



**The Blogger's Guide to
Effective Writing**

by
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Introduction

If you've been around in the blogosphere for a while, you'll have come across the phrase "content is king". Top bloggers all agree that great content is *crucial*. Many blog owners hire writers just to ensure top-quality content.

Whether you started your brand new blog yesterday, whether you've been blogging for months or years without much success, or whether you're planning a big blog launch, you need your *writing* to be effective. You'd like each post to have a brilliant headline, to hook readers from the very first sentence, and to be a creative, funny, compelling piece of content. And you want to do this consistently, and keep readers coming back for more...

But this is the real world. Your energy and time are limited. You're fitting blogging in around all the other commitments in your life: friends, family, work...

In this ebook, I'm going to give you all my secrets for writing top-quality blog posts without working around the clock. I've written over six hundred blog posts over the past two years: including hundreds of paid pieces for blogs I work for as a staff writer, a couple of hundred articles on my own blogs, and several dozen guest posts.

Strong content is universally valued. It's hard work to create it, but in the long run it generates lots of long-term referral traffic. I'd rather write one article I'm really proud of than 25 smaller posts. It's been my experience that the best articles I write will outperform all the forgettable little posts I've made.

(Steve Pavlina, [How to Build a High Traffic Web Site \(or Blog\)](#), StevePavlina.com)

Content drives the Internet, and using the right words in the right way will determine not only how well your site converts visitors into sales, but also how well you rank in search engines and how many links you get.

(Brian Clark, [Why Content and Copy are the Keys to Successful Online Marketing](#), Copyblogger)

Chapter One: Why Good Writing Matters

In this first chapter, I'm going to explain *why* writing well is an essential part of blogging, and how blog posts differ from other forms of writing – in particular, how they're different from two forms which can look quite similar: magazine articles, and static website content.

If you've been blogging for a while, or if you're very net-savvy, you may find this material quite basic. Feel free to skim your way to Chapter Two!

Regular Content is Essential for a Blog

What's a blog? It's an ongoing collection of regular pieces of writing: posts. You can switch off comments and still have a blog, you can add a forum and still have a blog, you can post fifteen times a day or fifteen times a year ... but every blog *has to have new posts on a regular basis*.

Why do people read blogs? Because they enjoy the writing. Sure, some people come to your blog through a link or search engine (but if the content disappoints, they won't come back). Others might be reading because they're your dad or your best friend. But the vast majority of readers aren't there because they know *you*, but because they're getting something – whether that's enjoyment, information, reassurance or some other benefit.

Great content makes people think. It stands out. It gets them talking. It gets them Twittering. It encourages them to subscribe. It teaches them that you know your stuff and that you provide quality material (pretty crucial if you want them to ever buy a product or service from you). Great content can establish you as an authority in your field – even if you don't have any formal credentials.

Darren Rowse doesn't have a degree in blogging. He wasn't dubbed "ProBlogger" by some university. He didn't get a book deal because he had a bunch of letters after his name, or twenty years experience in the field. His reputation and authority rests solely on the high-quality content available on the ProBlogger blog. He practices what he preaches:

Successful bloggers have to keep their heads around many different aspects of the medium – but at its core is being able to write compelling and engaging content on a consistent basis over time.

(Darren Rowse, [How to Write Great Blog Content](#), ProBlogger)

You Can Write Great Posts

A lot of bloggers get intimidated by the need to write well. I've talked to bloggers who have a background in literature, journalism or publishing ... and they're often daunted by the need to keep producing great content. If you've ever put off writing in favour of checking stats, leaving comments, or participating in forums ... you're not alone!

I'd like to reassure you that you *can* write well and that you *will* find your blogging voice.

Writing well is a learned skill, and blogging is no different. The purpose of this ebook is to help you understand what goes into great content, so that you can produce your own.

I'm not promising it will be *easy*: blogging well takes time and practice, and a willingness to learn from your mistakes. But I am promising that, if you work through this ebook and try out some of the ideas and techniques I suggest, you'll see a *definite* improvement in your blog writing.

You'll learn to:

- Write faster and more confidently
- Structure your posts so that they're easy to write – and easy to read
- Come up with way more ideas than you'll ever need
- Figure out what sort of content your readers want – and give it to them
- Draw readers in – and keep them coming back for more
- Make your writing truly effective

(If you don't? No worries, drop me a line at ali@aliventures.com – you've got a six-month money-back guarantee, please use it if the course doesn't work out for you!)

Unique Features of Blog Posts

Before we delve into the nitty-gritty of what does and doesn't work in a blog post, I want to give you a brief overview of how blogs are *different* from other forms of writing. If you're used to writing for magazines or newspapers, or if the last thing you wrote was a school essay, you're going to have to unlearn some old rules. Here's why.

Blogs are an incredibly new medium, with the earliest blogs appearing in 1994, and major blogging platforms (like LiveJournal and Blogger) created in 1999. You grew up reading books, magazines or comics – not blogs – and so did the majority of your audience.

Plus, blogs are read on-screen, by people whose attention is fractured between different browser tabs, messenger programs, music players and emails. They might be at work, reading in their lunch hour, or sneaking a quick break. They might be at home, flicking through blogs while keeping an eye on the kids or the dinner.

