

REVISED 7TH EDITION OF THE BESTSELLING CLASSIC

THE TRAVEL WRITER'S HANDBOOK

*How to Write—and Sell—Your Own
Travel Experiences*



JACQUELINE HARMON BUTLER AND LOUISE PURWIN ZOBEL

the
travel writer's
handbook

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*To our wonderful families and all the budding travel writers who will be inspired and enabled through
this book.*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I was happy to be asked to update the 6th edition of *The Travel Writer's Handbook* with Louise. We are now on the 7th edition and I'm on my own. Louise passed away in June 2008 at the age of eighty-six. However, so much of Louise's content from past editions is still very relevant today, and some of it is included in this book. Her style and sense of humor really came through in her writing. I like to think she is organizing trips (and writing about them) in heaven.

There have been so many changes in the travel writer's world since Louise published the first edition back in March 1980. Electronic gadgets and computers have become a very important part of our lives and were in their infancy back then. I've done my best to give you information on the digital age. As we all know, things change fast in the cyber world.

Thanks to everyone who assisted in bringing the 7th edition of *The Travel Writer's Handbook* up to date, especially my agents Michael Larsen and Elizabeth Pomada and my editor Doug Seibold.

Special thanks to Cathleen Miller, Georgia Hesse, Lee Foster, and fellow members of the Bay Area Travel Writers: especially to Richard Jordan, Laurie King, Diane LeBow, and Mark Longwood. Also thanks to Spud Hilton, Serena Bartlett, and David Cartwright. And to all the students I have taught and who have taught me a thing or two about travel writing.

I'm grateful to my children, Laura and Timothy, and the rest of my family for encouraging me to follow my dream and become a travel writer.

Jacqueline Harmon Butcher
Summer 2010

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INTRODUCTION

While some publications—both print and online—have quietly shut down operations, that neither forecasts the end of travel nor the end of the written word. Even when the popularity of some destinations changes as a result of world events, travel itself remains a constant. The desire to see an experience what others have enjoyed remains a desire of the reader. Yes, there is a need for travel writers today and beyond.

Some of you reading this book may already be travel writers, hoping to discover useful tips and shortcuts. You will discover them. Some of you are probably successful writers in other fields yearning to move in a different direction, trying to find the tools that will help you. You will find them. Doubtless some of you are writing-relatives—English teachers, advertising copywriters, newsletter editors, and others who feel they can become successful travel writers by learning how to move in the right direction. You will learn how. Certainly some of you are travel writers, writers of exciting letters, tellers of inviting tales. You want to professionalize your product. You can do it. And some of you, with no background at all in writing or traveling, are reading this book because you think it sounds like fun to be a travel writer. It is.

This book is for each of you. If you've ever had anyone say, "You write such wonderful letters—you ought to publish them," or "When you tell about that trip, it sounds simply fantastic—why don't you write it all down?" or "We loved looking at your pictures and your videos—you made it all so interesting"—this is the book you need.

While not a book on basic writing techniques (it assumes you already know how to write grammatical English sentences, and that what you don't know about punctuation, you'll look up), it does offer helpful avenues to organizing and writing travel articles, both print and electronic. It explains the importance of market research and subject research before, during, and after you travel. It suggests successful approaches to editors and online content managers. It tells you how to write the most popular types of travel articles and gives you an in-depth look at the business of being a travel writer, including such diverse subjects as how to use the query as a sales tool, where to obtain illustrations, and what to take off your income tax.

While not exactly a book on travel either (it assumes a basic familiarity with traveling, whether around the corner or around the world), the advice you will find here on preparing for a trip, as well as profiting from it, should be welcome to any traveler. It's important to remember, too, that the travel-oriented article may just as well be about your own neighborhood—an exciting, faraway destination or others.

Louise and Jacqueline have taught travel writing to college and university students of all ages, as well as to cruise ship passengers of many nationalities, and to online participants around the world. They both have served on the faculty of many writers' conferences and published in many kinds of media. Much of their travel has been by plane, train, bus, taxicab, streetcar, cogwheel rail, cable car, automobile, ship, subway, gondola, launch, rowboat, mule, and safari bus, but much more of it has been by shoe leather. We have enjoyed sharing our travels with our readers, and we hope you will enjoy sharing your travels with your readers. That is what this book is about—writing good travel stories that other people will want to read.

Though writing of itself should please and satisfy the writer, and may even have some therapeutic value, here we are talking about writing as a public profession—writing about your travel experiences for the enjoyment and the edification of your readers. Professionalism leads to pleasure *and* profit for

the travel writer. The trip is more enjoyable when you know you'll be writing about it. And it's possible to make your vacation pay for itself.

The ideas expressed in *The Travel Writer's Handbook* have, in our experience, proved helpful, and we hope they will prove helpful to you. But, of course, there is no assurance that all the pieces of the puzzle will always fit together advantageously. In the end, each of us must find our own way to satisfaction.

As a travel writer you will feel a great responsibility—the writer's responsibility to the reader. Later travelers see what you have seen, not only in the setting of your words but also within the framework of the emotional responses you transfer. The need for truth and accuracy in both hard facts and intangibles can never be emphasized enough.

