

Tips from a Publishing Insider: how to get hired by a book publisher as a freelancer

With over 7000 UK publishing establishments and more than one third of these working in book publishing, why do so many freelance editors and proofreaders find it hard to make a substantial income from their work? (One glance at the website for the SfEP will show you just how pessimistic that organisation is about editorial freelancers finding work.) But having sat behind a publisher's desk for many years, I know to what extent the industry relies on freelance resources and that the publishing world simply wouldn't turn without the editorial expertise, design know-how, and of course, the flexibility, tenacity, and patience that every freelancer brings to their work.

I'm not suggesting it's easy, particularly for new freelancers. But, on the other hand, some recent research I conducted amongst those taking on freelancers confirms that publishers can't always have the luxury of working with those they know and trust. 'New' freelancers have to be hired, too.

So what will improve your chances of a publisher taking on your services? What qualities do they put above all others? Well, the research suggests there are six clear factors that matter most to a publisher.

1. You can adhere to tight deadlines

Publishing is a deadline-driven business. Publication dates and publishing on time – for the critical Christmas sales period or the start of the academic year - will define a project's financial success or failure. Delivering work late is an absolute no no. And if a tardy author has already submitted late, you may well be asked to recoup that time in the schedule. Not fair, I know, but business savvy to oblige.

2. **You know your target market inside out**

An expertise or subject knowledge will be expected of you, certainly if you're starting out. Even as an experienced editor, you will need to have a comprehensive, bird's eye view of the readership. Publishers will expect you to know the level your audience operate at and identify with with their level of interest. So for example, teaching experience is a huge help if you want to work in educational publishing and will help set you apart from other editors and proofreaders.

3. **You're easy to work with**

Publishers, like most business clients, will give work to people they like to work with. Hone your social skills and appreciate that it isn't only *what* you do, it's *how* you do it, too, that matters.

4. **Your communication skills, particularly over the phone, are second to none**

As a freelancer, much of the work you do is over the phone. You may be required to carry out quite sensitive work with high-level authors. Publishers will not want to risk fast-selling, till-ringing authors to the whims of a bad-tempered, crotchety editor.

5. **You provide value for money**

Much publicity has leaked out about publishers' declining interest in the accuracy and integrity of an author's text. In truth, a squeeze on profits has required an increasingly tight-fisted approach to editorial and design costs. But research would suggest that publishers are not necessarily looking to pay the lowest price for a freelance job. They are paying for the job to be done well and within the required timeframe, so will take a view on whether a freelancer's work represents value for money. They might even be prepared to pay a pound or two more per hour if they know that the quality of the freelancer's work will save money further down the line.

6. **You guarantee high levels of confidentiality**

All publishers want to work with the best freelancers. By the same token, the best freelancers are busy freelancers who work with many different publishing clients. But any publisher can't afford to let a contender for market position see their trump card. Over the top, perhaps? But having been in their shoes I know that competitive sensitivity breeds insecurity. So any

information on what your clients are publishing, what you're working on, and when, has to be secure in your own pc – leave any 'promotional' work to the in-house marketing team.

Of course, this guidance represents a starting point. You may have to carry out more of your own research to identify exactly what it is your potential clients would require of you before employing your services – and what evidence they need to retain you on their database of freelancers. But with more than 100,000 new book titles published in the UK last year, there's a great deal of freelance editorial work still to be done.

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Mary James is the tutor for the Publishing Training Centre's one-day course 'Successful Editorial Freelancing'. Go to www.train4publishing.co.uk for a course outline.

With more than 20 years' experience in publishing, Mary now works as a Market Sleuth to provide research and consultancy services to publishers, so has first-hand knowledge of the freelance market. For more information, go to www.innoved.co.uk.