



ESTABLISHING YOUR FREELANCE BUSINESS 101

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LESSON #1

Is This a Good Career Choice for You?

For purposes of this course, I'll focus mostly on freelance editing, although many of the comments are equally applicable to other types of freelancing.

Advantages and Disadvantages

Freelancing has several advantages and disadvantages, which should be considered carefully before you launch into it, especially on a full-time basis.

Advantages

Based on my personal experience, there are many advantages to being a freelancer, especially when compared with a “normal” job as an employee.

1. The number-one advantage is that I have the best boss in the world—no, not me ... although, I dare say, I get along with myself a lot better than most of the bosses I've had. But in a very real way, my direct supervisor is God. He brings in business. He helps me see how to make my clients' manuscripts better. He helps me make and maintain positive relationships with my authors. He even helps smooth out the misunderstandings that occasionally crop up.
2. Another great advantage is that I have a very flexible schedule. I can do the work whenever it's convenient for me. I can schedule my work around my life instead of the other way around. If my family needs me, I'm available. If I have downtime in a dentist's waiting room, or in the passenger seat of a car on a road trip, or on a plane going to a writers' conference, I can get my editing done. I can do some of the work in the evening if I have other things to do during the day. I can work weekends or even holidays if I feel like it.

I can also take time off whenever I want or need to. If I'm not feeling well, I can sleep in, or take a nap, or quit early. If I wish to attend a writers' conference, I go (as long as the Boss has given me permission). If I want to take a vacation, I don't have to schedule around my coworkers' plans. And I'm not limited to the number of days off per year that my company determines is appropriate. As long as I get the work done in a timely manner, *how* and *when* I do it is up to me.

3. A lot of the things I would buy anyway are tax deductions: my computer and other office equipment and supplies, my DSL line, books, even the expenses of going to writers' conferences.

4. I get to decide who I work with ... and who I don't. If a client starts acting obnoxious, or the work he wants me to edit is not something I want to subject myself to, I can choose not to work with that person. (In an office, if you have a personality clash with a coworker, you still have to see that person and work with him or her every day ... or quit your job and look for a new one. And there'll probably be someone at the new job you don't get along with.)

5. The "commute" is fantastic! I have driven an hour or more each way for some of my office jobs—longer in inclement weather or when accidents jam traffic. Now I simply walk from my bedroom to my computer. LOVE IT! I spend a lot less money on gas and car repairs and maintenance than when I was working outside my home. I no longer have to deal with stress-filled fighting of rush-hour traffic twice a day every day. I don't even have to walk from my front door to the car in the rain! My husband used to have to put up with my daily tirades of the idiots/morons I encountered on the road all the time, so he's happy too. ☺

6. One of my favorite benefits is that I absolutely *love* what I do. I get excited about helping authors make their manuscripts better. I seem to have a natural talent for catching typos and errors in punctuation, usage, grammar, and spelling—in other people's manuscripts anyway. And I enjoy learning how words are spelled and how sentences should be punctuated. So that helps me with the basic proofreading. But I also seem to have a talent for seeing ways a manuscript can be improved. So I really enjoy my work, and others appreciate it enough to pay for it ... and to pass the word on to others!

7. That leads me to another thing I love about my job. It thrills me when a client raves about how much better the manuscript reads after I've edited it. I love it when an author tells me that an agent or publisher accepted the manuscript I edited. My clients often send me complimentary copies of their published books that include my name in the acknowledgments. Manuscripts I've edited have received awards in contests and become CBA best sellers. One author I mentored from the "I'm not even sure if I can write" stage made the *New York Times* best-seller list with her initial book series ... and I'm the first person she shared that news with, after her immediate family. Very exciting!

Even more thrilling is knowing that God is using me as one of the stepping-stones to help get the books He wants to be published into the hands of readers He wants to speak to through those books. Some of my clients have sent me copies of their fan letters, and it really touches my heart to see how people's lives are being changed through something I helped make happen.

Disadvantages

There are some disadvantages to freelance editing as well.

