



# The Writer's Compass

## Turning the Next Page

### Briefing 1: Boosting your income with freelance journalism Fiona Gibson

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This briefing sheet is based on a session delivered by Fiona Gibson at Turning the Next Page, an event for graduates of Scotland's Creative Writing Masters and PhD programmes and early career professional writers held at the CCA, Glasgow on Saturday 16 April 2011. Turning the Next Page is presented by The Writer's Compass (NAWE) in partnership with CCA, Glasgow Life, Gutter and Scottish Book Trust and funded by Creative Scotland.

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### About the author

Fiona contributes to Red, Marie Claire, Zest, Prima, Mother & Baby, Top Sante, Edition (John Lewis magazine), Sainsbury's magazine, the Daily Mail and many other publications. Fiona is also an author; her fifth novel, Mum on the Run, was published by Avon in February 2011. Her first children's book for 9-12s will be published by Scholastic in August 2011. <http://www.fionagibson.com/>

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### Is freelance writing for you?

The freelance market has changed in the past two or three years. Due to budget and staff cuts there are fewer commissions. Many staff writers have gone freelance since the closure of their publications, so it's pretty crowded out there. However, magazines, newspapers and websites still need content and there are opportunities to sell your work. You just need to adopt an extremely proactive approach.

It's worth considering how you want freelance writing to work for you e.g. do you aim to:

- Sell features, interviews and reviews etc as a way of boosting your income to allow you to pursue your own creative writing?
- Make a living as a full-time freelance writer?
- Write on a subject you're passionate about?

Consider, too, how freelancing will sit alongside your own creative writing. I enjoy both and find that they complement each other very well. For instance:

- Writing a novel can be a long and lonely business. Having shorter freelance projects to go can help you to feel in touch and connected.
- Freelancing can provide much-needed income if you haven't been paid an advance for your creative writing.
- It can also spark ideas which can then feed into your more creative work. It's not unheard of for a feature to 'grow' into a novel or non-fiction work.

*And some cons...*

- Commissions often seem to pop in when you're deeply immersed in your creative writing. Breaking off to write a feature definitely interrupts flow - but then, life interrupts flow too, and having the ability to flip back and forth between projects is extremely useful.

In fact, that's the only 'con' I can think of. Dividing time is challenging but, for me, books and magazine/newspaper features have always coexisted pretty happily.

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## Who do you want to write for?

It makes sense for the titles you enjoy, and are familiar with, to be your first port of call. However, be prepared to take a broad approach, targeting several publications and not just, say, The Guardian. You don't have to be an expert to write for specialist publications - I write for health and banking magazines and know virtually nothing about health (or banking). It's your take on a subject, and the way you present your idea, that nails a commission.

Before you make an approach, be sure you know the publication inside out and read several issues. Decide whether your idea fits, and if it's new and different enough, and read the masthead to find the right person to contact. Familiarise yourself with the readership too - age, sex, lifestyle. Reader profile is often on magazines' websites and the content - letters page, case studies featured etc - should give you a flavour.

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## Writing a pitch

Your next step is to put together a pitch or synopsis of the feature you hope to write. It's a better approach than writing the entire feature and sending it in on spec. Success rate with this method is low, and you'd be incredibly lucky to approach a features editor with the precise feature they want, at the right time. Plus, sending on spec seems unprofessional - established freelance writers would never do this. 'I thought you might like to publish my feature' approaches tend to come from readers.

The features editor, or commissioning editor, is usually the person to contact. On smaller publications, where no features/commissioning editor is listed on the masthead, approach either the editor or deputy editor. If you're unsure, it's worth making a call to find out who does most of the commissioning.

## What makes a good pitch?

It should summarise the content, structure and 'type' of feature - whether it's a personal piece, or includes case studies, experts' quotes etc. Your pitch should also get the tone across (funny, authoritative, hard-hitting). Mention what you feel the *reader* would get out of your feature. Sell it with enthusiasm and try to sound confident and not too formal. The aim of a pitch is to make your piece sound as appealing, grabby and reader-relevant as possible.

## A note on etiquette

Submit by email - phoning is intrusive. When submitting ideas, two or three is enough in one go (too many are overwhelming and there's a chance that they won't be read). If you don't hear anything, email again after a couple of weeks, saying that if the ideas aren't right for them you would now like to offer them elsewhere. Unfortunately, if the ideas don't hit the spot, the commissioning editor is unlikely to get back to you. It can feel a little like throwing ideas into a black hole, which is why recycling ideas is important (see below).

