

13 Ways

to Get the Writing Done

FASTER

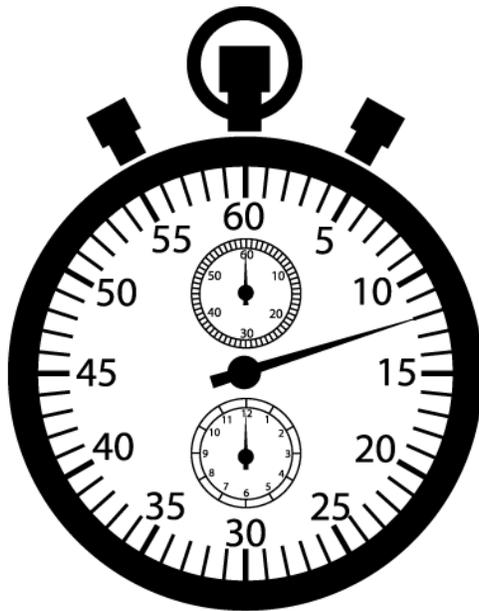
Two pro writers share their secrets



By Carol Tice & Linda Formichelli

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Introduction

Have you been wondering how you can be a more efficient writer? It'd be great to get your writing done fast and have more time for friends, family, and leisure time, eh?

We hear these questions a lot – so we wrote this ebook to give you an inside look at how we crank out a ton of writing in a short time.

Who are we, and why did we write this ebook?

Carol Tice



Hi there – I'm Carol Tice. Just to give you some background, I've been a full-time freelance writer since 2005. I was a staff writer for 12 years before that, and freelanced for several years at the beginning of my career, too. I've earned more every year since I returned to freelancing in '05, straight through the downturn, hitting six figures in 2011. I write the Make a Living Writing blog (<http://www.makealivingwriting.com>). Magazines I've written for include Entrepreneur, Alaska Airlines, and Seattle Magazine, and corporate clients include Costco and American Express.

Linda Formichelli



I'm Linda Formichelli. I've been a full-time freelance writer since 1997 and earn a living working under 25 hours per week. I've written for magazines like Redbook, USA Weekend, Health, Writer's Digest, and WebMD, and businesses like Sprint, OnStar, Pizzeria Uno, and Wainwright Bank. I'm also the co-author of *The Renegade Writer: A Totally Unconventional Guide to Freelance Writing Success* and run the Renegade Writer Blog (<http://www.therenegadewriter.com>).

We also both serve as mentors in Freelance Writers Den, a support and learning community for writers looking to grow their income.

We get a lot of questions from writers in the Den's forums. A lot of those questions go something like this:

“How do you fit it all in?”

“How do you balance family time with writing?”

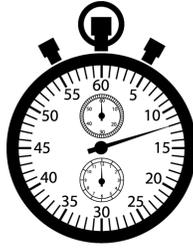
“It takes me eight hours to write each blog post. How can I speed up?”

To answer these questions, the two of us got together to share our writing shortcuts – the methods we've perfected over the years that help us cut the bull and get the writing done, so we can have fun and get more family time.

In this ebook, you get to listen in on that conversation – we came up with our 13 biggest tips for getting the writing done faster.

Members of Freelance Writers Den got to listen to this chat, and asked us some great followup questions, so we've included those at the end of this ebook. We cover some of the down-and-dirty shortcuts that you don't want to take in that section, too.

Read on for our quick guide to how to speed up your writing process...



Here are our 13 best tips for faster writing:

1. Write in a niche.

CAROL: When you stick to one topic or even several, it really helps you write faster. You kind of know where all the bodies are buried. You know where all the good sources are, which university has that awesome think-tank on that topic.

When I used to write about retail all the time, for instance, I would tap one university's retail institute in Texas, over and over. When you're not having to reinvent that sourcing and study-data wheel with every single story, that saves a huge amount of time.

Writing in a niche often means you have multiple publications where you write on a similar topic. That means you can re-spin one interview with one source into more than one different market. You can slant that idea three different ways and resell it. But having to source each story from scratch because it's a new topic every time is a really big time suck. I'm just saying.

LINDA: Like you were saying, you can have several niches. My niches are business and health, plus a few others. You want to not be a total Jack-of-all-trades.

2. Keep your interviews short.

LINDA: I think a lot of writers tend to ask every question on a topic they can think of because they're afraid they're not going to get everything they need. Then they have trouble reining in their sources, so the interviews just go on and on. They don't even get a lot of useable material out of it, so it's a really big waste of time.

My interviews tend to take 20 to 30 minutes. One thing I do is I let people know how long the interview will be, so they know what to expect. For example, I'll tell the source upfront, 'I'll only need 20 minutes of your time.' Or, 'I've scheduled from 1:00 to 1:30 for this interview.' That way you don't need to worry about cutting somebody off if you get what I call the Rambling Rhonda. You have no problem cutting her off because you say, 'Okay, we only have five minutes left. I don't want to waste your valuable time. So, let's get back on topic.'

