

Health Journalism Basics for Nurses, Lesson 1: The Process of Freelance Journalism by Elizabeth Hanes
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beth@rn2writer.com

HEALTH JOURNALISM BASICS FOR NURSES

Lesson 1: The Process of Freelance Journalism

Objective: After completing this lesson, you will understand all seven parts of the freelance reporting process: ideation, pitching, assignment, writing the article, revising, invoicing, and receiving payment.

INTRODUCTION

Since I was a little girl I wanted to be [Lois Lane](#): the woman reporter with a nose for news. My life didn't work out that way at first, but I knew when I transitioned from nursing to writing that I would become a health journalist, and that's exactly what I did – going to work as a freelance reporter on health-related topics.

Consumer health reporting (writing health-related articles for the public) makes an excellent first niche for nurse-writers. Before I discuss why that is, let's clarify what consumer health reporting actually is.

As I said above, the term “consumer health reporting” means writing health-related articles to be published by a media outlet (that is, a company whose primary business is publishing news) to be read by the general public (“consumers”). At its core, consumer health reporting involves reporting health-related news. You can get a very good idea of the breadth of health reporting by reviewing the [mission and goals statements](#) of the Association of Health Care Journalists.

Consumer health reporting can take many different forms, including:

- Straight news (reporting on new research findings, for example)
- Features (longer, more elegantly crafted stories that often use multiple real-person sources)
- Service articles (how-to stories that help people solve a health problem)
- Evergreen articles (stories that convey information that is unlikely to change over time, such as a story about the best household disinfectants)
- Columns (often opinion-based stories that run on a regular schedule)
- Reviews (unbiased evaluations of healthcare products or services)

Generally speaking, essays and other types of creative writing are not considered “reporting.” Neither is content marketing writing, because it is published by companies whose primary business is not publishing news stories.

Trade journalism is another type of journalism, except its reporting is aimed at a professional audience instead of at consumers. Trade magazines (also called B2B publications) cover industry news, and you'll find many such publications within the healthcare sphere. However, trade journalism operates under slightly different rules than consumer health reporting, and I'm going to focus on the latter in this lesson.

After you develop great reporting chops in consumer health, you might consider adding trade journalism to your repertoire, as it can be an excellent, steady source of income.

So why do nurses make great health reporters? Because:

- We have professional experience with a wide range of medical conditions/diseases/illnesses that adds depth to our coverage
- Our clinical experience equips us to ask nuanced questions of interview subjects that other reporters would never think to ask
- We know how to read and interpret research studies
- We have a great interest in helping people by conveying accurate health information

- Our byline elevates the article’s “expertise-authority-trust” quotient in Google’s search rank algorithm, which confers great value to our clients
- Consumers rate nurse-bylined articles as highly trustworthy, which again benefits our clients

In short, health reporting can be an excellent route for nurses to break into freelance writing. In fact, many nurses who contact me about freelancing already are engaged in health journalism by publishing their own blog related to some sort of health condition. Writing a blog like that can be personally enriching, but why publish that stuff for free when you could be getting paid for it?

Since nursing school doesn’t train you to be a journalist, this self-study lesson will walk you through the basic process of consumer health reporting so you understand how freelance journalism works and can get on your way to seeing your byline in print.

Freelance consumer health reporting follows a specific cycle, which is what I’m covering in this lesson. Now that we’ve defined what consumer health reporting is – and why nurses can excel at it – let’s look at how you can break in by working through the seven steps of the process.

The 7 Steps of the Freelance Journalism Process

Many aspiring freelance writers believe they need to write a story in advance and then sell the story to an editor. This is not the case. In fact, editors rarely purchase pre-written articles because they want the opportunity to shape the story during the writing and editing process.

Instead, you need to pitch *story ideas* to editors. And coming up with stories ideas represents Step 1 of the process.

The seven steps of the freelance journalism process are:

1. **Ideation:** developing a salable story idea
2. **Pitching** (also called querying): sending the idea to an editor, in hopes s/he will buy it
3. **Assignment:** having an editor assign the story idea to you to write
4. **Writing/Reporting:** creating the article, including finding and interviewing sources, locating and evaluating secondary sources, adhering to style guidelines, etc.
5. **Revising:** receiving the draft article back from the editor and making the requested revisions
6. **Invoicing:** sending an invoice to the editor for the completed and accepted article
7. **Receiving payment:** getting the check in the mail or electronically

Many writers switch the order of steps one and two. Sometimes it's helpful to identify an outlet before trying to develop a story idea. My goal here is to share the basic process I most frequently use, not to claim there is One True Way of doing this.