While successful travel writers never forget the importance of accurate detail, they also know that equally important is how the writer—and the reader—feel about that detail. For no matter how literate your piece may be—counting the miles to every turnoff and the dollars for every dinner—in travel writing, as in most kinds of writing, it is the people and the emotions that matter. How did you *feel* about the experience? Without the *feeling*, your reader might as well look up “Paris” in the encyclopedia.

Emotions are awakened by the travel itself; and the desire to write is stimulated by new faces and new places. Travel and writing complement each other, and the travel writer finds that thinking about the reader and trying to increase the reader's enjoyment enhances his own excitement in the adventure.

The travel writer's success is determined by how precisely he defines his audience. All good writers know that the reader is not only a partner in the writing but is the ultimate boss. The travel writer has to *care* about the reader enough to break through the barrier of ink to the magic of shared feeling.

PART ONE

Joining Substance to Style

It was a cold, damp January morning in San Francisco, and fog made it seem even colder as Jacqueline made her way from the car park to the international terminal of the airport. After checking in, she hurried into a café, seeking a big cup of hot coffee.

“Please hurry. I’m catching a plane,” she told the waitress.

“Where to?” she asked.

“Barbados.”

“Where in the world is that?”

“It’s in the British Virgin Islands, near Bermuda.”

“Barbados!” She fairly breathed the word. “Lucky you!”

“Well, I’m a travel writer . . . that’s my job.”

“*Job!*” the waitress gulped. “A job that takes you to Barbados in January—geez, I’d love to have a job like that.”

Being a travel writer is one of the most desired jobs, right up there with being an actor or rock star.

Being a travel writer can take you to Hawaii in February, to New Orleans in August, to India in January for the monsoon. If you like to write and you like to travel, if you’re the kind of person who is continually captivated by new places, new ideas, new faces, you may find that this job sometimes seems less like work than play. But it’s always more work than it seems.

Depending on how you look at it, the travel writer never takes a vacation—or lives in the vacuum of perpetual vacation. The hours are flexible, so you end up working most of them. To us, Saturday is a working day. So is Sunday. So is every day, 365 days a year. The travel writer’s job is ongoing and demanding. It’s also intriguing and rewarding.

What Makes You a Travel Writer?

Being a travel writer sounds so easy and glamorous. All you have to do is write about the beautiful and exciting places you visit. You write about the people you meet, the landscape, the weather, the flora and fauna, and the wonderful food and wine you taste. You might even throw in something about the history, politics, culture, and folklore.

But a travel writer needs instinct, insight, imagination, and enthusiasm. As a travel writer, you not only see and hear, you investigate and interpret and try to understand. You meet people of different cultures and different backgrounds. You learn new customs, embrace new thoughts, and absorb new knowledge.

Your main purpose is to share your travel experiences. But this is not your only purpose. Your purpose is also to write a travel article that entertains and informs your readers. As well, you want to be able to transport the reader to the destination you have visited. Your purpose might also be to convince your readers to take a trip to the destination you are writing about. Your purpose will, in part, depend on the type of travel article you are writing.

Not satisfied only to ask *what*, the travel writer wants to know *who* and *how* and, more importantly, *why*. He or she recreates the travel experience, lending it relevance and perspective. In his desire

enhance his reader's enjoyment, he draws on his own spirit of adventure, rousing senses that tend to lie dormant and discovering that, as Herman Hesse says, "The true profession of man is finding his way to himself."

New places and new faces stimulate perception, encouraging you to delve more deeply, observe more carefully, and focus more clearly. As a travel writer, you will never be lonely, never be bored, and you share with your readers the people and places, adventures and activities of your trips.

You'll find yourself behind the scenes in search of stories, and you'll come across areas and information to which the average person has no access. Tell people you're a travel writer, and nothing's too much trouble for them to show you or take you to. Again and again, you'll be led to the front seat instead of a back one; picked up and chauffeured by someone assigned to show you around or provided with a meal, a briefing, and a ticket to an event you didn't even know existed. It's always more fun to be on the inside looking out.

While travel writing, of itself, is not a notably lucrative field—not in the same ballpark as, say, electrical contracting or dentistry—its fringe benefits are irresistible. As we'll see later in this book, the travel writer can sometimes accept exotic hospitality, sometimes deduct expenses from his income tax, and often arrange lecture engagements and other related professional activities. You'll know the gratification of seeing your name in print, and your **byline** may lead to professional advancement in other fields. You'll appreciate comments of friends and colleagues; enjoy **email** and phone calls from strangers.

For many of us, a special advantage of being a travel writer is the feeling of doing meaningful work, even on vacation. Raised in the Puritan ethic of "keep busy," we sometimes feel uncomfortable in a state of complete relaxation for more than a few days. It seems as though we *should* be learning, absorbing, taking notes, and becoming experts. Being a travel writer gives you a legitimate motive for listening, taking notes, and learning. You know that later you'll use this information in some meaningful manner.

One prolific writer replied to a question about how long it took him to write a particular article with, "How long did it take me? All my life." He went on to explain, "Everything I've ever been done or thought or known or experienced somehow went into the writing of this particular piece. I couldn't have written it exactly this way a year ago, and if I were to write it a year from now, it would be still different." The most successful travel writers use every place they've ever been and everything they've ever done and thought, known and experienced, as their jumping-off point.

