

>>Snapshot

Emma Sheppard

Journalist

NUJ



Can you tell us a bit about your career to date?

After I left university with a degree in English Literature, I moved to Japan for a year with the Japan Exchange and Teaching programme (JET). Then I travelled to Australia before heading onto New Zealand to work with a magazine publishing house as the editorial assistant for two publications – one a national current affairs title, and the other an Auckland city magazine. I subsequently moved to Air New Zealand’s inflight magazine as the entertainment editor, where I interviewed musicians, actors and directors, and reviewed blockbusters on board. At the same time, I managed the product pages capturing all the ‘Hot News’ about new products, openings and events in New Zealand.

After three years in New Zealand, I came back to the UK to do a master’s degree in print and online journalism. I worked freelance while completing my thesis and had a few interesting roles with Look, Marie Claire and Love It magazines. Then I got a job with Haymarket where I worked as a sub-editor for Children & Young People Now, and Horticulture Weekly. For the last five years, I worked for Travelzoo as a producer, researching travel deals, writing copy and managing clients. My most recent role was setting up a member’s hotels programme as the company’s European content manager.

I wanted to broaden my portfolio so decided to go freelance at the end of last year. I am pleased to have been awarded two new contracts – one with The Guardian’s small business network working on their commercial features, and the other managing the digital content for The Education Support Partnership, a teacher’s charity in north London.

What do you like most about your work?

Every week is different. It can be a real rollercoaster. I love meeting people and hearing their stories. I love the challenge of making sense of the world or a situation, hearing both sides, then pulling it all together in a concise and understandable way. The aim is for everything to



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be captured and explained well, hopefully to then inspire engagement and debate.

What are the biggest challenges of maintaining a freelance career?

Financial worry is the most difficult part of freelancing. You feel under constant pressure to make connections to editors. I have time set aside every week to pitch to them. I am constantly thinking of who might want a story or idea that I have. I can be out and about and feel it is a waste of time if I am not writing up something that would make a good story.

When I first became freelance and was unknown, it was tough finding work. However, with persistence, I was able to add further titles to my portfolio.

Have you added new work/skills to your portfolio over time?

It’s important to keep up with new technology, trends and social media platforms. Having a story is no longer enough. You need to be thinking about other media too, especially for online. Does this work well with a podcast or video element? Data journalism is something else that everyone is talking about, and maps and 360-degree video is going to become more common. There is so much more to think about now.



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What is the biggest challenge of learning the skills that you need?

It can be quite overwhelming sometimes especially as time spent learning is time taken away from pitching and writing your stories. You are incredibly busy as a freelance writer so finding the time to do it all is very challenging. Even if you're not using all of the new platforms or tools yourself, you at least need to know about them and understand how they are used.

What FEU Training courses have you attended?

I've attended Build your Confidence.

What are the most important things that you've learned?

Attending the confidence workshop left me feeling nicely topped up. There were great strategies for staying confident like tips on using your body and movement to get yourself back in to a more confident state. I like the idea of borrowing someone else's persona to 'try on' their confidence. The strategies for getting yourself out of your own head through focusing your attention were also great. I was reminded of an interview I watched recently with Barack Obama. He was asked how he keeps going in the face of adversity, and said he stayed motivated by focusing on the work.

It was interesting to hear other attendees speak about themselves in a negative way and wonder how they could feel like that, then realising that it might be equally ludicrous for me to be thinking those same things about myself.

What has encouraged you to attend FEU Training sessions?

I heard about the workshop from a friend who couldn't go. The timing was good as it was just what I needed at that point. Apart from the workshop content which was really useful, I really enjoyed chatting to everyone there. It was such a lovely group and everyone was so friendly and supportive. It's great that it's free and the networking opportunities are fantastic. I met so many interesting people. I sat between an opera singer and a stunt man. Our work and experiences were so different, yet we were all dealing with similar issues. I have stayed in touch with some of the other attendees and was able to put another writer in touch with an illustrator I know.

Do you know any organisation that offers business courses to creatives?

Apart from the NUJ, no.

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