

The Ultimate Guide to Making \$100,000 a Year as a Freelance Writer

by Aubre Andrus

Contently

Illustrations by Courtney Menard
Copyright © 2016 Contently. All rights reserved. contently.com



Table of Contents

Introduction	4
I. Getting Into the Right Frame of Mind	5
II. Building Your Business	6
III. Marketing Your Services	11
IV. Getting Paid	14
V. Getting to \$100,000	18

“We, as writers, need to recognize that most of the world cannot write well. There are so many people out there willing to pay writers, and they are often desperate to have [them].”

—MELANIE PADGETT POWERS, OWNER OF MEL EDITS

Introduction

Journalist Laura Shin is living the dream. She's pulling six figures as a freelance writer in New York City while she works on a book proposal on the side. But she wasn't always a success story.

Years ago she tried freelancing—and failed. She was pitching one story at a time, struggling to manage what little money she was making. Eventually she returned to the safety of a traditional job after four rocky years of trying to make it on her own. So what's the difference between the six-figure freelancer of today and the failed freelancer of the past? While her talent level didn't change much, her process did.

“I'm so much better at what I do,” Shin said.

Unfortunately, becoming better at freelancing isn't an overnight project. And earning six figures, in particular, is only accomplished by the

rarified few. According to our study “[The State of Freelancing in 2015](#),” only 5 percent of surveyed freelancers earned six figures by year's end. But with a little advice from other successful freelancers, you can learn to improve your bottom line—and become better at what you do in the process.

“The Ultimate Guide to Making \$100,000 a Year as a Freelance Writer” is not just about making more money. After all, if you were just in it for the money, you probably wouldn't be a freelance writer. Instead, it's about using your time more wisely, improving your craft, and marketing your business in the best way possible, all while maximizing the returns of your work.

I.

Getting Into the Right Frame of Mind

Melanie Padgett Powers, a former newspaper reporter who started her own business called [Mel Edits](#), did something unorthodox when she started out as a freelance writer: She didn't call herself a freelance writer.

“I just saw this as a business. I'm starting my own business. I'm an entrepreneur,” she said.

Business owner? That's right. You may be a writer, but you're also running a writing business. And there's a lot that goes along with running a business. It may sound intimidating, but it's a crucial difference to consider when you're climbing the ladder to \$100,000.

“[Running a business] is the ability to constantly think about what you can offer people, what you like to do, how you can monetize what you like to do,” Powers said.

Shifting to a business mindset can be difficult. Many writers write because they're passionate about it, not because they want to make a lot of money. But to be financially successful, you need to think of your writing as a service rather than just a passion. Even the best writers do more than write; they edit, consult, teach, and find new ways to monetize their skills and expertise.

Powers is always thinking about how to diversify her services—new industries she could write for, ways to meet new clients. If that sounds exhausting, it is. Running a business, especially one that brings in hundreds of thousands of dollars, takes extreme dedication.

“I work more hours than I ever have in my life, and I work harder than I ever have before,” she said. “But it's more fulfilling than ever.”

II.

Building Your Business

Once you've embraced the business-owner mindset, it's time to establish your personal brand. "Personal brand" can sound like marketing gobbledygook, but it boils down to how you spin your expertise.

As you start ramping up your freelance business, you'll have to decide what services to offer and which clients you want to work with. That all starts with finding your brand and then selling it.

How to brand yourself

"The key is knowing what your niche is, who you can best help, and then finding those people," said Dawn Josephson, owner of [MasterWritingCoach.com](https://www.masterwritingcoach.com) and author of [*101 Tips for Becoming a \\$100,000-a-Year Freelance Writer*](#).

A personal brand can hinder your income as much as it can help. If you're a film critic, for example, keep in mind that there are limited publishing opportunities and limited funding for the positions that do exist. In other words, you'll probably have



to get creative if you're committed to topics that aren't known for being lucrative. Shin, for one, attributes her six-figure success as a journalist to the topics she writes about: business, personal finance, and tech. More specifically, she is a Bitcoin expert and a regular contributor for Forbes.

“What you write about does play a huge role,” she said. “I feel like I am a scarce commodity, and that's why I get a lot of people reaching out to me and asking me if I can write for them. I don't think that happens very often to an entertainment writer.”

