, of course, but they have a lot more to lose. Adjuncts commonly take leave for one or more semesters—to devote additional time to writing, to attend a residency, to take on freelance projects, or even, as in my case, to waitress—and return to teach at the same school with no hard feelings on either end.

There is a risk involved, of course. Once you're off a program director's radar, it *might* be difficult to get back on it. New people join onto his or her faculty, and there may not be room for you during the given semester when you try to return. But if you stay in the loop and on good terms, decision makers may be more likely to reach out to you when a need does arise.

And needs, as far as I've seen, *always* arise.

Also, there are lots of schools out there. Some may be more aligned than others with your interests, needs, and approach to teaching. Developing relationships with multiple institutions in your area gives you more choices, freedom, and flexibility to take or turn down offers.

3. Cast a wide net, and maintain multiple relationships.

Whether you want to teach composition, creative writing, professional writing, journalism, or some other type of course, it's important to know which department or program these courses fall under and who does the hiring. Before you reach out to a new institution, do your research online. But don't be discouraged if the information isn't as explicit as you'd hoped; reaching out to the chair of a program or department for more information or with questions, I've found, is almost always helpful—they'll either answer your questions directly or immediately forward you to the most relevant person.

Don't wait for a job posting to appear online; many schools don't bother to list part-time openings but, instead, maintain a growing pool of current, former, and potential adjuncts that they can dip into at will. Instead, send out a simple query—briefly introduce yourself and what

you're interested in, and attach your C.V. Unless you're replying to a specific job ad, I would avoid sending too much information—teaching philosophy statements, sample assignments, syllabi, etc.—until or unless they are requested. Asking to come in for an informational interview or to learn more about a particular program/department often works. When they're busy and hard-pressed to fill a slot, they'll be more likely to call *you* if they can put a face to a name on that glorious C.V.

Whether you're trying to land a gig at a new institution or at one where you've taught before, it's important to reach out at the right times—namely, when the aforementioned “needs” are most likely to crop up. While you don't want to bombard a program director or department chair's inbox, it's worth reaching out around mid-semester to inquire about their teaching needs for the following term. Because things often change at the last minute, it's also worth following up again in the few weeks right before a new term begins.

All of this is part of how you keep your options open, and possibly avoid feeling stuck. Remember that English departments and writing programs need you, as a reliable and effective adjunct, as much as (or *more than*) you need them. Value yourself and your time, while fostering good relationships.

4. Understand your rights and responsibilities.

Good relationships are founded, among other things, on mutual respect. In the adjunct realm, this means remembering that you are a professional, and as such, you are entitled to certain benefits (which, unfortunately, almost never include health care just yet) and rights, ranging from whether you'll be granted office space with access to a computer to whether you'll be represented in (or welcome at) department or university-wide meetings. These matters vary from school to school, so it's a good idea to become familiar with them. If an employee handbook is available to you, it's worth reading. If not, or if it's not specifically tailored to adjuncts, it's worth talking to and asking questions of your supervisors and colleagues.

Of course it's equally as important to understand your responsibilities. Are you contractually obligated to attend meetings or

hold regular office hours and conferences with students? Are there certain curriculum standards or requirements that you must include on your syllabus and integrate into your courses? If you teach at multiple institutions, it can be difficult to keep track of all these, but doing so is essential to establishing a reputation for yourself as an adjunct who can be counted on. This, I think, puts you into a stronger—or, at least, less vulnerable—position.

5. Know, and communicate, your limits.

And then there's going overboard. Signing on for every "opportunity" to sit on a committee, or join a task force. Volunteering to work every "Come be an English major!" fair. Serving as an advisor for various students' honors projects or independent studies without compensation. Such activities can be professionally and intellectually enriching, and can also be a chance to present yourself as motivated and dependable. They can widen your exposure and showcase your value. But, in excess—and excess, I find, comes quickly here, as these activities have a way of compounding themselves—you may find yourself feeling stretched too thin, not to mention *broke*, and possibly on the road to bitter-burnout.

This applies, too, when you're suddenly offered more courses than you feel you can take on in a given semester. There's often a fear, for an adjunct, that saying *no* to a course will get you black-listed, or at least cast you permanently off an employer's radar. Perhaps this is a well-founded fear; however, I've found that explaining why you aren't able to take on the course, and following up at a later date (when you *are* more available), effectively avoids this issue. If you take on too many courses and end up flailing through the semester, it can be worse for your reputation and relationship than saying *no* from the start.

