



Read all about it: Newspaper writing

Premier papers remain a viable market for freelancers. Here's how to break in.

“WHAT'S BLACK and white and completely over?” Jon Stewart quipped last December on his Comedy Central show. “It's newspapers.”

Not so fast, say publishers, writers and readers. Yes, the Internet certainly is giving dailies a run for their money as a news and entertainment source, and siphoning off advertising dollars in the process. Still, 38 million read papers on weekdays and 5 million more on Sundays, according to the Audit Bureau of Circulations reporting service. And it's not just the older set: My husband and I are among that number—and so is our 22-year-old. She may check out the headlines online, but she also subscribes to *The New York Times*.

This need for content for the approximately 1,400 daily papers around the country continues to mean good news for freelancers. And it's not just small-town and regional papers—it's the major dailies, too. Sure, they might be harder to break into, but a variety of opportunities abound in different sections, and you just might have the story they're looking for.

Know the papers

You can always go online to read highlights from premier newspapers, and you should. While you're there, check out the media kit (most often found under the advertising tab). It provides a wealth of information, such as editorial calendars and descriptions of different sections.

But you also need to get your hands on the print versions. Chances are, no matter where you live, you can find one nearby. Libraries typically are a good source; if yours isn't, ask your librarian

if he or she will consider regularly carrying at least one paper in the future. Coffee shops, especially national chains, are great places to find papers (Starbucks usually has *The New York Times*), as are bookstores. Airports are another good source: Pick up dailies when you travel, and ask friends who are going away to get copies for you. Subscribing by mail is another option.

At any rate, says Caitlin Kelly, a non-fiction author who's been on the staff of three major dailies, “you must read the paper very carefully for several months, every day, to get a feel for what regular spots are open to freelancers.”

Find out what they want

Case in point: I always thought sports was pretty much a local gig, but I recently discovered that isn't necessarily so. At a forum on *The New York Times* sponsored by the American Society of Journalists and Authors, I was surprised to hear deputy sports editor Sandy Keenan say she's open to stories from across the country, as long as they have nationwide appeal. Sandy and her pool of assignment editors depend heavily upon freelancers, some of whom work almost as much as the staffers. If she likes your writing, she promises, “I'll work you like a racehorse.” Sandy loves unusual stories tagged to current news (check out the “Cheering” feature) and statistics, and you can even pitch her and sports editor Tom Jolly blog ideas.

On the other hand, Mike Kellams, *Chicago Tribune's* associate managing editor for sports, says he uses few freelancers (or stringers, in newspaper parlance), because the paper is “much more Chicago- and Midwest-centric” than national. If he needs a story from an-

other area of the country, he first contacts reporters from Tribune's other newspapers scattered across the U.S.

Another section with space to fill is science and health. Even though he “doesn't have an appetite” for using writers he hasn't worked with, editor David Corcoran of *The New York Times* is open to manuscripts for “Cases,” an 800-word first-person essay about encounters with health care, which runs every Tuesday in “Science Times.” His companion editor, James Gorman, will look at pitches for hard-science topics like chemistry and physics, etc., as well as technology and the environment. And Toby Bilanow needs comprehensive pieces for the online health guide, a list of 3,000 health topics (<http://health.nytimes.com/health/guides>). At the *Los Angeles Times*, health editor Tami Dennis needs submissions for the paper's “My Turn” column, which recounts an experience or airs an opinion relating to health and fitness.

Also at *The New York Times*, house and home editor Trish Hall says she's very dependent upon freelancers for the home and dining sections, as well as for domestic travel in the weekend section. All have a national perspective; look at “Great Homes and Destinations” at www.nytimes.com/pages/great-homes-and-destinations for an example. Service pieces and first-person account pitches on “what's new” are what Hall most prefers. Occasional essays run in the home section, and can be sent in their entirety to editor Tom DeKay.

Perhaps the most popular sections with freelancers are op-ed and travel. Josh Gohlke, commentary editor for *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, lists several requirements for a good opinion piece: a

strong point of view, expressed clearly and quickly; an original point of view; careful writing and reporting; newsworthiness and relevance; and intangibles such as wit, style and humor. (See also the *Los Angeles Times*' "Op-Ed, explained" at www.latimes.com/news/opinion/la-oe-pages23oct23,0,82791.story). "And I couldn't care less where an opinion is located on the political spectrum or whether it contradicts the position of the editorial board," he adds.

