



BY JESSICA ROSS, Editor and Editorial Workflow Systems Developer

# HOW TO WRITE A GOOD ASSIGNMENT LETTER

**A GOOD ASSIGNMENT LETTER IS ESSENTIAL** in bringing in the manuscript you're looking for. Take the time to clearly spell out the story you want and you are more likely to get it, perhaps even in the first draft. You may also win the appreciation of your writers: if they have a clear sense of what they need to deliver they'll be able to get straight to work, saving them time and reducing anxiety as well. Here are some tips to help you get off on the right foot.

## DO YOUR HOMEWORK

Peruse background research on the topic and perhaps story interviewees so you can develop a clear, precise assignment. Learning about the topic will help ensure your story is fresh and not based on poor assumptions or out of date ideas. Consider creating a research package to give to writer. Providing a foundation of research helps the writer get well beyond the basics in his or her own research.

## DETERMINE A WORKING THESIS

This thesis may change, given information the writer may discover during their process, but assigning what point you would like the writer to make, particularly in service writing, helps you get a piece with structure and interviewees closely tailored to the story you want. Discuss the thesis with the writer to ensure they feel confident that it's a point that they can prove.

## NOTE THE TIMELY HOOK

Why is this story right for your brand now? If you have a reason for wanting this story now, make sure you share that reason with the writer. If you don't have an element of timeliness in mind, ask the writer to come up one.

## MAKE A LIST OF QUESTIONS

Consider your reader. What will s/he want to know? What perceptions is s/he likely to have that may contrast with this information, and how can you address the discrepancy?

## SUGGEST A STRUCTURE

Discuss how you see the writer presenting the piece. Does the information best come across in diary style? Is it better structured with subheads? Should it be presented as a package with a mainbar, sidebars, timelines and a chart?

## DISCUSS VOICE

Should the writer use first person? Or should they stay out of the limelight and use third person?

## DON'T KEEP SECRETS

If you're hoping that the writer will explore a particular angle, share that expectation with them. Be open to their feedback: perhaps they'll have a different way of approaching the piece, but at least you've discussed your desires.

## NOTE APPROPRIATE SOURCES

You can go beyond what types of experts would best suit the story. Use the assignment letter as a tool to keep sources fresh – you can even note any sources you prefer the writer not use, such as personalities too often interviewed on a given topic. Offer web links, books and other sources.

## SING THEIR TUNE

If you are assigning a story that the writer pitched, refer to the query and use phrases from it where it makes sense. You're not cribbing the writer's words, you're showing that you want exactly what they suggested.

## BE CLEAR WITH RATES, RIGHTS AND DATES

Ensure you've included a fee and deadline in the assignment letter, and outline your rights requirements or refer to your writers' contract. Make sure that the writer agrees to the rate, rights requirements and deadline before s/he begins work. Note the kill fee and describe when a kill fee would be paid. For more advice on this subject, see the Magazines Canada hotsheet, *Crafting an Agreement for Freelance Writers*.

## GIVE THE WRITER A CHANCE TO RESPOND

Discuss the assignment and ask the writer to identify any changes s/he would like to see, both right away and if their research uncovers new information that would change the story parameters.

With your story requirements spelled out, add your payment terms and kill fee conditions, unless they are stated in your writer's agreement. By being clear and open with your writers on all the points above, hopefully you'll develop strong partnerships with them that will make for a great long-term working relationships – and terrific stories for your readers.

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