In the table below, I've compared blogs with two similar mediums: **magazines**, which often fulfil a similar role (entertainment or information, with regular content) and **static websites**, which on the surface may look similar to blogs.

	Blogs	Magazines	Static websites
Time from writing to publication	Very short: reactions can appear within minutes of news events	Most content is written several months before publication	Whole site usually written before being put online.
Frequency of new content	Typically between daily and weekly	Typically monthly	Years may go by without an update
How many writers?	Often just one. Some large blogs have several regular writers, and these may be paid freelancers.	Several in-house writers, plus freelancers.	May have one copywriter, but often numerous people have input.
Writer – publisher relationship	Often the same person. On large blogs, writers and publishers (owners/editors) typically have a close relationship.	One editor in charge of magazine. Some writers are in-house, others are outside freelancers.	One person will usually “sign off” content.
Quality expectations	Most readers will be tolerant of typos, spelling/grammar errors.	Readers expect professional quality.	Readers may be tolerant but will expect “polished” feel for professional site.
Tone and style	Often informal, chatty and with personal details	More formal, restricted by house style of particular publication.	Generally very corporate and often quite dry.
Feedback	Via comments or email directly to blogger. May also be via Twitter, Facebook or other social sites.	Letter to magazine or phone call to the editor	Via email or phone
Durability	Older posts can easily be found through search engines, but may not be read by new subscribers.	Often read once then forgotten.	Site stays the same so content doesn't get buried like in blogs.

Purpose of content	(Generally) to be read, though also to encourage particular actions.	To be read, to encourage readers to keep buying.	Mainly for traffic and to push sales – readers aren't generally there to linger and read.
Readers come for...	Entertainment, information, sense of community.	Entertainment or information.	Information or to buy products/services.

Blogs are a dynamic medium: they can be updated instantly, they're often written, edited and published by the same individual, they have new content on a very frequent basis.

Unless you're running a blog purely for search engine traffic (in the hopes of converting some through ads and affiliate links), then your blog posts need to *engage* readers. In this way, blogs are often more similar to magazines – which want subscribers and repeat buyers – rather than static websites, which tends to be either for information or simply to tell people how to purchase products or who to call for a quote. I visit Amazon to buy books (often with a particular book in mind) -- but I visit Copyblogger to learn more about copywriting and blogging.

Text Is Still Crucial Online

In the early years of the internet and blogging, most content was textual: on a slow internet connection, graphics and sounds take time to download (and video is *very* bandwidth-heavy), but text is fairly quick. The very first modem my family had, thirteen years ago, was 28.8kbps, and I used to browse the internet with graphics switched off.

Since then, graphic-heavy content, video streaming, audio content and even fancy Flash interactive environments have all become much more common. The prices of technology have dropped, so that web cams and recording equipment can be bought on a budget. Blogs are evolving: many bloggers, big and small, are posting video and audio content.

However ... text is still crucial to bloggers. Text has a number of attributes which audio and video doesn't – all of which help you:

- **Text can be skimmed and scanned** by readers, letting them know if a blog post is worth their time. If they're not sure whether audio will be useful, they'll often just skip it.

- **Text can be indexed by search engines**, bringing traffic to your site.
- **We can read faster than we can listen**, reading around 300 words per minute on average (meaning it would take 2 minutes to read a typical blog post), and listening at around 150 words per minute (taking 4 minutes to listen to the same post).
- **Text can be easily quoted from**: a blogger can scan through and copy and paste a quote, and link to you. Audio needs to be transcribed.
- **Text can be annotated**, either on screen or when printed out – useful if you want to ask someone to edit or proof your content.
- **It's easy to go backwards and forward in text** – no need for a rewind function, just scroll up or down the page

My view is that text content is *crucial* to blogs. Audio and video content can be useful, but it's not so essential – and many blogs do fine without it. You'll typically get a lot more readers subscribing to text content than to a podcast, though audio subscribers may be more engaged with you and your blog.

What about images? These are often used as attention-grabbers. They can perform several other useful functions like:

- Adding visual appeal to your blog by breaking up chunks of text.
- Creating a brand or tone for your blog
- Explaining concepts that are hard to convey in writing: diagrams, flow charts or screenshots can be very helpful to readers.

Although this ebook is about effective *writing*, I've included information about using images in [Chapter Fourteen](#).

Chapter Two: Foundations of Effectiveness

Before you write the first word of a blog post – or of anything else for that matter – you need to figure out *why* you're writing it.

Some internet marketers write content purely and simply to draw search engine traffic. I'm no fan of that (not just because it adds to the sea of dross out there on the net: speed-writing a load of low-quality articles isn't fun for anyone). So I'll be assuming here that your aims include writing great, thought-provoking, helpful posts for your readers.

Why You're Blogging

You could write a wickedly hilarious post that gets onto the front page of Digg ... but if the point of your blog is to get people to buy cute baby outfits from you, that's not going to do much good.

Before you get to the content-writing stage, have a think about *why* you're blogging. I've suggested a few possible answers – yours might be completely different. And it's fine to have more than one answer.

