

Chelsea's Guide To Freelancing

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Have questions? [Email me](#). You can also tip me (you don't have to!) but my Venmo is @Chelsea-Cirruzzo.

About the author

My name is Chelsea Cirruzzo and I'm a health and local news reporter in Washington, D.C. For several years, I freelanced on my off-time from work for both local and national news outlets, including DCist, Washington City Paper, The Lily, Washington Post, and others. I teach a course at a local university on freelancing as well.

I'm hoping this guide can serve not only as information for myself to keep track of my freelancing, but also as a guide for anyone interested in getting into freelance writing.

This guide is based on what I've learned in my time as a freelancer as well as from so many more accomplished people than me (see [resources](#)). A lot of people who I admire a lot and look up to freelance full-time, so these tips may not resonate as much. I intend for this to be a living document that I can continuously update as I grow, learn more and get better.

You can follow me on [Twitter](#) or check out my [website](#). Have questions, feedback, etc?
Get in touch!

How to get started

When I left my first job from D.C. local media and began reporting full-time for a trade publication, I turned to freelancing because I wanted to continue reporting on local news as well as experiment with other types of writing.

It is important to note that I was in a unique position as a freelancer: I worked full-time at a reporting job while maintaining my freelancing as a side business, which was a choice I made to continue receiving health benefits through my employer and pay down my student loan debt. Other freelancers may work full-time jobs outside of journalism or make freelancing their full-time job.

So, when I decided to freelance as my side gig, one of the first things I started doing was emailing editors at publications I wanted to write for and introducing myself. Some even agreed to meet with me for coffee.

The important thing was I went into these conversations with specific questions:

- Do they have pitching guidelines?
- What are they looking for in a freelancer?
- What is the best way to pitch them?
- What stories are they not looking for?
- Is there something they're missing in their newsroom a freelancer could help with?

However, this isn't always possible and editors are extremely busy, so please be respectful of their time and do your homework! Some publications have their pitching guidelines on their website, so before you ask for them, do some research.

Another thing you can do is start **talking to other freelancers**. Reach out politely and ask for a phone call, particularly if they're someone you admire, but, again, always have specific questions like:

- How did you get started in freelancing? Which publications do you write for?
- How do you write your pitches? Can you show me a pitch of yours?
- Do you mind sharing your rates?
- Who else should I speak with?

Some people will say no or not respond. That is okay! Don't take it personally. If cold-emailing people scares you, here are places to start:

- [Digital women leaders](#)
- [Journalism mentors](#)
- Professors or old supervisors

Getting ideas

One of the hardest things I've found about any type of writing is simply getting ideas, especially when you're starting out. Once you start to develop a beat or an area and develop sources, stories may come to you (for example, I keep my email and my social media DMs open—both a blessing and curse on social media as a woman—for tips. An anonymous tip sent to me led to this [story](#) on D.C. libraries during COVID-19). But what do you do when you want to write but aren't sure where to start? Here are some tips:

- **Read a lot!** Read things you like and things you hate. If you ever read something from a publication you want to write for and think, wow, this is great, but I wonder about this other thing...then you might have a story! Can you add to this coverage in any way? Do you think it could be better? How? Is there a particular aspect of the story you think should be fleshed out? Start thinking about it.
- **Go to what's happening. Wherever you live, there's probably something going on:** Events, protests, parties, performances, local government meetings, school board meetings, businesses opening and closing, etc. Go to them and just talk to people. I acknowledge that this advice is probably not helpful right now, but that doesn't mean you can't see if local governments or schools or organizations are

having virtual events. See what people are talking about and what they care about. Get to know those major players at those events, spend time on Zoom calls. Not every event will yield a story, but it's worth a try. Some of the best advice I've ever received is: You can be a reporter anywhere. Something happening where you are? Check it out.

