



**ESCAPE**  
the Content Mills

# 6 WRITERS' TRUE STORIES

OF BREAKING OUT

&

**EARNING  
MORE**



BY CAROL TICE & LINDA FORMICHELLI



## Introduction

Do you think, “Once a low-paid content mill writer, always a low-paid content mill writer?”

Well, these case studies, which we prepped for our upcoming “Escape the Content Mills” course, will open your eyes. You *can* move up from content mills to earn much, much more. And it doesn’t take long, either.

We sat down with some of our previous students and asked them exactly how they broke free of the content-mill grind—and learned how much more they’re earning now. We hope you find these stories as inspiring as we did!

—Carol Tice & Linda Formichelli



Carol Tice



Linda Formichelli

## From \$10/hr to \$85/hr: “Just do it.”

**Name:** Nida Sea

**Title:** Texas-based health copywriter

**Website:** <http://nidasea.com>

***Q: When did you start writing for content mills?***

**Nida:** In 2008. My first content mill was Demand Media Studios. They were crap. Awful. I couldn't stand them. I moved on to London Brokers, Copy Press, Suite 101. It was one right after another. I signed up for a bunch. And most of them have closed down now – they're gone.



***Q: Why did you start with content mill writing?***

**Nida:** To be honest, I didn't know what the heck I was doing! I knew there was a way to make money online, and I thought content mills were a way to do it. But I learned the hard way—I didn't get out until 2012.

***Q: What did you earn, writing for mills?***

**Nida:** It ranged from 1/3 of a penny to 1 cent per word. I could do about four posts an hour...so I made maybe \$10 an hour. That was it. I was making about \$800 a year.

***Q: How did you feel about that?***

**Nida:** I couldn't believe I was writing 500-700 word articles for that little. Oh my God! I could never do that again.

And then you'd get a note: "You earned a \$5 bonus!" For writing 30 articles. Wow.

Burnout was common, for me. I could do maybe 25-30 articles a week. Then I was like, "I hate this. It's frustrating."

***Q: What topics did you write about?***

**Nida:** I'd write about gambling, or sex toys, gay and lesbian relationships, finance, business...everything. The most boring thing was roofing gutters. I don't know how to make that more exciting than it is.

***Q: Why did you stay with writing for mills for so long?***

**Nida:** Well, I was also looking for [full-time] jobs, locally, during this time, as well. But I didn't want to stop trying to make money at home. I thought, "I know there's a way to do this." I kept reading blogs, and then I found the Make a Living Writing blog.

***Q: What finally made you decide to quit writing for mills?***

**Nida:** I had a fallout with an editor on CopyPress—I've had criticism before, and that's fine, but this woman was off the hook rude. I thought, "I cannot stand this anymore."

I quit all the mills I was writing for, all at once, and thought, "I'm just going to do what Carol says."

***Q: What happened when you tried marketing more proactively?***

**Nida:** I got my first client on LinkedIn within a month. I took the social media bootcamp in Freelance Writers Den, and fixed up my profile. A marketing manager found my profile on there, and gave me a test run—and I've been working for them for 3 years now. I'm making about \$17K a year, from this one client. I do a lot of online dating and relationships for them. I've written a



lot of product reviews for them, and then I moved on to dating advice articles, website copy, email marketing campaigns—lots of different stuff.

***Q: What did you change on your LinkedIn profile that made the difference?***

**Nida:** I used to list the content mills I wrote for on my LinkedIn. Then, I took your advice to take them off, and mention end clients instead. Then this client saw it, and said, “OK, you wrote for Dell and eBay.” I didn’t mention that it was through a content mill.

***Q: How did you get more clients?***

**Nida:** I started getting more recognition as I got more pro clients. I had this one couple that wanted to do a bariatric dating site, who found me off another online profile I’d set up—that was a \$500 project. They saw I had done online dating with my other client.

***Q: What fears did you confront as you moved to finding your own clients?***

**Nida:** My fear was: “Am I good enough to do the work these clients need?”

The only answer was to keep learning, and keep taking more classes. If I got an assignment, I’d look up all the resources I could to get it done.

I had a fear of being able to charge what I wanted. That was a problem, when I reached out to the wrong clients. “If we like your stuff, we’ll give you more assignments.” “This is what we offer for all beginning writers.” Those became red flag comments for me.

***Q: Update us with what’s happening now with your freelance writing business—what’s new this year?***

**Nida:** I have three new clients so far this year. Besides the bariatric dating one, the others are a social-media marketing client I found on Indeed.com, and a firm I’m writing product descriptions for that I found via FlexJobs. So

far, these three clients alone paid me \$8,000 already in 2015, and the year isn't half over yet. And with my perspective now, I think they're still too low!

The hourly rate with them is around \$60-\$85 an hour, but now, I'm trying to find the \$100-\$150-an-hour payers.

***Q: What would you like to tell content mill writers about how to make the leap into earning more?***

**Nida:** You don't have to slave at the mills to earn online. You need a website set up, and your social media, especially LinkedIn, and a marketing plan. That's all you need to get started.

I wish somebody had told me that at the beginning! Four years wasting away at content mills...it was so bad, I almost gave up writing. You're like a factory worker.

I hate the fact that the mill editors tell you, "The faster you write, the more you can make." I can only write so fast, and I don't like to put out crap.

Don't be afraid to let go of the mills. It's not as scary as you think. They're not a reliable source of income, and you'll never go anywhere with them. Just do it.