I blog...

- To build up my profile in my field
- To get feedback and encouragement on my writing
- To sell my own products
- To sell other people's products
- To generate income from advertising and other indirect methods
- To encourage customers to keep coming back to my site
- To showcase my writing
- To establish myself as an authority in a particular niche
- To change people's lives for the better
- To create something meaningful – my blog
- To connect with others who share my hobby or interest

Your Message

Your message might be expressed as your tagline or as a mission statement for your blog. What are you trying to tell people? **How would you sum up your blog in a sentence?**

Popular messages tell readers (in more concrete terms):

- You can change your life – here’s how
- You can make more money – here’s how
- You can be part of this community
- You can learn about something that interests you here
- You can be entertained here

The content you write for your blog is the key way in which you shape your blog according to your particular aims. You need to be clear about the purpose and message of your blog so that you can figure out who your readers are.

Your “About” Page

The place on your blog where it’s most crucial to get your aims and audience clear is your *About* page. Many first time readers will glance through a post or two, then click straight onto *About* to figure out what the point of the blog is – and who you are.

About pages are notoriously difficult to write: even if you find producing blog posts easy, it can be very difficult to sum up your blog, and yourself, in a few short paragraphs.

Some good points to keep in mind are:

- **Make it clear what your blog covers.** Whether it’s a broad niche (“personal development”) or a narrow one (“iPhone software for accountants”), sum it up as clearly as possible.
- **Avoid using descriptions like “Joe’s ramblings about everything under the sun”.** Unless you’re a *very* good writer, or a celebrity, readers don’t want to read a blog where you’ll be discussing your latest grocery-shopping trip.
- **Tell the reader about the benefits of your blog** for them. Words like “tips”, “how to”, “problem-solving”, “encouraging” and “inspirational” all work well here.
- **Include a photo of yourself.** Ideally, try to make the photo match your style and theme – if you’re a snarky humour blogger, you’ll want something a little more zany than a professional web-designer blogger.

- **If you have qualifications related to your blogging topic, include these.** How much prominence you give to them should depend on how much they'll mean to your typical/ideal reader. Including your entire resume is overkill – but mentioning a relevant degree, your professional certification or your years in the field lets readers feel more confident that you know what you're talking about.
- **Include a few well-chosen personal details.** Don't use this as an excuse to ramble. And don't include stuff that's boring and generic ("I like to read" or "I enjoy watching television"). Something a little incongruous can work well, though approach this with caution: confessing to your weekly binge-drinking sessions on your life coaching blog might not win you many new clients.

Your Aim For Each Post

Before you start writing a post, be clear what you want the post to *do* (bring traffic? Get comments?) and what you want to *say* within the post. Although post length and style will vary from blog to blog, it's generally best to base each post around a single idea. If you want to discuss several different topics in one post, find a thread that unites them: perhaps a running metaphor, or the fact that they are all seasonal.

You may find that you clarify your ideas and discover the "aim" of your post during the writing process. That's fine – but go back and revise with an editor's eye, cutting out anything which doesn't fit with the key point of that post (you can always use it in a future post).

As well as thinking about *your* aims, you need to think about what your *reader* wants when they read your blog posts.

Your Ideal Reader

Your ideal reader will be interested in the topics you write on. Magazines create profiles of their "typical reader" or "ideal reader" – it costs nothing for you to do the same.

You might want to think about your ideal reader's:

- Age, gender and background
- Hobbies and interests
- Income level
- Family life
- Political and religious views
- Level of internet confidence

All of these will have a huge influence on your blog content: they'll determine the topics you choose to write about, the way in which you write, the products which you review, recommend or sell, how personal you are, and what metaphors or contemporary culture tie-ins you use.

Here's a quick example: if you're blogging about traditional-but-trendy knitting patterns and your ideal reader is a grandma on a moderate pension, you'll be using a very different style to someone who's writing about cutting-edge knitting patterns for 25-year-old single fashionistas.

I don't actually know any knitting bloggers – sorry – but I do know that Naomi Dunford probably isn't writing for my grandma:

I, for example, just gleefully paid nearly \$30 for 50 yards of eco-friendly yarn, and I'm on my way back to buy a shitload more.

(Naomi Dunford, [Blood in the Streets: Home Business Economics in Troubled Times](#), IttyBiz)

Call to Action

If you've read any marketing blogs, you'll probably have come across the concept of a "call to action".

A call to action is what you ask your readers to do. That might be "leave a comment" or "buy my ebook" or "pass this post on to a friend".

This shouldn't come out of the blue, tagged onto the end of your post: it should be in your mind from the very start of the writing process, before you start putting words on the screen.

Here are some typical reactions you might want from readers:

- Subscribe to my blog
- Subscribe to my newsletter
- Buy my product
- Click on my advert
- Read other posts and stay on my blog longer
- Follow me on Twitter

- Leave a comment
- Bookmark my post
- Vote for my post in StumbleUpon, Digg or Reddit
- Donate money to a charitable cause
- Donate money to support my blog
- Join my membership course
- Join my forum
- Vote in my poll
- Email me
- Hire me

When you plan your post, decide what action you're prompting readers towards. For example, if you want them to stick around and leave a comment, it's not a good idea to put in a lot of links mid-post that direct them away to other sites. You might also want to ask direct questions throughout the post, or to provide talking points.

