

The 12 Steps to Recovery



**FREELANCERS
*ANONYMOUS***

by Nicolas Ritoux

Foreword

Hi, my name is Nicolas... and
I'm a freelance writer.

This project answers all of those needling questions I've encountered throughout my career as a freelance journalist.

- Why do so many freelancers feel insecure and mistreated?
- Why do so many people look down on freelance journalism?
- Why aren't journalism students better prepared for the reality of freelancing, when many of them will become freelancers at one time or another during their career?

We've all heard stereotypes and preconceived notions around being a freelance writer.

This survival guide serves to help re-establish certain facts, as well as to compile the basic principles and tools for our success.

As the media moves unrelentingly towards the Web, and journalism becomes de-institutionalized, freelance is becoming the mainstream for an entire new generation of journalists.

I wrote this guide because I think the time has come to reflect on our status, survival strategies and best practices for the future.

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Unlocking our full potential

Freelancers offer great service, with flexibility and availability, and the promise of consistent quality.

They can earn a comfortable living once established.

Some of the sharpest pens in our profession are freelancers.



Admit we have a problem.

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- We are subject to the myth that a freelancer is an “artist,” author by contract, or some kind of journalist – instead, we must present ourselves as professional suppliers offering a high quality of service.
- We suffer from a sad preconceived notion: freelancers are “poor,” “insecure,” and “still trying to find a real job.”
- There’s a misconception about the professional status of freelancers. Clients and freelancers too often think they are in some kind of remote employer/employee relationship. Why are we still seeing job postings that read “freelance position available”?

Only we can decide to change things.

- Let’s treat ourselves as full-fledged journalists, just like our newsroom colleagues. We have nothing to envy them for, and they are a disappearing species anyhow. The future of journalism is “de-institutionalized”, independent and ever multitasking. The future of journalism is freelance.
- Let’s embrace our entrepreneurial nature by priding ourselves on our good organization, business development skills and high quality of service. These are the cornerstones of success and personal achievement.
- Let’s stop whining about our financial difficulties. It creates the perception that we’ll take on any contract. There’s a French proverb that says, “Only rich people get loans.” Talking about our difficulties makes us more depressed and a drag to those around us.



We're great and we know it.

- In our line of work, compliments are few and far between. Let's compliment ourselves instead of waiting for a recognition that won't be coming from clients.
- It's up to ourselves to believe in our talent: the more we believe, the more others will believe.
- Let's make it a priority to offer a consistent quality of service, whatever the situation. Pride in a job well done will always help us to feel great!
- As creative people, we are exposed every day to the "imposter syndrome". Our humility keeps us from seeking new jobs, seducing new clients, and billing higher rates. What's more, this syndrome is sustained by certain clients who project the idea that they are doing us a favor by giving us jobs, and who show little appreciation once our work is done.

Ignore the imposter syndrome, otherwise real imposters will do it for us.

- We should seek feedback from trusted colleagues and friends, who can show us our weaknesses to help us do an even better job. Finding a mentor is also a good way to be judged on our true value.
- Accept compliments gracefully: they're precious and rare.
- We shouldn't negatively interpret an absence of compliments from clients and colleagues. If we are great – which we are! – then we don't need someone to tell us so.
- The simple fact that we're still making it as freelancers is proof enough that we are great.



Declare independence.

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- Job security does exist for freelancers. Like any other employee, it relies on the capacity of our employer. In our case, that means finding more clients.
- We should never depend on any one client. No client alone should have the power to weaken our standing.
- Business development is our top priority: every new client we win weakens the negotiating leverage of our existing clients, while growing our income and strengthening our job security.

Maintain a balance of power to ensure our job security.

- **Maintain quality:** “You’re only as good as your last picture”, goes the saying among our photographer colleagues. A consistent quality of service strengthens our reputation and helps us to keep feeling great!
- **Focus on verticals** by developing one or several specialties to make ourselves a name and corner the market.
- **Diversify:**
 - Never let one client control more than one third of our income.
 - Diversify media: print, video, radio, web, publishing...
 - Diversify services: journalism, photography, screenwriting, copywriting, translation, content development...
 - Diversify markets, by publishing in different regions or languages.



Think like suppliers.

- Clients are not our employers. They don't have to offer us "conditions" or "respect".
- Clients will always assume that we can get along fine without them. They don't care about our happiness on the job, and rightfully so – not having to care about this kind of things is the exact reason why they call us instead of hiring.
- We are the ones who need to make clients happy, not the other way around. We are the ones who have to show respect and concern by complimenting them, flattering them, and feeling sorry for them when things are bad, while always putting our own worries aside.

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Make good management and business development our top priorities.

