

# MODULE #1: GETTING EXPERIENCE AND BUILDING YOUR PORTFOLIO

## IN THIS MODULE:

We'll be looking at ways to gain more freelancing experience (and key signs that you may need to do so), as well as covering how to make the most of your portfolio and any qualifications you have.

Welcome to the first module of Freelance Confidence.

Whether you've been freelancing for just a few weeks or for several months or years, you'll want to both make the most of the experience you already have and look for ways to gain more experience to move forward in your career. That's what this module is all about.

**As a freelancer, your experience is primarily shown through the pieces you've written previously.** Ideally, these will be pieces with your byline (name) attached – however, if you ghost-wrote the pieces for someone else, or if you wrote without a byline, then you can still use that work for your portfolio if the client gives permission.

Your experience might also include things beyond your writing, though. That could be in the form of:

- **Past jobs or careers** – e.g. you've worked in software development and you want to freelance as a technical writer.
- **Personal experience** – e.g. you have three young children and you want to write for parenting websites and blogs.
- **Hobby-based experience** – e.g. you're a keen golfer and you want to write for magazines that cover golf.

Your experience may be something that you take for granted, or something that you feel isn't anything special. Keep in mind, though, that lots of freelancers *won't* have the same expertise and knowledge as you ... and many other people who do share your experiences may not be able to write fluently about them.

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From here, we're going to focus primarily on how to gain more experience with your actual freelancing – but it's well worth thinking through how you can capitalise on your other experiences too. Towards the end of the module, we'll take a look at how you can use your credentials and any qualifications to help enhance your profile as a freelancer.

## Should You Take On Unpaid Work?

**If you currently have *no* samples for your portfolio, then it may make sense to take on some limited unpaid work.** I certainly don't recommend that freelancers do this for any length of time – but it may be a necessary step when you're just starting out.

You may also be in a position where you need to take on one or two pieces of unpaid work in order to move into a different area of freelancing. For instance, if you've been writing short and chatty blog posts for parenting websites and you want to move on to writing in-depth articles about software development, you might need to create something for free that helps bridge the gap.

If you do decide to take on some unpaid work to build your portfolio, a couple of great ways to do that are:

- **By writing guest posts for big, high-quality blogs in your field.** As well as giving you a published piece for your portfolio, this helps you to get your name out there in front of a large, relevant audience. You get bragging rights, too: you can say "I've written for [name of blog]" on your website or in your pitches for other jobs.
- **By writing posts on your own blog, or on a site such as Medium, where anyone can write a post.** This doesn't give you the same boost to your reputation as being published by a large blog or website – but it does mean you can very quickly publish pieces to link to as samples of your writing.

## Do You Need More Experience?

It can be tough to tell whether you actually need more experience before you can successfully pitch clients, or land freelancing gigs ... or whether you're just not feeling very confident.

If you have two or more pieces in your portfolio, I'd suggest that you start applying for freelancing gigs, or that you find a magazine or (paying) blog to pitch to.

Some good signs that you may need more experience include:

- Not hearing anything back when you apply for a freelancing gig (though this can just be a sign that the client had a lot of applications).
- Not hearing anything back when you pitch a publication, like a magazine or a paying blog, or getting a generic rejection email.
- Struggling to find a sample piece that fits the things you want to apply for or pitch to.

If you're successfully landing paying work, though, that's great! You can use those pieces for your portfolio.

## What Types of Work Could Build Your Portfolio?

Whether you're looking to take on a few unpaid pieces to create a stronger portfolio of work, or whether you're trying to decide what paid jobs to take on, you might want to think about:

- **Choosing work within (or related to) the topics you want to work in.** For instance, if you want to focus your freelancing on parenting-related topics, it would make sense to write some pieces in this area.
- **Choosing work that gives you experience of different writing styles.** If you've written several short "how to" blog posts, you might want to write a much more in-depth review post, or a magazine article. Some clients will be keen to see examples of the *type* of article you can write, not just evidence of your subject-matter expertise.

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## Should You Write for Content Mills?

Some websites, like Upwork, allow you to sign up and create a profile so that you can “bid” on jobs that are available. They often claim that you don’t need any experience at all – and so they can be an attractive option for freelancers who are just starting out.

**However, these sites tend to pay very poorly** (I’ve often seen rates as low as \$5 - \$10 for an 800 word blog post) and the pieces you produce aren’t likely to be published on large, reputable sites.

Instead, you’ll probably be working without a byline for small, potentially rather shady or poorly produced, websites.

Instead of working for very little pay for content mills, I think it’s a much better approach to write a small number of pieces for free – for websites that have a great reputation within your subject matter area. That way, you’re in full control of what you write, and you finish up with a piece with your name on that you can be proud of. Getting published on a big site can also be a huge confidence boost.

## What About Getting Print Experience?

If you want to write for magazines or if you want to write advertising content that’s going to be printed, then of course it makes sense to focus on gaining print experience.

(If you want to write mainly for blogs or websites, though, print experience won’t necessarily be that helpful – the style in which you write, say, a piece for your local newspaper may not translate well into the style that a blog wants.)

It probably won’t be as hard as you might think to get print experience, even in a world where more and more content is online. Perhaps a local organisation that publishes a regular printed newsletter or magazine – or maybe there’s a local newspaper you could write for. The pay may be non-existent, but at least you’ll be gaining some experience.

