

FREE GUIDE

The Freelancing Starter Guide

How to start freelancing from zero — find clients, price your work and get paid.

Pick a skill

Pricing

Portfolio

First client

Outreach

Getting paid

Thejas

Digital with Thejas

About this guide

You have a skill — or you are willing to build one — and you keep hearing that people get paid to write, design, edit videos, build websites and manage social media from a laptop. You want in. But every video you watch either oversells it (“earn lakhs from day one!”) or drowns you in jargon.

This guide is the honest version. It walks you from zero to your first paying client: choosing a service, pricing it without panic, building proof before you have clients, and reaching out in a way that actually gets replies — written for India, with ₹ pricing talk and WhatsApp-first workflows.

How to use this guide

- **Read in order the first time.** The chapters build on each other: decide and package (Ch. 1–3), price and prove (Ch. 4–5), then go get the client (Ch. 6–8).
- **Every chapter ends with a “Do this today” box.** Do those ten things and you will be ahead of most people who only watch videos about freelancing.
- **Chapters 9–10 keep you out of trouble** — money basics and the mistakes that sink most beginners.
- **The bonus section is for later.** 20 quick tips to come back to whenever you have a spare ten minutes.

Three promises

- ✓ **No hype.** No income screenshots, no “quit your job tomorrow”. Freelancing is real work with a real learning curve.
- ✓ **No jargon.** If a term matters, it is explained in one line.
- ✓ **No dependence.** You can do everything here yourself. And when you want a professional eye on your online presence — the last chapter tells you how I can help.

TIP

Keep a notebook or a notes app open as you read. By Chapter 3 you will have written your one-line offer — the sentence your whole freelance business runs on.

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Is freelancing actually for you?

Freelancing means selling your skill directly to clients — no boss, no fixed salary, no office. That cuts both ways, so let us be honest before you spend a single evening on this.

The genuine upsides

- **You can start tiny.** A laptop, an internet connection and one useful skill. No shop, no stock, no investment to lose.
- **Your income is not capped by a salary band.** Better skills and better clients mean better rates — on your timeline, not an appraisal cycle.
- **You choose the work.** Over time you pick the clients, the projects and the hours. Students and working professionals can build it around their day.

The honest downsides

- **Income is irregular, especially early.** Some months are good, some are quiet. If a missed month of income would sink you, do not depend on freelancing yet.
- **You are the whole company.** Delivery, sales, follow-ups, invoices — all you. Roughly half your time will go to finding and managing work, not doing it.
- **Nobody hands you clients.** The first one usually takes real effort and more rejections than you expect. Most people quit exactly there.

The side-hustle-first rule

Do not resign to “go freelance”. Start alongside your studies or job: evenings and weekends are enough to land and serve your first few clients. Switch to full-time only when freelancing income has covered your essential expenses for a few months in a row — not after one lucky project.

DO THIS TODAY

Write down two numbers: your essential monthly expenses, and the hours per week you can honestly give freelancing. These two numbers decide your pace — not anyone’s YouTube income claims.

Pick a skill you can actually sell

Beginners get stuck here for months, waiting to feel like an expert. Here is the truth: **you do not need to be an expert — you need to be useful.** A shop owner does not want the world's best designer; they want someone reliable who makes their posters look professional this week.

Start from what you already do, even casually, and map it to a service someone will pay for:

If you already can...	You can sell...
You write well (even just good English)	Blog posts, website copy, social media captions, product descriptions
You make decent Canva posts	Social media creatives, posters, menus, brochures for local businesses
You edit videos on your phone	Reels and Shorts editing for creators, coaches and local brands
You are comfortable with Excel / Sheets	Data cleanup, reports, dashboards, billing and inventory sheets
You built a website once (or can learn)	Simple business websites and landing pages on WordPress / no-code tools
You use Instagram seriously	Account management: posting, captions, replies for busy business owners
You speak two languages well	Translation, subtitles, voice-overs, regional-language content

How to choose when several fit

- **Pick one.** "Writer + designer + video editor" sounds flexible but sells as "confused". You can add services later.
- **Pick the one you can practise weekly** — skill grows with repetitions, and repetitions only happen if you enjoy it enough.
- **Pick where you can name buyers.** If you cannot imagine who pays for it, you will struggle to find them.

