



A Contractor Just Fired Me for Paying Late...Except I Paid Nine Days Early

Published on August 21, 2017



Joanne Cleaver | [Follow](#)
Strategic Communication Consultant

0 0 1

Don't make the same mistakes she did and ruin a steady gig

In a series of increasingly hostile emails, a copyeditor I've been working with for over a year fired me for paying late.

Except...I paid her nine days early, and it's all documented in black and white.

In my 36 years of freelancing, I've extracted payment from clients, paid subcontractors, and covered many facets of money management and cash flow for business publications. This newly-departed copyeditor made some errors common to many inexperienced freelancers. Here's how to actually strengthen client relationships while navigating payment discussions.

(For more awesome advice on growing your practice as an editorial freelancer, check out these two November conferences sponsored by [the American Society of Journalists & Authors](#). [Spotlight on Ghostwriting](#), Nov. 17, is an intensive for published nonfiction authors who want to grow their practice as book ghostwriters, and [Content Connections](#), Nov. 18, is all about getting more from content marketing clients.)

The point of payment is a critical touchpoint for the relationship. For about seven years, I wrote six articles annually for a magazine for debt collectors. Debt collectors and accounts receivable staff are in a unique position: unhappy customers who can't get a customer's attention any other way will refuse to pay their bills, figuring that nothing gets a company's attention like withholding payment.

They were right. When the payment hangs in the balance, problems are suddenly addressed, questions answered, and issues resolved. The debt collectors saw all the company's dirty laundry. (And smart debt collectors often can salvage the customer relationship by making things right.)

Your client is already doing business with you. It's less stressful and more productive all the way around to frame a conversation about slow or non-payment in terms of the

ongoing relationship than it is to default to hostility. Here's how, in four factors that all converged in my recent firing.

It's not you. Plenty of things can hold up payment: vacations, unscheduled leave, staff defections, a transition from one accounting software system to another, switching banks. Before making accusations, ask if internal logistics are complicating payment. The copyeditor who just fired me ignored the fact that I lost a week to a family funeral. I simply wasn't paying much attention to my emails for several days.

It is you. Does the client have questions about the work, the amount, or the terms? No business pays immediately for work that is not satisfactory. The contractor that just fired me billed me for work done after a project was completed. I wasn't sure what was actually covered in the invoice. And, as we had been straightening out a mistake she had made, I wasn't sure if she was actually charging me for the time she spent to figure out how she'd made a major error. (As it turned out, she was, to my astonishment., but that's another topic for another day.)

Know the terms. How you bill doesn't affect when you are paid. If you bill via Paypal, the client still has the period of time specified in the contract to pay. Payment is not late when Paypal says it is. Payment is late when the contract says it is.

Some of my subcontractors invoice via Paypal. Usually I pay within a day. But the contract I use specifies that I have 25 days to pay. I had to repeatedly ask this copyeditor about what was covered in this particular invoice, and she essentially gave me the brush-off, saying she didn't have time to show how the time billed was spent. Meanwhile, she sent me a series of increasingly hostile reminders via Paypal about late payment. I paid her with nine days to spare, according to the contract. She still insists that I paid late.

Two years ago, a different copyeditor, who failed her trial assignment with spectacularly subpar work, emailed me an invoice on a Monday. She didn't have the capability to taken an electronic bank payment, so on Tuesday I wrote her check and on Wednesday I mailed it. Friday – two days later – she sent me a past due notice. Then she asked me for more work. She was tone-deaf from beginning to end.

Comply with the paperwork. Every client has its own billing quirks. Some want you to use their standard invoice. Some want you to use an electronic format. Some keep losing W-9's and other forms. One of my clients just went backwards, from requiring electronic payment to requiring a paper invoice sent to a post office box. The contractor who just fired me tried to make up her own payment protocol.

Follow your clients' rules. Make sure you aren't introducing complications. I keep a subfolder for every client with invoices, templates, and copies of emails documenting their invoicing protocol and the contact information of the helpful people in accounts

receivable. That's how I got paid last year for a \$1,200 story that had been accepted, then put on hold. I followed up monthly with the editor, who love the story but who didn't seem too motivated to clear up lingering paperwork, so I found out who to contact in accounts payable. I showed the accounts payable staffer the documentation that the story was accepted and asked that she expedite payment, citing my ongoing relationship with the publication (under a prior editor). I had a check in four days.

Finally, say thank you to everyone in the payment process. I love my clients, and I try to sweeten the annoyance of paperwork by leading off with thanks for the just-completed work and for the ongoing relationship. A little bit of goodwill changes the tenor of an annoying task and invites clients to continue working with you, so you can keep sending them those cheery invoices.



Report this



Joanne Cleaver
Strategic Communication Consultant
[1 article](#)

[Follow](#)

0 comments



Leave your thoughts here...

Top stories from Editors' Picks



Why Podcasting Is Still a Great Way to Grow Your Business

John Jantsch on LinkedIn



Elon Musk and 100 AI Firms Say No to Terminators

Michael Spencer on LinkedIn



Showing Students Different Futures

Bill Gates on LinkedIn

Looking for more of the latest headlines on LinkedIn?

[Discover more stories](#)

