

I've Tried That interviews Carol Tice

Halina: My guest today is Carol Tice of MakeALivingWriting.com. Carol is a blogger, a freelance writer, and a den mother at [The Freelance Writers Den](http://TheFreelanceWritersDen.com)- just to name a few things that she does. But, most importantly, at least in terms of what I think I've Tried That readers can gather from her work, is the fact that Carol teaches how one can become a real, professional freelance writer and make an actual, sustainable living from this pursuit. Part of that includes finding better and higher paying clients. So, thank you, Carol, for talking with I've Tried That readers today and talking with me.

Carol: It's my pleasure- nice to be here. Thanks for asking me, Halina.

H: To get started with our interview, overall, to get readers on board with what you've been doing all these years, how long have you been freelance writing?

C: I've been a freelance writer in two skins. From about 1990 until 1995, and then from 2005 until now. And In between, I did twelve years as a staff writer at two different publications, most recently The Puget Sound Business Journal- I wrote for 7 years, full-time, 3 times a week, every week, 50 weeks a year, 7 years.

H: So you've been doing freelance writing as well as employed writing.

C: Yes. I've had a full-time job as a writer in the middle there. So, I have two different "How I Broke into Freelance Writing" stories that happened in two totally different eras of the Internet and pre-Internet.

The first time, I broke in with a couple of essay contests that I entered. One was with the L.A. Weekly and one was with the L.A. Times. Both times it was the kind of thing where they put in announcements, like "Hey, we're going to have an essay contest and the winner's going to get \$100, or whatever, and the topic is..."

And the topic, when I read it, I went "It's like they wrote this contest just for me!" This is exactly something that's been happening to me! The L.A. Times wanted remodeling stories, and we had just been remodeling our house for three years. So, I wrote this whole "Our Hearts were Young and Stupid" story- all the things we did wrong...and that led to him [the L.A. Times] wanting me to cover the real estate section reported features, which absolutely terrified me; I had been writing pro for about nine months.

Prior to that, when I had won an essay contest that the L.A. Weekly had, they were turning 20 and they [asking me] "Tell us about your journey over the past 20 years." I think *I* was 20 and I had just come back to L.A. to be a songwriter, which was my original form of writing. So, I wrote about the struggles of that.

Literally, when I won that first one and they paid me \$200, I took all of my recording equipment and gave it away. I just said, "I found the kind of writing where they pay you

money!” And I never looked back. I thought it was so amazing...and I’ve never really stopped feeling, that’s it’s so amazing.

I love to write and, I love getting paid to do it. When I was a staff writer, on payday, they’d give me my paycheck and I’d just look at my editor and go “All this and a paycheck too!” I’ve really have never gotten over the thrill of it. Not everyone writes well, and therefore, there is a paid market opportunity for those of us who do.

H: Well, that’s great that you found something that you love to do- and you’re getting paid for it. That’s just a golden opportunity for anybody. It sounds like you’ve been writing for a long time...did you always want to write? Was that what you wanted to grow up and be, is a writer?

C: I did, but what I wanted to be a songwriter. When I was 14, in my room, I would be listening to music and analyzing lyrics. Later on I was going to song writing workshops and playing clubs in L.A. The fun thing is when I came out of songwriting into writing articles and later [on] blogs and everything...I sort of left my anxieties, all my complexes about writing, behind in songwriting. Because, to me, writing stuff that I don’t have to stand up and perform live, in front of people, is so easy by comparison. It’s so not scary to me in comparison to live performance, which absolutely terrified me, that I’m just like a happy-go-lucky kid every day. It took me a long while to tune into how many fears other freelance writers had about putting themselves out there, in magazines and, on their blog[s].

H: We’ve talked about I’ve Tried That and the readers that go on our blog. A lot of these people are looking to make money- as you do through your writing- but specifically, they’re looking to make an online income or even to work from home. A lot of these [people] are looking for work at home opportunities so to speak. Would you say that freelance writing can be a viable work at home job?

C: Absolutely, and never more so than now. More all the time. I’d say more and more magazines and companies, every day, are letting go of the idea that they need a freelancer to come into the office and take a meeting with them. That the magazine editor needs to have a face-to-face meet with you. There’s Skype now, as you can see here.