Travel Writers Come in All Sizes and Shapes

The term "travel writer" is all-inclusive. It encompasses newspaper and magazine travel editors, staff writers, columnists, and **freelancers** as well as public relations and advertising practitioners, writers of radio and television scripts, art reviewers, compilers of cookbooks, publishers of travel newsletters, and producers of armchair travel books, audiovisual materials, and travel videos. It includes those who deliver content to travel **Websites** or software, write for **e-zines** or **blogs**, and contribute to their own Websites or those of others.

Travel writers also include guidebook writers, whether nuts-and-bolts or literary and imaginative, and writers who need a place as background for other work—anything from juvenile stories and whodunits to historical novels and musical comedies.

This book will speak to all types of travel writers but will focus on the freelancer who provides travel material for newspapers and magazines in print and **online**.

For some of you, travel writing will be a full-time profession, for others a part-time occupation.

Some of you part-timers may also write other types of material, and much of the information in the book applies, of course, to other types of writing as well.

Because readers vary—in their needs and desires, age and financial position, level of education and travel experience, temperament and lifestyle—a diverse group of people will succeed at travel writing. It's hard to draw a profile of the successful travel writer, but there are certain qualities every travel writer needs.

In addition to instinct, that spontaneous impulse that moves you to the right place at the right time and insight, that quality of discernment that apprehends the inner nature of things, the travel writer also needs imagination, or the creative ability to visualize something not currently present. Add to these great quantities of enthusiasm, the force that propels the writer forward and carries the reader along.

A travel writer should also cultivate the characteristic of curiosity (and a bit of nosiness), the readiness to observe, to eavesdrop, to look (figuratively) through the keyhole, always wondering what's waiting around the bend in the road. You have to be active, eager to see new places, and alert to simple pleasures. You might want to use Agatha Christie's Miss Marple or Hercule Poirot as examples for finding clues to a potential story. Sometimes a simple detail will lead to a discovery that will turn into an interesting story or article.

You need to be energetic and willing to work hard. You need to be healthy, as well as a good sport, ready to accept inconvenience. You should be a good listener, sensitive and perceptive, good at drawing people out, and interested in and knowledgeable about a variety of matters.

If you know another language, that's great. But even if you don't, you should learn a few basic words of your target area. There are foreign language apps that you can use on your smartphone or other **mobile device** (more about that in [Chapter 16](#)). You have to be good at understanding unfamiliar accents and prepared to make conversation through pantomime, crudely drawn pictures, and finger-pointing to words in the dictionary.

To be a travel writer you need faith in yourself and in your opinions.

Trust Yourself

The travel writer is not the passive tourist who always eats at the name restaurant because "everybody goes there." You'll seek out your own adventures and feel confident that what you have to say about them will prove valuable to others.

If *you* think something is attractive, you don't need anyone else there to admire it. If *you* think it's worth writing about, it's worth writing about. You must be observant, conscious of small details, accurate in recording them, and prepared to undertake any amount of work to verify existing particulars or to uncover new ones.

Because both traveling and writing are things everybody wishes to do "if I ever found the time," the travel writer must *make* the time. If you want to be successful, you must learn to use your "thinking time" to best advantage so that your writing time may be used for writing. Thinking about what you'll write while you're standing in line, stopped at the signal, or waiting in the departure lounge means your time at the keyboard will be spent writing. You need self-discipline and the conviction that waiting for ideal working conditions will never put a word on paper.

You also need to be an aggressive salesperson, knowledgeable about markets, confident of your own abilities, and aware that a manuscript in the desk drawer has no chance of selling.

You Need "Plus Value" for Success

To make your work salable in today's competitive world, the most important characteristic you need

is “plus value,” that special something that makes your piece better than the next person’s. It exists but it’s hard to define. Yet all successful manuscripts have it.

Plus value, that patina of excellence that triggers a positive response in the editor and, later, the reader, may result from any of several advantages: a universality that communicates clearly; a strong connection with a topic of current interest; a personal background that lends depth to the experience; a theme so true we can’t fail to recognize it; a conviction so firm it’s only logical to listen; research so extensive it’s impossible to discredit; information so relevant we can’t ignore it; or writing so polished that reading is effortless.

Of all the characteristics today’s successful travel writer should have, the most essential is the ability to produce stories of higher quality than the editor specifies or the reader anticipates. You need plus value.

When we speak of “success,” we’re equating it with publication, preferably publication with payment. While you never want to be caught in the trap of writing *only* for the money, money *is* the yardstick of professionalism. When somebody’s willing to pay for what you write, you have, in a sense, succeeded.

On the other hand, the principles of effective travel writing applied to the standard trip postcard or Christmas newsletter can only improve them. What the traditional “Having a wonderful time—wish you were here” is really saying is, “*I’m* having a wonderful time. Don’t *you* wish you were here? I bet you’re jealous. I sure hope so.” Whether it’s a postcard or a bestseller, the writer’s concern for the reader is the difference between failure and success. When you write on your postcard:

I thought of you when the outboard refused to catch this morning—how many balky outboards have we coped with? I can hardly wait for you to see this place—you’ll love the sandy beach and the gentle waves and the fishing—well, I’ll tell you all about it when I get home.

your reader’s jealousy is mitigated by the fact that you wrote to *him*, specifically and concernedly.

