

# Free-lancing is an 'iffy' business

by Ron Friesen

The current recession has knocked the free-lance writing market in Edmonton for a loop.

The folding of some publications and belt-tightening by others has caused a sharp drop in the number of publishing opportunities for fledgling writers.

But a good free-lancer can still make it, especially if he's willing to diversify, according to Gordon Morash, the editor of Edmonton Magazine.

"You have to be committed," Morash told a group of would-be free-lancers at a two-part workshop held last month in the Edmonton Public Library.

A free-lancer should approach writing as a business, Morash said. It shouldn't be seen as "a nice thing to try."

Morash admitted there is a "shrinking market" in Edmonton for free-lance writers, especially with the folding of Interface earlier this year and the recent axing by the Edmonton Journal of 56 regular columns.

But he added that free-lancers able to handle writing for various media can still get work.

"There's no easy way to do it," Morash said. "It requires knocking on a lot of doors. But you get brownie points if you can write in several areas. You get known that way."

Although some consider magazines the only market to write for, other markets include advertising, education, radio and television.

## Saturday classes?

**WINDSOR (CUP)** — The first faculty strike in Ontario history was settled after a week on September 26.

The strike by 523 professors forced the cancellation of classes for 7400 University of Windsor students September 20. The faculty association charged the administration with bargaining in bad faith.

A day into the strike, the Ontario government imposed on the faculty pay hike limits of nine percent the first year and five percent the second year under its public sector restraint program.

But Donald Laing, faculty association president, said the strike concerned non-monetary issues. Both sides were reported to have made concessions, but no details were revealed.

The administration is currently considering proposals to make up for lost teaching time. One would involve holding classes on Saturdays.

"You don't just write for paper," Morash said. "Besides, there aren't that many magazines."

Local periodicals, besides Edmonton Magazine, include What's On In Edmonton, Heritage, plus other government publications.

Free-lancers are often hired by firms to write slide-tape presentations, Morash pointed out. A lot of writing put out by the province is done by free-lancers on contract, although Morash called it "getting paid to be the government's mouthpiece."

Despite other openings, most free-lancers dream of having their work appear in magazines. Morash recommended that they do their homework first.

"Find out what's been published," he urged. "Get a feel for what the editor is trying to portray."

Morash estimated he gets 30 percent of his submissions "over

the transom" or unsolicited. He doesn't recommend the approach. "It's up to the writers to show ideas first. It shows they're hungry."

Querying is usually the best way for a writer to sell an idea to an editor, Morash said. If writers have already published, they should show editors some examples of their work. If they haven't published, they should show what they're working on.

"Not the actual piece but the idea," Morash said. "The whole thing might be a waste of time."

Editors may respond to queries with counter suggestions and indulge in a give and take with writers over the idea for an article.

"A lot is shooting in the dark," Morash noted. "You don't know where you're going to hit."

If an editor likes a writer's idea, he might commission a piece on it. If the article doesn't work out, however, the editor may pay a "kill fee" — up to 5 percent of the

total fee — just to send the writer away and not publish the piece.

Sometimes an editor may buy just the idea from a free-lancer and farm the actual article out to another writer. In such cases, the magazine reserves publication rights and the idea becomes its research.

Unpublished writers sometimes break into print by having special skills. University students, for example, might start by writing articles on subjects they're researching.

"Write from these areas first," Morash suggested. "Write from what you know. What you don't know, research."

Even if successful, a writer leads a tenuous existence, at best. A recent study revealed that in Canada free-lancers writing primarily for newspapers averaged an annual income of \$7,898. Independent magazine writers averaged even less at \$6,888 a year, while full-time book writers

did only a little better at \$9,744. Writers working mainly for radio showed an average of \$9,378 while film writers reported an average of \$9,667.

Playwrights were near the bottom of the heap, averaging \$7,099 a year.

Morash conceded that free-lancing is "iffy" but added that "most businesses are." He also said that free-lancers in Edmonton are better off than in Toronto where writers glut the market.

Sometimes, people write under delusions of grandeur, only to show that they just don't have it. If one or two pieces by a writer don't work, Morash said he tries to work with the person on improving them. In ten pieces by the same writer don't work, then "the honest approach is the best."

But writers are always free to try elsewhere. "I'm not the last word either," Morash added.

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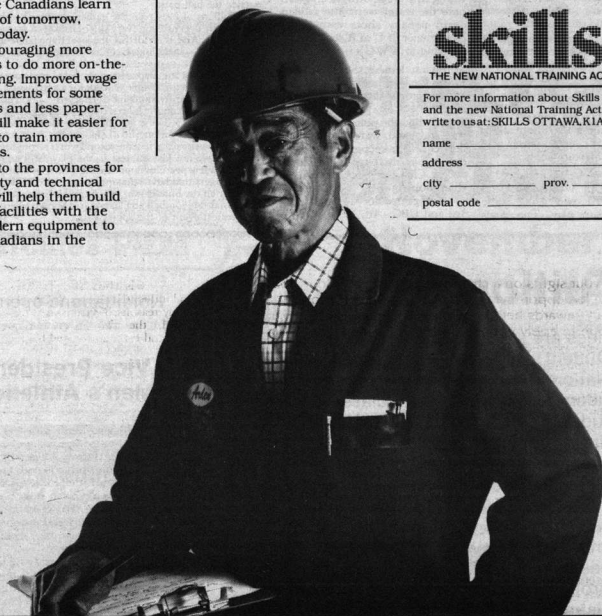
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