— HOW TO —
GET STARTED ON UPWORK

Lessons, Tips and Tricks from a Top-Rated Freelancer

upwork

CHRIS THE FREELANCER

Introduction

Thank you for downloading my Free Guide to Getting Started on UpWork!

If we haven't already met, allow me to introduce myself. My name is Christopher R Dodd, or perhaps better known as 'Chris the Freelancer'.

Why Am I Making This Guide?

I think it's safe to say that I've inspired quite a few people to pursue a location independent lifestyle and naturally, I get a bunch of questions flooding my inbox each week from people who want to know how they can get started doing what I'm doing (ie. freelancing online and travelling the world).

Truth be told, I'm not an UpWork Freelancing guru. I don't have all the answers but I can share with you what has worked for me so far.

The following guide contains my biggest lessons I've learned so far as well as my favourite tricks and tips to land jobs on a more consistent basis.

My Journey on UpWork

After a year spent working on a new career for myself as a developer, I embarked on a one-way journey out of Australia to pursue a location independent lifestyle.

Some of you are probably thinking that I picked up work easily and that I was able to continue the success of my web development career without any friction - wrong!

This brings me to the first and most important lesson of this whole guide

Crucial Lesson #1:
Just because you have experience and skills doesn't mean you'll succeed as a freelancer

To think like this is to ignore the other skills you'll require as a freelancer, things like sales & marketing, branding, delivery, customer service and everything else.

Even though I had figured out how to get started as a developer in Australia, I was starting from scratch with trying to attract clients purely online. This why I stress that **if you want to freelance online, you should get started as soon as possible**.

So, for the first few months on UpWork, I struggled to attract the right clients.

Back home in Australia, I had the ability to network in person and demonstrate my enthusiasm and drive. Online, I was just a name and a photo.

I started to doubt everything that I worked hard to achieve over the last year.

I saw the low rates that freelancers were getting paid for similar jobs and I started to have that thought that a lot of UpWork newbies have….

The Big UpWork Myth:
There's no good money for freelancers on UpWork

The truth is, there's both small money and big money to be earned on UpWork.

Now, unlike me, you might not want to travel the world. Maybe the lower rates on UpWork is enough for you to survive in your home country and that's all you want - cool!

For the rest of us, I can assure you that there are clients who will pay up to $100 USD per hour or more for the right freelancer.

I know it can be scary and disheartening when you're bidding more than double what the other freelancers are but you have to believe in your rate and believe that there are clients out there who will pay you what you're worth.

Crucial Lesson #2:
Look for quality clients the way clients look for quality freelancers

Don't just apply for every job or accept every interview that you're offered.

This is what I used to do.

Now, I make sure NOT to waste my time applying for jobs with clients unless I get the sense that…

1. I have a good chance of getting the job,
2. The client is actually going to pay me & treat me well

So, to get back to the story, I took an internship with a location independent entrepreneur in Chiang Mai to learn a different skill - digital marketing.

It was a good opportunity to get a bit of steady income and a chance to build a new skillset that I could use to maybe pivot on my web development career but to be honest, I was mainly motivated by the fear of inconsistent - or worse, non-existent - work through online freelancing.

When the internship finished in November 2016, I was back to square one but now, I was going to do things differently.

I decided that the only way I was going to succeed on UpWork was to really back myself and not give up until I figured it out.

Within my first two weeks back on UpWork, I secured a client that resulted in hours of ongoing work at a good western hourly rate.

This brings me to my third crucial lesson…

Crucial Lesson #3:
You have to believe in yourself. Set your price, back yourself and focus NOT on what the other freelancers are doing but on putting your best foot forward.

Alright, so now that the motivational talk is out of the way, let's get into the nitty gritty of the UpWork platform.

How to Make UpWork Work for You

Unfortunately, there aren't many shortcuts to building long-term success on UpWork, nor are there set rules for how you should approach the platform.

You should approach UpWork with the aim to not only gain work and build your profile but to experiment and find out what works for you specifically.

I've taken a number of courses on UpWork and some of things these courses suggested didn't work for me but some of them did.

At a minimum, I hope to share with you some tips and tricks that you can add to your arsenal right away but after this guide, I suggest you keep learning, by putting yourself out there as well as taking courses and reading books.

How to Get your First Job with No UpWork Reviews or Experience

It can be intimidating starting on UpWork with no reviews or experience on the platform.

Yes, reviews are important but **they're just one element of your profile**.

To be clear, I'm talking specifically about reviews and experience on UpWork itself.

Ideally, you'll want your skills to be backed up by relevant work experience, qualifications and testimonials but these don't have to be on UpWork.

When I started on UpWork, I already had about a year's experience (on-and-off) working as a developer in Australia. This was something that I could put in my bio and put forward in my proposals.

