

When You Should "Write For Free" ... And When You Shouldn't

By John Wood



Picture it ...

An email lands in your inbox ...

"I'm interested in your copywriting services. Contact me ASAP."

You email the person back and set up a time to chat on the phone. When you finally do talk, the conversation seems to go well ... until this one simple question comes up:

"Could you write something on spec for us? We want to see if you're a good fit for our business."

What do you do?

It's not an uncommon question. Freelancers are often asked to write on spec. Today, I will answer that question and as well as examine other issues related to the pros and cons of "writing for free."

What message do you send when you *don't* agree to write for free?

- **You value your services** — *"I want to test out your work, will you fix my car for free?"* If you said that to your local car repair shop, they'd look at you like you were crazy. They know that without their service, you'll have to take the bus or cab to work, rent a car, get a lift with a friend, etc. It's important to always keep in mind what you are bringing to the table. If you're writing website copy, you're increasing their online conversion rate; if you're writing autoresponder emails, you're driving prospects they may never hear from again back to a sales offer; if you're writing a blog, you're improving their search engine rankings, and so on. You're not just a person who writes content, you're a marketing strategist who will improve their overall profitability.
- **You value your time** — Motivational expert Brian Tracy says, *"Your greatest asset is your earning ability. Your greatest resource is your time."* Your entire success as a freelancer is dependent on the time available to you to market your services, research, write, and edit. If you're writing copy for free, you're taking away time from when you could be writing for a paying client or marketing your services to clients who will pay you what you're worth. If your actions convey to your prospect that you don't value your time, they won't value your time either.
- **You are credible and have expertise** — If you're willing to give someone your services and time for free, it may chip away at your credibility. Because if you're an in-demand expert, why would you even consider providing copy to someone on the off chance there may be a payoff at a later date?

What message do you send when you *do* agree to write for free?

- **You're desperate** — You risk coming off as being desperate for work and that you need money badly. Even if this is the case, you don't want to convey that to your potential client as it gives them leverage over you.
- **You're a newbie** — Even though you might be a newbie, you don't want to shine a spotlight on it as a client may expect to pay less for your services.
- **You'll work for less** — This isn't the case with all companies, however, a business who wants you to work for free may expect to pay bargain basement prices for your copy. If you've agreed to work for free, they may also assume you'll work for less.

The benefits of writing for free ...

Okay, so we've looked at the downside of writing for free, so why do writers sometimes do it? Here are six reasons ...

1. **It allows you to show a client you are a good fit** — And that you're easy to work with. Okay, this might not be a huge benefit given that doing paid work has a similar effect.
2. **It allows you to avoid talking about price** — For many freelance writers, figuring out what to charge for a project is filled with second-guessing and doubt. Working for free eliminates or delays that responsibility. I'm being "tongue-in-cheek," because of course this isn't a benefit. If you're having a problem figuring out what to charge for your services, check out this article by Ilise Benun called, [The Formula for Properly Pricing Your Freelance Copywriting Fees](#).
3. **It's an opportunity to hone your skills** — Practicing your copywriting skills is a great way to fine-tune them. That said, you may not receive knowledgeable feedback from someone asking you for free copy. If you could benefit from more feedback, read Christine Butler's article, [How to Solicit Useful Feedback on Your Writing and Why](#).
4. **Build a portfolio** — If you're just starting out and you don't yet have writing samples to display on your website, working for free is a way to build up your portfolio. Sid Smith shares tips on [How to Build a Web Copywriting Portfolio Fast](#).
5. **It's a strategy that can open up new writing opportunities with a current client** — AWAler Elizabeth Blessing writes about how she wrote a few "freebie" test articles for a client she'd written an online sales promotion for. The client liked what she'd written, leading her to earn an additional \$50,000+ in fees writing editorial articles for them. Follow Elizabeth's example by looking for areas you could improve your client's offline and online marketing. For example, if you finished re-writing their website, offer to write a blog post for them on spec. It could lead to an ongoing revenue stream.
6. **You might get paying work out of it** — While it's always a gamble, the upside is that they may decide to not only pay you for what you've written, but it may grow into a long mutually beneficial relationship with ongoing work.