- **Listen and watch conversations on social media.** Are lots of people talking about something? Is it making you think? For example, after watching some people discuss IUDs on social media in response to RBG's death, I was reminded of a similar discussion post-2016 and [wrote](#) about it. I follow a lot of local business, organizations and people in my area on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and even TikTok to see what's going on.
- **Think about how to connect with people off of social media**, which may go back to going to events via Zoom or in-person. Not everyone has access to social media and lots of stories are happening in other ways. For example, I've [written](#) about homelessness in D.C. and I've made connections with organizations that are made up of people who formerly experienced homelessness or are advocates for people experiencing homelessness. These connections are incredibly valuable to me and help me speak with people who may not always have access to social media or the Internet. This is important to think about, too, if you largely use social media for source call-outs like I do (if I get better tips on this, I will share!)
- **Always foster connections beyond immediate stories as well.** Check in with sources for phone calls even when you don't have a story idea. I like to ask people: what's on your mind? Is there something you've read recently in your area of expertise that you liked? What's missing out on coverage right now? That may give you story ideas.
- **Spitball your silliest ideas off of your friends.** The ideas that come to mind in the shower may seem like silly or dumb or unimportant ideas to you, but talk them through with friends or other freelancers. Workshop them. And then pitch them.
- **And right now, ask yourself: How has this current moment in time impacted [insert literally anything]?** There are so many stories to write about this. For

example, I wondered how the pandemic has impacted museums in my area and [wrote](#) about it. Think hyperlocal or think big, workshop it, and pitch it.

How to pitch

When I speak with people who want to get into freelancing, the biggest question I get is how to pitch, so I thought I'd break down the anatomy of the pitches I write. First things first: Make sure you've done your homework before you pitch. **Check the publication you're pitching to make sure you aren't pitching something they've already written** or something they wouldn't normally write. Usually, I do this by Googling: **[Name of publication]: [key words related to the story I want to write]** and spending some time reading. Also, **make sure you're pitching the correct editor.** Read their author page, check out their Twitter to see if they've said anything about the types of pitches they accept (I will search on Twitter: **[@editor]: pitch** to see if they've tweeted anything on pitching)

Sometimes publications have specific styles they want pitches in, but if not, here is the formula I use:

1. The subject line

- a. The subject lines I normally use say: PITCH: [A brief headline-like sentence of what the story is]. Try to make it engaging, but beware of writing it too much like an advertisement because they may get shuffled out of an editor's main inbox.
- b. Examples of successful subject lines I've used:
 - i. [PITCH: Museums can start reopening. What will be the same and what will be different?](#)
 - ii. [PITCH: Confused about working from home? Listen to people with disabilities and chronic illness](#)
 - iii. [PITCH: Here's how coronavirus is impacting D.C.-based sex workers](#)

- iv. [PITCH: D.C. is counting how many unhoused people there are during the pandemic](#)

2. The address and email

- a. Address your email to an editor, not just a general inbox. Do your research and find the correct editor and write a polite address: Dear so-and-so, or hello so-and-so.

3. Give a brief introduction

- a. Introduce yourself and let the editor know you have a pitch! You don't need to make this too long.
- i. Example: I hope you're well. My name is Chelsea Cirruzzo and I'm a [freelance reporter / health care reporter / etc]. I have a story idea I hope would be a good fit for [your publication]

4. The pitch itself

- a. Right after your introduction, paste your subject line back into the body of the email in bold:
- i. **PITCH: TK TK TK**
- b. **First, give a couple of brief lines on what the story is about.** Make sure you're pitching a story and not a topic. For example, don't say you want to write about TikTok. Say you want to write about the top 10 TikTok accounts to follow in your area ([Yes, I did this!](#))
- i. Here's an example from my story on the annual point-in-time count in my city that I pitched to a local publication in 2021.
1. Here's what I wrote: **Between 9 p.m. and 2 a.m. on Wednesday night, [The Community Partnership](#) will be counting how many people are sleeping on the streets in D.C. Point-in-Time counts are being conducted all across the nation, some virtually and some not, but D.C. will be doing its count in person.**
 2. There's a few parts to this: I set up the situation but then got directly into the exact story: This is happening in our city, in-person.