Many writers would agree that business, health, science, and technology writing—writing that may take a little more technical experience—pays more than flooded markets like arts, lifestyle, food, and fashion. When you are an expert in a high-demand, low-scarcity topic, you can charge more. That doesn't mean writers in traditionally low-paying fields can't make it, but it will be a harder hill to climb.

It's not all about topic, though. As Josephson pointed out, writers often get hung up on the topic they specialize in and not the services they offer.

How to find your personal brand:

- 1.** Identify your areas of expertise.
- 2.** Choose the type of writing you excel at most.
- 3.** Determine the skills you can offer as services.
- 4.** Find clients at the intersection of the topics, types of writing, and services you do best.

For example, after Powers’s stint as a newspaper journalist, she became a managing editor of custom media magazines and newsletters for a membership association in Washington, D.C. While her background was in health writing, she knew she had skills that made her more than just a health journalist. She saw an opportunity to pitch her services to all kinds of membership associations and has since written for specialized publications for lawyers, realtors, and optometrists.



As a writer, you probably already have a few specialties. Maybe music, fashion, or finance is your thing—maybe all three. In addition to the topics you know well, think of at least three services you offer. Maybe they’re blogging, ghostwriting, and social media management.

Now find at least one intersection of these topics and services, then brainstorm clients who need them. The outcome of this exercise will serve as the building blocks of your brand.

Thinking outside the glossies

“You can either pursue low-paying jobs or high-paying jobs. It’s all up to you,” Josephson said.

“It’s just a matter of changing where you look.”

Many freelance writers ignore high-paying clients like marketing departments, PR agencies, and business leaders. Instead, they spend time pursuing publications that often won’t shell out high rates for anyone but famous writers.

Being published in big-name publications is useful in a lot of ways: Doing so can help build your reputation, and those publications are generally where your passion projects will find an audience. But for those who are willing to look, there are many high-paying opportunities beyond the glossies. Thanks to the rise of content marketing, many brands are looking for writers who have a background in interviewing, fact-checking, reporting, and researching. And these companies tend to pay much better than your typical publication.

“We as writers need to recognize that most of the world cannot write well,” Powers said. “There are so many people out there willing to pay writers, and they are often desperate to have [them] because they don’t have them internally.”

If you’re an experienced fashion blogger, for example, high-end retailers (or the PR agencies who work with them) could use your writing skills as well as your knowledge of building a community, working with influencers, establishing an editorial calendar, and promoting content.

Josephson would advise a food writer to reach out to food manufacturers, which may need marketing copy, content development, and biographies for their CEOs. Instead of writing an article on Italian food, find the PR agency running Olive Garden’s strategy and offer your services. If it works out, you could be writing a company’s website copy for thousands of dollars.

Josephson practices what she preaches. She ghostwrites books and speeches for professional speakers—but not the ones who are just starting out in the business.

“I’m targeting household-name speakers who make millions of dollars each year because they can afford my services,” she said. “You have to position yourself so you can attract those high-paying clients. It really is about targeting where the money is.”

Writers should follow their industry to learn which person or business is thriving—because they might need your help. Josephson keeps tabs on speakers and knows who just landed a big gig and can, therefore, afford to hire her. It’s also good to keep track of businesses going under since those are the clients who might not be able to cut you a check after you’ve completed an assignment.

But don’t forget your passions

Before you shun any writers for turning to the “dark side,” remember: Turning your talent into a business doesn’t mean you have to give up the writing you love. If anything, it may help subsidize it.

”

You can either pursue low-paying jobs or high-paying jobs. It’s all up to you.

—DAWN JOSEPHSON

For [Mike Long](#), a freelance speechwriter and educator, his business writing, speechwriting, and teaching gigs help give him the financial breathing room for his

passion projects, which include writing fiction and plays. He’s even done brief stints consulting for *The Onion* and *Saturday Night Live*.

In other words, instead of supporting his writing career by being a barista or bartender, he chooses to support his career by doing what he’s good at: writing.

III.

Marketing Your Business

Unfortunately, most high-paying freelance jobs aren't listed on Craigslist. But you still need to build a pipeline of high-paying work that holds up over time. What's a freelancer to do?

“You have to embrace the mindset that you are a salesperson,” Josephson said. “Nothing happens until someone hires you to write something.”

If you can understand that your career depends on making a sale, then you're already a big step ahead of other freelancers. You're running a business, and businesses need marketing. With the right strategy, you can start a marketing machine that saves you time and brings in more revenue.