- Keep our pipeline full by never working on one job at a time. Only half our time should be reserved for jobs we already got, and the other half for finding new ones.
- Always be in pitch mode, by sending proposals everywhere, all the time. Even a low response rate contributes to building our independence, which is the key to negotiating power, job security and income growth (see Step 3).
- Negotiate all the time, by asking for bigger word counts, better rates, longer deadlines, etc. The more we consolidate our independence by multiplying clients the more we will be in a position to negotiate those things.
- Sell retainers, even at a low price. Better have small recurring payments coming in than big one-shot deals.
- Don't turn down any project – there's always sub-contracting to be had. Always keep a good list of writers and researchers who can help us out during crunch time.
- Take advantage of tax deductions. Freelancers don't have to pay the same tax as salaried employees. We need good accountants who understand freelancers and can help us to maximize deductions. We should all have GST/QST numbers no matter what our current annual revenue is. Charging sales tax gives us a free line of credit while displaying a professional image. Sales tax reports should be filed by the same accountant who does our income tax in order to match deductions on both fronts.



Command admiration.

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- Resisting stereotypes is our everyday battle. Clients should have admiration for our professionalism, not pity for our misery.
- Clients are not our superiors, mentors, or patrons. They are clients – i.e., economic agents in position of demand.
- Whatever they might say, they need us as much as we need them. We are equally lucky to have met each other.
- Clients have less ideas than we do for the job, otherwise they would do it themselves.

Never give the client the upper hand.

- Take the lead and be proactive! Let's impose our will and professionalism by taking the initiative and making decisions without waiting for orders.
- Questions about the job should be kept to a bare minimum. Coming back all the time with new questions for the client eats up their time and energy, while making a display of our uncertainty and vulnerability.
- Always ignore clients' attempts to assume an air of superiority. When they talk down to us, patronize us, or try to play the journalism teacher, always act as if we didn't notice it. Keeping up a professional attitude void of any emotional engagement is the only way to make them stop.
- In journalism like in any part of life, we should always act in accordance with how we see ourselves, and refuse the roles that others may try to impose upon us.



No more freaking out.

- Unanswered calls, delayed payments, forgotten signatures, unpaid reproductions, and other misdeeds from our clients should always be like water on a duck's back. Taking it personally just makes it worse.
- For whatever the reason our clients treat us badly, that reason has nothing to do with us personally.
- We will always give our clients the benefit of the doubt.
- Stay calm and remember: we're great! When we can't manage to keep up a professional attitude, it means we're in doubt about our greatness and we should read Step 2 again!

When we keep our pride intact, we'll never say something we regret.

- Going for a run, grocery shopping, or calling a dear friend may be a better idea than showing our anger to the client. Even if we believe we're in the right, displaying negative emotions is always bad for business, especially when we do it in writing.
- Maintain professional detachment at all times. In the media industry, it's always a good thing to be a fun person and even act a little crazy, but we should never be ourselves to the point of opening up our personal sphere.
- When clients don't return calls or emails, be persistent like a fly against a window. Some people are just bad with communication. As long as they don't explicitly tell us that they're not interested in our services, we should never jump to conclusions.
- If we really believe a client acted in bad faith, we should take the appropriate course of action by calling a lawyer or making our problem known to other freelancers to update their black list. When the client won't be able to get the best freelancers, maybe he'll start thinking about what he's done. Or not.
- Whenever our pride gets stepped on, we should always trust time to heal our wounds.



Don't expect to be understood.

- Employees and freelancers live in separate worlds. Employees who have never freelanced on a serious basis have no way to grasp our reality.
- Employees live in a different space-time continuum than us: they don't share our need to produce volume, to diversify clientele and to stay cost-effective.
- Their lack of understanding gives us the best of both worlds: we can enjoy the benefits of their kinship while keeping our business interests in mind.
- We will never forget that employees will turn against us at the first sign of a crisis, and become obstacles to our business.

Treat our salaried colleagues like key insider sources.

- We shall keep friendly at all times with our salaried colleagues, and generously give a hand every time they need help finding information.
- We must avoid getting involved in their inside conflicts. Paying attention to their workplace "cancers" or union issues can be extremely toxic for us. We have nothing to do with these matters and should not even have an opinion on them.
- We can turn employees into a great source of business opportunities by regularly inquiring about new business developments and trends inside their company.
- Hearing them talk about their managers and other power structures at work helps us identify the true spheres of influence where we'll find our most fertile ground for the next step...



Executives are our best clients.

- Executive managers are not our bosses. They're only bosses for our salaried colleagues.
- Unlike employees, we have nothing to fear from executives, and everything to hope.
- Executives are serious business people who immediately recognize our status as suppliers. They're more receptive to negotiation than lower-ranking employees.
- Executives hold the purse strings we'll need to pull when proposing new content ideas, concepts, and recurring jobs such as columns. They're also the ones who can make exceptions to the company's "rules" on key issues such as our rates and our copyright.
- Executives are a powerful source of referrals. The more they hear our names, the more they'll mention us to their powerful friends in other fields. Content is currently a growing business, not just in the media, and we're in the best position to sell it.

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Go straight to the top and deal with the boss!

