



Psychologic Issues to Consider when Embarking on a Freelance Writing Career (and You Thought it was Just About the Writing!)

In this Freelance Forum, we asked all of the panelists to address 2 questions about the psychologic aspects of being a freelance: What mindset do you need to be a freelance? and What personality traits work for or against you? The panelists' responses are lighthearted yet provide valuable insights not only for writers considering a future in freelance medical writing but also for writers who are already working for themselves (and wondering if they're suited for this life). Some of the responses may sound redundant; we chose not to edit out repetitiveness, as the same comments from multiple freelancers indicate the significance of the message.

Q *What mindset do you need to be a freelance? What personality traits work for or against you?*

A For fun, let's start with a definition of freelance: According to Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Freelance>), "a freelance is a self-employed person working in a profession or trade in which full-time employment is also common. The word's etymology derives from the medieval term for a mercenary, a *free lance*, which literally described a knight who was not attached to any particular lord, and could be hired for a given task."

Just by digesting this definition, we can ascertain some mental traits one would need to succeed as a freelance. First, you have to consider that you will be working for many 'lords' and maybe all at the same time. Can you juggle the demands and boundary setting when 3 different bosses are asking you to accelerate your schedule? What happens when 1 lord changes mid-project (retires, quits, etc.) and leaves you to pick up the pieces with the new one? Can you work independently if the lord doesn't have time for you and act as a boss if need be? Can you handle sometimes being the scapegoat for mismanaged projects? Freelancing is very demanding and you have to know how to manage your various lords. You need leadership, mediator, and negotiation skills. You must perform well under deadlines and have not only a "can do" but also a "let go" attitude. Oh, by the way, good writing and editing skills also help!

Now let's examine the 'given task' part of the definition. How many given tasks can you support at one time for the same boss? How many tasks can you support at the same

time for different bosses? Can you switch gears quickly to write on many and varied subjects? It's fun to write about an interesting topic, but can you write about a boring topic? And do it well? Can you write given very little direction and guidance (working with no outline) and enjoy the freedom and creativity? Can you write given too much guidance (working with a heavy-handed outline) and accept the restrictions? Can you accept micromanagement gracefully? Can you accept no management and still get the job done? And finally, can you live with the possible financial anxiety caused by the feast-or-famine nature of the given tasks? After all, the tasks are assigned at the convenience of the lord's schedule, not yours!

I'm sure we don't need to define 'mercenary,' but, just for fun, let's do it anyway. Webster's says that a mercenary is one who is "hired for service." This is your livelihood just as with any other job. Freelance writing is not a lark, not something to pass the time—it is your job. Your mindset must be serious; you and your office must be professional. No writing in your bunny slippers! If you don't treat yourself like a professional, then no one else will either. Writing is a paid profession (albeit often underpaid). Paid means that you should expect to negotiate fair and regular payments for your work. Profession means that your family, friends, and neighbors must be taught to respect your work time and your workspace. Are you up to the task?

Lastly, let's consider the 'self-employed' part of the definition. You are it baby! You will have to be everything from the janitor to the collection agency, from the technical expert to the photocopy grunt—change the toner, fix the computer, do the research, deliver quotes, get new business, put out fires, fix the office equipment. Also, don't forget that you have to handle your own taxes, Social Security, retirement, and medical coverage. And, did I mention, write every day whether you want to or not. You would go into the corporate office every day, so you must go into your home office every day. You know those newspaper reporters in the movies who always say, "I am on deadline"? Well, you are too!

Do you have the humbleness to handle the scut work in your jeans and the panache to wear your best suit at a client meeting? If so, then you are a knight who is ready to be a "*free lance*." And if you are also a person who likes a lot of

variety, a lot of learning, and a lot of hard work, then you will also have fun. And remember—you can take a power nap in the middle of the day, which has been scientifically proven to increase productivity.

— Barbara Rinehart

A Mindset: The determination and discipline to juggle ongoing, current work with continual solicitation for future projects are critical factors in keeping one's workflow and income at least somewhat constant. Only those freelancers who can stand the financial pressure of periods with no work and the emotional pressure of too much work survive in this tricky environment. Of course, limiting freelance jobs to contract work provides better planning and scheduling opportunities.

Personality traits that work for or against a freelance: For those of us who work at home and interact with clients exclusively or mostly through the Internet, the pleasure in solitude is beneficial. For "people who need people," working in a home office is detrimental.