H: Yes.

C: There are amazing technology tools now that make it possible for all of us to communicate with clients all over the world.

Right now, my main clients are –I live in the Seattle area just for anyone who doesn’t know- and my main clients are based in Australia, Vancouver, New York and L.A. At the moment, I have no local clients.

H: So everything is from home, essentially.

C: It's all on the phone and on email and on Skype and...everywhere. And the coaching I do, I do from home as well.

If you're writing for a regional city lifestyle magazine, you're probably going to have to get out of your house and go drive around and physically observe things. There're many many kinds of freelance writing where; you don't have to be anywhere in particular. Anytime you're writing a national story, for instance, for a national magazine, no one is expecting you to fly to three different cities to interview experts. It's all done from home. So, it's very viable.

And, I actually get the question a lot of, whether you can really make a living as a freelance writer. Many people seem to feel like, it's sort of an urban legend, that there's any money in it, and it's mostly because they've been hanging around content mills, which we'll talk more about in a bit.

In 2011, which was the last year that my full-time focus was on freelancing, I made just about six figures, about a hundred grand. From there, I've earned less in the last year, and I'll earn less this year because I'm spending so much time helping other freelance writers make more money. It has now become a big activity in my life. If I was still freelancing, I'm sure I would continue making more each year, which is what I was doing every year since 2006, when I got back into freelancing. Straight through the downturn, I've made more each year, because that was my goal for me, was to make more each year, so I did.

The thing about the freelance writing marketplace is it's huge. When we talk with writers about freelance markets, if you can't find any good paying markets or you think there's not much work out there, it's usually because you don't know where to look for work as a freelance writer. Most people seem to think that Craigslist ads and content mills and bid sites like eLance pretty much constitute the entire universe of all the freelance writing opportunity in the world. And that is so untrue.

I refer to that as the underworld of freelance writing. That is the freelance writing underworld. It didn't used to exist; it used to be that we just had the surface of the Earth, and freelance writing jobs. But now, under the ground, this whole new world sprung up in the past decade, of low paying writing opportunities online and, all you have to do is leave the underworld, and return to the surface of the Earth-

H: Return to the light.

C: Return to the real world, of real publications, with real readerships, real businesses that sell real products and services and they hire real writers and pay them real living wages. Real first world, American, you-can-live-off-it, kind of money.

H: You're just preaching to the choir here. I'm a recovering [content mill writer] here, and I'm seeing a whole different world where, no one's paying you a penny a word or, even a tenth of a penny a word. It's just real live wages, it's real life earnings.

C: And this is actually why I started my blog, is that I started becoming aware of content mills and, I would see people saying “Oh, I’m all excited, I’ve worked my way up to a penny a word,” or something. And other people would be saying “Right on, that’s so awesome,” and I was like “What are you talking about?!” I just thought these people had all gone mad and, apparently, no one knew how to make writing pay a real living, and pay their bills. And I really started the blog to offer people tips on how to find real clients and get paid a fair wage. It was really like the old labor union reporter in me was enraged. I was just kind of like “Writers of the world, unite!” Stop being exploited. I just thought it was horrific and wanted to help writers not be taken advantage of and that’s sort of how the whole thing started.

Last year it was probably 50/50 that I did freelancing and helping other writers, and this year it’ll be more like 75% or 80% [in terms of helping other writers]. So, I don’t earn as much as a freelancer but I get leads every day. There’s so much work out there. It’s astonishing.

H: So following up on that, you’re talking about how much you’re making and obviously, you’re not spending as much time this year as compared to last year, or actually, 2011, in terms of, you’re not 100% freelance writing. However, you are still freelance writing.

C: Yeah.

H: Of course, many of your past blog posts do talk about how much you make this month, or this year. If I may ask, for this past fiscal year, what do you make right now, as a freelance writer?

C: Last year I made about 40 [thousand dollars].

H: OK.

C: I don’t know what I’m going to make this year because I’m contemplating taking a hiatus for a few months, so, it’s kind of in flux. But yeah, that [\$40K amount] was on the side of running a community with 700 members. That was like totally part time income from freelancing.

