

CHICAGO READER

Freelancing for the Reader

The Reader publishes articles by freelancers, including material that comes in "over the transom"—from writers we've never heard of and may never hear from again. We think that keeping the Reader open to the greatest possible number of contributors makes for a fresher, less predictable, more interesting paper. So we not only publish unsolicited freelance writing, we depend on it.

Below are our answers to the questions freelancers most commonly ask:

WHAT KIND OF ARTICLES ARE YOU LOOKING FOR?

Generally speaking, our greatest need is for magazine-style feature stories of varying lengths on Chicago topics. Beyond saying this, we usually answer this question with a list of the things we're not looking for: hard news (What the Mayor Said About the Schools Yesterday), commentary and opinion (What I Think About What the Mayor Said About the Schools Yesterday), poetry. We are not particularly interested in national stories unless there's a local angle, or in celebrity for celebrity's sake.

We value good writing more than we value any particular topic—and, it should be added, more than we value the above list of rules. We are always willing to violate our own guidelines—to publish news, commentary, a celebrity interview—if we like a particular article enough. Virtually any topic can make a good Reader story if it's written well enough. Similarly, any terrific-sounding article can miss the mark, no matter how fascinating the idea, if it's butchered badly enough.

We publish quite a bit of arts and entertainment criticism—reviews of movies, music, theater, dance, art, etc. Don't be put off if these essays seem to be written by the same people every week—we're always open to new reviewers who can do as well as or better than our regulars. Be aware, however, that many reviews are reserved by our regulars in advance. You can ask if the art exhibit or movie you want to review has been reserved by someone else. Or, better, you can just go ahead and review it anyway. If we like your piece but can't print it, we'll get back to you and suggest something we can print. If you'd like to become one of our regulars, submitting freelance material on spec is the only way to audition.

We also run short articles (typically 250–1,000 words) on places to go, things to do, restaurants, shops, etc. We welcome short profiles and humor pieces. A good rule of thumb: if you don't see it in the Reader (whatever it is), don't assume we don't want it.

We have occasional special issues focusing, among other things, on fashion, books, fiction, and stories from around the region. Fiction submissions are welcome year-round, but see below for our caveat about slow response time.

SHOULD I SEND A QUERY?

Sure. Occasionally we know in advance that we don't want a particular story because we've just published it, or someone else has, or the idea is patently revolting. But the rest of the time we're likely to respond: "You're welcome to try this on spec." We don't usually make assignments to people we haven't worked with before, but if you're willing to take a risk, we're willing to read your work. Feel free to [e-mail](#) us with a query anytime.

WHAT ABOUT CONTRACTS?

If we've worked with you before, we might make an assignment and discuss a deadline and payment. We've found that e-mail exchanges serve well as contracts (keeping everyone on the same page). We do our best to make sure assigned stories make it into the paper, but if an assigned story or rewrite doesn't work out we'll pay a kill fee of at least 25 percent of the agreed-upon minimum.

WHAT LENGTHS DO YOU PREFER?

We run short features of 250–1,200 words. Our larger feature stories start at about 2,500 and are often much longer. Reviews are generally 600–1,200 words but can be more. If we make an assignment, we'll likely recommend a length.

ONCE MY STORY'S ACCEPTED, WILL YOUR EDITORS DESTROY MY DEATHLESS PROSE?

We have a healthy appreciation for writerly idiosyncrasies but little patience for lazy reporting or bad logic. If we have to edit your story heavily, we'll explain our changes, and we show edited work to writers before publication. Naturally, a writer can refuse at any time to submit a rewrite or withdraw a story from consideration. Stories that need a lot of editing tend to migrate to editors' back burners. If we want your story but it's taking a long time to get it edited, we'll be happy to give you an advance.

HOW MUCH DO YOU PAY?

As of this writing (January 2009), from about \$25 (the shortest items) to \$1,000 (the longest cover features). Short features usually run \$150–\$300, and reviews pay set rates of \$150 or \$250, depending on length. A more complete schedule of fees is available upon request. We pay weekly.

DO YOU PAY EXPENSES?

Not usually. Check with us ahead of time if you plan to spend our money. Expense requests, including receipts, should be submitted within a month of publication.

WHAT RIGHTS ARE YOU BUYING?

Unless a different arrangement is made prior to publication, our freelance fee for articles includes first-time serial rights, nonexclusive Web use, archival rights (microfilm, microfiche, etc), and the right to publish in anthologies, for an additional amount to be negotiated. Our fee for listings (such as a movie capsule) includes all of the above plus the right to repeat publication in print. We also

assume permission to make articles available via third-party online databases such as [Proquest Alt-Press Watch](#) and [AltWeeklies.com](#).

HOW SOON DO YOU REPORT ON ACCEPTANCE/REJECTION?

Usually pretty quickly, but if we don't love your article or hate it, we could hold it for weeks or even months, waiting for the right time to publish it. If you know that you'll need a response in a hurry, inform us in a cover note.

HOW ABOUT ARTWORK AND PHOTOS?

We prefer to take care of art ourselves. You're welcome to submit photos, drawings, diagrams, etc, but we may decide we can do better with our own artists and photographers. Of course, if it's going to be impossible for our people to do the artwork the subject of your story is leaving town for six months, or the art requires technical expertise that you happen to have it may be to your advantage to supply us with something.

Photographers and illustrators who want to contribute to the Reader should send the editor a link to samples. If we like your work we'll add you to our roster of available artists and let you know when we have an assignment for you. Occasionally we accept unsolicited photographs, photo essays, and comics. And occasionally we publish photos uploaded to our [Flickr groups](#).

DO YOU ACCEPT REWRITES OR SIMULTANEOUS SUBMISSIONS?

We have on rare occasion accepted rewritten versions of articles that have already appeared elsewhere, and we have no objection in principle to simultaneous submissions (manuscripts submitted to several publishers at the same time). But in both cases we need to know up front what we're dealing with: please inform us in your cover note.

WHAT MANUSCRIPT FORM DO YOU PREFER?

We prefer e-mail (mail@chicagoreader.com) with your text pasted into the message rather than sent as an attachment.

Feel free to [e-mail](#) us if you have any further questions. And thanks for your interest in the Reader.