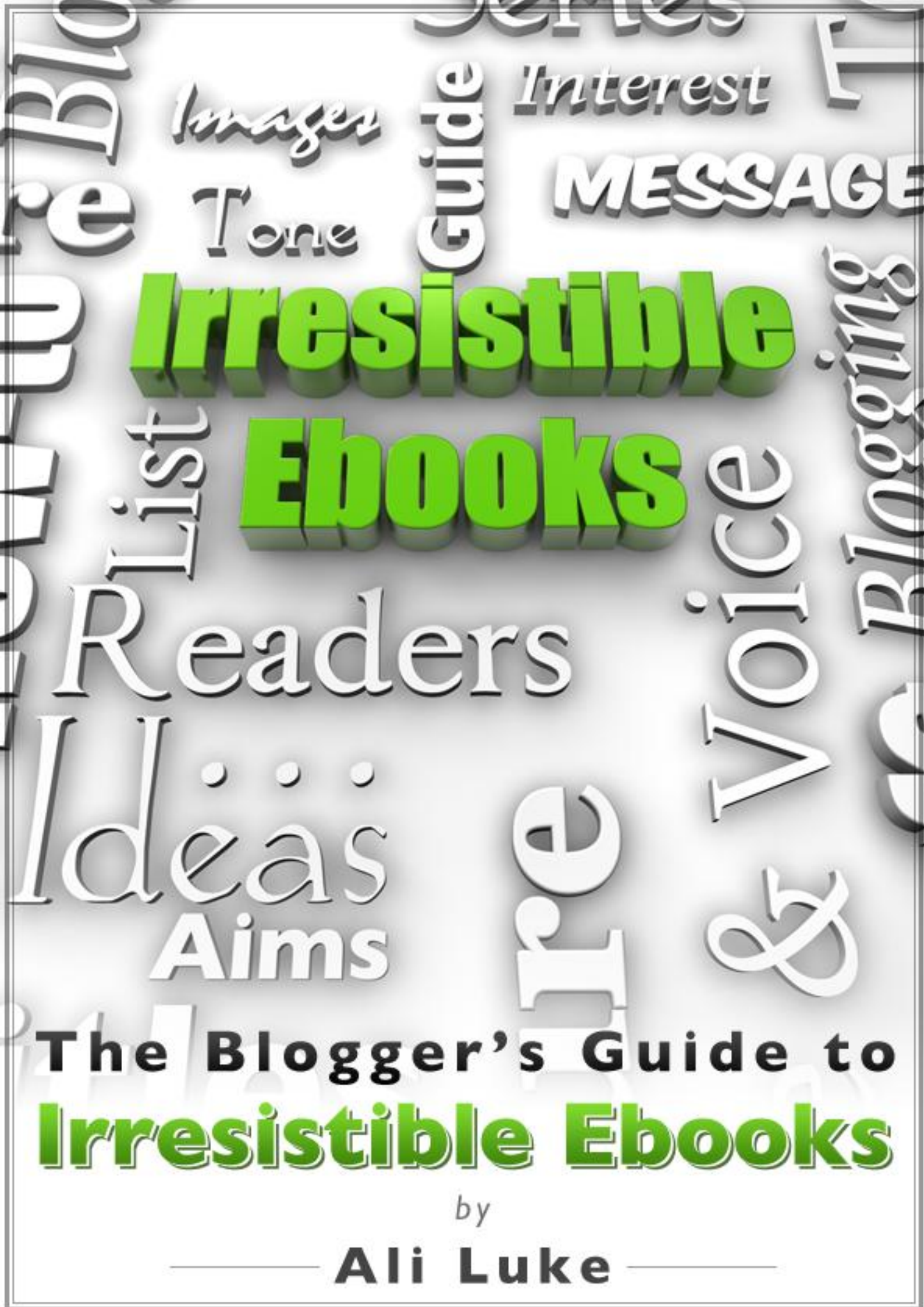

The Blogger's Guide to Irresistible Ebooks

by

Ali Luke

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Huge thanks to...

