

How to Use Spec Challenges to Launch Your Copywriting Career

By Elizabeth Blessing



It was early 2014, and I had just finished AWAI's *Accelerated Program for Six-Figure Copywriting*. And boy, was I excited.

I felt like I had accomplished something important toward achieving my dream of making a good living as a copywriter. I was more than eager to keep my momentum going.

But I had a problem.

I didn't know how to parlay my newfound copywriting skills into landing my first direct-response client.

Marketing my own talents had never been my strong suit ...

I dreaded making cold calls. My stomach churned at the thought of introducing myself to clients at marketing events.

I was afraid I'd stumble over my words, embarrass myself in front of the very people I wanted to impress.

Now, at this same time, I was also taking AWAI's *Secrets of Writing for the Health Market* program. I noticed something called "Spec Challenges" (also known as "Spec Assignments") included with the program.

These were opportunities to write a customized copy sample (generally just a few pages) for potential clients with the possibility of landing a paying job.

Basically, you needed to follow the client's instructions on the kind of copy they wanted you to submit ... write the copy to the best of your ability ... and send it to them via email.

If they liked what you submitted, they'd contact you and maybe hire you for a project.

No hunting for clients. No awkward introductions. No cold calling.

Yep, the absolute perfect marketing strategy for a wallflower like me!

So I took the plunge and submitted a three-page Spec Assignment to The Healthy Back Institute.

Within 24 hours, the company owner contacted me. He wanted to know how I would go about completing the sales letter if he hired me.

So I told him. Then he said, "Great, let's get started."

And just like that, I had my first client.

The Beginning of a Long and Profitable Marketing Strategy

From that point on, I was hooked on Spec Challenges as a great way to market myself and prove my writing abilities to new clients.

Over the years, I've written and submitted dozens of Spec Assignments to prospective clients.

To be honest, most of my copy submissions have not had the same quick results as that very first one. However, when my spec copy has piqued the interest of a client, the results have been outstanding.

For example ...

- I have landed multiple well-paying clients by submitting spec copy. This includes two jobs for top publishers in the financial newsletter industry, Weiss Research and Eagle Financial.
- I've won tens of thousands of dollars in contracts and prize money through Spec Challenges. My Weiss Research Spec Challenge win included a \$12,500 copywriting contract. One of my favorite prizes was a full year of copywriting mentorship with the Copy Chief of a leading publishing company.
- Another effort led a client to offer me a lucrative retainer contract, which to date has yielded me over \$50,000 in new work.

So, you can see how lucrative Spec Assignments can be!

Now, let me answer some common questions about them:

"Isn't submitting a Spec Assignment to a client the same as writing for free? Why would a client ask such a thing, and why should a writer even consider it?"

Well, the truth is, plenty of well-respected and reputable marketers (the kind that would be a boon to add to your client list) request customized samples from new writers as part of their hiring process.

And plenty of top-notch writers have launched successful careers by first writing and winning a Spec Challenge or two.

Let's discuss this from your client's perspective ...

Reasons a client might ask you to write a Spec Assignment:

1. **To see if your writing is a good fit for their company.** Before hiring you, clients need to make sure you can write copy for their specific product, targeted to their specific audience. The best way for them to gauge your ability to do so is to request a *customized* sample.
2. **To see how easy you might be to work with.** AWAI instructor and copywriter Joshua Boswell notes that we all want to work with people we "know, like, and trust."

Your prospective clients are no different. They use Spec Challenges as the first step in developing a relationship with you.

They're looking at things like whether you submit your copy on time and if you follow instructions. This helps them determine if you're somebody they would enjoy working with and should entrust with their important copy projects.

3. **To find a "diamond in the rough" copywriter who just might become their next copy star.** Why are these marketers so eager to get you to submit Spec Challenges? It's a matter of supply and demand. Many of them have more writing jobs than they have qualified writers to complete the work. Spec Challenges help them identify talented new writers they can hire to tackle their backlog of writing assignments.

Which brings us to ...

Reasons you should consider writing Spec Challenges:

1. **Because very good clients are asking for them!** Yes, it's really that simple. If a whole slew of high-paying, well-respected clients are saying this is what the new freelancer needs to do to get a foot in the door and land a job, then that's something you need to pay attention to.
2. **It's a chance to hone your writing skills.** If you're new to freelance writing, you've probably heard it a thousand times ... *you need to write every day*. Spec Challenges give you the chance to practice your writing skills with the added bonus that these assignments could lead to a paying client.

You can also use the copy you write for challenges to build a portfolio of samples you can show other prospective clients. So even if you don't win a challenge, you can still use the copy to showcase your writing talents.
3. **It's an opportunity for you to "window shop" for a new client or niche.** You might be wondering if a certain copywriting niche is a good fit for you. Or you might be curious what it would be like to work for a particular client. By reading the Spec Challenge instructions, doing the research required, and writing the copy, you'll gain valuable insights into what it might be like to work in a new niche or for a specific client.
4. **It's a great way to market yourself.** When you're just beginning your career, it can be difficult to find clients open to working with new writers. Even if you're an established writer trying to break into a new niche, you might encounter these same difficulties. With Spec Challenges, that problem disappears. Marketers encourage both novice and experienced writers to apply.

Here's what Paul Hanson, a *Wealthy Web Writer* Spec Challenge winner, had to say about the experience:

"My confidence went up more than a few notches by simply working through the process of choosing which Spec Assignments to go for, planning and writing the assignments, and actually pressing the 'Send' button on my email. I learned so much from the exercise itself that winning was icing on the cake. The power really comes from taking action and giving it your best shot."



(L to R) Rebecca Matter, Paul Hanson, Katie Yeakle

As Paul said, there's power in taking action. (Not enough people do!) Spec Assignments are a great way to build your writing career.

I've had a lot of success with Spec Challenges, and encourage you to try them too. If you have any questions about specs, please leave a comment below.

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2 Responses to "How to Use Spec Challenges to Launch Your Copywriting Career"

How do you handle it if the examples provided for a spec don't seem to follow the guidelines?

CelticGirl – over a year ago

Elizabeth, Thank you! I'm new and ready to work and, like you, shutter to think of the cold prospecting which becomes even more intimidating when I have no work to show. You've shown me a way!

The time you spent to submit this article has not been in vain. I hope someday to reciprocate and share my knowledge and experience with a timid newcomer.

Have a great day and all the best blessings to you!

Laura

Laura Galusha – over a year ago

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