
Don't Leave Money on the Table! 13 Negotiation Tips to Earn More



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by Carol Tice of the Make a Living Writing blog

INTRODUCTION:

Who am I and what do I know about negotiating?

I am a longtime professional writer on my second lengthy freelance stint. I've been earning my full-time living from writing since the mid-1990s. I returned to full-time freelancing in 2005 and have earned more each year since then, straight through the downturn, and pulled in my first six-figure freelance year in 2011.

I also used to be a legal secretary, a day job that I think gave me a lot of confidence to negotiate! In that role, I saw attorneys negotiating contracts all day long. I formed the opinion that it was routine and even expected to negotiate to try to get all you can – and that's served me well as a freelancer.

The issue of what to charge as a freelancer is always a tough one because there is no such thing as a going rate in freelancing. There is just what the market will bear and what you are willing to work for. Where those two factors come together, you've got a gig.

That said, there are some techniques I use to try to maximize what I earn when I negotiate with new clients, and I'm going to share them with you today.

Many freelancers are fearful that if they try to negotiate they will lose the client. That just doesn't happen, with any legitimate opportunity. All they can do is say no to your question of whether you might be paid more.

Also, new freelancers get excited that they have an offer and tend to say yes right away, instead of considering carefully what they need to earn for this project to make them a living wage.

Then, have the confidence that your skills are valuable and that you provide something important to clients. Without that, you won't feel like you can negotiate a good rate.

Here are my top tips:

1. FIND THE RIGHT SORT OF CLIENT

Remember, if you have the sort of client where you can't ever negotiate – as in a content mill for writers, where there's a set pay policy for everyone, no matter how quick or talented you are – that's *the wrong kind of client*. Likewise, clients who advertise on Craigslist are auditioning 200 freelancers, so your negotiating position is very weak. Market proactively to find your own clients and you'll find better prospects and be in a stronger position to negotiate.

2. NAIL DOWN THE DETAILS

Before you know what to bid, you need to find out what is involved in doing this gig. Defining the scope answers some of the questions that you may recognize from your journalism classes:

- What--What does the project seek to accomplish?
- When--When is the work due?
- Where--Where can you contact them, and where will you do your work?
- How--How do they want the work created and delivered?

Be as specific as possible when you define the scope. Think about situations that may arise, like revisions for freelance writers. Specify how and when you will be paid.

If the client departs from the agreed upon scope during the course of the project, you are justified in pointing it out and asking for additional compensation.

For instance, I once had a freelance writer tell me she bid \$300 to write a company website...only to discover the site had 34 PAGES of content that had to be developed! She didn't ask how many pages it would be. Part of negotiating is carefully defining the project, and then setting an appropriate rate.

I wrote a post for [Copyblogger](#) on 40 questions to ask a copywriting client before you sign a deal that may help you with this process.

3. MAKE THEM BLINK FIRST

The best way to find out what a client is willing to pay is often simply to ask. Example: You meet someone to discuss a project. You learn they want a weekly blog post.

Once you have a rough idea of the project size, simply ask, *"So...do you have an idea what your budget is for this?"* Sometimes, they'll simply tell you. If it's \$5 a blog post, you know you can move on immediately. It's key to your overall earnings not to let low-payers suck up a lot of your time.

4. ASK AROUND

You don't have to negotiate in a vacuum here! If you cannot get the client to cough up some parameters on their budget, start researching to learn what you should bid.

This is where you need to belong to some freelance groups, so you have people you can ask about rates. It's ideal to have one that's specific to your city, too, as those freelancers may know the local publications and businesses you are looking to work for.

For me, there is an email list in my city, Seattle, called Women in Digital Journalism that's been a great resource for vetting rates. LinkedIn Editors & Writers online is great in my niche as well, and of course, these days many freelance writers are using the forums in the community I started, [Freelance Writers Den](#), to get advice on rates.

You can also use references such as *The Writer's Market* or *The Photographer's Market* to get at least a general range of rates for types of jobs. A little bit of research and asking around before you bid can help keep you from bidding too high or too low.

For instance, last year I bid on a government contract, which was a large job to do two 200-page annual reports. I ran my bid idea past a few writer friends, one of whom had more public-agency experience than I did. She told me I was definitely too low. I added about \$1500 to the bid when I submitted it, and it was accepted immediately – so that's money I would have just been out if I hadn't asked for feedback on my bid from my peers.

5. DELAY OR USE SILENCE

When new freelancers get an offer, they often feel a lot of pressure to make a decision on the spot. Instead, tell them you'll think about it and get back – then check with your writer networks and research sources to compare your bid offer and get a sense of whether it's high, low or inbetween. Get some feedback when they make you an offer, too, and consider whether you want to counter-offer, pass, or accept.