- Circumvent obstacles as soon as they appear. For example, when an editor shows no interest in ideas that don't fit their agenda or go against what they believe to be the "rules" or "policy." There are no such things as rules or policy when we deal with the boss.
- Always come back to the boss with new ideas and concepts, even when we're told to deal with lower-ranking employees.
- If the boss is not comfortable with our direct requests, explain to him that he's the only one able to understand the issue in its entirety. Not only is this true, but it's flattering, which is hard to deny.
- Show no hesitation when selling ideas to the boss. As professional suppliers of high quality services, we always get straight to the point when we talk business.



Seek pleasure elsewhere.

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- Passion and sensitivity are our best friends and worst enemies. While they feed our drive as creative persons, they also make us vulnerable.
- Seeking excellence does not mean being obsessed by perfection. We should always seek a happy balance between the two.
- Perfectionism takes time. Freelancers don't have time.
- The more we waste time on artistic doubt and anguish, the less we are profitable and the more we weaken our negotiating leverage.
- Even our 80% is better than anybody else's 110%, because we're great.

Leave our artistic ideals at home.

- Remember the 80/20 rule: 80% of our work is done in 20% of the time spent on it, and conversely.
- Perfectionism drives us crazy and makes us poor. Better to identify our comfort zone and make our choices early in each process.
- Allow ourselves to be vulnerable only when working on personal projects in our free time. Artistic pursuits are only satisfying when there's no client involved.
- Measure ourselves on business criteria such as quick delivery, quality of service and business development, rather than our style or talent.



Abandon the ideal of purity.

- Advertising doesn't support content; it's the other way around.
- Journalism is not a community service, nor an artistic pursuit, nor a charitable endeavor. It's a value-added product that helps sell other products.
- Nevertheless, the added value of journalism lies in its ethics.
- As journalism becomes more and more "de-institutionalized," we must differentiate ourselves from amateurs and imposters, through our rigorous, transparent and unbiased methodology.
- Ethics are part of our job security as freelancers. Everything we do should be transparent; as any little misbehavior can cost us a lot.
- Journalism works well with copywriting, public relations, advertising or other forms of writing, as long as we keep airtight barriers between our different roles.

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Stay beyond suspicion with a self-imposed code of ethics.

- Being suppliers doesn't mean we can sell anything to anybody.
- If we still want to do this job in 20 years, it's best to steer clear of conflicts of interest. Opportunism is a very short-term strategy.
- Avoid even the appearance of conflict of interest by refusing to write about topics, issues or people we are connected to in our other lines of business.
- Practice complete transparency by warning clients of any possible conflict of interest, and asking a colleague to take the job instead.



Our names are brand names.

- In the course of our careers, we develop a more precise idea of who we are and what we can do. Let people know about it!
- Our names must bear a set of sought-after values that people can easily remember. We must be seen as hot commodities in each of our specialties.
- Being sought-after means being rare; being rare rarely means being cheap.
- There's nothing more suspicious than being absent from the Web. We should own and control our identities online to better corner our markets, make our values known, and reassure our existing clients.
- Once our names are brand names, we can ditch the résumé. It's a good thing, because résumés have never been a good format for reflecting freelance careers.



Clearly communicate our positioning.

- Never send our résumé; the Web is our résumé. Our blogs, portfolios and other online work should be enough for clients to know everything they need to know.
- Never let a client dominate our page rank. When googling our own names, the first results should have been created by our own efforts - except for those of us who have the same name as a celebrity!
- Communicate everything we do, think, and find on blogs, Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn.
- Use social media wisely to get our names out. Giving out good references, sharing cool information, and taking part in conversations about our favorite issues is a great way to brand ourselves as hot commodities.
- Apply for awards and grants, because we never know. Winning these can quickly make our names known and increase our perceived value.



Make freelancing synonymous with quality.

- All for one, and one for all! We can help each other grow our clienteles, enhance our legal protection, and simply be happier, by uniting our forces and getting our story straight.
- Unions and labor confederations can't do anything for us: they live in "another world" (see Step 7). As suppliers, we should come together through association.
- "Demanding" better "conditions" is a working-class mindset that only applies to a replaceable workforce. We're not a workforce; we're independent suppliers. We're not replaceable; we are valuable brands.
- Our power of attraction lies in the consistent level of quality we deliver to ensure our job security. An experienced freelancer is by definition talented, or else they wouldn't be around anymore.
- Together, let's make freelance journalism synonymous with excellent service and superior quality, like "ISO 9001" or "Intel Inside."

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Let's build the future of freelancing.

- Inspire rather than demand. Success has a lot to do with attitude, same as failure.
- Stop thinking and talking like employees. Their world will never be the same as ours, and is slowly disappearing anyway.
- Since we're not going to form a professional corporation anytime soon, we should develop a common identity for freelance journalists, which will act as an attracting and reassuring seal of excellent service and superior quality.
- Deep mutations in traditional media will force us to explore other markets and services. Journalism as we know it may disappear, but our skills will always be in demand. We should promote ourselves like the best specialists in content development, not only for media but for any type of industry.

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