The last question I always ask a source is, 'Is it okay if I get back in contact with you if I need more information as I'm writing this?' They always say yes. That way you can feel reassured that

if you're writing the article and you're missing something you can call that person and get another quick quote.

CAROL: When I was a staff writer at the Puget Sound Business Journal, there was this one cub reporter... every interview he did, he would go out and talk to the person in person. And he would be there for hours. Then later, the source would call the publisher to complain that they had totally wasted their time and it ended up being two lines in a story! People were pissed off. This brings us to the next point:

3. Think before you drive.

CAROL: I find with a lot of writers, it seems like every interview they do, they're going to jump in their car and go physically see someone. But when I'm scheduling appointments, I think real carefully about whether there is a compelling reason I need to see this source in person or not.

If you don't need to describe their office, or the way they dress, or the way they talk... if it's not a personal profile of them and you don't need to tour their plant, then you want to talk to them on the phone. Because that's going to be a half-hour on the phone, where driving somewhere is easily killing at least half a day of productivity.

LINDA: I've been freelancing fulltime for 15 years, and I think I have done three in-person interviews. None of them were necessary, but the editor or the source insisted on them being in person. This is so rare. Luckily, you can get out of it a lot of times, especially when you're interviewing people and they want you to come and you say, 'Well, I'm in North Carolina. So, we're going to have to do it on the phone.'

CAROL: Well, that's the thrill of reporting national stories, you get out of that 'Can you come over?' problem.

LINDA: People say, 'Oh, do you want to come in and see the store?' I say, 'No. I can't. Sorry. I'm all the way across the country.'

CAROL: I ask: 'Can you send a slideshow? Have you done a video of it I could look at?' In our Internet age of online tools, often you don't have to tour that plant in person. They've done a movie of it and posted it on their website, or on YouTube.

If you live several states away from that source, then obviously, you're not coming in person. Skype's awesome.

I'm in a small state way up in the upper left-hand part of the country. I'm not near loads of things. I get invites all the time -- about half of the world seems to think I'm in L.A. and the other half thinks I'm in New York. So, I get this constant stream of 'Will you take a meeting with this person in New York tomorrow?' I'm like, nope. That's the reality.

The only time that I've gone out and done a lot of in-person interviewing was when I was writing for Seattle Magazine. If you're writing for a regional publication where you really need to

capture the flavor of a location or a person, that's when you're going out. If it's not that kind of piece, you just don't need to.

4. Don't over-report.

LINDA: This is a huge issue for writers, especially newer writers, because they're not confident in their researching ability. So they tend to do way more research than they need to because they're afraid they'll come up short when it's time to write the piece.

One thing I like to do is start earlier. So as soon as I get the assignment, I start looking for sources. That way, if I realize later that I'm missing something, then I'll have time to go back and get more.

I challenge you to experiment with cutting down on the research to help you gain confidence. I think that if you say, 'Okay, for this 1,000 word piece I'm going to interview four people. I'm going to keep the interviews to 20 to 30 minutes, and I'm only going to spend so much time researching on the web,' then you write the article and see how it turns out for you, I think you'll be pleasantly surprised that you can do a lot less research than you were doing and still come out with a quality article.

I'm not saying to skimp on your research. But just don't over-research because it's a waste of time. Another reason it's a waste of time, besides the fact that you're spending a lot of time researching, is that now you're trying to cram all of this research into one article because you hate to not use the research that it took you so long to come up with.

So you need to realize you're not going to get eight to ten sources in that 600-word piece and just interview three or four. Experiment with it, gain confidence as you go along, and I think you'll find that you can do less research.

CAROL: I was so bad at this at first, because I started from nothing, with no J-school degree. I had a massive complex about how much I knew, so I would do a book's worth of research on every piece.

Then writing it was, of course, just horrible. I knew all this interesting stuff and had to leave it all out. So, it was really, really depressing. It makes the writing agony, because you've got too much information for this size piece.

The other bad thing that happens is you end up interviewing sources that you end up not being able to use. Then you kind of screwed them over and wasted their time. You don't want to do that to your sources. Realize that it's a disrespectful thing when you take people's time, but you don't get them in the story.

Over time, I learned to take the exact opposite approach. If someone tells me a story is 800 words and it only pays \$400, I'm thinking – it's like two sources and a statistic, that's what I'm going to go out and get.

You want to key your research to the pay offered and the value that they're giving to the project. If they're not paying \$800 for that 800-word article, you're going to report it differently. I've done 600 word articles that were \$100 and the research was really brief. So you want to take that into account.