In a column last year, Deborah Howell, then the ombudsman at *The Washington Post*, decried the lack of diversity on the paper's op-ed page, writing that it was "too male and too white ... [a]nd there aren't a lot of youthful opinions, either." The *Post*'s op-ed editor, Autumn Brewington, is eager to correct that. "More op-eds about local issues are [also] needed," Howell wrote. "And some that aren't deeply wonky—maybe even with a laugh or two."

Compelling, fresh and offbeat are the adjectives most often used by travel editors to describe what they're looking for in stories, accompanied by detailed informational sidebars. Other than that, travel-article needs at premier papers vary widely. For instance, *The Boston Globe*'s Anne Fitzgerald rarely uses first-person accounts, while travel editor Catharine Hamm of the *Los Angeles Times* loves them (see www.latimes.com/travelguidelines). And Bill Reed, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*'s travel editor, says his section has no formula—he likes a mix of styles.

Other sections that bear investigation are business and book reviews. *The Boston Globe*'s business editor, Shirley Leung, looks for writers that can report on breaking news and issues in a readable way, focusing on "big picture" and national stories. The *Los Angeles Times*, however, takes almost no business freelance. Rebecca Skloot, who has served on the Board of Directors of the National Book Critics Circle, wrote an excellent article on how to break into

book reviewing (http://rebeccaskloot.com/?page_id=336).

Submit with your eyes wide open

Short lead times and quick turnarounds are a given in the newspaper business. So are strict ethics—writers usually must sign an ethics agreement, and travel articles are never accepted from those who take sponsored trips.

Writing for the major dailies is not the path to riches. Pay often varies from section to section and can run as high as a dollar a word, with a chance of receiving more from syndication or reprint sales—but many papers buy all rights. "We don't have a set rate," says Randy Harvey, sports editor of the *Los Angeles Times*. "We pay freelancers depending on the importance of their assignments and the frequency of their articles."

Newspaper articles also tend to be shorter than magazine pieces, especially for writers new to the editor. "Scale back your expectations," Kellams says. "Pitch me a 400-word story."

Breaking into the premier papers is definitely not for the faint of heart. Competition is fierce and expectations lofty. "*The New York Times* culture is a

tough one," Kelly says. "It sets a very high bar for freelancers—you can imagine how many people would love to have a *Times* byline."

Consider this: *The Times* receives around 1,200 unsolicited submissions weekly for its op-ed pages, but only needs about 100. The thought of the avalanche it must get for its Sunday magazine "Lives" column gives even veteran writers pause. But the good news, Kelly says, "is that once you have truly satisfied the demands of your editor (and the two to four copy editors who will also handle your copy), you can pitch again and know you are likely to get a quick reply." Again, she adds a caution: "You can then start trying to write for other sections—but do not assume this opens the door."

Ready to try? Pour yourself a cup of coffee, pick up that paper, take a deep breath, and brainstorm about what you can offer millions of other readers sitting around their breakfast table.

Penny Musco

A member of the American Society of Journalists and Authors, Penny Musco writes service, narrative and travel articles for a number of publications. Web: www.pennymusco.com.

MAJOR NEWSPAPERS

THE BOSTON GLOBE Circ.: 324,000.
Contact: 617-929-2000, www.boston.com/bostonglobe. Staff listings at http://bostonglobe.com/news/contact_news.aspx.

CHICAGO TRIBUNE Circ.: 516,000.
Contact: 800-874-2863, www.chicagotribune.com. Staff listings at www.chicagotribune.com/news/opinion/chicagotribunemail,0,4974145.html#story.

LOS ANGELES TIMES Circ.: 739,000.
Contact: 213-237-5000, www.latimes.com. E-mail formula and staff listings at www.latimes.com/services/site/la-media-center-editorialstaff,0,5952869.story.

THE NEW YORK TIMES Circ.: 1 million. **Contact:** 212-556-1234, www.nytimes.com.

times.com. Toby Bilanow: bilanow@nytimes.com. David Corcoran: corcoran@nytimes.com. Tom DeKay: dekay@nytimes.com. James Gorman: jmg@nytimes.com. Trish Hall: trishh@nytimes.com. Tom Jolly: jolly@nytimes.com. Sandy Keenan: skeenan@nytimes.com.

THE PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER Circ.: 301,000. **Contact:** 215-854-2000, www.philly.com/inquirer. Staff listings at www.philly.com/inquirer/about/staff.

THE WASHINGTON POST Circ.: 623,000. **Contact:** 202-334-6000 or 800-627-1150, www.washingtonpost.com. Staff listings at <http://projects.washingtonpost.com/staff/email>.