- c. **Then, get into the story. What will you write about? What questions will you answer?** Say directly: I will write about or this story will be about...
 - i. Example: **I'd like to write about what the count looks like in 2021, how it impacts the people being counted, and how the count is actually done—and why. The website discusses specific precautions being taken during the pandemic, as well as security concerns specific to D.C. I'd like to learn why the count is important and what it looks like during a pandemic.**
 - 1. I highlighted the last part of this because I usually like to **bold** parts of my pitch to highlight the most important parts. I also like to include the questions I'll ask.
- d. **Finally, give a brief explanation of why you're the best person to write this story or why this story would be a good fit for the publication.**
 - i. Do you have certain sources in this area? Have you done any pre-reporting on this story? Has the publication written something similar in the past and you'd like to further the story? Link it!
 - 1. Example: **I've asked to speak with the Community Partnership tomorrow about what it looks like this year and they've also offered to connect me to the Columbia Heights team to shadow on Wednesday night. I also have experience reporting on homelessness and have sources among unhoused people in D.C. who are willing to share their perspective.**

5. Give a brief bio

- a. Once you're done with the pitch, write a little boilerplate that gives a brief bio as well as links or includes clips that you have written.
 - i. Example: **A little bit about me: I'm a full-time health policy reporter for a trade publication, but I also freelance for a number of local and national publications. I've covered the pandemic, the restaurant industry, local happenings,**

homelessness and housing, and urban health for DCist and Washington City Paper. My portfolio can be found [here](#).

- ii. This is a boilerplate I've used mainly for local publications or publications within my area, but feel free to change it up depending on who you're pitching (for example: if you're pitching a national publication, include more information about articles with national angles you've written)

6. Say thank you

- a. I know this should go without saying, but always say thank you for considering your pitch and let them know you're available for any questions.

Following up

When do you follow up? Normally, I wait about a week if the story isn't timely (if it is timely, put that in your subject line). Editors are super busy, so be polite in your follow-up.

It can be a very brief email:

- Hello, I'm just following up on this to see if you're interested. I appreciate you taking the time to consider.

I usually follow-up twice, but I always make sure to tell editors if I'm planning on pitching elsewhere:

- Hello, I'm just following up on this to see if you're interested. If not, I plan on pitching this elsewhere by Friday of this week. I appreciate you taking the time to consider. Please let me know if you have any questions.

Here's another example of a successful pitch I've written for [Teen Vogue](#):

Good morning Allegra,

I hope you're well. My name is Chelsea Cirruzzo and I'm a freelance reporter in Washington, D.C. I'm reaching out to pitch an article I hope might be of interest to Teen Vogue.

PITCH: These progressive Capitol Hill staffers are organizing for better conditions

Earlier this month, a group of Capitol Hill staffers in progressive offices launched the [Congressional Progressive Staff Association](#), which is aimed at creating better conditions for [chronically underpaid](#) staffers. Now, within 2 weeks of launching, they've gotten more than 300 staffers on board and are meeting today to discuss their priorities going forward. I've spoken with one of the organizers already about why they created the organization and their goals. I'd like to write about: **why the group decided to organize, the priorities they discuss at the meeting, and why it's important for Hill staffers to organize given their conditions (and how January 6 impacted them)**. I'd like to speak with more staffers who are involved on why they got involved and what they want to see happen.

As a policy reporter, I have sources within many offices on Capitol Hill as well as experience covering the Hill. Given Teen Vogue's coverage of progressive politics in the past, I think this might be a good fit as it would go behind-the-scenes within those very offices.

About me: I'm a full-time health reporter who has freelanced for a number of local and national publications, including The Washington Post, Washington City Paper, DCist, WIRED, The Lily and more. My portfolio can be [viewed here](#).

