

# Will a nicer word disguise that you are a freelancer?

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The suitability of the word *freelancer* remains under scrutiny. It seems the 'free' part is an offensive little blighter that suggests freelancers offer a cheap commodity or work for free, and the 'lance' part is archaic and totally out of date.

The word is considered negative and demeaning, and many suggest replacing it with 'nicer' words, like independent worker, professional writer/artist/designer, self-employed worker, consultant, business owner, or even entrepreneur.

## Independent professional

The origin of *freelance* is free + lance. Free refers to personal liberty (as opposed to slavery) and not free of charge. Lance refers to the tools a freelancer has. The word has a rich history and its original meaning implied a mercenary warrior, a hired gun.

I get a kick out of picturing myself as a warrior astride my trusty steed, off to conquer an army of atrociously assembled words. A modern day warrior, though, equipped with the latest technology and improved tools, and the freedom to take on or refuse work as I please.

But, if I had to choose, what word would I choose to replace freelance? I have no objection to independent, professional, self-employed, or business owner (because that's what freelancers are), but I would hesitate to call myself an entrepreneur or a consultant.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* and the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* define entrepreneur as a person who starts or sets up a business and takes financial risks in the hope of making a profit. The *Cambridge Dictionaries Online* defines entrepreneur as a person starting their own business when it involves seeing a new opportunity.

All three dictionaries have similar definitions for freelancer, that of a self-employed person working independently for different companies - no mention of financial risk.

I wouldn't use the word consultant, based on personal reasons. I worked in government for a while and groaned every time a consultant was appointed. I mean no offence, and perhaps I'm biased, but I regard them as egotists that charge exorbitant rates and demand preferential treatment.

## Moonlighting

Today *freelance* differs from its intended meaning and suggests moonlighting, being between jobs, not having a real job, working freelance until the right job comes along, or a failed wannabee that can't find anything better to do.

Many freelancers drop the word to sidestep its perceived negative implication, but nicer words merely sugar-coat the truth, which is, at the end of it all, they fit the description of a freelancer.

And who's to guarantee that, over time, the nicer word used to uplift your status won't suffer the same fate? A few rotten, inexperienced apples that misrepresent their skills and abilities, and offer substandard work at cheap rates, can rapidly tarnish any name.

I believe most people tacitly know a freelancer is an independent professional who is self-employed and works for various clients. If a client is worried about hiring you (as a freelancer), it is up to you to allay their fears. This could entail pitching your title to the client as a writer would a story to a magazine's style.

What is more important than any title is for your clients to know they are dealing with a professional, ethical businessperson. My bulleted points will help you build trust and maintain good relationships, whatever your title.

- Understand each new client is probably as **fearful** of taking you on as you are of accepting the work.
- **Network** with other freelancers and build up contacts. Freelancers look out for each other, and you may get referrals, which will eliminate the fear of working with strangers.
- Have a **portfolio** to show the quality of your work. (New freelancers can prepare samples).
- Get a **website** going and update it regularly. Websites indicate a sense of permanency and are great marketing tools.
- **Research** a client to determine if they are legitimate, or to familiarise yourself with their activities.
- **Don't quote upfront** until you confirm the work you are quoting for is what the client wants. *Listen carefully* to a brief, and *ask questions* if you don't understand.
- **Break down your quotation** into sections so the client can see what it entails.
- Draw up a **contract** which outlines in *detail* what is expected of you *and* the client - scope of work, target audience, output, deadlines, payment, kill fee. Get it signed.
- **Communicate**. Say what you can do and outline the *benefits*. Give your client regular feedback, answer emails or phone calls promptly, and don't make lame excuses for not getting back to them. Request *feedback* on completion of a project.
- Maintain strict **confidentiality**.
- **Don't take on more work** than you can do, and don't ever say you can do something you know you can't.
- Stick to **deadlines** - promise less and deliver more.
- **Don't sell yourself short**. Your price indicates how highly you value your skills.
- **Don't be bullied** into working for free. Consider doing unpaid work for non-profit organisations to build your portfolio, but make this the exception, not the norm.
- **Take criticism** seriously but not personally. Act on the constructive and discard the destructive.
- Avoid confrontations. Calmly discuss issues and find a **win-win** solution.
- **File and keep all correspondence**. It could be needed should a dispute arise.
- Accept you will make **mistakes**, nobody is perfect. Learn from them, don't beat yourself up.
- Keep abreast of trends, and continuously **improve your skills**.
- Always present yourself as a **professional, ethical** businessperson.

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