You won't necessarily have the *same* aim in mind for each post – and it's often a good idea not to carry on banging the same drum. Vary the purpose of your posts, and offer different calls to action in different posts. Think strategically: for example, you might want to post something short and open-ended on a Monday to encourage comments and engagement – then follow up with a longer post on Wednesdays to push for subscriptions to your blog.

Chapter Three: Coming Up With Ideas

Before you write a blog post, you need an *idea*.

Famous authors are often asked “where do you get your ideas?” Many find this a baffling question: ideas are plentiful and easy to come by. For a lot of writers, having too *many* ideas is the problem! A few great ideas can sustain a whole book.

But bloggers need new ideas for every post. And however much you love your topic, you’ll hit a point where you simply feel uninspired and you can’t think of anything new to say.

Why Good Ideas Matter

From the reader’s point of view, good ideas matter because they make good posts! Whether it’s a unique angle, an unusual experience, or some advice that goes above and beyond common sense, your post stands out as memorable.

Good ideas also make your life easier as a writer. Starting off a post with a weak or ill-thought-out idea doesn’t do you any favours. You’ll often run out of steam after a few paragraphs, you may not feel very confident or proud of what you’ve come up with ... and getting it written in the first place is an exercise in bloody-minded willpower.

If you find yourself feeling like this about a post, it’s worth pausing and taking stock. Is your idea really worth writing about?

A good idea can almost write itself. It might be a great metaphor, a story from your own experience that can be applied to your blog, or even an idea for an unusual post structure. It might be a piece of advice that you *know* will help your reader. Whatever it is, that idea will help you to write easily and enthusiastically.

Sure-Fire Ways to Generate Ideas

Whatever stage your blog’s at, these are methods that’ll bring up more ideas than you can write:

Make a List

This is one of my favourites because it's so simple – and so effective. I recommended this for the pre-launch stage of a blog, but you can do it at any point, and it can be especially effective when you think you've run out of things to blog about.

Get a piece of paper or open up a blank document. Start writing ideas for blog posts. Don't worry about whether the ideas are "good" or "boring" or "too wacky" – just get them down. You don't need to craft the perfect title for each post at this stage: if a fantastic title comes to you, great (you can figure out the content that goes with it later!) but it's fine to just jot down the main idea.

I do this all the time – especially for my freelance work. It's a lot easier to come up with a bunch of ideas all at once and pull one out when I want to write a piece, rather than sitting and staring at a blank screen. Here's part of my notebook, with a list of post ideas for Pick the Brain (I italicise posts as I write them):

1. Maximising Your Productivity During the Day
2. Where's All Your Time Going?
3. Have You Abdicated Control of Your Life?
4. Where Are You Waiting For Permission?
5. Ten Ways to Wake Up Ready to Rock
6. Five Games That Help You Get More Done (And Have Fun Doing It)
7. *Is Prioritisation Failing You?*
8. Creating Systems to Make Routine Tasks Easy and Hassle-Free
9. *Why "Free" Costs You a Lot More Than You Think*
10. *Do You Have Dozens of Half-Finished Projects? Here's What to Do*

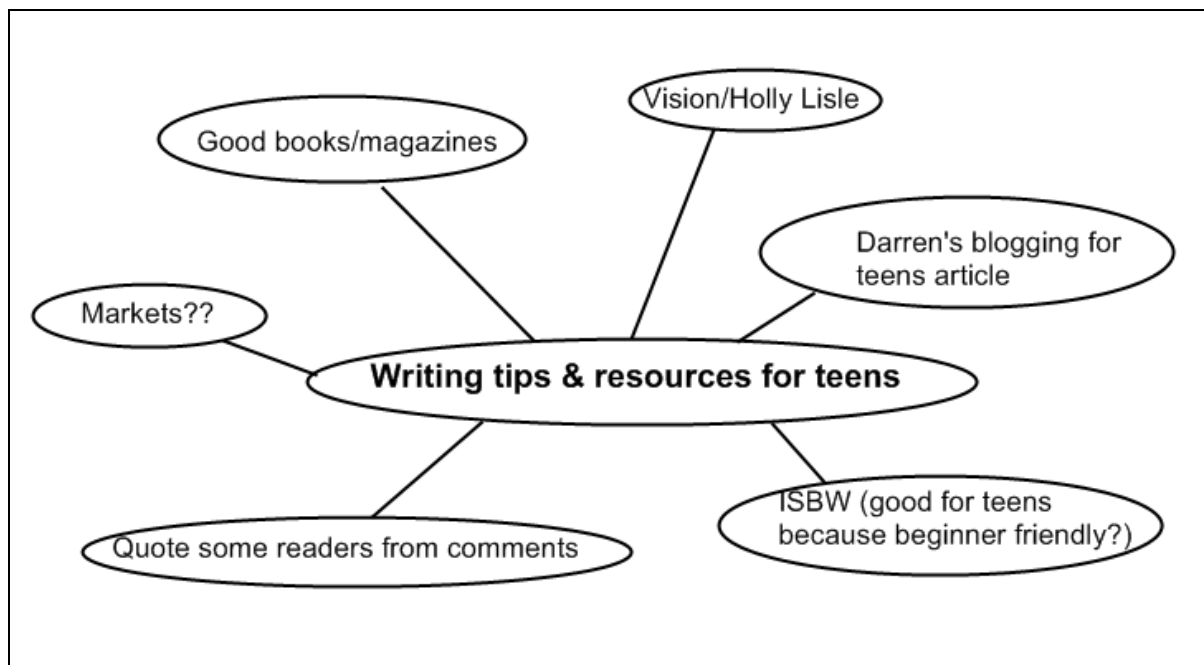
I won't necessarily write all of those posts (I've no idea *what* games might be going in item 6, for instance!) – but that's not the point of the list. Even if I only get one good idea out of every ten I write down, it's worth doing.

