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# MAKE YOUR PASSION MAKE MONEY FOR YOU

A writer's guide to changing the rules  
for unconventional success.

BY CHRIS GUILLEBEAU

**A** company that produces in-flight magazines recently asked me to write a short destination piece. “We can’t pay you,” they told me, “but we’ll print your photo in the magazine. By the way, can you finish it in the next two days?”

I’m not making this up, and I know what most writers would have said: “No thanks—it’s disrespectful to ask a professional to drop everything and work for free.” And they’d probably be right, at least on moral grounds. I wouldn’t hold anything against a writer who turned it down. But instead of saying no, I said yes: “Let me help you with that. Thanks for asking.”

I’m fortunate that in my second year of full-time writing, I can regularly score gigs with CNN, *BusinessWeek* and half a dozen other outlets with good reputations. But please understand: If I were to try to earn my living from this kind of work, I’d struggle to make minimum wage.

Let’s get some bad news out of the way: In today’s publishing world—with the wrecked economy, the slow decline of print journalism and the unstoppable trend of global outsourcing—trying to make money as a writer under the old rules is almost futile.

The *good* news is that you also can use all of these factors to your advantage. You’ll need to radically change your approach to writing and publishing, but if you can make the switch, you’ll be years ahead of your peers. Regardless of what you write—fiction, nonfiction, books, blogs—if you’re like the rest of us, you probably aspire to turn your passion into some kind of regular income, whether supplemental or full time. And as long as you’re up for hard work and are willing to embrace change, it’s probably within your reach.

Here’s how.

PHASE  
1

## Find the convergence between your passion and what people want.

Let’s start with your passion, and how it relates to the rest of the world. First up, some more bad news. (Don’t worry, it gets better soon.) The bad news is that aside from your family and friends, nobody cares about you until you give them a good reason to do so. Seth Godin has written 10 bestselling books, and he knows how this works better than anyone.

“Nobody cares about you on the Internet,” Godin says. “People care only about themselves. They’re looking for the answer to the all-important question: ‘What’s in it for me?’”

Pursue your passion, and the money will follow ... right? Not necessarily. If you’re passionate about something no one else is interested in, it will be a hard sell. Your project may be personally meaningful (and there’s nothing wrong with doing something strictly for personal meaning), but that doesn’t mean it will be financially successful. If your goal is to make a profit, then you’ll probably need to more carefully evaluate your focus.

Because your future readers won’t care about you until you give them a reason to, it helps to find the best reason as early as possible in your writing career. Here’s the key: Instead of solely following your passion, you need to find the *convergence* between your passion and what other people also care about. It doesn’t mean you should give up your dream, but it does mean if you want to make money, it can’t be all about you.

If this sounds a little theoretical, let’s look at three examples of unconventional success by writers who have combined passion and money.

**CASE NO. 1: DAVID ROWELL, AKA “THE TRAVEL INSIDER.”** Rowell publishes *The Travel Insider* ([thetravelinsider.info](http://thetravelinsider.info)), a website and e-newsletter about the airline industry. Each Friday since November 2001, he has sent out a long, detailed e-mail summarizing what has been happening in the airline world that week. The newsletter is highly opinionated—some people get upset about Rowell’s rants—but over time, he has benefited from his “tell-it-like-it-is” reputation and has built a core following.

All of the information Rowell offers his readers is free, but because this is his full-time job, naturally he needs to be supported. So, once a year, he holds a fundraiser where

he asks readers for contributions. From his broad readership of 20,000, a core group of about 800–1,000 subscribers typically responds to the call for help, providing a range of donations from the very small (\$5–\$10) to \$250 or more, with \$50 being the average. For the rest of the year, Rowell is relatively silent about his need for support. Additional contributions do come in, but the bulk of his yearly income is derived from the fund drive. Rowell's devoted fans so highly value the free e-newsletter he sends them each Friday that they are happy to “pay” to ensure they continue to receive it.

**CASE NO. 2: MIGNON FOGARTY, AKA “GRAMMAR GIRL.”** Fogarty produces a wildly popular podcast series that has spun off into an entire Grammar Girl media empire ([grammar.quickanddirtytips.com](http://grammar.quickanddirtytips.com)) complete with other podcasts, print books, Oprah appearances and even her own Wikipedia page. All from following her passion, right?

As you might guess, there's more to the story. Before Fogarty was Grammar Girl, she was Science Girl—or technically, the host of another podcast called “Absolute Science.” Her background was in technical writing, and she was passionate about making science accessible to a lay audience, but the project never really got off the ground.

To make money as a writer using this model, you don't need just any readers—you need dedicated readers willing to spend money on something you offer.

“Although ‘Absolute Science’ was well-received,” Fogarty says, “after doing it for nearly a year, it was clear that the show was never going to make enough money to make it worth the time required to produce it. More people are interested in grammar and writing

than in science. I still like science, but I didn't need to rely on it for my new career.” When she shifted her emphasis to her more marketable skill set, Fogarty found her true following.

**CASE NO. 3: ROBIN SLOAN, AKA “STORYWRITER-ON-DEMAND.”**

What if you're a fiction writer and not able to provide the same kind of practical content that Rowell and Fogarty do? Can you still recruit a fan base that is willing to support your work? Sloan ([robinsloan.com](http://robinsloan.com)), a writer and “media inventor” with a long history of unconventional projects, thinks so. His latest pursuit is writing crowd-sponsored fiction that fans voluntarily pay for.