This creative relationship with the reader, this feeling of kinship, should always predominate in the travel writer’s mind. With so many people traveling on wheels, waves, and wings these days, could there possibly be enough stay-at-homes to provide a reading audience for all the travel material being published? There most definitely is an audience, and one of the goals of every travel writer should be to encourage the never-before-traveled folks to get out there and get going.

Do You Know Your Reader?

Do you know your reader and what interests her? You should.

There is no such thing as writing “generally.” Good travel writing is always addressed to a specific reader, and it’s essential to visualize that reader. Market research tells us who our reader is; the travel writer tries to anticipate and answer her questions. For some articles and some destinations the questions may be: What is it like to take that trip? Where are the best places to stay, eat, and shop? What sights should I see? What time of year is best? What shall I wear? How much will it cost? Under other circumstances, the questions may be: What kind of people live there? What are they like? How can I meet them? What and where are the flora and fauna? How can I see it? For still other pieces, the reader’s questions might include: How can I get there? What special training do I need? How long should I stay? And some readers may be saying: Why should I stay away from there? Or if I go, what precautions must I take?

Whether your reader is an active or an armchair traveler, whether he’s planning a similar trip or simply reminiscing about one he’s taken or simply enjoying a vicarious view of the world, it’s up to you, the writer, to give him the kind of story he wants. You bring to life reminiscences and breathe possibility into planning. You pave the way for later travelers by telling them what it’s like so they see it in the

setting of your words and within the framework of the emotional responses you have developed.

This saddles the writer with tremendous responsibility. Your opinion has great influence on others. A bad word from you, and a restaurant will lose customers. Recommend a delightful, out-of-the-way Paris hotel full of charming French customers, and a year later it's so full of American tourists there's no room for the French.

Be careful with negative reviews of restaurants, hotels, people, cities, and even countries. Focus more on the positive aspects of your experiences. Your job is to encourage travel and not gripe about the negative things you might encounter.

Whether you're going around the world or around the corner, you must take this responsibility seriously. You must know what you're saying and be sure you're telling it exactly as it is. You may be surprised at how much this book emphasizes research. But don't let it frighten you. Many activities you've never thought of as research are continually adding to your store of knowledge.

Research, remember, is an exchange of ideas. Often it's done on the ski slopes or at the theater at a sidewalk café. *Research!* Of course! So sit down and order some refreshment. Look around you. Listen. Ask questions. Take notes. Record how it feels, tastes, and smells. If you've already gone on the trip you plan to write about, and you didn't take all the pre-travel steps this book advises, don't despair. You can still write a travel article. But it will be harder to develop the plus value without the preliminaries.

Your Reader Has Great Expectations

Today's readers expect a lot of plus value in a travel story because they're sophisticated. They've probably traveled a good deal themselves, and, with the rise of the **Internet** and mobile devices, they're as close to an opera at the Baths of Caracalla as they are to a song in the shower. Travel is one of the most important facts of modern life. And today it's big business.

Travel is now one of the largest industries in the United States, and seers predict that it will continue to grow. Asia and Eastern European countries are also experiencing a huge growth in travel.

Travel has a long history. Remains of caravansaries and entertainment centers that catered to visitors have been discovered at the most ancient archaeological sites. Over two thousand years ago the goddess Artemis/Diana lured pilgrims to her new temple at Ephesus, one of the ancient world's Seven Wonders. The goddess had a very efficient public relations organization, with branches on three continents. They used every inducement to encourage tourists to visit Ephesus, sign up for the temporary sightseeing tour, and take home a silver souvenir. (Some scholars think they probably offered charters on the express galleys, but so far no advertisements for this have been uncovered!)

Are people today interested in travel? A national magazine offering a free brochure about an upcoming festival received five thousand requests in the first twenty-four hours. When Ethiopia was mentioned in a travel talk, officials had to close the Ethiopian tourist office for three days to get caught up with the backlog of visa applications for travelers headed there. One of Louise's students, Owen Johnson, authored a brief article in the *Los Angeles Times* Travel section about a tiny town in Germany. Within a week, the town's chamber of commerce had fielded sixty phone calls from people in California requesting information about how to get there. Each travel article published finds new readers, thus building an ever-increasing audience for future travel articles, by that author or by others.

You don't have to travel to exotic places to be a travel writer. That which is "down home" to you may be glamorously distant to others. It may not seem like *travel writing* when you tell about the haunted house that's a big attraction in your neighborhood, the new lodge at a nearby ski slope, or the

local farmer's market. But that's what travel writing *is*—telling readers about something interesting beyond *their* own backyards.

If it's in *your* backyard, celebrate. If your own milieu is a backwater, you can be the first to tout its attractions. And even well-traveled areas can provide new angles of interpretation. How about inspiration from the homes of all the writers who've lived on Long Island? Backyard barbecues in Las Vegas? Touring California's wine country with a teetotaling relative? Palm Springs in summer?

Wherever you live, wherever you travel, there's a story in it that somebody wants to read. Whether you go around the world or around the corner, when you discover the plus values of that particular travel experience, you'll be ready to share your pleasure with your readers.

