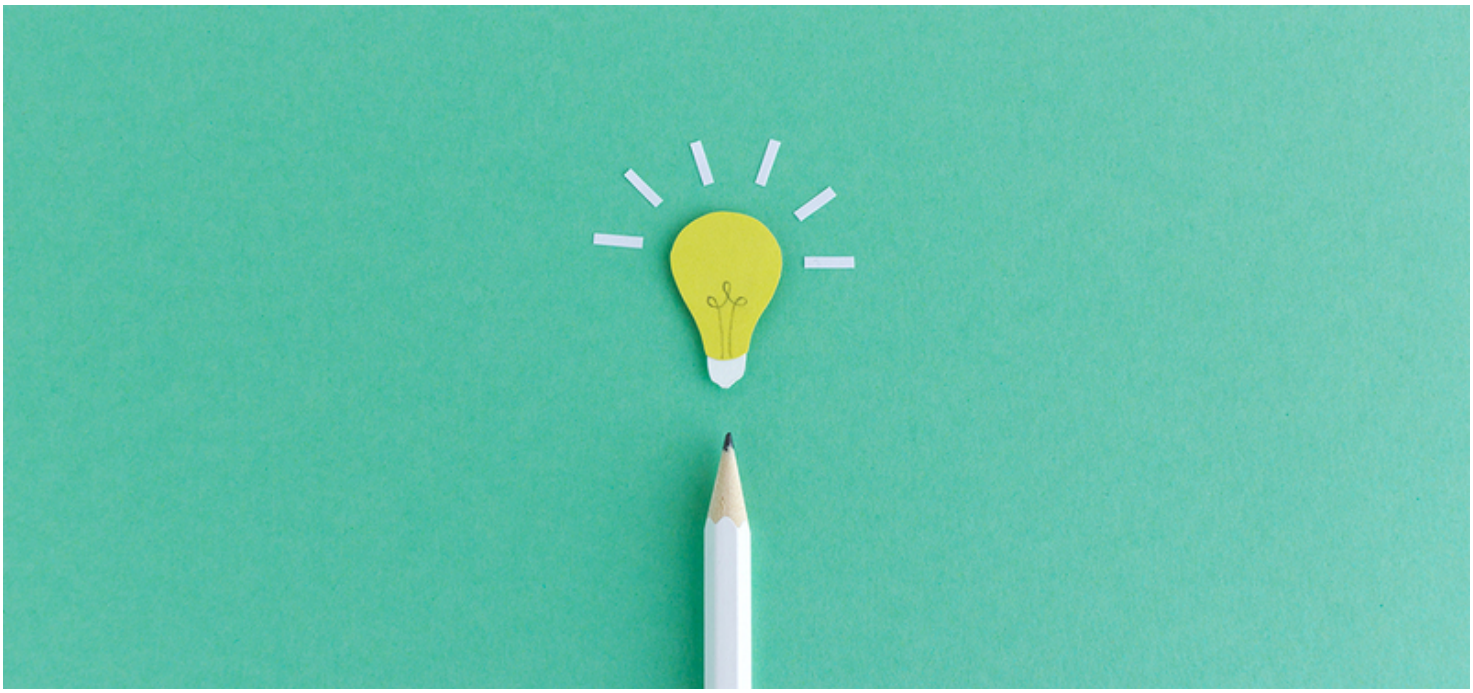
The Public Writing Life: the Venue, the Pitch, and the Fee



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So you've decided it's time to branch out from scholarship and write for the public. After mulling how your expertise relates to something in the news, you have a sense of what to write. You even have some venues in mind. Now what?

How, exactly, do you approach editors at newspapers, magazines, and websites? What do you say? And what are the next steps if an editor accepts your pitch?

You might have a vague sense of how the process usually works: You pitch an idea to editors, who either accept or reject it (unless they ignore it entirely). Some editors give you feedback once they accept the pitch: Include a little more of this or a little more of that; check out this story or interview that source. Then you and the editor come to an agreement about length, deadline, and fee. (Spoiler alert: Most of the time, you'll get very little say about any of those things.)

All of that editorial back-and-forth can be nerve-racking, especially if you're new to public writing, and even when you're not. My aim here in Part 3 of this series — The Public Writing

Life — is to spell out a bit more clearly all the things you have to do before you get serious about the actual writing.

Finding editors. When you're used to approaching a specific set of scholarly journals, it can be a strange experience figuring out how to find — let alone communicate with — editors of public venues. Scholarly journals seem to move at a snail's pace, while websites, magazines, and newspapers are fast-paced environments where editors are under a lot of time and financial pressures.

For a freelance writer (get used to the term; it's what you are when you pitch to mainstream publications), creating and maintaining relationships with editors is crucial to your success. Sometimes emailing (today's version of cold-calling) works to interest an editor; more commonly, you find your way to an editor on social media or via someone in your professional network.

For insights on how to connect with editors, I reached out to Liz Bucar, a professor of philosophy and religion at Northeastern University and project lead of the Luce-funded Sacred Writes: Public Scholarship on Religion. How, I asked, had she gotten her foot in the door with public writing? She pointed out that she had help — which is not uncommon: "I was extremely lucky with my last publisher, Harvard University Press, whose ace marketing team reached out to editors on my behalf."

However, Bucar said, making the introduction to a magazine or website editor was all that the marketing team did. She had to establish and maintain the professional relationship on her own: "Once they had an editor interested, it was up to me to pitch, write, and respond to editorial feedback quickly — which I did."