DO THIS TODAY

Choose your one service and write it down. Then list five types of people or businesses who obviously need it — that list becomes your client hunting ground in Chapter 6.

Package your service into one clear offer

Clients do not buy “I do graphic design”. They buy a clear package: what they get, by when, for how much. Packaging is what separates “freelancer” from “person who does stuff sometimes”.

The three parts of a package

1. **Scope** — exactly what is included. “12 Instagram posts per month: design + caption”, not “social media help”.
2. **Deliverables** — what lands in the client’s hands. Files, formats, number of revisions (two rounds is a sane default).
3. **Timeline** — when they get it. “First drafts in 5 working days” beats “ASAP”.

Just as important: what is NOT included

Decide your exclusions now, before a client decides them for you. Printing costs, ad budgets, extra revision rounds, “quick” extra posts — name them upfront and scope creep mostly disappears.

Your one-line offer statement

Compress the package into one sentence you can say, message, or put in a bio:

The formula

I help [who] get [result] with [service] — [key deliverable] in [timeframe]. Example: “I help local restaurants look as good online as their food tastes — 12 designed posts with captions, every month.”

This sentence does heavy lifting everywhere: your WhatsApp intro, Instagram bio, outreach messages (Chapter 7) and the first thirty seconds of every client call.

DO THIS TODAY

Write your offer statement using the formula above. Say it out loud. If it takes more than one breath or needs explaining, simplify it.

Pricing without panic

Every beginner freezes at “what do you charge?”. Relax: there is no single correct price, and your first price is not your forever price. You only need a sane starting point and a way to raise it.

The three ways to charge

Model	How it works	Best for	Watch out for
Hourly	You bill for time spent (₹X per hour)	Ongoing, open-ended work; tasks that are hard to scope	Punishes you for getting faster; clients fixate on the clock
Per project	One fixed price for a defined scope	Most beginner work: websites, logo packs, monthly content bundles	Only works if scope is written down — vague scope means unpaid extras
Value / retainer	Priced on the result or a fixed monthly fee	Later, once you have results to point to and long-term clients	Hard to justify without proof; do not start here

So what number do you say?

Honest answer: beginner rates in India **vary widely** — by skill, city, client size and how much proof you have. The same Instagram package can go for a few thousand rupees a month with a small local shop and several times that with an established brand. Anyone giving you one “correct” number is guessing.

Instead of hunting for the magic number, do this:

- 1. Set a floor.** Estimate the hours a project honestly takes, and decide the minimum that makes those hours worth it to you. Never quote below your floor.
- 2. Ask around.** Two or three freelancers a step ahead of you will happily tell you what they charge — that beats any generic rate card online.
- 3. Quote a range on calls.** “Projects like this usually land between ₹X and ₹Y depending on scope” feels professional and leaves room to adjust.
- 4. Raise prices every few projects.** When most prospects say yes instantly, you are undercharging. A small raise for each new client is normal and expected.

One rule above all: never work for “exposure”. Free work is fine only when *you* choose it strategically for your portfolio (Chapter 5) — not when a client decides your work is worth nothing.

DO THIS TODAY

Calculate your floor price for your main service: honest hours × the minimum your hour is worth to you. Write it down — this is the number that stops panic-discounting on calls.

Your minimum portfolio: three proof pieces

“But I have no clients, so I have no portfolio” — the classic chicken-and-egg. Here is the way out: **a portfolio proves you can do the work, not that you were paid for it.** You can build one this week with zero clients.

The three proof pieces

1. **The redo.** Pick a real local business with a weak online presence. Redesign their posts, rewrite their website copy, or re-edit their video — unasked. Show “before → after” side by side. This is the single most convincing thing a beginner can show.
2. **The favour.** Do one real project free or heavily discounted for someone in your circle — a relative’s shop, a friend’s startup, a college club. In exchange, agree upfront: they give you a short written testimonial and let you showcase the work.
3. **The process piece.** Document how you work on one sample: the brief you assumed, the options you explored, the final result and why. Clients hire people who think, not just people who produce files.

