

FREELANCE JOURNALISM: A SURVIVAL GUIDE

LE 25 OCTOBRE 2010 ADAM WESTBROOK

The last year of freelancing has been a roller-coaster of mistakes, mishaps, lost cash, wasted time, frustration. And now here are 10 lessons I have taken home with me.

A year ago I knew nothing about freelancing.

Zip. Nada. I didn't even know how to prepare an invoice (when are we supposed to get taught that?!)

So the last year of freelancing has been a roller-coaster of mistakes, mishaps, lost cash, wasted time, frustration. I've found myself tied into week long gigs at a scandalously low rate, and also lost out on good commissions because I went in too cheap.

Errors like this are part of the course – and there absolutely no way to get through your first months and years without falling victim. But hopefully these 10 lessons, which I have really taken home with me (OK, I work from home, but whatever) will stand you in good stead!

10 things I wish I knew about freelancing a year ago

.01 The first two weeks are really hard

I remember slipping wildly from pure numbness to feelings of sheer terror. I woke up every morning in a mild panic, not knowing whether any money was coming my way. Most of the days were spent at my desk – which meant entire days on my own, hardly speaking to a soul. The complete loss of structure left me feeling unbalanced and guilty (yes, guilty!) when I hadn't been productive for an hour or so.

It was miserable – and it's in these dark hours that your mind starts playing tricks on you, saying things like “this was a huge mistake”; “this is going to go horribly wrong!”; “If you start looking for a full time job now maybe no-one will notice you've messed up...”.

So: have a plan for the first fortnight. Fill it with structure, routine, fresh air, exercise, meetings and lunch dates with friends. Your first couple of weeks in a normal job usually ease you in, so why should freelancing be any different?

.02 Time management is even harder

If you're working at home, and even worse, in your own room, then time management is a tough nut to crack. With no manager, editor or colleagues looking over your shoulder, does it really matter if you slack off for an hour this morning? Does that commission really need to be done right away?

If you get the work done, then it doesn't matter when you do it...except: I've learned completing a structured day, getting all your to-do list ticked off and all the work you set for yourself done, is a really good feeling. Having to shift stuff to the next day, feeling behind and knowing you've wasted a whole day really blows. Even if you haven't had any urgent work to do, as a freelancer, you feel the pangs of a wasted day even harder.

So: get a daily routine. A great quote from **Mark McGuinness**: “*Be regular and orderly in your life so that you may be violent and original in your work.*” and that's a rule I like. Ring-fence your most productive time, and devote it solely to your primary work. Ban email, twitter and the like when you're doing this A-flag work. I no longer answer the phone before 1pm, because mornings are my time (seriously).

Bonus tip: there's loads of awesome time management advice in Mark McGuinness' excellent (and free) ebook: **Time Management for Creative People**.

.03 General assignment freelancing is tough

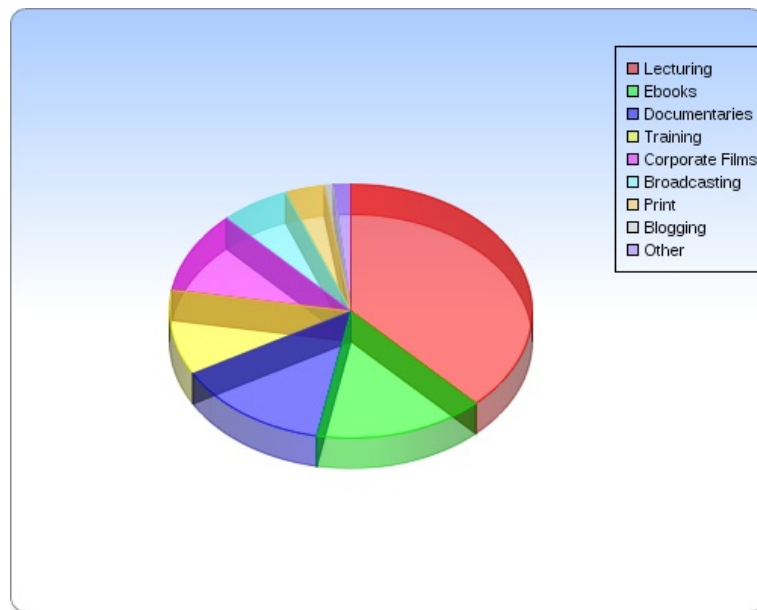
If you're going into this with no area specialism it will be tough. Although the flexibility to grab any story and work it is appealing, the highest paid freelancers are the ones with the specialisms: the contacts, the *proven* insider knowledge, the ability to crunch numbers etc., of a specific field.

