

Writing Greeting Cards That Sell:

Eight Steps to Success

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Writing greeting cards may never produce a byline for you, but you can earn welcome cash with your words of encouragement, comfort, or humor.

Imagine the thrill of receiving \$1,700 for 18 inspirational poems, or as much as \$115 for a 3-word greeting! Checks like these convinced me to keep writing! The greeting card market adds new companies each year, and ranges in pay from \$10 to \$200 per idea.

I have always loved poetry and words. In the past, when I couldn't find the "perfect" card for a friend or occasion, I started writing my own. If you enjoy bringing encouragement and smiles to others, you will like crafting greeting cards.

Be prepared, however, for fierce competition and hard work. An editor may receive thousands of card ideas a year. If that company only buys 30-50 ideas in one year, obviously you won't sell all your verses. If you're selling 15 to 20% of your ideas, that's a decent percentage. My first attempts at writing cards for profit netted me only four sales out of 150 ideas. Years later, I tried again, researching and writing seriously. My percentages of sales rose dramatically, and I began netting frequent assignments. Eventually, I put my girls through college writing greeting cards.

How do you write greeting cards that sell? Here are eight steps to help you get started, or to increase your sales if you're already an established freelancer:

- 1. Surround yourself with the proper tools.** Every greeting card writer needs a current copy of market books such as Writer's Market, The Christian Writers' Market Guide, How to Write & Sell Greeting Cards, Bumper Stickers, T-Shirts and Other Fun Stuff (by Molly Wigand), and You Can Write Greeting Cards (by Karen Ann Moore). Include a good rhyming dictionary, a Thesaurus, (The Synonym Finder is excellent!) quote and illustration books.

Subscribe to one or two good writing newsletters or magazines that offer market updates, such as the Christian Communicator. Attend greeting card or poetry workshops at writers' conferences.

Keep handy current magazines, newspapers, songbooks, and greeting card catalogs. Always carry a small notebook with you in your purse or wallet, and one by your bed to jot down new ideas. (For me, greeting card ideas used to come at unusual moments--like during Sunday sermons, drives to the shopping mall, or in the middle of the night!)

2. **Study your guidelines!** Check in your market book for companies that suit your style. Send for current guidelines and a catalog if available. If you're sending off-the-wall studio cards to a company like DaySpring Cards, you'll only get rejections. Likewise, if you send Christian traditional sentiments to a company that only buys "very clever" humor, you're wasting time and postage. Note the occasions and buying schedules. Pay special attention to "Tips" or "Special Needs," and even "Other Product Lines." These words alert the freelancer to greater opportunities for sales.
3. **Send only the best.** Don't waste the editor's time with misspelled words and trite verses. Concentrate on quality, not on quantity. (I learned this the hard way!) Like any other kind of writing, greeting cards require careful editing and creative techniques. Although you need to be familiar with terms like imagery, alliteration, and meter, greeting card verses differ from poetry.

Most card companies employ professional writers, so editors buy only those "special" and exceptional ideas from freelancers. Experiment, including samples of a different style but adhere to the rules of your guidelines. Some companies don't know exactly what they like until they see a new idea.

4. **Search out the markets.** Go to your supermarket, card stores and gift shops. Find out what's hot and what's not. Get a feel for the kind of cards that sell by studying several companies' cards. Although each company produces its own style, your own personal

market survey will give you more volumes of information than any how-to book or encyclopedia. If you can't find a company's cards in your local area, write for a recent catalog, or call the sales or marketing division of the company, and request one. Many editors will send you one free upon request or for a small fee. You **must** familiarize yourself with the kind of cards your company uses if you expect to sell any ideas.

5. **Stretch your style and your own creative limits.** I prefer writing inspirational verse, but have also sold conventional, humorous, soft-line, sensitivity, and alternative. Inspirational may mean religious, but nearly always includes verse, rhymed or unrhymed, that uplifts the faith and encourages beauty. Graduation, Birthday, Get Well and Friendship inspire thoughts such as this one I wrote years ago:

What is a Dream?

A dream, a desire,
A hope soon to be,
A treasured rainbow
 in the heart,
A future yet to see...
A dream is what
 you make it,
And faith becomes
 the key...
For with you and God
 together
There's a promise
 guaranteed!

Note the tie-in verse on the same card inside:

May God give you
Faith to believe...
Hope to receive...
And wisdom to decide
Your dream.

-Rebecca Barlow Jordan

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I added an appropriate Scripture verse and a tag line, such as "Congratulations on Your

Graduation."

