

Q: WHEN SHOULD YOU WORK FOR FREE? A: ALMOST NEVER

For a nation supposedly built on the backbone of Capitalism, we sure have a lot of companies who want you to work for free.



If you are (1) a recent college graduate, (2) a creative professional (artist, writer, web designer), or (3) trying to break into a heavily-impacted industry (entertainment, fashion, advertising, music), then someone is going to ask you to work for free. They may call it an "internship" or an "apprenticeship" or "on spec" or a "contest." But the practical upshot is that you work, the company makes money off you, and you get nothing. You'll be told that you will gain experience, and will expand your reel or portfolio. This is true. But people who get paid also gain experience and a thicker portfolio. So when should you give away your work? **Don't participate in "contests."** This scam is especially prevalent among web sites and online t-shirt sellers. You're asked to design web graphics or a t-shirt, and then submit your work as a "contest entry." If you win, you get a "prize" -- like one t-shirt, or \$50. Meanwhile, your design goes on to make the company a ton of money. You have just gotten screwed. Never fall for this scam. **Don't do free work just to get an interview.** Lots of job ads out there now require applicants to actually do work on their behalf just to get an interview. Your existing portfolio is not enough -- the ad describes a specific assignment the company wants you to complete and submit before they even look at your resume. This is unethical, and blatantly exploitative in the current job environment. You do not want to work for these people -- they will never value your time, energy or talent. **Some internships can launch your career.** If you're trying to get into fashion or publishing, you may have to just bite the bullet and spend six months or so working for free. Make sure the internship is with a reputable firm, and find out what happened to previous interns. Were they offered jobs? Did the firm give them a solid recommendation? Only work for free if there's good reason to believe the donation of your time and talent will turn into a real job, either with this company or another one. **If you're trying to get into the entertainment industry, be very careful.** Once you establish that you write scripts on spec, or work crew in exchange for lunch, you'll get nothing but offers for free work until you get sick of it and go back to Nebraska. Don't work for free for the same person twice. Donating your labor is a favor -- and eventually, you need to expect the favor returned. Remind producers and filmmakers that you helped them out, and now you need a paying gig. **What about giving my own work away for free online?** Absolutely do this. Work on your own projects and make sure people see them. It's your own work, and you're giving it away of your own free will. No one else will make a profit off of it without sharing a cut with you. Look into Creative Commons licensing. But if someone steals your work and uses it for profit, make a lot of very loud noise. Even if you can't afford a lawyer, the Internet community may very well rally behind you. Got any more advice for readers contemplating internships and spec work? Let us know in the [comments!](#)