

# *How Long Will It Take?* Estimating Freelance Work

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Correctly estimating the time needed to do a project is critical for scheduling your freelance work and estimating the cost for your clients. Developing a reliable timeline depends on accurately predicting how much time you will have to work on the project and how long it will take to complete the project. We provide here practical tips for estimating the time needed to complete different types of projects, drawing from advice given by freelance guru Cathryn Evans[1] and our collective 30 years of experience in freelancing and networking.

**How Much Time Is Available?**

Although traditional employees are paid for 40 hours of work each week, or about 2,000 hours per year, most consultants bill only about 1,000 hours per year. As a freelance, you can generally expect to average only 4 to 5 "billable" hours each day if you work a traditional 8-hour day. "Billable" hours are those hours spent directly on projects that can be charged to the client. "Non-billable" hours are those for which you are not paid and include, for example, the time when you are marketing your services, managing your office, learning new skills, or attending non-project-related meetings. Whether hours are billable may depend on the agreement between you and your client. For example, some clients will pay for the time spent traveling to their office whereas some will not.

When determining how much time is available for work, consult your calendar and subtract the time that will be lost to vacations, holidays, appointments, and conferences. Most important, leave some slack in your schedule for illness and other unplanned interruptions, such as computer catastrophes.

**How Long Will It Take to Complete the Project?**

Estimating how long it will take to complete a project is as difficult as it is important. Take time and care with your assessment; avoid giving quick estimates under pressure from your client. If necessary, tell your client that you will call back after checking your schedule. Before accepting a project, think it through and make a list of the questions that will elicit the information you need to estimate how long it will take to complete the project. Questions may vary according to specific kinds of projects, such as manuscripts (Table 1), slide series (Table 2), editing jobs (Table 3), and clinical study reports (Table 4).

**Table 1.** Questions to Help Estimate the Time Required to Complete a Manuscript

- What is the target journal? How complicated are the articles in the target journal?
- Is an outline available? If not, will you be expected to draft one?
- Is the manuscript a scientific article based on an original study, a case history, or another type of article?
- If the paper is a report of findings from a clinical study, how many variables will it present?
- How many references must be reviewed and cited? Will references have to be annotated?
- Who will do a literature search, you or your client? How many databases need to be searched?
- Who will obtain the necessary references?
- Do you have to interview thought leaders? If so, who is responsible for identifying them? Who will provide transcription services for potential interviews?
- How many tables and graphs will be included in the paper? Who will be responsible for creating graphs or other figures?
- Who will be responsible for obtaining permission to use copyrighted materials? How many permissions will be needed?

In addition to the project-specific questions, some questions, such as how many drafts need to be prepared, should be asked for almost any project. Other important questions include the following:

- What is meant by "draft"? You may wish to restrict revisions in a new draft to editing and minor rewriting and exclude changes in the structure of the paper or incorporation of new material.[1]

- How will the client provide comments? Incorporating conflicting comments from several reviewers is difficult and time consuming, often necessitating numerous additional queries to the client. You may wish to specify that all comments will be consolidated and reconciled onto a single copy of the paper before undertaking the revisions.

**Table 2.** Questions to Help Estimate the Time Required to Complete a Slide Series*

- What is the scope of the project? Are you developing content or incorporating content provided by the client?
- Is a sample available to demonstrate the desired product?
- Will you use presentation software (such as PowerPoint) or will you use word processing software (such as Microsoft Word)?
- How many slides are needed? How many will be text, figures, and tables?
- What materials are available for preparing the slides? Will you have to create new figures and tables?
- Are speakers' notes required? How much detail is required in the notes?

*Many of the questions for manuscripts also apply to slides, especially those about the outline, references, and permissions.

**Table 3.** Questions to Help Estimate the Time Required to Complete Editing Jobs

- What is the level of editing? Is it simple copyediting or substantive editing?
- How many tables and figures are included in the project?
- How many references are listed? Do you need to format them in the appropriate style? Are the references complete? Do you have to supply additional information such as author names or page numbers? If so, is this information readily available?
- Who is responsible for obtaining permissions to reprint previously published information?
- Does the paper contain special characters and symbols; complex formulae; or complicated, highly specialized nomenclature?
- How complex is the formatting? Are you familiar with the style to be used?
- Who is responsible for adding codes for headings and special characters and symbols for the compositor?
- Is the piece a multiauthored document, with different writing styles that must be edited for consistency?
- Who is responsible for developing a timeline and ensuring that the authors adhere to it?
- Who is responsible for checking facts?
- Has the author used an electronic referencing system? If so, are you familiar with the system?

**Table 4.** Questions to Help Estimate the Time Required to Complete Clinical Study Reports

- What is the scope of the project? What is the study phase? How many variables will be presented (eg, safety, efficacy, pharmacokinetic, pharmacoeconomic, quality of life)? How many tables and figures will be required?
- Can you begin work on the non-data-dependent sections of the report before the data are available?
- Is an electronic version of the study protocol available? How many protocol amendments are there, if any?
- Is an electronic "template report" available that can facilitate formatting and provide text for "boilerplate" sections of a report? Is a sample report for a similar study available as a model?
- If a literature search is required, who will do it? Who will obtain the necessary references?
- Will a statistical report be provided?
- Who will enter data in the in-text tables? If tables are provided, will reformatting be required?
- Do you have to write patient narratives? If so, will they be brief paragraphs or 1- to 2-page mini-reports? Will sample narratives be provided? Will narratives be written based on individual data listings or patient profiles? Is there information from non-clinical-database safety reports that must be incorporated in the narratives?
- Will you be responsible for responding to quality control/quality assurance comments?

- How many people will you be working with during the course of the project? Working with more than one individual will add to the time needed to complete the project.

- Will you need to travel to the client's work site during the course of the project?

- What software will you need to use? Depending on your familiarity with it, you may need to budget your time accordingly.

Once you have the information you need, divide the project into sections, estimate the number of hours required for each section, and then add them. Cathryn Evans recommends estimating how long it will take to complete the job, doubling that estimate, and adding 10% to 20%.[1] Although this advice may seem excessive, projects typically take more time than expected. Remember that all project-related hours are billable (eg, addressing envelopes, taking phone calls, writing telephone reports, attending project-related meetings) and should be included in your timeline. If you are new to freelancing, it may be helpful to keep a time log for each project, noting the type of project and the number of hours spent. Eventually you will have a database that will help you estimate future projects.When you call your client, explain your estimate. Review the project carefully, making sure that you and your client agree on each element. If you are still not sure how long it will take to complete the project, ask your client how long it would take him or her to do it. If you are unable to give a reliable estimate, provide a range or negotiate the option to revisit the estimate once you have had more opportunity to evaluate the project.

### Summary and Conclusions

An accurate estimate of how long it will take to complete a project is critical to the success of the project not only from a financial perspective but also from a scheduling perspective. Scheduling affects everyone involved in the project, including your client, other members of the publication team, and you and your family. Invest the time needed to identify all the elements that may affect the timeline for the project. Do not hesitate to ask your client for the information you need to develop your timeline. A carefully planned timeline based on specifications agreed on by both you and your client will help you work efficiently and prevent unpleasant surprises midway through the project. You can share your questions about estimating timelines on AMWA's bulletin board (www.amwa.org).

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### References

1. Evans CD. The business of freelancing. In: Minick P, ed. *Biomedical Communication: Selected AMWA Workshops.* Bethesda, Md: American Medical Writers Association; 1994:108-113.