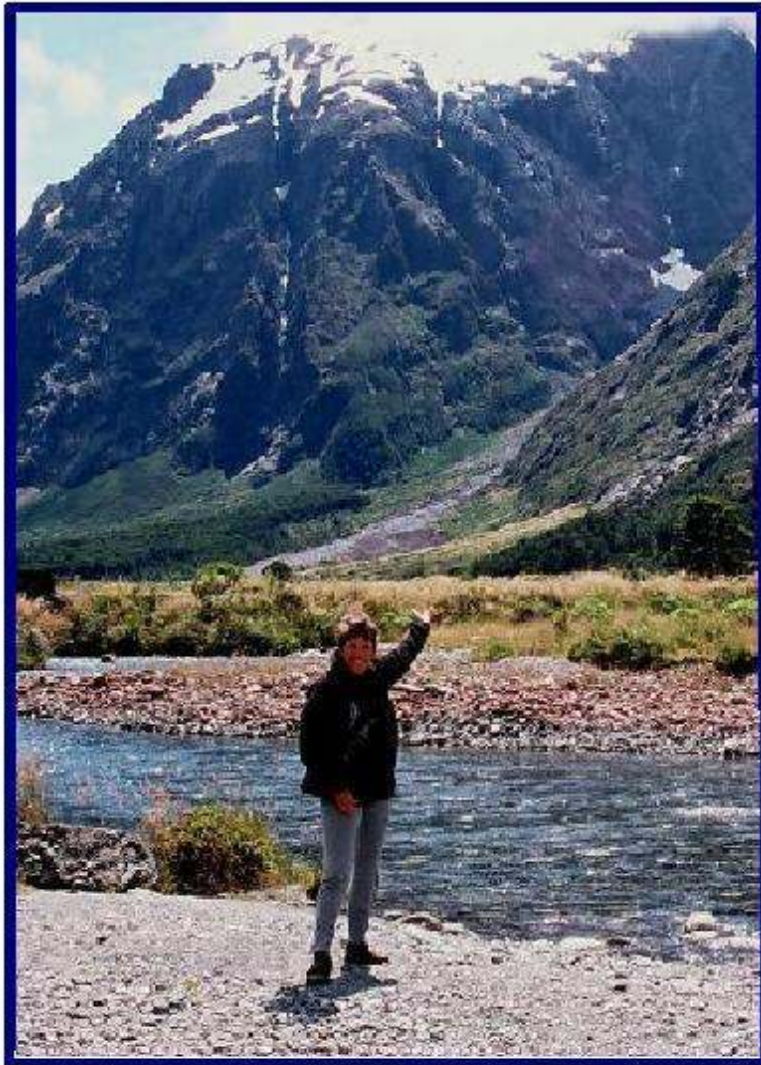


# **How to Make Travel Writing Work for You**



**by Linda Ballou**

## How to Make Travel Writing Work for You

My other half says I lead a charmed life. I have to admit I am amazed at how great my life has become. I am hosted by wonderful people eager to share their brand of beauty with me. I only go where I want to go and take adventures that are exciting to me and then I write honestly about what I see and experience. I have a few favorite editors who love my work and make placement of my pieces easy. But, like any success story, if you look closer you will see that I worked hard to get charmed.

I'm happy to share my roadmap for this journey with you. My first assumption is that you do not have to make a living as a travel writer. My payment is the wonderful trips I receive that I could not afford otherwise. Travel writing is like show biz in that 10 percent of the people in the business are making 90 percent of the money. The top 10 percent in the travel writing arena work very hard at placing articles and getting more than one article out of each trip in order to pay their bills. They usually have a couple of books under their belt to make ends meet. I get incredible trips, the pleasure of sharing the experience with others, and making my hosts happy.

I don't take press trips and have no interest in those kinds of outings. I don't bother with tourist boards, except for gathering basic information for my own use. I am an adventure travel writer. I Google regions for outfitters that will take me where I want to go. Outfitters are people who guide me into areas I cannot go to by myself and who provide me with all of the equipment I need for the journey. For instance, I love river rafting. This takes expertise I do not possess.