H. When you first started out as a freelance writer, what was your income per year, if you can go back to that time?

C: I don’t know if I remember. The thing is, the first round, when I first got in, I think I probably had a goal of making two grand a month. And if I made that I was totally happy and, we were paying our bills. You know, I didn’t want to work a ton. When I first got into it I had a newborn, so, I...

H: Which is a job in itself.

C: I was maybe working three days a week. My Mom used to come over and play with the baby. And then I would do it on days that my husband was home. That was probably a part-time kind of income.

H: That's pretty good if you're making two grand per month as a part time writer. That's what some people make as a full-time worker somewhere.

C: Right on. Well, I was very lucky in transitioning into it because, at the time I had a business, a home-based business...I was a script typist. I lived near MGM. I had been a secretary at MGM, in my past life. That was my day job when I was a rock and roller. I was a secretary during the day and then I would go gig at night and practice and write...

So, it kind of spun out of that. I went out on my own and was doing script typing for people. As I discovered freelance writing, I just sort of wrote more and more and typed scripts less and less. Until one day my husband said "You know, I just don't think you have to type scripts anymore. Why don't you just try writing and see what happens." He's actually behind every key business decision I've ever made.

I was like "Huh, it wouldn't have occurred to me. I would've been too risk-averse to drop the other thing entirely. So I was "OK, I'll try it," and of course I never looked back. Once I had more time to pursue it, I got more clients and, it just rolled along.

H: Well, a supportive spouse is certainly a big factor for success.

C: I'm very lucky, and I hear from people whose spouses are very unsupportive of their freelancing and trying to cobble together work-from-home careers and that's just, not cool. The fact is, the trend is, towards outsourcing, and freelancing, and the people who learn to do it today are going to be well-positioned.

Every survey they do of big business is all "we're outsourcing more and more, we love outsourcing, we're going to do more outsourcing in the future." All the creative jobs- design, photography, writing, editing, proofreading- these are all going to be outsourced jobs in the future. So those of us who learn how to run our own business and, be that freelancer- as far as I'm concerned- I have job security forever.

H: You touched on an important point. This *is* a career. This *is* a business. It does take some time to get it fully functional, fully running. You're going to have a little bit of a lag time before you really get successful, you have non-stop clients, and then you're turning down clients, essentially. Looking back over your life as a writer, what would you say were your biggest contributing factors to your success- especially monetarily as a writer?

C: Stupidity. As I expressed before, the inability to realize that I should be scared out of my wits to be doing things, was really helpful. Especially when I got that first L.A. Times job...I'd barely been writing pro and, I was like, shouldn't I know more? It would take me like six, eight weeks to write one of their features- you know, something that would

take me like two weeks to do now. I was so slow and the editor had to work with me so much.

The other big factor was that, that editor, and another editor the L.A. Reader, which I actually transitioned to after that other essay win from the Weekly...those two guys were willing to train me. Honestly. And I wanted to learn. I would go in, I was writing an article for the alternative press- like every week I would write some little story of some community controversy or something, and then I would take my article to the editor. It'd come out on Thursday. On Friday, there I'd be in his office. "I see you changed the first line of this, from that, to that. Why? Tell me." Every week. And I think they just loved that I wanted to learn so bad, that they were willing to take the time and really train me from scratch.

I don't have a degree in anything, much less journalism. I'd been playing with words since a young age, but for song lyrics. I had a decent command of language. And, I was curious. To be a successful freelance writer, you really need a natural curiosity. Because, you're going to end up writing about stuff that is not really sexy. All the good money is in, what I like to call, the low glamour kind of things.

For instance, I just finished up a series of eight feature stories at nearly a buck a word for an entrepreneur that were all about logistics and shipping.

H: Exciting stuff.

C: Sexy stuff! Yeah. "How to save money on shipping," "How to get cargo claim paid if your goods are lost in transit," you know. I have written about surety bonds, I have written about insurance, legal, real estate, all kind of arcane topics- and that's what pays well. Health care, technology. The more you have a natural curiosity where you can kind of get interested in a wide variety of things and, you love to dig into topics, and you want to ask why and you have a lot of questions for people...you have the right skill set for this.

I know people who are like "But I just want to write about what I want to write about! I just want to write about journaling with your children." That's a great topic for your blog and your own personal writing. That's not the writing you're going to make a good living off of. To do that, you're going to find the scenario where you know something, even a little of something, that not every writer knows about.

