

How to Become a Successful Freelancer

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So, you want to be a freelancer. (Or, entrepreneur [if you don't like the freelancer title](#).)

Maybe you are tired of toeing the corporate line. Maybe you are just ready to be your own boss. Perhaps the corporate 9-to-5 just doesn't work for your life. Or maybe you just want to work on more fulfilling projects.

Whatever your reasons are for wanting to become a freelancer or entrepreneur, the journey is an exciting one. And sometimes scary. I have been a full-time freelancer for more than two years now. Today, in addition to working with the awesome SEJ team, I also edit, write, and consult for small businesses and big brands like Hard Rock Cafe, Travelodge, and Best Western.

Getting to this point wasn't easy, but if I can do it I am confident anyone who is dedicated can, too. I am not particularly special. I am not ride-or-die dedicated, either. I just knew I didn't want my life to be lived between 6 p.m. when I got off of work and 11 p.m. when I went to bed. I didn't, as the song goes, want to be working for the weekend. So I went freelance.

Here are 13 tactics to help you ditch the full-time job and start hustling your way to freedom.

1. Start Small

It is unlikely you can quit your full-time job today and expect to replace that income in just a few months with no ground work. Impossible? No, but unlikely. If you want to jump into freelancing, start small by looking for jobs in your field (or the field you want to be in). For me, that meant looking for gigs on sites like [Upwork](#), [ProBlogger](#), and [Freelancer](#).

Over time, those small gigs that I could finish after work and on weekends added up to a decent portfolio. And those clients ended up as referrals.

2. Do Not Work for Cheap—or at Least Not Too Cheap

If you are just starting out, you only need one to three examples of your work to show prospective clients. Don't fall for the "working for exposure" line for too long. I would recommend working for less—but not free. [Undervaluing your work](#) sets you—and your entire industry—up for failure.

You need the experience; I get it. But don't be afraid to charge what you are worth once you have that experience.

3. Niche it Down

This one is still hard for me. I am a writer, but I also edit and help create content strategies. Until recently, I also did social media. It was hard for me to explain what I did in a concise manner. Today, I say I help brands create successful content to reach and engage their target audiences. In reality, I should probably niche down to a more specific industry, but currently nothing feels quite right.

The purpose of finding your niche is so you don't spread yourself too thin and you can assert your expertise in one, very specific industry.

4. Do Your Research

Let's say you want to be a small business social media consultant. You need to find out what types of services you should be offering: Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn? What goals do small businesses have? You might also realize that small businesses want a one-stop-shop for marketing—so maybe you team up with a local SEO

person to offer that services as well. (Or, maybe you learn to do it yourself!)

Doing the research and making a plan will help you with the next step.

5. Get Professional

There are some [who say business cards are dead](#). I am not entirely certain if that is true, but to be a professional, you don't HAVE to have a business card, particularly if you meet most clients online.

You *do* need a website of some sort. This might be your own website, or it might be a portfolio on another site in the beginning.

6. Create a Client Intake Process

Creating an intake process helps you look polished and professional. Looking polished and professional is how you create and grow your income stream. Your goal here should be to build trust with your client and make them feel like you have done this a million times, even if you are a newbie.

If you want to be a web designer, you need to research what other designers do first—for example, you might create mood boards on Pinterest, use Google Doc to keep contracts and other research organized, or have the client fill out a profile to get an idea of what their style is.

If you act like a professional, you will be treated like one—and you will soon be able to charge like one.

7. Network!

I am not talking about the boring, old-school networking. The kind that feels more like speed dating or a sales pitch. Nope, there is a new world order, and networking can totally happen online. (Introverts rejoice!) Look for Facebook groups built around books or podcasts that you love, or search for LinkedIn groups related to your industry.

A few other suggestions: Leave meaningful answers on sites like Quora or your favorite blogs. Email people in your industry you admire and reach out to influencers on social media sites like Twitter. The key to networking successfully is to be authentic and useful. Don't try to sell—try to *help* and your reputation will sell for you.

8. Figure Out Your Tax Situation

My greatest fear about going freelance was taxes. I pushed off making the jump because I was terrified about how much I would have to pay and how I would afford to pay those taxes. A good rule of thumb is to put aside 30% of your earnings to pay your federal income and self employment taxes and send payments to the IRS quarterly. You can use Turbo Tax or H&R block to easily file your taxes at the end of the year.

Keep in mind, I am by no means a tax professional; I am simply sharing what works for me. You can find more info about paying estimated [taxes here on the IRS website](#).

The point is, dig in and figure out what you have to do—don't let the tax fear hold you back.

9. Get a Handle on the Fear

Besides taxes, my second biggest fear was failure. What happened if I tried and it didn't work out? For me, the path to getting over that fear was working out the worst-case scenario.

Over the course of two years, I had built a decent side hustle. I had one main client (that was SEJ!) and a few smaller ones, and I was making decent money. Not six figures, but a decent amount.

But what happened if it all dried up? That could happen. Well, I bartended for many years in college and I waited tables. Not glamorous work, but it was something I was good at and I knew it would pay my bills. Worst case scenario: I go back to waiting tables. Not ideal, but not the end of the world.

Working through what I would do if I failed gave me the courage to make the jump.

Figure out what you need to do to get a handle on your fear. Otherwise, you risk making decisions based on fear—such as taking on clients you know you shouldn't.

10. Learn to Recognize a Red Flag Client

Some clients will be more trouble than they are worth. You can usually see them coming a mile away. They ghost on you after you agree on a start date, and then show back up ready to work. Then they want to change something in the contract. Maybe they are rude from the start, or they are condescending. ([Here are a few other red flags](#) to keep an eye out for.) You will feel your stomach clench each time their email shows up in your inbox.

I highly recommend developing a script you can use when clients start throwing those red flags. “Sorry, I just don't think I am a good fit for your needs” or “I cannot accommodate you at this time, but I would be happy to refer you to another freelancer.” (Only say this if you can, in good conscience, pass them along to someone else.)

11. Learn to Say No

When you work for someone else, you don't get to say no very much. You get assignments, and you do them. It can be very difficult to flip the switch in your head and learn to say no. When you are hustling and hungry, it can be hard to say no to gigs, even when you see the red flags.

You need to learn to say no when a job just doesn't excite you, or when it really isn't a good fit for your skills. Or if the client is obviously going to be a headache. Say no, and remember that time really is your most precious resource. Sure, you might have to take those 'boring' gigs occasionally to pay the bills, but don't sell your soul.

12. Don't be Afraid to Ask for Referrals

Asking for referrals felt awkward to me at first, but it is one of the most effective ways to build up your client base. It doesn't have to be complicated. Send an email to current or former clients: “Hey, I really enjoyed the project we did last (month/week/year). I currently have a few slots open in my calendar, so if you need any additional help, please let me know! If not, please keep me in mind if your friends/colleagues are looking similar work. I would greatly appreciate it!” Don't spend a lot of time hemming and hawing, just get to the point.

13. Just Do It

There may never be the 'perfect' time to make the jump to full-time freelance status. There is a good chance you will try to talk yourself out of making the jump because your cat got sick and you have vet bills, your rent just went up \$100 a month and you didn't budget for it, or you want to wait until your 401 contributions hit in two months.

All of those are viable reasons why you might put off making the jump. But, at a certain point, you need to set a date and (as Nike said) just do it. Don't let fear hold you back.

Want to learn more about when the right time is to make the jump to full-time freelancer status? Kelsey Jones and I recorded a Marketing Nerds podcast on just that topic. You can listen to the episode below!

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