Please let me know if you have any questions and thank you so much for considering,

Other considerations

- **Don't pitch two places at once,** but if you must, put that in the email and let editors know. But I'd avoid pitching multiple places at once because you run the risk of getting them both accepted at once and potentially harming a relationship with an editor.
- **Got rejected?** That's okay. I always send an email back thanking the editor for their time. But reflect on why you got rejected and keep pitching them! If they rejected you once, that doesn't mean they will always reject you. I've pitched people numerous times before they've said yes. But also, read what they wrote in their email if they gave you a reason why. Some editors do that: it's not their style, they have someone else on the story, they have a similar story in the works. This may give you a hint as to what they'd want to see next time.
- **As you start to get better relationships with editors,** you may be able to pitch less formally. Some editors I can just email short pitches to now because we've worked together, but always be polite, specific and informative.

Here are some additional pitching resources to read:

- [How to pitch The New York Times or anyone else](#)
- [5 tips for a successful freelance pitch](#)

- [How to pitch your article to an editor](#)
- [How and where to pitch your writing](#)
- [How not to pitch](#)

Tracking your work and invoices

Tracking your work is important for a few reasons:

- It can help you more easily organize and share your clips
- Give you a confidence boost seeing all of your work in one place
- And most importantly: It helps you keep track of when you did work and when you should expect to be paid.

Personally, I keep an Google Sheets spreadsheet with these things: The date of the article, publication, article link, agreed upon payment, when an invoice was filed, the date payment was received, and if you need to follow up:

A	B	C	D	E	F	G
Date	Month	Publication	Link	Payment	Date invoice sent	Payment received?
1/4/2021	January	The Lily	https://www.theli	\$350	1/4/2021	Yes
1/5/2021	January	DCist	https://dcist.com	\$75	1/12/2021	Yes
1/11/2021	January	The Lily	https://www.theli	\$350	1/11/2021	Yes
1/20/2021	January	DCist	https://dcist.com	\$125	1/20/2021	Yes
1/20/2021	January	Washington City	https://washingtc	\$125	1/20/2021	Yes
1/29/2021	January	DCist	https://dcist.com	\$175	1/29/2021	Yes
2/20/2021	February	The Lily	https://www.theli	\$350	2/20/2021	Yes
3/3/2021	March	Nieman Reports	https://niemanre	\$2,357	3/10/2021	Yes
3/11/2021	March	Washington City	https://washingtc	\$150	3/11/2021	Yes
3/11/2021	March	DCist	https://dcist.com	\$175	Yes	Yes
3/22/2021	March	The Lily	https://www.theli	\$450	Yes	Yes

Invoices

That brings me to invoice tracking. A lot of places have their own invoice systems where you can input your work and what you're owed. If you're responsible for writing your own invoices, I'd recommend settling on an easy-to-use template and organizing every

invoice into one folder along with that template. Where should that invoice look like?

Here [are some resources that](#) I like.

You should expect to be paid out in two weeks, which is where keeping track of it all can come in handy. [I would also recommend setting up alerts on your Google calendar for two weeks out.](#) If that alert comes up on your calendar, and you realize you still haven't been paid, it's time to follow-up.

Following-up on an invoice

First of all, deep breath: [You deserve to be paid.](#) Admittedly, I have only a couple of examples of times where I haven't been paid out in a timely manner, but here's what I did:

- Politely started with the editor I worked with, but asked if there's someone else I should also speak with (is there a person who handles the money? Sometimes working directly with Accounts Payable is quicker)
- Brought my receipts ("Hey, I wrote this article on X date and submitted my invoice on Y date. It's been Z days since I've been paid. I'm just checking on the status of my invoice. Thank you!")
- Do your homework first on yourself. One time, I had a very late invoice and I was prepared to get upset! Then, I checked back at my spreadsheet for when I invoiced and then pulled out the email where I sent the invoice -- it turns out I had been asked to provide an additional document and never did it! Oops, this is why tracking is important on both ends.

I'd highly recommend reading these two things from freelancer extraordinaire Wudan Yan: Her [thread](#) on late payment and her [Medium post](#) on what happened when she tried to hold publications accountable for late payments.