Mindmap

Lists work well for discrete ideas – but they're not an easy way to see connections between ideas, or to riff off one idea to get others. For this, you want a mindmap. Pick a starting point for the centre – something like:

- An existing post which was popular (*how can you build on this?*)
- One of your blog's categories (*what "core" posts would fit in?*)
- A word or phrase to do with your blog (*what resonances does this have?*)

I won't waste your time telling you how to make a mindmap; you've probably used them before (if not, just Google and you'll learn more than you ever needed to about the concept). Here's an example of one of mine:



This led to the Daily Writing Tips post: [Writing Resources for Teenagers](#). As you can see from that post, I didn't use everything from the mindmap in it, and I added some other ideas – the mindmap is just a starting point.

Riff on a Theme

When you read a blog post that makes you stop and think, consider how you could respond – not just with a “great post!” comment, but with a piece on your own blog. This doesn't have to mean writing a post on the exact same topic: just go with a particular thought that was sparked for you, or find a few notes to riff on.

Is there a potential side-avenue of thought that the other blogger didn't explore ... but which you could?

Do you disagree with them? Can you write a post that explains why?

Did they make a throwaway comment which you want to expand and take further?

You can do this with your own posts, if you want. Find an old post, perhaps one you loved writing or one which went down unexpectedly well with your readers, and find a new angle.

Here's an example. One of my posts on Aliventures was a response to what seemed to me like a prevailing attitude within the personal development niche: the idea that, once you find your passion, your work will be fun and effortless. I wrote [What to Do When Your Adventure Feels Like a Long Hard Slog](#), reassuring readers that we all have times when even things we love seem hard. In the piece, I directly quoted a couple of the bloggers who I was disagreeing with:

You might end up reading things like these two quotes and thinking "what the heck is wrong with me? Why aren't I like that?"

She is completely on fire with passion, and we're savoring every delicious minute of this time in our lives. Often when I see her now, she will jump up and say, "I am so excited. I am so *excited!*"

([Steve Pavlina Podcast #014 – Embracing Your Passion](#), StevePavlina.com)

I'm continuously motivated to drive onward and forward. I'm living every moment in joy and I can't wait to see what's next. And the reason why that's the case is because I'm living my passion. I'm doing what I love – to help others be their best self and live their best life. While I'm busy every day writing at my blog, doing my coaching and conducting speeches, it's a kind of busyness which I relish in. In fact, I simply can't get enough of it – I just want to do more and more, because I love all of this so much!

(Celestine Chua, [How to be Endlessly Motivated](#), Motivate Thyself)


I'm passionate about writing, but I don't always sit down to write feeling like I "can't get enough of it". Sometimes I sit down feeling "this is bloody hard work" or "I'm tired" or "I wonder what's new on Twitter."

Read Comments

A lot of my best post ideas have come from readers' comments. I deliberately asked for questions, problems and thoughts as part of a mini-competition, early on with Aliventures – and I got dozens of great ideas to write on. I asked people to:


Leave a comment on this post, *telling me what's stopping you from getting more from life*. Give me a question to answer, a topic you'd like me to write on, a problem you want me to offer a solution to. **You need to give me a question or a suggestion** – if you leave a comment just saying "me too", it won't count in the competition.

I got 30 comments, with loads of great questions, many of which I used as the basis of posts:

Colin August 17, 2009 at 1:57 pm 

I've got a question! When my business is ticking along reasonably nicely – just like right now, I've got enough clients to be comfortable – I find it very hard to convince myself to spend time on branching out into other areas. Any advice on how to motivate yourself when you're not terrified you're going to starve?

... led to [Staying Motivated to Develop When Business is Going Well](#)

Wilma Ham August 19, 2009 at 2:36 am 

Hi Ali

Thank you for the e-book.

My question is, how do you know if you have done enough?

When I was employed it was easy, at least I had the weekend off. Now I am working for myself I do find it hard to stop because who is telling me when enough is enough?

It is a bit like when you start renovating the house, the more you do the more you see what else needs doing.

...led to [Why You'll Never Be Finished \(And How to Figure Out When You've Done Enough\)](#)

When you're stuck for inspiration, go back to the comments on an older post, and see what people are asking for. If your blog is new or yet-to-be-launched, find another blog in your niche and read through some of the comments there.

