

# Freelance Your Way to Poverty

by Con Chapman

There is a charity in Boston that helps the homeless by publishing a newspaper to which they contribute articles and poems. The thinking is that if a panhandler has a newspaper to sell, as opposed to merely asking for a handout, people will be more likely to give him or her money. As a happy byproduct of this retail transaction, the theory goes, the downtrodden will acquire valuable skills by cranking out content for the good sports who fork over cold, hard cash for their efforts.



*"It was either this, or write a two-part article on the decline of social dancing in America."*

What a great idea; help people get out of poverty by turning them into freelance writers. While we're at it, why don't we take away the deposit cans and bottles they've been collecting?

*Maypole dancing: The pay is lousy, but the benefits are bad.*

As someone who first sold a freelance article for \$100 thirty-five years ago (adjusted for inflation: \$3.26), and worked the better part of a summer to get it, all I can say is if you want to lift people out of

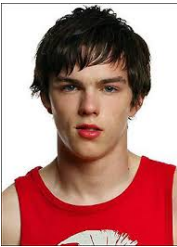
poverty, freelance writing is as good a tool as any, if by “any” you mean maypole dancing.

As a freelance writer, you deserve to be treated like the professional you are, although with pay for print articles being as low as it is, you may feel like you're preserving your amateur status for some future Freelance Olympic Games in Oslo, Norway.



*“Umm—I just love this guy's writing!”*

I sold thirty-two freelance articles in 2012. At the everyday low prices that prevail in the marketplace for unsolicited non-fiction, my take-home pay averaged twenty cents a word. Not bad, you think. You've got plenty of words—you're the freaking Wal-Mart of words, for Christ sake! The problem is, no one wants to buy the Big Gulp size; everyone wants to buy the little, teensy 430-word piece.



*You can't tell by the smell alone.*

And then there's the phenomenon of reverse literary panhandling. One editor to whom I sent the taboo-breaking article “How to Tell Your Teenaged Son From a Dead Rodent” went out of his way to tell me how much he enjoyed it, and how eager he was to run it in his suburban weekly. “Of course, I have no budget for freelance articles,” he added with a fraternal tone, as if an experienced writer

like myself would know that one doesn't actually get *paid* for this sort of thing.



*Maurice Chevalier*

*"Mais oui, mon ami!"* I replied with the devil-may-care attitude of a *blase*, sophisticated *boulevardier et flaneur*, like Maurice Chevalier. "Why should you pay me for something that will mean so much to your readers, when it is but a trifle to me!"



*Pointer Sisters: "I want a publisher with a slow hand . . ."*

The purchasers of freelance writing have a well-deserved reputation for responding as slowly as possible, thereby increasing your pleasure in much the same manner that the Pointer Sisters longed for a slow hand. I was pleasantly surprised in 2007 by the jackrabbit response of a publishing company to an over-the-transom Hail Mary I sent them. "Thank you for your submission," their friendly, personalized form letter read. "You should hear back from us in approximately six months." I set my snooze alarm for January of 2008, and waited for the big check to arrive, Ed McMahon-style, at my front door.



*"Could it be the rejection letter I've been waiting for, or is it the pizza guy?"*

Time passed. Buildings rose and fell outside my office window. The Tampa Bay Rays went to the World Series, an African-American president was elected, the Arizona Cardinals played in the Super Bowl. We were surely in the end times predicted in the Book of Revelations, but I had to wait for a year after I received that first "Save the Date!" semi-rejection letter to get my official rejection letter. All I can say is, it's a good thing I didn't send them a live report from Pearl Harbor.



*"This is good, but could you cut it down to 500 words?"*

If one were to adopt this policy for a one-on-one transaction with a panhandler, instead of going through a middleman non-profit newspaper, the exchange might go something like this:

BUM: Hey man, spare a quarter?

YOU: Actually, I'd be happy to give you more than that.

BUM: You would?

YOU: Sure. Just send me a draft of a short, humorous piece about sleeping on heating grates.

BUM: That ain't funny . . .

YOU: Well, no, not strictly speaking, but if you *embellish* it, and I take it, I'll pay you within 30 days of acceptance.

BUM: (To another passer-by) Hey man, spare a quarter?



*"Tell him I can't see him right now—I'm meeting with a homeless guy."*

And then there are the unintended consequences of training the currently unemployed to become freelancers. My going rate for a +/-500-word article is \$100; do the math on a price-per-word basis yourself, I can't afford to waste precious battery juice. My "hit" rate for print articles last year wasn't bad, around 95%, which was Larry Bird's career-high free throw shooting average, so I'm in good company there. On-line it was about the same, but the prices were a fraction—around 10%—of what newspapers pay. No wonder they're going out of business.

So additional writing supply from panhandlers means prices will go down even further, leading to uncomfortable negotiations like this:



ME: . . . so that's the news hook. Unless we rescind the Hungarian Toy Tariff *right now*, we face the collapse of the domestic Play-Doh market, which will ripple through the economy like the fudge part of Fudge Ripple ice cream.

EDITOR: Um-hmm. So . . . what kind of fee were you looking for?

ME: Well, my usual.

EDITOR: I don't know. I met a guy sleeping in the vestibule who said he'll do a three-part series on how the Pope controls his bladder—for a 50 ounce jug of Thunderbird wine!

ME: (Pause) Okay, I'll do it for the 750 milliliter bottle.