Some people, of course, travel around the world but never leave home. They follow Michelin advice for weeks but don't find anything as good as Sally's Creamery at First and Main. The Black Forest isn't as pretty as Turner Woods back home, Arlington Cemetery is only a larger version of the town's own church graveyard, and Saks Fifth Avenue doesn't have a thing better than their own Emporium on Second and Elm.

The travel writer *celebrates* the differences in manners and customs. While she is interested in seeing temples and museums, she's more interested in learning lifestyles.

Travel should have an important purpose. It should result in meaningful experience. As Thoreau says, "It's not worthwhile to go around the world to count the cats in Zanzibar." The travel writer needs to be excited about her trips, so plan destinations and activities that intrigue you. Expand your horizons. Cultivate the urge to see, know, and enjoy so you can inform, entertain, and motivate your reader.

As a travel writer, you'll find that your own attitude is intrinsic to the value of the trip. In the words of Emerson, "Though we travel the world over to find the beautiful, we must carry it with us; or, if we find it not." Travel writing encourages deeper insights and a gratifying sense of belonging. When we welcome the travel experience, we realize that we have to take something to the experience as well as bring something away from it.

If you're already a vital, sparkling, positive person, travel writing becomes you. Spin the globe and let your travel dreams take flight.

Putting Yourself on Stage

In the digital age, it's more important than ever to build a reputation. In person, of course, you should keep commitments and be on time. Be someone people can count on to do what you agree to do. Let people know you are reliable, meet deadlines and keep appointments. Make sure that you write truthfully and your stories are well researched. These days, most writers also have Websites or blogs to showcase their work. If you don't already have one or both, it's a good idea to get them if you want to compete with other writers for the online portion of the worldwide audience.

The Internet offers special opportunities to compete on an even footing with all other providers, large and small. Using email; social networks such as **Facebook**, **Twitter**, and **LinkedIn**; or other media sharing Websites like YouTube can easily give you an opportunity to form your own network of followers. Niches can and should be developed. For example, if a particular place in the world is where you know best, take advantage of that information by displaying examples of your writing about it.

Social networking is the grouping of individuals into specific groups based on interests and relationships, like small rural communities or a neighborhood subdivision. The friends that you can make are just some of the many benefits to social networking online. Another one of those benefits includes diversity, because the Internet gives individuals from all around the world access to social networking sites. This means that although you are in the United States, you could develop an online following in Denmark or India.

No matter which of the social networks you use, be sure to complete your profile completely wherever appropriate. List all your qualifications, specialties, areas of expertise, publications, and awards, including a recent head-only photo of yourself. Many people will find you by conducting a keyword search on the social network site or using Google, so make sure you've seeded your profile with all the relevant details.

Websites

There are many variations of Websites, and you can create one yourself by using one of the many templates available online. Develop a modern-looking site and optimize it for search engines. You will gain much more from your Website if you maintain it yourself.

Your Website should look clean and professional. Keep it uncluttered with flashy graphics, voice or music that plays automatically. They make your site slow and irritating.

Your Website should contain your biography, a recent head-only photo of yourself, a few samples of your work, press releases, and details on how to contact you. You can add or change pages as you develop your portfolio of material.

The Title of Your Website and Blog

Acquiring the rights to your domain name is important even if you don't put up your Website or blog right away. Jacqueline can't stress enough the importance of acquiring the rights to your chosen domain name. One of her fellow travel writers tried to buy her own name, only to find it had already been taken by someone else with the same name. Jacqueline had trouble with her blog name FoodFlirt.com, already being in use. She decided to call it FoodFlirtOnline.com and secured the name.

There are many domain hosts to choose from, including GoDaddy.com and NetworkSolutions.com.

The .com, .net, etc. labels are called the Top Level Domains (TLD) and are “suggested” ways differentiating the type of Website you are running:

- .com is commercial
- .net is an Internet service provider
- .edu is an educational organization
- .org is a not-for-profit organization

People don't always follow these rules. For example, no one checks up on you to make sure you're not-for-profit if you use the .org in your Website URL. Other domain names differentiate countries (.ca is Canada, .sk is Sweden, etc.), and you have to follow some rules in registering these.

Blogs

Blogs can lead to amazing results. Think of the success of Julie Powell, who blogged about teaching herself to cook. She vowed to cook each and every one of the 524 recipes in Julia Child's *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* within a year. By the end of the year she had publishers knocking on her door with book contracts, and ultimately received a movie contract.

All that from a daily blog about cooking!

Blogs are gaining in popularity because they are more immediate than other types of communication. You can add to your blog whenever and from wherever you want. However, it's a good idea to blog at least once a week, with bits of information, photos, thoughts, and ideas. Try to keep your content on target with the niche you are developing as a travel writer. Be it restaurants in Paris, a bike ride along the West Coast of the U.S.A., or sightseeing in Morocco, you can build up a following by encouraging your readers to comment on content.

Some writers feel that a blog is easier to maintain than a traditional Website. The short, serialized content of blogs encourages regular readership and repeated exposure to your writing style.

You can choose from several free blog hosts such as WordPress.com or Blogspot.com. Take some time to cruise through their Websites to see if they are appealing to you. There are a variety of templates to choose from for the look of your blog, and you can add your own photos and text at will.

