

# Should You Write for Free?

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New writers often consider writing for non-paying markets as the only way to break into the writing business. But is that really the case? Does it pay off in the long run?  
Should You Write for Free?

If you're just breaking into the writing business, you may be wondering if you should start by offering your work to nonpaying markets. Do new writers need to serve some sort of "apprenticeship" in such markets before moving on to those that pay? Are nonpaying markets the only way for a new writer to break in?

Sadly, some writers don't ask this question at all, assuming (for various reasons) that the answer must be "yes." Too many talented writers end up wasting considerable time writing for free, unable (or refusing) to believe that they could be paid for their material.

At the heart of this issue are two misperceptions. The first is the assumption that one must somehow pay one's dues, "crawl before one can walk," in the writing business -- and that this involves working for no money. The second is the phrasing of the question itself. Instead of asking "Should I write for nonpaying markets?" many writers should be asking "When should I write for nonpaying markets?"

## The Apprenticeship Myth

Many writers believe that one's career must begin with nonpaying markets. Many articles extol the value of such markets for building clips, enabling one (theoretically) to move on to paying publications. Writers often assume that without a history of publication, no paying market will consider their work -- and thus, that they have no real choice.

It isn't true. My own experience offers a good example: In the beginning of my career, I wrote exactly three "unpaid" articles. The first (my first-ever publication) was for a monthly community paper. The second and third were for a weekly newspaper -- and these were based on the editor's promise that he would pay me once he had a freelance budget. By my fourth article, he did, and I was earning a whopping \$15 per feature!

Did those unpaid articles help me break into better markets? No. My first magazine sale was to Omni -- and was due to a chance meeting between my boyfriend (now hubby) and the editor at a conference. My second was to Quilt, and was due to a query that described my enthusiasm for, and knowledge of, crazy quilts. (My career has been a bit of a patchwork ever since...)

Omni, alas, is dead, but specialty magazines like Quilt abound, and are more than ready to welcome new, unpublished writers. All you need are a good idea, the ability to turn that idea into a well-written article, and the confidence to send that article to an editor. If you can do all of the above, many editors truly do not care whether you've been published before or not.

In short, if you have a choice between offering your material to a paying or a nonpaying market, there is no logical reason to choose the latter. The nonpaying market will always be there if you fail to sell the piece -- but it need not be your first choice, or even your second or third. If your goal is to become a paid professional, it's far better to exhaust all possibilities of payment before turning to markets that don't pay (rather than the other way around). After all, you only have to "break in" once to be considered a paid author!

## When Should You Write for Free?

Does this mean you should never write for free? Not at all! There are many excellent reasons to do so; it's just that

"being new" isn't necessarily one of them. Here are some better reasons:

1. For fun. Sometimes you may want to write something for the sheer enjoyment of it -- whether it's likely to find a paying market or not. (After all, someone must be writing all those variations on "how to bathe your cat" that circulate on the Internet!) One of my earliest "sales" was an "outsider's" view of dog shows, which was published in a breed-club newsletter; later, I actually managed to sell it to a major dog magazine. (I doubt, however, that I'll ever find a paying home for "I Was a Teenage Were-Elkhound"...)
2. To support a cause. Instead of contributing money to organizations or issues you believe in, you may choose to donate your writing skills instead. Your "payment" is often simply the knowledge that you are increasing awareness of an important issue. If you already have a "name," lending it to your chosen cause can be an important contribution in itself.
3. To help a favorite organization. You may enjoy contributing an occasional piece to your company, community, or church newsletter. Be careful, however: Once such organizations realize that you can write, you may be flooded with requests for more freebies. Before you say "yes" the first time, be sure you will feel comfortable saying "no" later.
4. To enhance your career. Many unpaid markets can be career-builders -- including your own website. Writing FAQs for your own site (or others), contributing articles to professional newsletters, or writing for professional journals can be good ways to build your reputation. They may also help you develop contacts that can lead to more lucrative work later.
5. To help and inform others. At a certain point in their careers, many writers (and others) feel an urge to "give back" some of what they have learned over time. You may decide to write about "what you know" as a way to mentor others in your field, or perhaps as a way to repay the mentoring you yourself received at one time. Sharing information may not make you rich, but it can be exhilarating.

When You Shouldn't...Just as there are good reasons to write for free, there are also bad ones. Here are some that commonly plague new writers:

1. "I'll do anything to see my name in print." Seeing your byline is a thrilling experience -- but don't assume that the only way to get it is to give your work away. If you have a well-written story or article, why not send it to a paying market first? If it's accepted, you'll experience a double thrill: That of seeing your name in print, and of seeing it on a paycheck.
2. "I want to find out if I'm good enough to be published."

Nonpaying markets are not a good place to test your abilities. Many such markets are stuck with whatever they can get (i.e., whatever unpaid writers will give them), which means that they often don't have the luxury of "rejecting" mediocre writing. Getting published in such a market, therefore, is no true test of your marketability. A better test is to submit to paying markets; if your work is accepted, you have your answer, and if it is rejected, you can explore ways to improve your material. (Keep in mind that a single rejection is no indication of quality; some articles never sell, no matter how good they are. Test the market with more than one article, and test more than one market with the same article, if you're rejected by the first.)

3. "I want to polish my skills before submitting to 'real' markets." To be blunt, if you don't think your material is worth publishing, why submit it to anyone? Nonpaying markets don't appreciate being dumping grounds for mediocre material. If you want to polish your work, do so through a class or critique group. Otherwise, send out your work -- and use the feedback you receive to identify areas where you may need improvement. "Polishing" is a lifelong task; since it's never finished, you might as well start selling at the same time!

4. "So-and-so gave me a start, and I don't want to let him/her down." Loyalty is a wonderful thing, and it can be difficult to abandon an editor or publication who accepted your work when no one else would. It's also hard to say no to someone who has learned to count on you. However, recipients of such loyalty can sometimes misuse it: Editors of nonpaying publications would often prefer to hold on to a writer "in the hand" (you) than seek out new sources. Don't let such a relationship interfere with your ability to move on to new markets.

5. "I'll write for nonpaying markets until I'm good enough for 'real' markets." The trick word in this sentence is "I." The issue here is often not whether your writing is good enough, but whether you feel that you are good enough. I've known too many writers who produced excellent material -- but felt that they weren't "ready" to send that material to paying markets. This often involves issues of self-esteem, fear of rejection, fear of failure, or even fear of success. Most often, writers who make this excuse doubt themselves or even their "right" to call themselves "writers." But that's another column...

Writing for free is simply an option, never a necessity. The bottom line is that if your writing isn't good (and you know it), your energies are best spent seeking ways to improve it. If your writing is good, and you believe in it, don't sell yourself short by failing to sell yourself at all!

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Moira Allen, editor of Writing-World.com, has published more than 350 articles and columns and seven books, including *How to Write for Magazines*, *Starting Your Career as a Freelance Writer*, *The Writer's Guide to Queries, Pitches and Proposals*, and *Writing.com: Creative Internet Strategies to Advance Your Writing Career*. Allen has served as columnist and contributing editor for *The Writer* and has written for *Writer's Digest*, *Byline*, and various other writing publications. In addition to Writing-World.com, Allen hosts the travel website *TimeTravel-Britain.com*, *The Pet Loss Support Page*, and the photography website *AllenImages.net*. She can be contacted at editors "at" writing-world.com.