

# Sell Your Soul!

## Attention: Ex-Journalists & Academics!

*Sell Your Soul and Abandon Your Principles for a Few Bucks!*

*In the book, I touched on the battles that ex-media or ex-academics have with the whole idea of “commercial” writing – the whole “selling-your-soul” thing. Let’s take these dilemmas – phrased as questions – one at a time:*

## Coming From Academia, Commercial Writing Feels Like a “Sell Out.” True?

In academia, especially creative writing/MFA programs, the focus is on “serious” or “literary” writing. Fine. But to look down one’s nose at fields of writing that do pay well while providing precious few alternatives doesn’t set right with me. Fact is, many MFA grads truly believe they’re going to be the next Jonathan Franzen or Patricia Cornwall, not grasping the lottery odds of that scenario.

I attended an academic conference a few years back for both professors and students of writing on the graduate and undergraduate levels. My book had been adopted as text in several universities at that point and I was there to stir up some more interest.

With marked-up conference program in hand, I set off to visit several germane breakout sessions with titles like, “Five Years Out: What We Wish We’d Known When We Earned Our MFA” and “Alternative Job Options for MFAs” – where they actually asked, *What are the ethics involved in continuing to develop MFA programs (and they’re literally mushrooming) when there are no good jobs on the back end?* Good question.

I approached the moderators at the beginning of the sessions, told them who I was and why I was there and asked for the chance to make a few comments about my field (and book) when the Q&A arrived at the end. They were all very receptive to my story and in one session, I handed out no less than 50 cards.

But I soon came face-to-face with *The Attitude*. I’d just gotten up and given one of my impromptu pitches – and people were listening. An older, grizzled academic in the back – full beard, rumpled jeans, untucked shirt – raised his hand. And judging from all the head-swiveling and murmuring going on within the audience and the panel, clearly, he was *Someone*.

He said, “Just keep in mind, that if you get involved in the commercial arena, you can become complicit in the exploitation of certain peoples...” (presumably banana republic sweatshop workers for big sport shoe manufacturers that hire copywriters...). I could almost hear the mental red pens coming out and crossing off that option. Afterwards, virtually no one came up to me for a card.

Fact is, the picture he painted represented an infinitesimally small percentage of copywriting situations. Given the chance to reply, I'd have said: *With all due respect, don't you think you should give these students credit for being intelligent enough to decide for themselves where to focus their efforts, instead of standing on high and closing off doors for them while offering little in return?*

I ran this story past a gentleman I met at the conference. Full professor of English, two-time novelist, broad work background including software development, technical writing, marketing copywriting – in short, a true Renaissance man and firm believer in people having a wide range of writing experience and not becoming too insulated in academia. His response:

*Academia is not a good place for young writers early in their careers. They need to see the world, and the corporate world and commercial marketplace offer important, eye-opening experiences. I find it terribly ironic that most of these young folks get treated like adjunct slaves by the very writing programs which, while certainly eager to take their money, seldom offer a decent job or adequate pay.*

He went on to tell how his son landed a job as a proposal writer in his second year out of school, earning \$60K at one of the world's largest environmental engineering firms. He commented:

*MFA teachers won't see that kind of money until mid-career, if ever. My son's getting a new window into another powerful world, an incredible education in a fascinating, high-stakes game – writing proposals for hundreds of millions of dollars. But our Exalted One [the name he bestowed on my outspoken critic] would not approve.*

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## Coming From Journalism, Commercial Writing Feels Like a “Sell Out.” True?

I hear this fairly often from folks in the media, including freelance journalists. Many have been told that engaging in copywriting is akin to crossing over to *The Dark Side*. And at the heart of their dilemma is their training in objectivity.

Journalists get endless contacts from PR types who are trying to land media exposure for their products, services, or clients – as a result, the average journalist is well versed in tuning out the pitch in order to stay focused on the newsworthy. Just imagine the conflict that develops when a career change to commercial writing means actually *writing* a pitch!