I, for one, am constantly forgetting my limits. So for me, it's not so much a matter of *knowing* my limits as *coming to know* them. I've learned to make a more conscious and reflective effort to do so, and it helps. I've also learned to better communicate those limits—to respectfully decline "opportunities," sometimes with a polite yet pointed reminder that, unfortunately, I have too many jobs and not

enough time to take on this additional course, or that project I would otherwise love to complete.

The reminder, I think, is important and useful to all parties involved.

While it's easy to feel embittered by the dearth of opportunity and the often utterly unjust circumstances, it may be helpful to recognize that important work is being done at various levels within academia to improve job categories and working conditions for adjunct/part-time/affiliate/pick-your-preferred-euphemism-for-*subordinate* faculty. Enough work? I'm not sure. But even within the *six* years I've been teaching, I've seen a noticeable increase in the national conversation surrounding these issues, within and beyond academia. It's good to keep track of this—follow the trends reported on in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *The New York Times*, and other publications, and maybe even take action and join the AAUP (American Association of University Professors). Because, in our excitement and desire to teach at the college level, it can be just as easy to wear rose-colored lenses (especially at the start).

Perspectives on and ways of handling the issues discussed above vary widely. The best advice I can offer is this: Pay attention; listen carefully to what others have to say, take stock of your options and, meanwhile, figure out what works best for you, your career, and your *life*.



While the role of literature in civil society seems always to be under threat, government and non-profit institutions still support writers through a variety of funding sources, but writers must be knowledgeable and proactive to access these funds. Carol Ann Davis explains the options available to writers who need an extra financial cushion to finish that time-consuming book or collection.

Grants and Fellowships: Where to Look, When to Apply

by Carol Ann Davis

The number of grants and fellowships for emerging writers has grown in recent years, and many include a chance to do a little bit of teaching and/or complete a residency as part of the award, all of which are an opportunity for professional development. Some residencies may not provide large stipendiary support, but support you in other ways, such as placing you in touch with an artistic community and offering additional professional preparation (such as editorial training). All grants and fellowships are accompanied by guidelines; carefully consult those guidelines to determine whether the grant is intended for an emerging or a mid-career writer, a writer from a certain genre or geographical area, etc.

Places to Look for Grants and Fellowships:

- A few grants and fellowships will be highlighted below, but there are a great many tailored to particular regions of the country, genres, or constituencies.
- Keep up with grant deadlines by consulting the Grants & Awards free directory offered by Poets and Writers magazine (<http://www.pw.org/grants>).
- For \$12, the PEN Center offers an annual Grants & Awards listing that is definitely worth the money, and PEN is a great organization to join as well (<https://www.pen.org/content/grants-awards-one-year-subscription>).

- State and local arts council grants are available on the websites of individual state arts organizations; many private, local arts organizations exist to support local writers.

A few select fellowships and awards (not requiring residency):

- The National Endowment for the Arts Literature Fellowships: the NEA Literature Fellowships program offers \$25,000 grants in prose (fiction and creative nonfiction) and poetry to published* creative writers that enable the recipients to set aside time for writing, research, travel, and general career advancement. *Grant guidelines stipulate a certain number of pages in genre must be published prior to application for this grant. (<http://arts.gov/grants-individuals/creative-writing-fellowships#sthash.IAdY5NBK.dpuf>)
- The PEN Emerging Writers Award: \$2,500 are awarded to two promising new writers—one fiction writer and one nonfiction writer—at a crucial early moment in their careers. The awards are given to promote talented up-and-coming authors whose writing has been featured in distinguished literary journals across the country, but who have yet to publish book-length works. (<http://www.pen.org/grants-and-awards/pen-emerging-writers-awards>)

A few select residential fellowships for emerging writers that include residencies and financial support (adapted from websites; consult listed websites for additional information):