1. It takes a long time to get established, and there's a lot of competition out there. (Kinda like writing for publication!)
2. Even after you've been in the business for a while, the income isn't always steady. You don't pick up a paycheck on the first and the fifteenth of the month, so it's more difficult to budget for paying bills.
3. You have ZERO paid time off—no lunch hour, no personal time, no paid vacation or sick days. Even work-related activities, like attending a writers' conference (or even teaching at one), aren't tasks you get paid by the hour to do.
4. You have none of the group benefits associated with full-time office work, like medical/dental insurance or retirement plans or pensions.
5. There are a lot of expenses. You *have* to have a really good, fast, up-to-date computer, with Microsoft Word and Wi-Fi. Things like paper, printer cartridges, postage, and advertising/marketing materials all add up. Granted, they are tax-deductible expenses. But that only means you get back a small percentage of what you spent. And if you don't make enough income to exceed your expenses, at least after the first few years, you can't take all those lovely deductions.
6. Occasionally, you're going to have a dissatisfied client for one reason or another, and you don't have anyone to pass him off to ... or blame.
7. For me, one of the disadvantages is that I don't have near as much time as I thought I would have to do my own writing. I figured editing would be a great way to support my writing habit. But I'm usually so busy editing for other people that I don't have time to work on my own manuscripts. And when I do focus on my own books, I don't get as much editing done, which means I'm not making as much money.
8. There are a lot of “nonbillable” hours you have to put in. For example:
 - a. Administrative responsibilities, such as organizing, filing, doing paperwork, etc. Unlike an office job, you don't get paid for doing those kinds of things. The only hours you get paid for are the hours you spend actually editing for clients.
 - b. Following up on potential clients. (This may involve multiple emails or phone calls or even face-to-face meetings on occasion.)
 - c. Marketing. That can include creating and maintaining a website, doing sample edits, reading and responding to emails from clients, making flyers and business cards, and networking. You'll also need to spend some time analyzing the various marketing strategies you try to determine which ones are most effective and efficient.

d. Computer glitches. Since you don't have an IT Department you can call (unless you happen to have a friend or family member who's willing and able to help you), you have to figure out how to fix problems yourself. And the time it takes you to get your computer up and running again is part of your "nonbillable hours." That can also be a huge delay in getting your work done.

I would estimate that for every one hour of billable time, there's about one or two hours of nonbillable time required. So if you charge, say, \$25/hour for your services, you're really only going to make about \$10/hour if you count all the hours you have to work to make that money. And that's before taxes!

Fortunately, a lot of those disadvantages fade after you've been doing this for a while. I've been editing full time for about sixteen years now, so I'm established. My income is pretty steady. I now get paid to teach at writers' conferences instead of paying to attend. I've purchased most of the expensive items I need. I've streamlined my administrative duties, so they take less time. I don't have very many unsatisfied clients. I don't do much marketing anymore. Because I have a lot of return clients and ongoing clients, people hear about me by reputation. (I also have medical/dental insurance through my husband's job, and I have a small retirement plan from my previous office job.)

And the truth is, I love this job far more than anything I've ever done in my life. So for me, the advantages far outweigh the disadvantages. If that's true for you, too, freelancing can be a very rewarding way to earn a living!

SO ... if you still think you'd like to try freelance editing as a business, how can you become successful at it? Following are a few helpful steps.

Six Helpful Steps to Starting Your Freelance Business

Step 1. PRAY

This is the first and most important step. God can make you successful in this business ... *if it's what He wants you to do.* (If not, you don't want to be doing it anyway.)

Step 2. WRITE

Writing and editing are completely different skills, and it's entirely possible to do one and not the other. However, it can be easier to help others improve their writing if you're doing it yourself, and you'll have more empathy for the clients you work with if you're writing too. Also, if you can establish yourself as a professional author, other writers will be more likely to trust you to edit their manuscripts.

A. Learn. Read all the books you can get your hands on about how to write and how to edit. Take local adult-education courses, or correspondence or online classes, about

writing for publication or creative writing or journalism. Attend writers' conferences so you can polish your writing skills and meet other people in the business.

B. Write. Start with magazine articles, short stories, play scripts, or other small pieces and work your way up to book-length manuscripts so you'll have experience with all kinds of writing.

C. Self-Edit. Find or start a writers' critique group so you can do some free editing, get feedback on what people find helpful, and improve your own writing skills. Go over your manuscripts again and again and again, making them better every time. Get your manuscripts as polished and perfect as you can get them, right down to the spelling and punctuation.

D. Hire a Professional Editor. Not only will this help you improve your own writing, but you'll get a good inside look at the kinds of things editors do and how they do them. You may even want to send your work to two or three editors to get a feel for different styles. (Not sure where to find a good editor? Go to www.ChristianEditor.com and fill out the form for Authors Seeking Editors.)