To sum up, over reporting is a bad habit you want to break.

5. Type and/or take notes faster.

CAROL: One of my big secrets of how I get stuff done is that I type 120 words a minute. In a past life I was a secretary. I developed a sort of unofficial shorthand method. If you can type and take notes as fast as most sources talk, it saves oodles of time and also results in really accurate quotes. It makes a huge difference in your productivity. If you're a two-finger typist, it's really hard to produce a huge volume like you need to, to earn well.

So consider taking a typing course or learning some shorthand. The speed at which I type allows me to not record (which we'll be talking more about in a bit).

I've had celebrity interviews where their handlers would say, 'Aren't you recording this?' And I'd say, 'No. I'm just typing it down.'

I'd read it back to them and they'd flip out that I had every word they said. I'm like a court reporter. It's a really big advantage in this line of work.

LINDA: I also came up with my own shorthand, which really helped me be able to do this. For example, if I was writing a health article I would just use the letter M for muscle. I would use the letter D for diet. I would use SO for someone. And probably only I could read it when I was done but it really increased the speed of my typing, which is not very fast to begin with.

6. Schedule appointments and calls carefully.

LINDA: As I mentioned, I keep my interviews to 20 to 30 minutes. But for years, for some reason, I was scheduling them an hour apart. So, I'd say, okay, I have an interview at 11:00 and let's do one at 12:00 and let's do one at 1:00. Then I'd have 40 minutes of dead time until the next one. As you probably know, it's hard to get a lot of work done in the 45 minutes when you know you're waiting for another big interview to happen. So it was a lot of wasted time.

Now I schedule my interviews 45 minutes apart because some interviews do go to a-half-hour and that gives me 15 minutes to prepare for the next one.

Also, another thing I used to do was I would schedule interviews whenever people were available. So I'd have an interview at 10:00 and then I'd have an interview at 12:00 and then I'd have an interview at 3:00. It kind of breaks up your day and makes your work less efficient.

Sometimes it's hard to get something done when you know you have another interview coming up.

What I do now is I take charge. I tell people when I'm available and I try to schedule all my interviews for around the same time. So now I'll have one at 10:00. I'll have one at 10:45. I'll have one at 11:30. I'll schedule them like that into a block of time. So my morning is taken up with interviews and then the afternoon is totally free to pursue whatever other aspects of my career I need to pursue. That way the interviews don't keep interrupting my day.

CAROL: I can be better at this. I still too often find myself looking at a schedule that's, like, I've got a call at 10:00 and one at 1:00. It's so easy in between calls to have it end up as I'm just picking up e-mail and messing around and not really focused on critical writing, source finding, actual getting-things-accomplished kind of stuff.

7. If you record interviews, hire a transcriptionist.

LINDA: I experimented with the various options for recording and transcribing interviews. I typed as fast as people talked, as we already talked about. There was one point where I was taping them and then I would go back and listen to the tape, which was just awful. Finally, a few years ago, I started just recording the interviews and then sending them to a transcriptionist.

It was the best thing I ever did. It saves me a ton of time. I don't pay that much for it. It's tax deductible. It's faster. I do the interview on Skype using a Skype recorder that cost me \$15. It saves the interview as a .mov file. I upload the files to my transcriptionist's FTP. It takes about a minute. A day later, I have the interview back at a cost of 20 to 30 bucks. If you're writing an article that's \$1,000 or whatever, \$120 in cost for transcription is not that bad.

Carol has another take on this, though.

CAROL: Yeah. I had a formative experience about recording interviews early in my cub-reporter days. I was a freelancer for the real estate section of the Los Angeles Times.

I had been writing songs about nine months before this. I was really, really green. I was always recording everything because I was really paranoid about not remembering a quote or having it written down.

One day in this early time period, I went to a big event that a lot of journalists were covering – it was for some TV show, and I remember Greg Kinnear was in it.

A reporter I idolized turned out to also be there, covering the same event. It was Bob Pool, who was the Times metro section anchor reporter. He is an amazing, amazing journalist who could write about anything. (I checked, and as of early 2012, he's still there!) They made him be a department store Santa one year and made him write about it. They could throw anything at him and he would create these compelling stories. I thought he was a genius.

So there Bob was. He had no recorder and the teeniest notebook I'd ever seen.

I say, 'Bob, you're not recording anything?' He says, 'What the heck, I've got to file this at 3:30. I don't have time to listen to some recording.' He sort of walked off.

And I pretty much never recorded anything again. It made me realize, 'This is doubling my workload every time I record this.'

I'm a fast typist and a good transcriptionist. I actually used to have a transcribing business myself. So I can do it, but it was making a lot of work. It made me realize that I should try and stay away from it. Since then, I've only recorded a couple of really important interviews. It does add up, hiring a transcriptionist.