Of these steps, aspiring writers often struggle the most with #1, 2, and 4, and I've devoted individual lessons (included in this course) to cover these in more depth. Meanwhile, let's expand on each of these steps to give you an overview of how this all works.

Step 1: Ideation

In this step, you must come up with salable story ideas. The key word here is “salable.” As you’ll see in the lesson on ideation, generic story ideas hold no interest to prospective editors. They want to field article ideas that are:

- Fresh/original/nearly unique
- Slanted to their specific audience
- Timely

For example, a story idea like “how Baby Boomers can prepare for retirement” is generally not considered salable because it doesn’t meet any of the three criteria outlined above.

However, if you wanted to pitch a story like that to a magazine with news aimed at Baby Boomers, you could refine it into salable shape by querying an article like: “how Baby Boomers should rebalance their stock portfolios at ages 60, 70, and 80, based on new financial research findings from XYZ university.” This pitch meets all three of the criteria outlined above. It is a fresh take on stale article concepts about Baby Boomers and retirement, it is slanted to the magazine’s specific audience, and it’s timely, since it’s pegged to new research.

One exception: sometimes editors will assign evergreen articles if they happen to be looking for stories to fill in the gaps within their content library. For example, if a publication has a large library of articles on breast cancer treatment research but discover they don’t have a foundational article that discusses, in general, the broad types of breast cancer treatments available, they may commission an article like that.

Evergreen articles serve a key purpose in website SEO rankings and in positioning a publisher as a robust source of all types of information surrounding a particular subject. In digital publishing, this type of article is sometimes called “cornerstone content” or “pillar content” because it’s part of the foundation that holds up all the rest of the content on the site.

After you’ve finished the ideation lesson, you’ll be brimming with story ideas. That’s when you’ll move on to the next step: pitching.

Step 2: Pitching/Querying

Pitching is an art unto itself. When I first started freelancing as a reporter 20 years ago, I invested in a copy of Lisa Collier Cool's seminal work, [How to Write Irresistible Query Letters](#) [affiliate link] because I knew I needed to become a master pitcher to make any money.

Querying has changed a lot since Ms. Collier Cool published that book, but the bottom line remains the same: the most successful freelance health reporters can create irresistible pitches that land them scads of assignments on an ongoing basis.

Because pitching represents the one of the most crucial steps of the freelance reporting process, I've devoted an entire lesson to it. For now, I want to give you a brief overview.

Pitching comes after you've developed a salable story idea. To me, the pitching step includes identifying target markets (that is, publications likely to buy your article). As I said before, sometimes it's helpful to identify a target market first (step two) and then develop the story idea. This approach allows you to really tailor your idea to a specific publication.

Once you've identified a target publication (editor, really), then you're ready to send a pitch. This is almost always done electronically these days, though you might occasionally run into a publication that demands snail-mail queries.

A pitch letter or query is basically a sales letter. You're trying to sell your article idea to an editor. Don't worry; it's not as daunting as it might sound.

Within the query letter, you not only tell the editor your story idea, but you also provide:

- A handful of potential sources to interview
- A very brief outline of the story as you envision it
- A couple of sentences that tell the editor why you – among all possible writers – are the person who should write this particular article

It's not enough to think to yourself, "Well, I should write it because I'm the one who thought of it." Yes, that's certainly part of the equation. But you also need to sell your credentials or background, too. I'll go into that in much more depth in the pitching lesson.

Eventually, one of your pitches will "land." And then you've move on to Step 3.

Step 3: Assignment

It may take a few tries, but eventually an editor will respond to one of your pitches with the glorious words, “I’d like to assign this.” Take a moment to do a happy dance when you hear this, because you’ve earned that moment of joy!