If you're on the phone or in conversation, slow down and leave silences before you respond. I once had a client nearly double their rate simply because I took a moment to think about the fee they'd put on the table. People hate silence and sometimes better their offer just to fill the emptiness.

6. DON'T DEAL WHEN YOU DON'T FEEL GOOD

One mistake that many freelance writers make is to talk to clients and negotiate a project when they're not feeling good or are too tired. But, those are the times you are most likely to make a mistake and sell yourself short.

Of course, we rush to negotiate projects because we are afraid--we think the client will award the work to someone else if we don't give them a proposal right way. In most cases, that's just not true.

Here's what to do when a prospect contacts you and you're not feeling well or are tired.

Acknowledge that they contacted you. Say something like: *"Thanks for contacting me about XYZ project. I'm currently wrapping something else up, but I'm very interested in learning more about this project. Can we set an appointment to chat about this project in a few days? I'm available Thursday afternoon or Friday morning, how do those times look for you?"*

This lets them know that you're interested. It even lets them put a date on their calendar for the first meeting or call. At the same time, it gives you a day or two to pull yourself together and get some rest or get over whatever bug you're fighting.

Delay tactics and making an appointment a day or two in the future puts you in a strong negotiating position. It says, "I'm not desperate here. I'm a very busy freelancer and I have to clear some things from my plate before I can even discuss your gig." It makes you seem busy and in-demand.

Note that you don't need to say you were too sick or tired to get to their proposal right away. The fact that you had a minor illness is none of their business. You can also use this same response when I'm overloaded with work or just want more time to think about whether this project is for you.

7. DON'T CAVE TO THE PRESSURE

If a prospect is putting a lot of pressure on you to respond right away with a bid, that's a red flag. That often means that this is going to be a problem client.

These days, the woods are full of dysfunctional companies who'd like freelancers available 24/7 on instant messaging. These are really needy clients – and often, they don't want to pay well, either. Watch out.

If a client tries to pressure me to drop my prices, I simply move on. They are not a prospect for me.

This is the scary point for many freelancers. The words “No, I don't want your money” are hard to get out of our mouths! Especially if we have downtime right now and really need the money.

But remember that when you take an assignment, you take marketing time off the table. If the assignment doesn't pay enough, you've sacrificed the chance to find a good client and wasted time on one that doesn't pay enough to cover your bills.

That said...always be professional when you turn a client down.

I often say something like,
“I'm sorry your rates are lower than I can work with. If your budget ever changes, feel free to reach out to me again.”

You never know when a company's fortunes will improve or their philosophy on content development will change, or where that editor will end up, so don't be snarky and let them know you'd be happy to hear from them again in another scenario.

I had one editor I knew who only had \$100 articles to assign...and then one day the company changed its approach and switched to \$800 feature stories. So be nice!

8. REFUSE TO BLIND BID

In general, blind bidding, or quoting a price for a project without knowing the details, is a bad idea. That's because there's no such thing as a "standard" article, blog post, or writing job. And yet, nearly every Craigslist ad you can find puts the pressure on for you to "send your best rate," all before they give you squat of details about what you'll be doing!

Let's take writing blog posts, for example. The amount of effort required to produce a 500-word blog post can vary greatly depending on how much effort is required. If you know a great deal about the topic, you may be able to produce the post very quickly. If it's on a topic you know very little about and information is not widely available, that short post may take you nearly all day. One client might require that you conduct interviews or extensive online research, while another might let you write off your own knowledge of a topic.

In blind-bidding scenarios like you see on online job ads, I have sometimes sent in a big range and just said, *"Once you've described your project to me, I'll be able to give you a more precise quote."*

9. RAISE OBJECTIONS

If there are legitimate reasons you can point to why the gig should pay more, raise them. For instance, I once got a prospect to raise their rate from \$200 per short article to \$300 by pointing out they wanted a large quantity of work done on a rush basis, on a fairly sophisticated topic.

Does the job require marketing to a sophisticated audience of CFOs of technology companies, for instance? That's a specialized skill not every freelancer can deliver – which means you should charge a premium.

By the same token, accepting rush work means you are taking a client's crisis and are willing to make it *your* crisis. You may have to work nights or weekends or get up extra-early to make this rush deadline – so remember that rush work should always pay more than your usual rates.

The question I always get about countering an offer like this is how to do it without being rude or offensive. It's definitely key to always keep the negotiation very calm and professional. You don't hate their guts – you just have an issue you want to raise. It's just business.

My preferred tactic is to profess mild surprise: “Really? I'm a little surprised to hear that's the rate you're offering, because [state your objections here – it's rush work, complex subject matter, etc]. I was thinking more along the lines of X+ rate.”