I select three companies, or outfitters, that I think are most likely to want a travel writer. I start at the high end because they have a budget for promotion and they know travel writers are the best kind of advertising they can get. I then send them my bag of tricks and wait for a reply. My bag, or as some call it, media kit, includes a brief bio, clips I think will impress the outfitter, and an assignment letter if I can get one. It also includes endorsements from other outfitters. All of this is now in my media room on my Web site, but when I first started, I used the old fashioned paper submission method. If outfitters are interested, they will get back to me right away. I pay for my transport to and from the adventure. I usually stay an extra week outside of the experience with the outfitter to get a better perspective, and because I enjoy independent travel.

When I started I had a few feature articles published in horse magazines. This was a "tootsie in the door" of guest ranches. My first big job was Skyline Ranch in Telluride. The piece I wrote, "To Ride among the Clouds," was a feature article in *Equus* magazine. I had an incredible time, earned a check and impressive clip in the deal.

Here are some tips to help you streamline the task of making travel writing work for you.

## Find your niche

Choose something you are passionate about. Think about your areas of expertise and how you can capitalize on them. Are you a birder? Then go for some of the great birding trips about the globe to get you started. This is going to be a labor of love so make sure you love what you are doing.



## Create a platform

You need a Web page. You can get a good one with your membership in North American Travel Journalists Association and have instant travel writing credentials, plus access to lots of good information and a press release option that goes out to editors.

They also publish *Travel World* magazine which is a good place for novice writers to get started. NATJA membership costs \$150 a year. Even though I have broadened my platform with a much more extensive Web page and my own domain name, I keep my Web site on NATJA active. It has served me well for years and gives me credibility when I query outfitters. Plus, they will give me an assignment letter from *Travel World* magazine to include in my query to outfitters.

I created, with the help of my Web master (Denise Cassino at [wizardslywebdesign.com](http://wizardslywebdesign.com)), an aesthetically pleasing experience for both readers and editors with tons of online samples of articles and photo essays. Check out [www.LindaBallouAuthor.com](http://www.LindaBallouAuthor.com). One page details my areas of expertise so editors can peruse and get ideas, and another page has a media kit so people can see my qualifications with just one click. No longer do I have to get expensive color copies of articles and put together a proposal package with a self-addressed return envelope. Instead I do a brief email query directing editors, or outfitters to my site for clips.

You will be writing two types of queries. First you will be sending one to outfitters, hotels cruise lines, or wherever it is you would like to go requesting that they host you. *If you don't ask you don't get* is a basic precept in my approach. Below is a sample of a query to an outfitter. I have provided a sample query to a magazine editor under the subheading **Work for free**.

I am a freelance writer who loves to ride. Enclosed you will find articles I have published on other guest ranches, including one in Gallatin Country. I would love to visit your ranch and write an article describing my adventures with you. You will also find an assignment letter from *Travel World International* magazine. I can guarantee you a piece in that publication, but my efforts don't stop there. *Real*

*Travel Adventure* magazine also publishes my pieces with regularity. Please note that my byline has appeared in *Equus*, *Horse Illustrated* and the Specialty Travel Index.

Are you able to host me for a week? I relish the thought of a loping ride through the desert and more vigorous trips into the mountains.

Sincerely,  
Linda Ballou  
North American Travel Journalist Association  
[www.LindaBallouAuthor.com](http://www.LindaBallouAuthor.com)

## Become a blog hog

In the beginning, I resisted blogging. I felt the time writing for this content-greedy format would take up all my quality writing time.



My Web master ignored my protests and created a blog for me on my page anyway. It does take time, and you do have to do it with some consistency for it to be effective, but it is the fastest way for you to create a public persona and it is free!

I learned that if you work smart you will find ways to use existing material to flesh out your blog on a weekly or monthly basis. For instance, I am going to post one of each of the subheadings in this report each month for the next year. Whenever I can get a “twofer in content” I’m happy.