- The Kenyon Review Fellowship Program: This two-year post-graduate residential fellowship at Kenyon College offers qualified individuals time to develop as writers, teachers, and editors. Fellows will receive a \$32,500 stipend, plus health benefits. (<http://www.kenyonreview.org/programs/fellowship/>)
- The Stadler Center for Poetry Stadler Fellows (open genre): Initiated in 1998, Stadler Fellowships offer a recent MFA or MA in poetry the opportunity to receive professional training in

arts administration and literary editing. Stadler Fellowships are designed to balance the development of professional skills with time to complete a first book of poems. Stadler Fellows assist for twenty hours each week in the administration of the Stadler Center for Poetry and/or in the editing of *West Branch*, Bucknell's nationally distinguished literary journal. Fellows also work as staff members and instructors in the Bucknell Seminar for Younger Poets in June. The Fellowship stipend is \$20,000. In addition, each Fellow is provided health insurance, office space in the Stadler Center, and housing. (<http://www.bucknell.edu/x3733.xml>)

- The University of Wisconsin Institute for Creative Writing: Since 1986, the University of Wisconsin's Institute for Creative Writing has provided time, space, and an intellectual community for writers working on a first book of poetry or fiction. Each fellowship carries a \$27,000 stipend, generous health benefits, and a one-course-per-semester teaching assignment in intermediate or advanced undergraduate creative writing. Fiction and poetry fellows are asked to give one public reading during the fellowship year. (<http://creativewriting.wisc.edu/fellowships.html>)

- Colgate University's Olive B. O'Connor Fellowship in Creative Writing: The annual fellowship is designed to support writers completing their first books. It provides a generous stipend, office space, and an intellectual community for the recipients, who spend the academic year at Colgate. In return, each fellow teaches a creative-writing workshop each semester and gives a public reading of his or her work. (<http://www.colgate.edu/academics/departments-and-programs/english/creative-writing-fellows>)

- Stanford University's Stegner Fellowships: Stanford offers ten two-year fellowships each year, five in fiction and five in poetry. All the fellows in each genre convene weekly in a 3-hour workshop with Stanford's creative writing faculty. Fellowships include a living stipend of \$26,000 per year. In addition, fellows' tuition and health insurance are paid for by the Creative Writing Program. The Stegner Fellowship is a full-time academic commitment, and

is not intended to be pursued concurrently with another degree program. Fellows must live close enough to Stanford to be able to attend workshops, readings, and events.

(<http://creativewriting.stanford.edu/about-the-fellowship>)

- Fine Arts Work Center, Provincetown, Fellowships: The Fine Arts Work Center offers a unique residency for writers and visual artists in the crucial early stages of their careers. Located in Provincetown, Massachusetts, an area with a long history as an arts colony, the Work Center provides seven-month Fellowships to twenty Fellows each year in the form of living/work space and a modest monthly stipend. Residencies run from October 1 through May 1. Fellows have the opportunity to pursue their work independently in a diverse and supportive community of peers.

(<http://web.fawc.org/program>)



We spill our minds and hearts onto the page, often instead of taking “real” jobs with benefits, but let’s not forget that writers also possess physical bodies that need to stay healthy. The Affordable Care Act has created a new landscape for writers in need of affordable and reliable health insurance. Meredith Kazer explains how “Obamacare” has created new rights, responsibilities and opportunities for self-employed writers to manage their healthcare without going broke.

Health Insurance for Writers

by Meredith Kazer

Prior to 2014, self-employed writers had few options for health insurance coverage. Young writers might have received coverage under their parents’ policy until the age of 25. Married writers were eligible for benefits under the policy of their spouse. Writers might also have received health coverage through writer’s guilds if earnings reported by their signatory employer reached the minimum threshold for coverage during a period of four or fewer consecutive calendar quarters. Those writers who might have fallen below the threshold after a period of coverage or left a position with health benefits could elect coverage under the COBRA, which extended the benefits provided by the employer for a period of 18 months after employment was terminated. In this case, while subsidies were sometimes available to reduce the premium, the (former) employee was usually responsible for paying the entire premium. A final option might have been the purchase of a major medical plan that provided catastrophic health insurance coverage for major health issues, such as development of cancer or a chronic illness.

Since January 1, 2014, health insurance for writers is a whole new ballgame. The federal Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (P.L. 111-148), also known as the Affordable Care Act (ACA) or *Obamacare*, was officially enacted on March 31, 2010. Under the provision of the ACA, self-employed writers now have greater access to healthcare insurance than ever before. American Health Benefit Exchanges now provide opportunities for individuals to shop for healthcare insurance tailored to meet personal needs. The health benefit exchanges are

designed specifically for individuals and small businesses and are regulated by states to provide an organized method through which individuals can shop in a competitive marketplace for insurance.