Where to put it (simplest first)

- **A Google Drive folder or Notion page** with your three pieces and one line of context each — enough to start outreach this week.
- **A clean Instagram account or a one-page website** when you are ready — your offer statement on top, three pieces below, WhatsApp link at the bottom.
- **Name the link properly.** “Portfolio – [Your name] – [Service]”, not “New folder (3)”.

Three strong pieces beat fifteen average ones. Depth and context sell; volume does not.

DO THIS TODAY

Pick the business for your “redo” piece tonight — somewhere you actually visit. Finish the before/after this week.

Finding your first client

Your first client is almost never a stranger from the internet. They are usually two or three steps away from someone who already knows you. Work outward in rings:

Ring 1: your warm network (start here)

Family, friends, classmates, colleagues, neighbours, that uncle with a business. They will not all need you — but they all **know someone**. The mistake beginners make is the vague announcement (“I’ve started freelancing!”). Nobody acts on vague. Send a specific, personal message instead — Chapter 7 gives you the exact template.

Ring 2: freelance platforms

- **What they are:** marketplaces like Upwork, Fiverr and Freelancer where clients post work and freelancers pitch.
- **The good:** real buyers with budgets, built-in payment protection, and reviews that compound — a genuine path for beginners.
- **The honest bad:** heavy competition and platform fees, and the first few wins take patience and many unanswered proposals. Treat it as one channel, not the whole plan.

Ring 3: direct outreach

- **What it is:** finding businesses that clearly need your service and messaging them directly — WhatsApp, email, Instagram DM.
- **The good:** no fees, no bidding war, and local businesses often prefer someone from their own city they can call.
- **The honest bad:** most messages get ignored — that is normal, not failure. It is a numbers game that improves as your proof improves.

The balanced play for month one: exhaust Ring 1 first, run Rings 2 and 3 in parallel after that — a few platform proposals and a few direct messages each week, every week.

DO THIS TODAY

List 20 people you know who run a business, work at one, or know owners. Do not filter (“he won’t need me”) — you are looking for doors, not buyers.

Outreach messages that don't get ignored

Most outreach dies because it is about the sender ("I am a passionate freelancer looking for opportunities..."). Messages get replies when they are **short, specific, and about the receiver** — with one easy question at the end.

Message 1: the warm network message

WhatsApp — to people who know you

Hi Priya! Quick thing — I've started taking freelance design work: Instagram posts and posters for small businesses (sample: [portfolio link]). If you know a shop or business whose posts look homemade, I'd love an intro. Who comes to mind?

Message 2: the direct message to a business

WhatsApp / DM — to a business you researched

Hi! I ordered from Cafe Arabica last week — loved the food, and noticed the Instagram hasn't been active since Diwali. I design posts and reels for restaurants; here's a sample I made using your menu: [link]. Would you be open to a quick chat this week?

Why these work

- **Specific service, named audience** — "posts and posters for small businesses", not "any work".
- **Proof attached** — the portfolio link from Chapter 5 does the convincing so the message can stay short.
- **A sample made for THEM** — in message 2, ten minutes of unasked work signals more than any bio. It is the highest-reply move a beginner has.
- **One easy question** — "who comes to mind?" / "open to a chat?" is answerable in five seconds. "Let me know if any opportunities arise" is not a question.

Follow up once, politely, after 3–4 days. A short "just bubbling this up" wins a surprising share of replies. After two silences, move on — there are more businesses than you can ever message.

DO THIS TODAY

Send Message 1 to five people from your Chapter 6 list — personalised, not copy-pasted. Names, not "hey buddy".

Closing the deal (calls, scope, advance)

Someone replied: “okay, tell me more”. Beginners fumble here — either too shy to talk money or too eager, saying yes to everything. Here is the calm way through.

The 20-minute call

1. **Ask first, pitch later.** “What are you doing currently? What is not working? What would a win look like?” Ten minutes of listening beats any pitch.
2. **Restate their problem in your words.** “So bookings are fine, but the page looks dead and enquiries dropped” — when they say “exactly!”, you are halfway to hired.
3. **Propose your package** (Chapter 3) and quote your range (Chapter 4). Then stop talking. Silence after a price is normal — do not fill it with a discount.
4. **End with a next step:** “I’ll send a summary on WhatsApp today. If it looks right, I start Monday.”