## \$1,500 An Article + a Book Deal —in Pakistan

**Name:** Jawad Akhtar

**Title:** Expert tech writer, Pakistan

**LinkedIn:**

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/jawadakhtar>



***Q: Where did you start out in writing?***

**Jawad:** I started out in May 2011, with bidding sites like oDesk (now UpWork), Elance, People Per Hour, and other sites like those. My strategy on these bidding websites was that I looked for and remained focused on offering my writing services in my core expertise, which is a top business software known as SAP.

Even on bidding sites, I tweaked my queries for every writing job, and showed them how I can help them in their SAP projects.

***Q: What were you getting paid on these sites?***

**Jawad:** The first project that I won on oDesk was for \$8, for an article of 1,000 words. Happy with the quality and timeliness of my work, after one month the client gave me a princely “raise” of \$2.00, and I started earning \$10 apiece.

***Q: How did you begin to move up?***

**Jawad:** As I gained confidence, I started bidding for other related projects, like creating a 30-minute video for \$100, and taking up a project with 100 questions-and-answers. Each Q&A pair of 400 words paid \$3.00, and I was happy to make \$300 at once!

***Q: When did you start looking into how to earn more, and how did you learn what to do?***

**Jawad:** I started doing research to earn more from my writing, and came across Make a Living Writing, and read *at least* 50 posts in one go! I recall not being able to sleep that night, thinking, “When can I start implementing all those gems?”

I realized I was living in a fools’ paradise—or maybe, a little writer’s pond. I’d never realized that everything I read about SAP was *also* a possible writing market for me!

***Q: What fears did you confront as you tried to move up?***

**Jawad:** I had fears because English is not my first language, and I’m a Pakistani Muslim. I thought, “No one will hire me [for good rates], because I’m in a Third World country!” I was resigned to my invisible role in freelancing sweatshops like oDesk for a while.

***Q: What sort of marketing did you do to find better clients?***

**Jawad:** I started visiting websites in my niche markets, and started looking for gaps or topics that were not covered that I have expertise in. I started crafting my query letters to address those gaps, and how my articles and columns can help their readers learn more.

I also give credit to Linda Formichelli, who in one of her blog posts mentioned that a writer must do *more* than just giving an article’s outline. A writer must tell the editor enough details on what he or she intends to cover, so the editor can visualize the article, before the first word is even written.

***Q: How long did it take to start getting better gigs?***

**Jawad:** In only three months of looking, I was able to land my first “real” writing assignment, by September 2011. It was for a top publication, and paid \$1,500 for 2,000 words! I didn’t know what to do with so much money for one



piece, when it would have taken me ages to earn the same amount from freelancing websites.

After that, there was no looking back. I mustered enough courage to bid adieu to the freelancing websites, and started focusing on finding good-paying writing markets.

I also got up the courage to say “No” to those opportunities that offered me “exposure” but little pay (this includes a top SAP recruitment firm with annual turnover of \$10 billion).

***Q: Tell us a bit more about how you grew your business.***

**Jawad:** I cultivated excellent professional relationships with all my editors, to the point that I started becoming their regular stable of freelance writers.

When editors moved to new roles or new opportunities, they introduced me to their replacements. Often, when these same editors joined new companies, they remember to approach me again! So, for me the writing opportunities doubled due to excellent professional relationships with the editors.

I also requested editors introduce me to editors of their sister publications, and even editors who were/are their friends/ex-colleagues! They gladly did.

I also took several rush jobs (by sacrificing my personal time, and even sleep) just because another writer goofed up, and the editor needed the completed piece on short notice. The editors remembered those favors, and richly rewarded me with more projects.

Also, when one of my articles was published online, I’d incessantly market and promote it on social media. This helped in two ways: I began gathering much larger readership and more engagement, and this also drove my client’s websites’ traffic up.

Little did I know that editors from traditional book publishers also extensively use social media to find experts who could take up book-size writing projects!

***Q: Wow, did you get a book deal out of your freelance writing?***

**Jawad:** Yes! For many of these book editors, my published articles/columns were the testimony of my writing skills and SAP expertise, and so for them, writing a book was just a “bigger” piece of the writing puzzle.

The world’s largest and most prestigious publisher of SAP books, SAP Press, first approached me in October 2012. The acquisitions editor saw I had several published articles on top SAP websites, and was looking to do a new book in English, to replace a previous one that was translated from German. She saw I was a perfect match for the book, and signed me to a multi-book deal in December.

I was elated, though the sheer thought of authoring 1,000 pages for the first book drained me. But I ended up loving every bit of it, including marketing and promoting my books. My second book just came out in April 2015, and the response is overwhelmingly positive.

Now, I don’t even have to present my writing portfolio—clients approach me for training, articles, and column writing after reading my published work.

***Q: What’s it like now, making so much more per project than you used to?***

**Jawad:** Funny story: That client who paid me \$100 for a 30-minute video recently approached me with another video project. This time, he graciously offered me \$150 to account for “inflation.”

When I told him that I now charge \$100 for a 3-minute video, he went berserk, and blocked me from future projects! I still thanked him for his initial projects.

***Q: What would you like to tell content mill writers who worry they can’t do better?***

**Jawad:** We must have the confidence and the courage to look above and beyond the horizon, to reach for the stars. We must also crush our fears of

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the unknown! Once Linda said in her blog post, [the question to ask yourself is]: “So what?” The world won’t fall apart, just because you faced one rejection.

