



INDUSTRY FACTS

- ▲ The greeting card industry generates more than \$7.5 billion in retail sales from consumer purchases of more than 7 billion cards.
- ▲ Of the total greeting cards purchased annually, roughly half are seasonal, and the remaining half are for everyday card-sending occasions.
- ▲ Christmas is the most popular card-sending holiday; sales of Christmas cards account for over 60% of all seasonal card purchases. Sales of Valentine's Day cards (the next most popular seasonal occasion) account for 25% of seasonal card sales.
- ▲ Birthday cards account for 60% of the sales volume of everyday card purchases, with anniversary cards following at a distant 8%.
- ▲ Most American households purchase 35 greeting cards each year.
- ▲ The average American receives 20 cards annually, of which one third are birthday cards.
- ▲ Women purchase more than 80% of all greeting cards.
- ▲ There are over 2,000 greeting card publishers in America, ranging from small family businesses to major corporations, many of which buy verse from freelance writers.

FREELANCING IN THE GREETING CARD INDUSTRY

GREETING CARDS TOUCH THE LIVES OF MILLIONS OF PEOPLE EACH DAY. They comfort, inspire, celebrate and communicate a range of emotions. Greeting cards are one of our culture's foremost tools of communication, and the greeting card industry has a constant and continual need for verse. As a writer of greeting card verse, you are saying for someone else what she is unwilling—or unable—to say for herself. Your words are the bridge which two other people will use to express happiness, sympathy, congratulations, comfort, elation, empathy. Providing editorial for a product that literally speaks for someone to someone else makes greeting card writing the most exciting writing genre on this planet. A consumer generally picks up a greeting card because she is attracted to the artwork (known in the industry as “rack impact”—that 1.5 seconds a card has to capture someone's attention). If the words are wrong, she'll stuff that card right back in its slot and move on to the next one until she finds “just the right words.”

Personalize this for a second. How often do you stand in front of a massive greeting card rack, with literally rows and rows of cards to choose from? Which one do you pick up first? The largest one? The one with the ivy-covered stone wall next to a flower garden? The abstract one with the swirls? Your attraction to the artwork is obviously unique and personal. Let's say you choose the ivy-covered stone wall beside the flower garden because it looks serene and comforting. Someone you know is going through a tough time and you want to send some encouraging thoughts. You open the card and read: “If kids were like flowers...we'd only have to water them every so often and watch them grow.” What?!? That's not what you wanted to say at all! The comforting ambience the visual originally evoked in you is destroyed; the inappropriate words have just jarred you back to reality and forced that card back in its place on the rack. It is a well known greeting card industry fact that artwork pulls the consumer in; the words clinch the sale.

GETTING STARTED

EDITORIAL IN GREETING CARD WRITING BOILS DOWN TO ONE WORD. VOICE. In most writing genres, we use the word “style” and you'll hear that word sometimes applied to greeting card verse. However, voice is more accurate because it inherently implies the active communication between two people. In most writing, the writer writes and the reader reads forming a two-person relationship. The writer is the active participant; the reader is passive.

Greeting card writing, however, has a three-person relationship. The writer writes the verse. When her words are published in a greeting card and someone chooses the card in which her text is a part, the words make a subtle change. The writer's words become the sender's words. They speak to her as something she wants to say—and from her, when she sends the card. The writer may never have had a sister, for example, but she'd better be able to know what words will touch the sender strongly enough to send that Sister Birthday card.

And what of the recipient—the person the card is sent to? This is the third person who is now involved and the conversational quality of the card reaches her as if the person sending the card is speaking directly to her or him. Now the relationship becomes one of sender and recipient; the original greeting card writer, while subtly present, is—and should be—anonymous. The writer drops out of the picture as soon as that card is purchased and sent to another individual.

TIPS OF THE TRADE

A GREETING CARD IS A MESSAGE FROM THE SENDER TO THE RECIPIENT; integral in *voice*, then, is that “me-to-you” quality in the writing of greeting cards. That quality is what determines its ability to commemorate, commiserate or congratulate. The whole purpose of a greeting card is to send wishes, remember a day, share in an experience, whether negative or positive, happy or sad. The successful greeting card writer never forgets these basic tenets of what makes a verse work!

How *voice* is rated has to do with how present that “me-to-you” quality is in a greeting card. A *voice* is always present in each of the four different types of cards, (Traditional, Contemporary, Humorous and Alternative) but the force of the *voice* is what the writer must understand in order to write for various companies which may or may not use different *voices*. There are three major types of *voice*: Strong, Neutral, and Weak, and these are designated by common sense, standard terms.

A card in a “strong” *voice* uses lots of personal pronouns, and makes the sender/recipient relationship clear. A “neutral” *voice* is less personal, more general, while a “weak” *voice* is simply descriptive. Different card sending situations call for different *voices*.

TYPES OF

TRADITIONAL CARDS

Traditional verse is usually rhymed. By its very nature, rhymed, metered verse is not a “natural” way of speaking. Therefore, even though initially it may seem like a contradiction, traditional cards use—or should use—either a strong *voice*, or in the case of “fun” cards for certain occasions that lend themselves to fun, at least a neutral one. In other words, even though the verse is rhymed and has a definite metered structure, it should have that sender-recipient element to it.