There are numerous online sites and books that give the nuts and bolts about entering the blog-a-sphere. I am here to tell that it is worth doing. I think it is more effective than social networks like My Space and Facebook. Blogging brings traffic to your homepage and the things you want to share with others and moves you up in the search engines.

## Writing ability required

My travel writing hero, Tim Cahill says, “It’s not in the travel it is in the writing.” Tim combines a dramatic spine with journalistic techniques in a friendly, conversational style. The result is a satisfying, fun, informative read that I emulate. You need to read travel narratives. Rolf Potts has a new book out called *Marco Polo Didn’t Go There*. At the end of each story in the collection he provides insights into what made him write the story and other very helpful tips to budding travel writers. I love Paul Theroux’s *Happy Isles of Oceana* and Tim’s *Hold the Enlightenment*. These authors impart a lot of information with a somewhat twisted, self-deprecating sense of humor. I wish I could be funny, but that takes a lot of finesse. I strive to connect with readers with an authentic voice. The most complete book on the subject, and one I strongly recommend you read, is Lonely Planet’s *Travel Writing* by Don George, another great travel journalist. The best

travel writing conference you can attend is at the Book Passage in Corte Madera, just north of San Francisco. This is the nexus of the plexus with all the major players in the Bay Area attending with special guests from around the country. It is a fantastic opportunity to make contacts like Michael Shapiro, veteran travel journalist, teacher at the conference, and author of *A Sense of Place*, a book that houses interviews of every major travel writer alive today.

It may seem silly, but you must learn the craft. Every good article or essay has a grabber opening that gives the reader an overview of what to expect in the body of the piece. The body should be chock full of the info you wish to impart delivered in a clever style that keeps the reader going. The piece should be capped off with a zinger close that buttons up the story. For each trip that I take, I write one 800 to 1,000-word piece for print and/or online sources. I also write one 2,500-word personal essay reflecting upon what I learned, or how the experience affected me for my travel collection *Lost Angel Walkabout*. Short 400 to 800-word pieces are easier to place when you are getting started. Magazines have more slots for shorts than features.

## Work for free

You have to be willing to do some work for free for a while. The Internet has a myriad of travel newsletters and magazines calling for content. They don't pay much, if anything, but they give you the opportunity to get clips with the minimum effort. Even for these sites, however, you'll need to read their guidelines, make sure you are submitting what they are asking for, and be able to handle rejection.



Blog sites are crying out for content and will publish your articles. You won't get paid, but you will get exposure. You can print this sort of thing and include it in a media kit to get you started. However, I think most tourist boards are aware that these are not stories that have been scrutinized by an editor and they will not be impressed. Outfitters however, may think this type of exposure will be a good thing for them. It will help you create your travel-writing persona to get your name out into cyberspace.

Getting in print magazines is more difficult today than ever. There are fewer of them for starters. They have tight budgets, and a string of regular contributors. You can certainly submit to them, but odds are not in your favor. The same with newspapers that are struggling to stay alive in the face of easy access to free information on the Internet.

Query letters to editors have three parts. First you must have a compelling opening. This could be a working title or the unique slant of your story. Next you tell the editor why their readers will want to know about this subject. Close with who you are and why you are the best person to write this story. Here is a sample query to an editor for a piece I was trying to find a home for after I had taken a trip.

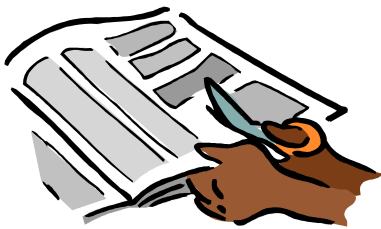
This journey is for the young at heart who want to breathe deeply of the landscape and know the rich diversity found in the poster child for eco-tourism. I stayed at lodges owned and staffed by locals and ate the traditional foods of the Ticos. In “Jungle Boogie,” a 1,000-word narrative, I take readers off the beaten path with reliable guides and provide them insights into the species-rich rainforests. Often overlooked ecological problems, like the fact that Costa Rica has the fourth highest deforestation rate in the world, are not ignored. By visiting the forests we make eco-tourism a viable economic alternative for a population with an ever-widening chasm between the super rich and the poor. May I interest you in a fresh look at the Rich Coast?