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Introduction

Welcome to *The Blogger's Guide to Irresistible Ebooks*.

I'll be taking you through the whole process of creating your own ebook – one that your audience won't be able to resist buying. We'll start off with a few basics, then we'll move into the four key stages of the ebook journey:

- Planning
- Writing
- Polishing (editing and designing)
- Selling

I'm going to assume that you've had little or no experience with writing ebooks so far. Perhaps it's something you've been meaning to do for ages ... or maybe you started on an ebook six months ago but never finished it.

Ebooks come in all shapes and sizes. In my corner of the blogosphere, ebooks are either:

- Books published as PDFs. (Usually specialist non-fiction, may cost up to $97 or even more.)
- Books published for the Kindle, Nook, etc. (Usually fiction or popular non-fiction, usually not costing more than $9.99.)

In the rest of this guide, you can take "ebook" to mean the first type – specialist publications for a niche market.

One key advantage to PDF ebooks is that it's incredibly easy to include full-colour graphics, and to ensure that they'll look right on your reader's screen. Plus, almost every computer can view PDF files, whereas many people don't yet have a Kindle, Nook, iPad or other e-reader.

If you've got no idea how to create a PDF, don't worry: it's very straight forward, and we'll be covering it in Chapter Sixteen.

Free Versus Paid-for Ebooks

The easiest way to split up ebooks is to divide them into *free* and *paid-for*.

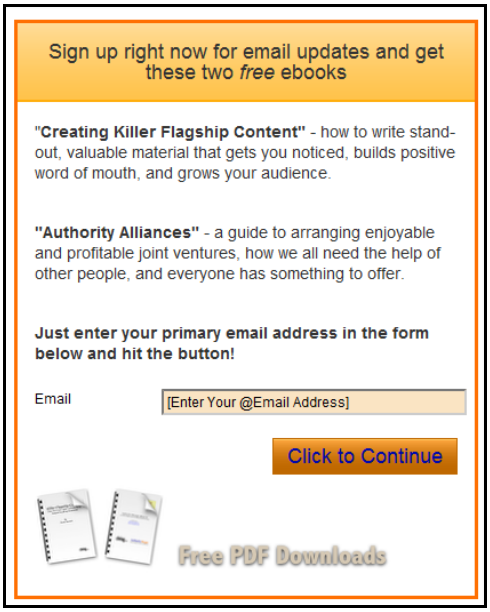
Free ebooks are typically quite short, around 2,000 – 5,000 words.

Paid-for ebooks vary in length, but most will be at least 10,000 words and probably not more than 40,000 words.

Free ebooks are promotional tools. They might be used:

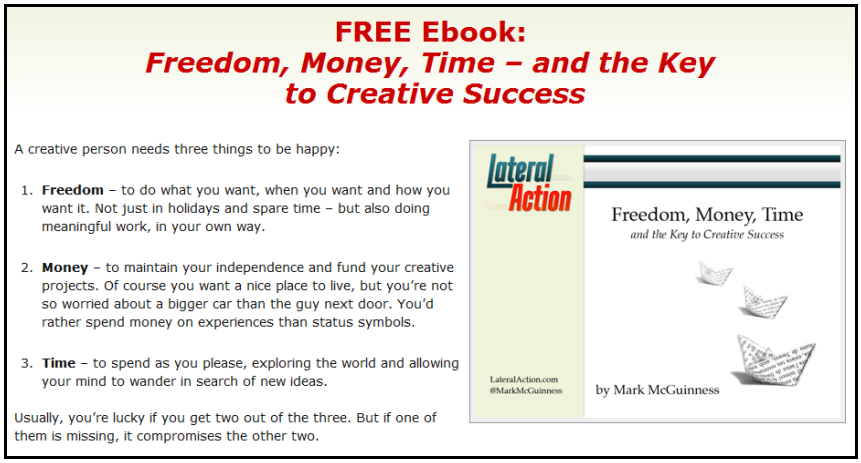
- To encourage sign-ups to an email list
- To showcase the author's work and help promote paid-for ebooks
- As a piece for the author's portfolio
- As a "bonus" when included with another product, to help provide great value