Strong Voice:

Outside: Visual shows teddy bear bringing breakfast in bed to Mom.

Verse: Mommy

Inside: Sugar on your eggs, salt in your tea, I love you Mommy and I know you love me.
Happy Mother’s Day! © Renaissance Greeting Cards (Verse by Sandra Miller-Louden)

Analysis:

“I love you Mommy” (I am sending this card to you, Mommy, because I love you)

“I know you love me” (and I know, as well, that you love me)

Neutral Voice:

Outside: Boo!

Inside: Skeletons, goblins, witches and bats, Monsters and pumpkins and scary black cats...
Big hairy spiders, eyes that are green—Guess what?!? It’s Halloween! © Renaissance Greeting Cards
(Verse by Sandra Miller-Louden)

Analysis: This verse definitely falls into the fun category noted above (and that goes to the heart of salability or defining occasions). Halloween is not a serious holiday; it’s all about fun and festivities. The first three lines of this poem talk about what is common to Halloween, but the last line brings it around to the more personal *voice*: “Guess what?!?” (If you remember your grade school English, the “guess what?” falls under the category of command. It is classified as a sentence because the “you” (as in “[You] guess what?!”) is implied. Due to this implication, the verse falls into the neutral *voice* classification.

CONTEMPORARY PROSE

Contemporary prose incorporates soft, realistic writing, that is conversational in tone. Even though it is conversational, it has varying degrees of *voices*, ranging from strong to weak.

Strong Voice:

Outside: You’ve warmed me with your smile...you’ve touched me with your love..

Inside: you’ve blessed me with your life.

Analysis: This verse not only has a strong *voice*, but equally strong parallelism. Out of 18 total words in this verse, 9 are personal pronouns. This is obviously very sender-recipient oriented and makes for a very personal, communicative card.

Weak Voice:

Outside: Two bright eyes, one strong heart,
two soft feet, ten little fingers.

Inside: one perfect miracle!

Analysis: While very descriptive, this verse says nothing about “you” new baby or how happy “we are to hear of your new arrival.” This entire verse is a narration, as in: “A baby is someone who has two bright eyes and a strong heart, plus two soft feet, together with ten little fingers and all together that makes one perfect miracle.” There is no personal *voice* here whatsoever.

MARKETING YOUR WORK

The presentation of material is a vital part of eventual sales success. Naturally, the ideas themselves are the most important; no matter how you try and dress it up, a bad idea just won't sell. However, many good ideas have been doomed from the start as well, because the writer didn't take a few extra minutes for a professional showing.

Request writer's guidelines from companies and then follow what they say! A good set of guidelines will give you specific information on topics such as how to submit your work (format), payment for your work and what type of work the company publishes. Many writer's guidelines are available online. If not, use the traditional method of obtaining them by writing to the company and including a long (#10) SASE (Self-Addressed, Stamped Envelope) with two first-class stamps affixed to the SASE.

Type your copy whenever possible. If you have your college typewriter (for those of you over 40), don't pitch it. It's actually better and more convenient than using a printer. Hand-printed (in conventionally-shaped block letters) material is acceptable, using dark blue or black ink. *(continued next page)*

F CARDS

HUMOROUS OR STUDIO

The range of voice used in humor is wide. The joke or gag cards so prevalent when humor cards were first introduced are still present today and these generally have a non-existent personal voice, except as an after-thought, when a generic "Have a Happy Birthday" or "Thinking Of You" is added to a totally unrelated text.

Some examples in this area of greeting card writing are:

Strong Voice:

Outside: Dad, I'm sending you this Father's Day card to tell you those 3 little words you always wanted to hear from me...

Inside: I'm earning money! © Oatmeal Studios (Verse by Sandra Miller-Louden)

Analysis: Look at all the references to "me to you:" "I'm sending you," "to tell you," "words you always wanted to hear from me." This has an extremely strong me-to-you voice.

Neutral Voice:

Outside: After awhile you've seen it all.

Inside: ...only it's blurrier than it used to be. Happy Birthday! © It Takes Two, Inc. (Verse by Sandra Miller-Louden)

Analysis: This verse subtly implies that the sender has experienced blurriness as well and is relating this fact to the recipient, in a rather world-weary tone of voice. Because of this subtle implication, we would call this a neutral voice.

ALTERNATIVE CARDS

Alternative cards are those carrying themes which didn't exist 10-15-20 years ago. Alternative cards use both contemporary prose and humor to get their message across. They also, as in the previous designations, use a variety of voices.

Strong Voice:

Outside: Visual shows cat taking a bite of tuna from a hand-held fork. No verse.

Inside: Thanks for cat-sitting. © American Greetings Corp.

Analysis: Is this surprising? Even though there are no traditional personal pronouns, this verse has quite a strong voice, as the word "Thanks" implies both sender and recipient pronouns. This verse could just as easily read: "I thank you for cat-sitting."

Neutral Voice:

Outside: A volunteer...

