



## On Track: Group Update #1

Hope you've been having a good writing week so far! I've been watching the On Track twitter group updates, and reading all your emails – it's great to hear about the projects that you're going to be working on throughout the course.

Leslie (@leslieajoy on Twitter) wrote in with a great tip:

*I have a non-writer friend whose help I enlisted. Every day (we started on Saturday) he asks me at the end of the day what I managed to get done. He also sent me a picture he drew of himself holding a bullhorn and a whip – mainly because those are 2 items that should never fall into his hands.*

If you want someone to help keep you accountable, how about asking around in the Twitter group? (Or look out for someone else's tweet so you can partner up with them!) You can find tweets from everyone in the group at: <http://twitter.com/#!/list/aliventures/on-track-members>

### Monday's Assignment

I mentioned on Monday that I'd be spending 15 minutes working on my rewrite of the Staff Blogging Course. And I did it! Hurrah! ☺

If you haven't had a chance to do Monday's assignment yet, here it is again:

1. If you've not already done it, *write down the name* of the project you're going to focus on. If you want, share it with the group by Tweeting it (#ontrack) or hit "reply" on this email to just share it with me.
2. Now, set a timer for 15 minutes (or more, if you can manage it) and work on your project. You don't have to show your writing to anyone. Your material can be as first-drafty as you like.

I've been hearing about all sorts of fantastic projects – blogs, ebooks, memoirs, and more. If you *have* done the assignment already, good for you! Though, there's nothing stopping you doing another 15 minute writing burst... ;-)

## Questions and Answers

I had some great questions come in for the Q&A this week – thanks! Even if you didn't send in a question, browse through the answers below – you might well find that someone else is struggling with the same problem as you.

Don't forget to email (or tweet) any questions for next week. You can be as general or specific as you like, and you'll remain safely anonymous.

Today's answers are on:

1. Optimum length for a blog post
2. Breaking down the writing of an ebook
3. Online Masters degrees in creative writing
4. Plot problems
5. Writing for a new audience

### #1: Blog post length

#### Is there an optimum length for a blog post?

In a word, no! It very much depends what you're writing about and who you're writing for. As a general guideline, though, most big blogs will ask for guest posts of at least 500 words – and more than 1000 words is often too much.

Look around at other blogs in the same area as yours, and see what they're doing. Gadget blogs tend to have shorter, newsy posts. Personal development blogs may publish very long, in-depth posts. You don't necessarily have to go with the crowd, but it's helpful to know the conventions before breaking them!

Don't be afraid to experiment with different post lengths, too. You might post a short, thoughtful piece – or a long, in-depth resource guide. See what response you get from readers.

## #2: Writing an Ebook

**I have ADHD, and while I'm on meds and have been working on behavioural modification techniques for it, the idea of an ebook is so overwhelming and hard to break down for me. I have a great idea for one, but I'm just getting a handle on breaking down smaller projects like blogging. How do I even START to break down writing an ebook?**

I think a lot of people get overwhelmed by ebooks, so please don't feel alone! There are also other writers with ADHD – the blogger Srinivas Rao (who co-runs BlogcastFM) comes to mind – he's written about [uni-tasking to control ADHD](#).

We'll be covering "setting milestones that work" in next week's lesson, which includes general ways to break down your project – but I'll give you some quick tips here:

- Write down your idea as clearly as you can. Unlike blog posts, ebook chapters do need to tie together into a coherent whole!
- List the most important parts of that idea: what big areas do you think you need to cover? You'll probably end up with between three and ten points.
- Run a survey on your blog (I use SurveyMonkey) to ask readers which of those points *they* want to know about. Give them a chance to make other suggestions, too.

This is the market-research stage of writing. Since you'll be selling the ebook yourself, you need to know there's an audience for it – and you'll want to include the content that *they* want.

Once you've got some feedback, you can start writing an outline for the ebook. Break down the major points by asking yourself "what are the steps involved in this?" or "what does the reader need to know here?" Sometimes it helps to think back from the *end* point – where do you want the reader to end up? – rather than trying to work forwards from the beginning.

Kelly Kingman's ebook *The Sticky eBook Formula* is a great guide for ebook writers – it takes you through the outlining and drafting stages, right up to revising, polishing and publishing. I wrote a review of it here, if you're interested in knowing more: <http://www.aliventures.com/reviews/sticky-ebook-formula/>

## #3: Online Masters' in Creative Writing

**Are there any good online masters' degree programs in creative writing?**

I took my MA in Creative and Life Writing at Goldsmiths College – the course required attendance on Wednesdays on around 20 weeks of the year, plus tutorials.

I don't have any personal experience with online degree programs, but I asked around on Twitter, and [this creative writing MA/MFA](#) at Wilkes University was recommended as a "low residency" program. Some colleges may have options to take their programs online, too; it's worth looking around.

However, one of the best parts of my own MA was the interaction with other students, and being physically face-to-face with a group. I know that taking an online degree course may well be your only realistic route, but if you do have the option, I'd urge you to look at in-person courses too. The attendance requirement may not be all that high.

## #4: Plot Problems

**What do you do if you run into a plot block? Like something in the story or project you're writing doesn't work and you can't figure out how to fix it.**

I feel your pain! The thing *not* to do is to keep blindly bashing your way forwards, despite the growing sense that something's really not coming together. I've done this with novels, and I've done it with (non-fiction) ebooks. It's no fun when you end up scrapping several chapters because you've tried to fight your way through a plot block, and the block's won.

The tough thing with fiction, in particular, is that your story tends to shift and change as you're writing it – however much you try to plan in advance. I usually work on the assumption that I'll have to cut huge chunks of a first draft, because the writing was a process of exploration.

In the novel I wrote on my MA, I lost a whole character part-way through draft one. She wasn't working and the easiest solution was to cut her entirely. That may or may not be a good fix for your current work.

The way I think of it is that the story is already there, and as the writer, your job is to find it. If something isn't working, it's probably not supposed to be part of *this* particular story.

As to how you move forwards ... there's no magic bullet. Try walking, daydreaming, keeping a journal about your writing, inventing more back-story for your characters, talking to someone about what you're doing (the act of explaining it can often make the holes dear to you), or even working on something else for a bit.

For me, simply admitting "there's a problem here, this scene/subplot/etc isn't working" is often enough to help me move towards a solution.

## #5: Writing for a New Audience

**What do you do if you're writing for a new audience you don't know very well, or you're not sure what your audience is going to be?**

If you can get to know the new audience a bit, that really helps. If I'm writing for a blog for the first time, I read past posts and especially the comments on them – so I can see who I'm writing for. With magazines, I look at the concerns which crop up in letters.

Some editors may provide you with reader profiles; even if you don't get given these, it's worth asking if they have any details about their typical readership.

I think it's important to be yourself – friendly, open and honest. If you've got a really strong, idiosyncratic style, tone it down a bit – but don't edit all the personality out of your writing.

If you're struggling to find the right tone, a good trick is to ask yourself *Would I read this? Would I enjoy it?* Write in the sort of way that you'd like to be written to.

In areas where you're not sure how much expertise your audience has (e.g. if you're writing about how to use WordPress), I'd suggest erring on the side of giving too much information rather than too little. You can always alert potentially-expert readers with something like *"In this section, I'm going to cover the basics of getting started with X. If you've used it before, you might want to skip this part."*

***That's all the questions for this week!***

***Your next lesson will be in your inbox on Monday – we'll be breaking your project down into useful milestones, and thinking about setting some deadlines.***