So, that's been my solution. I don't record stuff. Just sayin'.

8. Get more than one story from each interview.

CAROL: I don't mean that you should write multiple articles at once about the exact same topic. But at the end of interviews, I always try and schmooze that source a little.

I ask, 'What's coming next for you? Are you going to any conferences? What are the hot topics in your industry? What do you think's going to happen next year?'

I try and finish the conversation with a couple other story ideas.

For instance, for a long time, I was writing about jobs and careers for one corporate client. They would place the stories on the front page of Yahoo!

Every time I interviewed a source, I would leave with the next idea to pitch this client. That saves you so much time. You don't go home and go, 'Okay, I've got to find another story idea for this client.' It just rolled along. They were okay with reusing sources. I'd just keep on going and keep on using them.

LINDA: This is something that I really slack at. I'm really bad at it. But just today, I had a couple of interviews for a Dunkin' Donuts trade magazine on Starbucks' new Blonde Roast. I learned so much about coffee roasting and the coffee market that I never thought I would have. It led to a lot of interesting questions and my mind is going a mile a minute trying to figure out what else I could do with this information.

CAROL: I'm sure you can find some spin on it for another publication. Absolutely.

9. Start writing anywhere.

LINDA: Most writers start where it's obvious to start an assignment, which is at the beginning – the title or the lede. It's the hardest part to come up with, so they just sit there and sit there. They

drive themselves crazy. Part of the reason for that is if you don't quite know the whole story arc of your assignment and what you're going to be writing about, then it's hard to write the lede because you don't quite know what you're leading into.

So one thing I do is I just start anywhere I feel inspired to start. The types of articles I usually write are services pieces that have bullet points or subheads. I pick one of the subheads and I start writing. I fill out all the subheads and then I might go back and write the lead and the title. It's much easier now because I have so much more to go on.

It's the same with the ending. The ending is very hard until you know what you've got in the article. I usually start somewhere in the middle. This really saves a lot of time because I can just start writing and not be sitting there staring, frustrated at a blank page all day.

CAROL: I do the exact same thing. Unless I've had a brilliant insight about the first sentence of this thing and I'm ready to just launch at the top, I'll start writing the bullet points.

I'm actually doing a piece now for Entrepreneur that's 50 ideas for topics for your business blog. So I started just doing my 50 points. I'm filling in my points and making sure there's 50 and not 52 or 48. I'm tinkering with all that, finding all the links, getting that all done, because that's 90 percent of the piece.

I could still be sitting there with nothing if I was trying to figure out some sort of quick little intro. It needs to be really short and snappy and calls for more general brilliance than the rest of the piece. I'm totally leaving that for the end.

Sometimes I'll write the end of the piece first, if I know where that's going.

But definitely, that's the biggest problem where you're thinking, 'I have to write that first paragraph and now I'm just going to sit here all day because I can't think of the first paragraph.' That's a big time waster right there.

10. Don't overwrite.

CAROL: There's nothing like writing the first draft of a 1,000-word article and finding that it's 2,000 words long and you need to cut it in half. That's just agony.

One of the things I do to avoid that is to try and lay in the subheads or the points and get a sense of how much room I have in each section so then I can write a section, run a quick word count on it, and say, 'I need to trim 100 words out of this. I'll just do that real quick.'

Then, I keep going. That way, you don't end up with some ugly monster draft. I used to really fail at this. The first big feature I wrote was twice the length that it needed to be – it was 6,000 words instead of 3,000!

That is so much time down the drain when you've got to cut a lot out of a draft. I try to be realistic as I'm writing about what's really going to fit in this thing.

After a while, you get pretty good at this. I usually am just writing to length now. If it's 700 words my first draft is pretty much there. What about you, Linda?

LINDA: Yeah. I was going to say that same thing, actually. The more you write, the more you will be able to write to length like that. I mean, if I have a 1,200-word assignment, it comes out to 1,200 words. It's just practice. You have an internal gauge that tells you how long it is, where you need to cut back, where you need longer, and so on.

CAROL: You get sort of a Spidey sense about it after a while that you're going on too much about this. You start doing it as you go. But this obviously also stems from the over-reporting problem. That tends to lead to over-writing, because you have too much stuff and you're trying to cram it all in. You're trying to figure out how to fit all eight of those sources into the thoughts and words. It's not really going to work. It gives you too much to wrestle with.

I actually suffered from this all over again doing these book chapters where I really did need to do a lot of research and then I had to boil it way down. It took a lot of time. So whenever you can avoid it you want to not over-write.

This next point is something that Linda and I recently discovered we both do. We were all sort of giggly to see that we both have this secret technique.