Don't confuse this with my 'jack-of-all-trades' approach to technical skills – you need a broad range of those; but they should ideally come together to enhance your offering within a specific area.

So: dig down into a niche and get a specialism. This is especially true of those leaving a general assignment reporter job (as I did) or those fresh out of a generic arts-style degree. Part-time or evening courses, weekend workshops, online courses, or even just self-teaching are affordable and practical ways to build a strong enough expertise in a specific field in a short time.

.04 Being underpaid sucks

And it happens to every single one of us. Especially after a bit of a drought. We accept a gig at a bad rate, sometimes just because we're flattered to be asked. I've even done stuff for people for free before, for that reason – and let me tell you straight up: it's a mistake. Taking low rates is bad all round. You feel resentful towards your client, unwilling to do extra hours – and you still have money worries! Meanwhile, they treat you less well (you're cheap for a reason, right?); and it also devalues the market for other freelancers.



So: double your rates for each gig. Sounds crazy? Try it. It's a popular adage among freelancers in a host of other disciplines. You might think you'll get laughed out the door, but unless your potential new client chokes on their diet coke you're probably OK. And even if they do, just come back a day or two later with "it's lower than my standard rate, but I'm really keen to work with you so let's do it!" Charging more is also about you taking pride in your work and wanting reward for the standards of your service: if you do charge extra, you'd better make it the best work you've ever done.

Bonus tip: if you're not comfortable with a 100% increase, try a smaller increment.

.05 There is such a thing as 'not worth it'

Money aside, some gigs just aren't worth your time. Unfortunately, for the inexperienced freelancer, you only discover the rotten apples by taking a bite. I've done jobs which I thought would only take two days, which took 10; jobs which cost me as much as I got paid; and jobs which haven't paid out for sometimes three, or even six months!

So: learn to say no. Do not accept any job without speaking to your potential client on the phone, Skype or in person first. Ask those tricky questions about expenses and when you could accept payment. In other industries, freelancers do not start work without 50% up front. If you are genuinely unsure, or not in love with the work – then say that magic word: no! Once you've said it, forget about it.

.06 Cold-calling does not work

In the early months I tried ringing and emailing news-desks offering my services. To no avail. I pitched lots of stories, and a few got commissioned, but mostly I got the cold-shoulder. About 90% of my work over the last year *has come to me*. A lot of freelancing guides say you have to do the sales pitch and 'hit the phones' – but doing so (in my opinion) puts you in the inferior position, as the struggling independent desperate for work. The easier, less

painful and less humiliating way is to make the work come to you.

So: build a brand. The internet is your sales pitch now, and it doesn't matter who reads it. I've banged on countless times before about using social media and blogs to establish your position in the market place. Put together your own portfolio website using free tools like **WordPress, Flavors** or **Tumblr**. For a brand you'll need a story and mission.

.07 You will need a blog

As well as a portfolio site, you have no excuse not to blog any more. We go on about blogging so much these days, you might think it's becoming a cliché, or even just an overpopulated place. But the truth remains: a blog is still the cheapest, fastest and easiest way to establish your authenticity, your credibility & expertise within your specialism and bring in cash.

So: don't hang around. Get a blog *today*. If you're unsure where to start, my **mini-series on blogging for journalists** will get you on your way.

.08 Money matters

There is no regular salary and there is no-one to babysit your account for you. If you're going to do the freelancing thing, financial expert has got to become one of your many job titles. Being afraid of money is a dangerous thing for a freelancer: being afraid to confirm a rate before agreeing to work, being afraid to invoice for expenses, even being afraid to check your balance, in case it's bad news. It's also really easy for all your personal and business finances to get mixed up.

So: separate your finances. One of the best bits of advice I got before starting out was to register as a sole-trader (a legal requirement in the UK) and open a separate business bank account for my freelance work. It was the first thing I did on day one. Any payments I make go into that account, and then each month I pay myself a salary into my personal accounts. This has two great functions: #1. it helps control the ebb and flow, and stops me gorging on a good month only to starve the next; #2 it keeps everything clearly separate, should Mr or Mrs Taxman decide to pay a visit.