## From \$1K to \$10K Per Month

**Name:** Jessie Goodwin

**Title:** Kansas-based freelance writer

***Q: I was so excited to read that you found four big new clients in a matter of a few weeks at the beginning of this year and were able to drop three content mill clients.***

**Jessie:** Yes. It was a dream come true.

***Q: When did you start writing for the mills?***

**Jessie:** Well, when I started writing for content mills, I didn't even know I was writing for content mills! When I first started my full-time business August 2012, a content mill was my very first client.

***Q: What content mills did you write for?***

**Jessie:** One is a local website company that was churning out websites for \$5 a pop. And one that I wrote for that you probably have heard of is CrowdSource. Basically, they have a big database separated by subject, and you go in and claim stories. They were usually about \$10.00 an article.

***Q: How did you get started with them?***

**Jessie:** Well, a little bit of back-story. Before I started the full-time business, I actually had been a magazine writer for six years for a little regional magazine. I studied music and journalism in college and that's when I started. I got the job my sophomore year of college. It was really an amazing way to start. I'd wanted to be a writer since I was six years old.

However, that magazine barely paid anything. I would get like \$25.00 a feature. So I just figured that's what you had to do to put in your dues.



Then I worked a desk job. I just wanted to write and got so tired of doing that desk job.

Finally, in May 2012 I said, "Okay, I'm done." So I quit. Then, in August 2012, I got my first content mill client within about a week of my putting out applications. So that's kind of how it started.

***Q: What was your experience with that kind of writing? What was your day-to-day like?***

**Jessie:** Well, as you know, it's basically a lot of content for very little money. So I would be spending hours upon hours working for these mills and barely getting paid anything, but I was willing to put in the extra time because I loved to write.

I actually made a pretty decent living off of it. I was bouncing between \$1,000 and \$2,000 from my second or third month until recently, with a few months of \$3,000 or \$4,000 here and there if I had some big projects.

***Q: Did you like the work you were doing?***

**Jessie:** Some of it was about interesting topics, and one of the things I did like about content mills was that I got to learn about a lot of different topics. It really refined my research skills.

I was able to very quickly learn about a new topic and write something relevant and creative. So that was really great, and it gave me experience in a lot of arenas that I might not have been able to get experience in otherwise.

But also, a lot of the topics were very dry, so it was kind of a give and take.

***Q: It sounds like it wasn't that bad, so what pushed you to go after different work?***

**Jessie:** A couple things. One was reading blogs like Make a Living Writing. That's where I learned what a content mill is. I didn't realize I was working for content mills until I started reading writing blogs like yours and Carol's.

Then, I said, "Oh, wow, I can't believe there are such better paying clients out there!" So education was a huge part of it, and reading other people's experiences; that was both inspiring and eye opening.

***Q: It sounds like you were okay with it until you realized what you were missing!***

**Jessie:** That's exactly right.

***Q: Like, "Oh, I didn't realize I could be doing so much better!"***

**Jessie:** Yeah. The other big event was when I got my first national magazine article and I got paid a dollar a word—and that was just huge. I was like, "Wow, I can get so much money!" I made \$200 off a 200-word article. It was so easy to write and I just couldn't believe it. So that was one time when I was like, "Okay, this has got to stop. If I can make this much money off one article, certainly I can find other better clients too."

***Q: What was the ramp up like for you? When you decided you wanted to quit the mills, did you immediately quit them or were you trying to gain enough income from the other gigs until you could drop the mill work?***

**Jessie:** It was a process for sure. Mentally, I was there. I was ready to give up. But I wasn't exactly sure how to qualify clients...how to go about finding the businesses that could actually pay me what I think I'm worth. So probably the biggest challenge was understanding that I could find these clients if I really tried.

***Q: What happened next?***

**Jessie:** I still applied on job boards, but it was very rarely—maybe a few a month, and only good ones. I actually got some clients from those and in writing for them, I started getting a lot of inbound requests. Since then, pretty much all of the clients that I've gotten have all been inbound.

I don't even really do much marketing any more, except to regularly update my website with new pieces to my portfolio and update my LinkedIn profile every time I get a new client. That's pretty much the extent of my marketing.

***Q: A good point that brings up is that you can learn on the job. Don't let the fact that you don't know these things hold you back—get a gig and you will learn them.***

**Jessie:** Absolutely. I've heard this many times before, but I've also read it on your blogs: You fake it until you make it. I completely, wholeheartedly agree with that. If you just believe in yourself, you can write about anything—and that was my experience for sure.

***Q: You mentioned you dropped three low-paying clients. How did that happen?***

**Jessie:** At the very end of 2014, all of a sudden, it was just *boom, boom, boom*: I got two or three new clients that were extremely well paying. With just one client alone, I was making one and a half times as much as I would make normally.

So I immediately started setting out to change things. I picked up a few more clients. But I was still holding onto the content mill work and I'm not sure why. I think it was mainly because I liked the editors and I had this problem with giving up. I felt bad. One of them, I had developed a really close relationship with and it was just hard to let go.

But one day I was like, "I'm making plenty of money. I'm over this. I just can't do it anymore. I have too much work with my new clients, so I'd rather just focus on that and have more time to myself and my family."

