

Government Markets For Writers

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Government Markets For Writers

The government, with its hundreds of agencies and thousands of offices, is a multibillion-dollar market for every kind of writing conceivable, and most of it is done under contract by private organizations and often by individuals.

A BASIC ORIENTATION

The 34,000 U.S. Government offices and other facilities scattered throughout the United States and our possessions are spending about \$14 billion per year, at current budget rates, for what might be described as editorial services. And there is a good reason for so describing them, although the bulk of the effort required is, in fact, writing effort. That the government creates a great deal of "paper" is well known. What is not so well known is that most of this generation of "paper" does not take place in government offices; the government contracts out most of this work to private industry.

For writers, the constant growth of new technological developments and the ever-swelling government bureaucracy add up to constantly growing markets. Virtually every government agency of significant size and importance has both publications and training responsibilities. In many cases, where the size of the agency and its publications/ training requirements are large enough, the agency may even have special departments or offices dedicated to these activities; in others the responsibilities are vested within some other office or department, often along with personnel and other administrative duties.

PUBLICATIONS

The publications fall into broad classes, those for internal consumption and those for public information. Consequently they may include reports, manuals, proposals, training programs, audiovisual scripts, motion picture scripts, lecture notes, speeches, brochures, articles, newsletters, and even books.

The military organizations who buy the weapons systems and all the related equipment and systems require a great many technical manuals and other documentation to be used to support the training of military personnel and the day to day operations and maintenance of the systems, so they are normally by far the largest developers of publications.. However, they are not the only purchaser of such publications, for the National Aviation and Space Administration (NASA), and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and many other agencies, such as the Postal Service, also require such documentation.

Training responsibilities may include the development of materials to be used for training, or training materials may developed by a publications group. There is no set standard in government organization; each agency has a large degree of freedom in organizing itself internally and allocation necessary functions. Each agency does so according to the needs of its own missions, size, and problem. In fact, several agencies - the Internal Revenue Services, the Postal Service, and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration to name three, have entire training institutes - residential institutions - of their own.

TRAINING

In addition to that, the Office of Personal Management (formerly the Civil Service Commission) operates a training division with six branches of training, offering training courses to the rest of the federal government. The military agencies have by far the largest training establishments: That is one of their prime functions. But training is a concern throughout the government, and a large portion of the writing and publications work carried on in-house and via contracting out is intended to enable and support training programs directly and indirectly.

WHO DOES ALL THE WRITING?

All of this call for a great deal of writing, of course, many billions of dollars worth each year, and with the size of our government and our annual budget we should expect the bulk of that writing to be done internally, by government employees. Surprisingly enough, that is not the case. Rather, by far the bulk of such work is done externally, much as a requirement under larger contrasts for engineering and manufacturing, but much also performed by individuals and organizations hire - under contract - for such tasks specifically. (In fact, for a few years I kept myself quite busy writing for government agencies exclusively, as an independent contractor). It is a market open to all, from freelancers to large corporations.

TYPICAL TASKS

Contracts let by government agencies for writing can range widely,, from hundreds of dollars to hundred of thousands - and even millions. Obviously, the large contracts are not for the freelance writer or small editorial business. On the other hand,, the large organizations often find that they cannot handle the smaller contracts profitably or efficiently, and thus often cannot compete effectively for small jobs and do not wish to do so. Finally, in many cases the smaller jobs are set aside for small businesses, and the large organizations are thus barred legally from competing for them.. However, to give you an idea of both the kinds of writing tasks and their sizes, here are some of

those I was entrusted with as a small, independent contractor and freelance writer:

* For the Federal Aviation Administration: A \$23,000 job to develop an "annual report", explaining the year's work in safety engineering.

* For the Energy Research and Development Administration, \$6,000 to answer mail and develop a system to enable them to handle the job.

* For the Public Buildings Service, \$3,5000 for an audiovisual storyboard and script.

* For the Postal Service Training and Development Training Institute, \$600 to upgrade their rate manual.

* For the Public Buildings Service, \$750 for a brochure about new procurement forms.

* For the Forest Service, \$9,000 to develop an audiovisual training program in American Indian history and culture.

* For the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), \$2,400 for the development of curriculum plan for training health and safety specialties.