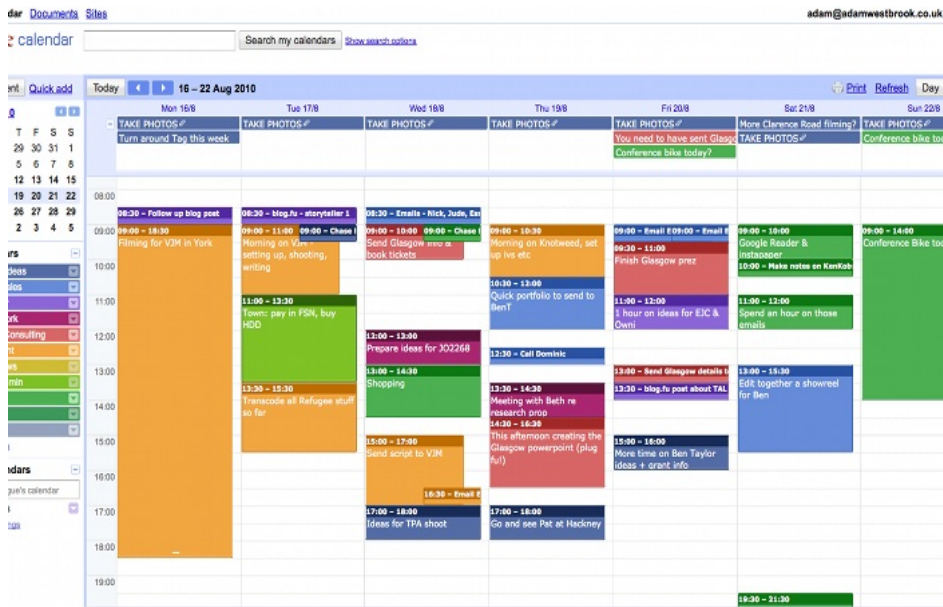
Bonus tip: Every time you catch yourself worrying about money: stop. Just think about something else (the weather, football whatever). I've saved myself a dozen ulcers by diverting my mind elsewhere...and that head in the sand approach hasn't ruined me, because I ring-fence some money time each week anyway.

.09 Admin matters too

A not insignificant time in a freelancers' work is dedicated to admin: filing invoices, chasing late payments, paying taxes, updating websites and LinkedIn Profiles. It all matters – and none of it earns you cash, which is one of the reasons freelancers earn more than full-time counterparts. This isn't something to let get out of control.

So: ring-fence admin time. I call mine 'Money Monday' and I start each week with the cheery task of checking all my accounts, opening bills, sending invoices and updating my accounts. I like to get it out of the way, but you might prefer 'Wonga Wednesday' or 'Finance Friday'. Ring-fencing it makes sure it happens, and then allows you to clear it from your mind as soon as it's done.

Bonus tip: I couldn't run such a portfolio career without Google Calendar. It's a great (and free) way to manage my time in a fluid way, which takes into account changing circumstances. It's colour coding helps me instantly gauge what's coming up.



.10 ...and freelancing is a mug's game

OK an odd one to end such a positive post on I know – *and I am not calling every freelancer a mug!*

But for all its freedoms, freelancing has its limitations. Pulling out a great days work for someone, or producing a great piece of work for them – only to have to wait weeks to get your due reward from it is tough going. As the economic clouds pull in, companies are getting worse and worse about paying up. I know people who have had to camp out in a magazine's office to get paid.

You are no longer part of the rat-race, but you are still renting your brain out to someone else, *on their terms* . It can be a career of writing stories about things you're not interested in, serving people you despise, and getting multimedia you've made redrafted to the bone. You can be very comfortable being a freelancer and, dare I say it, even rich. But can you make millions or change the world?

There's got to be a better way to do it...what do you think?

Next Generation Journalist: Nick Williams from **Adam Westbrook** on **Vimeo**.

Photo Credits: Flickr CC **Lisa Padilla**

MARK MCGUINNESS
 le 28 octobre 2010 - 16:32 • SIGNALER UN ABUS - PERMALINK

I'm impressed it only took you a year to learn these things – took me a lot longer...

