



Professionalism in Writing: You Know It When You See It by Bobbi Linkemer

What does it really mean to be a professional writer? Years ago, I thought it was just a matter of being paid - something, anything - for a piece of writing. The first time I received a check for all of \$50, I was sure I had made it. But the thrill didn't last long. For one thing, it was ages between checks. For another, after a while, \$50 checks didn't seem fair compensation for what I put into article after article. And, finally, it took four-and-a-half years to fill a single portfolio. It was a very slow process and hardly a lucrative one. On the other hand, it was a fitting beginning to my career in many ways. I pursued every opportunity to write. I gave every project my all. I made very little money. And I questioned my sanity on a regular basis.

Much of that is still true, but I have learned that there is so much more to being a true professional than I ever imagined when I was young. It certainly goes far beyond the financial aspect by which I first measured it. Like "class," professionalism is difficult to define; yet, we all recognize it when we see it. There are two perspectives on this subject: one is that of your clients or editors; the other is yours. While there are some measures of professionalism most people would agree on, you won't really know how your clients or editors define it unless you ask them. Asking them, by the way, is a very good idea. How will you know what they think, expect, or value unless you do ask? And if you don't know, how will you be able to evaluate how well you measure up to their criteria? From my own perspective, however, I will consider myself a true professional when:

- I do my best work on every project, every time. To me, that means I don't get sloppy or cut corners on small jobs. I have a single set of standards that applies to all of my work, not just the high-paying assignments. When I found myself feeling resentful because I was underpaid for going above and beyond, I decided not to accept any projects under a certain minimum dollar amount.
- I come through. I keep promises. I do what I say I'll do when I say I'll do it. This applies to even the smallest things. If I tell someone I will look up a phone number and call them, I try very hard to do it and, more than that, to do it in a timely manner. If I don't, I am haunted by not doing it, even if it was more an offhand remark than a promise.
- I treat people with respect and consideration - all people, no matter what position they may hold or how "important" they may be. I have seen too many people ingratiate themselves with senior executives only to turn around and bite off some secretary's head. I don't know what bothers me more - the insincerity of the obsequious behavior or the double standard based solely on status.

- I can be trusted. I don't carry tales or betray confidences. I don't talk to one client about another. I don't pad my billable hours. I do express my opinions, even when it may not be what the client wants to hear. Surprisingly, clients expect me to tell them what I think. In fact, I believe that is one of the reasons they hire me.
- I look the part. Perception is reality. I work hard at creating and nurturing the perception of professionalism in my appearance, attire, attitude, and demeanor. Everything reflects what I do and how well I do it, from the message on my voice mail to my wardrobe. My theory is that, if I take great care with how I present myself, it is a good indication that I will take great care with anything I write.