***Q: Yeah. Clients that pay that low, they can't expect you to stick around forever.***

**Jessie:** Yes. I know. I mean, I outgrew them and I just couldn't do it anymore.

***Q: You mentioned inbound marketing a couple times. How exactly did that work? Was it through referrals, or people finding your website...?***

**Jessie:** It's been a few different ways. For example, I wrote articles for this one food website. Somebody read one of my features on there and then looked me up, saw my website, and contacted me.

***Q: So it sounds like good paying work led to more good paying work.***

**Jessie:** Yes. And LinkedIn has been huge. Apparently, LinkedIn does these regional top X positions in Kansas and I was on the list for top freelancers. I didn't even know.

I read a lot about LinkedIn marketing. I did a lot of keyword optimization research and tried to have that integrated into my LinkedIn profile so I come up in searches. That has been really big.

Then there's my website and my portfolio...that's the main thing I do. I've read that the more you update your website, the higher it'll stay in searches. So that's why pretty much every time an article comes out, I add it in.

***Q: Do you mind sharing what the difference is between how much you were making with the mills and how much you're earning now?***

**Jessie:** Sure. So in my first month, I did around \$300. By month three, I had made \$1,200 and then from there, I pretty much bounced back and forth between \$1,000 to \$2,000 up until December of 2014.

Sometimes I went over and had a \$3,000 or \$4,000 month. Sometimes I only had another \$300 month because I had a few episodes where I had three clients drop out in a matter of three or four weeks.



Then, as of December of last year, I started getting these job offers. I made about \$3,000 in January and since then, I've made \$6,000 per month. And last month, I can't believe it, I actually made \$10,000.

***Q: Wow! That's pretty sweet.***

**Jessie:** Yes. I mean, I'm not to the point where I'll make that every month. I had some big projects, but still, being able to say that was a really great feeling. I feel like I've come far in the past few months because now, I'm making at least three times as much as I was making just four or five months ago. It feels great.

***Q: Is there anything you wish someone had told you when you were starting to write for the mills?***

**Jessie:** That you are worth more. I mean, I thought this was about paying your dues. I thought this was what everyone had to go through and it was just a fact of life. I had no idea that if I had just spent more time looking for the right clients and pitching the right magazines that I could have been doing a lot better from the start and working a lot less.

***Q: Do you have any tips you'd like to share for writers who want to escape the content mills?***

**Jessie:** Sure. Inbound marketing is absolutely wonderful. Anything you can do to try to get the clients coming to you is good. Granted, they're not always great...I've had to turn away several inbound clients that were not going to pay my rates. But I would say anything you can do to get that started will help, and your website is absolutely the most important tool.

I think second is a LinkedIn profile.

Job boards are okay, but don't rely on them. I think it's okay if you check them every once in a while, even every day, but don't apply for *everything* because you're going up against so many writers. Pick and choose the ones that pay the most and that you think you are most qualified for.

***Q: That's great advice. Is there anything else you wanted to add?***

**Jessie:** I would say, really try to work on your portfolio—even if it means working for a nonprofit or a free magazine in your town at the beginning. I did a couple things like that. Just try to do a few little things to get a couple pieces under your belt, give you a little experience...then, it gives you something more to send to the clients that you want.

Even writing on your own blog can help. If you take it really seriously and put out good content, then that's a great writing sample too.

## Leaving Snarky Editors & Crazy Rules Behind

**Name:** Charlotte Edwards

**Title:** Freelance personal finance and parenting writer

**Website:**

<http://www.CharlotteEdwardsFreelanceWriter.com>



***Q: When did you start writing for content mills?***

**Charlotte:** I started with Textbroker in 2011, because I'd lost my job as an English teacher in China, at a technical college. I live in a small town where there aren't many opportunities to work legally. I'd been reading blogs online, and I heard you could make money writing. Not sure how I stumbled across Textbroker. I'd been doing lenses on Squidoo and making \$2 a month, which allowed me to get back into writing. My degree is in education, but I never set out to be a writer.

***Q: What were you earning from the content mills?***

**Charlotte:** Pretty quickly I was earning \$80 a week, which to me was a lot. My husband thought it was great, but around the end of that year I found Make a Living Writing and subscribed. In November 2011, I found Writer Access and signed up with them. I haven't written for Textbroker since 2013. I was level 4 there, and pay was still less than 1.5 cents a word.

There's a test to earn more, but it's hard to pass, and the questions are kind of crazy. In 2012, I hardly wrote for them, because Writer Access's level 2 paid more than that, and I started at level 3 and got to level 5 within about 5 months.

***Q: Why did you start with mills, instead of finding your own clients?***

**Charlotte:** I wasn't quite confident on going out on my own. And it was pretty nice to just log in and see there were some articles.

***Q: How did you find the working conditions, writing for mills?***

**Charlotte:** Of course the work is very inconsistent. Some days I'd find 20 articles to write and you could only check out five at a time. I'd frantically try to get as much done as I could. And other days there'd be nothing to write at all. At their level 4, pay was 4 cents a word, much higher than what I started out with on Textbroker.

***Q: What kept you writing for mills?***

**Charlotte:** I never really see or use this money. It goes into my US accounts for my kids' college and for retirement, so there wasn't as much impetus for me to earn more.

But at the end of 2012, I joined Freelance Writers Den, on a whim, on my birthday. In June, Carol published one of her lists of markets that pay. Reading through the comments to that post, I found more markets including *International Living*. I've traveled through China quite extensively, so I sent them a short letter of introduction to them, and five ideas. He wrote back almost immediately saying he really liked one and two others were suited for *Incomes Abroad*, a sister publication. So, he put me in touch with that editor and within a week I had two assignments.

