



## Former Educator, Now Grant Writer, Lands \$68M for Schools

In virtually every community across the nation, there are schools that could do more – if only they had the funds.

One Illinois freelance writer has stepped up to help schools grab a piece of the estimated \$44 billion in available grants. Toni Rockis, a former educator, writes grant proposals and teaches other writers, teachers, and parents how to create winning proposals.

And Toni knows her stuff. To date, she has personally been a part of winning more than \$68 million in grants for schools and professional organizations.

“Grant writing allows me to help students in a different way – without being in the classroom,” Rockis said.

### A Second Career

In 2007, Toni Rockis retired from 30 years in education, ready for something new. But what?

“I decided to leave the field and do something else, but I didn’t know what that ‘something else’ was,” she said.

Then Toni received a letter from American Writers & Artists Inc. (AWAI) that answered that question for her. The letter introduced her to freelance copywriting, where, by writing a simple direct response letter, writers can help clients – and themselves – earn a healthy income.

“After reading that letter about what copywriting is and how someone can become a copywriter,” Toni said, “I thought, ‘I can do that.’”

Toni knew she could write. She’d written throughout her academic and professional career. But she admittedly didn’t know much about more conversational writing, the hallmark of copywriting.

#### CASE STUDY:

### Toni Rockis

*“As writers, we often wonder, ‘Do I know enough? Am I good enough?’ Our world moves very rapidly these days, so I strongly believe in lifelong learning. I’ve advanced my skills by investing in myself. AWAI offers high-quality professional development that can catapult your career.”*

#### MEMBER:

Toni Rockis

#### LOCATION:

Morris, Illinois

#### OTHER CAREERS:

Teacher, professor

#### HOW SHE GOT HER FIRST CLIENT:

Toni approached the owner of a business and technology center, leading to a project to create a brochure to market the available office space in the center.

#### TOP AWAI PROGRAMS:

- *Circle of Success*
- *FastTrack to Copywriting Success* Bootcamp and Job Fair

She dove into AWAI's *Accelerated Program for Six-Figure Copywriting*. She also signed up for *Circle of Success*, which gave her lifetime access to all AWAI's writing and business-building programs, and attended AWAI's *FastTrack to Copywriting Success* Bootcamp and Job Fair, their annual event in Delray Beach, Florida.

Unexpectedly, the more Toni learned about copywriting, the more she felt drawn to a form of writing she had done on the side throughout her education career: grant writing. Suddenly, her copywriting niche was clear.

"I was getting more grant writing opportunities and clients, so I decided to stay with it," she said. "It seemed to be the direction that I was supposed to be taking."

### **Boosting Her Skills, Confidence**

Toni already knew how to write grant proposals. But investing in copywriting programs added a much-needed dimension to Toni's grant writing toolkit: new skills and the confidence to move her forward as a freelancer.

"I found the fundamentals of copywriting were an ideal complement to my grant writing experience," she said. "AWAI is phenomenal because it offers so many opportunities to build on your current skillset and interact with highly successful people. It gives you the ability to take that giant step forward."

Highly driven, Toni threw herself 100 percent into her niche. She reached out to her industry contacts and grew her slate of project work. Her successes include an \$8 million advanced manufacturing project to retrain American workers, a \$2.7 million job-training program that serves young adults with intellectual disabilities, and numerous other grants that have supplied updated technology, new curricula, and education supplies for programs across the United States.

### **Always a Teacher**

As a grant writer, Toni felt limited in the number of schools and organizations she could reach. The lifelong educator recognized she could multiply her efforts – by teaching grant writing.

When she noticed that AWAI lacked a grant writing program, she approached AWAI co-founder, Paul Hollingshead, and co-managing partner, Katie Yeakle, about creating an offering for AWAI.

Toni's timing was spot on. AWAI had been considering adding a grant writing program, but just hadn't found the right instructor. Toni, with both grant writing experience – and copywriting skills – was just the right fit. After just a half-hour lunch, Toni had a verbal agreement to create the program, *Grant Writing Success: Opening the Door to Financial Opportunity*.

"I believe grant writing is a huge opportunity for copywriters," she said. "There just aren't enough good grant writers available to schools and other nonprofit organizations."

### **'More Dollars into Schools'**

As Toni continues to serve schools directly as a grant writer, she added training to her offerings as well. Her primary business, Granted Inc., teaches schools and other nonprofits how to write award-winning proposals that bring in money and resources. Toni employs a full-time associate and multiple contractors to help with marketing and product development to better serve her clients.

Toni, along with her associate, recently co-founded Grantmamas, a subsidiary of Granted Inc. Grantmamas trains parents to write



smaller foundation grants that bring money and resources into their children's classrooms and schools. These parents work directly with educators to help write these grants.

"These two businesses form a solid foundation for getting more dollars into schools," she said. "My goal is to have one Grantmama in every school district, and eventually one in every school."

As Toni grows her businesses, she calls on newfound copywriting skills she picked up in AWAI programs to develop her marketing materials (e.g., sales letters, scripts for sales videos, blogs, etc.) and information products (e.g., online video training, e-books, etc.) for clients.

"AWAI helped me advance my writing skills and increased my confidence to take on these entrepreneurial ventures," she said.

## Target: \$250,000

Toni puts in an average of 60 hours a week, but working for herself is markedly different. For one, she's passionate about building her businesses so that schools and nonprofits can get more funding. Two, she makes considerably more money than she did as an educator. Her revenue goal for the coming year for both businesses: \$250,000.

"It's definitely more than a full time job, but I love it," she said. "I still get goose bumps when I realize the hundreds – and sometimes thousands – of students who are positively affected by a winning grant proposal. I have no plans of retiring anytime soon. I'm doing what I love and serving in the best way I can."

## Toni's Tips for Copywriters

- **Invest in yourself** – "As writers, we often wonder, 'Do I know enough? Am I good enough?'" she said. "Our world moves very rapidly these days, so I strongly believe in lifelong learning. I've advanced my skills by investing in myself. AWAI offers high-quality professional development that can catapult your career."
- **Find your niche** – Toni's previous experience and newfound skills through AWAI gave her the boost to pursue the grant writing niche full time. In addition to being a financially lucrative niche, she says there's a huge need for good grant writers.
- **Read and study winning writing** – Toni notices and studies examples of strong writing and marketing, from sales letters to sales videos to grant proposals. "I'm a voracious reader, and it becomes easier and easier to identify good versus mediocre copy," she said.
- **Enlist mentors** – Early on, Toni found a grant writing mentor as she worked on her doctorate. Through AWAI, she studies top writers such as Bob Bly, Clayton Makepeace and Dan Kennedy, who inspire her to continue developing her writing skills.
- **Join a mastermind group** – Toni teamed with other AWAI members to share ideas, ask questions and solicit support. "Mastermind groups have been incredible for me. They've helped me experience success much more rapidly," Toni said.

## Ready to pursue *the Writer's Life*?

Learn more about the program that launched Toni's career,  
[\*\*The FastTrack to Copywriting Success Bootcamp & Job Fair.\*\*](#)

