

Analysing what you have to sell

UNIT 2

Aims

When you have completed this unit you should:

- be able to work out what assets you already have that are saleable
 - have begun to see ways to expand your range of products.
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Introduction

Having analysed your goals, motives and personal attributes, the next thing you need to analyse is your assets. This is not a time for modesty – this is business! It will be far easier to see where you should be concentrating your marketing efforts (Unit 3) when you have a clear idea of your assets.

Many people, either from modesty or from underestimation of their own talents, believe that they have less to offer than is the case. In fact, every individual has some knowledge or expertise which is of use to someone, and if they have writing ability as well they can turn it into interesting material. You may, for instance, believe that you have little to offer ‘because you have been out of the workplace having children’. Yet caring for and bringing up children is one of the subjects which virtually everyone needs to know about at some time in their lives, and anyone who can offer information and advice about it has a valuable commodity to sell. Alternatively, you may have been working in an estate agency, in which case you will have boundless information and experience of things that people do to their houses to make them more saleable or nicer to live in, all of which could be of interest to anyone else with a home. Similarly, anyone with experience of the law, medicine, accountancy, investment, gardening, hairdressing, selling, or anything else can offer their knowledge to others through the written word.

What are your assets?



Activity 1

In order for you to work out what you already have within your grasp that could make the basis of saleable writing, the rest of this unit will in fact be one long activity, with a space after each potential asset for you to write in what you have to offer in that respect. To help you think, I have divided the possibilities into categories and made some suggestions of the sorts of things which you might be able to include. Again, you may be able to think of other things which are not included within these categories. The first potential assets in the list will be the broader ones: the qualities and attributes that will enable you to produce good-quality writing a publisher will want to print. After these I'll mention some more practical and down-to-earth assets you will find very useful.

Your writing skills

You must already feel fairly confident about your ability to write clearly, and in an engaging style, or you would not be contemplating the prospect of selling your writing for money. All the same, it will be important for you to assess the strengths and weaknesses of your particular writing style, so that you can continue to enhance the former and reduce the latter. In the box below, make notes on what you feel are (a) your strong points as a writer and (b) areas where improvement is possible. Do you tend to get carried away with colourful words and phrases and produce 'purple prose'? Are you able to write strong, clear sentences and paragraphs but don't feel so confident about organising your material so that an argument or description develops logically? A professional writer must always bear such considerations in mind, and you should be in a state of continuous self-assessment of your basic skills.

(a) My strengths as a writer:

(b) Areas for improvement

cont.

Activity 1 cont.

Surprisingly, not all professional writers are very good at details like spelling, grammar and punctuation. If they are weak in those areas they have to compensate for it in others, otherwise it is not worth the editor's or publisher's time and money hiring other people to put the words right. Those who are adept at these skills, therefore, have one more weapon in their arsenal, since they are solving another problem for their customers – or at least not creating any new ones. How confident do you feel in this respect?

Writing experience

This is probably the next most important of all the assets you could have, which is why it is hard for the beginner to break into the writing business. If an editor or publisher can see a collection of articles or a list of book titles which you have produced in the past, he or she is immediately going to feel happier about commissioning new work from you or reading something which you have submitted speculatively. Make a note below of all the relevant experience which you have had and don't hesitate to use it as a selling tool, whether in the form of a curriculum vitae or a collection of cuttings. (We'll discuss this further in Unit 4.)

Expert knowledge

Do you have any particular expertise which you have gained as a result of your job or your personal life? In other words, is there any subject which you know more about than most other people? Have you received training in anything which you could pass on to others?

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Activity 1 cont.

Have you just been through a major experience, such as childbirth, redundancy, bereavement, bankruptcy or divorce? If so, you could almost certainly offer advice on how to cope with it to those who are undergoing a similar experience. Anyone who is in a position to train or teach someone else in any subject is in a position to write about that subject. Write down in the box below what specialist knowledge you think you might have that you could turn into an article or even a book.

You may not have listed some of the areas that follow. Give each of them some consideration as potential subjects for your writing, and then note in the boxes what you might have to offer in each field.

