

Murphy's Laws of Freelancing

By Barnaby Kalan

Remember Murphy's Law ("If anything can go wrong, it will")? According to an extensive website on the topic (www.murphys-laws.com), it was named after Captain Edward A. Murphy, a U.S. Air Force engineer who was working in the late 1940s on a project to see how much sudden deceleration a person can stand in a crash.

Supposedly, one day after finding a mistake in the wiring of the test vehicle, Murphy cursed the technician responsible and said, "If there is any way to do it wrong, he'll find it." The project manager kept a list of "laws" and added this one, which he called Murphy's Law.

There are a number of amusing corollaries to Murphy's Law, such as: "If there is a possibility of several things going wrong, the one that will cause the most damage will be the one to go wrong." And "If everything seems to be going well, you have obviously overlooked something."

If you are just starting out trying to build a career as a freelance writer or designer, you should be aware that there are Murphy's Laws of Freelancing as well. For those of you who have been freelancing for years, you'll recognize the painful truths in these Laws.

1. **The phone doesn't ring until you leave the office.** You can work diligently at your desk for days, wondering why things are so quiet. But get up to go on a one-hour errand and you'll find five missed phone messages waiting for you when you return.
2. **If you want more business, book a vacation.** You will receive several large, rush projects a day or two before you are scheduled to leave.
3. **A project that's put on hold will only become active again when you're swamped with other work.** No amount of follow-up calls or emails will get it started.
4. **Freelancing gives you the freedom to work 24 hours a day.** Shortly after bragging to friends and family that you can work as much or as little as you want (which is true), you will find that you are checking emails at 12:30 a.m. and sneaking in some extra work on weekends.
5. **The insignificant project you turned down six months ago will show up again as this year's industry awards show winner.** Someone else accepted it, did a predictable job, and walked to the podium.

6. **If a client or project doesn't feel right at first, it will feel a lot worse in a few weeks.** If you have that queasy feeling in the pit of your stomach right now, stock up on the Alka-Seltzer. Or better yet, politely explain why you are too busy to meet their deadlines and decline the job.
7. **There are only two amounts of work you will get: too much, and too little.** Managing work overload is one of the most challenging aspects of freelancing. Most of us endure a couple of weeks of burnout, every now and then.
8. **There is never enough time to do things right the first time. But always enough time to do it over again.** Some clients will push you to deliver copy for an unreasonable deadline ("We need it by tomorrow noon"). Yet somehow, they will be able to get back to you in two weeks for a rewrite.
9. **If you give your clients a choice of three concepts, they will invariably choose the one you like the least.** Clients like choices and deserve choices. After all, you like choices when you shop, too. Just be sure you'll be happy if they chose any of the concepts you present, instead of presenting a "straw dog" and hoping they'll pick your favorite.
10. **A rush project that requires weekend work will generally sit on the client's desk until the following Friday, 4:30 p.m.** The corollary to this rule is: should a freelancer ever answer his or her phone after 5 p.m. on a Friday?
11. **Clients will not change strategy and direction on your project – until you've completed the project and billed for your time.**

Then there is one more Law referred to as Murphy's Law of Client Approvals:

Senior executives will only find time to review your documents and make changes when:

- 1) So much time has passed that you barely remember the project and are up to your eyeballs with other work;
- 2) The print production deadline was yesterday;
- 3) You're leaving on vacation in two hours.

We all know freelancing can be a wonderfully satisfying, liberating, lucrative way to earn a living. It can also be incredibly frustrating at times, as these Murphy's Laws point out. But we wouldn't want it any other way, would we?

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