

Deciding to Become a Freelance Science Editor

Jamie De Gregory

Waking up at 9 or 10 AM. Working in pajamas. Being home for the kids. The life of a freelance science editor can be an enticing one. In a world that seems to be moving increasingly toward outsourcing, freelance editing may become even more popular. However, the life of a freelance science editor isn't always the easy one of daydreams. It can also be scary. Work is never guaranteed, and there is no organizational structure to fall back on in hard times.

It can be difficult to determine whether the life of a freelance editor is a good fit. I recently talked with several freelance editors from the United States, Canada, and Spain to find out what the life of a freelance can be like and what it takes to be a success:

Susan Aiello
WordsWorld Consulting
Manuscript Editing—Medicine
Beavercreek, Ohio

David Couzens
Textbook Editing—Physical Sciences
Los Gatos, California

Tom A Lang
Tom Lang Communications
Editing—Medicine; Teaching—Statistics
Murphys, California

Janice Metcalf
Metcalf Communications
Writing and Editing
Fairport, New York

Wendy Meyeroff
WM Medical Communications
Writing and Project Management—
Medicine
Pikesville, Maryland

JAMIE DE GREGORY prepared this piece while a Science Editor intern. She hopes to include freelance science editing in her career.

Peggy Robinson
Manuscript Editing—Medicine
Ottawa, Ontario

Karen Shashok
Translation, Editing, and Project
Management
Granada, Spain

Martha Tacker
Biomedical Communication Services
Editing and Teaching Writing—Medicine
and Pharmaceuticals
Seattle, Washington, and
West Lafayette, Indiana

Audrey Thompson
Write to Fit, Inc
Writing and Editing—Technology and
Natural Science
Tumwater, Washington

Gabe Waggoner
Editing—Biomedical
Silver Spring, Maryland

The Idea

In general, the first question to ask of any small-business venture—and freelance editing is a small business—is what services or products one can offer. At first, it seems like a no-brainer; after all, for the most part, science editors edit. But not all editing is created equal. Some people specialize in journals; others work on textbooks. Some offer both writing and editing services; others are strictly editors. And some prefer to be managing editors or project managers rather than handling the copyediting themselves. Editors must decide where their strengths and interests lie and specialize in those services.

Audrey Thompson, a freelance editor in Washington State who runs Write to Fit, Inc, cautions, “If you want to make it only freelancing, [it’s important] that you know how much you need to work, how many hours you’re able to work a week, and what types of documents you’re comfort-

able with. Not just what type, but what content.”

It may be best to start with a kind of editing that is familiar from previous jobs. “Stick with what you know at first”, advises Janice Metcalf, of Metcalf Communications in New York. “Don’t take on things you aren’t sure you can do.” Freelance science editors can become more adventurous as they gain more experience and more clients. The important thing is to be sure that all parties understand the scope of the project and what is expected of whom. “Be honest with your clients”, freelance David Couzens cautions. “If you’re uncomfortable with a project, don’t try to fudge it; be honest. No one remembers your successes, but everyone remembers your mistakes.”

The Life

The schedules of freelances are as varied as their personalities. Some prefer mornings, others evenings. Some like to work in large chunks of time; others like to tackle small tasks one at a time. All agree, however, that no matter when one works, a dedicated space is a must. Home offices range from Gabe Waggoner’s hutch in the corner of his Washington, DC, studio apartment, to Susan Aiello’s office in what should be her dining room, to Thompson’s loft office overlooking the 5 acres of woods she built her house on. Some freelances choose to get out of the house and rent commercial office space.

After an office location has been chosen, it can be tempting to go the office-supply store and buy everything in sight. However, Metcalf says, “It’s better to get the jobs and then get the technology to suit the jobs.” Then there is no pressure to buy a scanner or some other piece of technology that may never be used.

Setting up the new office may be a great deal of fun, but when it comes to sitting in it day after day, it can evoke a sense of isolation that can be a downside to working alone. “I’m . . . very team-oriented. And that’s actually a minus”, Thompson

says. "Because I telecommute, I don't get to work as a team. I don't get to see people across the table. I miss that part of being a full-time employee."

Canadian freelance Peggy Robinson notes that "you don't get the same face-to-face contact. You're not part of an office team that gets together for people's birthdays. So you have to make those more social opportunities happen." One way that Martha Tacker, of Biomedical Communication Services, has dealt with that lack of structure has been by "being active in both the American Medical Writers Association [AMWA] and CSE. Working in those two associations was how I established my contacts and my credibility. They became my corporate structure and support." In return, Tacker has supported those organizations and has served as a president of each. Aiello schedules periodic interpersonal interaction into her work to combat feelings of isolation: "Once a week, I try hard to plan a daytime activity, usually a lunch with somebody, so I don't feel isolated."

The Realities

Once the decision has been made to go freelance and the office is set up, there are other realities to consider. Finances are often a concern. A freelance editor does not work for an entity that will pay for health insurance, retirement, or even technical support. Everything from pencils to desk chairs to new software must come from the freelance's pocket. The freelance generally handles all secretarial work, although some do hire outside bookkeepers or other office staff. It can be difficult "having to handle the business side when you're not naturally a business person", says Wendy Meyeroff, of WM Medical Communications. It's not all blue pencils and editorial curlies. There's a lot of accounting and technologic expertise required as well. As Tacker puts it, "It's an interaction between communication and science and technology—all the Internet and computer stuff. You have to know something about each of those to be a success."