Reach out to potential clients and introduce yourself and your services. This can be done with a letter of introduction or a message from a mutual contact. Think of it as a pitch, but instead of pitching an article idea to a publication, you're pitching your services.

Networks like LinkedIn and Twitter make it easier than ever to get in contact with people. But the best way to meet new clients fast is by attending networking events, local industry meetings, and conventions.

Networking your way to a full client list

Embedding yourself in the industry that you want to serve is one of the savviest ways to build a business—and the only way to find out what your potential clients need. Once you know how you can help, you can spin your skills and make yourself an asset.



Know your niche, know your community, and get ingrained in that community. Become one of them and then when they have a writing need, you're the person they think of.

—DAWN JOSEPHSON

“Know your niche, know your community, and get ingrained in that community,” Josephson said. “Become one of them and then when they have a writing need, you’re the person they think of.”

Powers is a “conference junkie” and loves traveling to events for both writers and her industry, from membership association conferences to Content Marketing World. She’s

landed multiple assignments from new and old connections after attending industry events. It’s arguably the best way to meet new clients fast, so make sure part of your business budget includes networking events and conference fees.

“When connections saw me at the conference, it triggered something and it reminded them that they needed someone for a project,” she said. “Being there in front of their face reminds them that you’re a writer and you can do something for them.”

Selling yourself—but not too much

Powers tries to show off her knowledge without selling her services directly, a strategy that works. Connections are more willing to hire her once they've hit it off at a conference. After speaking with her for a bit, they'll see her as smart and likable.

“It’s human nature that people want to work with people they like,” she said. “Getting to know someone a little bit at a conference session or lunch really helps.”

When meeting potential clients, it’s important to show off your unique personality—both online and offline. Long knows his “hillbilly accent,” his intelligence, and his standup-comedian background make him especially memorable to potential clients.

“People don’t want serious, they want interesting. Being weird helps me,” he said.

New clients hear about Long in “the strangest ways.” Maybe they’ve seen a YouTube video of him teaching a seminar on writing. According to Long, people remember him as more than just a talented writer. “I just cast my name everywhere while being a memorable cat,” he said.

[Kelly James-Enger](#), ghostwriter and author of [Six-Figure Freelancing: The Writer’s Guide to Making More Money](#), is a master networker and takes a “How can I help?” approach when meeting people at events.

“It’s the opposite of what most people think about networking,” James-Enger said. “Networking is usually ‘What can I get out of this?’ Honestly, my whole goal is connecting with people, and the work is secondary. That’s why it’s effective.”

IV.

Getting Paid

When it comes to finding information about the perfect hourly rate, most writers are stumped. Just as there's no easy high-paying job database for freelancer writers, there's no official guide to setting your rates.

“I did a lot of research online and there is really little saying, ‘This is a standard rate for this city and this particular experience,’” Powers said.

Shin, who coaches writers and shares writing advice at [Ideas Words Empires](#), sees this problem all the time. She's seen writers jump at \$50 for a blog post even though she would only do it for \$1,500. “People do not know what their own time is worth,” she said. “They think someone is going to tell them, ‘This is what you should be charging,’ but it depends on your personal experience.”

”

You have to have a realistic sense about how good you are.

—LAURA SHIN

Personal experience is only part of it—talent is key as well. And that might be a tough realization for some freelancers to swallow.

“Any freelancer, they need to understand what their actual value is,” Shin said. “You have to have a realistic sense about how good you are.” It's hard to put a numerical value on your talent, but it's a necessary evil. Otherwise, clients are likely to walk over you in any sort of negotiation.

“People who want to be freelancers need to dispense with the illusion that this is about anything other than getting money,” Long said. “The people hiring you want to get you at a good rate and you want to make as much as you can.”

Find your hourly rate

Instead of thinking per word, you have to think per hour. It all comes back to that pesky business mindset that can be unnatural to many writers.

“You have to look at how much time you’re putting into each assignment,” James-Enger said.

To figure out your desired hourly rate, you need to think about not only how much money you want to make per year, but also how many billable hours you’ll work each week. When Powers and her business coach calculated a reasonable hourly rate based on her experience, services, and location, she only needed to work 17 hours per week to meet her income goal.

