

Journalism or bust! How to get writing work in tricky times



By [Marie Rocher](#)

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Hundreds of young people may continue to enrol in journalism and communications courses at universities and colleges, but job prospects in that industry are dimming.

So you want to be journalist - chasing hot leads, producing smouldering stories and setting the world alight, like a latter day Woodward or Bernstein? Here's a reality check - reports the US-based Pew Research Centre, the number of newspaper editorial employees in that country are at their lowest figure since 1978. Look to Woodward and Bernstein's employers, the *Washington Post*, which is on the cusp of another newsroom downsizing, or the esteemed *New York Times*, which has reduced its head count by more than half over the last five years, and weep.



Here in South Africa, hundreds of jobs continue to be shed from print newsrooms - it seems not a week goes by without another magazine title shutting up shop - and even broadcast journos are taking the hit, with the likes of eNCA 'retracting' international correspondents and closing bureaux. For journalism or communications majors fresh out of varsity or college, the chances of working as a crack investigative journalist or hotshot editor are fading fast.

With industry contraction, fewer and fewer graduates have the opportunity of landing a starter job or internship which allows them to experience the cut and thrust of the newsroom, and to learn from demanding editors - both the skills of writing and editing, and of managing a successful commercial venture. How's a lowly journalism graduate ever to get a look in?

Your two-minute internship starts here...

Working that first writing job is where writers learn the fundamentals of good journalism; that proverbial on-the-job training which gives graduates the universal skills they'll use throughout their careers. In the absence of that traditional big break then, self-starters know that they have to create their own opportunities.

This means recognising that joining the Freelance Economy may not just be a stop-gap but a full-time, lifetime career. Here's what would-be writers can do to create their own careers:

- 1. Get a job, any job** - The UK's Social Mobility Report earmarks journalism as one of the most socially exclusive careers, accessible only to those who can work unpaid internships. It's not very glamorous, particularly for graduates who feel they've automatically earned the right to a permanent paid job in their field, but a part-time gig will help pay the bills while you're busy building your writing career. It also shows would-be editors and agency content directors that you're willing to get your hands dirty.
- 2. Invest in a good writer's dictionary** - when I started my first job in publishing, I was requested to purchase the *Oxford Dictionary for Writers and Editors* (you can subscribe to the online version, [here](#)). It's now dog-eared and worn - because I've used it, every day, and so should you! Especially when you're sending out queries and pitches to prospective employers or clients - it's a no-brainer, but it's astonishing how many English/Journalism/Media/Communications graduates cannot spell and/or have appalling grammar.
- 3. Invest in the right tools for the job** - a decent smartphone and laptop are indispensable to the modern journo. Optional extras include a voice recorder, camera and tablet. Don't forget an old-fashioned journalist's notebook and pen (writing notes is still the very best way to commit knowledge to memory).
- 4. Build your portfolio** - Write a variety of pieces...basic news stories, feature stories, short clips...you name it, you should write it. In time, you will find you have a knack and passion for one type more than another, and that may be what you become known for. Until then, pack as much diversity into your portfolio as possible. This also helps push you out of your comfort zones, and extends your writing. The beauty of the digital era is that you can publish your work to owned media, like a blog or vlog - no relying on editors to help it see the light of day.
- 5. Build your online brand** - it's surprising how few so-called digital natives effectively leverage online channels to develop and grow their personal brands, and to showcase their work. A small personal website, a LinkedIn profile and a Pinterest board for your portfolio are the very least you should do.
- 6. Develop an elevator pitch** - This is a brief summary about who you are and what you offer; a quick soft sell. Remember, a little less arrogance and a tad more humility - make sure you set out exactly what you can do for an organisation and not just what you hope to get out of it.
- 7. Find a mentor** - Instead of asking for a job or an internship, suggest a mentorship, instead. On the face of it, an internship and a mentorship might not seem that different, but the latter offers greater flexibility, with a focus on personal and career development, rather than just skills acquisition. Instead of babysitting an intern day in and day out, a mentor can provide ad-hoc career guidance, like looking over stories and providing feedback, or other assistance, like introductions to the right industry people.
- 8. Odd-job it** - Show interest in gaining experience in specific tasks on a casual basis, for example interviewing, copy-editing or proof-reading. An organisation may be more open to piecemeal work than offering full-blown internships.
- 9. Know your market inside out** - Understanding the entities to which you wish to contribute is the key to crafting pieces that resonate both with editors and producers, and with audiences.
- 10. Network, IRL** - social media offers a plethora of opportunities to connect with industry leaders online, but don't forget to get out there and attend industry events and gatherings, too. Always have personal contact cards on hand (you can have these created for less than R500) and give them out with firm handshake and a smile!

ABOUT MARIE ROCHER

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