Self-starting and self-organizing are absolute requirements for a successful freelance. In fact, for job applications—written or oral—assurance that the applicant has these qualities is something I would place right after academic credits and professional experience. Individuals who need detailed, repeated directions from a supervisor or who have difficulty planning their time are readily frustrated by freelance work unless they implement organizational strategies, such as audiotaping or writing instructions and schedules, then sticking to them—no snacking, making personal phone calls, or socializing.

— Phyllis Minick

A What mindset do you need to be a freelance? It takes much self-discipline to be a freelance, especially if you work out of your house. After all, something always needs cleaning (your kitchen, your laundry, your closets...). I work as a freelance only 15-20 work hours a week (being a mom most of the other hours), so I have to try really hard not to waste time.

What personality traits work for you, against you? If you need face-to-face human interaction on a regular basis, then freelancing might not be for you. I have worked with clients for years that I've never met in person. However, if you enjoy not wasting time with endless (fruitless) meetings, not being involved in office politics, and not sitting in traffic to and from that 8 to 5 job (at which you will only get 5-6 hours of real work accomplished), then freelancing may be the way to go! I never feel isolated or lonely (how can you with e-mail coming at you all day?). An added bonus: I've saved a fortune on clothes and drycleaning!

— Sherri Bowen

A Obviously, a sense of self-discipline is probably the most essential mindset you need to be a freelance. When there's no boss looking over your shoulder to see that you're "doing your job," it is easy to be distracted by other things—a favorite morning TV show, the laundry, or phone calls from friends and family who think that working at home really isn't work. It is also helpful if you are comfortable working in relative isolation. People who are used to working in an office may initially be happy to forego the too-frequent interruptions by coworkers for the peace and quiet of their home office; but they may soon discover that they miss the constant drone of activity (and the office gossip). Two less obvious mindsets that I think are important for a freelance are a sense of curiosity and joy of learning. One of the things I like most about being a freelance writer is that I learn something new every day.

Although some might disagree, I think it helps to have a relatively "easy going" personality that enables you to be patient with yourself and others. The ability to "roll with the punches" can go a long way toward maintaining your sanity when working with difficult clients who can't make up their minds about what they want and when dealing with the feast-or-famine aspect of freelance work. The ability to think in a logical, organized way is another important personality trait for a freelance medical writer, especially when trying to explain complicated medical or scientific concepts.

As for traits that can work against you, obviously impatience would **not** be a desirable trait for a freelance. Also, if you are not deadline oriented, that could discourage clients from giving you repeat business. However, there may be such a thing as being too deadline oriented. For example, I actually need a deadline to motivate me to declare a project finished. One of the problems I constantly struggle with when I have an assignment, for which I'm being paid a project price, is the urge to keep "tinkering" with it after I've completed it. Without a specific due date, I tend to think that, if I just look at it one more time, I can make it better. Trust me, it is possible to overthink something!

— Donna Miceli

A What mindset do you need to be a freelance? **Courage** to push beyond your comfort zone—to embrace the absence of the false safety net of a staff position and to take on new assignments that broaden your abilities. **Confidence** to believe you can do anything and, when it all boils down to just you and the keyboard, to actually do it. **Commitment** to the quality of your work above everything, because without it you're nothing. **Consistency** in delivering every project on time, on target, and on budget. **Clarity** to remain focused, no matter what the day, the project, the client, or life throws at you—writing is the easy part.

What personality traits work for you, against you? Compulsion with detail is a positive trait, but taken to its extreme it causes analysis paralysis and keeps anything from getting done. Willingness to go above and beyond is great for building business, but too much kills profitability and, ultimately, can kill the business. Other positive traits: optimism, flexibility, self-awareness of how clients perceive you. Other negative traits: inflexibility and unresponsiveness.

— Brian Bass

A The freelance must be independent—not just in his/her mind but in many other ways. Independence is a multifaceted psychologic characteristic, or mindset, if you wish. It means you are able to think independently and make your own decisions (and of course mature enough, we hope, to bear the consequences of such decisions). It means you have confidence in your own competencies, can stand behind your choices and actions, and have no need to point fingers and blame others. It means you are a self-starter and have the ability to get yourself up and working without someone else's prodding or guidance. The freelance also must be able to work *alone* a great deal of the time, without depending on the energy of others. And more energy is required to work alone than with others (this is not only a law of physics, but is intuitively obvious; ie, we receive energy from others).