For instance, Chris Garrett has a prominent free ebook offer on his site to encourage readers to sign up for his newsletter:



(From chrisg.com)

And Mark McGuinness from Lateral Action has a free ebook that doesn't even require a sign-up – he encourages readers to share it with their friends:



(From [Lateral Action: Free Ebook])

Paid ebooks can also be promotional – especially if they're cheap. They can be used:

- To make money immediately, usually with a strong launch
- To introduce customers to your work (people may go on to buy something more expensive from you)
- As a longer-term income source, with slow but steady sales
- As an impressive, value-adding bonus when included with another product

Which Type of Ebook Should You Write?

If this is your first ebook, create a *free* one, or a cheap paid-for ebook (around the $10-$15 mark). This will help you get a sense of what your audience wants – and if your ebook isn't quite as perfect as you'd like, it's not a big deal.

If you've already written one or two free or cheap ebooks, try tackling something longer. I know a full-blown 20,000+ word ebook can look pretty daunting – but we're going to take things step-by-step.

Most of my advice will apply to both paid and free ebooks; the main difference is that, for a free ebook, each stage will be faster.

Ready to get started?

Part One: Planning Your Ebook

In the first part of this ebook, we'll be looking at *ideas* and high-level *planning.*

It's crucial to have the right concept for your ebook – otherwise it simply won't sell. You need to write something that delivers what your readers want, rather than what you *think* they want...

I'll explain what works and what doesn't, and I'll share some of my ebook flops as well as my successes, so that you don't have to make the same mistakes as me...

Chapter One: Find Out Exacty What Your Readers Want to Buy

You might have an idea for an ebook already – something that would be a definitive, much-needed publication in your particular niche. You're certain it would be useful to your blog readers ... so you just *know* it's worth writing.

For now, I'm going to ask you to **put that idea on hold**. Don't get too excited about it or too attached to it ... because it might not be what your audience wants.

My Big Ebook Flop

When I started blogging on Aliventures, I was writing about personal development topics. I decided that I wanted to write an ebook that would help readers with every aspect of their lives – personal finance, health, relationships, work, and so on. I called it *Regain Your Balance*, I got a great cover designed, and I launched it.

Sales were disappointing, to say the least. Why? Because it wasn't what my audience wanted. In retrospect:

- It was too general a topic for a specialist ebook. (I'm considering re-releasing it for the Kindle.)
- There wasn't one clear benefit to the reader. "Getting your life sorted" is an overwhelming task – an ebook on *one* aspect of this would have worked better.
- I didn't *know* what my audience wanted. I made assumptions based on what I thought they needed.

Now, there's nothing wrong with writing an ebook simply because you want to write it ... but **if you're hoping your ebook will win you fame or fortune, then you need to write something that your audience wants to read.**

What Do Your Readers Want?

It's easy to get some initial ideas about what your readers would like you to write. You can:

- Ask them to leave a comment
- Go through existing comments and emails
- Draw on one-to-one interactions
- Examine popular blog posts