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## Some women's magazine-style pitches I've sent which have resulted in commissions

### *For Red:* **Kitchen Resolutions**

This is one of my resolutions every year - to widen my kitchen repertoire. In fact this time I plan to ditch all of my staples - the fail-safe crowd pleasers I've cooked hundreds of times and introduce my family to new, exciting dishes.

I imagine this in a diary format. Every day for a week, banned from resorting to any of the spag bol/meatballs/roast chicken old faithfuls, I have to tantalise my family's tastebuds with something different and new. I have a vast collection of cookbooks with hundreds of recipes I'd love to try - but am always put off by the prospect of a lukewarm response and time/food wasted. But churning out the same old stuff is so dull and repetitive. Time, then, for a brave new approach. I look upon it as broadening my family's horizons so, really, I'll be doing them a favour.

I'd report on the family's reactions, what's loved and rejected, and how I feel at the end of a cooking-frenzy week - revitalised, and freed from bolognese monotony? Or sick to the back teeth of chopping lemongrass only to have someone say, 'Ugh, what's that?'

### *For online women's magazine ivillage:* **Truly Madly Sleepy – being a couple and not just shattered Mum and Dad**

Nothing puts the kibosh on romance than running around after babies and small children - and even having teenagers mooching around the house until the wee small hours can make you lose your sense of coupleness. Piece would comprise ten tips to get your coupleness back on track, with quotes from psychologists and relationship experts woven in, e.g.

- Every couple needs child-free time together: how to make that happen.
- When you do have that time, how to make it work? Don't discuss the kids obsessively. How to communicate as a couple and not just parents.

- Random acts of kindness: how our partners can end up at the bottom of the pecking order as we're so busy focusing on the kids. How small acts of kindness can make your partner feel cared for and wanted again. Then he's more attentive to you - and so the kindness cycle begins.
- The importance of having fun together, being silly and frivolous, and seeing the funny side of bringing up kids. It's that vital, 'we're in this together' feeling which makes everything worthwhile.

*For Sainsbury's magazine: **Stand back, girls, it's barbecue time...***

What is about the first glimmer of spring that sends men scampering towards the barbecue? Why, at the first peep of sunshine, are they lighting coals, sprinkling lighter fluid around willy-nilly and embracing such a haphazard method of cooking? I'm sure it's tied up with some basic hunter-gatherer instinct. There's nothing especially manly about putting a casserole in the oven - but throwing raw meat over sizzling coals? It's so testosterone-fuelled, almost caveman-like.

Whatever the appeal, being a spectator is certainly fun. There's all the bad language when food falls into the flames - not to mention guessing what that mysterious foodstuff (with a blackened exterior, yet curiously bloody inside) actually is...

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## Backing up your idea - selling yourself

Even if they like your idea, a commissioning editor will want to feel confident that you can write it not only well, but in their house style. Use your initial email approach to sell yourself as a potential contributor. Consider what you can offer that no other writer can. A personal experience? Expertise in a certain field? A unique take on a subject? Also...

- Use any contact or connection you have - however tenuous - as it may give you an 'in' with your chosen publication.
- Be realistic in your expectations. If you are viewed as 'new', they are unlikely to commission a 2,000 word main cover story. Suggest shorter features to give the features editor a chance to test you out.
- Email previous pieces as attachments when you send your pitch. If they are relevant to the publication, so much the better. Don't send reams - no one has time to read them. Two or three pieces are plenty.
- Some people send their pitches as an attachment but I tend to copy and paste them onto the main body of the email, following on from my introductory blurb and a summary of my previous work.

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## Building your business

I look upon freelance writing as a business, and have various systems to attract as much work as possible. For instance:

*Keeping a record of all the pitches sent out.* It's easy to forget and send the same idea to two features editors, and have both commission you (panic!).

*Recycling ideas.* I do this endlessly, which is why keeping a record is important. If Red don't want an idea, I'll rewrite the pitch and offer it to, say, the Mail. There's so much cross-over with content these days. No one knows and it doesn't matter as each pitch is tailored to that specific publication so it feels 'new' again. It's also very eco-friendly (cuts down on energy spent thinking up new ideas!). And it helps to dispel that hollow feeling when editors don't get back to you. A good idea is rarely wasted.

*Creating a support system* e.g. a writing buddy with whom you can share contacts, seek opinions on ideas and boost each other's morale. Weekly email updates with a writer friend work well for me.

