

Simon Townsend's 10 Rules for Freelance Journalists

So You Want to Be a Journalist · By Simon Townsend · 5 min read

Simon Townsend 's 10 Rules

for being a productive freelance journalist and staying successful

Rule 1: Manage your fear of rejection

1. The No. 1 fear of all humans is the fear of rejection.
2. Rejection by our loved ones, our bosses, our canaries . . . it doesn't matter who or what. We all fear rejection by the people and entities important to us.
3. Freelance journalists, even senior and successful ones, me included, live with the constant fear of their latest creation being rejected.
4. You can't escape the fear of rejection. It's not an imaginary fear. It's a real fear. It can happen, and probably will happen to you, from time to time, no matter how successful you become.
5. But if you learn now how to manage this natural fear, you will be a happier and more productive freelance journalist.
6. Incorporate these actions into your freelance life:
 - Plan for rejection: think about the actions you will take if rejected. These might include a list of other publications to send to, doing a major rewrite, adding photographs or more photographs or adding more quotes, anecdotes and examples.
 - An editor doesn't owe it to you to explain why he or she rejected your article. Be brave and self-critical. Work it out yourself. Compare your article against all the others that were published in the latest issue.

Rule 2: Get more time into your life

1. There's still only 24 hours in each day. Time management is important to be a successful freelance journalist.
2. You need time to read-read-read!!!, think up ideas, do research, conduct interviews, write, re-write and edit. To fit this new work into your busy life you must organise your time well.
3. You must give up something. Suggestions:
 - No television two nights a week
 - Cut down on a hobby, sport or other pastime

- Give up socialising two nights a week
1. That is, give up something not vital to your career or job, your love life, your family life or your wellbeing. That is, create new time for your new life as a freelance journalist.
 2. Write a new article every fortnight, then EVERY week.

Rule 3: Be clear about your objective

1. Label your objective. Label yourself. Don't be vague.
2. That's why your letterhead is so important. The descriptive words under your name describe succinctly WHO you are. Mary Jones Sports Commentator . . . Bill Smith Asia Travel Writer . . . Chris Black Ethical Issues Writer.
3. If you're not clear about why you're now a freelance journalist, your interviewees, your contacts and your editors will not be clear about you.
4. Old saying: "You have to name it to claim it."

Rule 4: Read!

1. "Read!" should not have to be a Rule.
2. Why would a tutor like me need to remind his students to READ? Because many students don't read the publications they say they would like to be writing for.

Rule 5: Write!

1. Similarly, why does the command "Write!" need to be expressed as a Rule? Because some students avoid writing for as long as possible during their journalism journey.
2. Some new freelance journalists want to come with endless ideas to talk, discuss, think about, suggest, muse over, deliberate and make judgments before tackling any actual writing (putting words on paper).
3. Many new freelancers have The Great Excuse locked up neatly: "I'm waiting for someone to get back to me." They're always waiting for someone else, so they always have an excuse to themselves for not yet writing.
4. If you can't get information, find it elsewhere. If you can't get a quote from Expert A get it from Expert B. If the idea for this article isn't working out, drop it and change to a different article.

Rule 6: No one cares about your intentions

1. When we were aged five we could impress adults by saying "I'm going to be an astronaut/train driver/rock star when I grow up!" The adults would oooh and ahhh and it all sounded fantastic.
2. Now we're grown up, no one - absolutely no one - gives two hoots for what we intend to do. As Henry Ford said: "You cannot build a reputation on what you are going to do."

3. Your eyes glaze over when the dreamy, do-nothing people in your life talk about their gunnas. They're gonna get a new love-life, they're gonna get a better job, they're gonna make a million?
4. And have you noticed that other people's eyes glaze over when you talk about your gunnas? Gunna write The Great Article, gunna write a great interview with Tom Cruise, gunna create your own wondrous column . . .
5. Students hate this Rule and frequently tell me I'm wrong because someone in their life cares about their intentions. Oh yeah . . . ? No, your loved one cares about YOU - not your intentions.

Rule 7: Start submitting immediately

1. Your journalism journey encourages you to think of yourself as a freelancer BEFORE being awarded your qualification. I push and push you to submit to publications before you win your qualification.
2. Do not wait until the end of the course to start submitting. Overcome your natural fear of rejection and start submitting your best work to your target publications from now on.

Rule 8: Adopt a hero

1. Each of us needs and benefits from having a hero.
2. A good hero you might have could be a journalist whose work you read all the time. You cut out her/his articles and analyse what makes her/him successful.
3. Another great hero to have is any successful person you admire. Someone with a positive attitude, who does well in their personal and work lives. Even if that person is not at the top, that person, to you, is a great success.

Rule 9: Spell correctly

1. You must not spell 99.99% correctly. You must spell 100% correctly.
2. "Look here Simon," say some students, "that's unfair. I have good ideas, I am a good researcher, good interviewer and I write well. If I make the occasional tiny spelling error, what's it matter? The sub-editors will pick it up . . . that's what they're paid to do."
3. Oh yeah? Today, the so-called "bad speller" doesn't exist. There is only the "can't-be-bothered" writer who doesn't use the spellchecker on the computer or doesn't use hard-copy or on-line dictionary, the phone directory, an atlas, the postcode section of the White Pages, or use the internet to research.
4. David M. one of Australia's most influential and successful journalists, has been the editor of a prestige publication, written books, columns and award winning features and had his own weekly TV show. He can't spell. But none of his colleagues know. Why? He checks.
5. A great professional writer can be a lousy speller and his or her editors would never know. If you USE the above tools, you CAN'T be a "bad speller".

6. Spelling is so important. It's the first hallmark of being careful with facts. If you have 100% perfect spelling, it marks you as a journalist who cares about his/her FACTS being right. If you allow lousy spelling in your writing, you probably have your facts wrong too.
7. Even when the mistake is a "typo" (typing error, like cna for can), I treat it as an unforgivable spelling error.
8. Harsh? You bet. Freelance journalism is not a hobby. Get it right ? 100% right.

Rule 10: Keep your promises to yourself

1. But that doesn't mean "fit it in when you feel like it". It means scheduling and setting your own strict deadlines.
2. Procrastination is the art of keeping up with yesterday. So you must stick to any deadline you set yourself. It's bad enough to break a promise to another person. It's one of life's big disasters when you break a promise to yourself.

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