

What Should You Get Paid?

Selling Your Work · By Simon Townsend · 3 min read

There is no fixed rate for freelance journalism in Australia. What you get paid depends on who commissioned you, how desperate they are, how desperate you are, what rights the contract takes, and whether you have the nerve to ask for more.

This page gives you rough 2026 benchmarks, the questions you should ask before accepting a commission, and the argument MEAA makes about what rates ought to be. Use it as a negotiating reference. Do not send a link to your editor.

Rough rate benchmarks, 2026

The numbers below are per published word, unless noted. Fees are negotiable. Some publications pay better than the listed range, especially for established writers. Most pay less than they claim.

Top-tier magazines and long-form: *The Monthly*, *Good Weekend*, *Griffith Review*, *Australian Book Review*. Typical range \$1.00 to \$2.00 per word. Long features from \$2,000 to \$8,000 total fee.

Mid-tier newspapers and magazines: *The Saturday Paper*, *Guardian Australia features*, *Australian Geographic*, *Cosmos*. Typical range 60c to \$1.00 per word. Features from \$600 to \$2,500.

Online news sites: *Crikey*, *The Conversation* (pays modestly), *The New Daily*, *news.com.au specials*. Typical range 20c to 50c per word. Short pieces flat-rate \$150 to \$400.

Opinion pieces: 600 to 800 words, typically flat-rate \$200 to \$700. Top-tier opinion commissions at *The Monthly*, *The Saturday Paper*, *Good Weekend* can go higher.

Trade and industry press: varies wildly. Corporate customer magazines pay well (\$1 per word or higher). Industry association newsletters often pay little or nothing.

Wire and breaking news: rates vary by agency. AAP, AP, Reuters all commission stringers, typically on fixed per-piece fees.

What MEAA says rates should be

The Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance publishes a recommended rates schedule for freelance contributors. The current schedule recommends a baseline around 80c per word for metropolitan publications and \$1 per word for major magazines. In practice, most publications pay below those rates. The schedule is still useful as a negotiation anchor.

MEAA also recommends you be paid for rewrites and additional drafts above a reasonable threshold, and that you retain rights you did not explicitly sell.

Questions to ask before accepting a commission

What is the word count?

What is the fee for that word count?

Are rewrites paid?

What rights are you taking?

Net 30 from invoice, or on publication?

Who is the editor I will be working with?

What is the deadline?

Will you pay a kill fee if the piece is commissioned but not run?

All seven of these deserve an answer in writing. If the commissioner cannot answer any of them, that is information. A vague commission usually ends badly.

Kill fees

A kill fee is what a publication pays you if they commission a piece but do not run it. Industry standard in Australia is 50% of the agreed fee. Some publications pay 100% if the piece was delivered on time and to the brief, even if they spike it. Some publications do not pay kill fees at all. Know the policy before you start work.

If a kill fee comes up, it is usually because of an editorial decision that has nothing to do with the quality of your piece. Do not take it personally. Do invoice for the kill fee. Do deliver the piece to someone else if the rights permit.

Rights and resale

First Australian Serial Rights is the freelance writer's traditional sale. The publisher gets the first Australian print (or digital) publication. You keep everything else: international, resale, syndication, anthology, adaptation.

Many modern contracts try to take everything, forever, everywhere. Do not sign a full buyout contract for a feature fee. A full buyout should be double, triple, or more of the base fee, because you are losing all future resale.

If you write syndicated columns, negotiate the syndication rights separately. The original fee is for the first publication. The syndication income is a second revenue stream that can be substantial over years.

Getting paid more over time

You will not charge \$2 per word in your first year. You might charge it in year five if you have a strong portfolio and a clear specialty.

Raise your rates. Every year, by a small percentage. Clients will push back only if they value you less than you think. Mostly they will accept the increase.

Build one client whose rate is high enough that losing the rest would not be fatal. A high-paying corporate customer magazine, a regular book chapter commission, a recurring Substack paid column. One anchor client makes the rest of the freelance life bearable.

Track your hourly rate, not your per-word rate. A \$2,000 feature that takes you three weeks of research and two weeks of writing is a poorly paid gig. A \$600 opinion piece you wrote in a morning is great pay. The rate per word is a starting point, not the thing that matters.

A final thought

Simon's rule was simple. Name your rate, quote it without apology, and do not drop it because you want the gig. A writer who drops their rate every time they feel desperate trains editors to treat them as cheap. A writer who holds their rate is remembered. Some editors will not commission you. Others will. The second group is worth working for.

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