***Q: What was the pay like with this new client?***

**Charlotte:** I was so naive, I didn't ask what the pay was! But I got \$250 for one assignment and \$450 for the other, and both pieces were about 1,000 words. One was a cover piece, so it paid more. I was really excited about that, and it got me motivated to keep branching out and to stop writing for Writer Access.



***Q: What was the upside of writing for mills, to you?***

**Charlotte:** It was a chance to get better at writing, I'd say.

***Q: What about the downside?***

**Charlotte:** The editors are very, very picky and very snarky, sometimes bordering on just mean and nasty. A few editors at the sites have been very pleasant, but some are nitpicky.

One time I made a mistake in the geography of something, and the editor basically said I was an idiot who'd never studied geography—never mind that it was some remote part of France that most people don't know. It was an honest mistake.

The short deadlines, too—usually, you only have 24-48 hours to get it in, or you're penalized. One time I was really sick and didn't realize I had [accepted] an order, and the next morning I was locked out of my account for three days. So they definitely penalize you if you mess up.

I'd been a 5-star writer at Writer Access, and then I got this new client. I found out later that a lot of other writers had had a problem with this person. I spent a lot of time on a first draft, and wanted to send it and get some feedback. They took it for the final piece, didn't read my note about it—and immediately they downgraded me to level four. That was about two years ago. And I wasn't able to get back to level five.

Over the next two years, I would intermittently ask for a review, and they'd find something nitpicky about an article [as a reason to refuse].

***Q: So was that the impetus to start finding your own clients?***

**Charlotte:** At this time, I was exploring more about getting clients on my own. I found *The Penny Hoarder* blog on the Den job board, and started writing a couple posts for them each month, getting \$75 for 800 words. I still write for them—they allow me to be more creative, and I get great feedback.

I've learned a lot from them and it's much more enjoyable, even though I have a long way to go on pay.

One other thing...Writer Access added a forum, and at first it was great to connect with other writers. But over the next year, some of the people stopped posting or were let go, and there were more negative people joining in. Free forums are very different than paid ones. There were lots of negative people in there, who were spending all day slaving away for maybe \$100.

I was really surprised at the end of 2013, when people started sharing on their forums about how much they made for the year. I was under the impression these people, who didn't have kids and worked all the time, were making a lot. And they'd made like \$15,000 for the year!

A lot of the people in Writer Access were living paycheck to paycheck. If their payment was 10 minutes late, they were freaking out. I'd see discussions about getting your own clients, but a lot of writers don't like marketing—they like being spoon-fed their articles and remaining a slave to it.

I wanted to leave mills because I know I can make more. I proved that over the last year. I earned less and less of my income from mills.

***Q: What did you make writing for mills, if you're willing to share?***

**Charlotte:** I think the most I made in one year was \$12,000. And that was last year, as I started adding in private clients.

***Q: What do you make writing for your own clients?***

**Charlotte:** I had one client I did a lot of work for that had super-easy work, and I could make \$50 an hour, so I kept doing that.

Seeing that I'm able to get jobs that get me 30-40 cents a word on my own, you want more, when you get a little taste of success. So that's what I'm doing now. I actually just quit writing for them completely, in April 2015.

***Q: How are you marketing yourself now?***

**Charlotte:** I search a few high-quality job boards, now. I've gotten published in a couple of parenting magazines, and I'm working with a couple blogs doing monthly and weekly blog posts for them.

The challenge for me is just making the time to do it. I tend to get distracted easily—I have little kids, and my husband comes home at noon every day for lunch and then goes back to work. It's hard to make time for my writing. But I've been keeping a journal of what I do each day to track my progress, and I'm finding an accountability partner who's a level or two above me in their career. They've encouraged me and motivated me to keep going and keep trying things.

***Q: Did you have fears you needed to overcome to get out and earn more?***

**Charlotte:** I didn't have any fear or resistance to marketing myself. I am a very shy person—my elementary school teachers would probably be very surprised to find out what I'm doing now! I guess because it's online and not face-to-face, it makes it easier.

***Q: How long did it take you to get published with your own clients?***

**Charlotte:** My first success was that *International Living* article, which took nine months to publication, from the time I started working with the editor. I just kept emailing back and asking where it was in the process. But their sister publication—that got published within six weeks of turning in copy.

***Q: Besides the better pay, what else do you like about writing for your own clients?***

**Charlotte:** The editors are real people you can communicate with, as opposed to the faceless editors in the content mills, where you've no idea who they are!

## Useful Writing Courses

After I got those clients, I started doing blogging and got a few different ongoing gigs. I think for a lot of people getting paid every two weeks or every month consistently is what keeps people in mills, because with freelancing you're never sure when you're going to get paid.

Back in January, I realized I'd done only \$100 on Writer Access and the other \$900 that month came from my own clients. And that was the end of mill writing. Now, I'm averaging about \$1,000 a month working for my own clients, maybe 20 hours a week or so.

## Less Work, More Money...More Fun

**Name:** Dale Cudmore

**Title:** Freelance writer near Toronto, Ontario

**Website:** <http://dalecudmore.com>

***Q: When did you start writing for the content mills?***

**Dale:** That was about 2010.



***Q: How did you get into it?***

**Dale:** It was my second or third year of university. At that point I was like, I can't see myself ever getting a traditional job—so I was looking at different ways to support myself while I pursued my professional soccer career. I tried a bunch of different things: poker, AdSense sites, making little sites...and then I finally came across the content mills, and it seemed like compared to everything else it was the most guaranteed money. So that's ultimately how I got into it.