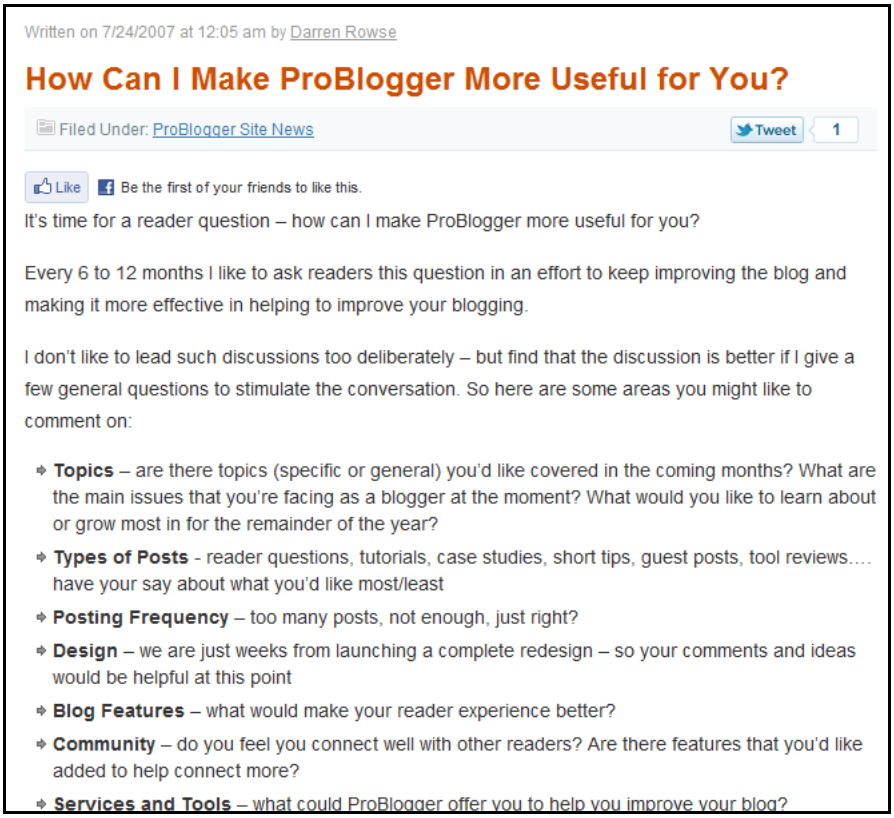
If you don't have many readers yet, you can also use other sites to help you:

- Ask forum members
- Look at Yahoo Answers

We'll be going through all these methods in this chapter. (In the next chapter, we'll take a look at a very effective way to get ideas and feedback from your readers: running a survey.)

Ask Them to Leave a Comment

This is useful any time you're looking for ideas – not just for ebook topics, but for blog posts. You can put a note at the end of a post, or even make it the topic of a whole post.



Written on 7/24/2007 at 12:05 am by Darren Rowse

How Can I Make ProBlogger More Useful for You?

Filed Under: ProBlogger Site News

Tweet 1

Like Be the first of your friends to like this.

It's time for a reader question – how can I make ProBlogger more useful for you?

Every 6 to 12 months I like to ask readers this question in an effort to keep improving the blog and making it more effective in helping to improve your blogging.

I don't like to lead such discussions too deliberately – but find that the discussion is better if I give a few general questions to stimulate the conversation. So here are some areas you might like to comment on:

- **Topics** – are there topics (specific or general) you'd like covered in the coming months? What are the main issues that you're facing as a blogger at the moment? What would you like to learn about or grow most in for the remainder of the year?
- **Types of Posts** - reader questions, tutorials, case studies, short tips, guest posts, tool reviews.... have your say about what you'd like most/least
- **Posting Frequency** – too many posts, not enough, just right?
- **Design** – we are just weeks from launching a complete redesign – so your comments and ideas would be helpful at this point
- **Blog Features** – what would make your reader experience better?
- **Community** – do you feel you connect well with other readers? Are there features that you'd like added to help connect more?
- **Services and Tools** – what could ProBlogger offer you to help you improve your blog?

(From ProBlogger, way back in 2007 – How Can I Make ProBlogger More Useful for You?)

You can also try using Facebook or Twitter:

The Simple Dollar

What single money question would you like to see a detailed post on from The Simple Dollar? I'm looking for questions short enough to fit into a Facebook comment (in other words, no really long personal stories).

