

Extra! Extra!

Write for Your Hometown Newspaper

While the newspaper industry is seemingly in decline, small community newspapers are holding their own, and their thirst for news, features and human-interest stories remains strong. This is welcome news for an aspiring writer, who, after reading a story about a person, event or local business says, “I could have written that!”

It is not difficult to become a freelance writer for your local newspaper, as many do not require a degree in journalism. They seek dependable people who know the community, have a good command of English, and are willing to cover stories and events that free their regular staff to cover editorial assignments.

Visit your local library and browse through past issues. Look around town through the eyes of a writer. Find something or someone of interest and write a 500-700 word practice article. Keep it simple, but interesting using who, what, where, when, why and how as your guide. You will send this sample to the managing editor of your paper. The Associated Press Style book comes in handy, and is favored by most editors. Borrow one from your library or purchase from a bookstore or online.

Send a short letter of interest with your writing sample to the paper’s managing editor. Follow up by contacting the editor, and asking for an interview. Bring a couple of story ideas to discuss with the editor and ask for an assignment.

Once you have your assignment, call your subject, introduce yourself and ask for an appointment to meet at a convenient time. Do some preliminary research before your meeting to familiarize yourself with your subject, and help formulate appropriate questions to guide the interview.

Bring a tape recorder and notebook to the meeting. The tape recorder saves time, allowing you to focus on your subject rather than trying to write fast and remember what was said. Later, while listening to the taped interview, you will get a better sense of your subject’s personality, style and attitude that helps you write a more interesting story, and helps readers relate to your subject personally. The tape also serves, as a record of your meeting should future questions arise. Allow about an hour for the interview, and get permission to call with any follow-up questions.

Do not forget to bring your digital camera, as editors and readers love to see pictures!

Listen to your tape and review your notes. Write your first draft without worrying about grammar, style or word count. When you have finished, take a short break.

Next, read what you have written and remove extra words and sentences using your dictionary, thesaurus and AP stylebook. Check spelling, grammar, punctuation, paragraph placement and organization. Use active sentences. Be sure your story is organized, interesting, flows easily from one paragraph to another, and facts and quotes are accurate.

When you are satisfied that you have met the paper's criteria, file your story with the editor. Your editor might make suggestions to enhance your story's interest or to clarify a statement or quote. Follow these suggestions, and file them for future reference. Suggest another story and ask for the assignment. When your editor is satisfied with the quality of your work, he or she will personally assign you work, in addition to your own suggestions.

You will not get rich writing for a local newspaper, but you will gain the confidence and experience to take your new career to the next level. You might also decide you are happy witnessing the comings and goings in your community, and contributing to its history.