

# ANNA CLARK

[WWW.ANNACLARK.NET](http://WWW.ANNACLARK.NET)

[ANNALEIGHCLARK@GMAIL.COM](mailto:ANNALEIGHCLARK@GMAIL.COM)

@ANNALEIGHCLARK

## BREAKING INTO FREELANCE WRITING

I wrote my first freelance articles in 2004, just after graduating college. I've been a full-time freelancer (single and self-supporting, with no inheritance or anything to boost me up) since January 2010. Here's a snapshot of what I've learned so far.

### **1. There's no secret trick. It's just hard work.**

People ask me all the time about freelance writing, and many seem disappointed when I tell them this. Freelance journalism doesn't hinge on insider info or clever strategy. It is just hard work. The ones who make it are the ones who are unafraid of this: There are no shortcuts. You've got to put in a phenomenal amount of time writing, reporting, and reading—that is, you've got to invest hours and hours (and irregular ones at that) in the *substance* of your work, not in the social media sheen.

### **2. You have a right to ask questions.**

This can be tough to believe if you're young, if you're just starting out, and if you're not yet able to see yourself as a "real" journalist. If that's where you are at, fake it until you don't need to anymore. You do have the right to call up public officials, CEOs, activists, and anyone else you like. Take yourself seriously as a journalist, and others will too. This right comes with responsibilities—to actually listen to what they say; to record it fairly and accurately; to be transparent about who you are and what you are working on; to give the interviewee an opportunity to respond to any criticisms you intend to publish; to not pay or promise favors to anyone you interview; to be transparent with your editor and with readers if you have a conflict of interest (ie, you used to date the person you're interviewing); and, not least, to spell their name right. And if someone shares their time with you, it is a professional courtesy to follow up and share the published story with them, even if their interview ended up being cut from it, or if you suspect they won't like the piece.

### **3. Get a website.**

It can be a static site or an active blog—I kept a lively blog from 2006 through 2013 or so, and it was hugely influential in developing my public voice. But one way or another, make it easy for people to find you online. At minimum, it should have your contact info, bio, and links to articles you've written. Make sure the design is clean and professional. Check in regularly to update it and fix any broken links.

#### **4. Get business cards.**

Even if you have another job, you should still get cards that highlight you solely as a journalist. These are useful to give to editors, to potential sources or interviewees, to journalists or bloggers you admire—anybody that should be taking you seriously as a reporter. I use inexpensive ones from Moo.com.

#### **5. Pitching stories.**

Think of a *specific story*, not a vague subject. It's the difference between the story of how one particular homeless family was forcibly moved when the Super Bowl came to town, versus "homelessness in Chicago." Think of a time-hook: "why now?" That can be tied to something currently in the headlines, a forthcoming event, pending legislation, or an anniversary. Think also of what expertise you can bring to the story, both through your background and your reporting. "Why you?" If your pitching that homeless family story, you might tell the editor that you live in Chicago, where you've written a number of stories on poverty and the shelter system, which is how you exclusively connected with this family. Or you might say that you formerly worked at a social service agency, giving you a unique insight into the cascading obstacles facing a family in this plight. You get the idea.

There is a lot more to say about pitching, but I'll just quickly note one more: Don't pester the editor; follow up in about a week if you haven't heard anything, and if there's still no response, move on. Remember: rejection is ordinary. Develop resilience, while also learning along the way how you can improve your pitches.

#### **6. Be curious.**

Objectivity is unfashionable right now in journalism. But I think objectivity—not as a static state of being, but as an *active practice*—is essential for journalists, even those who write stories with a clear point-of-view. I see this as the practice of approaching your stories with questions, not with a conclusion. Having a hypothesis about what you're writing about is a helpful way to get started, but if you know what your conclusion is before you begin, you're basically just playing fill-in-the-blank.

So, for example, you might write a story about the how there are sweeping water shutoffs for people who can't afford to pay their bills. You oppose this. Okay, but keep yourself curious as you start reporting and writing. Ask yourself skeptical questions: What am I missing? What is the best possible argument for why the water shutoffs are a good idea? Maybe you develop some sympathy for the underfunded public utility that is hampered by local politics. But you still think the water shutoffs are a terrible idea. Great. Now go write your story. The trick is this: if you are knitted to a particular viewpoint from the outset, and you end up writing exactly what you thought you'd write before you started, your writing will be shrunken and dull, *even if that viewpoint is right*.