***Q: Which content mills did you write for?***

**Dale:** I bounced around a lot. The main ones I can think of are Textbroker, and then I did a lot over the next couple years on Zerys and CopyPress. The last one I finished off with was TripleCurve.

***Q: What was the pay at these mills?***

**Dale:** I think Textbroker was like 2 cents a word. I stopped there pretty quickly. Zerys I mainly worked for one main client they had doing these

HVAC articles, and they were 3.2 cents a word. I think CopyPress was maybe 5 cents a word.

***Q: How much did you have to write for them to make the kind of money you wanted to?***

**Dale:** I just worked whenever they had stuff to do, because a lot of the time there is no work on those sites. The work I was doing on those sites was their high tier stuff, so it would come and go. But overall, I got probably about 15 hours a week.

***Q: How much would that get you per week, if you worked 15 hours?***

**Dale:** It'd be \$300 or \$400, depending.

***Q: Were there some positive points to writing for these sites?***

**Dale** Yes. At the time, I was seeing it as my most guaranteed income, and they pay out really quick. They don't require a ton of research or high quality writing, obviously. That's about it.

***Q: What were the negatives of writing for the content mills?***

**Dale:** Lots of negatives. You have no control, I think is the big thing. For example, I mentioned those Zerys articles. I mainly wrote for one big client there—and then one day they disappeared. Never heard from them again. I was getting \$1,200 to \$1,500 a month, and all of a sudden it was gone.

The second main negative is that you're in their system. You have to use their text editor. It's usually buggy. It's usually frustrating. Sometimes you lose work.

And the fact is, it's boring as hell. You're writing pretty much the same thing over and over. Like I said, it's not hard writing, but there's no challenge. There's no nothing. There's nothing fulfilling.

***Q: What were some of the topics you wrote on?***

**Dale:** The one with Zerys was all HVAC articles—so heating, ventilation, and air conditioning. The same kinds of topics would come through week after week and sure, I could write them really quick, but...

***Q: Did you realize at the time that you could write for an HVAC trade magazine and make maybe 25 cents or 50 cents a word?***

**Dale:** No idea.

***Q: Another thing you mentioned was that the writing doesn't have to be very high quality, and that was a positive point. But it sounds like you can do quality work, so was that a negative point too?***

**Dale:** Yeah. It's a positive as far as it's quick. You can write easily 1,000 words an hour, whereas if you're doing a real article there's not a real good chance of doing that.

***Q: What made you decide you wanted to leave the content mill work behind and start going after other types of markets?***

**Dale:** I mentioned I had those other types of sites on the side, but after another Google penalty we decided this was not going to happen. Initially, I saw writing for content mills as a temporary thing. I'd have my niche sites I wouldn't have to touch and they'd bring in a few thousand a month. No problem.

Basically, I came to a fork where I said, "You know, writing for content mills is not sustainable. I hate it. It doesn't pay that well, so either I need to find a different option or I need to go more legitimate and try to be a freelance writer."



***Q: What made you decide to take the freelance writing fork as opposed to the other fork?***

**Dale:** Well, there weren't a heck of a lot of options on the other fork. It was get a real job. I thought freelance writing would be my best option, so that's what I went for.

***Q: Once you decided that, what was your next move? How did you get through that learning curve?***

**Dale:** One of the biggest things that held me back from being a real writer was I was overwhelmed with information. So I started small. I didn't have a personal website. I didn't have too many samples. I came across the ProBlogger job board and I got extremely lucky. In fact, the first day I looked at it, there was a listing for a poker writer. I didn't even have any samples, but there are very, very few writers who can send an email saying, "I've played a million hands, I was a winner at big stakes, and I can write for you."

I got an email back right away saying, "Oh my God, you're perfect." I'll be honest, it wasn't the highest paying job—I think it's like 5 cents a word—but at the time I was like, "Holy shit!" This is more than I've ever made and it was *my* client. It showed me that I didn't necessarily have to be pitching magazines. I didn't even need my own website. I could still start small and pick up a few clients here and there and then, hopefully, get out of the content mills.

***Q: Sure, the pay was low, but now you were getting some legitimate clips that you could show people.***

**Dale:** Yes.

***Q: How did you start parlaying this experience into more work?***

**Dale:** I was lucky in that I did have a few other personal blogs I was trying to make money with, but even though they didn't really make any money I had a few really good articles on them, so I could use those as samples.

Over the next few weeks, I just stuck with the ProBlogger job board. I applied to a few jobs and didn't hear back, but I applied to one for PaleoHacks, which is a fairly well-known nutrition site, and that was what one of my personal sites was—in nutrition.

I reached out to them and sent them a few of my samples and they were like, "That's great. How much do you want?" I negotiated terribly. I said 7 cents per word and they were like, "Oh, yeah. No problem."

At the time, I couldn't believe it. I'm like, "I'm getting away with robbery here, 7 cents a word. Oh my God. "

***Q: So you got those two clients, and what happened after that?***

**Dale:** From there it was more similar things—just building up a portfolio, getting used to writing for clients. I didn't want to scale up too quickly because I still felt like I needed to learn the writing side better as well. While I did that, I built my writer website. I started reading more about marketing. Nothing too complicated, really.

