

June 29, 2012 § By Ann Friedman

#Realtalk for the j-school graduate on the first five years of your career

The former editor of GOOD magazine shares her advice for young writers and editors on how to navigate the early years.



I've spent most of my own admittedly short journalism career mentoring the younger writers and editors coming up behind me — especially those who graduated from journalism school, which seems to instill a false sense of preparedness that dissipates about two weeks into the first post-graduate internship. I end up repeating myself a lot. Now that I find myself **without a staff editor job** for the first time in years, it seems like a good time to share these

few lessons with the wider world. Plus, there's nothing like a professional shakeup to make you think back on your career choices.

Write something short every day. Don't wait for an invitation to write for a major publication. Or even a minor one. Invest time and energy in the spaces you control: your blog and Twitter account. (I'm assuming you already have both of these things because you are no fool.) Use them to dash off quick opinions and keep track of things you're interested in exploring at greater length. This won't *prevent* you from pitching these ideas to paying outlets or combining them into bigger projects — it'll prepare you to do exactly that. When you apply for a job or pitch a freelance piece, editors will google you. Until you've got a lot of great clips (which will take a while), you want them to be able to find your awesome idea. You want them to be able to, at the very least, see what other publications you read and what kind of thinker you are. This is because...

Your ideas matter more than your prose. Sorry to crush your illusions, but it is possible to succeed in journalism without being a great writer (*cough* editing *cough*). It is not possible to succeed without having great ideas. For many editors, knockout prose is a bonus, not a requirement for making an assignment.

Fake it 'til you make it. I mean, don't *lie* on your resume, but feel free to be a little...aspirational in your description of yourself on your personal site and in your Twitter bio. Do you obsessively follow tech news and want to write for Wired, but pay the bills by writing up community meetings for a suburban newspaper? Change your bio to "Reporter at Podunk Daily and freelance tech writer." Then write about tech on your personal platforms, where

you'll develop ideas and build credibility. Never describe yourself as an "aspiring" anything.

Write every piece three times. And I don't mean three drafts. I mean you should be pitching and writing every idea, with three similar but not identical angles, for three different outlets. This is a bit of journalistic advice that an older dude-journo passed along to a young dude-journo I know, who passed it along to me, and I've since imparted it to lots of other people. The only person who's paying attention to your entire body of work is your mom. You will be the only ones who notice the close-but-not-overlapping theses. Warning, though: **Don't just cut and paste!**

Read good articles twice. If you read something you love, ask yourself, "**Why's this so good?**" Then read it again. One of the most valuable exercises in journalism school is picking apart pieces by established journalists to figure out how they did it. It's harder to keep doing this once you're out of school. I like to go through my **Instapaper** archive every once in awhile and re-read the things I've liked. (What? You're not using Instapaper or **Readability** or a similar app? Remedy that immediately.)

Make a list of places you want to work (or want your writing to appear), people you want to work with, and milestones you want to hit within the next five years. Don't think you'll accomplish these in any sort of order, but do use this list to shape the small-bore decisions you make. Because your career, like your life, is made up of a lot of little decisions — not just which of two jobs to accept.

Email the people who have the job you want tomorrow. Assistant editors and blog editors and up-and-coming freelance writers are

going to have career advice that is way more relevant to your life than wisdom from 20-year veterans. (Their advice is valuable too! Just...different.) When you reach out to these young-ish journalists, don't just ask them to coffee or for general "advice." Send concrete questions: How did you hear about the job you have now? What sorts of interview questions were you asked? What do you wish you had known five years ago? Which publications are you paying attention to? Why? Keep in touch.

Read the publications you want to write for. Read them religiously.

Learn to write headlines, even if you don't want to be an editor. Headline writing is about distilling complicated ideas and selling what's sexy about a piece. This is also called, "being good at Twitter" or "effective pitching." Practice this by writing a headline for every piece you want to write. Set high standards for every post title on your personal blog. You'll get better at it, I promise.

Be an early adopter. Mess around with new reading apps, new blogging platforms, new social media sites. You don't have to use all of these things every day, but you need to be familiar with them. One of your main selling points as a newbie journalist is that you're "hip" to the "Internet sites" and "gadgets" that "the young people" are using today. Deliver on that stereotype. And while you're at it, learn a lesson that your journalistic elders have largely failed to grasp: Evolution is a lifestyle, not a conference you attend once a year. Keep at it.

Know that "colleague" is a lifetime affiliation. Let go of the idea that you'll work with one set of people, then work with another set when you switch jobs. This is a small industry, and if you're doing

it right, jobs and networks will bleed seamlessly into one another. The negative way of putting this is, “Don’t burn bridges,” but the positive way of putting it is that every journalist is your coworker.

Practice horizontal loyalty. Prioritize your relationships with people who are at a similar stage in their career. Yeah, it’s helpful to befriend accomplished older journalists, but it’s really the relationships with people on your level that will sustain you. Include all types of media people in your network, not just writers. Send your ideas and drafts to these people. Retweet each other. Connect each other. Collaborate on a short-lived but hilarious Tumblr, or apply for a reporting grant together, or put together a panel. Make awesome stuff *now*. Don’t wait your turn.

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