And this is, leading into it, the whole problem with content mills. They're asking you to write about really common topics that anybody could write, so the pay is really low.

H: So your advice is, especially if you're looking at making beaucoup money, you have to target the stuff that's really making the money out there in the economy. And it's not going to be, essentially flowery topics like, taking a journey with your children somewhere. It's going to be hard things like insurance, like investments, e-commerce.

C: Yeah, finance is great. Everybody wants to write about their pets, and home décor and home and garden kind of topics. It seems like there's a few verticals that are so overpopulated. How to do a home remedy for removing a wart, or whatever. All of these kind of crazy topics.

But, I know you wanted to talk about content mills and, you said you'd like for me to define them. First off, these are places like, I feel like the best-known one is Demand Studios. I just did a post where people listed a dozen different ones-

H: 14

C: Yeah, Associated Content, which is now Yahoo! Answers and...there's millions of these places, and more are born every week. I know, because they email me and say "You should sign up!" "You're right for this!" I get every pitch.

H: This might explain why so many people are now looking at this as a revenue source for them.

C: Oh sure, it's a very low barrier to entry. But the problem is...the basic structure of content mills for anyone who doesn't know is, they are engaged in stuffing websites with content, with hundreds and hundreds of articles, the topics of which are determined by strictly SEO research of what search terms and what search engines would give them a lot of traffic. And, they just spin topics off those keywords. And you write [those topics] and they put ads next to them and hope to make money off of affiliate ad clicks that they get.

The problem with this model (the advantage I had is, my background is as a business reporter) [is that], when Demand [Studios] went public, their disclosure documents -I'm betting I'm one of the few writers who did- they discussed how unprofitable this model is. They get \$54 a post, is what they revealed. You get \$15- and they weren't breaking even.

H: Yes.

C: So, the problem with content mills is- and everyone is always asking "Why don't they just pay more, and then they'd get better quality stuff, and I'd be able to eat?" Why doesn't this work out for me? Any why won't they ever be better? They will never be better because they don't have any money for you! Their business model is a failure. It's a failed business model. And Google is doing its best to make sure that it fails worse all the time.

H: Yes.

C: They have come to understand that, when content mill junk comes up to the top of Google searches, that it makes people want to go look for a different search engine to use. And they can't have that happening. So, they continue to improve their algorithm to

screen out this content, which means that content mills get less traffic, and less clicks, and have even less money for you. That's the future of content mills. Less money. We're just not seeing anyone that made a success of it. And, because Demand is public, you can see what's happened with their stock price, which has gone like this [hand showing downward trend] ever since they came out on the public markets. And it's because there's no future in their business. They're currently buying up other businesses-

H: I've seen that.

C: To be in. Because they're looking for another business to be in while they've still got some cash flow- they're taking that cash and buying other businesses that aren't about mass content development. Because they can tell: It's going down the drain. The other thing that's emerging is what I call the "move-up" mills, things like Contently and Skyward. Places where you get 30 to a 100 bucks for things. Mostly 30. So it's a little bit better pay, a little bit better clients- but, the thing is, anytime you're on a content mill, or on eLance, or, any of those places, there's an intermediary between you and the client. And that means at least half of the money, someone else is keeping. All the time. Usually, much more.

H: It's like a job agency, in a way.

C: Yes, it's like an employment agency. Yes. So, that's the problem. Demand gets \$54, but only \$15 of it is for you. As long as you continue on that model, you never get ahead. Because it's such a big cut of your of revenue that really should belong to you, is going to that middleman. So, when you cut out the middleman, and start actively prospecting to find your own freelance clients, you start to make real money. It's just kind of that simple.

H: So Carol, I think it's safe to assume that you don't like content mills.

C: I don't recommend them to people. Content mills have a place, and this is the place that they have: If you are a person who just needs to make a couple of hundred extra bucks a month, you want to be able to take your kids out to dinner once or go to the movies and, you just kind of need a little supplementary income, you don't have a lot of free time, you're totally unable or unwilling to market yourself in any capacity...that is actually what content mills were designed for. And when you see interviews with Demand's CEO...that is exactly how they describe it...that, our average writer makes \$200 to \$500 a month, and is supplementing their income. It's like a farmer's wife who needs a little extra income besides the farm revenue. That is their vision of who the writers are.

