

The phone goes at 11.20am. The baby is bawling. He is scooped up and rocked in my right arm. "Hello?" It's the engineering director of a large oil company returning my call two days late and he's only got this 15 minutes this week. I stick the pick-up on the phone headset, start the tape recorder, hope like hell that it works properly, fight off the over-friendly cat with my foot and apologise that I'm baby minding at the moment, hence the occasional cry in the background (fortunately he's quiet now, as long as I keep rocking. Energetically.)

"So, tell me about the reasons behind expanding into low-sulphur diesel fuel..."

I bet someone, somewhere, subsequently read that article and thought, "Hey. That looks like a really good job. Just talking to people and writing it down."

Don't get me wrong. Freelance journalism has a lot going for it. It can, once you learn a series of ruses and manoeuvres, be carried out around looking after children, for instance. It can also be nerve-jangling not knowing where your next month's income will appear from.

There is of course one main route to becoming freelance: work on staff somewhere, learn the business inside out, make lots of contacts, get made redundant and go freelance. Easy. Well, actually not, but it may seem like it to those to whom this article is really addressed — people trying to get their work in print with no experience, no contacts and no fat redundancy cheque to buy the G4 Macintosh.

While you're still feeling pig-sick about all those rivals out there with the redundancy money, let's make you feel even worse. I promise it will help.

Suppose you want to employ a carpenter to put up some kitchen shelves. What are you looking for? Experience? Personal recommendation from someone you know? Someone who sounds confident? Does it make a difference if the job is putting up a couple of shelves or building a conservatory?

Offer what's wanted

Now look at it from the point of view of the people who will buy your precious words. They have their own requirements, foremost among which is that they want journalism. A truism? An amazing number of people out there want to be journalists in order to write what they want, their way. And unless they're incredibly lucky, they will hold that aspiration for life.

If the business is about anything, it's about the application of communications skills to whatever is relevant to the publication you're working for. So all those who want to interview movie stars but certainly not the woman who organises the local flower show should go down the snake and miss a turn. Have aspirations, by all means. Want to write about finance, or beauty products or the arms industry, but keep that desire as a long-term goal. Aspire in the short term to be a damned good writer.

Which is why the editor on the local rag, who is, to maintain the analogy, in the kitchen-shelf-buying end of the business, will be impressed enough to give you a chance when he hears you have written numerous reports for the neighbourhood watch newsletter, the parish magazine, your college newspaper, or a particularly long shopping list. For such things suggest you can probably spell passably and string a sentence together. And those skills are rarer than

Wanna buy some words?

Terry Gault explains that breaking into freelance journalism from scratch can be a pretty unromantic business

you might think. The editor's on a tight budget and can do without wasting a member of staff's time cleaning up your spelling and punctuation.

So what are you going to write? If you've never heard the words "Don't call us, we'll call you," then try ringing a local paper editor and saying: "Is there anything you'd like me to write?" You may hit lucky. But I doubt it. Unless you can cultivate sympathy some other way ("I'm doing a form three project...")

Most local papers will, if you fulfil the basic competence criteria above, be happy to listen to ideas. They're not difficult. Big local events will be covered by the staff. Hundreds of interesting things go by un-noted. That's where you come in. "Hello Mr Editor. Would you be interested in a story about the AGM of the local ferret fanciers club where members are acrimoniously debating a merger with the polecat breeders society?" Alternatively, "I know one of my neighbours will be 100 next week. Could I submit a short piece about her?" Or, "residents in a nearby road are furious at speeding traffic and have demanded action from their councillors. Would you like a news item?"

OK. You've talked you way into one article. You've been asked for 200 words on the old lady. Now you must prove you can do the job to the customer's expectation. Look at how similar stories are treated in this or similar papers. Don't be clever or arty. Do the job professionally. And I don't even need to mention how many words your 587 word first draft should be before it's submitted. You can have leeway of maybe 50 over.

Journalism is technical. There's no getting away from it. So you have a lot to learn, even beyond competent writing skills. How to write news, features. What questions to ask. What to include; what to leave out. Reading similar sto-

ries is the crash course. But it's easy to miss a lot, unless you're looking for it. So read books on basic journalism. Enrol in evening classes. Articles in *Write Justified* may help. And when you deliver your news story to the local paper, take it in person. And listen. Those who are interested, but not in the way, will probably be welcome visitors. So express interest in writing and how a newspaper works. Ask questions if staff are in a position to answer (learn what press day is, and never intrude on it; learn when it's slack and people can talk). But mostly listen.

And a point about delivery. Newspapers are electronic. Copy on disk takes two minutes to put into the system. Hard copies are hassle.

So now you have something in print. (They mangled it so it was nothing like you wrote and ended as an extended picture caption, so of course you used that as an opportunity to chat, without rancour, to the news editor or editor about how you could have made it stronger and how you'd like to try what you learn on another piece.) You are now becoming a competent shelf builder and are learning more than you ever realised there was to learn: house style; why reporting in the local court is an artform; why papers are full of politicians, however parochial.

The next leap could be to the often ignored magazine market. Not the news-stand glossies. They come later. No. The unromantic bin-fillers that come through the letter-box. Someone writes the *Poultry Retailers Gazette*, the *Irkshire Friendly Society Magazine*, etc etc. Why not you? Some of them even pay quite well. The same principles apply. Find something you think they may be interested in. Then talk. Bounce ideas off the editor.

The web can help

A good tip could be to think technical and to get a few contacts. For example, you reckon the *Tree Huggers Digest* might be a good bet. So they've got every by-pass protest in the country covered: hit the web and look for the less obvious. New polyvinyl protection for saplings thanks to a new mould-making process? A couple of phone calls and you're tapping out: "What do David Coulthard and a hillside in Wessex have in common? They both rely on a new form of plastic moulding insert just developed by a Loamshire company..."

You've just sold another story. And the web isn't the only tool. Company PR offices (identity companies that cover the area you've targeted) should talk ("I'm looking for potential stories for..."), and there's always word of mouth.

Stick with it, listen, learn, always try to meet the requirements of your customer, and, despite the knock-backs, you'll find professional journalists are usually willing, within the constraints on their time, to pass on knowledge and encouragement to the genuinely enthusiastic and basically competent.

Like the carpenter, you are now armed with more experience and more knowledge. People will be more willing to take your work. You will make quantum leaps, as from local paper to lower-circulation magazines to the top trade magazines and those on the newsstands. And of course there are the newspapers.

And if you get to that stage, and learn how to do it with a screaming one-year-old, let me know. I never did master that one.