11. Write what you want to write.

LINDA: I mentor a lot of writers. I hear from them, 'Well, I thought I would save time and be more efficient by really scheduling my days. So on Monday and Wednesday I'm going work on marketing. On Tuesday and Thursday I'm going to work on my blog. On Friday I'm going to do administrative tasks.' It never works. I have tried this and I can't get beyond the first hour of the first day.

You're sitting there thinking, 'It's Monday, which is a marketing day, but I'd much rather be writing a blog post today.' Then you feel stuck and you either force yourself to plod inefficiently through the marketing you should be doing because you scheduled it, or you do nothing because you feel guilty writing your blog posts.

I discovered something. I have ADD, so I like to jump from task to task. It's just the way I work. So many writers that I've been mentoring lately have the same problem. I discovered that if I let go of the schedule and just do what I'm inspired to do every minute of the day, everything gets done in its own time and it gets done on time.

One thing I do, as I mentioned earlier, is I start my articles early. So that way if I have three weeks to write an article and I've got my sources and my interviews done a week in, I have two weeks to kind of wait for that inspiration to hit, because I like to write when I'm inspired to write, not when I'm forced to write.

However, there are times when I come up against a deadline, I haven't been inspired and I've got to pull it out -- and I do, because I'm a professional and that's what I do. But a lot of the times, if you just let things happen in their own time, you will want to write a blog post. You will want to send some queries. You will want to work on that article, just not when you're expecting to. It really does save you a lot of time because you're not trying to fit your schedule into hours that don't work for you.

CAROL: I'm really focused on writing what I have the urge to write – sometimes, I'll even turn something in a day after deadline if I can write what I'm inspired on right now. (I try not to write for many clients at this point for whom that would be a huge problem.) Life is so much easier once you just go with that.

If you're setting a schedule that says 'From 8:00 to 10:00 a.m., I will do marketing,' but you wake up just itching to write something...you should just write it and do marketing in the afternoon.

I hear that all the time from writers who say, 'I'm setting out my schedule for the month of when I will do what.' I'm like, really? Because I never do that. I mean, I have deadlines. I know I need to meet them. I look at what needs to be done in what order.

One of my tips: If you've just finished the last interview for a piece, try to sit down and write the article right then. It is so much easier than if you have to write it two days from now.

It's always more time if you have to start again cold, reviewing all your notes to rediscover what you thought was fascinating about that interview. Where if you do it when your head is already in that piece, it'll just flow out.

I'm doing it more and more now, where I just don't even care what I'm supposed to be doing. It's like – stop being a good girl and be an artist. Be a creative writer. That's what you really are.

If it means blowing a deadline, I just ask the other editor if I can have another day. I usually find nobody really cares, so why do I? If I know there's some breathing room in my deadlines and I'm inspired to do something else, I'm going to do it. Both pieces are going to come out better.

The thing that writers lose track of is that it's all about the results. It's all about the brilliant writing. Or as I was just saying to my sister yesterday, 'It's all about being 'brilliant Carol.' That's what people hire me for. They hire me to bring the brilliant Carol, where I win Society of Professional Journalists awards for them or help them land big clients.

They're looking for something exceptional from me, not something mediocre. So I need to do whatever it takes to deliver that. If that means I'm not going to turn in this draft today because I still think it's not there and I'm totally driven to write something else, that's the deal.

12. Write without notes, quotes, or attribution.

CAROL: This is one of my favorite tips. It really changed my life back when I was a staff writer and I needed to write three, four stories every single week on deadline or else. I learned this at a training given by the Donald W. Reynolds National Center for Business Journalism.

Here's the trick: If you've got a pile of research and interviews and notes and press releases and study data and now you're ready to write, you should put it all aside and sit down and just tell the story.

Don't stop to look up links you need or how to spell sources' names or what exactly the quote was that they said. Write this flowing, dummy draft that tells what you know is the guts of the good part of the story. Then, go back through your notes and fix it all after you've spit out that draft. It's an incredible unleasher of creativity.

Linda puts TK for "to come" by any little missing factoids that she doesn't know offhand, which works great.

I was inspired a bit in this by the late Polish journalist Ryszard Kapuscinski, who famously never even took notes, despite being a beat reporter for years and subsequently writing nonfiction books. He said you remember the good parts of the story. It's really true.

If you approach your article draft like you're on a phone conversation with a friend...you would just say what was interesting about the story. You get a great draft and then you can go back and look up that study to find out if they found it was 60 percent or 72. You can go plug in all the boring fact-checking details that you need later, and you're good.

LINDA: It's funny because I do that sometimes. But often, I do something that's pretty much the opposite of that and it helps me save time: I'll have an idea of what I want the article to be, meaning I'll have the subheads written down or whatever. Then I will go to my interview transcript, pull out the quotes that I like and stick them under the right subhead and then write around them. So, I start with the quotes instead of ending with the quotes.