SMALL-PURCHASE OPPORTUNITIES

Some of these contracts I won in competitive procurements through submitting the winning proposals: others were awarded to me under authority of the Small Purchase Act. This permits agencies to use purchase orders, rather than formal contract, in an accelerated and simplified procedure, with limited competition - even without competition, in many cases - for purchases under \$25,000. (the limit was \$10,00 at that time).

HOW THE GOVERNMENT BUYS

How the government buys and how to sell to the government are different subjects, but you should understand the basic system. By law all public purchasing for federal, state, and local government agencies is open competition. Therefore, although there are certain exceptions, contracts are aware as a result of sealed bids (awards to the low bidders) and competitive proposals (awards to those submitting the best proposals).

The federal government announces its needs and calls for bids and proposals in a daily publication called the Commerce Business Daily, published by the U.S. Department of Commerce and printed by the Government Printing Office. (Subscriptions may be ordered from either agency). State and local government announce their

invitations in the classified advertising columns of daily newspapers under the head Bids & Proposals. The announcement tells you how to send for or pick up the solicitation package that will furnish all the forms and details necessary to prepare and submit your bid or proposal. However, all procurement offices want you to register with them by completing their bidder's application forms, which will put your name on bidder lists so that you will receive many solicitations without specific request for them.

The federal government has thousands of contracting offices (130,000 federal employees work in purchasing and procurement functions) all over the country. (There are more federal employees in California, for example, than in Washington, DC!) State governments do most of their purchasing via a central purchasing and supply organization in the state capital, while local government have purchasing officials in county seats, town halls, and city halls.

You should register - file the bidders application form - with every federal, state, and local government agency with whom you expect to do business. Getting on a maximum number of bidders lists helps in this case; it enables you to survey and choose from the maximum number of bidding opportunities.

MODUS OPERANDI FOR FREELANCE WRITERS

Writing is a custom service, and normally you would compete for a writing contract by submitting a proposal. However, because so many writing jobs are relatively small - qualify under the law as small purchases - many can be awarded without competition and/or a simple letter proposal. Direct, personal contact with government officials is by far the best approach for this work. Seek out the various government agencies and inquire who is in charge of publications, public information, and training. Make personal calls on these people and leave business cards, brochures, and capability statements, describing your background, qualifications, experience, and available resources (e.g., equipment, help, other factors that reflect the kind and volume of work you can handle, how fast you can respond and turn a job around, and other relevant factors). Continue to make these calls and become a familiar figure in those offices. People in government have problems, as everyone does, and they often need help... For example, they too discover on Thursday, that they are shorthanded for a job due on Monday, or they have been handed a hot potato of a job by a superior, and they are eager to find a freelance writer who can help. That is opportunity for those prepared to handle it.

"EDITORIAL SERVICES"

In many cases the agency will ask you to simply do an "editing"

job because they do not wish to acknowledge or even recognize and admit to themselves that they cannot do the job or have tried and botched it.. (Or, sometimes, that another contractor did the job and botches it, as they learned after they accepted the job and paid for it!) In such cases, writing and / or rewriting is required, often starting all over from the beginning.

Be prepared to recognize such situations, but do not embarrass the client by pointing this obvious truth out.. Instead, solemnly agree that what has been done is an excellent start and that, yes a goodly bit of editing is required; it was wise of the client to perceive this. Price the job for what is really required - writing/rewriting - but do agree that it is editing and bill for "editorial services." Everyone is then happy!

Of course, there are cases where they do, in fact, need editorial services literally - editing, proofreading, typemarking and advice-consulting services, actually. Unless you object to doing such work, you can and should take advantage of this to cement your position with the agency and the individual client in the agency. It's good business to do so,, and will usually pay off in future assignments and recommendations to others. (Repeat business and recommendations from a Department Labor office for whom I did some needed editorial "repair" work resulted in over \$65,000 in additional business).

You may at times find your self entrusted with "the whole ball of wax" - an assignment to handle the entire job, from initial research to having the final camera-ready to go to the printer. That happens quite often, and in the route to the larger and more profitable - contracts. (There are even occasions on which the government agency wants you, as the contractor, to have the publication printed and bound).

