

2007 AHP Survey Results: Freelance-Writer Compensation

With analysis and tips from Jennifer Bryant, AHP affiliate-member board representative

Publication type

Survey says: Generalists win here: 42% describe themselves as general-interest equine publications. The others are breed mags (12%), association publications (26%), and tabloids/newspapers (many of which are general-interest but regionally oriented) (20%).

What it means to you: There's room for both "basic horse care" writers and those with special expertise or knowledge. If you're trying to break in, match your skill set to the publication's focus.

Circulation

Survey says: Tops are 5,000 and under (30%) and 10,000-25,000 (also 30%), followed by 5,000-10,000 (20%), 25,000-50,000 (14%), and over 50,000 (6%).

What it means to you: "Nag mags" are small potatoes compared to the dollar-a-word mainstream mags that we so admire. The numbers just aren't there to support high freelance pay rates. Unfortunate but true.

Readership

Survey says: The highest percentage (32%) of respondents claim an international scope, followed by regional (28%), national (22%), and state (18%).

What it means to you: Going to Britain or Bali any time soon? Perhaps you can parlay a trip to Badminton or an exotic horse trek into a feature story. If you have foreign horse-world contacts, use them. But if you're staying close to home, plenty of markets are eager for your regional-interest reports.

Use of freelancers

Survey says: A whopping 96% of respondents use freelance writers. Of the ones that do, just over one-quarter (26%) say that half their content comes from freelancers. Slightly fewer (23%) get about 25% of their content from freelancers. About 14% use freelancers for 75% of their editorial material. Almost the same number (13%) are about one-third freelance-written. The others use freelancers either exclusively (4%) or very little (20%).

What it means to you: Completely staff-written publications are almost nonexistent in the horse industry, so if you're good and can come up with targeted ideas, you should (in theory) be able to get practically any magazine to take a look. But don't waste your time on the ones that use freelancers rarely, if ever. Not sure? Call or e-mail the mag and ask.

Compensation

Survey says: Most offer a threesome: a byline (85%), a copy of the issue (81%), and payment (94%). Of those that offer "other compensation" (16%), the most common form is advertising space.

Pay rates themselves vary widely—too widely to categorize neatly. Our respondents offer anywhere from \$25 to \$400 for a front-of-book piece; from \$25 to \$750 for a department; and from \$30 to \$1,000 for a feature. Most respondents pay flat fees or ranges thereof, not per word or per column inch. Most (87%) do not offer extra money for sidebars, although more than half (54%) pay extra for photos supplied to accompany stories.

What it means to you: Don't write for free. Advertising is not useful to most writers (it could be more valuable to photographers, but they weren't part of this survey).

Become accustomed to negotiating on a flat-fee basis. When negotiating an assignment, decide whether the word count—and the work involved—make the fee worthwhile.

Fellow writers may be willing to tell you what they've been paid, but keep in mind that established, valued contributors often command top dollar. Don't be insulted if the editor offers less for your first few assignments.

Get a decent digital camera and learn to use it. If the mag has to pay for photos anyway, it might as well send the check to you.

Rights

Survey says: There's an even split (49% apiece) between those that buy first North American serial rights (FNASR) and those that buy all rights. Others also (or instead) buy Web rights (33%) and reprint rights (16%). But 81% of respondents that purchase FNASR and Web rights offer nothing extra for the online usage.

What it means to you: Get used to being asked for all rights, and negotiate accordingly. But be kind: One respondent admitted to not knowing what "FNASR" means. Some publications know full well that they're requesting all rights plus your firstborn child, but others are "Mom and Pop" operations that are learning about the publishing business as they go. Help educate them...politely. Then, after you sell the story, market the reprint rights (if you've still got 'em).

Kill fees

Survey says: Almost three-quarters (73%) of respondents offer no "kill fees"—a measure of compensation to a writer whose assigned story is cancelled, or "killed." Of the 22% that do, an average kill fee is 50% of the original pay rate.

What it means to you: Usually, not much, as this situation seems rare in our industry. In some cases, a story may get killed for political or economic reasons beyond your control. If the topic is especially sensitive or controversial, you may want to ask for a kill-fee clause in your contract.

Payment time frames

Survey says: "On publication" (76%) trumps "on acceptance" (22%). The definitions of those terms vary widely, from one day to 60.

What it means to you: Having to wait for your money is crummy. Boost the odds of getting a check sooner by asking the editor to confirm that the story is acceptable (please, not a nanosecond after you press "send"). After you've answered any questions and done any requested rewriting to the editor's satisfaction, send an invoice. If you act like a bona fide vendor, you may get paid in a more timely fashion.

Expenses

Survey says: The majority (69%) of respondents do not pay writers' expenses. Those that do reimburse long-distance phone calls (16%) and/or travel expenses of writers on assignment (27%).

What it means to you: Reimbursement of phone expenses is less of an issue today than in the past, with many people subscribing to calling plans with unlimited long distance. But travel expenses add up, particularly considering high fuel costs. If a magazine asks you to drive to another town to cover an event, say, ask whether you can invoice for miles traveled at the company's standard mileage rate. If it's an important story that requires spending time out of town to conduct research and interviews, ask the magazine to pick up lodging costs and meals or to offer a per diem.

Pay-rate trends

Survey says: Good news: 63% of respondents report increasing their pay rates over the past five years. Almost 35% of respondents' rates have stayed the same, and 2% have actually decreased.

What it means to you: If you've written for the same publication for a few years in a row and your checks haven't gotten bigger, it's time to have a polite chat with your editor.