

Get Paid for Your Expertise: the outside income you are already allowed to earn

8 MIN READ

Most researchers assume outside income is either forbidden or vaguely disreputable. At a lot of institutions the opposite is true: it is written into policy, with a specific allowance and a specific cap, in a document almost nobody reads until they are already in trouble.

This guide covers what that policy usually says, the disclosure rule that decides whether any of it is safe for you, and what the work actually pays where a real published figure exists. Where no reliable public figure exists, this guide says so instead of inventing one. Every number below is attributed to the survey or institution it came from.

01 You are probably already allowed to do this

The single most useful thing to know is that outside professional activity is usually permitted, budgeted, and bounded. It is not a grey area you are sneaking into. It is a line in your faculty handbook.

- The common shape is one day per week. New York University states it plainly: the university has generally allowed full-time instructional staff up to one day per week, which it puts at 40 days per appointment year for those on academic-year appointments.
- That framing matters more than the number. The allowance is a budget of TIME, not a cap on earnings. Nothing in a one-day-per-week rule limits what that day is worth, which is why the rate you charge matters far more than the hours you find.
- It is conditional, not automatic. Institutions that grant the allowance generally require approval up front and an annual written report of the time actually spent, filed with the department chair and dean.
- Your institution is the authority here, not this guide. Policies differ in the cap, in what counts as outside activity, and in what needs pre-approval. Find your own "outside professional activities" or "conflict of commitment" policy and read the actual text.

Find your own policy in five minutes

- ☐ Search your institution site for "outside professional activities policy" and "conflict of commitment".
- ☐ Write down the cap in days per year, and whether it is per academic year or per calendar year.
- ☐ Note what requires PRE-approval versus what only requires annual disclosure. These are different obligations and people confuse them.
- ☐ Note who signs off: usually the department chair, sometimes the dean as well.
- ☐ Check whether the policy treats paid and unpaid activity differently. Some cap the time regardless of payment.

If you cannot find the policy, ask your department administrator rather than guessing. The question is routine and asking it is not a red flag.

02 The disclosure rule that decides whether any of this is safe

Time is the smaller constraint. The one that carries real consequences is financial disclosure, and if you hold federal funding it is not your institution making the rules.

- For NIH-funded work, the governing federal regulation is 42 CFR Part 50 Subpart F, "Promoting Objectivity in Research". Its purpose is a reasonable expectation that the design, conduct, or reporting of funded research is free from bias caused by an investigator's conflicting financial interest.
- The obligation is disclosure of significant financial interests that relate to your institutional responsibilities. Your institution then decides whether an interest is a conflict and how to manage it. You do not get to make that call yourself, and the safe move is to disclose more than you think is required.
- Disclose before you accept, not after you are paid. A disclosed relationship that gets managed is routine administration. An undisclosed one discovered later is a compliance problem attached to your name and your grant.
- The highest-risk case is the one that looks most attractive: paid work for a company whose product your research evaluates. That is precisely the arrangement the regulation exists to catch.

03 Expert witness work pays the highest verified rate on this list

Litigation needs people who can explain a technical record and hold up under cross-examination. That is an unusually direct match for what a researcher already does, and it is the one route here with well-surveyed public rates.

- The 2026 ExpertPages survey of expert witness fees and practices reports an average hourly fee of \$465, up from \$451 in 2024, with reported rates running from under \$200 to over \$1,500 per hour.
- SEAK's 2024 fee survey breaks it out by task: a median of \$450 per hour for file review and preparation, \$475 per hour for depositions, and \$500 per hour for testifying in court. Testimony pays more than paperwork.
- Rates vary widely by field, so treat the average as a starting point rather than your number. The same surveys show medical specialties at the top of the range and engineering fields lower.
- The work is real work. It is file review, a written report, a deposition, and possibly testimony, on a legal timetable rather than an academic one. Most of the hours are reading.
- You are engaged for your expertise and your record, which is the thread running through everything in this guide: publications are the reason anyone can justify hiring you at that rate.

04 The academic work that already pays, and what it honestly pays

There is a tier of paid academic work that circulates quietly by word of mouth. It is worth knowing what it pays before you spend a season on it, because the figures are more modest than the effort suggests.