At this point, most editors will provide you with a contract or assignment letter that outlines the details of the assignment:

- Deadline(s)
- Word count
- Payment rate, often per-word but sometimes per article or even “per page”
- Payment timing (on acceptance, on publication, etc.)
- Rights being purchased (such as “first rights” or “all rights”)

Always read your contracts carefully and consult a lawyer if you don’t understand certain clauses. Many publishing contracts contain dreadful clauses that limit the writer’s ability to write for competing publications and things, so be sure you know what you’re signing before you sign it.

Not every publication uses formal contracts, but consider it a red flag if they don’t. If you don’t receive a contract, be sure to nail down all the details of the assignment by email. For the record, an email chain can be considered a “contract” in a court of law, if it ever came to that.

A note about rights:

As a content creator, you hold all copyright interest in anything you produce until you sell those rights to a publication. Generally speaking (and I am not a lawyer, so please do not take this as legal advice), until a publication pays you for your work, they cannot claim copyright to it. It’s extremely important you understand your rights concerning copyright, and I do not go into this topic in-depth in this workshop because I’m not a copyright attorney. I suggest you download the Society of Professional Journalists’ PDF “[*A Beginner’s Guide to Copyright for Freelance Journalists*](#).” It’s free, and that is not an affiliate link.

Once you accept an assignment, then the fun begins: actually writing and reporting the piece.

Step 4: Writing/Reporting

As a health reporter, your job is to, er, *report* the story you've been assigned. Although I'm lumping the two concepts together here, writing and reporting are two separate things, in my mind. But they're intertwined during the process of actually producing the article.

- **Reporting** involves identifying sources (primary and secondary), obtaining key facts and background information, determining which facts and information to include, and writing a compelling story.
- **Writing** involves actually putting the story down on "paper" (usually in pixels in this day and age) in a cohesive structure that observes grammar conventions and adheres to a publication's style guide.

Most freelance health reporters – myself included – consider this step to be the most exciting and fun part of what we do. It can be exhilarating and satisfying to obtain that perfect quote from a source and weave it skillfully into an interesting story that people want to read. I urge you to revel in the content creation aspect of reporting, because it's what gives us such a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction.

Because this step obviously represents the core of what we do as health journalists, I've devoted an entire lesson to it. I'll describe in great detail how to put together a perfectly reported piece.

Once you've performed your journalistic duties and crafted a dynamite story, then you submit that draft to your editor *on or before the deadline*. And then you wait for the inevitable edit requests to arrive.

Step 5: Revise

A word to the wise: Don't fall in love with your prose.

Don't get me wrong. I love coming up with lilting alliterations and beautiful turns-of-phrase and then tenderly inserting them into my stories. But if you fall in love with your prose too much, you'll be crushed when the revision requests arrive. And, believe me, they'll arrive.

The first time an editor sends back a shredded, red-inked copy of your draft, do not feel defeated. We've all been through that. Hell, it still happens to me.

This does not occur because your writing was "bad." It does not occur because you're a "terrible writer."

Editors request revisions for reasons that have nothing to do with you or your writing talent, including:

- *Their* editor (because editors usually work in hierarchies) changed the slant of the assignment at some point and didn't bother telling anyone
- They didn't communicate their style guidelines
- They didn't clarify what they expected regarding sourcing
- They didn't provide guidance regarding acceptable vs unacceptable sources
- A source's conflict-of-interest came to light during the editing and fact-checking process
- A source died after you submitted your story, so those quotes can't be used (oh, yes, this happens!)
- The editor decided the structure you chose didn't quite work

And then there are those editors who simply like to rewrite every assignment they receive because that's what they do. To everyone.

So try not to take it personally when you receive revision requests. If you can keep in mind that your only goal is to satisfy your editor, you'll be much better equipped to move forward on slashing that gorgeous, atmospheric paragraph you wrote about the palm trees bending in the breeze over Baja Bay when your editor says it has to go.

You can expect to be asked for at least one set of revisions, and sometimes many sets – depending on the publication. Simply smile through your clenched jaw and do your best to comply with the editor's requests.

That's not to say you can't push back. Indeed, if you believe an editor is introducing a factual inaccuracy, you definitely should push back. Likewise if the editor asks you to do anything unethical, such as fabricating quotes by a source, you should strongly push back.

