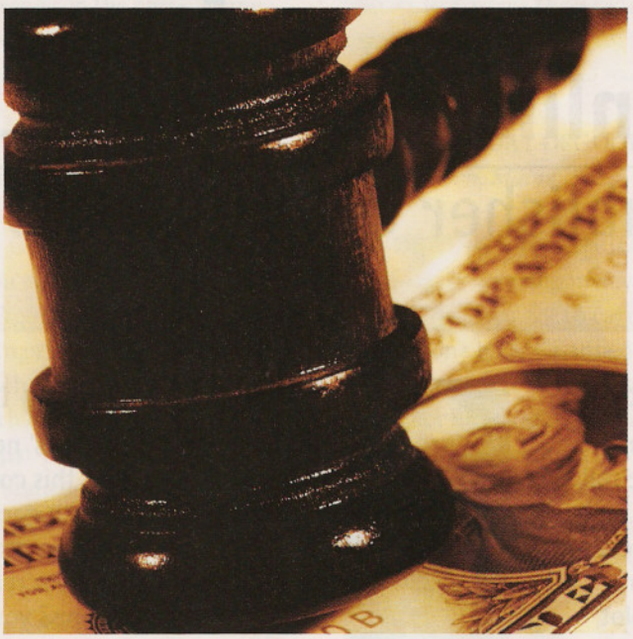


Bidding War

Are freelance-bidding sites helpful to professional writers—or are they online dollar stores where clients shop for cheap labor?

By Michelle Strait

The world is full of desperate writers, and you'll find thousands of them on freelance-bidding sites, fighting for low-paying writing assignments. Over at getafreelancer.com—one well-established bidding website—the most popular writing project was for 20, 500-word articles per week at a rate of $2 each. Two dollars each! Worse yet, there were 76 bidders vying for this job. Projects like this are common, but should writers really take the bait on assignments that pay less than a penny a word?

Freelance-bidding sites operate much like eBay: A buyer posts a job assignment, writers bid for the job and the winning bidder gets to complete the assignment. The lowest bidder usually wins. As you can guess, quality has little to do with the process.

When I began my writing career, freelance-bidding sites helped me tremendously. Some were free to join, but the best of the crop charged membership fees. I panicked at the thought of networking, cold-calling and marketing, so I shelled out the cash for memberships to elance.com and guru.com. I quickly won enough well-paying assignments to recoup my fees and quit my full-time job as a graphic specialist and proofreader.

Things went from great to garbage over a two-year period. An influx of writers, happy to write for .01 cents per word, drove the market into the ground. No matter how low you bid, someone would go lower. The better-paying assignments began to disappear, leaving mostly low-paying assignments with ridiculous demands.

"The freelance-bidding sites currently available are geared almost completely to the buyer," says Leslie Poston, founder of and writer for writerswell.org, a site for professional writers and editors. "Because of this, buyers are able to post project requests that ask for professional writing and offer laughable rates in exchange for this expertise."

That's an understatement. Buyers request batches of 500- to 800-word articles for $3 apiece. They want 100-page e-books written for $250. My favorite? Zero pay in exchange for exposure and future work from some obscure website.

Karen Spring, freelance writer, admits she's found great clients on elance.com. Her experience up to now has been positive, but she notes a steady decline in quality assignments. "Lately, the jobs listed on the site have taken a downturn," Spring says. "People want to pay next to nothing for a lot of work."

The sites make their money from writers looking for any assignment they can find. Buyers aren't charged listing fees, so they have nothing invested in the process. But writers often pay membership fees just to bid and are always charged commissions on the jobs they do get.

"There's no doubt freelance-bidding sites like elance.com are set up to favor the buyer," says Tiffany Dow, author of *A Writer's Guide to Internet Marketing*. "But if you're persistent in bidding and stick to your guns about your prices, you can develop profitable relationships with the few buyers willing to pay for top quality."

Unfortunately, very few buyers want to pay for good writing. A proofreading client admitted he'd rather hire an inexpensive, bad writer and then hire a proofreader or editor to take care of the details. This mentality is prevalent among buyers.

Allison Nazarian, president of Get It In Writing, sees no value in the sites. "A process in which quality, service and professionalism are trumped by 'lowest bidder gets the work' is bad for everyone involved and must surely be reflected in the process and final product."

Buyers often encourage unethical tactics, such as requesting rewrites of published books or asking that paragraphs from various websites be combined and reordered. Most disturbing is the willingness of writers to accept these jobs. It's common to see 20 or more writers bidding on these illegal, low-paying assignments.

Dismayed with the current state of freelance-bidding sites, Poston decided to fix the problem. She and a partner are working on a freelance-bidding site that she says will benefit writers as well as buyers.

"Right now, we're in the planning stages," Poston says, "working with creative professionals and programmers to make sure the needs of the buyers and creatives are met in the best system possible."

Should you avoid freelance-bidding sites completely? Not necessarily. You might get lucky and find a great assignment. But be wary: You may do better marketing yourself and networking to clients who put more emphasis on good writing and less on cheap labor.

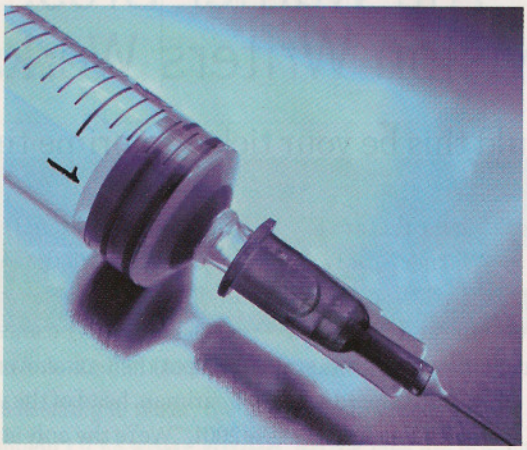
MICHELLE STRAIT (michellestrait.com) is a ghostwriter specializing in business reports and e-books.

[CONVERSATION]

➥ In the previous article, Michelle Strait questions the helpfulness of online-bidding websites used by freelance writers. Do you think online-bidding sites are a great place for freelancers to find work, or are they just writer sweatshops in disguise?

E-mail your response to writersdig@fwpubs.com with "Bidding War" in the subject line, or post it at writersdigest.com/forum.

[MODERN MEDICINE] BOTOX AWAY HAND CRAMPS?



Writing is tough work—and not just the mental aspect. The physical activity of writing by hand can be exhausting, especially if your hands are more used to hitting keys than moving a pen. For traditionalists who still insist on longhand, help may be on the way from that Hollywood favorite: Botox.

According to research from the *Journal of Neurology, Neurosurgery, and Psychiatry*, the botulism toxin, which is more commonly used to banish wrinkles, can rid your hand of writer's cramp.

Researchers tested 40 writer's-cramp victims with a series of randomly assigned injections that included either Botox or a dummy substitute. They did this for 12 weeks, and of the 20 people who were treated with Botox injections, 70 percent experienced significantly less writer's cramp.

This isn't to say that every longhand writer should be knocking down the door of the closest dermatologist. Side effects include mild and temporary muscle weakness and pain at the injection site. Relief isn't permanent, either—you'd have to keep going back for more shots to keep your hand moving across the page sans cramping. Now that's suffering for your art.

—JEN A. MILLER