

# The Idea

A successful freelance career starts with the ability to match unique ideas to specific markets. A great place to start is by studying the market you want to sell to. If you want to be in a magazine, read the magazine. The actual magazine is the best place to start and can often be more insightful than the writer's guidelines.

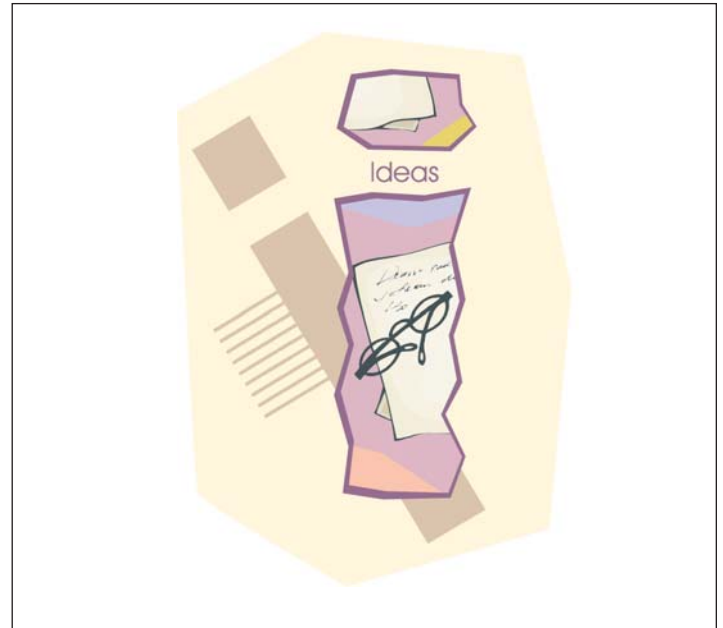
Parenting magazines, for example, often revisit the same issues on a regular basis. You know they are going to address the Terrible Twos, diaper rash and being a new parent. What you need to figure out is how you can pitch these ideas that have been done (many times!) with a fresh spin That's the challenge! It works the same way for any market.

The hardest thing about getting ideas is recognizing them for what they are as you go about your everyday life. Once you learn how to start recognizing ideas, you'll never have a shortage. If you have a problem and solve it, that's an article idea. If you have a problem and don't solve it, that's an article idea.

Writer's are also advised to write what you know, and that's a great place to start looking for ideas. What are your hobbies? What is your job? What is your home life like? These are the places to start when you go looking for ideas. Did you spend two days trying to figure out how to operate Excel? That could be the basis for an article such as "Excel experts reveal the 5 secrets you need to know." Plus if you interview Excel experts, you learn something useful you wanted to know too.

If you are a parent, what are the biggest challenges you deal with on a daily basis? If it's getting your kids to keep their room clean, you can develop that idea and find experts who claim to have the solutions. I recently turned a conversation with my daughter just before her seventh birthday into an article. "Battling the Birthday Buy Me" came to light after she gave me a wish list for her birthday presents that would have broke the bank. I pitched my idea to a parenting magazine in South Florida.

I had done my market research, so I knew the parenting magazine was fairly large. I also knew it published an issue centered around birthdays every



February. I pitched my article in time to meet a February publication. The editor assigned the article, making it the cover article for her issue. She also assigned a sidebar to go with the main article. I interviewed experts and other moms to get additional information.

The editor wanted the sidebar to be about alternatives to presents, such as donating money in the child's name or buying dog food for the local shelter. But when I talked to my experts, they thought that was a bad idea. I still wrote the sidebar my editor wanted, but I included the cautions from my experts.

Where did I find the experts and other moms? When looking for experts, look for recent nonfiction books published on your topic, professors at state universities, or visit sites like [www.profnet.com](http://www.profnet.com). Every day moms are harder to find. You often have to get sources from all over the U.S., or in a certain region that may be thousands of miles away from you. (For instance, I lived in Michigan when I wrote the article for the Florida magazine.)The Internet makes this possible. In my case, I belong to a writers' group that has members from all over the world, and I asked for volunteers willing to be interviewed.

Back to finding the idea -- Start with what presents

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challenges to you and most likely you'll find you stumbled onto something that presents a challenge for many. Last summer for a very short time it was so hot that I hated to cook in my kitchen. I live in northern Michigan where I need a furnace for about 10 months of the year and an air conditioner could only be put to use for about two weeks. I knew I wasn't alone. So I interviewed a cook for great meals that cook up quickly AND didn't require the use of the stove. I sold it to a local newspaper during a heatwave.

If you still find that you are short of ideas, sit down and write a letter to someone. What are you telling them about? It could be your next query idea.

Always be prepared to write down an idea, even if it arrives while you are in the shower (it's been known to happen). Keep a notebook handy. In your house, think about placing one in the kitchen, your office, your living room, where you read the newspaper, and next to your bed. You'll also want to keep one in your car. Be prepared to jot down your ideas when you first think of them. I keep a basket of 3x5 index cards on my desk. When I think of an idea, I jot it down. The next time I need an idea, I go through my index cards. Be sure, however, that you write down enough of the idea that you'll remember what you meant the next time you read it.

If you become an expert in a certain topic, you can develop research folders. When you read a newspaper article, magazine article or interesting fact about your topic, plop it in your research folder for that topic. When you need an idea, pick up your research folder and go through it. You may find connections that develop into interesting story ideas.

The calendar is another great way to develop ideas. Magazines often work at least six months ahead of schedule, so in March, they're thinking about September. What happens in September? Labor Day; School starts, and there is Grandparents' Day too. In Roscommon it's the Fireman's Memorial. There's also patriot day and the first day of Autumn. There's a host of possible topics right there.

If you expand your calendar to include historic dates and those "national" days, your idea treasure trove grows even larger. For instance, September is the anniversary of the first U.S. newspaper, the establishment of the U.S. Treasury, the discovery of planet Neptune, and more. It's also when Banned Book Week happens, National Punctuation Day, SAT deadline, and National PlayDoh Day happens. Those factoids, with some relevant research, can help you develop an article idea that sells.



It never hurts to take a fresh look at an old idea. For years I handled public relations for Merritt Speedway. I wrote a weekly article about the race, but the primary audience was drivers, people who understood racing. I could easily have written an article about the racing experience from the vantage of someone attending the race for the first time. I never wrote that article, but I did start thinking about what I knew in a different way.

It wasn't long before I was able to develop new article ideas for new markets outside of my PR work. For instance, I knew a father and son duo that raced, but their primary job was driving truck. I sold the article about truckers spending their down time behind the wheel of a racecar to Road King magazine, a glossy national magazine published by TA truck stops.

When reviewing a current issue of Road King, I noticed a travel article piece about a little festival where they catapult pumpkins. I knew Houghton Lake's Tip-Up Town would fit right into that column, so I pitched it. They bought it. I put the editor in contact with the local newspapers to get artwork for the article. After two articles, I was placed on the magazine's regular contributor list. That meant the editor knew who I was, and I received a free copy of the magazine each month.

One important thing to remember about an idea is that it is just an idea. It can be changed, shaped and moulded. Be willing to work with an editor to whip that idea into a shape that will fit the magazine perfectly. Don't get so sold on your idea that you aren't willing to bend it a little to make the sale. Developing an idea to its fullest potential is one of the great advantages of working with an editor, and a perfect example of why it's important to query.