

Freelance success

3 top-tier freelancers tell you WHAT IT TAKES

By Reshma Memon Yaqub

IT MAKES ME want to rip my eyeballs out: seeing a story I should have written, running under someone else's byline. Someone who thought of it first. Someone who sold it to the right editor. Someone who doesn't scour her mailbox for freelance checks the way Charlie Brown does for Valentines. But you know what makes me want to take said eyeballs and whack them with my keyboard? Seeing that same name, over and over and over, in all the right glossies, above all the right folds.

Some elite writers, it seems, are everywhere. You can't open a top women's magazine, for example, without tripping over Lisa Collier Cool, without tumbling into Pamela Redmond Satran, without falling headfirst onto Ginny Graves. These writers are either blood relatives of most of the magazine editors in New York or just really, really good at what they do. Because my health insurance does not cover eyeball replacement, I have decided to take the high road. Instead of hating these writers, I've decided to learn from them. Recently I rounded up these three uber-freelancers for *The Writer* and begged them to spill their trade secrets—particularly how they got where they are in the freelance game and how, just maybe, some of us might get there, too. Pull up a cushion and join me as I sit at their feet and listen.

What led you down the freelance path?

Cool: I was working with my dad, as a literary agent, when I heard about an interesting local event. A



group of Libertarians was holding a "Vote for Nobody" party on Election Eve. I contacted several newspaper feature syndicates to see if any of them wanted a story on it. North American Newspaper Alliance offered me \$35 to write 500 words on spec. I was thrilled when they accepted the article, and I looked around for more stories to sell them.

One day it occurred to me that maybe, just maybe, there was somebody who paid *more* than \$35. I began sending ideas to a variety of magazines and landed an assignment with *Harper's Magazine* for a short article.

That credit pumped up my resume quite a bit, and I was able to break into other national magazines—and make a whole lot more than \$35 for my articles. After giving birth to twins, I decided that I would like to work at home. So I left the literary agency and became a full-time freelancer. At first I wrote about a wide range of topics, but later I decided to specialize in health, with the occasional dramatic narrative thrown in. I find that specializing in a particular topic, plus the credits I've accumulated over the years, makes editors think of me for their health-related assignments, so I often get unsolicited assignments as a result.

Graves: I knew I wanted to be a writer from an early age. At 15 I submitted my first story—a truly atrocious work of fiction about a young girl who makes peace with her estranged mother after finding a delicate seashell on the beach—to *Seventeen* magazine. The form letter I received in the mail several weeks later turned out to be the first of many rejections.

After college I moved to New York and sent my resume to 57 publications. I landed an editorial-assistant job at *McCall's*. Then I was promoted to assistant editor, a position that entailed a little writing. I learned two important things: I love writing for magazines, but I hate working 9 to 5. Despite the fact that everyone from my parents to my editors advised against it, I quit after two years and went freelance.

I landed a two-days-a-week job writing fashion copy at *Mademoiselle*, a gig that actually paid a higher salary than my full-time position at *McCall's*. With that kind of luck on my side, I felt certain my success as a freelancer was a fait accompli; unfortunately, most of the editors at the women's magazines to whom I began diligently pitching ideas hadn't received the Ginny-is-bound-for-the-big-time memo. I picked up a few small assignments here and there but also received dozens of rejections—and each one felt not like a rejection of my idea, but a rejection of me. It was brutal.

Panicky about making my Manhattan rent, I moved to San Francisco, where I quickly began writing for local magazines. The work was steady, but the pay was dismal. A year later, in a desperate effort to ramp up my career, I charged a plane ticket to my nearly maxed-out credit card and scheduled a five-day visit to New York. I called every editor who'd ever been the least bit friendly and begged for five minutes to pitch a few ideas. Those first meetings were grueling. I was sweaty and nervous and felt pathetically inarticulate. But I flew home with three assignments—all for health stories, something I'd never really written before—and renewed hope.