Even if a comment doesn't *spell out* an idea for you, it can often get you thinking.

Forums

Like comments, forums are a rich source of inspiration *from other people*. Find a large forum that covers the same topics at your blog, and look for:

- Questions people are asking (you'll often only need to read the post title)
- Common problems that people have – what seems to crop up again and again?
- Posts which are “sticky” or popular

Tip: If you're a member of a forum and you write posts based on forum questions or problems, leave a message on the forum to let people know that you've written something on your blog in response, with a link to your blog post.

Sneaky Ways of Generating Ideas

Sometimes, you sit and stare at your sheet for an idea list or a mindmap, and nothing comes. You go through comments and forums, and you've either covered everything before, or it's way off-topic for your blog. This is when you need to get sneaky with your idea generation. Here are some of my favourite methods:

The Titles Game

There's no copyright on titles or headlines, so don't be afraid to "borrow" great ones and use them as a model for your own post titles. (I like to use Copyblogger – see right for a quick list of titles there.)

This is a great way to come up with titles that work – it's also a method of finding ideas.

Find a popular blog – or use the front page of Digg, or a glossy magazine – to get a list of titles. It's best if these are from *different* niches than your own blog.

Use each title as a template. For example:

5 Steps to Going Viral on Twitter

could become:

5 Steps to Going Green in the Office

Why No-One Links to Your Best Posts (And What to Do About It)

could become:

Why No-One Laughs at Your Funniest Jokes (And What to Do About It)

Five Grammatical Errors That Make You Look Dumb

could become:

Five Blogging Mistakes That Make You Look Dumb

popular articles

[The First Rule of Copyblogger](#) 102

[10 Secrets to More Magnetic Copy](#) 100

[The Eminem Guide to Becoming a Writing and Marketing Machine](#) 128

[The 7 Harsh Realities of Social Media Marketing](#) 140

[The 7 Deadly Sins of Blogging](#) 202

[Blogging is Dead \(Again\)](#) 132

[Is Commenting on Blogs a Smart Traffic Strategy?](#) 264

[The #1 Conversion Killer in Your Copy \(And How to Beat It\)](#) 170

[How Twitter Makes You A Better Writer](#) 239

[Is Your Tribe Holding You Down?](#) 183

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Free Writing / Automatic Writing

If you've spent any time in the creative writing world, you might have heard of the technique of "free writing" or "automatic writing". You simply take a blank piece of paper or blank screen, set a timer, and **write about whatever comes into your head until the time's up**. You don't stop, self-censor or delete, just keep the stream-of-consciousness going.

I've found this a useful technique when warming up into a writing session, though for me, it's not the best way to generate ideas. Give it a try, though; it works really well for some people. If you're finding it very hard to put words down without perfecting each sentence, or if you feel like you've got blogger's block, this is a great way to get through that barrier.

Using Twitter

Like the headline game, this is a way to relax into your blogging – and to turn Twitter into a productive use of your time (well, maybe!) The aim here is grab some random inputs and see what your mind does with them.

You could:

- **Pick one of the "trending topics" to write about.** Don't worry about what it means, if it's something obscure – give it a twist that's meaningful to *you*.
- **Take the most recent tweet on the screen,** and find something in that which could lead to a blog post. Generally, the "*harder*" you think this will be, the better the results!
- If you're really feeling apathetic, **ask your Twitter followers "what should I blog about today?"** And then pick *two* of the answers and combine them.

Chapter Four: Writing at Different Stages

I'm going to split some typical blogging issues – and my suggestions – into the different stages in the lifetime of your blog, because coming up with great ideas for a brand new blog isn't the same as coming up with great ideas for a blog that's been going for several years. Plus, you need ways to leverage what you've already written about.

Ideas for a New Blog (first 3 months)

When you're starting up a new blog, you often have *lots* of ideas ... you're just stuck on which to write about first. You might worry about whether you've got enough ideas to sustain this blog over the long haul. You may have problems getting broad ideas down into topics that will "fit" into a blog-post sized piece of writing.

Before launching a new blog, I recommend that you write a few posts in advance – at least five is a good number. This lets you get a feel for whether you do enjoy writing on this topic, and it ensures you have content ready to post during your launch.

Having Enough Ideas

To reassure yourself that you *do* have enough ideas in you for future posts, take a blank document or sheet of paper, and list 50 – 100 separate post ideas. Don't judge or assess your ideas, just write them all down! Sometimes a weak-looking idea can spark off further thoughts.

If you find yourself really struggling at this stage, your blog's niche may be narrow. Don't be too put off if you're finding this exercise hard, though because:

- It's easier to generate new ideas once you have readers (see below!)
- You'll continue to learn more about your topic, and you can share what you learned on your blog

Knowing What to Write First

Cover several of the main themes or categories of your blog with the initial posts: this means that readers get a good cross-section of what you'll be posting about.

Of course, in the first week, your blog is unlikely to have many readers. Some bloggers feel reluctant to put forward their *best* ideas because of this – after all, wouldn't it be better to save those ideas until the blog's more established?