Setting up an LLC

- If you don't have a social security number or want to launch your own business, you can make an LLC
- [LegalZoom](#) is a good tool to use

- [Immigrants Rising](#) can help offset costs

Contracts

When you receive a new client, you'll likely get a contract which isn't unlike regular hiring paperwork.

But check for:

- What's the kill fee policy? This means you will still get paid some portion of your rate even if the story is published
- Are your deadlines and agreed upon rate in the document? They should be!
- What's the ownership and copyright clause? Do you have the rights to your own work?

Remember: A contract can always be negotiated.

Paying your taxes

First things first: KEEP EVERYTHING. Any receipts for anything you bought in the name of a story can possibly be written off. You also must set aside parts of each paycheck you receive because it will be taken out by the IRS later—and you don't want to be surprised. Here are some tips on paying your taxes:

- Keep all financial records (invoices, payments)
- Keep records of all expenses you've incurred (office expenses, gas, mileage, source coffees, keep receipts)
- Set aside 20-30% of all of your freelance checks (you can also track via [Form 1040-ES](#))
- Freelancers file a [1099-MISC](#) (ask publications you work with to send you this form)

Rate setting and sharing

This is an area I'm also still struggling with. I'm very adamant that sharing rates is important. **Talking about rates is important for a number of reasons:**

- It lets you know if a publication is worth your time (it's okay if you can't take a smaller rate. Take what will allow you to survive. I have sometimes weighed smaller rates if it means writing for a publication I believe in. This is why it's important to know)

- **And importantly:** It sheds light on pay disparities between freelancers (important!)

Some places I've freelanced for have had rate guides (always ask for one) and others have asked me to set my rate.

Here are some considerations when negotiating a rate:

- Remember that Editors expect you to negotiate
- Set a base rate for yourself
- Start high
- Consider your time commitment
- Raise your rates as you grow
- Charge by hours (how long the assignment takes you) or by word count or type of assignment (a reported piece vs. a listicle, for example, you could charge differently for)
- Be clear and direct! Always ask exactly for what you want.

An example email:

Dear [editor],

I appreciate the opportunity to work with you on this project and your rate offer. However given the amount of hours / number of interviews / other factors that will go into this story, my rates for this project are X. Is there any wiggle room available / Is there any way we can work together?

Thank you!

Some more resources on rates:

- [Study Hall's Pandemic Publications Cuts](#)
 - Includes information on which publications aren't accepting freelancers right now, as well as some that are, with some rate information
- [Freelancer extraordinaire Kim Kelly on negotiating rates](#)
- [Old database on freelance rates, so please check with others, too](#)
- [National Center for Business Journalism on how to set rates](#)

Showcasing your work

A huge part of being a successful freelancer is showcasing your work! Here's how I show it off:

- **LinkTree!** I began using [LinkTree](#) recently. It's free and good for short quick links. [I use it](#) to share one link to my most recent stories (I cycle them out), my social media, this guide, and my website.
- **Twitter!** It can be a blessing and a curse, so don't feel pressured to get online. Admittedly, it's how I've shared a majority of my work and met new clients but also I've faced harassment. We will talk more about protecting yourself later.
- **Make a website.** I organize my writing using separate pages for different publications and highlighting 3-5 articles from that publication I like. I particularly like [Squarespace](#) which ranges from \$12/month - \$40/month. Here are some [other sites](#) to use.
- **Instagram!** I'm not great at Instagram but it can be a good tool if you're good at aesthetics and making things look nice and within your brand.
- **Create little clip bundles**
 - Clips are published pieces you have written. I like to create small bundles of clips (either via links or via PDFs) that showcase a good mix of my work. Sometimes people want to see 1-2 links of your writing, so I pair together clips that may be good when I'm pitching a local editor or a health editor, etc, with clips that focus on the things I might be pitching.