CAROL: That can be awesome, if you think you have a couple of killer quotes that you want to be sure to get in.

13. Limit your social media time.

LINDA: Social media is great, but it's a huge time suck. I know a lot of writers think, 'This is really a necessary part of my business, because I need to network and I need to get ideas and this and that.' That's true. But I think a lot of us verge into wasting time on it. I don't have so much of a problem with social media. But I do have a problem with clicking around online.

One thing I do that would work for both of these problems is use a piece of software called Freedom. It's at MacFreedom.com. (<http://macfreedom.com/>) It's \$10, available for Windows and Mac. It shuts down your network altogether so you can't get online unless you reboot your computer.

I use this when I have an article to write. I have this thing where sometimes I'll write a sentence, look online, write a sentence, look online. It is a real waste of time. So if I use Freedom I'm not even tempted to go online because I know I can't. There's another software called Anti-Social (<http://anti-social.cc/>) and it's for Mac only right now. It's \$15. It's by the same people who do Mac Freedom. It just shuts down the social network, if that's your bugaboo. Those things can be really helpful in helping you save time and be more efficient.

Q&A

Q: If you write on the same topic for several clients, how do you avoid self-plagiarism?

CAROL: It's really simple: I totally rewrite it. I make sure there isn't a single sentence that's the same in the two pieces.

Often, you're freshening it up with a little new data. Time has passed. I don't usually write them to come out the same month. Like, I just did a piece on royalty finance, which is how movies are financed and how that's becoming something startups of all types can use. I already wrote that for a site that serves medium-sized businesses, last fall.

I'll do it again for a small business magazine and plug in a couple of different sources to it that are small business examples instead of medium, and presto, a new article. I know where all the sources are. It's sort of an instant story for me, ready to write.

But I have also done the exact same topic over again. One of my favorites is ratio analysis of your balance sheet. It's this really math-heavy story, but it's very useful information. I just rewrite it.

LINDA: I don't tend to sell the same idea over and over again, which I know is bad. Because when I'm done with a topic I typically want to move on. But let me give you a warning story. One time, I did write on the same topic for two completely different magazines in different markets and I reused some of the same sentences. One of the editors found out and he was not happy. So, that is a word of warning. Be really careful.

Q: What happens if people want a face-to-face interview instead of over the phone?

CAROL: If you think it's totally unnecessary, I'd just not be available. Just say, 'I have other appointments. I'm not going to be able to fit it into my schedule.' Pretty basic.

I don't know that many people who are dying to do a face-to-face interview because it's more of a time and energy commitment for them too. Hopefully you don't run into that too much.

LINDA: I would do the same thing, I did have one situation a couple of years ago where this woman at a college about 45 minutes away said she was really uncomfortable with phone interviews, really wanted in-person. My editor wanted me to go. I really needed her in the story. I just had to do it and it sucked.

I had to get childcare. I spent half the day driving up there and back for an interview that was half an hour that could have been on the phone. Yeah. Sometimes you've got to do it. If the assignment calls for it and your editor says you have to do it, you've got to decide. Do I want to do this or not do the article at all?

CAROL: If it's someone that I'm dying to connect with, I really want to build a relationship with them, get to know them, then I might want to do an in-person because I feel like it's going to pay off down the line.

Q: I have a client who always wants to meet in person to discuss minor issues. I don't want to insult her but I keep running into this. How can I help her break this habit?

CAROL: Have you tried 'I can't come?' Just don't be available.

LINDA: You have too much work. You're busy, busy, busy.

CAROL: 'I'm sorry, I can't fit that in. I'm really swamped. Happily I still have time to work your account, but I don't have time to do this in-person meeting so you can tell me to change the font from blue to green.'

Q: What about using sources you've found in a print article or book, using a quote from a piece instead of contacting the actual person? What's the best way to get permission for this?

CAROL: I get this question a lot, and it worries me, because that isn't something you're going to normally want to do. That's the kind of thing you do in a college paper. But that's not generally what you would do in an article you are writing for any sort of legitimate market.

LINDA: I agree. You definitely don't want to reuse quotes that you found in other media...

CAROL: ...or just quote a paragraph out of their book instead of talking to them.

LINDA: Right. You could very rarely say, 'In book such-and-such, so-and-so says whatever.' Once, you know what I mean? If you really can't get that person on the phone and it's really important. But that's not something I would do regularly. I would never quote another article. I would never quote them from another article, lift the quotes out of there.

CAROL: I'm not aware of a lot of situations where that would be OK. That would be considered such lazy reporting in most of the world I know.

You couldn't pick up the phone and call them and get a fresh quote? What the editors want is something fresh and new from you, not something recycled. That's why they're paying a reporter to report the story. So that's sort of a worrisome area to me.