But finding 17 billable hours can be more challenging than you think. Most freelancers spend about 30 percent of their time completing non-billable work like pitching, researching,

interviewing, responding to emails, marketing, networking, and invoicing, according to Shin. That means an eight-hour workday only leaves you with about five billable hours.

So when finding your own rate, be realistic with what you can charge and how many hours in the week you can work.



Then find your project rate

Once you've come up with an appropriate per-hour rate based on your desired salary, don't tell your client. Instead, translate your hourly rate to project rates. It may seem like an unorthodox move, but it's the secret behind many successful freelance careers.

A client might balk at an hourly rate of \$100, but they won't blink twice when you tell them the project will cost \$2,000. You alone need to know that you're estimating spending 20 hours on the work.

Remember that a couple thousand dollars might sound like a lot of money to you, but it's not a lot to a large corporation or wealthy client. "You can make a fine living off the scraps that fall off the corporate table," Long said. "Their scales are different from ours."

Calculating your per-project rate will also involve some conversations with the client. It's smart, if not outright necessary with larger projects, to set expectations upfront. For example, be clear that a rate only includes one round of edits. Or this tight deadline requires a \$100 rush fee. Or that you'll charge by the hour for conference calls.

How to set a rate for a project:

1. Anticipate how long the project will take. Ask yourself what you'll need to focus on for the majority of the time—writing, researching, editing, or something else?
2. Consider the project's difficulty. Will there be reporting? Is it a multimedia project?
3. Check your finances and see how much money you need to reach your monthly income target.
4. Ask yourself whether or not you will enjoy the job. If not, considering raising the rate.

The hard truth is that if you don't protect yourself, no one else will.

It can take a while to perfect your rates. You'll underprice some projects and overprice others. You'll find that you're really fast at some tasks and slow at others. Really, only experience will help you refine your rates.

In the past, Shin's per-project rates have resulted in her making anywhere from \$10 per hour for a really intense project that took her much longer than expected to \$650 per hour for a high-paying project she completed very quickly. In other words, your rates will vary dramatically depending on the project and client, making organization and time management all the more important.

Time is money

There is one fixed resource that freelancers must learn to manage well: time.

"I counsel freelancers to think of time as their most important and precious commodity—it's time that you can leverage to increase your pay," Shin said.

Shin recommends writers religiously monitor how they spend their time during the work week. If you do that, you can learn exactly how long certain projects take you. You should learn how many hours you'll need to, say, complete an 800-word story with three sources. If you're organized and have the answer, you can confidently charge your client and schedule your time accordingly.

”

I counsel freelancers to think of time as their most important and precious commodity—it’s time that you can leverage to increase your pay.

—LAURA SHIN

James-Enger has a “daily nut” of about \$450 per day—what she hopes to earn by the end of each workday for 50 weeks during the year. “If I put four days of work into a \$900 article, I’m not going to make my goal,” James-Enger said. “If I take a story that pays \$1,350, I know I’ll have three days to finish it.”

Shin loves to “gamify” her work, constantly challenging herself to complete tasks faster than before. By becoming more efficient, she can make more money. She uses time-tracking software like [RescueTime](#) and her personal favorite, [OfficeTime](#). It allows her to tally how much time she dedicates to each assignment, client, and task (writing versus revising, for example). She then runs reports to assess her productivity.

Writers operate on deadlines. “Gamifying” your time management with self-imposed deadlines can keep your income on track, and eventually help you increase your per-project hourly rate as you complete the work faster and faster.

V.

Getting to \$100,000

You've established an hourly rate, you're quoting per-project fees with ease, and you're networking like crazy with people in your industry. The best part? The work is flowing.

You've figured it out. Sort of.

As many people know, freelancing is full of ebbs and flows. A client may drop you. Three clients might reach out to you at once. You could lose interest in a topic. Or maybe you pick up a new specialty. Maybe you have less time than you thought this month—or more time than you realized. The minute you think you have it figured out, the rug often gets pulled out from under your desk.

But there is one way to survive in this unstable freelance world: diversifying your income. Every freelancer will find a different mix of clients,

services, and per-project rates that works for him or her, and it might change from month to month or year to year.

Diversifying your income

Freelancers may find some sanity once they've landed an “anchor client.” That's a high-paying, reliable client who has signed a longer-term contract. Long prefers this strategy and tries to have one client that provides “a good chunk of the nut” every month. Then he works on a few smaller projects that help him reach his end goal.