Satran: I was an editor at *Glamour* when I sold my first book, a baby-naming guide called *Beyond Jennifer & Jason*. That gave me enough money to take

The Players

LISA COLLIER COOL has a clip file that reads like the magazine rack at Barnes & Noble: *Family Circle*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Harper's Magazine*, *Parents*, *Ladies Home Journal*, *Glamour*, *Marie Claire*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Reader's Digest*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Self* and *O, The Oprah Magazine*. She's the author of five books and a board member of the American Society of Journalists and Authors. In her bulging trophy case, you'll find a National Magazine Award, a Henry R. Luce Award and two National Health Information Awards.



GINNY GRAVES has graced the pages of *Elle*, *Allure*, *Outside*, *Reader's Digest*, *Glamour*, *Harper's Bazaar* and *Self*. She was a contributing editor to *Parents* and *Family Life* magazines and now writes a discipline column for *Child*. Her latest book is *Bringing Home the Bacon: Making Marriage Work When She Makes More Money*.



PAMELA REDMOND SATRAN writes for the likes of *Glamour*, *Parenting*, *The New York Times*, *Bon Appetit*, *Good Housekeeping* and *Publishers Weekly*. Her fourth novel, *Suburbanistas*, came out in March.



Alexa Garbarino

the leap to freelance life. It was 1986. My oldest child was 3 at the time, and although I actually worked more hours as a freelancer than I did when I was a full-time editor at a magazine, the flexibility of freelancing helped enormously.

What is it about you that makes editors come running?

Cool: Sheer persistence. If one editor turns down an idea, I immediately send it somewhere else until it either finds a home or I lose interest in that project. Once I make a sale, I also try to be the most hassle-free writer my editors know and make a point of delivering my work on time, even if I'm sick or am dealing with personal difficulties. I also carefully research each story and talk to the leading experts. (In some cases I find them by calling researchers who have done recent

studies on my topic, or through Profnet.com queries.) I want my editors to feel that I'm a solution, not a problem. My can-do attitude makes editors want to turn to me if they need something quickly or have a big story.

From my background as a literary agent, which was primarily a sales job, I've learned to be friendly and cultivate my editors. While some writers prefer to communicate with editors by e-mail, I actually like the phone better, and find it an effective way to sell articles and make new contacts. When I need more work, I also call my editors and ask what they're looking for, or go on idea hunts. For example, since I like to write dramatic medical stories, I have built up a list of publicists at hospitals around the country. Sometimes I'll e-mail them and ask if they have any amazing medical cases involving women or children.

Graves: Well, having been raised with an older sister, maybe it's that I'm easy to boss around. I'm actually only half-kidding. I'm reliable and fairly easy to get along with—I rarely argue about editorial changes, for instance, and have learned not to get my feelings hurt or become defensive about revisions. As important, I'm willing to do the tough, time-intensive reporting that is necessary for a good health or psychology story, and I've learned to boil down complicated scientific principles into interesting, accessible language.

Satran: Flexibility helps me to make a serious living consistently. I've always written lots of different kinds of magazine pieces—big, serious research pieces as well as essays and humor pieces like "The Glamour List."

I don't know if it's my writing that's opened doors so much as my contacts, many of whom came from my original days at *Glamour*. I'm still floored by how difficult it is—yes, even now—to break into a new magazine, though at least now I'm confident enough to think it's *their* loss.

The quality of mine that draws repeat business is

professionalism—always meeting deadlines, being cooperative about revisions, being engaged with the story, and staying serious about executing it well. Perhaps the most valuable thing about my writing is the thing that comes easiest to me: the humor. Being able to write funny pieces that also strike home with the reader is an unusual talent, editors tell me, and a valuable one. And I always have *tons* of ideas.

What do you do that's different from your average freelancer?

Cool: The other day, a writer I know was complaining that editors weren't getting back to her, no checks had arrived recently, and she was having trouble getting herself motivated to work on the assignments she did have. I pointed out that this could turn into a vicious cycle, since lack of work today will lead to lack of checks and assignments tomorrow.

I believe in setting regular hours where I sit in front of my keyboard and work to the best of my ability. Some days I might only write a paragraph, and others I might end up with 1,000 words. On my best day ever, I finished an entire 7,000-word chapter for one of my books. It's just a question of working on the project step by step instead of waiting around for inspiration to strike.