Early on, Bucar said, she also teamed up with a freelance journalist on a project: "One of the best things I've done to learn about public writing is co-report a series on Muslim feminist activism with Amanda Randone, a freelance journalist." Bucar learned a lot through that partnership: "We did everything together — developed pitches, conducted interviews, wrote, and edited." She credits the experience with giving her much of her insider knowledge about freelancing: "That experience taught me a lot about the culture of journalism, the craft of writing for a public audience, but also the norms of interacting with busy high-powered editors."

Learning those norms is crucial to success in freelance writing. Bucar now shares what she knows via Sacred Writes, which offers an annual training retreat for academics to learn the ins and outs of public writing directly from reporters and editors. "Never underestimate what you can learn — just by being in the room — about the pressure a media outlet is under, the way they frame stories, and how their audience is evolving," Bucar said.

But what if you don't have access to a retreat, or to a publisher that can help you make connections with editors? How do you get started on your own?

That was my predicament back in 2014, when I was just starting to write for public venues. The few connections I had to mainstream publications came not from academe but from social media — mainly Twitter. It was scary the first time I asked someone I "knew" only from Twitter to refer me to her editor, but she did it (and gladly), and my public-writing career was born.

Bucar agrees that social media are essential for scholars who want to write for the public: "A lot of relationship-building between scholars and editors happens on Twitter. I know scholars not on Twitter hate to hear this, but it is true: If you want to be networking with editors, the best way is to be active on Twitter."

In a future column, I'll talk more about how to effectively use social media in your public writing. But for those Ph.D.s still resisting the lure of Twitter, here are primers on "How to Curate Your Digital Identity" and "How to Build a Twitter Following — and Why You Should."

Pitching your idea. Once you've established which editors you will approach, and how, you have to sell your story to them. You sell your story with a "pitch."

I'll touch only briefly on this topic as there are a lot of great resources already out there on how to pitch to editors of popular publications, including a 2017 essay in *The Chronicle* on "How to Craft a Pitch." That essay was aimed at Ph.D.s and written by Kelly J. Baker, the newly named editor of *The National Teaching and Learning Forum* and current editor of *Women in Higher Education,* who is also a member of the Sacred Writes' leadership team.

"Pitching a potential article to any publication involves a delicate balance," Baker wrote. "You must tell the editor what the article is about, show how the article would fit the publication, and explain why you are qualified to write said article before writing the whole darn thing." The hardest part, she added, is brevity: "You must accomplish all of that in a few paragraphs, which can seem daunting." A good pitch is just long enough to "offer a glimpse of your voice as a writer as well as the tone of the article, so the editor can decide how you fit (or don't) with the publication's style, tone, and approach."

Remember, a good pitch makes an impression on editors even if they reject it. They are more likely to remember you the next time you send them an idea, or even take the initiative and contact you. Creating a good relationship with an editor means that pitching becomes easier in the future.

Don't be surprised if the initial reaction you get from an editor is skepticism. Fair or not, Bucar said, "scholars have a reputation of being entitled and difficult. That is how a lot of editors think of us." That's a hill you may have to climb in order to build trust. So, she added, "prove them

wrong. Be polite, respectful, helpful, and, above all else, kind. This matters." A simple thank you is always a good idea.

And don't get discouraged by rejection; it's just part of the process. Keep a positive attitude, and use the rejection as an opportunity to show you are a professional. Be gracious to the editor who rejected your idea (after all, many editors don't reply at all). And then, rework the pitch and send it to another venue — and then another, until you've placed it. If it's good, you will find a place for it. As you form more relationships, this process will get easier.

Talking about fees. Once an editor accepts your pitch, you naturally want to know about the money. I know I did when I started freelancing, mostly because I was a contingent faculty member at the time, and (per usual) constantly concerned about money.

The first thing to know: You probably will not earn much from your freelance writing. I learned early on that I could not make a living solely from writing for the public, but I could use it to supplement my income.

What kind of money can you expect for a freelance piece in a mainstream publication? "For an op-ed of 700 to 800 words, I have made everything from $125 to $350," said Bucar.

In my experience, too, those rates are pretty standard. If you want to learn more about how much you can expect to be paid, ask your own colleagues. You also can check the crowdsourced website Who Pays Writers? for more information on what different publications pay for freelance pieces. (And if you are a freelance writer, submit your rates to that site. Its database is only as strong as the information we provide.)

As a full-time academic with a steady income, you may decide to write without pay in order to get your work published in mainstream publications and get your name circulating among certain editors. But think twice. As Bucar said, "Even if I don't need to be paid, it is important to others that I not provide unpaid labor in cases where publications can afford to pay me."

If a fee is low — be sure you understand what "low" means — you can request a higher one. Freelance writers do negotiate. Especially if you've been writing for a publication for a while, it is normal to request a higher fee, just as you'd ask your employer for a raise.

But what if the publication is nonprofit? In that case, allowing it to publish your work without paying you might make sense. Often, these small publications are run by and for marginalized groups, and have trouble securing funding. The editors often work free to help get the writing of marginalized writers to the public, and wish they could pay them.

I can't say this enough: Don't be afraid to talk about money. If a colleague asks you how much you made writing that essay for CNN or *Vox,* please share that information. Help your colleague

negotiate a higher rate. Remember, that person might be in a position to return the favor in the future.

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