Keep yourself curious, is what I'm saying. Not only does it make your writing better, but it's more fun! Curiosity will guide you to interesting stories, and it will also guide

you through the writing of them. Trust it. The world is wide. You are a writer. Perpetual discovery is part of the gig.

### **7. Read.**

Read widely. Think: Books, magazines, newspapers, literary journals, trade publications, blogs. Read magazines that target people who are not like you. Subscribe or donate to at least one media outlet that you think is great; if you want this industry to help you thrive, you've got to be a participant in lifting it up. Sweep up a sheaf of diverse publications from a newsstand and page through them. The idea is to know what's out there, to learn from the work of others, and perhaps to see places where your writing belongs that you didn't initially expect.

### **8. Community matters.**

It's hard to make a go of it from your own living room or corner café, day in and day out. I love solo writing time, but I've found that community is essential, both in person and online. Go to media and journalism events in your community, like a talk featuring a celebrated reporter. (If there are no events like this, put one on!) Join a national and/or local group that matches your ambitions, like, say, your local chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists, or the Society of Environmental Journalists. If there are meetings or conferences, go to them! Meet folks, banter, ask questions, and most of all, listen and learn. Also, seek out online groups or listservs that fit your journalism interests so that you can participate in an ongoing conversation.

### **9. Guard your time.**

You're in the hustle now! What are things that are worth giving up—even *if you love them*—because you love writing more? For me, I've had to say no to most TV time, book clubs, and a summer soccer league because it cut too far into my writing time. I have been leading an improv theater workshop at a men's prison for years, and I'm incredibly committed to it, but my co-teacher and I recently switched it from every week to every other week. The guys were disappointed,; it was hard to do. These aren't easy choices. They're also not even necessarily permanent ones. Just remember that every time you say "no," you're really saying "yes" to something else.

### **10. About working for free...**

If you have literally no clips, not even from a college paper, you may need to do a few pieces for free to get your byline out there. Don't do this more than a couple times, though. Writing for free ultimately harms you and all other writers. When I started out, my early pieces were mostly for indie magazines with a progressive, arty viewpoint that operated on a shoestring: *Bitch Magazine*, *ColorLines*, *Clamor*, *Kitchen Sink*. They couldn't afford to pay me more than a nominal rate, but I appreciated it as a gesture of respect. (And hell, I needed every \$50 I could get.) Nowadays, I only make writing-for-free exceptions if it is a work of fiction or poetry; a book excerpt; or a personal favor for a friend who runs a publication.

### **11. Don't think you're too good to get a part-time gig.**

Look, the finances of freelancing are tricky. It's not just about making *enough* money; it's the timing of the payments. In my first years of full-time freelancing, I created stability by working part-time jobs. I was a personal helper to a woman with cerebral palsy; I wrote for an economic institute at the University of Michigan; I took tickets in the box office of an improv comedy theater; I cleaned apartments and condos for my landlord to get reduced rent. And so on. These gigs didn't cut into my writing time; they were added on top of it. Don't be afraid to do the same. It can be exhausting. But there are upsides, even beyond the fact that you can now buy groceries. The odd jobs throughout my life have given me an ability to connect with a hugely diverse group of people; honed my capacity to work both hard and humbly; sparked story ideas; deepened my network of sources; and given me relief from the constant glow of the computer screen. All this has served my journalism.

### **12. On simplicity**

And about those finances... I can speak from my own experience on how my living conditions have helped make freelance journalism possible. First of all, I live in Detroit. While it's not as cheap as some news accounts make it seem, it's far outside the pricey population centers that many folks assume you have to be in if you have national ambitions for your journalism. (New York, Boston, LA, etc.) This is hardly a sacrifice; I love living in this city, and all my big breaks came *because* I was here (and, frankly, because few other journalists writing for national publications are). That includes my first stories for the *New York Times*, *POLITICO Magazine*, and *The New Republic*.