For this reason it is advisable to have "associates" - illustrators, editors , and others on whom you can call for support when you are responsible for an entire program or publication.. It is mutually beneficial to have agreements with others, representing yourselves as associates, for any that you may want to call on others for support, which means, actually, sharing in a contract. That is, of course, to everyone's benefit in marketing, for it makes marketing your services at least partially a shared function and - also an important consideration - it enables all of you to bid for the larger jobs.

Some freelancers in writing and other professional-services fields actually share office space and expenses and advertise as a firm of associates, although each has his or her own clients and projects, as well as cooperating on large projects. You may want to consider this after you have gotten established, if you wish to "graduate" to an office outside your home and pursue more ambitious projects than solo writing tasks.

BEST GOVERNMENT MARKETS

Government is not a single market. It is a whole population of markets. Not only are there hundreds of agencies - departments, commissions, administrations, and other organizations - but in many of these entities there are multiple markets. Momolithic although the government may appear to be, it is remarkably unstandardized and diverse in many ways, as already noted. Therefore, although you should make all efforts to learn the official procurement regulations in general, it is also necessary to understand that each agency has its own policies. For example, although the law permits the agency to spend up to \$25,000 via government purchase order, the agency's contracting officer or other top official may restrict that to some lesser amount as the maximum that can be spent without a formal contract.

In general, the best government markets are the organizations that have their own, in-house departments or special offices for training and/or publications and other writing tasks.. That sounds like a strange idea to those not familiar with how large organizations do things, but the explanation is quite simple. The existence of a separate organization for such functions, as distinct from burying such functions in another office (usually Personnel), demonstrates that the agency has regular or at least frequent need for such work. Such organizations are almost characteristically overloaded and need help.. You will therefore usually find many more sales opportunities in such organizations.

Sometimes an organization does not by its nature furnish any clues to the probable opportunities for writers. I once found the Value Management offices of the General Services Administration, an engineering office, a rich lode of contracts for several years. And the Wind Energy Office of the Energy Research and Development Administration was another totally unexpected and unsuspected opportunity. You must be alert for such windfalls too.

FINDING OPPORTUNITIES

Although I am based in the Washington, DC area my government contracts were often in such distant places as Missouri, Montana and Orlando, Florida. It is not necessary, in most cases, to be near the agency. The government has offices and contracts everywhere. In fact, you can use the mail and telephone for most contacts; in many cases you never meet face-to-face with the customer, even in a long-term contractual relationship.

The most basic tool of marketing to the federal government is the government's own daily publication, the Commerce Business Daily (CBD). It can be ordered from the Government Printing Office,

Washington, DC 20402, and both 6-month trial subscriptions and regular annual subscriptions are available. This publication lists hundreds and hundreds of government needs - bid and proposal opportunities - every day.

Write also to the Contracting Officer or Public Information Office of each major agency and request information about their procurement policies and practices. Many will then send you thick envelopes of literature - pamphlets, brochures, and even thick manuals explaining the systems in detail. A starter list - not a complete one because that would be too large for the space available here- appears at the end pf this report. But you can get a great deal more information from any nearby office of the Small Business Administration (SBA), Department of Commerce (DOC), or General Services Administration (GSA). Be sure to visit any GSA Business Service Center near you or write the GSA in Denver, Colorado, a major federal center. For Government offices near you, check the telephone directory under "U.S., Government of."

State and local government advertise their requirements in the daily newspaper classified columns under Bids and Proposals. Be sure to keep an eye on those, and visit procurement offices in your state capital, county seat, and city or town hall.

The Government Printing Office operates a number of bookstores in which it sells a great many government publications, including most of the procurement manuals published by the various agencies. However, many of the agencies will furnish copies of those manuals free of charge, on request, as already noted above. That is one of the key reasons for writing them at the addresses listed below. (You may also request similar information from the purchasing and supply offices of your own state and local government offices. Many of them also publish thick manuals of instructions).

A FEW REFERENCES

GSA Business Service Centers are located in the following cities:

Boston	New York
Philadelphia	Chicago
Washington	Atlanta
Fort Worth	Denver
Seattle	San Francisco
Kansas City, MO	Los Angeles
Houston	

Some key agencies/offices to write (Contracting Officer or Public Information Officer) for information on procurement:

Small Business Administration