The mistake comes on the writers' side, where the writers get this idea that, they think that, huh, if I could write three of these articles an hour, and, eight hours a day, 40 hours a week, I could maybe try and pay my bills with this. In that way lies insanity.

H: And I wanted to touch on that for a second. There are a lot of posts out there from writers that write just for content mills. And they're claiming how "Well, this month I'm going to show you how I made \$2,000 on, let's say, Yahoo! Network. And here's the breakdown. It works for me and I'm making a living."

C: And if \$2,000 is your nut, and you're willing to work like a demon around the clock and have no other life, then, it sounds like you've found a dream thing. I bill \$10,000 a month, \$14,000 a month. For a long time, six grand was like the least I ever billed, in a month. That was my floor of how little I brought in. So, it's really a totally different income scenario when you start doing your own freelancing. It's a different universe. It's like Peter Bowerman, who talks about "The Well-Fed Writer": It's about getting out of the starvation mentality of, "OK, I didn't lose the house, I was able to pay the rent, yay, I'm a writer!"

H: Baby steps.

C: Getting out of that mentality...the first corporate client I got, I made so much more money, I took my family on an Alaska cruise. With the extra money. I had extra money for the first time in my life. You know, where I didn't immediately have to pay something off. It was a totally new experience to me.

H: And here's the thing...let's say you get your first, real world client, like your corporate client...you get that money coming in, for a little article you write, and all of a sudden, you try to go back to content mills and you can't.

C: Well, why would you either? You're going to make more in an hour than you were making all week, before. It's orders of magnitude, more potential.

H: And it spoils you.

C: And the thing is, once you start marketing your business proactively, and you start getting clients and they refer new clients and it all kind of starts to roll along...the reason, in my view, to be a freelancer is because your earning potential is unlimited. When you have a job, it's like, OK, I was an awesome staff writer but I could only make \$50K. That's what they pay. I was at the top of the scale. That's what you make. Maybe [\$60K] if you're really amazing. That's it. You can never make more. That is it.

H: Unless you make it to your next performance review.

C: I make an order of magnitude of that now. I never could've imagined how much money you can make. I never imagined making six figures when I started. It took me a while to get into freelancing to realize- like, oh. If I just targeted the right kind of clients here, I could really make a lot of money. I could really take care of my family. And in fact I have: A couple of years ago I had my husband quit his job. We didn't need to be a two-earner family.

H: As I like to say, good writing is always in demand. Don't ever think that, if you have a good product that you're producing, that someone's not going to pay you good money for it.

C: There are so many good paying markets out there. Honestly. I just got off the phone with one just before this call. A new client that reached out to me. They have a ton of content that they need to have developed. White papers. Case studies. Special reports. Blog posts. On a great big business portal that they're looking to build and, they're probably going to pay a buck a word, for a whole bunch of content that's for some of their advertiser clients on the site.

H: That is great news.

C: There's so much work out there. There really is. But it's always a huge shift when I get people in my community freelance writers den. The first thing that happens is they start seeing, with our discussion about rates, what they should bid. It's a mind-blower for anyone who comes out of the content mills.

I've had people say to me, "I don't understand why anyone should pay \$100 for an article. They shouldn't have to. It's like the thinking gets so warped, to where you truly lose track of the fact that you offer something of value, and there are plenty of people who are willing to pay really a lot for it.

H: But writers get into this mindset where they're like...we need to only get slave wages because that's all we're worth...

C: The mills so capitalize on the low self-esteem of writers. They're like a leech sucking the lifeblood of insecure writers.

H: That's a great mental image.

C: They live off your scaredness of not [believing] that you can put it out there, that you couldn't do this on your own. That is how they survive. If writers all reared up on their hind legs and said "Dang! I'm good!" and "I can go out and find clients," they would all be out of business tomorrow.

So, you said, "Why don't I like them?" The reason I don't like them is because you can't get ahead. You'll never get a raise. It will never get any better. The cost of living will continue to go like this [hand showing upward trend] and what you earn will go like this [hand showing even trend] for the rest of your life. Anyone who knows math knows that that is not going to be a good outcome. You need to continue to grow your income, and you can't on content mills. There's just no potential there.