31 May at 19:36

6 people like this.

View all 56 comments

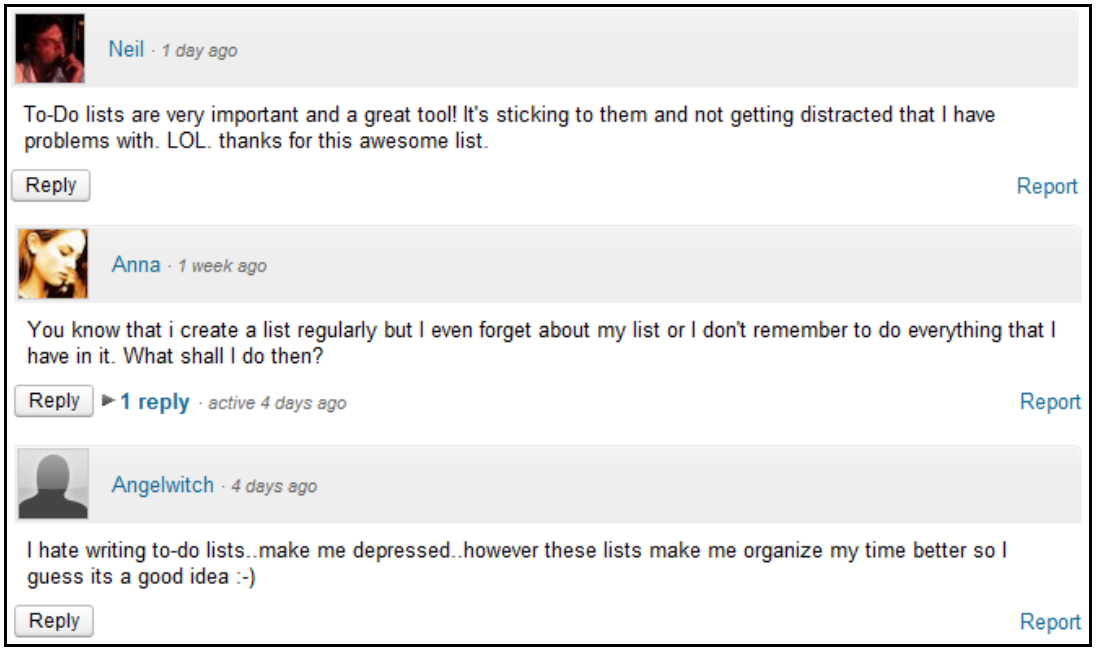
(From The Simple Dollar's page on Facebook)

Go Through Existing Comments / Emails

Your comments are a goldmine of information. What posts seem to resonate with readers? What questions or problems seem to crop up again and again?

If you don't have many comments yet, find a bigger blog that's similar to yours in topic and style. Read through the comments there, and see what readers are asking about. Look for posts which clearly struck a chord, too; could any of these form the basis for an ebook?

These are just three of the comments from one of my posts on Dumb Little Man, a personal development blog:



(From [How to Write a Great To-Do List (And Why You Need To)])

Just from these comments, I can see three good issues to write about:

1. How to stick with to-do lists and not get distracted *(from Neil's comment)*
2. How to make sure you actually *use* the list that you created *(from Anna's comment)*
3. How to make to-do lists encouraging, rather than depressing *(from Angelwitch's comment)*

Draw on One-to-One Interactions

Have you done any coaching, or had the opportunity to chat directly to your blog's readers? What issues seem to crop up again and again?

After a few months of coaching writers and bloggers, and working with small groups in ecourses, I found that some topics came up a lot, such as:

- **Finding time to write** – this prompted me to write a free ebook as a promotional goodie for my newsletter list.
- **Staying motivated**, especially on longer projects – that's helped me with many blog posts, and with this ebook.
- **Coping with technicalities** – this led to a free ebook on "Formatting Blog Posts in WordPress and Blogger" which I produced for my *Blog On* ecourse.