Naturally, Sloan's success didn't take place overnight. He first wrote a number of short stories that he then posted for free online. The stories received a lot of attention, so he decided to take the next step: He wrote a novella, and announced that everyone who made a donation to his writing venture would receive a copy. He set an initial goal of raising \$3,500, but ended up bringing in more than \$13,000 in just a few months thanks to his free short stories' engagement of eager readers who wanted more.

Through unconventional methods, Rowell, Fogarty and Sloan have found the convergence between what they love and what interests other people. They write every day and do work that they love, but they've also made sure the work is something other people also are passionate about.



## PHASE 2 Focus on that convergence and deliver content people are willing to pay for.

After you settle on a topic that both you and enough other people are interested in, you'll want to establish a home base (usually a website or blog) as your hub. The hub is critical. Designed properly, a hub can become self-sustaining so that you can focus most of your efforts on two things: 1) bringing in more readers through other outlets, or “spokes,” and 2) doing the writing you set out to pursue in the first place.

With the hub-and-spoke model, your spokes can include any or all of the following:

- Social networks you engage with and build platforms on
- Guest posts you write on popular blogs (which can make a huge impact if the blogs have enough influence)
- External outlets that publish your work (*Huffington Post*, etc.)
- Any other source, online or off, that contains a link to your hub.

Naturally, the hub itself needs to include a means for readers to support your work. Whatever you do and wherever else you publish your writing, the goal is to bring readers over to your hub and give them a way to support you if they so choose. The three main models for doing this are taking donations, selling advertising or sponsorships, and creating products or services.

**THE DONATION MODEL.** This is the “please help!” public-radio-style model. Rowell uses this model to recruit financial support from his most active readers. During his most recent fundraiser in the fall of 2009, *The Travel Insider* drew more than 900 paying sup-

porters. He's been doing this a long time and some years have been challenging, but in 2010 he expects to earn a good income primarily through reader donations.

**THE ADVERTISING MODEL.** The oldest form of the hub-and-spoke model involves building a popular website that is supported through direct or indirect advertising. Be aware that it's hard to earn any significant money with an advertising model unless you have a great deal of traffic. A better variation, if this is your preferred model, is to look for specific sponsors for your online home. This is what Grammar Girl has done to earn the same level of income she had in her prior career as a senior technical writer. Finding dedicated sponsors takes more work, naturally, but can usually produce a better fit for your specific content (and, of course, for your readers).

**THE PRODUCTS & SERVICES MODEL.** Sloan used a variation of this model in offering his novella for a fee. This is also the model I use and prefer. My goal is to attract like-minded readers to [chrisguillebeau.com](http://chrisguillebeau.com) (currently about 15,000 a day), provide a ton of free, useful content, and also create additional products for sale to those who want more. So far it's working out quite well—six months after starting, I was able to go full time. I now write from more than 20 countries every year.

To make money as a writer using this model, you don't need just any readers—you need dedicated readers willing to spend money on something you offer. That's why the convergence point is so important. I target readers who are interested in travel and self-employment of various forms (or some combination thereof). My readers may first explore free information I offer—including online articles, an e-newsletter and PDF downloads of *A Brief Guide to World Domination* and *279 Days to Overnight Success*—and then, once they trust me to deliver quality content on subjects of interest to them, they may decide they're willing to pay for more involved and targeted products, such as my *Unconventional Guide to Working for Yourself*.

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3

## Make your own rules and expand your network.

Here's one final story, which I hope won't get me fired from the only pseudo-job I hold. In addition to my online work, I write a monthly travel column for the largest newspaper in my state. I also hope they won't be offended when I say that they pay me a laughably small amount of money to do this task. Supposedly they have 500,000 subscribers who receive a printed copy of the paper, but my impression is that most of them are literally dying off.

This isn't a complaint; it's an observation. I'm happy to work for peanuts because my goal is not to get rich by writing a column for a print newspaper. I do it because some people are still impressed by columnists, and it helps to open doors elsewhere. Also, I want to reach as many people as possible, so if any of the 500,000 subscrib-

ONLY@WRITERSDIGEST.COM 

For five more ideas for achieving unconventional success in your career from entrepreneurial writer Chris Guillebeau, visit [writersdigest.com/article/unconventional-success](http://writersdigest.com/article/unconventional-success).

ers are not actually dying during any given month, I hope they're paying attention. Maybe they'll even check out my website.

Because publishing is evolving, writers have to evolve, too—but this is more good news, as long as you're willing to adjust your strategy. You can try taking the high road (“If they won't pay me, I'm too good to write for them”), but then what? Someone else will do it. If that someone is smart, they'll do it in a way that produces a universal win, where everyone gets something and no one loses.

Whichever route you pursue, you'll want to focus on continually expanding your network of readers. My method is to bring people over to my site and get them excited about something. That's why I write for the newspaper even though I'm not sure anyone's really reading. That's why when the airline magazine calls and asks me to work for free, I say yes.

As a full-time writer, I have the greatest job in the world: I publish most of my writing for free, but enough people are willing to pay for the additional content that I can support myself well. I don't lack for anything, and I'm building strong relationships with readers that will continue for a long time.

It's not fair that writers are treated as disposable, and that the freelance world has become more and more difficult. But because the times are changing, you might as well change, too. Right?

Good luck with your own unconventional writing journey. **WD**

**CHRIS GUILLEBEAU** travels the world and writes for a small army of remarkable people at [chrisguillebeau.com](http://chrisguillebeau.com). You can also find him at [twitter.com/chrisguillebeau](http://twitter.com/chrisguillebeau).