Conventionals are the meat and potatoes of the industry. These me-to-you, traditional messages convey a greeting, a compliment, an expression or wish. Most of the time conventional avoid the pronouns "me," "I," or "my" except for husband/wife, sweetheart cards and a few close relative verses. But there are exceptions.

Here's a conventional Thank You card, though this one is way too "common" for a sale in today's market:

A THANK YOU PRAYER

For your thoughtfulness and love,
For the special ways you care,
For every deed of kindness
Comes a special thank-you prayer.

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If you have a good sense of humor, try contemporary humor cards. Most editors agree: good humor is hard to find. Humor ranges from cute to irreverent. Joke books, cartoons, newspapers, and people's conversations make good sources for humorous cards. These cards always create a mood: funny, sentimental, outrageous, or nonsense, and are usually written in short prose.

If you prefer cute humor, which I do, many companies will pay a premium for these. Including a visual suggestion may increase your sales potential such as this idea I once sold:

(Large gorilla)

(Cover) Are you going to have a happy birthday.....

(Inside) Or do you need some friendly persuasion?

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Informals also sell better with visual concepts. In this type of card, you are selling an idea, more than a verse. Keep informals light and positive, such as this one:

(Mother bunny holding baby bunny)

(Cover) Always remember.....

(Inside) I'm only a hug away.

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Soft-line or sensitivity cards create a close feeling of caring, affection, warmth, and understanding. Picture someone close to you, and create a mood or feeling with these cover lines: "You and I.....," "Love is.....," "Friends like you...." Although sensitivity cards still focus on the receiver, as all greeting cards do, this type may include more personal "I" and "me" messages than other lines.

Many cards don't focus on a particular occasion, but embrace every imaginable situation or emotion. These kind of cards change yearly with trends, so keep researching stores and catalogs to see what's out there.

- 6. Simplify your record-keeping.** Most card companies will receive card verses by fax or e-mail attachment. (Check your Market Guide. Some companies may still require 3 x 5 cards through the mail). That's great for you and them—it saves time and postage. Some companies limit the number of submissions at one time, so check before you send. Be sure to include your name, address, telephone number (possibly e-mail address also) and a code number that will identify each verse idea, such as B-1 (Birthday 1).

Keep a record of your verses by category (Birthday, Anniversary, etc.) as well as files sent to each company. I also use a program like Excel and create my own file per occasion with: Card Number, Company, Date Sent, Date Rejected, Date Sold, Amount, Holding, etc. for each card. When the cards come back, are sold or held, I can record them, then resend the ones out that didn't sell the first time to another company that may need that kind. Never send simultaneous submissions for greeting cards. And if you use snail mail, always include a SASE in all your correspondence.

7. **Spend time in research.** Whether you're researching the history behind an occasion, looking up animal pictures, or compiling a file for Bible quotes, this is valuable time. Hours in research have increased my sales by 30-40%.
8. **Start writing.** Find a needed occasion for your market, like Christmas. List words that associate with the holiday—places, objects, feelings, etc. Put on a Christmas record. Get out old Christmas cards. Select a picture, and match it with a greeting of your own. Visualize a person you'll write to, such as a special friend, or create a general wish for Christmas. Select a caption, such as "To My Special Friend at Christmas" or "Warm Thoughts of You at Christmas." Match the company's general style, select some key phrases, and begin! Now ask yourself these questions. Would I buy this card? Is the message "me-to-you?" Is it unique? Does it fit all the company's guidelines? Does it create a visual image?

Never give up on a good idea. Keep it circulating to other companies. You can recycle card ideas to the same company, but give two or more years in between. Though most editors will buy an exceptional idea on the first round, tight budgets and overstocked markets may bring a first time no. Editors change often, so keep alert. If you've exhausted your potential markets, try pulling a one-line quote from your verse, and send it to companies that buy posters, mugs, or memo pads. Or rewrite old verses.

Respect company policies. Companies change their procedures for freelance submissions. Many require a screening process that will weed out unsuitable submissions, so you may need to query first before sending submissions, just like you would for a magazine article or book.

Remember, a greeting card writer must learn to understand people. Your goal is to cause this response in a potential customer: "That's exactly what I wanted to say!"

Editors vary in their answers about the difficulty of breaking into the market. Some say it is increasingly difficult, especially with more in-house writers. With

advanced computer technology, many people are sending out their own computer-printed greetings—which can reduce the market for freelancers.

Writing truly original ideas can be challenging. Others say it's not easy, but promising—if you are good. But if you do your homework for this specialized market, and you have talent and perseverance, you **can** write greeting cards that sell!

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