

# SURVIVING AS A FREELANCER: NOTES FROM REZA RITES

## A Presentation given for RI Council for the Humanities' May 13 Skill Share Workshop (Tips for Thriving on a Shoestring)

### WORKING FOR FREE, COMING UP WITH RATES: DO'S & DON'TS

- Do Work for Free. Wait, do not work for free. Wait, find a balance then change the balance ALL THE TIME.
  - Working for free definitely works - To learn a skill, to network with a new crowd or the right people, to build clips, to be independent, for getting the word about what you do, to connect with people who may give for you for free later, and so when you're feeling huffy you can say, shit, and I'm not even getting paid for this (that does not mean you don't do the job).
- Don't work for Free. Wait, do work for free. Wait, find a balance then change the balance ALL THE TIME.
  - Working for free or minimal pay definitely does not work – When it's being asked of you time and again and there's no plan for receiving income; for trying to come up with a rate for yourself; when other benefits like free tickets, editorial meetings or advancement, or access to higher level people isn't coming with it.
- Do take the time (DAYS, WEEKS) to make yourself a rate sheet. REALLY. It should be based on a number of factors including experience AND what you need to survive. BUT DON'T let it run you or ruin opportunities. It's not the end all for what you're going to be paid, but it gives you a base/rationale for saying
  - yes (it fits my rates),
  - no (it does not fit my rates),
  - no (it does not fit my rate, but I'm still going to do it),
  - yes (it fits my rate, but the turnaround is ridiculous, I want to charge more), or
  - no (it doesn't fit my rate, it's above it. Hallelujah, my rates just went up).

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### OTHER DO'S:

- Do maintain, create, or identify a specialty.
  - Sometimes it's a given – you've always been good at, read on, and reacted to computer repair, puzzles, French music.
  - Sometimes it's passion. You love dogs, always have, always will. There it is. Start learning everything you can about dogs – then write about them.
  - If a conversation is happening three rooms away and a question comes up about history, pop culture, or news from the DR Congo and you can hear it – and give the correct answer - that's your specialty.
  - Once found, it's a great way to find assignments, grants, money, and contests.
- Do read and consume information ALL the time.
  - A great place to start is with guides on how to be a successful freelancer or consultant.
  - It might be each and every single news source available – print, online and tv – if you're trying to work in news.
  - It might be publications about music, dogs, or puzzles because it's the specialty you have developed or are developing.

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### OTHER DO'S (con't):

- Do read and consume information ALL the time (cont'd)
  - It might be a certain type of blog or website or it might carry a certain theme. If so, find more than one of them. And try to really follow them regularly.
  - It might be signing up to hear from every website you visit.
  - These places may also be great for finding assignments, grants, money, and contests.
  
- Do create, build, and maintain relationships. That includes
  - Yes, utilize Facebook, Linked In, and stuff, but it really does not end there.
  - “Network” at events. Definition: Have business cards on you, introduce yourself, ask questions, exchange contact info.
    - If you're shy, find the other uncomfortable people in the room, commiserate about how uncomfortable you are, then go for the same approach.
    - If you're outgoing, step it up and do the job of introducing others.
  - Join or become a member of something – something in line with who you are. Think free PR, a break from work, a way to work more, a place to test new ideas, a street/marketing team you don't have to pay.
  - Keep in touch with folks regularly, and be vigilant about following up.
  
- Do set goals and action plans. And be specific. Make it a moment to demonstrate what I call the privilege of fearlessness. That is, be a fearless visionary FOR YOURSELF. Then, be prepared to adapt, delete, prolong, and reconsider those goals – OVER AND OVER AGAIN.
  - Letting yourself think big is a great way to find grants, money, and contests.
  - Create schedules, deadlines, or desired end dates for projects. This is a great tool for personal motivation and keeping oneself managed. It might be a certain number of articles written, it might be about your salary / worth, it might be a place to travel to, it could be anything.
  - IF YOU WANT TO DO THIS FULL-TIME, these things are likely to change.
  
- Do learn to Say NO and do learn to set boundaries
  - Boundaries can be great for building up other people's anticipations / expectations around your work. For instance, if you blog, try doing it only once or twice a week – on the same day. Your audience will eventually know when to check in, and will be excited about what's to come.
  - A schedule helps with boundaries too. If you're not making enough money off one job, your schedule might need to shift to reflect that; say no to the next free request, do less free work, demand more money, or spend more time elsewhere.
  - Boundaries might be about the type of work, publication, organization or the type of hours, your salary/worth, etc.
  - IF YOU WANT TO DO THIS FULL-TIME, these things are likely to change.
  
- Do Take Risks
  - If it smells like a good opportunity, walks like a good opportunity, and talks like a good opportunity, it probably is one. BUT YOU WILL NEVER KNOW TILL YOU TRY. By the way, often times a good opportunity comes in the form of an invitation to a lunch meeting.

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### OTHER DO'S (con't):

- Do Take Risks (cont'd)
  - If you feel embarrassed or pushy about a follow up, consumed with interest in a project even though it's post-deadline for the application, or anxious and ungrateful about saying no to an offer, MANY TIMES, not all times, you still need to go forward with it.
  - Sometimes we get used to 1) getting unsolicited praise and recognition from others or 2) being too busy to do the work to receive praise and recognition. But there are lots of prizes and awards out there that you can be getting, and filling those forms out is similar to filling out grant and fellowship forms.
- Do make time to learn your craft, to share your craft, and to teach it.
  - Attend conferences, seminars, etc., especially if there's someone there you want to meet, hear from, or learn from.
  - If you have found joy, freedom, and a sense of worth, shouldn't you at least share it with your friends? Invite them to be part of projects, even if you have to take time to teach them some of it.
  - Accept invitations or seek opportunities to give presentations or workshops on what you do. Besides teaching others, which usually feels good inside, you may find it becomes another source of income.

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### OTHER DONT'S:

- Don't start working as a freelancer or consultant full-time until you talk to an accountant about how your taxes are going to change.
- Don't leave yourself unemployed. That is to say, yes, take risks, but having things in writing, especially the salary, and knowing it's definitely happening is a lot better than giving notice to a current employer for a false start or empty promise.
- Don't be afraid of credit, but for goodness sake, pay those cards off!!
- Don't become fixated about things you don't know. You have time to learn!!
- Don't become fixated on bad news about the economy, the news industry, the vastness of the world wide web, any of that. Be aware of these factors; they are things to plan for or around, but they shouldn't deter you from your dreams if you're ready.
- Don't pretend like you and your computer are friends or buddies through thick and thin. Try to troubleshoot, anticipate, and address any and all computer and tech issues and FOR GOODNESS SAKE, back up your back up, which of course, is backed up.