Try not to get hung up on the fact that you have no reviews yet and for now, focus on the other areas of your profile.

Bonus Tip: I've found it useful to ensure the prospect that you do have experience when applying for jobs and that while you're new to the platform, you're not new to the work required.

Step 1: Pimp Your Profile

Your profile is both important for when you are applying for jobs and for when you are allowing jobs to find you.

Photo:
This doesn't need to be ultra professional but you do need to come across as friendly and easy to work with. Make sure your face is clearly displayed in the photo and smile!

Also, make sure that it is just your face. You obviously don't want to use a group photo here.

Title:
This is very important and still something I'm personally trying to refine.

Ideally, you want to be a specialist in something because when a client is searching for freelancers, you'll have more chance of getting the job if your title speaks directly to what the client is looking for.

At the time of writing, I have '*Web Developer | Digital Marketing | Youtube Consultant*' but if I wanted to specialise, I would expand on one of those titles. The more specific you can get, the better.

The smartest way to do this is put the most appropriate keywords in the title followed by a specific result that you deliver for the client or industry that you specialise in.

For example, if I was to choose Web Development and go very specific, I would put something like: '*Wordpress Website Developer specialising in creating beautiful and responsive websites*' - something like that.

Keep in mind here that you can change the title at any time, so don't worry about being specific if having a general title isn't working for you.

Tags:
These tags are predominantly just for SEO which means that they will help your profile show up when a client is typing in the keywords you specify. Make sure to set them to something relevant and make use all of the available tags.

Rate:
Finding the perfect rate is a little experimental. It's something myself and other experienced freelancer friends are constantly testing.

The important thing to understand with rate is that you definitely don't want to underprice yourself here!

Clients will make a judgement on you based on your rate. If you have a low rate, clients may associate you with lower quality. If you have a high rate, they may see you as premium.

This is why you might actually see the number of job invitations go up when you price yourself higher.

Remember, you're looking for *quality clients* (ie. clients that are easy to work with and that will pay you what you are worth).

Overview:
This is your opportunity to:
1. Add more keywords to your profile
2. Describe your expertise and what you can do for the client, and
3. Share your experience and credentials

Much like your title, if you can go really specific here, it will likely be to your advantage. My profile for example, is very generalist and kind of generic.

Depending on your approach, you can go really salesy here or very resume-style. I've seen success from both (not personally but from talking with other freelancers) but it's important to get the balance right. You don't want to bore the reader with paragraph after paragraph of your immense experience nor do you want to come off as just a salesman.

You can also throw in examples of client feedback here, especially if the work was performed outside of UpWork.

Portfolio:
As the only visual section on the profile (apart from your profile picture), the portfolio section is the best place to show off some of your visuals.

You can be creative here. When I was experimenting with applying for video work, I put my audience retention graphs and viewer feedback from YouTube here. I also have a mockup of some of the websites I've built, showing what the website looks like on different devices.

The portfolio is your chance to show off some of the projects you've worked on or to share any visual elements that you think will help your profile.

Certifications, Education and Employment History
As you build experience on the UpWork platform, these three sections get pushed down and become less and less important. For someone starting out though, this is a good place to show off some things that perhaps will make you more hirable.

It's important to remember however, that clients are looking for someone competent, communicative and reliable. Therefore, your credentials won't matter too much to most clients. They would much rather see the work you've done in the past and verify your success through client feedback.

Step 2: Find Work

On the first menu item after the UpWork logo in the navbar, you'll find the link to '*Find Work*'.

On this page, you'll search for jobs that match your skills and experience.

Remember lesson #2 here,
'*Look for quality clients the way clients look for quality freelancers*'

There are hundreds, if not thousands of jobs that are added everyday but you're just looking for the right job for you. This is why you want to filter results as much as possible without missing out of the odd opportunity that may have been listed in a different category.

Here's how I filter:

Category:
I start with a broad category, let's say '*Web, Mobile & Software Dev*'. I don't filter by subcategory as there's a chance I could miss out on a job that's been poorly categorised.

Experience Level:
I exclude '*Entry Level*' as there's little hope of earning a western wage in this category.

A little UpWork secret:
UpWork gives the client an indication of price when they select a desired experience level.

Think about it, why would I client select '*Entry Level*' unless they were just looking for a cheap deal?

Ideally, they'd want the most experienced freelancer but they'll take 'Entry Level' if it means they'll save money.

Again, if you're not after a western wage, you can still have success applying for jobs at this skill level.

Client Info:
I always select the checkbox '*Payment Verified*' as chasing payment is the last thing I want to do as a freelancer.

If the job is on an hourly basis for example, you're not protected by UpWork unless the client has verified payment. Besides if the client is not serious enough to verify their payment, I don't want to work with them.