***Q: How many clients do you have now?***

**Dale:** I have five active clients and I just picked up a really big one. So I might have to drop a few of the other ones.

***Q: Is the pay going up each time?***

**Dale:** Yes. It's definitely going up. That's for sure.

***Q: How long did it take you to make up the income that you were losing from quitting the content mills?***

**Dale:** It took a month and a half or so.

***Q: How are you doing now, financially, since you dropped the content mills?***

**Dale:** It's hard to say exactly, but overall, I would say I'm earning at least \$70 an hour.

My first month was about \$1,200 including the content mills. The next month was about \$1,800 without the content mills. So that brings us to April, which was last month, and that was about \$1,800 as well.

Yesterday I locked down a new gig that's going to be ghostwriting these huge guides on a regular basis. Assuming everything goes well, that should be at least \$3,000 to \$4,000 a month.

One thing I would point out to other people who are just starting out: We see all these posts that say to never work for under \$100 per hour. You see other posts where people are making \$200 to \$300 dollars an hour and you think, "I have to shoot for that right away." But if you're brand new, it's okay to start out at 30 bucks an hour as long as you're learning and building a portfolio, because that's going to help you grow over time.

***Q: Good point. And it sounds like also the topics you're writing about are a little more interesting than the HVAC articles you were writing for a few cents a word.***

**Dale:** Yes. Much more interesting. Now I write about nutrition and Internet marketing mainly, and those are two topics I really enjoy.

***Q: What do you wish somebody had told you when you were starting to write for the content mills?***

**Dale:** That you can find writing work you actually enjoy and that will actually help you earn more without any more effort than writing on content mills. Even the bottom tier of real clients pay more than content mills, and it's much more enjoyable.

***Q: What tips do you have for other writers who want to escape the content mills?***

**Dale:** Number one, I would say start small. Don't get overwhelmed by all these posts about different marketing tactics. Pick one and just go after that. No writer does everything. You can start with one client and go from there. You don't need to make \$2,000 or \$3,000 off the bat.

***Q: You didn't even have a website when you started, and I think that's what holds back a lot of writers who want to move out of the mills. They're like, "I don't have everything all lined up that I need, I don't have my LinkedIn profile, I don't have my website." But obviously it doesn't matter.***

**Dale:** Yeah. No LinkedIn, no Twitter, no websites, very few samples. You know, it doesn't take much to stand out from 90 percent of the writers out there.

## Double the Income, Half the Hassle

**Name:** Mike Straus

**Title:** Freelance writer in Kelowna, BC

**Website:** <http://strauscopywriting.com>



**Q:** *When did you start writing for the content mills?*

**Mike:** I started writing for the mills in 2012.

**Q:** *Which ones were you writing for?*

**Mike:** Fiverr and Craigslist. Craigslist isn't technically a content mill, but it's on the same level.

**Q:** *I know you then got a gig with a content marketing company. When was that?*

**Mike:** Also 2012.

**Q:** *So you didn't write for the mills for very long at all.*

**Mike:** No, I didn't.

**Q:** *How did it happen that you got the gig with this content marketing firm?*

**Mike:** I actually found a posting on a Facebook group where they said they were looking for some decent writers, so I contacted the guy over Facebook. He told me to go to the website and fill out a form to apply, which I did, and

pretty soon they gave me a trial assignment...then a couple real assignments, and three years later I'm still working for them.

***Q: So what's the difference in the pay rate between the mill work you've had and this client?***

**Mike:** Well, the one mill that I wrote for was Fiverr. They pay you \$5.00 a page, but they take a 20 percent cut on all sales, so \$4.00. I've also done a bit of Craigslist work, which was kind of variable, but that was about \$10.00 a page. So the mills were \$5.00 to \$10.00 a page, whereas this content marketing firm is a lot closer to about \$20.00 or \$25.00 per page.

Five to ten a page is not sustainable, but twenty to twenty-five—you're not going to do great, but you can get by.

***Q: So when you got the content marketing gig did you immediately stop writing for the mills, or was there some overlap?***

**Mike:** There was no overlap. I immediately stopped. I was like, "Okay, I've done enough of these little \$5.00 crap gigs, let's try and find some serious work."

***Q: What was it like writing for the mills? What was your day-to-day like?***

**Mike:** The day-to-day it wasn't fun. Basically, what would happen is, you'd have somebody who would give you all these different stacks of things that they wanted, and I was usually able to hit it on the first try—but sometimes people would come back and request revisions, and I'd either have to say, "For \$5.00 a page you're not getting squat," or cave. Then all of a sudden you're working for not \$5.00 every half hour, but closer to like \$5.00 an hour, which is not cool.

Pretty quickly I started to feel this sense of shame, because I come from a rural area, and I have a lot of cousins who work in the trades and are earning quite well. So I kind of felt this shame; I was like, "I'm a writer, I have a

university degree, I've been published here, there, and everywhere, I've got these awards like crazy—and I'm working for \$5.00 a page."

***Q: How did you ramp up to better-paying writing gigs?***

**Mike:** I quit the Fiverr and the Craigslist as soon as I had enough pieces to form a portfolio. I started pitching myself to some higher-paying clients. The content marketing firm gave me enough money and enough work that I didn't have to worry about where my rent was coming from. So it was my guaranteed thing that allowed me to pitch bigger clients.