Regardless of their client mix, all successful freelancers will agree that it's critical to diversify your income. And despite the obvious challenges, freelancing can be an incredibly sound financial line of work if you diversify.



“People look at freelancing as a tenuous way to make a living, but it is a very secure way of living if you hustle,” Long said. “I can’t be fired by one person. You can knick my income, but you can’t fire me.”

Josephson advises freelancers to have at least three income streams. At any given time, she is working with five to seven clients on bigger projects. Some

clients are new and some have been around for nearly 20 years, but the average client commitment is about two or three months at a time.

James-Enger makes 80 percent of her income ghostwriting and editing books, 10 percent on content marketing and traditional journalism, and 10 percent on speaking. She typically works on four to six projects each month, which breaks down to one book, a few features, and two or three shorter journalistic articles.

Powers has five consistent clients per month plus a handful of other sporadic assignments, some of which have year-long contracts. She makes 60 percent of her income from editing and about 40 percent from writing.

As you can see, there’s no single formula that leads to six figures. Finding your own mix is the first step towards building a \$100,000 business—but you shouldn’t rest on your laurels once you have it.

Firing clients and negotiating rates

If an amazing project comes in but you're busy working on some lower-paying projects, it's time to reassess your workday.

“Look at who is paying you and what you enjoy doing,” Josephson said. “If you still have small clients, you have to fire them. You have to fire the clients that are not profitable and focus on the ones that are.”

It's easy to feel overworked, burned out, and overwhelmed. Firing the low-paying clients can free up time for you to recruit higher-paying ones. James-Enger has dropped clients who ask for too many rewrites, which, in turn, lowered her hourly rate for their projects.

Shin has experienced situations where she got too comfortable with an existing long-term client—and found that it was depressing her income. When she cut her ties with that client,

she found new work that compensated her almost three times as much for the same amount of time.

”
If you still have small clients, you have to fire them. You have to fire the clients that are not profitable and focus on the ones that are.

—DAWN JOSEPHSON

Shin is willing to negotiate, but has no qualms about walking away if the money isn't sufficient. She recommends devising a floor, or a minimum amount you're willing to accept, for each project, based on your skills and the client's budget.

“My argument to them is I can take those same ideas elsewhere and make more money,” Shin said. “I can write the exact same thing for this other outlet and make more per hour.”

Six-figure freelancers aren't afraid to fire a client that's wasting their time, or pass up an opportunity if it doesn't pay enough.

Delegating tasks and investing in your business

As a business of one, you wear a lot of hats, and not all those hats help you generate income. But now that you've established your hourly rate, you know how much money your time is worth. And if you can afford to hire someone to perform an easy task, why wouldn't you? It frees up more time for you to make more money.

Delegating non-income-generating work like transcribing interviews, filing taxes, and marketing to someone else (or to software) you trust is an obvious choice. If you despise transcribing interviews, find a service that can do it for you at a reasonable rate. It's just a smart way to run your business.

Some freelance writers even hire ghostwriters who can help manage their workload or step in temporarily during vacations or medical leave.

But delegating doesn't stop there. Josephson encourages writers to think beyond their business. If hiring someone to clean your home or do your grocery shopping will give you more time to make money, it's money well spent. It's an investment in your business, your career, and your sanity. Outsourcing certain tasks can be the key to finding the work-life balance and the income you need.

"Make sure you're protecting your most valuable writing time," James-Enger said.

It's not all about the money

Before Shin accepts any project, she thinks, “What am I going to get out of this?” Every freelancer should ask themselves this question before accepting a gig.

Sometimes, it is just about the money. You might desperately need the paycheck, or maybe it's a difficult project and you want to make it worth your time. When Shin is faced with situations like this, she negotiates the highest rate possible.



But there are exceptions. Low-paying jobs may be worth the time spent if the experience helps you grow as a writer.

If The New York Times offers \$150, would you take it? In all likelihood you should, even though it's almost certainly not an efficient use of your time in the short term. That byline will increase your clout and could give you reason to increase your rate with corporate clients.

Think of it as content marketing for your business—a business that could ultimately bring in \$100,000.

Thank you.

Want more insights into the state of freelancing?

For more tips, trends, and timely analysis of the gig economy, subscribe to [The Freelancer](#).

And if you'd like to talk to someone about Contently's services, please reach out to us at contently.com.