Q: If you can't talk on the phone, does it work to e-mail questions to them?

LINDA: Yes. I have done that in the past. It is doable in certain situations where you really don't need a lot of flavor and you just need a little bit. However, one thing I've found with that is that it can actually waste time because on the phone you can ask questions as they come up. The conversation will lead you to questions that you hadn't thought of. Whereas, on e-mail they'll send you all their stuff and then you'll be like, 'I still need this, this, and this.' You'll e-mail them back and then they'll e-mail you and then you'll e-mail them. Then their quotes also come out kind of canned, like they're not...what's the word I'm thinking of, Carol?

CAROL: Lively, fresh, fun.

LINDA: They're not lively. They're canned, which is a little harder to work with. So if you absolutely can't get on the phone and this is a key source I would do an e-mail interview but just keep in mind those limitations. But if possible, for any type of article, I try to do a phone interview.

CAROL: I disagree here.

This issue of people passing off e-mailed responses as interviews is a real pet peeve of mine, coming out of traditional journalism. I am of the opinion, and I know many, many publications editors are of the same opinion that *e-mails are not interviews*.

And if you want to quote a piece of e-mail in an article, the correct way to do it is to say, 'I hate that idea,' *said Joe in an e-mail response*.

It should be cited differently. If your editor doesn't need that, let them take it out if they don't care about it. But you don't ever want to be passing off e-mails you got as interviews you conducted live with a person.

I know people do this all the time. This has become a big, gray area.

My advice is simply not to do it. As Linda said, e-mail answers suck. They really do. You really want to avoid it if at all humanly possible.

I had one person recently who was literally in Mauritania for a month of something, in the bush. Beyond a drastic situation like that, there are very few situations where you cannot get someone on a phone, really.

There's Skype now. What's your excuse for not getting them on the phone, is my question? You are afraid of phone interviews? You want to avoid them? You're lazy?

But like Linda said, it may feel like this is shortcut but I don't think it is. It's certainly not a shortcut to award-winning journalism or anything lively or fresh or awesome, which is what you want to be delivering every time, because that's what makes people rehire you. I don't know when I've gotten that out of an e-mail.

I have had sources who would only send me quick little e-mail responses to things. The only time I've accepted it is if it's somebody real high-powered and I've just got to have them. You know, it's Howard Shultz and I need him because he invested in Pinkberry and I'm writing a book chapter about Pinkberry. If I've just got to have it and that's all he's willing to give me, I'm going to take it.

But otherwise, I'm not liking email interviews. You can't ask any follow-up questions. There's no flow to the conversation where new things might come up. So often you start with a standard list of questions and if those are all the answers you get and you're not able to do any follow-up to that, you may not have gotten anything interesting. The interesting stuff often comes as you get into this conversation you're having. So, that's the big problem that I see.

Anyway, you can tell this is a hot button with me.

LINDA: Can I just tell everybody that I do not like interviews. I am a nervous person on the phone. It gets better as you do them. Everybody's really nice to you. Nothing bad ever happens.

CAROL: They won't bite or suck your blood or eat your children or anything. It'll be okay.

If a source says to just e-mail, I ask myself if I really need them. Could I just get a different source? Maybe they're just not that hot to be quoted and there's someone else who would be a better source, is my reaction to that.

Q: It's taking me three to six hours to write my own blog posts, and six to eight hours to write blog posts for other people that are just 350 to 500 words. What's wrong with me? How can I write faster? My first draft goes pretty well, but then when I look at it again I don't like it, and I rewrite some of it, and this keeps going on every time I look at it.

CAROL: This is a bad, bad problem that's going to seriously impact your ability to make a living as a writer. It sounds to me like an over-editing problem.

Let me start by saying you are looking at it too many times. You're having let-go-itis problems. You're having trouble saying, 'It's done.'

LINDA: Some people are just slow writers. But a huge problem for a lot of them is perfectionism. I think they need to get it through their heads that your blog posts will never be perfect. There's just no perfect. They don't know what perfect looks like, so they keep going and going and going. I think at some point you just need to experiment with cutting yourself off, get it out there, and see what happens. I think you'll be pleasantly surprised that it's fine. I mean it takes me, for the Renegade Writer blog, about half an hour to write a blog post, maximum.

CAROL: I'm mad at myself if I go over about an hour.

LINDA: Yeah. I write it out, I look at it, I put it up, I look at it in its format so I can catch any other mistakes, and it's out there. I mean that's it and it's fine. Maybe if I revise it 100 times it would be better. But I don't know, I have pretty good results with it. So I think you just need to challenge yourself to stop. Give yourself a time limit, stop there, put it out, and see what the response is.

CAROL: I do know people like Jon Morrow who invest an 8-hour day in writing a post. But that's because they're going to earn \$5,000 off that post because it's linking to something they're selling. They can make that time investment and they make it really, really amazing. But it's basically a sales tool.

