

# The Freelancer's Business Guide

Selling Your Work · By Simon Townsend · 3 min read

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A freelance journalist is running a business. It is a very small business, usually a one-person business, often not incorporated, but it is a business. If you do not treat it like one, the Tax Office, your clients, and eventually your bank account will teach you.

This is a practical guide to the business side of Australian freelance journalism in 2026. It is not legal or tax advice. See an accountant. But the basics below will get you started and save you money in year one.

## Getting registered

Get an ABN. Australian Business Number. Free, takes about twenty minutes on the ABR website. Without one, most clients will withhold 46.5% PAYG from your invoices. With one, they pay the full amount. Register as a sole trader. It is the simplest structure for a freelancer.

GST registration is required once your turnover crosses \$75,000 per year. Below that it is optional. Most freelancers do not register for GST until they have to, because it adds BAS reporting paperwork.

Get professional indemnity insurance if you write about anything that could attract legal action. MEAA membership includes some protection. A commercial PI policy costs from about \$600 per year for a freelance journalist. Worth it.

## Invoicing

Write a proper invoice. Number each one sequentially. Include your name, ABN, the client's name, the work description, the date of publication or delivery, the amount, and your bank details. Xero, MYOB, Wave and FreshBooks will all do this. A spreadsheet will do this. A Word document will do this.

Always confirm the fee and the payment terms before you start work. "Net 30" means thirty days after the invoice date. "On publication" is a trap: publications slip. Push for net 30 from invoice date, and invoice on delivery.

Chase late invoices. Politely at 30 days. Firmly at 45. A final notice with a mention of small claims at 60. Most publishers will pay when chased. Some won't.

## **Record-keeping**

Keep every receipt that relates to the work. Home office costs, internet, phone, subscriptions, research subscriptions, memberships, travel, accommodation when on a story, meals when travelling. The ATO is specific about home office claims. Keep a log of work hours at home for at least four weeks per year, or use the ATO's fixed rate method.

Track your income by client and by month. A basic spreadsheet is enough. Patterns emerge: which clients pay on time, which drag their feet, which have stopped paying at all. Learn from the pattern.

Keep your receipts, invoices and correspondence for five years. That is the ATO's record-keeping requirement.

## **Tax**

Put at least 25% of every invoice aside in a separate account. You will need it for your tax bill. If you are earning over \$45,000 from freelance work, you will probably owe more than that. Your accountant will tell you the exact figure; do not argue with them.

Pay quarterly PAYG instalments if the ATO asks you to. Paying them in advance is cheaper than paying in one lump at the end of the year.

Deductions that most freelance journalists miss: a portion of home internet and phone, work-related software subscriptions (Adobe, Microsoft, any research tool), travel to interviews, accommodation, MEAA membership, professional development, a portion of the home office including electricity, books and newspapers used for research.

Get an accountant who understands freelancers. A bad accountant will cost you more than a good one saves. Ask for a recommendation from another working freelance journalist.

## **Superannuation**

Most freelance work is not covered by compulsory employer super. You have to do it yourself. Set up a super fund in your name (most people use an industry fund, some use a self-managed fund). Pay yourself at least ten percent of your net income into super each year.

If you miss a year, you miss a year. You cannot back-date contributions beyond certain limits. The compounding effect across thirty years is very significant. A freelancer who puts 10% into super from age 25 will retire with enough. A freelancer who puts nothing in until age 45 will not.

## **Contracts**

Publications will push work-for-hire contracts that assign all rights to the publisher in perpetuity. Read before signing. Negotiate. The rights you need to protect: resale and syndication of the piece, audio and video adaptation, inclusion in anthologies, use of your name and likeness.

First Australian Serial Rights is the traditional freelance sale. It gives the publisher exclusive first rights in Australia for the first publication. Everything else stays with you. Most modern contracts try to take more. Push back.

Do not sign anything that indemnifies the publisher against legal action arising from your work. That clause, in a defamation case, can make you personally liable for the publisher's costs. Unacceptable.

## **When the work dries up**

It will. Every freelancer has dry months, dry quarters, sometimes dry years. Build a buffer. Three months of household expenses in a separate savings account is the standard advice. Fewer publications, more clients. Teaching, copywriting, corporate writing and content work are legitimate sidelines that keep the business alive without ruining your reputation.

Simon once said that a freelancer with five good clients is harder to hurt than one with one great client. The great client leaves, the freelancer is finished. Five good clients can lose one and carry on.

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Reprinted from *The Wonderful World of Journalism*. Written in the spirit of Simon Townsend's journalism craft advice. Visit [simontownsendjournalist.com](http://simontownsendjournalist.com) for the full archive.