This is a mistake: if new readers come to your blog and the content seems fairly so-so, they're unlikely to come back. Having some *really good* initial posts creates a great impression – plus, you can link back to those posts in future ones, highlighting them to readers who weren't around when you started the blog.

Some bloggers recommend launching your blog with a series of “cornerstone content” or “pillar content” already in place – very in-depth, well written posts which form a core of great writing. My advice here: if you've got the time to do this, do! But don't use this as an excuse to put off launching your blog: it's better to get something out there than to spend months perfecting posts which no-one will ever see.

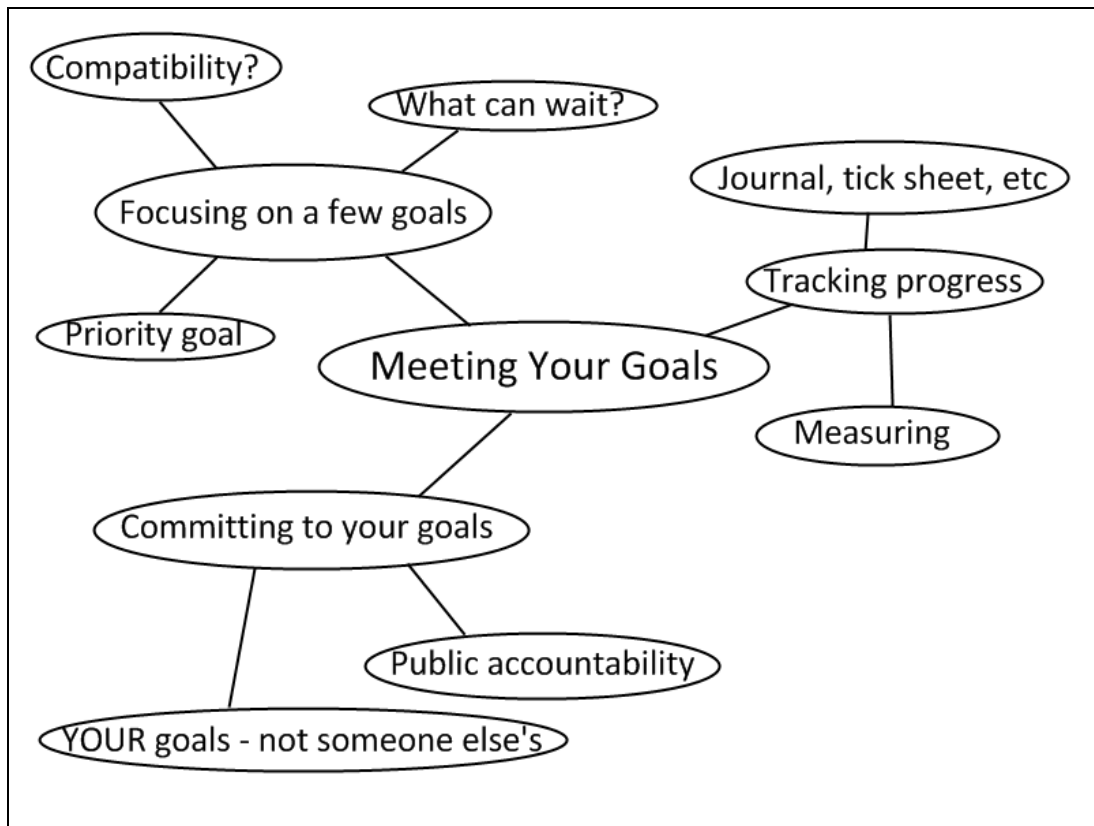
Getting Post-Length Ideas

Another common problem is that initial ideas for a blog can be quite high-level. They're the sort of ideas you'd come up with for book chapters, if your blog was a book. When I started Aliventures, I was planning for posts to be around 1,000 words long. Most have ended up at 1,500 – 2,000 words, and I found myself frequently cutting down my plan whilst writing a post.

When you have an idea for your blog, see if it can be broken down further. Some ideas are single posts, others work as series (see [Chapter Twelve](#) for more on this). Write a number of sub-points for your idea. Would these work as stand-alone posts?

Here's an example of this thought process in work on my own blog Aliventures. I wanted to write about meeting goals – but as you can see from the mindmap over the page, I quickly realised I had far too much material for one post.

Rather than writing one post with three main topics (focusing, committing and tracking), I wrote a series of three posts – starting with: [Meeting Your Goals #1: Getting Focused](#).



Don't worry too much about whether your initial ideas will "fit" into posts. Start working on one of them, and see how much space you need to explore what you want to say. If it ends up too long, split the post into two parts.

Ideas for an Established Blog (3 months – 2 years)

Once your blog's been going for a few months, you'll probably have plenty of new ideas, and you'll have a better sense of which ideas "work" on your blog – and which don't. You also have *readers* ... which brings up some new possibilities, and some new concerns

As bloggers, we don't *just* want to write about the things which happen to be of interest and concern to us – we also want to reach and help readers. Once you've got a few hundred readers, you might be wondering where they've all come from, and what it is they like about your blog.

Ask Your Readers What They Want

Don't be afraid to ask readers for feedback. If you need to make a decision about a big piece of content – such as a series, a report or ebook – then ask your readers what they'd prefer to see. You could run a simple one-question poll, invite comments, or even produce a survey.