H: But let's look at the writer who is stuck in content mills and all they know is the content mill lifestyle. Now, what would be the first steps that a writer like that would take to get out?

C: You know, I work with these writers all the time. In the den, we actually created a boot camp that's called "The Step-by-Step Guide to Freelance Writing Success," that talks exactly [about that]. The big problem with mills and, the other reason I don't like them, is that often the clips are sort of ghostwritten and/or they're just on sites where the reputation of the site is so crummy, for content like eHow, where the reputation of the site is just horrible, that you can't ever build a portfolio out of your mill clips to go get better clients. This is the other way they keep you caught in the gerbil wheel forever.

All that writing content mill work qualifies you for is to write more content mill work. That's it. It doesn't really qualify you to do anything else. So, the problem is you kind of have to start from scratch, even though you've been writing and writing and writing. You've got to start from scratch and, build a portfolio that you could show to a magazine editor, to a small business owner, and they would go "Oh!" and "I want to hire you."

There are some basic places that most people get those first clips to build that little starter portfolio and go out and get better paying clients. People you know, letting them all know you're looking to do some writing work and get some samples...you never know who they know who has a little business.

Local publications that you read, that little, tiny paper- like I live on an island [and] we get this little tiny hometown paper that comes out only twice a week- those are great opportunities to go write up a report on that city council meeting for them. They never have enough people; they'll be happy to have your help.

Nonprofits that you know and like their cause and you volunteer at or already are familiar with...they would love to have you rewrite their website and, you can get some online writing experience or write their brochure.

Professional organizations you might belong to from your past. Maybe you're a former nurse, lawyer, fireman, whatever...

Those are all really good, easy, basic places. [Also], the stores where you shop, the locally owned businesses that you patronize.

That's pretty much my hit list of where you go to get those initial samples.

There's a way to approach them where you don't sound desperate. You're just business-like and you're like "You know, I'm a writer, I'm looking to build my portfolio in this area"- you don't have to tell them- "I currently have no portfolio." "I'm looking to add some web content work to my portfolio and I'd be willing to do a small sample for you, a small project for you, if you would refer me and give me a testimonial if you like it."

It just doesn't take three or four of those to feel like you have enough clips to get out there.

H: And what about another avenue- guest blogging- on online sites?

C: If you're interested in paid blogging work, guest blogging is actually a really great way to get paid blogging. I know several freelance writers who get all their clients that way; they do a guest post on ProBlogger or [TinyBudda] or whatever and, clients email them and say, "Oh, I saw you on there; I'm all impressed now." You know. "I want you to sprinkle that magic on my blog," where you know how to get on the big blogs and get noticed and do social media.

For people who have a blog, often, the easiest way to build samples is to run your blog as a tightly focused niche blog. Not a personal journal where you talk about this, that and the other thing, and whatever occurs to you. If you have a focus niche blog, [that's great]. Because that's what all businesses have and will want you to do for them: to blog about their tightly focused niche topic. So, if you can show you can do that, and you can guest post on busy sites that get a lot of traffic, that introduces you to a lot of prospective clients. Absolutely.

H: So, it's just a matter of getting your name out there, getting some real clips that aren't content mill clips...

C: Like three of them, even. Not a lot. The other thing is, when I talk about getting paid blogging gigs, I'm talking about a hundred bucks a post and up. Real money- not this, twenty bucks a blog post.

H: Play money.

C: Yeah, play money. It just doesn't really make sense. You might as well stay on the content mill, for all the work you'll have to do with the client. But yeah, I know people who are getting \$150 to \$200 or \$300 a blog post from the right kind of clients.

H: Let's say you're a freelance writer. You've had, let's say, a couple of newspaper clips happen and, a couple of blog posts of yours were really popular...now you're sending out query letters to editors and publishers of big name magazines, big newspapers, and they're getting turned down. Or, you're not hearing back from them. Writers like that really get discouraged. Personally, that's where I was about a year ago. I was just getting discouraged.

C: This is why people stay on content mills, because you don't have to deal with this rejection. I just never thought of it as rejection- I thought of it as playing a big game of "Match Game". You remember that old game show? I'm just looking for where I fit into the marketplace. Where is someone who would like my kind of writing and my topics, my ideas?