Please go to my Web site for credits. Media kit attached.  
Sincerely

Linda Ballou  
North American Travel Journalist Association  
[www.LindaBallouAuthor.com](http://www.LindaBallouAuthor.com)

The piece was picked up by *American Fitness* magazine on the first query. It gets easier as you get more credits. I was recently commissioned *without a query* by the editor of the in-flight magazine of Korean Air to do a piece called, “Heavenly Hawai’i.” He saw my areas of expertise online and found me! Once you have clips, a Web site, and credentials you can start querying higher-end stays and glossy print magazines.

### **Analyze the market**



*Wend* is an outdoor travel magazine, but the editor and readers are very young. Extreme skateboarding is not my bailiwick. *Outside* magazine, one of the most popular outdoor magazines, has thoughtful and well-researched pieces, but they have a string of writers in their stable with a long list of credit. My chances of being placed with them at this time are slim-to-none. I focus on finding sources that are receptive to my POV and style. I find sources in the Travel Publication Update and am constantly on the lookout for new opportunities. It is amazing how many magazines there are!

When you join [www.travelwriters.com](http://www.travelwriters.com) you have access to the Travel Publication Update. This useful tool provides editorial contact information and a brief rundown on their guidelines. You can get a sense of their editorial slant. Then go to their Web site. Usually they will have a few sample articles online. You can see if your style is a good match for the magazine. Also, check to see who the editor is at that time. They change frequently, and that is why the update is so handy. It saves a lot of time, money, and hassle. The site [Travelwriters.com](http://Travelwriters.com) also has an online chat room that lets you know what other travel

writers are experiencing. That's very helpful information that can save you lots of steps. You can just lurk in the background and learn from these conversations.

My favorite travel newsletter is TravelWritersNews.com. In it you will find calls for submissions, upcoming events, and very timely information.

## **Tools of the trade**

Take notes every day. This will help you to remember vivid details that bring stories alive for the reader. I usually take an hour before dinner to take notes of the experience of the day, and then I'm free to socialize with guests without guilt in the evening. I use a bombproof AlphaSmart word processor for journaling, an old-fashioned but reliable tape recorder for interviews, and a digital camera that is weatherproof. If you are more technologically savvy than I am, you may have more sophisticated tools, but the job is still the same. I don't want to have to worry about having my brain stolen or dropped in a river, so I leave my computer at home. My outdoor activities require streamlined packing and tough gear that can take a beating. Experiment with what works for you.

## **Admit you need professional help**

I have a degree in English Literature, but all that means is that I love to read. Let's just say my editorial skills fall short of Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style*. After a lot of false starts, I have finally found my personal editor. She shares my love for the outdoors, is a sensitive and caring person and has the patience to deal with devilish details. She not only helps me provide clean copy but lets me know when my comments, that seem so clear to me, are murky.



Often you are posting content on blogs and online magazines that will not be professionally edited. You need to make sure there are no glaring errors in this copy. It will be circulated to millions and very hard to retrieve once it goes into cyberspace. You don't want to be perceived by editors, or those you are querying for a job, as sloppy or unprofessional. You must make certain that what you put out to the public is your best work. My editor, Barbara Milbourn, affiliated with Writers in the Sky, has saved me from myself many times and makes my work shine. She is worth every penny I pay her and more.

## **Make friends with editors**

Magazine editors are mostly overworked and underpaid. A little gift thanking them for an assignment or acknowledgement goes a long way to help them to remember you out of the throngs approaching them daily. Read their guidelines, so you don't waste their time. Be flexible. If they cut your piece to shreds and turn it into pabulum for the masses, don't fret. You want clips and a relationship with the editor so you can get future assignments.

