

# Dear editors... step up or step aside



By [Eugene Yiga](#)

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Dear editors,

My name is Eugene Yiga and I'm a personal development writer. I'm that guy whose emails you don't reply to and whose phone calls you don't return (or "you again" for short). Like many of my peers, I believe I have something valuable to contribute. Like many of yours, you don't seem to care. We need to talk.

Don't get me wrong; not all editors are exasperatingly bad. I've come across some really good ones, including a new gem that's instantly become my number one fan, introducing me to contacts and commissioning work after just a few days. Unfortunately, she seems to be the exception to the eternally frustrating rule.

**"Don't talk to me. Talk to my assistant."**

Most others, too busy (read: smug) to receive emails directly, abdicate all responsibility to unqualified assistants who shouldn't have a say in editorial concerns. (I wouldn't be surprised if this is why the first Harry Potter book was rejected by 12 major publishing houses, only to eventually become the wild success it has.)

Either that or they keep cowering behind tired aphorisms such as "I'm on a deadline" or "I'll get back to you soon" as though these meaningless sound bites were valid excuses to treat people like crap.

Guess what? They're not.

Let's try this instead:

- **Have a set policy for freelance contributions and make sure everyone at your publication knows what it is.**

If you accept contributions, you accept contributions. If you don't, you don't. Sounds simple, right? You'd be surprised.

I recently emailed a somewhat senior staff writer at a national magazine. She said they didn't have a set policy for freelance contributions and that I should simply send some articles to her boss. And so I bought an overpriced copy of their latest magazine, read through the dribble (when my eyes weren't rolling and could actually focus on the page),

and put together some pieces that appropriately matched their tone.

But her boss replied saying all their writing was done in-house. In other words, I'd just wasted time and money for no reason at all. Seriously?

- **Put someone in charge of freelance contributions and make sure everyone at your publication knows who that person is.**

If you accept freelance contributions, someone needs to read them. You could even set up a dedicated email address specifically for this purpose and have staff writers take turns responding to submissions so no individual is overwhelmed. Sounds simple, right? Again, you'd be surprised.

In another recent incident, I contacted a business magazine about writing an opinion piece similar to the ones they publish every week. Unfortunately, the woman I spoke to didn't know who I should speak to next. I can't blame her. There were 35(!) people with the word 'editor' in their title, making it a mystery to figure out who was 'the one'. Seriously?!

- **Make a decision, even if it's to say no**

Writers are grownups who can (or should) handle rejection. So why don't editors have the guts to make up their minds?

Saying "maybe" only makes us keep coming back for updates, while a firm "no" means we can either fix up the piece or move on to someone else. Still, it helps if you give us concrete reasons for rejection so we don't keep sending you stuff that doesn't work.

In yet another recent incident (it's been a rough couple of weeks), I sent an article to the features editor at a men's magazine. She replied a few minutes later saying it wasn't what they were looking for. I sent another two. She said the same thing. I eventually asked what I could do differently at which point she replied saying they weren't actually taking freelance contributions right now but she'd let me know should that change.

For those not used to reading between the increasingly blurry lines of Editorese, this can be roughly translated as follows: "I actually have no idea why these articles aren't appropriate or what it is we'd like instead. Please excuse me while I get back to my Farmville crops." SERIOUSLY?!

The media industry has gone through tremendous change over the last several years. As *The Economist* correctly pointed out in its 9 July 2011 [special report on the news industry](#) (a must-read for anyone still reading this), the transformation is "unstoppable" and "attempts to reverse it are doomed to failure".

But while Hollywood's responded by tinting (or is that tainting?) perfectly acceptable movies with surcharge-incurring and headache-inducing effects of 3D, most magazines have no concrete plans.

### **Come up with viable strategies**

Why can't they come up with viable strategies that involve more than slapping social media buttons and annoying banner ads onto websites that are laughably inadequate to begin with? And why are so many formerly respectable newspapers blindly following their trashy tabloid brethren into the cheesy world of "screaming headlines and intrusive tittle-tattle", as *The Economist* went on to so aptly describe?

I can't possibly be the only person who's grown a little tired of a certain daily paper's tendency to use the word "SHOCK" in almost every single lamppost promo just because they're too lazy to pick up a thesaurus or write stuff people actually want

to read.

Petty nonsense aside, the biggest question is this: Why are publications shunning the freelancers that could very well be their salvation?

I think it's because they're scared. The realisation that they could save a ton of money by replacing fulltime staff writers with a top team of freelancers instead has left them desperately clinging to their floundering fiefs. That's beyond sad.

### **Fresh voices readers would enjoy**

If anything, accepting freelance contributions might give their publications fresh voices their readers would enjoy. At the very least, it would encourage fulltime staff writers to stop defaulting to rehashed pop psychology or what effectively amounts to the same ab routine month after month, even though it's always rebranded as the newest and bestest thing in the history of the world, like, ever.

Perhaps I'm being naïve (I'm allowed to at 25) but I'd like to see things get better. I'd like to see writers challenge and inspire each other to produce better work. I'd also like a lot more transparency in the process so we don't have to keep banging out heads against the walls of publications that simply won't get with the times.

To that end, I'm currently creating on a new platform that I hope will give freelance writers a chance to get their work into the hands of publications who value what they have to say. It'll also be a way to start bringing some of the most disrespectful publications to account, a la Hello Peter.

If you're a writer or editor interested in joining my quixotic crusade, please email [hello@eugeneviga.com](mailto:hello@eugeneviga.com). Until then, I suggest you guys start behaving.

Seriously,  
Eugene

*Updated at 1.18pm on 20 July 2011 as per author's request.*

*Updated at 2.35pm on 20 July 2011 as per author's request.*

## **ABOUT EUGENE YIGA**

Eugene graduated from the University of Cape Town with distinctions in financial accounting and classical piano. He then spent over two-and-a-half years working in branding and communications at two of South Africa's top market research companies. Eugene also spent over three-and-a-half years at an eLearning start-up, all while building his business as an award-winning writer. Visit [www.eugeneviga.com](http://www.eugeneviga.com), follow @eugeneviga on Twitter, or email [hello@eugeneviga.com](mailto:hello@eugeneviga.com) to say, um, hello.

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