E. Get Published. If you haven't had any manuscripts accepted and published by paying markets, you may not be able to convince potential clients that you know what you're doing. Get a copy of one or more writers' market guides and learn what the different publishers are looking for. Many times, editing clients will count on you to provide suggestions for where they can market their work. In addition, the contacts you make at publishing houses through your writing can be the best way to get into editing for those houses.

Getting your own writing published isn't essential for becoming a professional editor, but it can certainly help.

Step 3. EVALUATE

Following are some areas you can evaluate to determine whether you'd make a good editorial freelancer.

A. Your Personality. Are you a self-motivated, organized, flexible person who can work well without supervision? Or if left to your own devices, would you sleep in, read a book or magazine, call a friend, run errands, clean the house, go shopping, or do so many other things you'd never get around to doing much editing work? Are you the kind of person who thrives on socialization? How well will you cope with working alone every day, having no coworkers to chat with? Are you excessively picky about details? No matter how good you are at evaluating a manuscript's overall strengths and weaknesses, if your client finds typos or misspelled words or errors in punctuation after you've edited a manuscript, those little oversights can make you look unprofessional. How are your people skills? Are you good at providing a balance of honest encouragement and helpful suggestions for improvement?

B. Your Skills. Do you have good proofreading skills? Can you spot a typo in a paragraph without half trying? Can you see how to tighten a sentence, make a paragraph flow better, improve the organization of a manuscript? If you're unsure whether your skills are good enough to offer for pay, you may wish to consider taking The PEN Institute's course [Freelance Editing 101](#). (The group course is usually held every January, but it's also available one-on-one at any time.)

C. Your Setup. Do you have an office space where you can work without distractions and enough filing capacity for all the paperwork? (Yes, even in this digital age, you'll still have paperwork, like receipts for taxes.) Do you have up-to-date computer equipment, email and internet (high-speed DSL) capability, the latest version of Microsoft Word or WordPerfect, and a good virus-scan program? Are you willing and able to check your email several times a day? Do you know a good CPA who has a thorough understanding of home businesses and can help you figure out what needs to be done on your income taxes?

D. Your Local Laws. Does your city require you to have a business license? Does your community or homeowners' association allow you to conduct a business from your home? (Many homeowners' associations discourage home businesses due to increased traffic, signage, and mail delivery, but you won't have those issues with an editing service.)

E. Your Finances. Talk candidly with your family about money. You probably won't make much for at least the first few years. If you can't pay the bills with your spouse's income alone for a while, you may want to do editing on the side until you have enough work to quit your day job. Even after you've been freelancing for a while, the work is often "feast or famine." You'll have some months when you barely have time to breathe and other months when you'll wonder how you're going to pay the electric bill. If you don't have a steady income that can cover the expenses during slow months, you could run into serious trouble.

F. Your Availability. If you have young children at home, don't expect to make very much money editing because you won't be able to devote much focused time to it. Editing takes concentration, which can be in short supply if you've got kids running around making noise and clamoring for your attention.

After all this evaluation, if you still believe you'd make a good freelance editor, then move to Step 4.

Step 4. PREPARE

Note: This topic is covered more extensively in the online course [Freelance Editing 101](#).

A. Get the Right Reference Books. Do you know what reference books are used by the industry(ies) you plan to edit for? If you wish to edit authors' manuscripts, do you know

what style guides and dictionaries are used by book, magazine, and newspaper publishers today?

B. Study the Reference Books. Get into the habit of looking up *any* word you are not 100 percent sure of how it's spelled. And read the definition and part of speech to make sure you're using the right spelling for that usage.

Look up punctuation rules and style guidelines. Don't rely on what you *think* you know, or what you remember from high school or a writing course you took, or even on the collaborative opinions of other writers or English teachers. The rules for book writing are different from the rules for term papers or even for articles. That's why you have to rely on the appropriate style guides.

Most publishing houses and editing networks will ask you to take a test to evaluate your skills before they ask you to do any editing for them. You don't have to *know* everything ... but you do have to know where to look up the right answers.

C. Try to Anticipate Situations. Expect to be asked to "just take a look" at people's manuscripts for free. Decide ahead of time if you want to do freebies to gain experience. If an editing client asks you to rewrite her rough draft, how much original writing are you willing to do? Will you charge for your services up front or do the work first and expect to be paid after the job is done? What will you do if someone asks you to do a rush job and promises to pay you later? What will you do if they don't pay? (These things will be addressed more fully later in this course.)

