



On Track #2: Setting Milestones That Work

Last week, we looked at getting off to a good start – and hopefully you've picked a single project to focus on, and have had the chance to spend at least 15 minutes on it.

This week, we'll be looking ahead to the rest of your project. Chances are, it's not something you can finish in a day. We'll be looking at three big ways to break it down, working from the biggest to the smallest chunks:

- Different drafts
- Major sections
- Chapter by chapter

We'll also cover ongoing projects, like blogs, which don't quite fit these chunks.

A huge project like "write a novel" or "create a popular blog" can be pretty overwhelming. Perhaps you get stuck after the first few days of work – especially once your initial burst of energy has petered out. And with some projects, it's easy to go off on a tangent, not really knowing what you should be doing next.

Breaking your project into chunks makes the writing much less daunting. Instead of having the whole thing in mind at once, you can focus on finishing the next stage.

It's up to you what size "chunk" you want to think in. Here are a few different ways to look at your work-in-progress.

#1: Break it Into Successive Drafts

These are the biggest chunks you can realistically work with (and, unless your project is quite short, they'll need to be split down further). Your first milestone is "draft one" – however rough and ready that is. The next is "draft two", and so on, until you have a "final version" that's good to go.

For smallish writing projects, like a short ebook or a long blog post, drafts can make great milestones. For big projects like novels, you'll want to celebrate the end of each draft (with champagne, if you're so inclined...) but you'll also want to chunk down *within* the drafts.

What counts as a "finished" draft?

- A first draft gets you from the start to the end of your project. There'll be lots of missing pieces or rough edges, but you've got most of your ideas down in words – even if it seems far from perfect.
- A second draft involves reorganising, adding new material, cutting sections which aren't working, and so on. You won't usually be tweaking individual words at this stage; instead, you're making sure that the draft is coherent.
- A third draft might involve getting feedback from other people and incorporating that into your project. At this stage, you're focusing on making the whole piece flow smoothly.

You may only need two or three drafts, depending on how complex your project is and how well the earlier drafts went.

#2: Break Drafts into Major Sections

You'll normally have particular sections to complete within each draft of a project. For instance:

- Your novel might divide into several plot stages, separated by turning points or major plot events.
- Your book or ebook might have three big sections dealing with different topics.

Each of these sections can be a milestone – something to aim towards and celebrate finishing. If you're drafting an ebook, for instance, you might aim to finish a particular section each week. If you're writing a novel, your sections might be several chapters long, and you might aim to complete one every month, writing a chapter a week.

For short non-fiction projects, your sections might be your chapters themselves.

#3: Drill Down to Chapter by Chapter

With long books – whether novels or non-fiction – you'll be breaking your work into chapters. These form your smallest chunks. "Finish novel by September 30th" seems a very long way off in January, and doesn't necessarily give you much sense of urgency. "Finish chapter three this week" is a lot easier to focus on.

Working on a chapter-by-chapter level also helps with planning – you can write a chapter outline (it doesn't matter if you eventually end up deviating from it) so that you know roughly where you're going next.

If you don't tend to plan much, you might want to keep a spreadsheet of your chapters. Jot down major events, or characters involved (in a novel) – or key points covered (non-fiction). This is very useful when you come to revise your work.

Note – we're going to be covering planning in more detail in a couple of weeks, in lesson four.

Help! My Project Doesn't Fit!

Some writing projects – I'm thinking particularly of blogs here – don't fit into straightforward chunks. Instead, they're made up of discreet pieces that form a more-or-less coherent whole.

In this case, it might not be appropriate or easy to think in terms of drafts, sections or chapters. Your project might not even have any end point at all.

Even if you can't "see" the whole picture of your project, though, you can still set yourself small goals along the way. With a blog, this might be:

- Get to 50 posts (or 10, 20, 100 etc...)
- Write guest posts for ten different blogs
- Write an in-depth series of "pillar content"

You might also set milestones around your blog's growth – for instance, aiming for a certain number of RSS subscribers or daily visitors – but I'd recommend picking goals that are fully within your control (like how much you write).

Should Milestones Have a Deadline?

You don't *have* to attach deadlines to your milestones, but if you find your progress slowing down, try setting a date to complete the next chunk of your project.

This needs a bit of a balancing act – you don't want to make your deadline so tight that you give up in despair, but you don't want to make it so relaxed that you have no real motivation to work.

Figure out how much you can comfortably write in a week, and use that as a basis for making deadlines – add in a few extra days (or weeks, on a long deadline for a big chunk) in case life gets in the way.

Deadlines don't always help, though. They can be stressful. They may make you rush your work. And if you miss a deadline, you might give up altogether – even though you're still on track for a milestone.

I'd suggest that, to begin with, you give yourself a target for each new milestone. Be realistic and allow some slack – but challenge yourself to stay on track too. If you find that the deadlines aren't helping, then ditch them!

Summing Up

This week, we looked at different ways to break down your work-in-progress, to make it more manageable and to keep you on track.

You won't necessarily want to work at all three levels of milestones (drafts, sections and chapters) in every project – but you can turn back to this lesson any time that you feel overwhelmed, so that you can break a project down step by step.

Assignment

Today's assignment comes in two parts. You can complete them any time before Monday 31st.

1. Look ahead to next Monday (31st). What milestone could you realistically complete by then? It's probably not a whole draft – but you could finish the current chapter of your novel, or write a great blog post, or draft the next section of your ebook.

Tell the On Track group on Twitter, using the hashtag **#ontrack**. (Or just email me, if you prefer – ali@aliventures.com)

And now – go and hit that milestone!

2. Pick a milestone that you want to reach by February 28th (which will be my final email to you – a summing up of the whole course). Where do you want to be with your project by then? Again, tell the group (or me!) – accountability really does help.

And yes, I'll be doing the assignments too! ☺ I'm rewriting my Staff Blogging Course, and aim to write a chapter of new material by next Monday. And by 28th February, I'll have finished the whole rewrite and launched the new version. You'll get to hear about it before the end of On Track...

Coming Up on Thursday 27th

Just like last week, I'll be sending out the Group Update this Thursday. If you've got a writing tip to share, or if you've got a success story to tell us about, just let me know and I'll include it.

The Group Update will also include the Q&A, so send in your questions! I've already received a few for this week, but there's still room for more.

(Questions in the Q&A are anonymous, so feel free to ask whatever you want. Success stories will have your first name attached, unless you ask me to make you anonymous.)

Coming Up on Monday 31st

Your third lesson will be about finding your perfect writing routine. If you struggle to write more than a few hundred words at the moment, this will help you get into a great writing habit.

I'll be explaining five different ways to establish a routine, so you can experiment with what works best for you.