

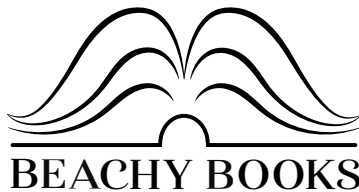
The Bounty Writer

Andrew Don has been a journalist for nearly 40 years—30 of them operating as an independent. Andrew has written extensively for the national press and business-to-business magazines—print and online—and he has been a news editor, features editor, deputy editor, launch editor and editorial consultant. *The Bounty Writer*, published by Beachy Books in 2021, is his third book. His first, *Fathers Feel Too*, a book about miscarriage and stillbirth, was published by SANDS in 2005. *Virtuality*, a self-published ebook, followed in 2011. He lives in West Wales with his wife, Liz, a Rhodesian Ridgeback and a DuCorps Cockatoo. He has two adult children. His passions are wildlife, long-distance walking, literature and music.

The Bounty Writer

**How to Earn Six Figures as an
Independent Freelance Journalist**

Andrew Don



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*For Jim Muttram with thanks for all the advice and encouragement,
Stephen Clackson, for helping me get my foot in the door and Val Clarke,
without whom I would never have got my Pre-entry Journalism certificate and
gone on to enjoy a wonderful career.*

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Chapter 1

Fear, hunger and angles

I learned that courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it. The brave man is not he who does not feel afraid, but he who conquers that fear'

Nelson Mandela

I did not need to be a household name to earn six figures as an independent journalist. Nor did I need an 'ology' with letters after my name.

All I needed was an overwhelming fear of destitution, a hunger for news and an instinct for seeing an angle in, ostensibly, even the most mundane. For I learned that nothing is mundane when approached with originality.

A modicum of skill proved helpful during my career as did my propensity to rage against naysayers. Anyone who said 'no' to me got the equivalent of '*I'm Henry the VIII I am*' in a loop, Patrick Swayze-style.

Luck, too, played an essential role, the relationships I cultivated and timing.

I have a genetic disposition to crippling anxiety and depression, which 'nurture' exacerbated. Frankly, my achievement of nine 'O' levels shortly after Mum died of cancer was nothing short of miraculous.

Mum's cancer played a major role in discombobulating and unbalancing me as did her propensity in my early childhood to play good-cop-bad-cop. She suffered extreme mood swings so that I never knew where I was with her from one minute to the next.

I broke down in the first months of sixth form and took a year off pursuing odd jobs in London. These included cleaning out animal poo in Palmer's Pet Shop in Camden Town, photocopying *World in Action* scripts on a massive Xerox copier at Grenada TV, in Golden Square, Piccadilly, and stuffing envelopes and packing books at a taxation book publisher near Green Park.

The next academic year, I attended a mediocre sixth-form college, which did nothing for nurturing my potential. Nor did my addiction to Valium, which had been prescribed from my mid-teens after initially pilfering them from my dad's second wife who had bottles of the tranquiliser in their bedroom cupboard. I performed woefully in my 'A' levels with a Grade E in my best subject, English, let down by one specific paper, which I stared at for three hours writing nothing but my name.

That I scraped through with what was deemed a by-the-skin-of-your-teeth pass in those days must have meant I achieved top marks, or as near as damn it in the other papers. I performed slightly better at Law where I scrambled a C—a joke because I excelled at English and Law had been a desperate afterthought.

I had originally signed up at college to do the three sciences but realised, within the first few weeks, I was completely out of my depth. I had some notion I was going to be a farmer. Don't ask! I didn't know who I was and where I was going. Dad wrote a letter to the college explaining that I had suffered 'emotional' issues since the death of my mum, and I was allowed to change courses. Students were normally

required to do three subjects but, in the circumstance, the college reluctantly agreed that I would do two.

My mental health made any further education out of the question despite an interview at Salford University which offered me a conditional place.

I also suffered from deafness, which I hid for as long as possible from as many people as possible, masking it with a talent for lip-reading, constantly ‘popping’ my ears when listening, and reading body language.

I was hardly set for journalism super-stardom in the mould of Piers Morgan or Andrew Neil. God’s gift to journalism, I most definitely was not. My shorthand was atrocious despite achieving 100 words per minute for exam purposes—a feat I never measured up to again. I would concentrate so much on hearing that I would tense and get cramps in my hand, which made fluid shorthand a challenge.

Somehow, I managed to scribble accurately what people said, although I struggled to read it back. A future editor and mentor, Jim Muttram, read my shorthand better than I, a remarkable decoding feat I marvel at to this day.

I survived nearly 40 years on shorthand that mixed Teeline with my own dodgy shortenings, but thankfully I have been aided more recently by technology.

What I lacked in terms of ear-hand coordination, I more than made up for with a pit bull terrier personality: give me a bone and I would rip your arm off before I would let you take it from me—the most important qualification, together with a good memory, I advocate, if you are going to earn big money as a freelance or independent.

If I can do it, with my baggage and hang-ups, then why not you?

Independent journalism is not particularly glamorous or romantic in most cases and it can sometimes be mundane. The press events and parties I frequently attended as a staff journalist were not financially viable once I was self-employed: rubbing shoulders with people as different from each other as Sir Douglas Hurd and the late Paula Yates did not pay the bills once I was compensated by the word, the magazine issue, or the day, rather than drawing a monthly payslip plus expenses.

I was chained to my desk, but I could have lunch with Liz, my wife, whom I married three years into my career independence. She is a self-employed travel agent and worked from our home from around the turn of the millennium. Typing away with my dog sleeping at my feet and a parrot on my shoulder beat working in Quadrant House in Sutton, Surrey, where I had last worked as an employee as deputy editor of *SuperMarketing*.

I earned more over the totality of my career and for years at a time than I ever imagined. The decision to become self-employed was one of the best I have made. I attribute my success to the right mentors who had my back, perfect timing and my own tenacity and determination to succeed despite both mental and physical issues.

For me, my news hunger is instinctual, like breathing. You are either a natural news reporter or you are not. The hunger for news cannot be taught. The technical skills can. Technical skills without hunger will not bring long-term success or sustain the independent journalist when times are hard.