I now have an editor who allows me to fill out my own assignment letter. She publishes all that I send her. She is great and has been very supportive of everything I write. You may have to work for free to get clips, but the goal is great trips, not to make a living as a writer. Money for your articles is a bonus. Clips are the building blocks of the trade that you put in your bag of tricks to get great trips for free!

## **Look before you leap**

Research before you go so you know the significance of what you are seeing and experiencing. You don't want to miss a major attraction in a given area out of ignorance. I find this prerequisite most enjoyable. I read literary travel narratives to get the emotional and personal appeal of a place and guidebooks so that I don't miss an important feature in the landscape or an art museum that will provide me special insights. This gives me a much more deep and informed experience when I get to go to the places on my list. It delights me when I write a piece and send it to the outfitter that hosted me and they say, "Where did you get that information? I didn't know that about my own backyard."

## **Case the joint**

I take a day or two on either side of my adventure to explore so that my impressions are unique and not restricted to what the outfitter brings to my attention. This also gives me a chance to take notes and reflect, maybe even write a bit, before I get home and have to get back to daily chores and events. Like a bank robber, you are seeing more than the average person looking at a given situation. Train yourself to look deeper. Regional museums are great places to find little known



books on the history and lore of a place. Plus, they are lots of fun to visit. The docents are often very interesting relics themselves filled with anecdotes that bring a story alive. This bit of extra effort gives my articles details that spice up my pieces. People can read itineraries on an outfitter's Web page. My articles are intended to inform, entice, and to give people a sense of place.



## **Resist being too cute**

Hip, cool slang and inside jokes date your pieces, limit your audience, and reduce your chances of placement. I strive to write in a timeless fashion that is not gender specific and does not betray my age. Whether we like it or not, people have age and gender preferences. Especially in the adventure travel realm, editors and readers tend to be much younger than I am. In fact, most of the people on the trips I go on are younger than I am. I emulate classic writers like Jack London, the greatest adventure writer of our time. I like Martin Troost, who wrote *Getting Stoned with Savages*, a book that I enjoyed very much. It has a fun, young vibe to it, but he makes use of slang that dates him and his book.

In my article writing I attempt to be objective in my observations so that they will appeal to a larger audience. I don't restrict my audience to women. I am not a feminist. In fact, I'm not sure what that word means. I don't want to be perceived as someone who champions women's causes and is opposed to men succeeding. I try to keep my audience wide open. If I do deserve a label, it would be earthiest. That is what Edward Abbey called himself. I am an environmentalist, but even in this arena I keep that point of view under wraps in my articles so that they hold a general appeal.

Your articles are not the place to express personal opinions if you want to get them published. On each trip that I take I do a personal essay for myself. In these pieces I take a stance, reflect upon how the trip affected me personally. If I do have a beef, I put it in a stand-alone sidebar. These stories are going into my soon-to-be-published travel writing collection *Lost Angel Walkabout*.

## **Lean how to get the shot that will tell your story**



No matter how great your story, editors will not be able to use it without pictures! When I first started, I connected with other guests who were professional photographers and submitted their work with mine. You can get some great photos from the outfitter, but editors really want a photo essay that highlights your personal experience.

Film is dead. When I started, editors wanted 35mm slides. Now, it's digital for everything, except the really high-end glossies. Take two cameras if you can and don't forget your battery charger. I did once and it was painful to miss incredible opportunities.

There are lots of good books on the subject. Don George's book gives good tips. A photography class or weekend workshop is in order.

The basics are that you need to have land and cityscapes accompanied with close-ups of details like colorful plates of food or artworks, plants, and so forth. Having people in your pictures bring them to life and allow readers to see themselves in the story you are telling. You must have people pictures for most travel stories. You should ask permission before taking pictures of people. They will almost always say yes, but I had one lady get very defensive when I asked to photograph her little girl. She looked at me like I was going to put her cherubim on an Internet child porn site.