Budget:
Here, it's important to put in the minimum that you will on a project for.

Some clients budget less than $100 and those aren't who I'm looking for. Even if the job is incredibly simple, it still takes time to negotiate with the client and figure out the finer details of the project.

Personally, I won't get out of bed for anything under $100.

Going Through the List

Once I've set my parameters, the job feed will update, at which point I scroll through and look for jobs that interest me.

What I'm looking for are jobs that both excite me in some way and/or jobs that I feel I could be a good fit for.

As I'll explain in the next step, my approach to applying for work is all about positioning. Therefore, if the job description is too vague or the job is too specific in its requirements, I move onto the next.

Usually how I do this whole process is by opening up jobs that look interesting in a new tab and continuing down the list until I reach jobs that are more than a day old.

Unlike a regular job, hiring often happens quickly on UpWork. After 24hours, the client may have already hired or at the very least had other freelancers apply. The quicker you can be to apply for jobs, the more likely you are to get hired.

Step 3: Send Your Proposal

It's all about Positioning

Positioning is just a fancy marketing term for being able to connect your product or service (in this case, you) with what a customer (the client) is looking for (ie. the job).

This is where my approach may be different to other freelancers.

What I try to do is find parts of the job description where I can take what the client is saying and match it with a reason why they should hire me. The more of these points, the better chance I expect to have of getting the job.

This is how I got my job with the client in Sydney that was worth over $3,000.

Initially, they wanted a freelancer to do voiceover replacement and editing for some webinars that they had poorly recorded. The screen recordings were great but the audio was terrible, so they were looking for someone who was both good at editing and voiceovers - ie. me.

Naturally, I was a perfect fit and after the webinars were done, I was given over 100 hours of extra work building email templates for their clients.

On the flipside, if I had read the job and felt that I didn't line up perfectly with the important parts of the job description, I'd simply move on.

Like I mentioned early, you don't want to waste your time applying for jobs that won't be a good fit.

I also take it a step further by not wasting time on jobs that I feel I have a low chance getting. I find it's better not to dilute your effort, especially if you're swifting through over 100 jobs per day.
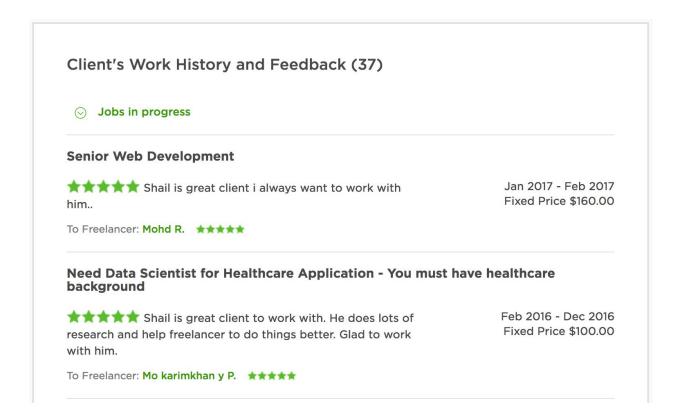
Tricks for Better Proposals

Through my own study into UpWork, I've found a few tricks during the proposal writing stage that really work wonders.

Pro-Tip 1: Use the client's name in the first line (where possible)

This an obvious one but an often overlooked technique simply because freelancers don't know where to look.

Here's the secret…

All you need to do is scroll down to the 'Client's Work History and Feedback' and see what other freelancers have said about the client.

As you can see from above, the client's name in this instance is 'Shail'.

Now when you apply for the job, you can start off with 'Hi Shail….'.

And best of all, not many others are doing this.

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PS. Does my name show up somewhere on the proposal? I just noticed that you're the only one who has ever used it….

Pro-tip 2: Answer the questions before writing your cover letter

Unless you have experience as a client on the platform you won't be aware of this secret.

The secret is that if the client has set up questions for the freelancer to answer, these will appear above the cover letter when the client opens the application.

This is different from when you apply for the job as UpWork gives the impression that the cover letter will come first as it does on the freelancer side.

Therefore, you should approach the questions and cover letter the same way the client reads it. Make the first line of the first question as strong as possible and reference the questions in the cover letter as if the client has already read them.

Pro-tip 3: Explain why you're different

If you're applying for jobs as a westerner, it may be worth adding a little extra paragraph to make reference to the likely fact that there will be freelancers who underbid you on the project.

This is something I learned from my friend [Stephanie's Udemy course](). I can't copy her script word-for-word but I have been using my own variation of it.

For me, it goes something like, '*While I know that they will be freelancers who underbid me on this project, I can assure you that…'.*

If you're not going after a western wage, it still helps to have a little something in there to show why you're different to the other applicants - your point of difference if you will.