*Other useful tools:* UK Press Gazette, the daily papers' media pages and Gorkana ([www.gorkana.com](http://www.gorkana.com)), a media database for journalists and PRs and a really useful resource. You do have to sign up, providing a brief summary of your professional background and experience, but it's quick and easy - contact details are on website. Once you've signed up, you'll receive twice-weekly email alerts, detailing media staff changes, new launches, opportunities for freelancers and permanent media jobs. For instance, in a recent alert::

**ShortList Media:** The publisher of free magazines *ShortList* and *Stylist*, will launch a free twice-yearly men's fashion glossy in March, to be branded *ShortList Mode*. The free title will focus on *ShortList's* affluent ABC1 male audience, with 250,000 copies being distributed in four key retail-centric cities - London, Manchester, Leeds and Glasgow. March confirmed as launch date. It will be edited by *ShortList's* Style Director **Adrian Clark**, with *ShortList* Editor **Terri White** taking the role of Editor-in-Chief. Adrian can be reached at [adrian.clarke@shortlist.com](mailto:adrian.clarke@shortlist.com) and Terri can be reached at [terri.white@shortlist.com](mailto:terri.white@shortlist.com)

**Sunday Mirror/The Sunday Times:** Reporter **Kate Mansey** is leaving the *Sunday Mirror* at the end of the year to join *The Sunday Times* as a Senior Reporter. Until then she can be reached at [kate.mansey@sundaymirror.co.uk](mailto:kate.mansey@sundaymirror.co.uk).

I've gleaned new, regular freelance work via Gorkana (for instance, I found out that [ivillage.co.uk](http://ivillage.co.uk) was relaunching and requiring fresh content) so it's definitely worth the (small) effort of signing up. It makes me feel more on the ball and connected, and sparks ideas of new people to contact.

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## Common mistakes:

*Suggesting tired feature ideas.* Features editors want originality - ideas which will grab their readers and boost sales.

*Not reading recent issues.* You might think you know a publication but has it changed recently? Been re-launched to attract a different readership?

*Adopting a cynical approach* and pitching to magazines you don't like e.g. 'trashy' magazines simply for the money. People who write for these magazines might not choose to read them personally but they do understand them and have an affection for them.

*Pitching by phone.* Emailing gives the features editor time to mull your idea over, rather having it thrust at them.

*Sending too many ideas at once.* Two or three is ideal. Nothing wrong with sending just one.

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## Your rights

When you're commissioned, you will usually be asked to sign a commissioning form giving the publication all rights to your piece. This is standard practice, particularly for magazines - in fact almost everyone I work for does this, apart from the Herald and DC Thomson (who buy First British Serial Rights, and pay an additional fee if they re-use a piece).

If you look at the rights section on the NUJ website at <http://www.londonfreelance.org/feesguide/index.php?&section=General&subsect=Rights+and+why+they+are+important&page=Advice> - you'll see that you are strongly advised to hold onto your copyright. However, being realistic, most freelancers have to accept the standard terms set out by the publishing company.

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## Money

Every publication has its going rate and unless you're a big name there's little room for manoeuvre. Sometimes you are paid by the word, sometimes a flat fee depending on length of feature. Occasionally they will pay a little extra if you have had to do a mammoth amount of research. A woman's magazine - monthly or weekly - will pay anything from £200-£400 for a single page feature (around 800-1,000 words). A longer piece - around 2,000 words - might earn you £400-£700. Newspapers vary hugely - the Daily Mail might pay £800 for a 1500-word piece, while the Observer or Guardian would probably pay around half that. Regional papers generally pay even less. Websites/portals such as ivillage pay around £200 per piece - usually around 800 words. To make a decent living it's important to constantly fire off ideas, develop and nurture contacts and work quickly and efficiently.

You can find out more from the **NUJ fees guide**  
<http://www.londonfreelance.org/feesguide/index.php?section=Welcome>.  
Incredibly, freelance rates have barely increased during the past 15 years.

**Yet it's not all bad news.** Even if rates seem low, regular work is worth its weight in gold and those cheques mount up. Develop those relationships with features editors, be pleasant and never sniffy or difficult, even if they ask for three re-writes. Then, hopefully, you'll be a contributor for a long time to come.

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## Further reading

Finally, for a very helpful and practical guide to freelance writing, invest in a copy of *No Contacts? No Problem: How to Pitch & Sell a Freelance Feature* by Catherine Quinn (Methuen Drama).

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