***Q: How many clients are you working with now?***

**Mike:** I've got a local tech accelerator that I do some writing and strategy work for. Also, through that tech accelerator, I got somebody who came to me wanting writing tutoring services to help her with a journalism course that she's doing. For a period of about six months, I had a local art gallery as well that came to me. Unfortunately, they recently folded, but it seems to have worked out because I've taken on some other clients too. So, currently, I am writing for about six or seven clients right now.

***Q: I know that you also wrote for that Canadian chiropractic trade magazine.***

**Mike:** Yes, *Canadian Chiropractor* magazine. Oh, it was amazing. It was the cover article. That's pretty cool to see your own article on the cover of a print magazine.

***Q: What is the main marketing tactic that you've been using to get the non-magazine clients you mentioned?***

**Mike:** Honestly, a lot of it has been just being in the right place at the right time and networking. I got myself into this co-working space, which has been amazing because there are all sorts of people there that need good writers.



***Q: Do you mind sharing what the difference is in your income between when you were writing for the mills and now?***

**Mike:** When I was writing for the mills I was earning about \$1,200 a month, and that was doing it every day for a good five or six hours. In March, I closed out my most profitable month ever, where I earned over \$2,500. So I'm earning double what I was earning then.

***Q: Did you have to work as many hours for it?***

**Mike:** I don't think I'm working quite as many hours.

***Q: Is there anything you wish someone had told you when you were starting to write for the mills?***

**Mike:** I wish someone had told me that my writing is worth a hell of a lot more than three cents a word. I wish someone had told me that magazine editors are actually friendly people who want to hear from you, especially if you have a good idea. I really wish somebody had told me that if you want to be a copywriter or a magazine writer you have to get off of your ass and hustle, and that it isn't really that scary.

***Q: Do you have any tips for other writers who want to escape the content mills?***

**Mike:** Absolutely. Before you even start out, like before you even think about trying to escape, you need to believe you can do it. Yeah, it is scary doing your own marketing, finding your own clients. Yeah, you are putting yourself out there, and yeah, you might get rejected—but if a worry wart like me can do it, so can anybody else.

The problem a lot of writers have is that they freak out because getting out of the content mills actually requires them to get up and market themselves, which means—gasp!—they have to take a risk. The biggest thing that writers need to know is, *it will be okay*.

***Q: What the content mills are perpetuating is, “Oh, this is a good way to break in and get clips. You need to start small.”***

**Mike:** Oh, that is a total crock. You do not need to start small at all. At least not *that* small.

***Q: You might want to start relatively small, but you don’t need to start at two cents a word, or \$5.00 an article.***

**Mike:** I now have clients who are paying me twenty, twenty-five cents a word. My first copywriting client paid me 25 cents per word, even though I had an extremely limited portfolio, no website, and no referrals. My first real blogging client paid me \$40 per 500-word article. And I was able to use both gigs as clips.

***Q: You talked about how scary it was, and what a worry wart you were. How did you get over that challenge?***

**Mike:** Basically, there were a couple of different things that happened that helped me to get over it.

If I had to write a guide on how to escape content mills, here’s what I would say: Step one: Breathe. You’ll be fine. Yeah, you’re scared. Yeah, you’re full of doubts, but getting out of the content mills really isn’t that hard if you just believe you can do it. It’ll be okay, I promise.

Then step two is: You need to get yourself some edumacation. You have to spend money to make money. It’s a cliché, but it’s true, and when you invest in yourself, you see all sorts of benefits. When I wanted to write for magazines, I was sending query after query after query, and I got crickets. I didn’t get anywhere. And then I took your Write for Magazines course, where I learned the right way to query, and within three months I had an assignment.

So take a class, learn how to write a magazine article, a case study, a white paper, whatever. I recently just finished a fantastic copywriting mentorship, and it’s completely changed the way I think about writing.

Don't be afraid to spend some money on professional training, because the money you spend will come back to you down the road.

Then step number three is: Get out there and market yourself. This is something I've had to learn the hard way. It's something that so many writers struggle with, which is so sad because this is so critical to the success of your writing business—and yes, it is a business. You wouldn't expect the perfect client, the perfect magazine writing gig to find you out of the blue, would you?

***Q: Is there anything else you wanted to add?***

**Mike:** There are two things I want to add. One, you should never doubt yourself as a writer. You should never doubt your value, and you should never take rejection or criticism personally. The freelance writing business is one that is so dependent on your mindset. If you stay positive, if you stay upbeat, you will do well—but the instant you start to think, "Woe is me," the instant you start to think you're worthless and that you'll never succeed—well, you're screwed. If you always listen to your inner critic, you'll be stuck working for content mills forever, which is simply not sustainable.

The second thing I'd like to add is, just remember that your inner critic is a jackass. He has one agenda: To keep you in that dark little prison cell you've built around yourself. Your inner critic is not above lying to you, manipulating you, or twisting that psychological knife of other people's thoughts.

One of the biggest things you need to do if you want to succeed as a writer is make that inner critic your enemy. Not just ignore your inner critic. I'm talking about evicting him from your mind and kicking his freeloading friends, shiny object syndrome and procrastination, to the curb. The more you let them control you the harder it'll be to break free.

So just keep writing, keep pitching, keep calling, know what you're worth, and don't give up.

# Ready to Escape the Content Mills?

Want to learn more about how YOU can leave content mills behind and earn great as a freelance writer? Check out our inexpensive (really!) [Escape the Content Mills course](#).