When it comes to using these pieces in your portfolio, the best approach is to:

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- Check with the publication if they're happy for you to (a) put the whole piece on your website itself and/or (b) email a copy to potential clients. Some will be happy with the latter only.
- Scan the piece – try to make it as clear and easy to read as possible.
- Put a screenshot of the piece on your website, plus either a link to where it's published online, or a link to download the scan. If you don't have permission to put the scanned version on your website but you do have permission to send it out, you can add a note prompting potential clients to get in touch if they want to see the whole thing.

There's no one right way to put your pieces on your website, but it often makes sense to have a dedicated "Portfolio" or "Samples" page that lists your work – perhaps with some details about each project and, if you have one, a testimonial from the client.

## Gathering (More) Testimonials

Testimonials can be a useful addition to a portfolio piece, especially if your target clients might not be a great position to judge the quality of your writing themselves.

If you don't have permission to use a particular piece in your portfolio (maybe you ghost-wrote it, for instance), then you can also ask for a testimonial to use instead.

You can include testimonials on your "Portfolio" / "Samples" page, have a separate page of testimonials on your website, or (the best option!) include one or two great testimonials on your page(s) about your freelancing services.

I wouldn't recommend including testimonials when you're applying for freelancing gigs, though, or when you're pitching to magazines. No one ever asks for them, and it would come across a bit oddly to send them. If you do have a lot of great testimonials, though, you could include a link to your website saying something like, "You can read what past clients have said here" or "You can find more details about my past projects here".

## What About Qualifications/Credentials?

One worry that a lot of freelance writers have is whether they need a particular qualification – like a degree or a certificate of some sort – to boost their chances of getting paid freelancing work.

**In my experience ... no, you don't.** I do have a fairly relevant educational background for freelance writing, with a BA in English Literature and an MA in Creative & Life Writing. However, I very rarely mention those when applying for freelancing gigs. I still get plenty of work!

Some freelancing gigs, particularly substantial ones (e.g. full-time or 50% of full-time), will ask for a resume or CV though – and in those cases, relevant qualifications could well help boost your chances.

**Another case where having relevant credentials can really help is if you want to write about something specialised.** For instance, if you'd like to write about money management and you're a trained accountant, that'll definitely give your application a boost.

Even with fairly specialised freelancing jobs, though, it's rare for specific credentials to be *required* – simply knowing what you're talking about (or being willing to do the research!) is usually enough.

Ultimately, if you do have relevant qualifications or credentials, you can certainly mention them when you're pitching an idea or applying for freelancing jobs ... but what clients and editors will really care about is how well you can write.

If you don't have any particular qualifications or credentials that relate to writing or to your subject matter areas, that's fine too. Don't spend time and money trying to gain those ... they won't necessarily make you feel any more confident about your writing, and they may not be a lot of help to you in terms of your freelancing career.

## How the Assignments Work

For each module, you have an assignment to carry out. Obviously you don't *have* to do it – this isn't school! – but you'll get the most out of the course if you work through the assignments along the way.

Each assignment has a suggested length (e.g. 30 minutes) to give you a rough idea of how long it's likely to take, if you do it in full. Don't worry if you only have a little bit of time to spare: even 10 minutes is well worth doing.

### ASSIGNMENT (40 minutes)

Your assignment this week is in three parts:

**#1:** Gather several portfolio pieces from the best of what you've already written. That might mean hunting through magazines, if your experience is in print, or looking through your own blog to find some pieces you're really proud of.

**#2:** Save those pieces, or links to those pieces, in a dedicated folder on your computer – so that you have them easily to hand when approaching clients or publications.

**#3:** Add your portfolio pieces (between 3 and 10 is about right) to your website, if you have one.

## Module #1: Further Reading

*All of the further reading is optional, but if you want to find out more about something we've covered, it's highly recommended.*

**[The Right Way to Start Freelancing](#)**, Benek Lisefski, The Startup on Medium

This is quite a long article that covers the whole process of getting started as a freelancer – I wanted to include it here as Benek has a rather different approach to me on whether or not you should work for free.

**[10 Great Portfolio Sites for Freelance Writers](#)**, Annie Rose Favreau, The Write Life

If you haven't yet got a website set up, you might want to create a site that focuses primarily on your portfolio itself. This article runs through a bunch of options for creating that type of website. My personal preference, though, is to use WordPress as it gives you a lot of flexibility on what *else* you can do with your site.

**[5 Major Types of Freelance Writing Jobs \(And How To Get Them\)](#)**, Claire Bradshaw, Writer's Edit

Claire goes into detail about five big areas of writing jobs, and – crucially! – offers tips on how to get that type of writing gig. There are some areas covered here that you might not have considered, like writing social media posts for clients.

*(Note: if you took my Start Freelancing course, you might remember Claire's article from the further reading in Module 1 there. I've included it here as it's a valuable read if you want to broaden your experience or gain more experience.)*

## What's Coming Up Next:

Well done on reaching the end of the first module. Remember, if you have questions at any point, please do pop into the Aliventures Club Facebook group: it's a really friendly place.

[facebook.com/groups/aliventuresclub](https://www.facebook.com/groups/aliventuresclub)

If it's something you'd prefer to discuss privately, or if you're having a technical issue with the course, the best way to get in touch is to email me at [ali@aliventures.com](mailto:ali@aliventures.com).

Here's what you'll find in Module 2:

### MODULE 2:

In the next module, we'll be looking at how to pitch ideas to websites and magazines – and how to apply for freelancing jobs that you've seen advertised. We'll then go through how to handle things if a potential client contacts you out of the blue.

Along the way, we'll be looking at some examples of real-life pitches and applications, and what you can learn from them. We'll also be covering some crucial tips on what to do – and what *not* to do.