Inside: brings sunshine into the lives of so many. Thank you for the gift of your time and caring.

Analysis: While the first sentence (split between outside and inside) is clearly a narrative or statement of fact, the second sentence brings the personal voice into being by not only thanking the recipient, but in talking about her gift of time and caring. While the voice isn't as strong as it could be, there is still a sender-recipient connection.

Weak Voice:

Outside: Visual shows mother and child making shadow pictures on the wall. No verse.

Inside: Make-believe is fun. Reality is better!

Analysis: Since the visual shows a mother and child on the cover, who would be the sender and who would be the receiver is unclear. The inside verse reinforces this with a statement that really has nothing to do with any sendable occasions today. The purpose of why someone would send this to another is not clear; therefore, the voice itself is weak. Remember, a weak or neutral voice does not necessarily mean a bad card verse; it simply means what it says—it does not carry a strong identification between sender and recipient. As a greeting card writer, you should strive as much as possible for this identification as that's the primary reason a greeting card exists; however, there is room on the racks for all voices.

RESOURCE LIST

Greeting Card Association Industry Directory

- ▲ An extremely valuable book which contains information about the industry, and gives contact information for over 2,000 greeting card and stationery publishers, and industry suppliers. A great marketing tool. Available through the Greeting Card Association; www.greetingcard.org

Write Well & Sell: Greeting Cards

by Sandra Miller-Louden

- ▲ This informative book takes the reader from start to finish in writing and submitting freelance work to today's greeting card companies. Available through Barnes & Noble (www.bn.com) or through www.greetingcardwriting.com. Miller-Louden also offers an online course: www.absolutewrite.com

Cartoonist' & Illustrators' Trade Secrets by Robin Hall

- ▲ This book is a detailed guide into the world of cartooning and includes an intensive greeting card chapter with interviews of writers and cartoonists.

Writer's Market

- ▲ Published by F&W Publications, Cincinnati OH. A comprehensive listing of all freelance writing markets, including magazines, trade papers and newspapers. The greeting card listing is very small, but there is targeted, specific information about each listing.



GREETING CARD ASSOCIATION

WWW.GREETINGCARD.ORG

1156-15TH STREET NW #900

WASHINGTON, DC 20005

©SANDRA MILLER- LOUDEN

DESIGNED BY LAKESIDE DESIGN

MARKETING YOUR WORK CONT.

The traditional way to submit material is on 3x5" unlined index cards, one idea per card. E-mailed and faxed submissions are also becoming increasingly popular, but always check with an editor before using these new methods. And please, even though it's one idea per index card, it is NOT one idea per e-mail or fax page. Use common sense. If the company permits e-mailed submissions, send all ideas in one e-mail, but don't send more than 15-20 ideas at one time. Put END OF TRANSMISSION at the end as some longer e-mails can get cut off. Be sure to include your e-mail address, name, address, phone number and fax.

For traditional submissions, 11 ideas on index cards plus your #10 SASE will just come in at one ounce...or one first-class stamp going out and another affixed to your SASE. Since a writer's #1 expense, at least in the beginning, is postage, you may as well get the most for your money. Often, it's that quirky 11th idea that sells!

Although everyone seems to have an opinion about what to include in a batch of submissions, the recommended approach is to mix occasions (although normally not types) of verses. This means you'll want to have an entire batch of humor and in it include, for example, 3 or 4 birthday, 2 or 3 friendship titles, 3 get well, 1 thank you, 1 sorry. Look at it from an editor's point of view; she simply doesn't want to read 15 humorous masculine birthday cards in a row. Be as creative in the selection of verses to include in your submission batch as you are in the writing of the verses themselves and you'll often be rewarded with an acceptance letter and...oh boy!...a check!

HOW TO CHARGE

Speaking of checks, it is an unfortunate fact that writers get paid less than artists. Starting rates are as low as \$25 per verse and as high as \$200. There are basically two tiers of freelance payment: between \$35-\$50 and between \$75-\$125. In general, humor brings in a higher amount than contemporary prose or traditional poetry.

Royalties for greeting card writers are basically non-existent. There are a very few companies that will issue royalties for the text, but in general, the writer is paid a flat fee with no further amount due. Also, the writer sells all rights to her written work and has no claim to it once she cashes the check. This is difficult for some writers to accept, especially those already-professional writers coming from other fields where they are permitted to sell First Rights or One-Time Publishing Rights. Some perks writers may ask for after their work has been purchased is a byline on the card itself (generally, but not always, on the back) and at least a dozen complimentary cards.

CONCLUDING NOTES

The greeting card industry is an excellent place for first-time writers to test their freelance writing skills. The competition is stiff, but not impossible. It's also a terrific genre for the professional writer who wishes to take a break from longer, more involved types of writing that require research or interviewing.

Start with solid mid-size companies or smaller ones. Some of these companies use 100% freelance writing and always welcome new talent. Remember one last thing as well: greeting card writing is so short, so to-the-point that there's simply no fudging. Make every word count and start out with your favorite occasions. Doing so will make your writing sparkle. In greeting card writing, more than any other genre around: SPARKLE = SALES!