Graves: Read magazines (or newspapers, or whatever your market is) constantly to learn about the editorial vision or voice of the outlets you're pitching. In other words, don't pitch an idea based solely on the fact that you want to write about it. Make sure it fits with the demographics and overall approach of the magazine. This is easier said than done.

Also, accept criticism graciously—you need a thick skin to survive in this business. I try to strike a balance between caring about my work but not caring so much that I'll fight to the death over a word change. The reality is, you're likely to see some of your favorite language—the gripping lead, the poetic description—blithely blue-lined. Editors change things for a variety of reasons, and you can't take their edits personally.

Finally, pitch lots of ideas. Most of them are going to be shot down—it's hard to find an idea that miraculously fits with a magazine's editorial agenda—but if editors see that you're making an effort, they're more likely to keep you in mind for story ideas that they generate in-house.

Satran: Freelancing is attractive to a lot of young moms, and my best advice to them is to hire a babysitter for the hours when you plan to work, even if you don't have assignments yet. It's just not possible to rock the cradle with one hand and type with the other. And editors won't take you seriously if they call and hear a baby screaming in the background or a kid's voice on

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—Ginny Graves

the voice mail. And when you're supposed to be working, don't give in to the temptation to throw in a load of laundry or plan your next vacation. Write, write, write for those hours.

A useful piece of advice for anyone, I think, is to not get too attached to your ideas. You have to be willing to spin out 10 ideas at a time, and if those get rejected, to immediately come up with 10 more, and 10 more after that.

Speaking of rejection, it helps to know that everyone, no matter how successful, gets rejected constantly and forever. The most successful people are those who are best at bouncing back from rejection!

What mistakes do writers make that hold them back?

Cool: Some common mistakes to avoid: gushing or groveling in your query letters, faulty facts (always check at least two sources) and failing to read the magazine before submitting an idea. Also avoid telling your ideas to friends or relatives, since they may pour cold water on your concept by saying that they've already seen an article on that topic or don't find it interesting. If you feel an idea is good, the key thing is to get it out to the real experts: editors.

What separates successful freelancers from the rest is that they're better marketers. When I was an agent, I saw over and over that talent alone isn't enough. Indeed, in nonfiction, while a gift for great writing is certainly a plus, it's not crucial for success. When I was an agent, I had some clients who were excellent writers but just didn't have that knack for coming up with clever ideas and packaging them in a winning way, so they actually made less money than other clients with more modest ability but genius for spotting what will sell.

I've noticed that some freelancers just don't have "story sense"—the ability to spot ideas that will sell. I'm not sure that this is a talent that can be taught: To me, it is a bit like having an ear for music or language. But immersing yourself in the magazines you want to write for will sharpen your ability to recognize how ideas you come across might be angled for these markets. And, after a while, you learn what doesn't sell, which is also helpful.

Graves: Novice writers often don't realize how hard it is to write a really good piece of nonfiction, so they don't edit and re-edit their work before they turn it in—or they simply change a few words when they should be revamping the whole story. I made that mistake on the first piece I wrote for *Cosmo*—which ended in a kill fee. The first lead to come out of my typewriter was the one I turned in—and the truth is, it wasn't very good. But it had a catchy phrase in it that I

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—Lisa Collier Cool

was reluctant to lose, so I stuck with it despite the fact that it didn't work well overall. Put another way, I sacrificed the integrity of the piece for a single moment of cleverness—a classic rookie move.

I also think new writers are way too sensitive about their work. Editors are as busy and harried as everyone else (maybe more so, given the deadline-driven nature of their jobs), and if you make their lives difficult by arguing about editorial changes, you're not going to endear yourself to them. And, quite frankly, we're all replaceable. There are thousands of good writers who are hungry for assignments. If you're difficult to work with, editors simply won't bother.

Satran: My career as a magazine editor was relatively short, but writer friends of mine who wanted to freelance would often shoot themselves in the foot by having one or two ideas, and that was it. So maybe they'd get one assignment, and then months would go by before they could come up with another idea, so they'd lose all their momentum. The really successful freelancer calls her editor a week—or a few days—after completing an assignment with a whole new list of ideas, and follows up with a formal query.

What can writers do to improve their sales?