To become a blogger it's important to read other blogs. This will give you insight into what works and what doesn't and help you develop the style you want for your own blog. A good place to begin your research for your blog is to browse blogs about travel. You can find these types of blogs by searching on Websites like technorati.com/blogs/directory/ or blogsearch.google.com.

Blog posts should be short and to the point. Nearly any tidbit relevant to your readers can be used as material for a blog post:

- Information, such as destination reviews.
- Events, festivals, and celebrations.
- Food and recipes from nearby and far away.
- Question and answer. Ask your readers where they are going or have been.
- Interviews. Chat with someone about his or her experience in traveling to a specific destination.
- New gadgets that would appeal to travelers.

Following several other tips can increase traffic to your blog and make it more attractive to readers:

- Comment on other blogs in your niche. This will attract fellow bloggers and their readers who

follow the link in your comment back to your blog.

-
- Add photos. Add a sprinkling of photos to illustrate the subject matter of your blog.
 - Always write in the first person.
 - Write catchy headlines to draw in your readers.
 - Hook your readers in the first sentence.
 - Don't be boring and don't rant. This will drive readers away from your blog.

Spud Hilton, travel editor for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, gave us the example of the wide-eyed clueless tourist raving about these amazing places—*called cafés!*—that you can find all over Paris and cautioned us not to be that person. Spud also warned against the danger of losing your authentic voice, instructing us not to write something we'd never say in real life (such as telling a friend about the “luxuriously appointed” hotel we stayed at).

As you can see, you could blog about almost anything. However, since you are building your travel writer's platform, it's a good idea to keep your posts relevant to travel.

Open connections on your blog to Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube, and other social networking Websites. It's important to get your name connected and these networks can help do that for you. Using social networks can be time-consuming, so limit your activity and always refer to your own blog or Website in your comments or additions.

Business cards are a must. You can purchase business card kits at most office supply or stationery stores, and you can easily design and print them on your computer/printer yourself. There are also inexpensive online printers, or you can have them made up at your local copy shop. Whatever you choose, proofread carefully before printing. Include your name, address, phone numbers, email, blog address, and Website URL. Be sure the design is attractive and represents you as a professional. Carry your business cards with you at all times and pass them out freely.

Travel Writers' Organizations

Joining a group of professional travel writers is extremely beneficial. Not only will you have a built-in network of like-minded writers, but you can list the membership on your business cards, Website, blog, and social networks, and you will get the all-important press pass. A press pass will often get you into events, museums, and exhibits free, and without waiting in line.

Look into the qualifications of various travel writers' organizations. Below is a list of only a few. You can easily Google “travel writers' organizations” to find more. Read the individual qualifications carefully before applying for membership. Many of the organizations have different levels of membership.

- NATJA (North American Travel Journalists Association), the premier professional association of travel writers, photographers, editors, and tourism professionals, is dedicated to redefining professional travel and promoting development for the travel industry.
- SATW (Society of American Travel Writers), now in its fiftieth year, promotes responsible journalism, supports and develops members, and encourages conservation and preservation of travel resources worldwide. Writers must have a substantial portfolio in order to join SATW.
- IFWTWA (International Food, Wine & Travel Writers Association) is a global network of people involved in the hospitality and lifestyle fields and the people who promote them by informing others about them. It has been a non-profit organization, run by and for the benefit of its members since it was founded in Paris in 1954.
- BATW (Bay Area Travel Writers, Inc.), based in San Francisco, California, is a not-for-profit

professional association of writers and photographers with outstanding achievements in travel journalism. These professionals share their unique stories in newspapers, magazines, books, Internet publications, and travel industry publications.

Writers' Groups

Jacqueline recommends joining a writers' group. They can be very beneficial in finding your writer's "voice." She connected with several women at a travel writers conference at Book Passage in Corte Madera, California, and they formed a group, calling themselves the Wild Writing Women. Taking writing classes often leads to forming small writers' groups. If you Google "travel writers' groups" you will find many choices. Some meet in person, some online. Spend a little time researching, and you will surely find a group that will work for you.

Having someone else critique your work is extremely important. It's so easy to fall in love with the story you've written and have a blind eye to grammar mistakes as well as the flow of the story.

Research Is the Answer. What's the Question?

While it might seem as though the trip itself is the story and pre-trip research is unnecessary, “being there” is never enough. To write successfully about travel, we need to begin at the beginning and learn all we can before we leave home.

Research helps you decide where to travel in the first place. You may be wondering about that—how the travel writer decides on a destination. People often ask which comes first, the assignment or the desire to visit a particular place. Does an editor ever suggest you go to Blanketyville and do a story? The answer is, sometimes. Or do you indulge a lifelong dream of seeing Blanketyville—and then decide to write about it later? Again, the answer is, sometimes. Most often, though, the impetus for exploring a particular place begins with the research that makes that place seem attractive to write about. And the research usually starts with an informal encounter or casual reading—things we’ll be talking about in this chapter.

Research not only helps you decide where to go, it tells you how to get there, where to stay, where to eat, what to see, what to do, what to buy, and what’s likely to prove valuable to the travel writer. Pre-trip research saves you time because you’ll be sure to see the things that most interest you, and you’ll know what you’re seeing when you arrive at your destination. You’ll be familiar with the lifestyle you’ll find; you’ll be able to add to your store of knowledge without beginning at the beginning. You’ve probably already discovered some of the aspects you want to write about, and you’re already thinking about a fresh approach to some of the places of interest. Your theme and your angle are defined. With pre-trip research you’re in a good position to ask the right questions, and you’re more likely to find yourself behind the scenes, where you want to be.

