

A must-have checklist for getting assignments right

It's vital to get this part right — messing up in the early stages can spell disaster for your entire story.



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Hello friends! As we dive deeper into Intro to Freelancing Month, today we're going to focus on an under-discussed-yet-crucial part of being a freelancer: the very first steps to take after getting commissioned for an assignment. This is one of the most important and nuanced things to master, and messing up at this stage can spell disaster for your entire story.

I've invited freelance writer and former editor [Liz Massey](#) to share some of her advice for what to do right after getting an assignment. In this checklist, she pulls from her experience on the other side of things as an editor, and adapts that knowledge into a process she now uses as a freelance writer.

Take it away, Liz!

While I focus primarily on freelance writing these days, I worked for more than a decade and a half as a managing editor, serving at two magazines. Few things were as exciting — for both editor and writer — as making a story assignment. But on the other side of that coin, few things were as disappointing for either party than a story assignment gone awry.

As an editor, I learned that the smallest omission I could inadvertently make in a story assignment could result in a fully qualified freelancer filing a story way off from my intent for it. When the differences were stark enough, I had to open a challenging, potentially awkward conversation about revision and provide feedback that could potentially lead to defensiveness and resentment.

Over the years I developed a detailed approach to delivering story assignments, resulting in great stories *and* praise from writers. After leaving the editor's desk and taking up freelancing again, I didn't want to hope and pray I'd find an editor who shared my approach to story assignments. So instead, I developed a systematic method to assess an assignment and guarantee I identify elements critical to writing the story the editor has in mind.

Why do editors send vague assignment letters, anyway?

Some editors who send you assignments that read like a fortune-cookie paper slip are tired. Some are stressed and in a hurry. Some already know your work and don't want to seem like they don't trust you.

All of this is understandable, but it doesn't do you a bit of good on the receiving end. Taking a methodical approach to reviewing your assignment letter and confirming the details can save your reputation, not to mention hours or days of misdirected effort.

Workshop alert! On August 21, freelance extraordinaire [Kaitlyn Arford](#) will join me for a workshop on **how to use social media to find work**, and how it can help you build a sustainable — and profitable! — business. There is SO much out there for those who know exactly how to look, and Kaitlyn is the best in the biz at digging up those opportunities. [Click here to register.](#)

The Assignment Checklist: Your secret to decoding an editor

The key to deciphering those sometimes inscrutable, overly simplistic, or just all-too-minimal story assignment emails is reviewing them with a checklist in hand.

We've got you covered. Below is a (noncomprehensive — every assignment is different) list of the bare minimum parts of the assignment that you should have 100% clarity on. And, as always, if you're ever not sure about something, just ask!

✓ **Basic terms of the assignment:** What is your deadline, pay rate, word count, and kill fee? What is the payment platform? What type of story will you

be writing? When and where will it appear in the publication?

✓ **Angle and framing:** Are you free to explore the topic and suggest an angle, or will the editor give you lots of direction? **This is a crucial point to be clear on. Make sure you and your editor completely see eye-to-eye on the approach — and eventual output — of the story.** When stories don't result in what the editor and writer talked about, this is often where things went wrong.

✓ **Sources:** Who will identify sources for the story? You, your editor, or both? Is there a protocol for when/how to approach sources? Does the editor need to clear your sources before you contact them?

✓ **Background information:** Can the editor share with you specific resources for background context that would be helpful as you report out the story?

✓ **Deal-breakers:** What potential scenarios would end the assignment before publication or payment? E.g., missing a deadline without a heads up, missing a story's *must-run* deadline, or failing to secure a specific source for the story. This doesn't necessarily have to be codified, but it's good to have the conversation up front.

✓ **Special considerations:** If writing for a custom, corporate, or institutional publication, are there "sensitive topics" that need special handling? Will you need the editor to help you obtain access to VIPs? Is (non-editorial) leadership allowed pre-publication review? Really, just make sure to ask about any details or possibilities on your mind.

✓ **Edit process:** It can be helpful to ask the editor about the editorial workflow, and what the general timeframe may look like. Some publications do one pass on a story from the editor and it's ready to go; others have many layers of editing and fact-checking that can take weeks or months. We all know it can be foolish to live by a predicted timeline in journalism, but it's good to have a ballpark.

✓ **Follow-up communications:** What's the desired method of communication with the editor after the assignment is made? What are their preferred hours for communication? What response time is usual? Is there a preferred method for delivering urgent/emergency updates?

✓ **Ensure that clear, reasonable expectations are set on both sides:** Don't leave anything to chance or assumption. If you're even slightly uncertain about something, no matter how small, just ask.

Confirm assignment details: Let's compare cocktail napkin sketches

You can keep your checklist in Word, Excel, or a tool like Trello or Airtable; wherever you like. Just have it somewhere handy and *actually use it* when you receive your assignment. We all forget stuff, so it's easier just to have your checklist ready. Afterward, reply to your editor and have them confirm your understanding of the details.

One way to think of this completed list is that it's the first *sketch* of the scaffolding that will support your story. Filling out the checklist helps you define the basic shape of your article and firmly puts you and the editor on the same page — or at least tells you that your cocktail-napkin sketches look similar.

Once you've completed your checklist and confirmed details with the editor, you can move on to researching and reporting, all while knowing you're building exactly what you're being paid to create. What's a better comfort than that? The way you, as a writer, handle this critical period in your work can better your chances of acing the assignment and paving the way for future stories. Cultivate those relationships with editors!

Liz Massey is a freelance writer in Northern Maine who frequently shares insights on how to create better nonfiction. You can catch up on her professional writing activities (which include résumé writing and content strategy, in addition to freelance writing and editing) on [LinkedIn](#). You can take a peek at her freelance portfolio (and drop her a line!) on [Authory](#).

Oh, a few other things ...

- **I offer one-on-one coaching!** Need help developing an idea or sharpening one you already have? Want a seasoned eye on a pitch you're kicking around? Interested in talking about careers and building your freelance business? Maybe just want an edit on a story draft? I've got you covered! Click below to

book a one-on-one coaching session to talk about pitches, story ideas and development, editing, careers, or anything else you might need help with!

- Get a pitch commissioned recently? I want to see it! I'd love to feature you and your #pitchesthatsold in an upcoming series examining great pitches that resulted in stories. Let's see 'em!
- Got a question about freelancing or the wider world of journalism? Let's hear it, and I may feature it in a future Q&A post! Drop your questions, comments, and thoughts about freelancing and journalism in general in a comment below, or email me at tim@freelancingwithtim.com.
- More from Intro to Freelancing Month:



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