(The easier you make it for people to respond, the more responses you'll get!)

For example, when considering whether or not to revive a "book club" style of posts that he'd been doing in the past, Trent simply asked The Simple Dollar's readers what they thought. And he got plenty of feedback:

Given the very positive (overall) comment, email, and Twitter response to my idea of bringing back the "book club" idea for a handful of books, along with many similar suggestions for it, I'm going to follow the crowd with most of those suggestions. Here's how I'm going to try it.

(Trent Hamm, [The Simple Dollar Weekly Roundup: Book Club Edition](#), The Simple Dollar)

Look At Your Comments and Popular Posts

You won't always want to ask readers directly, so another good way to see what resonates with your audience is to **look at which posts get comments – and what those comments say**. Do readers respond surprisingly well when you get a little personal in your posts? When you use humour? When you focus your post on taking action?

You could also look at which posts have been bookmarked or stumbled, though these statistics may be more valuable once your blog's better established.

Reply to Reader's Emails – And Ask For Ideas

One of the best moments in any blogger's day is when a reader emails to say how much they enjoyed a post, and how your blog is helping them. I usually get an email or two each week from readers of Dumb Little Man (which has a huge audience), sharing their appreciation.

When I reply, I always thank them and say something like "If there's anything you'd like me to write about on Dumb Little Man, just let me know." Some people don't email back, but others will reply with great ideas that I'd never have thought of myself.

It's easy to get blinkered by our own situation, our own strengths, and our own interests. Sometimes, a reader's question can open up a new avenue of ideas: you may find that something which seems easy or second-nature to you is much more difficult for many of your audience.

Think Like a Beginner

When you've been running your blog for a while, especially if you started out with a good bit of expertise, it's easy to forget what it's like to be a beginner. Although not all blogs are aimed at beginners, most will benefit from having some basic posts that help those who are newly interested in your topic to get started. (These sorts of posts typically get good Google traffic, for instance.)

Think back to when you started out in your chosen field, career, hobby or niche. What were you anxious about? What didn't you understand? What basic questions did you have?

If you find that your skill comes naturally to you – if you’ve *always* been able to paint or write music or understand computer code – then try sitting down with a complete beginner who wants to learn, and see where they get stuck.

Unlike many art educators who believe that ability to draw well is dependent on inborn talent, I expected that all of the students would learn to draw. I was astonished by how difficult they found drawing, no matter how hard I tried to teach them and they tried to learn.

(Betty Edwards, *The New Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain*, page xi)

If you’re a beginner (or still near the beginner stage) at the moment, try jotting down the questions, worries and moments of confusion which come up. These could be invaluable a year or two down the line, when you’ve forgotten what it was like to be starting out!

Don’t be afraid to mix things up a little, either. When your blog feels securely established, it can be very tempting to stick to what you’re already doing – but it’s easy to get stuck in a rut and to keep producing posts of a particular type. Give yourself room for experimentation: readers usually respond well to something a little different.

Ideas for a Long-Running Blog (2 years +)

It's what we all want as bloggers: a successful blog that we can continue writing for years. But when your idea well is running dry, that blog can start to resemble the Ancient Mariner's albatross.

Should You Quit?

A *long-running* blog might not have been going for several years: if you're in a narrow or quite straightforward niche, you might reach this stage after six months or a year. I found this with my blog *The Office Diet*: I simply ran out of things to say about healthy eating for office workers.

Quitting is a legitimate, and sometimes very sensible, choice. That's what I did with *The Office Diet*: I'd built up a good body of content, and the site got plenty of search engine traffic and some advertising revenue, so I changed the front page to a static one and stopped writing new posts.

But if you still want to maintain the blog – perhaps if you've built up a big name for yourself, or if you simply still love the topic – there's no need to quit. You can dig deep and generate more ideas (see the previous chapter for plenty of ways that will work). You can also tackle one of the most frustrating problems that long-running bloggers see:

Readers Keep Asking About Topics You've Already Covered

As your blog gets bigger, you'll typically find that new readers come faster and faster: once, you got two or three new subscribers a day, now it's twenty or thirty (or, in the case of some blogs, hundreds).

New readers may have a look at your most popular posts and your about page, but they're not going to read your entire archives. There are several ways to help point newer readers towards the great content you've already produced, including:

- Make sure you glance through your own archives and link to a few of your own posts within each new post you write
- At the end of a new post, point readers towards previous posts for “further reading”
- Have a list of “Popular Posts” or “Best Of...” in your sidebar

- Use a Wordpress plugin such as [Yet Another Related Posts Plugin](#)
- Have a weekly post that introduces the blog and points new readers to key content – Trent Hamm does this with weekly posts called “The Simple Dollar Time Machine” ([see an example here](#)).
- Create a page that lists a number of your posts on a specific topic: Darren Rowse does this with his [Blogging for Beginners page](#).

You can also polish up an old post and republish it: your thinking about the topic will have moved on, and you’ll have a more natural writing style too. You could even republish old posts without changing them, though keep an eye on the reactions from old-time readers on this.



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