So part of the independent mindset of the freelance has to include the ability to observe oneself honestly and relatively impartially to know when it is time to stop, when it is time to be with others, and when it is time to take a vacation. No supervisor, human resources department, or state regulation is going to make this decision for you.

Of course, financial independence would be ideal, but this is not something an individual can control, for the most part.

Being independent, by the way, does not mean that you always do everything yourself! A very important independent (and intelligent) decision one may make is to hire professional help; ie, accountants, bookkeepers, attorneys, artists, business consultants, and others who can help you with aspects of your business that are not directly related to medical writing/editing/publishing.

— Cathryn D. Evans

Cathryn Evans also developed a self-questionnaire for medical writers to help them determine if they're equipped for a career as a freelance. Take the quiz on the next page and see if you have what it takes to work for yourself.

GUIDEBOOK TO BETTER MEDICAL WRITING by Robert L. Iles

“The best basic manual on medical writing. . . everything you need to know about developing a clear persuasive paper that stands a good chance of publication by a peer-reviewed journal.” Barbara G. Cox, MedEdit Associates, Gainesville, FL. (amazon.com book review)

“Iles has succeeded in boiling down the essentials of medical writing into a cogent handbook.” Linda M. Bonnell, PharmD, *AMWA Journal*.

“A concise, no-nonsense approach. . . provides readers with a series of excellent tips. . . helpful in my own medical writing and consulting service.” Thomas Buckingham, MD, Bratislava, Slovak Republic. (amazon.com book review)

“Although the focus is on clinical articles, what Iles has to say applies to most scientific writing. . .” Jude Richard, *CBE Views*.

“I’ve been a medical writer over 20 years. The book will help me do even better for my clients. Lots of terrific tips and insights.” Michele Grygotis, MG Medical Writing.

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Are You Made for the Freelance Life?

A Self-Assessment Quiz for the Prospective Freelance

Answer the 25 questions below to measure your aptitude, enthusiasm, and motivation for a career as a freelance.

0 = Never, 1 = Rarely, 2 = Occasionally, 3 = Frequently, 4 = Almost always

	0	1	2	3	4
1. Do you have more energy than most people?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. Do you enjoy working alone?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. Are you willing to work very long hours every day, with no time off for weeks at a time?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. Are you a self-starter who, on down-time, can generate new ideas or new ways to do something?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. Can you tolerate days, weeks, and perhaps months with few or no paid assignments?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. Can you manage several unrelated projects at the same time?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. Are you self-confident enough to undertake a completely new type of project?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. Do you trust your instincts to turn down a project you know you cannot do in the time allotted or at the level of quality required?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. Are you willing to accept a project for little or no pay in order to learn a new skill?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10. Are you flexible enough to update and learn new computer programs to stay competitive?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
11. Are you confident enough to acknowledge when you've made an error?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
12. Can you identify and work with appropriate sub-contractors in areas where you lack proficiency?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
13. Will you persist in making "cold calls," knowing you'll be ignored/rejected more often than not?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
14. Can you tolerate criticism and/or rejection of material you have submitted?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
15. Can you live with the uncertainty of not knowing when your next assignment is coming?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
16. Are you disciplined enough to save money during flush times to support yourself during lean times?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
17. Can you take responsibility for multiple tasks—marketing, sales, market planning, accounting, customer service, writing/editing, graphics, word processing, and clerical duties?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
18. Do you like initiating contact with new people?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
19. Are you able to turn down work from an incompatible client in a manner that avoids bad feelings and a bad reputation?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
20. Can you sell yourself and your abilities/experience with enthusiasm and conviction?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
21. Are you prepared to work hard to produce excellent material that is credited to someone else?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
22. Are you tough enough to charge late fees—even sue if necessary to collect a fee?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
23. Are you willing to develop and listen to your intuition to avoid problems with underestimating fees?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
24. Do you have enough self-respect and courage to schedule and take regular vacations regardless of the risk of losing an assignment because of your absence?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
25. Are you assertive enough to refuse to do a project that you believe has unethical consequences?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Score: 0-25 = find a rich spouse; 26-50 = consider a regular job; 51-75 = you have a fighting chance; 76-100 = go for it!