Travel research is a subtle skill. You may consciously say to yourself, “Today I’m going to the library to read up on Yellowstone,” or “I’m going to call the Tollivers and ask about their trip to Yellowstone.” But more likely, you’ll research Yellowstone when you run into the Tollivers socially or come across a “Yellowstone” link when you’re looking for something else online. The Internet is now the main source of gathering information, and you can copy and paste information relevant to your story angle easily into a saved folder you title “Yellowstone Park.” Contacting the Tollivers for their personal experiences can give your research a more personal angle.

Using the Internet to research places, topics, etc. is very easy. Just Google the name or item you are looking for and a list of related items will come up on your computer screen. It’s amazing the amount of information one can find through the Internet.

However, be sure to check the dates the Internet posts were made and make sure the places recommended or written about are still there.

“Carry Knowledge with You”

Samuel Johnson quotes an old Spanish proverb that says, “He who would bring home the wealth of the Indies must carry the wealth of the Indies with him.” So it is with travel, says Johnson: “A man must carry knowledge with him if he would bring knowledge home.” The travel writer with pre-researched knowledge will bring home stories with plus value.

The successful travel writer subscribes to the iceberg theory—know ten times as much as you’re

telling. The part that's unseen beneath the surface gives you the voice of authority that makes your readers sit up and take notice. An information overload enables you to choose which materials to use rather than simply using whatever you happen to have; and doing lots of research helps you assimilate, understand, and enhance the parts you do use. When you produce a well-researched travel article, editors respect you.

Also, as we'll discover later, the travel writer has to do enough preliminary research to write compelling **query letters** to prospective editors. Research always becomes easier the more you do. Some push-button mechanism in the brain starts sending out signals: "Yes, this goes with and enriches something I'm now beginning to understand," or "No, I already know all about that—I won't bother with this piece of research."

Research: Live and Library, Offline and Online

We used to divide subject research into *live* and *library*, but in this computerized world we need to consider additional resources. However, we still find the various research opportunities so intertwined that we need them all. Your friend Jim tells you Pennsylvania is the most fascinating place he's ever seen. He shows you the pictures he took on his last vacation at the National Recreation Area in the Poconos. You ask questions, and he answers them. That's live research. If he also brings over a book on Pennsylvania he wants you to read, and you read it, that's library research. If you query your Internet search engine about Pennsylvania, and the computer comes up with usable results, that's research too.

You then scan your own bookshelves and go to your public library to find materials to guide you in deciding which parts of Pennsylvania to see, how to get to your gateway city, and what kind of transportation you'll use from there. Perhaps you'll go to a travel Website that gives you a quick fix on Pennsylvania prices, or you'll check out the official Pennsylvania state home page. You may spend some time researching information on the Internet Public Library (www.ipl.org).

Next you contact the Philadelphia Convention and Visitors Bureau, the National Park Service, the Gettysburg Travel Council, and the Pennsylvania Dutch Visitors Bureau. You check out the Visit PA Website. Then you call Cousin Susie, who honeymooned in the Poconos and lives in Pittsburgh.

By now you've decided which facets of Pennsylvania are likely to have the most plus value for the articles you will write. Back to the Internet you go for specific information on Valley Forge, the Amish Farm Home, the U.S.S. *Olympia* at Penn's Landing, and the Philadelphia Zoo.

You can see how pre-trip research is a combination of writer and written word, writer and visual description, and writer and other human beings. Live research includes observation and interview, both of which we'll discuss in [Chapter 13](#). Less formal than interviews are encounters. The encounter is less structured than the interview, and often it's just the kind of casual give-and-take the travel writer needs. You absorb easily what the other person has to offer, using the information to fill in the chinks in your own knowledge. Somehow this comes through in your finished story, making you sound less didactic because it isn't only *you* speaking to the reader—it's you along with your reference sources.

As soon as you've done enough preliminary research to ask sensible questions, talk to everybody you think can help you—airline representatives, steamship company representatives, government officials, other travel writers and editors, college students from far away, friends and friends of friends, and anybody else who has already been where you plan to go. Rent, borrow, or buy appropriate CDs, videos, and audio tapes. Attend community college courses and illustrated lectures as well as films about the area you plan to visit. Browse or download electronic information sources

including podcasts. And don't hesitate to ask questions.

Prepare yourself in advance, for instance, for visiting a town in a developing country. What will you look for? Does that country claim it offers free, compulsory education? But will you see school-age children playing in the street during school hours? Do the houses have electricity? Plumbing? Privacy? What are the residents like? Do they have radios, books, mirrors, ice, and newspapers? If you've done your homework, you'll know what you're looking at and what it means.

If you'll be visiting a ruin, do enough homework to people it with those who once lived there, worked and played, made love, made war. Picture them relaxing in their atriums, fountains playing, or on a warm summer evening, or poring over their clay tablets as they discuss the inflationary spiral and household expenses. If you get to know the *people*, a ruin is more than a pile of old stones.