Then just let that lay while they think about it. Maybe they'll counter and you'll meet in the middle, or maybe they'll just say, “Nope, X is all we've got for this.”

10. STAND FIRM...

There are two ways to present a bid. One is to say, *“Here’s my quote. The end.”* Final offer. Boom. Take it or leave it.

The advantage here is you seem very decisive and professional. It’s clear you know what you’re worth and what you’re willing to take the project for, and that you’re ready to walk if this isn’t a scenario that fits your desires.

11. OR LEAVE THE DOOR OPEN

If that idea of dropping your bid and standing pat, scares you and you really want this client, another way to approach it is to submit your bid but end with, *“If you’re considering going with another writer purely on price here, I’d appreciate a chance to hear about it and have an opportunity to revisit my offer.”*

That lets them know you have some wiggle room and you really want the gig. You can always say no later if you don’t like their counter-offer, but you can feel more confident that you won’t lose the gig because you’re underbid. This can be useful if you’re in a situation where it’s hard to tell how to bid it, or you’re new to bidding pro rates and worried you’re too high.

Either way, somewhere in here you’ll be down to a final offer from the prospect. Then, it’s time for you to make a decision on whether the project is worth your time at the rate they’re offering. Weigh all the reasons you might want the gig – is it a good portfolio piece? Gets you into a new type of niche? They may have ongoing work? Then, make your final decision – and stick with it.

12. BID BY THE PROJECT

In most cases, you should bid by the project and not by the hour.

Clients often balk at hourly rates (often, they are comparing the rate to a salaried hourly rate without taking into account the benefits that go with that salary). An hourly rate just always sounds more expensive to a prospect. As a newbie, you want to avoid hourly-type gigs since you'll be slower than other writers. Prospects may worry that they'll end up overpaying you.

So, whenever possible avoid naming your hourly rate.

Also, quoting a project price lets the client know what he or she needs to pay at the start of the project. With an hourly rate, the client may fear that the cost of the project will exceed their budget.

Quoting by the project benefits you, too. It rewards you for being efficient. If you learn to work quickly and accurately, you will earn more as time goes on. And the client will never be the wiser that over time your hourly rate has crept from \$75 an hour to \$125.

It's rare to get \$200 an hour if you quote that much as your hourly rate, but many pro writers end up earning that much. When they get to know a client, they improve their speed...and they stick to their project rates.

Also, if you're charging by the project, the time you spend is none of the client's business. Having to track hours for billing is annoying...so avoid it.

Some exceptions where it's difficult to bid by the project include situations where you are consulting, working on-site for a specified number of hours, editing, or charging for meeting time.

13. GET YOUR AGREEMENT IN WRITING

This is one of the most important points in negotiating. When you and the client reach an agreement, memorialize it with a written contract. Even if you think it's a very straightforward assignment, there are always many questions you want answered.

Who owns the rights to the work, for instance, and for how long? Can you take credit for this work? Will you get royalties if it's resold or reused in another medium? These are all details to hammer out in the contract.

If your client is skittish about formal contracts, type up the gist of your agreement in an email and have them respond with "I agree." This at least forms a date-stamped paper trail that might help you should you ever need to sue for payment in future – or even simply to refer back to the contract if scope creep is occurring. (If it is, it's time to renegotiate and get more money!)

So often, freelancers gripe to me about how a project is going or about being paid. Yet, when I ask what their contract said about that issue, they sheepishly admit there is no contract.

The written contract is how you prove what was agreed upon. If you have no defined payment terms, for instance, then the client is under no obligation to pay you ever.

A common flub here is to not have clarity on when the final payment on a project is due. I try to include a clause in my contract that final payment is due within 30 days of turning in the final draft or after revisions are concluded, whichever is sooner.

That way, if the client takes that final draft or design and disappears, you still have a trigger for sending that final bill. Otherwise, if they never give you final approval on that last draft, there is no trigger event where you can demand payment. The project could go into limbo – forever.

I'm also a fan of having short initial contracts if it's ongoing work. I like 60 to 90 days, and then the contract comes up for review and renewal.

This provides a natural opportunity to negotiate for more money if it's turned out that the project is more difficult or complicated than originally described.

RESOURCES:

Learn more about freelancing:

My blog: **Make a Living Writing:**

<http://www.makealivingwriting.com>

Subscribe and receive the free 20-week e-course: Marketing 101 for Freelance Writers

My community for freelance writers: **Freelance Writers Den**

<http://freelancewritersden.com>

Handout from this presentation: 13 Negotiating Tips to Earn

More: <http://www.makealivingwriting.com/13-negotiation-tips-handout>