Resources for Freelances

Small Business Association (www.sba.gov)

This government organization has extensive general information on how to run a business. The Web site has a startup guide that includes information on how to start planning a business, how to find the money necessary for a business, and some regulations to keep in mind.

Northwest Independent Editors Guild (www.edsguild.org)

This is an example of the regional groups across the United States that freelance editors can draw on. Based in Washington and Oregon, this group offers opportunities for editors to list themselves on the organization's Web site, meet other local freelances, and learn more about the trade.

Editorial Freelancers Association (www.the-efa.org)

Established in 1970, this national nonprofit organization includes editors, writers, indexers, proofreaders, and more. Any full-time or part-time freelance can join. Benefits of membership include access to medical and dental insurance at group rates.

Freelances often must be business-savvy as well as good editors. "You have to learn how to stand up for yourself and make clear what your rates are", says Waggoner. But it isn't always easy to know what to charge. "Know how much you need financially and what the market will bear", says Thompson, "and don't be afraid to ask other people in the industry how much to charge". Tom A Lang, of Tom Lang Communications, urges freelances to "keep an eye on the bottom line. The bottom line is the bottom line." However, as Couzens points out, "No matter how experienced you are, you don't know what's going to happen. When September 11 happened, I went 5 weeks without work because FedEx wasn't flying."

The nuts and bolts of running a business are important to consider as well. "I took a course sponsored by the Urban League. . . . It was the best thing I ever took", Metcalf recalls. "It was a whole week. They taught us the nitty-gritty of how to keep our own books. I have an MBA. I know how to buy a company, but they didn't tell us how to keep our own books". Furthermore, Lang notes that "probably the best piece of advice I got was from another freelance . . . [to photocopy] every check I get". Meyeroff

recommends "forcing yourself to put away the retirement money. The best advice I got was to take 10% of every check and put it away." When an editor is part of an organization, it can be taken for granted that a check will arrive every week with all the proper deductions—some for health insurance, some for retirement. Freelance editors must do it all themselves unless they hire an accountant.

The Perks

There can be many benefits to being a freelance editor. The ability to set one's own hours is cited by many freelances as a plus. Lang says that one of the pluses is "the ability to work when it makes sense to work". On the flip side, Meyeroff says, "No one believes you're working. You must set very strict boundaries with family and friends."

Other popular pluses of freelancing are eliminating commutes and bosses. As Couzens puts it, "You don't have to deal with a boss. You don't have to deal with employees. You get to set your own hours. That's really important."

Another advantage can be the varied nature of the work. Karen Shashok, a translator and editor in Spain, enjoys "the

Freelance continued

stimulus of always learning new stuff". Not only can the work be varied, but so can the working location. Tacker and her husband have commuted between Seattle and West Lafayette for the last 7 years for her husband's job. She notes that "being able to pick up and do [my job] halfway across the country has really been a luxury".

The Jobs

Nothing is guaranteed in the world of freelance science editing, including jobs. Lang says, "You can have a good year, and you can have a bad year, and the difference can be tens of thousands of dollars in income." Tacker says, "I think you're always concerned about the next job. . . . That's always in the back of my mind."

Seven of the 10 freelance editors I talked with said that a major way they get jobs is by word of mouth and referrals. Therefore, networking and memberships in professional associations are important. "I think the secret to being a good freelance is visibility and credibility", says Lang. "I think the way to establish that is to be active in professional organizations." Furthermore, Tacker says, "My best advice would be to get active in AMWA or CSE or both."

More traditional marketing tends to be important as well. Meyeroff says, "No

matter what field [you're in], you must do marketing and sales." Marketing can be as simple as letting your contacts know that you are available and staying open to new contacts. When Thompson left her job, she advertised her services by sending letters to previous contacts and letting them know that she was available for freelance work. After Lang moved from Cleveland to Murphys, California, 2 years ago, he got in touch with department heads at local medical schools and research institutions to let them know about his services. There are also Web sites, such as *www.linkedin.com*, that can help in creating new contacts.

The Plunge

After considering all the angles and deciding to take the plunge, new freelances should not resign until they have some clients lined up. Robinson says, "Be sure that you have at least one contract lined up before [you leave] . . . so that you're not hanging up your shingle and asking, 'Where's the work?'"

When the current article was written, Waggoner was spending 20% of his free time in freelancing, in addition to working full-time for Oxford University Press. "I started freelancing because one of my goals in life is to be a full-time freelance from

a home office", says Waggoner. "With the way jobs are being outsourced, I thought it would be good to start to build a client base, to one day break out of the 9-to-5 corporate world." Indeed, shortly after this article was written, Oxford began outsourcing and laid Waggoner off. When this article went to press, Waggoner was freelancing while exploring job options. Couzens also recommends trying out freelance work before leaving full-time employment: "I think it's essential that people work in house. But while you're working in house, take on freelance jobs." Of course, taking on freelance assignments while in a full-time job can be challenging. It may be hard to come home from a 40-hour work week to take on a new project. But it's an invaluable way for potential freelances to see how well freelancing fits their lives.

Making the move to freelance science editing can be both liberating and scary. The commute might be a breeze, but the tech guy may never figure out why Internet Explorer keeps losing your list of favorite Web sites. But if an editor has the talent and the nerve, then, as Thompson says, "[You] just need to . . . be brave enough to hang [your] shingle out." 📍

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