An exclusive story

Do you have access to any sort of exclusive or hard-to-get story? Have you had an experience which few others have had, or do you have access to someone who has? It could be someone who has suffered through some particularly rare medical or legal problem. It could be someone who was the victim – or the perpetrator – of a crime. It could be a connection with a celebrity, or inside information on anything which would be of interest to a wide audience.

Do you, in other words, know any secrets?

cont.

Activity 1 cont.

Knowledge of a particular place

Do you have an inside knowledge about a particular city or country which might be of interest to other people? It could be of interest simply as a holiday destination, but it is more likely to be because the place is intrinsically interesting for some reason. (See Unit 3, on travel writing.)

What do you know or what could you discover about the history of your town, neighbourhood or village? Local history is a strong and growing interest for many people; could you join the local society and gather material that way?

An interesting hobby

Is your hobby something which is shared by many others? If so, then it is likely that you have information which you could convey in written form to fellow enthusiasts. It might be that you know all the best golf courses in Britain, or you have some good fishing tips, or advice on car maintenance or cookery ... whatever you are enthusiastic about, you will have gained information on it which you could share with others if you just had an outlet.

Celebrity or professional status

If you are already well known within your field, whether it is as a film star or a scientist, a racing driver or public relations executive, there is probably going to be a market for your views on your subject. If you are very well known that might be all that is necessary but, even if you are not exactly famous, any sort of credentials which help to establish that you are an expert will work in your favour when you are trying to convince someone to buy your words.

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Activity 1 cont.

'A talent to amuse'

Are you able to make people laugh, or to see things from a different and amusing angle? If so, you have one of the rarest and most valuable skills and you should be able to use it to make money. (The quote in this section-heading is from Noel Coward's assessment of what he had to offer as a writer, and became the title of Sheridan Morley's biography of him.) Being funny with the written word is not the same as being able to tell jokes in the pub, but it is not that far removed from it either. If you know how to use words and timing to get a laugh verbally, it would not be too great a jump to learn how to make people laugh in print. You might also be able to transfer those jokes into the mouths of others in the form of comedy scripts for the theatre, television or radio. Write down what you think you could offer in this field.

The ability to tell stories

A large part of writing is about telling stories. Some people are bad at this, although they can still become writers by working hard and focusing on other assets. If you are a good, natural story-teller, put that on your list and write in the box below what you feel you can offer as a writer of stories. (We'll talk further about fiction in Unit 3.)

Next we come to some more concrete, down-to-earth assets you could put to good use as a writer.

An existing manuscript

It may be that you have gone ahead and produced a full-length manuscript. Whether it is for a book, a film or an article is immaterial – it is still something which you own and can

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Activity 1 cont.

sell. As I will explain later (see Unit 3) it is in some ways preferable to establish your market before you create your product, but that is not always possible, especially for a beginner. If you have already created a product then note it in the box below as an asset because you want to do everything you can to sell it, and it is evidence of the level of your ability, though you may want to reshape it as a result of some factors we'll consider later in the course.

A fund of ideas

If you are good at producing lists of ideas for articles, programmes, stories or books, then once again you have a product which other people might need to buy. Potential customers will also need to know that you can back the ideas up with practical work, but a list of good ideas is a product in itself. Write below what you think you could sell in this way.

A willingness to undertake difficult assignments

A large percentage of the working population makes a living by solving other people's problems. Whether they are plumbers or garage mechanics, doctors or lawyers, these people sell their skills to people who need help. A writer who is willing to take an editor or publisher's problems and make them his or her own has created a product. A 'troubleshooter' who is willing to put in a bit more effort and suffer a bit more discomfort than the rest is always going to be of value. One of your products is 'service'. For example, an editor might want a story which requires the writers to travel to an inaccessible location, or to interview someone who is reluctant to talk. The staff may not be keen to undertake the work and that provides the freelance with an opportunity to shine. Could you do this sort of thing? Write a paragraph on what services of this sort you can offer a publisher, as if you were including it in a letter to one.