Seek out high ground to get an overview of where you are and what you want to say about it. Climb a mountain or go to the rooftop of your hotel to get this vantage—it's worth it. Pictures out of an airplane seldom work. Too much movement, and there is always the corner of wing in the shot. I love to ride horses through gorgeous country. I have a useless collection of pictures with the tips of horses' ears on the bottom of the frame.

Develop 360-degree vision. Look up, around, and behind you; not just at your eye level. You will see much more than the average person. Frame your shots mentally as you walk through life. You have to act quickly to get them.

## **Behave yourself**

Once you do get a gig, be a good guest. Don't over imbibe and make snotty remarks about where you are visiting. Be respectful of your hosts. Remember, you are working on referral. You may want the endorsement of this host to help you get another job.

When I was at a guest ranch in Telluride, the owner told me that travel writers in the past came there, partied, and left a mess. You won't build a good reputation this way. You do it with testimonials on your Web page. If you can't say something nice, don't say it at all is what your mother told you, and, in this case, I think she was right. However, if the trip requires a modicum of fitness or certain gear to enjoy it, say so. Let the reader know what they are in for, but there is a nice way to say things. What sounds better: "Mozzies dive-bombed me relentlessly" or "be sure to bring plenty of bug juice"? I'm not saying you can't be honest. When I visited a guest ranch in Arizona in February I experienced a freak and very intense snowstorm. When I turned in the piece, I was asked to tone down the weather experience. I said I had, and asked them if they wanted me to write about my experience or that of someone else? They dropped it and the piece went out as I had written it. Just remember, you are reviewing the experience and letting people know what to expect from the trip, not panning it for affect like a film critic.

One of my pet peeves is when a travel writer says, or intimates, that the people who hosted them were saps to do so. They snicker and say they never intended to write a piece and that the hosts were fools to roll out the welcome mat to them. This really angers me. Most travel writers are very sincere in their efforts to please and satisfy their hosts and

work very hard to place their pieces in a timely manner. These types of comments and exploitive behavior make it harder for all of us to get hosted and reflect an attitude that does not prevail among most travel writers. I know of two very prominent travel writers, whose names shall not be mentioned here, who made such snide comments in their published works.

### **Look for the hook**

While you are on your journey be thinking about that opening paragraph that will capture reader attention and give a unique slant to your story. You will be going places that many others have written about many times. Think about what made your trip most memorable, what happened on your trip that was unique, and how it affected you. These are the kinds of universal connectors editors are looking for in a piece.

### **Have fun**

Remember, the secret to youth is to fill your mind with beauty. That benefit will be there for you no matter what happens with your writing.



## ABOUT LINDA BALLOU

My appreciation for nature took me to Kauai, the most luscious of all the Hawaiian Islands with pleated cliffs and treacherous seas fending off newcomers. It is believed by Hawaiians that a mantle of mana (spiritual power) protects the island from harm. It is here that I listened to wind voices and the seed for my historical novel *Wai-nani: High Chiefess of Hawai`i – Her Epic Journey* took root in my heart. This story inspired by the powerful personage of Ka`ahumanu, the favorite wife of Kamehameha the Great is a poetic rendering of the ancients with tales of heroes and heroines doing supernatural deeds of mythological proportions. The people of old Hawai`i were connected to nature, played freely, loved passionately and communed with gods that dwelled in every tree, rock and flower. This book is written in the name of Wai-nani with great Aloha.

My quest today is to get to as many naturally beautiful places as I can before they are no more! I have hiked, biked, kayaked and ridden on horseback through some of our most precious wilderness areas. My travel articles and photos have appeared in numerous national publications. My essays have appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* and various literary journals. "Look Both Ways on Small Islands" was included in the *I Should Have Stayed Home* anthology published by RDR Books. Please go to my website [www.LindaBallouAuthor.com](http://www.LindaBallouAuthor.com) where you may view many of my articles and photos. If you look closely your reward will be to discover the Secret to Youth.