It's almost impossible to conduct formal live research until you've laid a foundation of library and online research. You have to know the right questions to ask—you have to already be familiar with the subject before composing a questionnaire or conducting an interview or even taking advantage of a chance encounter. So let's consider, in addition to informal live research, some of the less formal research you can conduct in your home library.

Again, some of your best resources will be those you really don't think of as research tools. You probably subscribe to a Sunday newspaper, and maybe one writing-oriented periodical, such as *Writer's Digest*. Your home bookshelves should already contain an up-to-date dictionary, a thesaurus of some sort, and possibly a style manual such as Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style*, as well as a recent edition of *Writer's Market* or some other marketing manual.

What else does the travel writer need at home? That depends partly on your computer skills and equipment and how much information you can access online. It depends also on how close you live to a public library, how good the library is, how often you go there, and how much it means to you to own the book or magazine and to be able to mark it up, cut parts out, put it aside to read next week, or take it along. And don't forget to begin your *futures* file early—stockpiling information you may need at some future time. When you *do* get ready to visit the places described in your files, you'll find the saved information invaluable.

The Travel Writer's Home Library

A quick sampling of our own overstuffed travel shelves reveals a diversity of books, ranging from *Traveller's Guide to Caribbean History* to the *Insight Guide to the Waterways of Europe*, *Adventure in Japan*, and *Let's Go Turkey*. Lonely Planet has travel advice ranging from *Travel with Children* to *Europe on a Shoestring* to their in-depth guidebooks on every country on this planet.

There are all kinds of books on "how to get there"—from motorcycles to tramp steamers—and a myriad of information on places to stay, places to eat, places to shop, learning opportunities, and sightseeing of all types. There are classics like Paul Theroux's *The Pillars of Hercules* and books on travel tales by ancient travelers from Herodotus to Marco Polo. *A Book of Traveller's Tales*, compiled by Eric Newby, a literary travel writer of no small stature, gives the reader a taste of the past—from Anthony Trollope to John Charles Fremont. Several volumes of *Literary Trips* transport readers from Franz Kafka's Prague to John Steinbeck's Cannery Row. The *Chronicles Abroad* series covers great cities, according to Somerset Maugham, Thomas Mann, Jean-Paul Sartre, Orson Welles, Benjamin Disraeli, Leo Tolstoy, Lawrence of Arabia, and other travelers inclined toward literary reporting.

This book, in its original first edition, was the first book ever directed specifically to the would-be travel writer, and it has been judged the definitive book on the subject. But in addition to *The Travel Writer's Handbook* in this new, updated version, there are many excellent books that provide insight

into nonfiction writing in general.

Books on Writing

Rudolf Flesch, Henry Fowler, Jacques Barzun, and Theodore Bernstein stand ready to advise on the niceties of the writing process itself. Such books as *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*, *The Home Book of Quotations*, or *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* belong on the travel writer's bookshelves or on easy electronic access. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) contains nearly half a million words and two million quotations. The *Dictionary of American Slang* helps keep your language up to date.

Bartleby.com has an excellent Website for answering questions about English usage (bartleby.com/usage), and it even has the full text of Strunk's *Elements of Style*. Many other language aids reside online, including Merriam-Webster (Merriam-Webster.com), with its dictionary, and Thesaurus.com, with synonyms and antonyms as well as a daily crossword puzzle.

Searching for special tips, shortcuts, and hints from the pros? Look for *The ASJA Guide to Freelance Writing*, written by members of the American Society of Journalists and Authors. Although not brand new, it's still helpful when some of the most experienced writers in the world tell how they handle their computers, their phone lines, their financial arrangements, and what books they refer to for their special needs. They reveal how to treat reluctant interviewees, how to promote a book or television, how to get help with research, and how to find envelopes at bargain prices.

Books on Photography

Since awareness of photographic techniques, sources, prices, and markets is part of the travel writer's essential knowledge, you'll want to read several books on photography.

Photographer's Market, published annually, not only gives advice on setting up a business, preparing a portfolio, and submitting your work both digitally and by traditional mail, but also provides a comprehensive, up-to-date list of photography buyers. Buyers range from advertising agencies to audiovisual firms and include consumer magazines, trade journals, and commercial publications. The listings tell you the name of the buyer, what each publication needs in the way of photographs, and what it will pay for them.

Additional books about the digital world, as well as magazines and advice, can help you over the rough spots. (More on photography in [Chapter 14](#).)

Books on Using Computers

Dummies books have inundated the market with simplified information on everything from *Internet for Dummies* to *Starting an eBay Business for Dummies*. If you're past the "Dummies" stage, try a title in the *Bibles* series.

Probably the most current hard-copy information on computing is available in magazines, and there are dozens—maybe hundreds—available at newsstands and bookstores, as well as everywhere computer equipment is sold. Magazines such as *MacLife*, *PC World*, and *Wired* cater to the knowledgeable users. Some publications are pitched to owners of specific hardware or specific software, users in certain geographic areas—from San Diego to Vancouver—or people who use computers for particular purposes, such as archaeology or genealogy.

Guidebooks

You'll surely want to read at least one guidebook on where you think you might like to go—or several guidebooks while you're deciding what your destination will be. But consider the different types of guides so you can make a sensible selection. You can often purchase guidebooks for less than half

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