Depending on the income status of the writer and his or her family, tax credit advances or refunds may be available on a sliding scale (according to income) to subsidize the premiums for those individuals and families with incomes from 100% to 400% of the federal poverty level (FPL) requiring coverage. Four levels of coverage are available ranging from Platinum (highest level of coverage), through Gold, Silver and Bronze (lowest level of coverage). Families at or below 250% of the FPL may be eligible to enroll in higher levels of coverage at lower costs.

The ACA defines health coverage comprehensively. In addition, pre-existing conditions no longer prevent writers from obtaining coverage, as the ACA makes it illegal for insurers to deny coverage or impose lifetime or annual coverage limits on benefits. In addition, young writers may now remain on their parents’ health insurance until the age of 26, and writers who are covering families are now able to continue covering their children until this age. Catastrophic coverage is still an available health insurance option for writers under the age of 30 and individuals for whom the premium of the lowest level of coverage exceeds eight per cent of their income. Coverage within catastrophic plans, however, is extended to include annual prevention benefits and three visits to a primary care provider each year. These are excellent benefits which will not only improve the health of the nation, but may actually decrease healthcare costs by allowing individuals to receive primary prevention interventions to prevent diseases from occurring or to detect illnesses at an earlier, treatable stage. If a writer qualified for health benefits through the Writers Guild-Industry Health Fund in the past, there is no evidence to suggest that eligibility for this coverage is changed under the provisions of the ACA.

While greater access to health insurance coverage is ensured under the ACA, minimum coverage provisions have been implemented in order to keep the system balanced. Self-employed writers, who have risked going without health insurance in the past, can no longer do

so under the ACA without having to pay a penalty. In addition, the availability of an adequate number of healthcare providers to meet the needs of the newly insured population has caused concern. In other words, newly insured writers could have trouble finding a provider to care for them, despite the fact that they have adequate coverage. Overall, the ACA is a step forward to improving the health of the nation, but writers must be proactive and knowledgeable to ensure maximum benefits from expanded coverage.



Group Plans and Resources

by Heather Zullinger

Emerging freelance writers might find the following websites helpful in researching options for health insurance coverage. As with any other long term financial commitment, education regarding this investment at the outset is imperative for maximum results, particularly in a changing marketplace such as this one. Review each site thoroughly to determine your membership availability and ascertain the best “fit” for your individual needs. It is also beneficial to re-visit the chosen policy on an annual basis and review for efficacy as your creative portfolio and compensation expands.

Below are a few select resources and options to assist with decision-making:

Healthcare.gov. The ACA website provides information on how to select and enroll in a health insurance plan that covers essential benefits, pre-existing conditions, and more. Links to statewide websites for health insurance coverage are also provided. (<http://www.healthcare.gov/>).

Internal Revenue Service. This website details information on required health insurance coverage and tax implications (credits and penalties) for coverage, or lack thereof, for residents of the U.S. It also provides links to a number of other helpful websites. (<http://www.irs.gov/uac/Affordable-Care-Act-Tax-Provisions-Home>).

The Editorial Freelancers Association. Paid membership provides access to varying levels of insurance coverage and discount plans. Membership is \$145 for one year or \$260 for two years, plus a \$35 processing fee for new members. (<http://www.the-efa.org>)

Freelancer’s Union. Free membership provides access to Health, Dental, Disability, Term, Liability and Retirement insurance options. (<https://www.freelancersunion.org>)

National Writer's Union. Eligible writers have access to Dental and Vision insurance as well as a free prescription drug card with their paid membership. Membership is \$120-\$340 per year, dependent on income; half year memberships are available. (<https://www.nwu.org>)

Artists Health Insurance Resource Center. The goal of this organization is to “insure every artist by 2014.” It contains a wealth of information on healthcare under the ACA, providing a variety of options and methods for obtaining plans. (<http://www.ahirc.org>)

Writers Guild of America. This organization, which is broken up into two regional sections (east and west), is a labor union that provides resources for screenwriters. Through the website, writers can learn about health insurance coverage that meets the revised ACA requirements. For more information, visit www.wga.org (West) or www.wgacast.org (East).

Chambers of Commerce. Many Chambers of Commerce offer access to health insurance with a paid membership. Membership pricing varies by state/municipality. Contact your local chamber for more information.

