

Las Vegas Quills Mini Lesson: Online Forums for Education Regarding Publishing

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Where can you get the best bang for your buck when seeking online forum resources?

I've reviewed several different websites for an upcoming article on "How Much Does Free Education Cost". I want to give a brief "yay" or "boo" for several sites offered to writers under the guise of information brokerages. There are hundreds of sites based out of the US alone that offer paid membership- opening secrets that seem inaccessible otherwise.

[If you are currently a member of these sites and disagree with my comments, I hope you post why. I'm happy to have my opinion changed if need be.]

Yahoo Groups/Google Groups/My Space etc: The web seems to blossom every few months with gardens of new online-meeting bulletin boards. Most don't charge a penny, and the people you meet can lead you into careers, assignments, book ideas, and even into friendships. When I first started using BBS systems back in 1986, Tom Clancy and a few other writers of note were already testing the medium out, finding writers to mentor, and testing out their newest projects.

Over the next few months and years, many of these free communities are likely to merge into a pay-per-use based service. The argument is that security costs, and the cost belongs to the user. Free services can't disallow a person, whereas a paid service can disallow membership based on poor behavior, netiquette, and even misdemeanors.

The obvious failure of the free boards is they require participation to be active--no one maintains the boards just to have them exist. Because of this, information may be well out-dated, or non-existent. Opinions aren't always statements of correct information, and there aren't any sure ways to prove or disprove a comment made on a free board. With a pay service, or even moderated services, you can be a bit surer that what you're being shown is factual. But again, it's no guarantee.

My top Writer's Resource site in the United States and the UK is **Writer's Market ONLINE**. [writersmarket.com] For \$60 a year, an author can view agency information, periodical histories and submission requirements, publisher

histories, and the information is active up to the date. The online version is updated weekly by information presented by Media Bistro, Publisher's Lunch, and several other reliable sources as well as their own staff members and sales team. You don't have to buy the print version of the book to use this service: simply go to WritersMarket.com and sign up for a yearly membership. Because it is part of the Writer's Digest magazine publishing services, you also have access to articles and resources that appear there.

The Writer Magazine offers its version of Writer's Market online. BUT, for a third of the price, you can sign onto the site, and view many of the same listings that exist on the other. Those who subscribe to **The Writer, (writermag.com)**, may access contest listings, agency information, and similar publisher-based information. The problem with these listings is they are from paid sources nearly exclusively. A vanity house has as much weight as Random House, provided they've paid their ad fee. It's also a little more difficult to find the most up-to-date information.

For a writer just starting out, or who has a basic knowledge of the publishing industry, this particular forum may not be as useful since there isn't any warning about which company is legit or not. However, keeping an eye on **Predators and Editors**, a wise writer can screen for herself.

In the "Oh man, they started out okay but..." file, we have Writing.com, a site so cluttered and difficult to navigate; it appears as though an anthill artist designed it. With an incremental fee structure, allowing a user to access the secrets of the site the more money spent, it hardly promises more than confusion. In addition to the multi-level structure, they offer "gift points" to those who make a habit of using the site.

Gifts are items that can be bought from the site store, or, can be used to prove a writer worthy enough to become 'staff'. You think this sounds confusing? I got an email from one of the "senior staff", who doesn't get paid for her work, but is expected to read several hundreds of pages a week for critique. I asked what her compensation is, and she let me know it was additional gift points, and access to higher levels of the site.

The plain fact is, none of the information on the site is remarkable. The advertising budget they have must be large, since I've seen posts for it in every lit journal available to the general public. I've sought out writers who claim the site has helped them, and have received zero responses, but instead, was bombarded with horror stories of the time spent in just getting noticed enough to reach the next level. Does it sound like a Multilevel Marketing scam?

The second in this category is Media Bistro. The site originated as a savvy up-to-date media Mecca. It went a bit nutso over the last few years, becoming a bit like a dating site. It appears to be getting back to it's roots of seeking out information and sharing it. The site really works for those who live in Los Angeles, NYC, or Chicago, as an insider's info brokerage. It appears that this trend will continue throughout other larger cities, such as Dallas, and Seattle. The staff of the database side does a great job of keeping track of news releases, however, and I think with the growth of other online journalist sites, (UPI.org, AP.org), Media Bistro will once again find its footing.

Poetry.com is a site devoted to taking the dollars of enthusiastic laureates to be. Despite years of warnings on nearly every legitimate author site I've found, people still send their work, get a letter stating how wonderful it is, and then get bombarded with solicitations for purchasing books featuring their poetry. Some folks have attended "annual award ceremonies" that happen every quarter in different parts of the country. The price for winning a Poetry.com contest can run from \$35 for a simple plaque with your name and poem, (plus S&H), upwards of \$1850, for the honor of having your name emblazoned upon a plastic cup.

The last on the list is **Publisher's Marketplace**. This is the most expensive to join, at \$20 a month minimum, but it does have a hired staff that works to ensure the information available is up to date. Where Writer's Market relies on the information obtained by surveys and solicitations, PM relies on press releases and HR news. Free newsletters are available (Publisher's Lunch and Lunch Weekly), that give a little bit of information regarding who has been hired or fired from a publishing house or agency. This is a useful service for anyone wondering if the agent she sent her book to is still at an agency. [It's a pretty crappy way to find out that your agent has been fired, too.]

The site has recently gone from requiring a full year's pay up front, to a month-to-month commitment. With access, you can find contests, publishers, and periodicals quickly. The site also serves as a gossip board for who may or may not be going or promoted. The best thing about the site is its devotion to Publishing as an industry, and not as a hobby. The information is factual, up to date, and reliable.