Cool: When writing my articles, I keep Stephen King's advice to “leave out the boring parts” in mind. I also try to show, not tell, so instead of saying someone is tired, I'd say that she wakes up exhausted after eight hours of sleep and drags through the day, or that she falls asleep in front of the TV every night. Putting in lots of details makes my writing better.

For research, I've found that there's an organization that deals with just about every imaginable topic, from lightning-strike injuries to toy safety. I've also found the government to be an amazing research resource. I also do Google searches and try to be creative in thinking of different keywords that might help me zero in on relevant Web sites.

One of my writer friends goes to the library every couple of months and reads lots of magazines in search of new markets for her writing. She goes through several issues of each one to see what they cover and

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—Pamela Redmond Satran

which departments might be a good fit for her ideas. As a result, she’s broken into a wide range of magazines, from in-flight magazines to business publications and women’s magazines.

Graves: Craft your queries as you would the actual story: Start with a potential lead (and spend some time on it so it’s well-written and compelling), then follow it with information you’d like to include in the body of the piece. This sometimes means doing a fair amount of research up front, but that investment of time makes editors’ lives easier and gives them a reason to feel confident that you’ll deliver a thorough, well-crafted story.

Meet with editors face-to-face now and again, even if it’s just for five minutes; that’s the best way to establish a solid relationship. When you set up a meeting, be respectful of the fact that the editor doesn’t have loads of time. Be prepared with your pitch, drop off a few clips and make sure he or she knows how to contact you.

Satran: Be scrupulous about finding reliable sources and getting accurate information. If your story doesn’t hold up to fact-checking, your credibility with your editor will be undermined. Write the best story you know how, but be open to your editor’s suggestions and changes.

On the business end, I’d make it a practice to always ask for more money—in the gentlest possible way. Find a phrase you can say that you feel comfortable with that’s also effective—my favorite one, early on, was to respond to any suggested fee by saying, “That sounds a little low.” I almost always got some extra cash.

What can writers at your level hope to make?

Cool: It’s quite variable, as some prestigious magazines don’t pay particularly well. When the American Society of Journalists and Authors surveyed its members in 2003, 41 percent reported annual incomes in excess of \$50,000; and nearly 12 percent made \$100,000 or more.

Graves: I make anywhere from \$2 to \$3 a word and write about 25 to 30 pieces a year.

Satran: The national magazines I write for seem to have standardized payment at \$2 a word, though stories are shorter than they used to be, and you still have to interview the same number of people. Fees top out at about \$6,000. The exception is list-style humor pieces, where the per-word rate is much higher. Including my books, my total yearly income from writing is always in the six figures.

Freelancing can be grueling. How do you keep going on tough days?

Cool: I want to give people information that will make a difference in their lives by telling them how to stay healthy, get the right medical care, alert them to potential dangers and find the best treatment if they get sick. A woman once wrote to me after reading an article I wrote about a pioneering treatment for heart defects. Her child had been born with the same condition, and she learned about this pioneering surgeon through my article, took her baby to him and had an excellent outcome.

So while I might be able to make the same amount of money writing about beauty and hairdressing, I much prefer to write about health, because something I write could literally save someone’s life or help people avoid serious problems. I also like being my own boss and meeting all different types of people through my work.

Graves: I love having the freedom to set my own schedule (although I actually work way harder than I ever did when I had a boss looking over my shoulder). I’m also intellectually curious and a bit restless—a wanderlust that freelancing satisfies, because it allows me to explore dozens of different topics and talk to disparate types of people. There are days when I can’t believe how stressful it is and I long to do something that’s less emotionally and intellectually taxing. But most of the time I feel incredibly fortunate to be able to make a living doing something I love.

Satran: Sometimes I think about getting a “real” job, and then I imagine Week 3 [at it]. They’d still expect me to come in every day. It would be months before I’d have a vacation. Forget about taking off if a kid got sick or it was supposed to snow; forget about getting a fabulous idea and being able to run with it. The horrible vision of Week 3 makes me re-appreciate being a freelance writer. #

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A freelance writer in Gaithersburg, Md., Reshma Memon Yaqub is a contributing editor for *Parents* magazine whose other credits include *Reader’s Digest*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Glamour*, *Men’s Health* and *Rolling Stone*.