I got a note from a journalist who was making such a transition. It read:

*Journalism, ideally, is all about objectivity and presenting all the facts of the case – good or bad. Corporate writing is sales and marketing, and it definitely isn't objective. I have to admit that this makes me a little squeamish.*

I have to smile when I read comments like this. As if, for those engaged in this field, it's a constant battle to keep from selling one's soul to the devil. I wish it was all so interesting and dramatic and that one was truly always flirting with eternal damnation. Alas, not so.

Certainly, it's easy to see how, after striving for a certain standard of objectivity for so long, after cultivating the habit of always presenting “the other side of the story,” a marketing brochure can seem decidedly one-sided. If you really want to move into commercial writing, however, you'll have to work on changing your worldview. Yes, this is an entirely different kind of writing, with an entirely different set of standards – not *bad*, just *different*. A company's marketing materials simply highlight its selling points – the things that make its products superior to the competition and hence, worth buying.

Some of the more “squeamish” out there might decide that that qualifies as “stretching the truth.” I call it putting your best foot forward. It's what people and companies do when they want to attract the attention of the marketplace. It's not supposed to be objective journalism, and the target audience does not receive it as such. Today's media-savvy consumers know when they're receiving a pitch for a product or service and they employ the appropriate intellectual filters as they read marketing materials. I'd assert that most people do the same when reading or watching the news – which is always biased in some way, no matter how hard journalists strive for objectivity.

If “hard sell” materials like product brochures and direct mail campaigns still seem absolutely foreign to you, consider building your commercial writing business on projects like customer newsletters, internal communications, ghost-written articles for trade magazines, etc. These focus more on simply presenting information to the target audience than on selling anything. I promise, you'll sleep just fine at night.

The writer also raised another dilemma of erstwhile magazine writers:

*How do you go about contacting people you've interviewed for articles in the past and asking them for work? Before, I was the one with something they wanted – a mention, maybe a feature mention, in a top-ranking trade magazine. Now, I'm turning around and asking them to hire me to work for them. It's a complete switch of positions, and it's not easy to just do it.*

Check out the interview with California FLCW Chris Taylor, a former journalist, in Chapter Nine (*Full-Time Dream, Part-Time Reality*), where she navigates some of these issues. And also ponder this...

I have a friend who does executive article ghostwriting for top company executives. He works both ways: working the pubs and finding out what they're looking for and then finding the exec who needs to get his/her name out there, OR contacting the execs, offering his services to write an article and then finding the pub to run it.

He's very cognizant of the fine line between a good informative piece and PR for a company but here's his edge: He guarantees the executive placement of the piece. How? He's up on the current editorial "wish-lists" of many publications and knows precisely how to write it so that the pubs see the value to their readers. He offers the pubs a professionally written piece (i.e., no "newbie" inexperience leading to major rewrites, etc.) of real value to the readers, and at NO cost to them. He gets paid by the exec and instead of the \$500 he might make for writing the piece directly for the pub, he gets paid \$1500 to 3000 a piece. Smart cookie.

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*Sigh, the mental angst-filled gyrations that those hailing from the Fourth Estate or Academe put themselves through are a bit comical. Not trying to be glib, but it really is much ado about nothing. I promise, you can embrace this business, make a pile of money, and still walk in the light. The secret is to just shift your perspective. Many have done it. A few URL's of ex-media folks who've made the transition:*

[www.prowritersandeditors.com](http://www.prowritersandeditors.com)

[www.theinhousewriter.com](http://www.theinhousewriter.com)

[www.marciDiehl.com](http://www.marciDiehl.com)

[www.reeveswriting.com](http://www.reeveswriting.com)

[www.worryfreewriting.com](http://www.worryfreewriting.com)

[www.duroskoPR.com](http://www.duroskoPR.com)

[www.compelling-cases.com](http://www.compelling-cases.com)