Now that you know the pros and cons of writing on spec, here are five steps to take if someone approaches you about writing for free ...

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Step One: Determine your prospect's intent — This is where the "rubber meets the road," so to speak. Do you suspect your prospect is looking for free copy, and possibly free marketing ideas? Search online to see if you can find out any insights into how they do business. If other freelance writers have had a bad experience in the past with them, you may find someone has posted something about it online.

On the other hand, do you believe they are sincerely searching for new copywriting talent? Even though your spec might not result in a payday, *you know these businesses need copy and are looking for new copywriting talent*. It's a trade-off.

You get your work in front of the decision maker for a copy-hungry business without having to cold call them.

AWAI's Job Fair at Bootcamp is an example of a situation where marketers invest their time and money in order to find their next new copywriting team members. They offer Spec Assignments as an opportunity for copywriters to demonstrate they're a good match for the company.

There's a long line of professional copywriters whose career received an early boost through writing a Spec Assignment for Job Fair. Ruth Hoover wrote a Spec Assignment about a health supplement and got her foot in the door with the Agora-affiliated Institute of Natural Healing; Tanya Brody's AWAI Spec Assignment led to a full-time copywriting job with LeadPages ... to name just a few. The intent was professional and advantageous for both parties.

- **Step Two: Are they a good fit for you?** — Are they a reputable company? Are they a company you'd be comfortable working with? Are they in your niche? Are they a mom-and-pop shop that most likely has a tiny marketing budget? Or are they a good size company with a substantial marketing budget?
- **Step Three: Explain why writing copy for free is not in *their* best interest** — Copywriting is not about sitting down and typing up the first thing that comes into your head. It's about research and getting to know your client's products, services, their target audience, the tone they use in their copy, and so on. Explain to your client that for you to put the best copy possible in front of them, it takes time. And while you're confident you could improve their existing copy, to be fair to your current clients, you won't be able to dedicate the time to it you would if they were paying you.
- **Step Four: Establish how much they normally pay for copy** — If you agree to write on spec, determine how much you'll be paid upon them approving the "free copy" you write. If it's too low, walk away.
- **Step Five: Lay down the ground rules** — Clarify that if they don't use your copy for this specific Spec Assignment, you own the rights to it and they may not publish it in the future without your consent.

The next time someone asks you to write copy for free, go through the above five steps and you'll discover whether it's a great opportunity you would gain from or one with little benefit to you. Either way, always value your services and your time, and your prospects and clients will treat you accordingly.

What questions do you have about writing on spec? Or what experiences have you had with Spec Assignments? Share in the comments below.

Writing on spec is just one of many ways you can use to [land more freelance writing jobs](#). [Learn more about this and 25 other ways to boost your writing business](#).

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4 Responses to "When You Should "Write For Free"... And When You Shouldn't"

Good job with this topic, John! Working without any guarantee of being paid for my time has never appealed to me. The way I see it... potential clients can look at my samples and determine if I'm a good fit for their project. They don't get to "try me out" for free. However, if you're just getting started as a copywriter, and you don't have many samples, taking a job on spec is a good way to get the samples you need to land higher-paying work. Just don't keep working for free!

Guest (Deanna) – over a year ago

Questions: "Search online to see if you can find out any insights into how they do business." Can you be more specific about how this is accomplished? And also, how do I find out what size company they are and what their marketing budget is?

Your article was insightful and brought up views I had not considered. Thanks!

Tina – over a year ago

Wood your enumerated pros and cons on the topic-"writing for free" is well versed and I commend you. What is worth mentioning is we might be writing for free without knowing it or paying attention to it, unless we have a contract, such as retainer whereby we are getting paid regardless. Otherwise, when you agree to write for a client, it will involve submitting samples and etcetera, so until everything is finalized and the client "hire or accept" your proposal, it would be deemed writing for free in my opinion.

Guest (clement) – over a year ago

Thank you for your comments. Tina, in terms of searching, you could put in the name of the company and check the first five or ten pages that come up. Also, search for their name followed by the word "scam" or whatever. Plus, check their Better Business Bureau status.

Although it doesn't give you marketing budgets, Owler.com will give you a revenue estimation and employees of many companies (for free.)

Clement, excellent point/topic and worthy of an article of its own.

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