



College mags welcome freelancers

Tap into alumni and research publications to build portfolios and generate referrals

FREELANCE WRITERS who want to generate a steady income can check into their local university—not to take classes, but to write for university publications. Most universities produce an abundance of publications, both in print and online. These include alumni magazines and research magazines, as well as special publications like annual reports and e-newsletters for the various colleges and departments across campus.

There are several benefits to pursuing this type of freelance writing:

Portfolio builders. Alumni magazines generally have fewer advertisements than consumer or trade magazines; features are often well-designed and make nice bylined clips to build a portfolio. Article assignments can also lead to other types of writing assignments and project-management work within the university network.

Referrals. Once you prove yourself with your first assignment for a university publication, your editor is likely not only to use you again but also to refer you to others. “The person that you really come to depend on is the freelancer who has written for your magazine before or comes with a glowing recommendation from another university editor,” says Elizabeth Massey, managing editor for *ASU Magazine*, a quarterly from the Arizona State University Alumni Association.

Reprints. Writers can often resell alumni magazine articles with little effort. For example, after completing a profile about an underwater wildlife photographer for his graduate-school alumni magazine editor, I pitched the same piece to the alumni magazine edi-

tor of his undergraduate alma mater. That editor reprinted the profile with only a few minor revisions, and I earned double income on the piece.

Intangibles. “I really enjoy working in higher ed because you encounter so many interesting people,” says Laurie Wurth Pressel, a freelance writer based in Findlay, Ohio, who earns the majority of her income writing for universities and colleges. Whether you’re writing about award-winning professors, cutting-edge research or top-notch students, the atmosphere can be both motivational and educational.

Breaking into university magazines can be easier than breaking into traditional consumer magazines, but that doesn’t mean it’s easy. This market has many nuances. The successful freelancer will do his or her homework on several levels—about the publication, the university and the industry—before making the first pitch.

Understand the market

Avoid painting all university publications with the same brush. Just as women’s magazines run the gamut in focus, university magazines vary in content, too, from alumni news and institutional reports to research endeavors and fundraising efforts. This variety is found not only among different universities, but among different publications within the same university. Another difference to keep in mind is the size of the institution. Large state and private universities tend to have bigger freelance budgets than do small or community colleges.

One common thread is that university editors typically wear many hats. They have titles like communications manager or alumni relations director, and they are tasked with many jobs in addition to producing a magazine.

When it comes to editorial responsibilities, their dependence on freelance writers is often two-fold. “To really have

RESOURCES

THESE resources can help generate leads to build a roster of university clients:

- **Council for Advancement and Support of Education** (www.case.org). The Web site includes a list of Circle of Excellence winners. Winning editors are committed to excellence and are often able to pay competitive rates for quality freelance work. The organization also has a college and

university editors e-mail list (CUE-L), which can be valuable for freelancers who want to stay on top of these editors’ changing needs.

- **University & College Designers Association** (<http://ucda.com>). UCDA has more than 1,000 members in the U.S. and Canada. The association is for professionals involved in creating visual communications for educational institutions. Its Web site features a

list of links to more than 200 alumni magazines.

- **University Research Magazine Association** (www.urma.org). URMA promotes excellence and professionalism among those who write, edit, design and publish magazines about the research and scholarly activities of a university, nonprofit research center or institute. Membership is also open to freelancers specializing in this niche.



Market Focus

the richest publication possible, you have to have more than one writer's voice; more than even two or three," says Conrad Stora, director of research publications at ASU. "Not to mention, the workload of producing a magazine is pretty immense with trying to write everything yourself."

Thus, university magazine editors are generally receptive to queries from freelance writers—especially from those who show they've done their homework and can add value to the publication.

Do the homework

Having previous work experience in higher education provides an edge, but it's not mandatory. "I think it's possible for freelancers to break in, even if they don't have higher-ed experience," says Pressel, who worked in marketing and communications for Bluffton University in Ohio before going freelance three years ago. "But you do need to have an understanding of the unique dynamics of higher ed: advancement and the relationship with donors; admissions and the competition for students; within the academics, you have the colleges and deans and professors, and all the politics and unique dynamics there."

Get to know the university in your area first. Spend a few hours reading its Web site. Attend a few events on campus; brown-bag luncheons, free lectures and student performances are newsworthy events in and of themselves. Digging deeper, you'll find that the speaker or event organizer will often have an interesting story to tell beyond the presentation or activity that day.

Next, get familiar with the news and issues surrounding higher education in general. Good sources of industry information include the Council for Advancement and Support of Education (www.case.org); the National Association of State

Universities and Land-Grant Colleges (www.nasulg.org); and *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (www.chronicle.com).

Get a foot in the door

One way to break into university publications is to *pitch story ideas*, just as you would to a consumer or trade-magazine editor. All the basic rules of queries apply. Read several issues of the magazine to get a sense of its style, tone and content. Make sure the topic you pitch is relevant to the university and the magazine's readership. Explain why readers will find value in the article you propose and why you are the best person to write it.

Keep in mind that university magazines might only be published two to four times per year. As such, their editorial planning and lead time can be six months to a year or longer. Try breaking in with queries for short profiles of alumni, students or professors with interesting stories to tell. "That's easier for me to fit in than a feature story and an easier sell in a short amount of time," Massey says.

A second way to break in is to *pitch yourself* as a professional freelance writer. Often, editors must rely on others in the university—such as public relations staff, marketing employees and students—to write articles. While these individuals may have the best of intentions, they often have other demands for their time or limited journalism skills. So university editors frequently contend with missed deadlines and time-consuming editing. Being approached by a professional freelancer who writes quality first drafts and delivers on time can feel like winning the lottery to an understaffed, overworked editor.

When pitching yourself, highlight anything that adds value to your services as a writer. This includes photography

skills or expertise in writing on specific topics like science or the arts.

Freelancers can also approach a variety of divisions within the university. "I have found that college foundations and fundraising offices have more of a budget for freelancers than the media and public relations offices do," says Mary Ann DeSantis, a freelance writer in Lady Lake, Fla., who has been writing for universities since the 1980s. "Many universities and schools like profiles about successful alumni that they can use in promotional and fundraising pieces."

Writing for college publications also led to an offer for DeSantis to teach a business-writing class at the local community college as an adjunct instructor. "Once you get in the door, there is no telling where writing for higher education will take you," she says.

Build the business

Once you've made inroads at your local university or college, broaden your reach by pitching to universities out of state. The magazines and newspapers in your hometown can be a treasure trove of profile subjects—business leaders, artists, politicians, community activists, physicians, entrepreneurs. Most of these individuals will have college degrees from one or more schools that may be interested in their stories.

As you become more familiar with higher education and specific universities, your opportunities will grow. It will become easier to generate story ideas. Your reputation as a reliable professional will expand and produce referrals. And you will be well on your way to becoming a longtime staple for a cadre of university editors and marketing/communications professionals.

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BEING APPROACHED BY A PROFESSIONAL FREELANCER ... CAN FEEL LIKE WINNING THE LOTTERY TO AN UNDERSTAFFED, OVERWORKED EDITOR.