- Times Higher Education puts external dissertation supervision at between £350 and £700 per student, spread across four to five months and several meetings.
- External examiner appointments run at usually about £300 to £600 per year, by the same source.
- Assessment marking comes in between £15 and £28 per hour, though it is typically paid per script rather than hourly.
- Book royalties are the expectation-setter. The same piece notes that annual royalties rarely exceed £300 even for bestselling titles in niche fields. Write the book for the record and the reach, not the income.
- These figures are UK and are quoted in pounds, because that is the market the source surveyed. Treat them as an order of magnitude rather than a rate card for your country.

IN PRACTICE

Compare on an hourly basis before you commit. A dissertation supervision at £500 across four months of meetings and reads can work out near the marking rate once you count the hours honestly. That is not an argument against taking it. It is an argument for knowing which of these you are doing for money and which you are doing for the relationship, the reference, or the record.

05 Consulting and advisory work, and why this guide will not quote you a rate

Consulting is the route people ask about most and the one with the least trustworthy public data. Rates are privately negotiated, unpublished, and vary by field, region, and client type.

- There is no reliable public benchmark for an academic consulting day rate. Times Higher Education, writing directly on this topic, acknowledges that setting a day rate is not easy and recommends asking mentors in your own field rather than working from a published figure.
- That is the honest answer, and it is also the actionable one: your comparison set is the people one step ahead of you in your field, not an internet average.
- Ask two or three of them what they charge and what the engagement involved. Most will tell you. The taboo around discussing these numbers is the reason the rates stay low for people early in their careers.
- Whatever you agree, put the scope in writing: deliverable, number of days, revision rounds, and who owns the output. Ambiguous scope is how a two-day engagement becomes a two-month one at the same fee.
- Every arrangement in this section runs through the disclosure rule above before it runs through your calendar.

06 What to do this month

The gap between knowing this and earning from it is small and administrative. It is mostly reading one policy and having two conversations.

- Read your institution's outside-activity policy and write down the cap and the approval path. This is the step people skip and the only one that carries real risk.
- Check your disclosure status. If you hold federal funding, confirm what you have on file and when it was last updated.
- Pick one route from this guide that matches work you already do well, rather than the one with the highest number attached.
- Ask two people in your field what they charge for it. Use their answers, not an average.
- Keep publishing. Every route above is priced off your record, which is the part of this that compounds.

Before you accept any paid outside work

- ☐ I have read my institution's outside-activity policy and know my cap in days.
- ☐ I know whether this engagement needs pre-approval or only annual disclosure.
- ☐ I have disclosed any financial interest that touches my research area.
- ☐ The scope, fee, and deliverable are in writing.
- ☐ This work does not evaluate a product or company connected to my funded research.

If the last line gives you pause, that is the one to raise with your research office before you accept, not after.

WHERE THESE NUMBERS COME FROM

- 01 The federal rule that governs disclosure for NIH-funded work is 42 CFR Part 50 Subpart F, "Promoting Objectivity in Research". **NIH, Office of Extramural Research** (https://grants.nih.gov/grants/compliance/42_cfr_50_subpart_f.htm)
- 02 The \$5,000 significant-financial-interest disclosure threshold, and what an institution must collect. **NIH Financial Conflict of Interest policy** (<https://grants.nih.gov/policy-and-compliance/policy-topics/fcoi>)
- 03 Expert witness fees averaging \$465 an hour in 2026, up from \$451 in 2024, ranging from under \$200 to over \$1,500, across more than 400 experts. **ExpertPages 2026 fee survey** (<https://natlawreview.com/press-releases/expertpagesr-2026-survey-reveals-expert-witness-hourly-fees-reach-new-highs>)
- 04 The per-task breakdown for file review, depositions and testimony. **SEAK expert witness fee study** (<https://seak.com/expert-witness-fee-study/>)

THE NEXT STEP

Your publication record is the asset all of this is priced from

Every route in this guide pays for the same underlying thing: demonstrated expertise that someone else can point to. The expert witness engagement, the advisory seat, the consulting brief and the invited examinership are all priced off a record you built by publishing. That is the unglamorous connection between getting published and getting paid, and it is why the two are the same project rather than competing ones. If the publishing half is where you are stuck, that is what we work on.

Get published, one task at a time.

See what the Academy is →