Remember: There are no Hard-and-Fast Rules

I've taken a few courses on UpWork where they will break down what you should write in your proposal section-by-section. For me however, I haven't found any one structure that works any better than the rest.

My advice is to experiment but also to do what feels right. If you are truly a good fit for the role then simply explain why. Most of time, you don't need to hard-sell yourself. Just put your best foot forward and stand by your value.

Step 4: Get Hired

First of all, don't expect every client you contact to get back to you.

As I mentioned earlier, UpWork is a fast-moving platform. There are thousands of jobs available but probably tens of thousands of freelancers applying for them.

Don't wait to hear back from people. If they don't feel you're a good fit, there's little more you can do to win them over.

When a client does get back to you, it's usually to either grab more information about you, tee up an interview or if you're really lucky, hire you straight away.

Most of client's concerns will be around your skills or your bid. It's important to stay strong here. Don't be bullied into lowering your rate and if they ask about your skills, just be honest. You may want to lie and say you're awesome at everything but be sure not do this at the risk of performing a bad job as this might result in a bad review or worse, a dispute.

Secondly, don't waste your time with clients who don't seem serious.

For example, I've had this one client follow up with me twice to ask for a fixed-rate on a vague set of requirements. When I suggest an hourly arrangement, she tells me she'll think about it. A week later, I get another call, same story.

Chances are, if she's like this after two phone calls, she'll likely never commit to a contract on UpWork and if she does, it's going to be even worse to work with someone who can't make up their mind.

Remember Lesson #2:
Look for quality clients the way clients look for quality freelancers

This is an opportunity for you to find out if the client is a good fit for you as well so now is the time to get all the details of the project and understand the role before accepting any offers.

Step 5: Do Great Work

Step 5 is not specific to UpWork. By this stage, UpWork has done it's job and now it's your time to deliver.

Of course, I can't tell you how to do your job but I can tell you one thing that every freelancer should have and that's communication skills.

Proper communication could be another book in itself but I have one simple suggestion to help you get on well with your client and succeed in your new role and that is to be proactive with your communication.

Most of the time, you should be the one following-up with your client and not the other way around. If for instance, your client has to keep contacting you for updates, you're probably not being communicative enough.

Remember, you're a remote freelancer. The client can't see you in front of them, so you need to reassure them that you're still around and working through the project.

Trust is the big factor here in forming a great relationship. If you can gain the client's absolute trust then you'll be the first person they turn to for extra work, even if the work is outside your skillset.

When the work is done, make sure the client is happy. If so, ask them to close the project (if it's not ongoing) and leave you feedback. Ensure them that you will do so as well.

Step 6: Build your Profile

You can now continue to repeat steps 2 to 5, accumulating more and more reviews and work experience.

Over time, you can refine your profile and start to specialise if you haven't already. Then if you're ready to take it to the next level, you can raise your price and experiment with attracting more premium clients.

Soon, there'll be a switch. Instead of having to look for work, work will come looking for you.

For me, it's a mix. I get invitations each week but I'm constantly applying for the right opportunities as well. Denise (my girlfriend) on the other hand, has carved a niche for herself on UpWork and no longer has to look for work as the invitations come flooding in each week.

The ultimate of UpWork is having a profile that stands out and is search engine optimised. What I mean by this is that when a client searches for skilled freelancers in a particular area, your profile shows up, they click on it, they see tons of 5-star reviews, hours worked and amazing client feedback. Suddenly, you have an message in your UpWork inbox like this:

Now It's up to You

I believe that everything in this guide is more than enough to get you started. Now, it's all up to you to set up your profile and start applying for jobs.

One last thing that I'll mention is that while freelancing is a whole set of skills in itself, you still need to be skilled in the first place. Please don't skip this step.

If you don't feel ready to provide the work required, maybe wait a little longer while you build your skills.

It's important however, to not let this become a self-fulfilling prophesy. Often times, freelancers will over-estimate what's required to get started. The more experience and portfolio pieces you have the better, but don't be held back by a lack of confidence.

You could always ignore my advice though and take the '*Say yes and figure out*' approach. If that's more you, I'd suggest my other friend's course, The Upwork Formula by Lewis Parrott.

While my approach is more about positioning, Lewis' approach is a bit more salesy and hence, I've nicknamed it '*the copywriter's approach*'. Especially if you're trying to freelance as a copywriter, I'd recommend you check it out.

Otherwise, I just want to say thanks for downloading the guide. If you haven't already, check my other free content out on my YouTube channel, Facebook page and website. You can easily find all of these by searching '*Chris the Freelancer*' on YouTube, Facebook or Google.

Finally, if you have any feedback, I'd love to hear it. Just email me back at chris@christhefreelancer.com and let me know how you found the guide.

Wishing you the best of luck with your Upwork journey.
Chris