Get the scope in writing — always

No lawyer needed: a WhatsApp or email summary the client agrees to is your written record. Cover five things: **deliverables, timeline, price, revisions included, and what is out of scope**. One “yes, confirmed” reply protects both sides better than any handshake.

Take an advance — it is normal

Asking for part-payment upfront is standard practice, not rudeness — many freelancers in India take roughly a third to half before starting, with the balance on delivery. UPI makes this painless. An advance filters out non-serious clients and confirms the project is real. **A client who refuses any advance on a first project is a red flag** — politely walk away.

DO THIS TODAY

Draft your scope-confirmation message now as a reusable template: deliverables, timeline, price, revisions, exclusions, advance. Closing becomes filling five blanks instead of a scary conversation.

Deliver well and turn one client into three

Landing the client is half the job. The other half — the half that decides whether you ever have to cold-outreach again — is how you deliver. Repeat work and referrals are how freelancing gets easier every month.

Communication is the product

- **Set a cadence and keep it.** A short update every few days — even “on track, first drafts Thursday” — stops the client wondering. A silent freelancer is an untrusted freelancer, even one doing great work.
- **Flag problems early.** Running late? Say it before the deadline, with a new date. Clients forgive delays; they do not forgive surprises.
- **Deliver slightly more than promised.** One extra poster variant or a tip they did not ask for. Small, cheap for you, memorable for them.

After delivery: the three asks

1. **The testimonial** — ask the same day they say they are happy: “Could you send two lines about how this went? I’m collecting feedback for my portfolio.” Screenshot the reply (with permission) — that is portfolio gold.
2. **The referral** — “If you know one other business owner who could use this, an intro would mean a lot.” Happy clients usually know several.
3. **The next project** — “Next month, want me to keep this going?” One-off projects become retainers because you asked, not because the client thought of it.

Do this after every project and the maths changes fast: each finished client can hand you a testimonial, a referral and repeat work — three assets from one delivery.

DO THIS TODAY

Create a “delivery day” checklist with the three asks on it. The asks feel awkward for the first two clients and automatic forever after.

Money and admin basics (without the headache)

You do not need an accountant, a company, or software subscriptions to start. You need three simple habits from client number one.

1. Invoice properly (a PDF is enough)

A simple one-page invoice: your name and contact, an invoice number (start at 001), date, client name, what you delivered, amount, and how to pay — your UPI ID and bank details. Free invoice generators and Canva templates handle the layout. Send it with every project, even for a friend — it sets the tone that this is a business.

2. Track every rupee in one sheet

One spreadsheet, five columns: **date, client, project, amount, paid/pending**. Update it the moment money moves. This is how you spot who owes you, what your real monthly income is, and when you have out-earned your floor price — and future-you will need it at tax time.

3. Keep money boring

- **Consider a separate bank account (or at least a separate UPI ID)** for freelance income — mixing it with personal spending makes everything murky.
- **Set aside a slice of every payment** for taxes before you spend it. Freelance income is taxable in India, and it is your job to declare it.
- **Chase politely and promptly.** A pending payment reminder after the due date is professional, not desperate: “Gentle reminder — invoice 007 was due Monday. UPI ID below for convenience.”

A word on GST and taxes

GST registration applies only above certain turnover thresholds, and rules differ by service type and state — most beginners are nowhere near the threshold in year one, but do not take this guide’s word for it. When money starts flowing steadily, one consultation with a CA (often cheaper than you expect) will settle GST, advance tax and deductions for your situation. **This chapter is general information, not tax advice.**

DO THIS TODAY

Set up your invoice template and your five-column income sheet now, while you have zero clients — so client one gets a professional experience and your records are clean from day one.