Alumni Associations. A large number of universities and colleges in the U.S. provide access to healthcare via their alumni associations. Contact yours directly or visit the Alumni Insurance Program site below. (<http://www.alumniinsuranceprogram.com>)

All organizations, guilds and unions listed above are transitioning to the new regulations stipulated under the ACA. Read carefully and contact the source directly for clarification and confirmation regarding any policy or plan purchases.



When in need of inspiration, and sometimes to escape depression, writers often study the lives of the authors we most admire. We hope to catch a glimpse of ourselves in their life stories, to learn that they too once held a soul-sucking or entirely unglamorous job to pay the bills. We need reassurance that success comes in infinite forms. Ashley Andersen Zantop had fun tracking down the former occupations of some of our favorite visionaries.

Before We Knew Them: Jobs Held by Our Literary Heroes

by Ashley Andersen Zantop

When you've paid your last bill, washed your last dish, signed up for health insurance, updated your prescriptions for glasses, contacts or anti-depressants and find that you're still not sure if your life or your writing makes any sense, sometimes what you need is old fashioned encouragement. Maybe you crave some reassurance that even though life seems odd now, if you keep writing, it will make sense later. Learning about the near-surreal jobs held by literary greats throughout the years can help us realize that no matter where we start from, we can achieve our goals as writers. Here are a few of my favorites for inspiration or at least a good stress-relieving chuckle:

Douglas Adams worked the night shift as a hotel security guard. *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* always did make more sense at night.

Margaret Atwood served a tour as a coffee shop cashier, briefly. She reportedly began writing when she was six years old and decided at sixteen to make a living as a writer, so she didn't have much time to do anything else. For some of us, it's just that simple.

Roald Dahl worked for Shell and served in the Royal Air Force. Shot down over Libya and wounded in Syria, he didn't start writing and publishing in earnest until he was recovering from head injuries sustained during his service.

Charles Dickens worked in a shoe polish factory to earn money to secure his father's release from debtor's prison.

T S Elliot labored in 'Colonial and Foreign Accounts' at Lloyd's Bank.

William Faulkner was a mailman, reportedly an atrocious one who read all the magazines he delivered and played golf while out on his route.

Robert Frost worked in a light bulb factory handling filaments.

Dashiell Hammett made a living as a private investigator for the Pinkerton Detective Agency and practiced his hand as a nail machine operator.

Nathaniel Hawthorne was a shipping clerk before publishing *The Scarlet Letter*.

Zora Neal Hurston worked as a maid to a traveling singer before conducting ethnographic research at Barnard with fellow student Margaret Mead.

E.L. James was a television executive before beginning to write fan fiction, which became fifty shades of an international phenomenon.

Ken Kesey volunteered as a test subject in a CIA-sponsored drug study and worked as a janitor in a mental hospital. The two experiences reportedly served as the inspiration for *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*.

Stephen King worked as a high school janitor. It's been reported that cleaning the girl's locker room provided the inspiration for *Carrie*.

Harper Lee worked as an airline ticket agent.

Stanislaw Lem was a car mechanic, welder and active member of the Polish resistance against WWII Nazi occupation of Poland. He began his writing career as a poet before earning fame as a science fiction author.

Jack London reportedly stole oysters from oyster farmers to sell in local markets. Seafood pirate? Seriously? It figures.

George Orwell worked in the Imperial Police in India, and was promoted to Assistant District Superintendent. He became a writer after leaving the Indian Imperial Police, prompted by taking sick leave in England to recover from dengue fever.

Sylvia Plath was a receptionist at a psychiatric hospital. Some things just make sense.

JD Salinger was an entertainment director on a Swedish cruise line.

John Steinbeck worked as a caretaker and guide at a fish hatchery. His first wife attended one of his tours.

Mark Twain worked as a typesetter and riverboat captain, among other things. The term 'mark twain' (a pen name) refers to the depth of a river of two fathoms.

Kurt Vonnegut was reportedly an owner and manager of a Saab dealership in Cape Cod, MA.

This final writer deserves a place of distinction as the ultimate success in fantastic pre-authorial careers, so excuse the lapse in alphabetical order: A variety of sources report **Maya Angelou's** professional endeavors outside of writing as "pimp, prostitute, night-club dancer and performer, cast member of the musical *Porgy and Bess*" and "coordinator for Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Southern Christian Leadership Conference." She wins. Hands down.