On that [note], if I send a hundred queries and don't get a response...I see that [stated] a lot, [for example] "I stay on content mills because I send queries and I get nothing, and there's nothing really out there for me."

Writing queries is a skill. It's a very specialized skill that you have to learn how to do. Just like blogging is kind of its own format and form. Paragraphs are different and layouts are different, and the way we present material and headlines are all different in blogging, from newspaper writing...

Writing a query letter is a really specialized activity. We actually do, in my freelance writers den community, we review queries, and I very rarely get sent a draft of one that I think is ready to go out and get a gig. They're very often not in good shape. People don't even understand what needs to be in them. If that's your "root", where you're wanting to pitch magazines, you need to learn how to do it. You need to realize that it is a specific skill.

And it's a different skill from writing the article, interestingly. There are plenty of people who can write great articles but they don't know how to write a query so they're not getting assignments. You have to get in the door. Once you're in the door, you don't have to write elaborate query letters to that same market again; it gets easier as you go. But, to get those initial relationships, you do need to learn how to write a query [letter].

H: That's good advice, and it sounds like, for the writer who is writing their hundredth query and not hearing back, there's something wrong. You need to find a mentor, essentially.

C: Absolutely. Something's really wrong. You need to study query letters and learn what makes them work. My teaching partner, Linda Formichelli from The Renegade Writer, she has a packet of queries that got gigs that you can get off of her site. That's always a good resource. You really need to be a student of that format and just, keep pitching. People don't understand that marketing is a numbers game. You need to send a lot of pitches.

The usual cycle is: "I sent a query and it said, 'Wait 6-8 weeks for a response,' so now I'm waiting 2 months, and then I never hear anything, and then I start again with one more." You're not going to earn a living that way. You need to be sending out a lot of queries, all at once, not waiting for anything. Ignore those things that say, "Wait..."

I have a saying: Be a writer, not a waiter.

H: It all sounds like dating. You have to ask out 10 persons to get 2 yes's.

C: Yeah, you want more of the speed dating approach of like, every 10 minutes, a new person. Because, that's how you're going to find the publications you connect with.

H: OK. Well, thank you for that advice, Carol. I'm wrapping things up here...I have a final question for you. I know that you are one of the den mothers of The Freelance Writers Den, and that's a great forum for writers who are trying to get ahead...mid-level writers, starting writers, even expert writers. Can you just tell us a little bit more about that platform?

C: Sure thing. The Freelance Writers Den is my membership community, and it is occasionally open to new members. I'm hoping to be open again in a few weeks, for a short time.

Inside the community, we put on weekly live trainings with different guests. Right now, we're in the middle of forming a boot camp on how to get top quality, great clients. We have a job board twice a week that we call "The Junk-Free Job Board." It's a deeply researched collection of only really quality gigs that we've found from numerous sources. We have forums where you can ask pro writers any kind of question whenever you want. It's not just me, it's me and Linda Formichelli, Chris Marlowe, copywriters coach John Soares of Productive Writers. Deeply experienced pros are around to answer questions...I feel like I'm forgetting some of the benefits...discounts on some of my other classes.

H: I guess readers will have to go online and check out the site.

C: I feel like there's seven different elements, and I haven't named them all now. The forums, the live events, access to all our past trainings, are all recorded, so there's more than a 100 hours of past recordings. I knew I was leaving out something important. Sorry.

H: That's alright.

C: Tons and tons of material on every aspect of how to make money through writing.

H: This sounds like a wonderful career resource, especially for the content mill writers that feel like they're just stuck, that they have nowhere to go. This is just a wonderful resource to get people out, and free, and into the real world of writing.

C: Yeah, I work with a ton of people who are coming out of mills, who are looking to get off and help them earn more. And they happen to learn a lot more.

H: Well, thank you Carol. I really appreciate your time with us today. I really appreciate all the advice you've given I've Tried That readers. I hope they implement what you've mentioned here.

If you'd like to catch up further with Carol and look at the blog, look at her posts, [then] I definitely recommend going to MakeALivingWriting.com

Good luck with writing. Thank you again, Carol.

C: Thanks Halina.