VOUS AIMEZ 0 VOUS N'AIMEZ PAS 0 LUI RÉPONDRE

JENNIFER
 le 29 octobre 2010 - 16:36 • SIGNALER UN ABUS - PERMALINK

An inspiration! Thank you.

Can you elaborate on building a brand? I know there are modes of social media (twitter, blogging, FB pages and the ilk), all of which I agree are imperative but how much networking would you say happens on a base contact level?

For example, have you joined forces with fellow freelancers, attended workshops or seminars, formed alliances with businesses, etc? I'm just curious how the brand is shaped primarily – do you find yourself contracted primarily via online searching or word of mouth?

Thanks again, very sage advice indeed.

Jennifer

VOUS AIMEZ



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VOUS N'AIMEZ PAS



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LUI RÉPONDRE

ADAM WESTBROOK

le 3 novembre 2010 - 11:56 • SIGNALER UN ABUS - PERMALINK



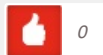
Hi Jennifer

I would say it is a mixture of digital and face-to-face networking which has the best effect. Social media can open many doors, especially if you become regarded as an authority on a particular niche. Face-to-face relationships are important too – always have a good number of business cards with you for conferences etc!

Thanks for reading,

Adam

VOUS AIMEZ



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VOUS N'AIMEZ PAS



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LUI RÉPONDRE

JENNIFER MOORE

le 11 novembre 2010 - 15:51 • SIGNALER UN ABUS - PERMALINK



Excellent article, Adam! Thank you so much!

I have done some freelancing—always as a sideline to a day job (working on reversing that situation)—but these are excellent tips for anyone and reminders for those of us who have been there, done that.

I'm going to share this on my Facebook page.

VOUS AIMEZ



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VOUS N'AIMEZ PAS



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LUI RÉPONDRE

POWER WASHING LANCASTER

le 11 novembre 2011 - 1:12 • SIGNALER UN ABUS - PERMALINK



It's extremely useful for me. Large thumbs up for this weblog post!

VOUS AIMEZ



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VOUS N'AIMEZ PAS



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LUI RÉPONDRE

9 pings

10 things I wish I knew about freelancing a year ago « Adam Westbrook le 27 octobre 2010 - 14:11

[...] Owni.fr have put into a neat little Freelance Journalism Survival Guide – click here to have a read. [...]

Jornalismo freelance : Ponto Media le 27 octobre 2010 - 14:26

[...] PARA LER – Freelance journalism: a survival guide. [...]

Freelance journalism: a survival guide » Article » OWNi, Digital Journalism « Linda

Machado @ Twitter le 27 octobre 2010 - 14:38

[...] Freelance journalism: a survival guide » Article » OWNI, Digital Journalism. [...]

Guia de sobrevivência do jornalismo freelancer | culturascopio.com le 27 octobre 2010 - 16:39

[...] dez conselhos de quem passou “pelo deserto” e está a conseguir sobreviver através do jornalismo [...]

Link love (powered by sand, sundresses and the first burn of summer) « Musings of an Abstract Aucklander le 30 octobre 2010 - 4:58

[...] a survival guide for freelance journos. A realistic take – I love that it's not all sunshine and roses about crazy earning [...]

Freelancing's 'A Mug's Game' And Other Tips - MediaJobsDaily le 10 novembre 2010 - 18:26

[...] laid-off freelance? Here's a list of been-there, done-that tips from a journalist who lost his job a year ago and was thrown headfirst into the land of [...]

Journalism: What is the best way to break into freelance writing? - Quora le 24 janvier 2011 - 16:06

[...] This great list of tips and tricks for budding freelancers was just recently posted on owni.fr: <http://owni.fr/2010/10/25/freela...> . Based on my own research (where I interviewed, among others, freelance and young journalists in [...]

How to be a 'portfolio journalist' without losing the plot — joni ayn le 18 février 2011 - 14:26

[...] important. Without it, I lose track of what time and where I'm supposed to be. Adam Westbrook blogs about this, and appears to have mastered the art of the diary. I'm not quite there yet. Particularly [...]

Freelance « the shakespeare le 21 mars 2011 - 16:00

[...] <http://owni.fr/2010/10/25/freelance-journalism-a-survival-guide/> [...]