It's kind of a different assignment than a typical blog post that you're writing for content for somebody. I would really challenge yourself to set limits on the number of times you're allowed to review it.

You only get two edits and that's it. You're done. Or you only get a half hour to review your draft. You need to cut yourself off. You're like a bad drinker at a bar who's exceeding their limit.

Earning well is all about quantity, producing a lot of work. So you've got to see what you can do to become more efficient.

To me, this might even be down to working with a therapist on anxiety issues and fears about putting yourself out there. You can't get any traction at this kind of speed, unless those blog posts are each \$1,000 or something. It's going to be really hard to earn on this level.

You need to attack this and say, 'This is not going to be my norm.'

This is just blog posts. I shudder to think what would happen if you're writing an article with sources in it. So you need to watch out on that.

Q: Is there any value to sub-specializing in a niche? For instance, if you write about retail and you focus on customer service.

CAROL: Well, customer service is a great thing to focus on, because that's one of those niches that goes across many industries. So you could come up with a concept for an article and then pitch it to 80 different trade magazines that serve different types of businesses. That's always good stuff.

I always think the more specialized you can be the more awesome it is and the more strong of a pitch you make to sell yourself for that kind of story. I have a lot of specialties within business – I write about franchising and business finance and crowd-funding. I think that's all good stuff, the more you can specialize. What do you say, Linda?

LINDA: You wouldn't want to limit yourself to only that subspecialty. But it's great to add a subspecialty. You wouldn't want to end up with one, tiny niche. You'd want to keep it a little bigger.

Q: I schedule an hour for banging out a rough draft. Sometimes it just flows and other times every word is like pulling a tooth. So how do you establish a pace that's fast but also reliable so you can budget your time accurately instead of just taking a wild guess?

LINDA: Wow. I've got to say, I don't budget my time at all. I try to start writing a few days before it's due – that way if I'm having a bad day or I can only get a little bit out, I still have another couple of days. I don't say, 'I'm going to give this article two hours.' I just do it until it's done.

CAROL: There is a book that was really life-changing for me called *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. When you're writing, you should be in a flow state where time has no meaning. You know, you look up and you're like, wow, an hour later. Whoa. You're lost in the creative process.

That's when you're doing your best work and you're really productive. If it's not flowing, we both tend to stop and do something else. I'll stop and add new members to the e-mail list of the Den or something. I'll pay bills, whatever. I'll do something else if it's not really flowing for me and try and come back around to it. Take a walk, take a bath, do Wii Fit Yoga for a half hour.

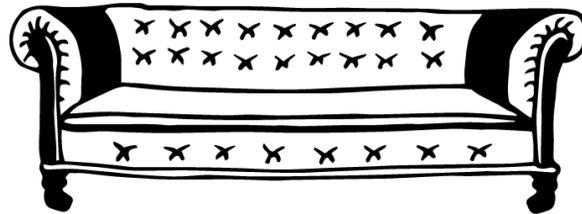
That whole beating-the-dead-horse, it's-not-coming thing, that's nature's biggest time waster.

Learn more about freelance writing

From Carol:

Subscribers to the **Make a Living Writing** blog receive a free 20-week e-course, Marketing 101 for Freelance Writers: <http://www.makealivingwriting.com/free-report>

freelance writers den



Members of her learning and support community **Freelance Writers Den** gain access to an archive of e-courses and event recordings, our Junk-Free Job Board, and get their questions answered on our supportive forums. We're not always open to new members, but you can check here: <http://freelancewritersden.com>.

The Den holds one free, monthly call, our Open House Call. You can learn about upcoming guests and register for a call here: <http://freelancewritersden.com/free-house-call>

Carol takes on a maximum of three one-on-one mentoring clients per month. Learn about her mentoring program here: <http://www.makealivingwriting.com/mentoring>

Linda and Carol put on the **Freelance Writers Blast Off** class, multi-week course in marketing basics for freelancers. We also teach **4 Week Journalism School**, our crash course in how to write articles.

From Linda:

Subscribers to the **Renegade Writer** e-mail list receive a free packet of 10 successful queries written by several full-time freelance writers. <http://www.therenegadewriter.com/free-query-packet/>

Linda offers phone mentoring for writers to help them learn the ropes, cut down on the learning curve, gain confidence, and boost their motivation: <http://www.therenegadewriter.com/mentoring/>

Linda also offers an 8-week **Write for Magazines** e-course that's helped writers break into *Spirituality & Health*, *GRIT*, *Flight Journal*, *For Me*, *Pizza Today*, *Washington Parent*, *Cottage Living*, and more. Learn more at: <http://www.therenegadewriter.com/new-renegade-writer-classes/>