Also, I live simply. This is part by habit—I grew up pretty poor, and I spent years in an intentional community in Boston where simplicity, or “voluntary poverty,” was a founding principle. Sometimes I think it would be nice to have a real couch, or to buy a cute summer dress, or to take vacations out of the country. But simplicity as a practice—re-use, repair, hand-me-downs, clothing swaps, Goodwill, home cooking, public libraries, bartering, biking—makes my writing life possible. So it's a no-brainer. And honestly, it's really not that big of a deal. If there's something I really want, then I save for it, and budget for it.

### **13. Staying steady.**

Save at least \$1000 in an emergency fund as soon as you can; keep it there for the *sole purpose* of ensuring that you don't go into debt for the inevitable car repair or late paycheck. I hire a CPA to do my taxes, and it's 100 percent worth the money. Save 25 percent of every check you get, no matter how big or small, and pretend it never existed—that's your taxes, which you may have to pay quarterly, depending on your freelance income. Keep *all* your business-related receipts.

### **14. Kindness.**

In all your communications, be professional and kind. This includes an editor who gets on your nerves, and someone who stands you up for an interview. This isn't being a pushover; this is about carrying yourself in a way that inspires trust and

credibility, even when (especially when!) things get tense. Carry yourself with seriousness, but don't fall into the trap of, say, complaining about an editor publicly on Twitter or sending sharp email to someone you wanted to talk with or bad-mouthing another reporter. There are a thousand reasons why this isn't good form, but in purely practical terms, remember that editors move on to different publications, people talk, and just generally, unkindness can come back to bite you.

### **15. Joy.**

This work is difficult. It can often feel unrewarding. But if you are a lover of truth, and of well-told stories, if you care about what happens in the others, if you are a person who is curious, questioning, spirited, and attentive, then I promise you: there is no more joyful way to spend a life.

## **RESOURCES**

*Every one of these has been essential to my life as a freelance journalist.*

### **The Columbia Journalism Review**

[www.cjr.org](http://www.cjr.org)

Okay, I write for them. But I read them long before that. This is a fantastic online magazine that should be part of your regular reading. It'll deepen your understanding of how media works, and help you learn from the triumphs and mistakes of other journalists. It'll also sharpen your sense of the ethical standards in the shifting media landscape.

### **On the Media**

[www.onthemedial.org](http://www.onthemedial.org)

Similar to CJR, but you get to listen to it. This public radio program hosted by Brooke Gladstone and Bob Garfield is a must.

### **Jim Romenesko**

[www.jimromenesko.com](http://www.jimromenesko.com)

While he doesn't blog as much now, his Facebook and Twitter feeds are active and lively looks into the journalism world. He gets his fair share of scoops, too.

## **The Freelancers Union**

[www.freelancersunion.org](http://www.freelancersunion.org)

A wealth of practical tips, ideas, and inspiration for “the independent workforce.”

## **AP Style Guide**

[www.apstylebook.com](http://www.apstylebook.com)

Here’s your brass-tacks guide for your questions about the standard style of journalism (“Is it streetwise or street-wise?” “Oklahoma City Bombing Case or Oklahoma City bombing case?” “Should I say the Statue of Liberty is holding *her* torch or *its* torch?”). If you’re a word-geek like me, you’ll also find this to be amazingly entertaining recreational reading.

## **Society of Professional Journalists**

[www.spj.org](http://www.spj.org)

Incredible collection of resources. You may consider joining it, but even if you don’t be sure to peruse its website, especially the SPJ Code of Ethics: <https://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp>

## **Dave Ramsey**

[www.daveramsey.com](http://www.daveramsey.com)

His radio show (available as a podcast and as streaming) and his “baby-step” plan transformed my life. No exaggeration. It’s getting me out of debt, permanently. And the implications of that for the future of my freelance journalism career—not to mention my sanity—cannot be overstated.

**ANNA CLARK BIO:** I am a full-time freelance journalist in Detroit. My writing has appeared in *The New York Times*, *ELLE Magazine*, *The New Republic*, *Grantland*, *NBCNews.com*, *The Washington Post*, the *Columbia Journalism Review*, *Next City*, and other publications. I have been the director of applications for Write A House, which renovates vacant homes in Detroit and gives them away to writers, for keeps. I wrote *Michigan Literary Luminaries: From Elmore Leonard to Robert Hayden*, and I edited *A Detroit Anthology*, a 2015 Michigan Notable Book. I am a Knight-Wallace journalism fellow at the University of Michigan, and I am at work on a book about the Flint water