

5 Key Qualities to Look for When Hiring a Professional Writer (So You Don't Make a Costly Mistake!)

By Michael J. Dowling

When you hire a freelance writer/editor, an element of risk is involved. If you hire wisely, you'll accomplish your goals and save valuable time. But if you choose the wrong writer, you could end up wasting time, missing deadlines, falling short of your goals, and suffering diminished credibility in the marketplace.

How can you avoid a costly mistake? What qualities should you look for when hiring a writer?

I believe that outstanding professional writers are characterized by five key qualities: *proficiency*, *efficiency*, *creativity*, *productivity*, and *reliability*. When you know what to look for, you'll make better hiring decisions. That means you'll get good results, not bad headaches.

The Five Key Qualities to Look For

- **Quality #1 – Proficiency**

The writer you hire should be proficient at his craft. He must be able to craft clear, concise, creative, and convincing writing that produces positive results.

Every time you put something in writing, your image is on the line. A proficient writer will enhance your credibility and reputation. A mediocre writer can tarnish your image and undermine your efforts to achieve your goals.

While searching the Web recently for information about colleges for my son, I came across the following sentence on a university's website:

“Our walking campus tour does not include a residence hall, however the Department of University Housing is proud to offer a special tour of one of our newest residential complex, Eagle Village.”

Did you spot the two grammatical errors in this sentence? First, this is what English teachers disdainfully call a “run-on sentence.” The word *however* is an adverb, not a conjunction. There should either be a semicolon or a period after the word *hall* and a comma after the word *however*. Alternatively, you could replace the adverb *however* with the conjunction *but*.

The second grammatical error is that the word *complex* should be plural.

After reading this website, I am *less* inclined to send my son to this university. Maybe this piece was written by a student earning \$10 per hour, but that doesn't

excuse the poor quality. The website represents the university, no matter who wrote it.

Good writing that produces positive results is worth the investment. Poor writing is worse than no writing at all. Review writing samples so you can be sure you're investing in a writer who is proficient at his craft.

- **Quality #2 – Efficiency**

You are successful because you are talented at what you do. A competent professional writer will free up your time so you can concentrate on what you do best. An inexperienced, disorganized writer will suck up your time and energy and distract you from more important priorities.

Choose a writer who has the skills and experience to work independently, so you don't have to waste time looking over his shoulder. You want to be able to trust him to do his job, just as you trust your doctor, lawyer, and accountant to do theirs.

An efficient writer will organize your project so as to minimize disruptions from your normal routine. He'll schedule phone interviews around your schedule. As you talk, he'll listen, ask questions, and record your thoughts. Then, working from your dictation and any additional materials you supply, he'll efficiently produce drafts for you to review and modify, until you're completely satisfied with the final product.

With the writing burden off your shoulders, you'll have more time to think about the content of your communication, which means you'll probably be happier with the final result. And you'll enjoy the writing process more because you won't be so distracted from your day-to-day responsibilities.

Writing projects are often complex, with tight time constraints. A missed deadline can be very costly...and embarrassing. Choose a writer who routinely finishes assignments on or ahead of schedule. The faster you get the final product in front of your audience, the sooner it will start producing positive results for you.

Your time is valuable. When hiring a professional writer/editor, don't skimp. Get more value for your writing investment by hiring an experienced professional who will save you time by managing your projects efficiently.

- **Quality #3 – Creativity**

A creative writer can turn your good idea into an outstanding one. He'll make your communication piece stand out from the pack. People will be more likely to read it, remember it, and respond to it.

Lots of writers do a fair job of putting pen to paper, but far fewer bring a strong creative element into the writing process. Creative writers usually charge a bit more, but the value they add far exceeds the extra cost.

I enjoy looking for opportunities to inject creativity into my assignments. For example, when I was asked to help write a book about a dramatic management turnaround at a hospital, I structured the book as if the hospital were a patient. My suggestions for the book's title – *Healing A Hospital* – and for the chapter titles – “Alarming Symptoms,” “A Sober Diagnosis,” “Thinking Well,” “Intensive Care,” “Fiscal Therapy,” “A Rapid Recovery,” “A Second Opinion,” and “An Encouraging Prognosis” – carried out the hospital-as-patient theme.

The content of another book I wrote about estate planning and charitable giving was quite technical. So with the client's approval, I created seven custom cartoons to add humor and graphic appeal. They related directly to topics covered in the text, and made the book much more inviting to read.

Creativity increases readability and impact. Look for a creative writer, not just a wordsmith.

- **Quality #4 – Productivity**

A productive writer produces a great deal of value at a very reasonable cost. The most productive writer is not the one who charges the lowest fees, but the one who produces the greatest return on investment.

Sometimes the return on investment is relatively easy to quantify. For example, I was encouraged when I received the following e-mail from one of my clients:

“The book you helped us write, *Investing in God's Business*, is a terrific marketing tool. This week alone two new donors called because they had read it. One wants to set up a complex gift arrangement to give \$8 million to Christian charities!”

Pamela Pugh, Executive Vice President
The National Christian Foundation, Atlanta, GA

That e-mail mentions only one instance when this book project paid off. I'm sure there have been many more tangible benefits that I don't know about. No doubt there have been many the client doesn't even know about. A well-written book produces positive results quietly and powerfully, hour after hour, day after day, year after year. They include intangible benefits that are harder to measure, such as increased goodwill, improved communications, enhanced prestige, stronger branding, and new opportunities.

Remember to consider hidden costs, such as the cost of your time, in your return on investment projections. If you have to closely supervise an inexperienced writer, or if you waste time repeating instructions and correcting mistakes, the true costs of the project can soar. And what if you miss your deadline? How much will that cost you?

When evaluating writers, consider the benefits you expect to receive as well as the costs you expect to incur. Don't simply try to minimize your writer's fees; aim to maximize your return on investment. Focus on value, not price.

- **Quality #5 – Reliability**

Look for a professional writer you can rely on to deliver top-quality communication products that are on target, on time, and on budget. When your deadlines are at stake and your image is on the line, reliability is critical.

A reliable writer can be counted on to write precisely, edit diligently, communicate honestly, relate cooperatively, respond promptly, and serve cheerfully. His goal is to help you accomplish your goals.

There's more to the writing process than writing. A writer who thinks conceptually and gives you honest feedback based on his knowledge and experience adds tremendous value to your project. The results you achieve together will far exceed anything you could have accomplished alone.

If you're planning to self-publish a book, your writer should be able to coordinate the various aspects of the process, such as interior layout, cover design, ISBN acquisition, and printing. Publishing books is his area of expertise, not yours, so don't burden yourself with the details. (I offer this service to my clients through my publishing company, Wool Street Publishing [www.WoolStreetPublishing.com]).

Before you hire a writer, be sure to check references. Look for a reliable writer – one who makes it his goal to meet your deadlines and surpass your expectations.

Michael J Dowling (www.MichaelJDowling.com) is a writer, editor, and ghostwriter who produces clear, concise, creative, and convincing books, articles, and other print communications to increase the visibility, credibility, and profitability of individuals and organizations. He has an MBA from Columbia Business School in New York City, where he was a Harriman Scholar, and is the author of three published books.

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