If an editor's "revisions" actually involve re-reporting, then you might consider asking for additional compensation. For instance, if you filed a 600-word story, per the contract, and the editor asks you to interview two additional sources and expand the story to 1,000 words, then that definitely warrants more money. Likewise, if an editor seems to be changing the scope of work (maybe you were contracted to write an article on "latest advancements in producing the flu vaccine," but now the editor has decided s/he really wants an article on "why the flu vaccine never covers the current strain of the

virus”), then you might gently say this looks like an entirely new story, and you expect to be compensated on that basis.

If at all possible, try to specify in the contract the number of “rounds of revisions” you’ll be accountable for. It’s not standard procedure in freelance reporting, but it’s worth trying.

At last, your editor will say, “This looks great! Go ahead and invoice.” And that’s what you’ll do.

Step 6: Invoice

When I first started out as a freelancer, no online invoicing and bookkeeping services existed. I literally typed up invoices on paper and mailed them to my editors. I tracked them by date on a legal pad, where I noted them all down using my trusty Bic Biro.

Today, of course, you can take advantage of all kinds of automated systems for tracking invoices, payments, etc. I urge you to do that. I can't tell you how unwieldy a spreadsheet will become if that's the only tool you use for invoicing and tracking payments.

Personally, I use [Quickbooks](#), but that's mainly because it's the system my accountant recommended to me. The freelancers I know use many other systems. Pick the one that will work best for you and meet your budget requirements. Here are a few such systems I know of (none of these are affiliate links):

- [Freshbooks](#)
- [Wave](#)
- [Xero](#)
- [Zoho Books](#)

As soon as an editor says "invoice me," head over to your accounting software to generate an invoice. Your invoice should conform to the publication's requirements, but in general it should include:

- An invoice number (usually auto-generated by your software)
- The date of invoice creation
- The assignment details: title, number of words, editor's name, date submitted or accepted by the editor
- The rate or fee: if a per-word rate, list the rate x the number of words (e.g.: \$1 x 650 for a total invoice of \$650); if another type of rate, list the rate x the units (e.g.: if you agreed to write one article for \$650, list \$650 x 1 for a total invoice of \$650)
- Payment terms: net 30, due upon receipt, etc.
- Any other notes

Then send the invoice to the person or persons specified in the contract or as instructed by your editor.

Don't forget to review your invoice list periodically to make sure everyone's current on payments. Don't hesitate to reach out in a friendly way if a client is past due in paying.

Eventually (most of the time, anyway), you'll receive payment. And you need to handle that step to complete the freelance process.

Step 7: Receive Payment

You may think there's nothing to this step but cashing the check and subsequently treating yourself to a lavish steak dinner with wine, but it's not quite that simple.

As a self-employed businessperson, you must do your own federal and state tax withholding. *I strongly recommend you get in the habit of setting aside for future taxes a percentage of every check you receive.* Ingraining this habit early on can save you from serious heartache later.

To properly receive payment in your business, follow these basic steps:

1. Deposit the check to your business bank account (never a personal account)
2. If your invoicing software is not connected to your bank, then be sure to mark the corresponding invoice "paid"
3. If your invoicing software automatically pulls transactions from your bank, you should be able to match the deposit with the invoice
4. Determine a percentage of each check to set aside for tax obligations; consult an accountant for help figuring this out
5. Set up a budget line to track money set aside for taxes; if you think you'll be tempted to spend those funds, then set up an entirely separate bank account to hold them
6. Transfer the predetermined percentage into the tax budget line or separate account
7. Spend the rest of the money!!

Receiving payment also represents an excellent opportunity to reach out to the assigning editor and pitch them again. It feels natural to send an email with a message like:

"Hi X,

"I received payment for the X story I wrote for you last month. Thanks so much!

"Receiving that check reminded me I've been meaning to pitch you another story. What do you think about..."

Then you're back at Step 2: Pitching. And so the cycle repeats.

Keeping the Cycle Rolling

As a freelance health reporter, your work life should repeat this seven-step process over and over, as often as possible. Successful freelance journalists always have multiple assignments in progress at the same time.

But don't worry about juggling multiple stories when you're first starting out. You'll develop those skills over time. Start by selling one story, and then get to work on selling the next one. Pretty soon, you'll be one of those veteran health reporters working on five or six stories all at once – and then you'll realize you've arrived in your new career as a nurse-turned-health reporter.

SELF-STUDY EXERCISES:

None for this lesson. Proceed to Lesson 2: Ideation.