The 7 mistakes that sink new freelancers

1. **Starting without a written scope.** Every horror story — endless revisions, unpaid extras, “that’s not what I asked for” — starts with “we discussed it on a call”. Five lines on WhatsApp prevent all of it.
2. **Working without an advance.** The project that starts with “I’ll pay after delivery” is the project most likely to never pay. Advance first, always.
3. **Competing on cheapness.** There is always someone cheaper. Clients who choose you only on price leave you only on price — compete on reliability, communication and proof instead.
4. **Saying yes to everything.** Wrong-fit projects eaten out of fear cost you the time to find right-fit ones. A polite “that’s outside what I do, but I can recommend someone” builds more respect than a bad yes.
5. **Waiting to feel ready.** One more course, one more tutorial, a better logo, then outreach... Months pass. You learn more from one real client than from five certificates.
6. **Going silent mid-project.** Beginners hide when work is behind schedule — the one move that guarantees an angry client. Bad news early is professionalism; silence is the sin.
7. **Stopping outreach when busy.** Deliver-month, starve-month is the classic freelance rollercoaster. A few outreach messages every week — even mid-project — keeps the pipeline alive.

DO THIS TODAY

Pick the mistake you are most likely to make — you already know which one — and write one sentence for how you will avoid it. Keep it where you work.

BONUS

20 quick tips & tricks

Quick wins you can apply in minutes. Come back to this section whenever you have a spare ten minutes.

GETTING STARTED

- 01** Tell ten people what you do this week. Opportunities come from people who know you exist, not from perfecting your setup in private.
- 02** Set up WhatsApp Business (free): a catalogue for your packages, quick replies for common questions, and a professional first impression.
- 03** Write your offer statement in your Instagram bio, WhatsApp about, and LinkedIn headline — the same sentence everywhere.
- 04** Keep one “wins” folder: every testimonial, thank-you message and before/after goes in. It is outreach ammunition and a bad-day cure.
- 05** Learn from free sources first — YouTube and documentation cover almost everything a beginner needs. Buy a course only when a specific gap blocks you.

CLIENTS & COMMUNICATION

- 06** Reply to enquiries fast — speed is the easiest way for a beginner to out-professional the competition.
- 07** After every call, send a two-line summary of what was agreed. It prevents misunderstandings and quietly shows you are organised.
- 08** Never end a client message with a full stop — end with the next step or a question: “Shall I start with the menu design?”
- 09** Voice notes feel personal and take 20 seconds — use them for follow-ups and explanations where typing feels cold.
- 10** Keep a ‘client language’ habit: talk about their customers and sales, not your fonts and tools.

PRICING & MONEY

- 11** Quote ranges, not single numbers — “between ₹X and ₹Y depending on scope” starts a conversation instead of ending one.
- 12** When asked for a discount, reduce scope instead of price: “I can do it for that budget with 8 posts instead of 12.”
- 13** Raise your rate slightly for each new client until saying the number feels uncomfortable — that is roughly where market rate lives.
- 14** Send the invoice the same day you deliver. The longer the gap, the slower the payment.
- 15** Review your income sheet monthly: which client type paid best per hour of your effort? Do more of that.

WORKING HABITS

- 16** Batch your outreach: one fixed hour, twice a week, phone on silent. Consistency beats motivated bursts.
- 17** Save every deliverable in a per-client folder with dates — “final_final_v3” chaos loses hours and looks amateur.
- 18** Templates are your leverage: scope message, invoice, delivery checklist, testimonial ask. Build once, reuse forever.
- 19** Protect one no-client block for skill practice every week — your rate only rises as fast as your skill does.
- 20** Track your hours per project for a month (a notes app is fine) — you cannot price projects sanely without knowing what they truly cost you.

What to do next

You now know more about starting freelancing than most people who talk about it ever will. But knowing the playbook and executing it — while studying or working a job — are two different things.

That is where I come in.

GET A FREE DIGITAL PRESENCE AUDIT

I will personally review your portfolio, profiles and online presence the way a potential client sees them — and send you a short, honest report with the **3 highest-impact fixes to help you win clients**. No generic checklist. No obligation. If you can do the fixes yourself, great — the audit is yours to keep.

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ABOUT THEJAS

I help small businesses, freelancers and independent professionals improve their online presence through websites, landing pages, Meta Ads and practical AI solutions. This guide is the playbook I share with people starting out — shared free, because a freelancer who understands their own positioning is a better collaborator and a stronger professional.

— Thejas, *Digital with Thejas*

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