Protecting yourself online

Being online can be important for showcasing your work and building a brand, but it can also mean exposing yourself to harassment and even doxxing. Here are some resources on protecting yourself:

- [The New York Times' social media and privacy checklist](#)
- [The New York Times' guide to doxxing yourself](#)

- [Online Harassment Field Manual](#)
[Preventing Doxxing](#)

It's important that newsrooms and editors recognize the vulnerability of their freelancers and offer proactive resources, such as a [DeleteMe](#) account (and this is something you can demand in a contract!)

Time management & stress

Time management and stress is something I still am working on. I admit I haven't had the best record: for nearly two years, I found myself working from 9 a.m. to 11 p.m. every day and most weekends to fit in time for my freelancing before and after my full-time job. This began to get habit-forming, compounding with a lot of self-competitive behaviors (am I writing enough from last week?) and general anxiety over whether or not my work is good enough. Lots of blown-off social engagements or even skipping date night with my partner to work.

I say all of this to highlight that it's easy to get sucked into these bad habits but I highly recommend recognizing them early and actively fighting them because your social and mental health is far more important than work. Unfortunately, working outside of a traditional newsroom setting can be lonely and means not a ton of people are checking up on you to prevent overworking from happening. If you're thinking of doing part-time work or work on the side in addition to a full-time job, please consider how many hours there are in a day and if you, not only have the time, but have the ability to say to yourself when it's too much and you need to take a step back.

First step to time management and stress is recognizing unhealthy and stress-inducing behaviors. Assess yourself. How many hours a day are you working? How many stories are you taking in a week? And is the pay you're accepting worth the time you're spending?

Here are some tools and tips:

- **Set timers on apps**, particularly social media (and tracking your screen time)
- **Turn off your WiFi when writing** (if you don't need to look anything up)—you'll get distracted less and finish writing faster
- **Celebrate your successes instead of lamenting your failures!** See more on [tracking your stories](#)
- **Use Togggl** which can help with project management and time management
 - Freelance icon [Fiza Pirani](#) uses it to [track her time](#) to ensure she isn't going overboard on working on a story without getting paid appropriately which is a great way to look at it
- **Get a therapist**—this is a link to affordable therapy which can be very difficult to find. If you're in the D.C. area, please get in touch. I know how hard it is to find an affordable therapist around here, but perhaps I can help.
- **Set times and days you will not work** (e.g. you will log off by 7 p.m. or you will not do work on Sundays)
- **Get an accountability buddy**
 - This is the person who will make sure you're not working past the time you set for yourself or that you're not taking on too many things. This person is very important (and has fully agreed to do all of these things)

Additional resources

I hope this guide was helpful and I wanted to share the resources and people who have been incredibly helpful to me over these past two years. This list will grow:

- **[Study Hall](#)**
 - A media newsletter and online freelancer community
 - Pay tiers range from \$2 to \$11 monthly for varied access to listservs, Slack channel, best practices and more.
- **[Mandy Hofmockel's Journalism Jobs and Photos of My Dog](#)**
 - Monday morning newsletter with a roundup of journalism jobs, internships, and freelance opportunities from coast-to-coast, including remote opportunities

- Each issue includes a cute photo of Mandy's dog

- The Cohort

- From Poynter, this newsletter comes out every other Tuesday and features tips, stories, and advice from women in digital media

- Sonia Weiser's freelancer opportunities newsletter

- A curated list of calls for pitches as well as advice from Sonia on her own freelancing
- Suggested donation of \$4/month

- The Objective

- Each issues comes out every other Friday and includes first-person essays and media analysis on reporting on communities journalism ignores, as well as roundups of the biggest stories in media

- The Writers' Co-Op

- A business podcast by Wudan Yan and Jenni Gritters on how to view freelancing as a business, with useful tips on money, client management, and collaboration.
- Pay tiers range from \$3/month to \$40/month with varied access to freelance coaching, bonus resources and pitch workshops.

- The Trans Journalist Association's style guide

- A free and informative guide on writing about trans people written by trans people. You can also [support them here](#).