Step 5. GET THE WORD OUT

Just as a writer's work is not done when his or her book is published, an editor can't simply *be* a good editor. You must advertise yourself, market your services, let people know what you can do. This will be covered in detail in Lesson 3, "Marketing Your Business."

There's one last tip I'd like to give you, and it's by far the most crucial of all. It's the same as the first step I mentioned. Remember what that was?

Step 6. PRAY

Every day. Without ceasing. Whenever we're doing something for the kingdom of God, Satan will do his best to stop us. It's easy to let busy schedules interfere with your quiet time with the Lord, studying God's Word, and reading devotionals and Bible studies. It's also easy for editing deadlines to draw you away from other priorities, like spending time with your family or serving in the church. Keeping your eyes on the Lord will help you keep your priorities straight.

God can even help you with your scheduling. Some time ago, I was booked to give five workshops for a Christian writers' conference. About a month before the conference, I still hadn't spent any solid time preparing for those workshops. But I had a ton of editing projects I had to get done before I left. I asked all my Christian friends to pray that the Lord would give me some extra hours in my day. (Most of them told me, "No, you don't really want that. I'll just pray for God's peace in your heart." But I kept thinking, *No, really. I DO need more hours in my day!*)

Well, shortly after I started praying that prayer, I stopped getting new editing jobs. I got caught up on the ones I had, and, lo and behold, I had more hours in my day to prepare for the conference! About the same time, my twenty-one-year-old son, who was living with us, got a car, so I didn't have to drive him to work and back every day. BOOM! Even more hours in my day! I started praising the Lord for answering my prayer.

A week before the conference, I got a call from the conference director asking if I could do one more workshop for a speaker who'd had to cancel. I said, "Sure! No problem!" And it wasn't. I had exactly the right amount of time to prepare for all my workshops and complete all my editing jobs. Matter of fact, I finished about a half hour before I had to leave home to catch my plane!

Unfortunately, when I got back from the conference, I realized that my lack of editing jobs had resulted in a lack of funds, which put me severely behind on my budget. So I started praying for more *work* in my day! And boy, did God bring *that* in spades.

I love being a professional freelance editor. I wake up every morning amazed that I can make a living at something I enjoy so much.

Freelancing isn't right for everybody. Not everyone will be successful at it, just as not everyone who wants to write a book will actually get one published. But if it's what God wants you to do and you're willing to put in the time and effort to do it well, it can happen.

Of course, in God's economy, success isn't always measured by monetary gain. Sometimes God calls people to write books or articles that never get commercially published but serve a purpose for the writer/others who read the manuscript. It's possible that our heavenly Father has you in this class for some reason other than establishing a freelance editing business. It could be that you'll do your very best to start a lucrative home-based career and never see a dime of profit. But you can be assured that He will not waste the efforts you put forth. If God has given you a passion to do something, whatever it is, do it, regardless of monetary gain (or lack thereof).

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LESSON #1 ASSIGNMENTS

To receive a Certificate of Completion, you need to complete at least two assignments from each lesson.

Assignment #1. Prayer

Write a prayer to God regarding your freelance business. Share it with the group if you feel comfortable doing so. (If not, you can send it just to me.) You may want to print and possibly frame your prayer for your freelancing business. Keep it close to where you do your editing to remind yourself of what's most important (especially when your schedule gets frantic).

Assignment #2. Advantages and Disadvantages

Share with the group what you see as the most important advantages and disadvantages of freelancing for you personally. Do you anticipate freelancing part time or full time? What is the motivating factor in your deciding to become a freelancer?

Assignment #3. Qualifications

Share with the group anything you've done in the past that you believe qualifies you to be an editorial freelancer. (You can use this information when we get to Lesson 3, "Marketing Your Business.")

Assignment #4. Preparation

What reference books do you own? Which ones do you expect to need for your business? How will you obtain the ones you don't already have?

CLASS NOTE: Throughout the course, you are encouraged to read your fellow classmates' posted assignments in the Google Group. This will give you more ideas about what you can do yourself. And please feel free to offer feedback on these assignments. If you read a classmate's work and think, *Wow, that's great*, post a message to the class saying so. If you notice something that you think could use some improvement, but it's not something the whole class could benefit from, please email that individual personally with your constructive suggestions (given in a kind and loving manner, of course).