Examine Popular Blog Posts

Which posts on your blog have the most comments? Which posts get shared on Facebook, Twitter or StumbleUpon? It's not a foolproof rule ... but if a post is especially popular, there's a fair chance that you've hit on something that readers really want.

If your own blog doesn't have many posts, then look at a larger blog in your niche. For instance, if I wanted more topics to write about on Aliventures, I might examine the popular posts on ProBlogger, Copyblogger or Men with Pens.

On Copyblogger, for instance, the most popular posts are shown in the sidebar:

(From Copyblogger)

Ask Forum Members

If you belong to any forums, ask there for people's particular struggles in your field. For instance, if you blog about golf, you could ask "What's your biggest frustration about golf?" or "What do you wish someone would explain to you about golf?"

You might like to explain that you're putting together an ebook – you could even offer a free copy for anyone who replies to your forum post with a question or idea.

Look at Yahoo Anwers

If you want to find out what people are asking about your topic, try Yahoo Answers (http://answers.yahoo.com/) See what questions crop up again and again. This is a good tool to use when you only have a small audience of your own.

(Thanks to Shlomo Skinner of Cats with Pens for this tip.)

All of these techniques will help you get a handle on what people *really* want. If you use several of them, you're more likely to get an accurate idea.

The very best way to find out what to write about, though, is to create a survey for your readers – and that's what we'll be covering in the next chapter.

Chapter Two: How to Run a Great Survey and Get Your Readers to Fill It In

You can find out exactly what your readers want by running a survey. I've done this several times myself, and I've seen other blogger's survey results – and *every single time*, there have been surprises.

You can run surveys in all sorts of ways. I've found that the site SurveyMonkey is simple and effective. A basic account is free, and easy to set up.

Structuring Your Survey

Try to keep your survey short. **The more questions you have, the less likely it is that people will take the time to fill them in.** If possible, make each question optional.

Try asking:

- One or two questions about the *topic*
- One question about *bonuses*
- One question about the *price*

Use multiple-choice questions, not ones which require typed responses. This means:

- It's easier for you to analyse the data
- It's faster for the person filling in the questionnaire

Whenever you have multiple choice options, though, make sure you've either got a "none of these" or "other" option ("other" should allow the reader to type in their own response).

Brainstorming for Your Topic

With multiple choice questions, you'll need to come up with possible answers. **Look for topics that you think will be popular (based on feedback on your blog)** and ones that you can definitely write about – even if that requires a bit of research.

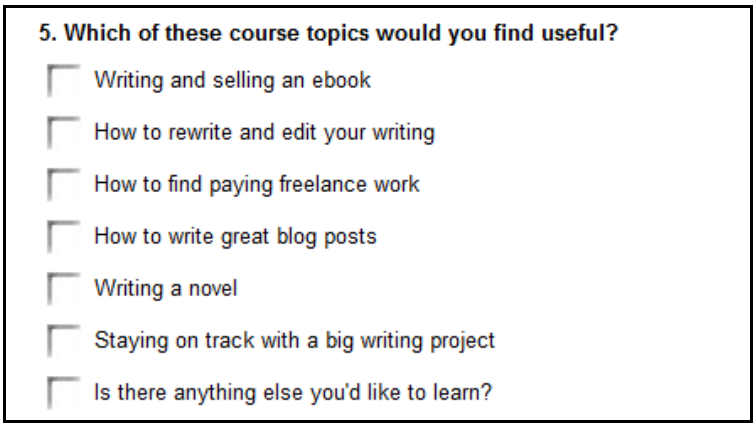
So, if I was running a survey for a fiction-writing ebook, I might ask:

"What would you most like to learn more about?"

- *Creating engaging characters*
- *Writing realistic dialogue*
- *Editing your own writing*
- *Staying motivated to finish a whole novel*

- *Submitting a proposal to agents*
- *Other* _____

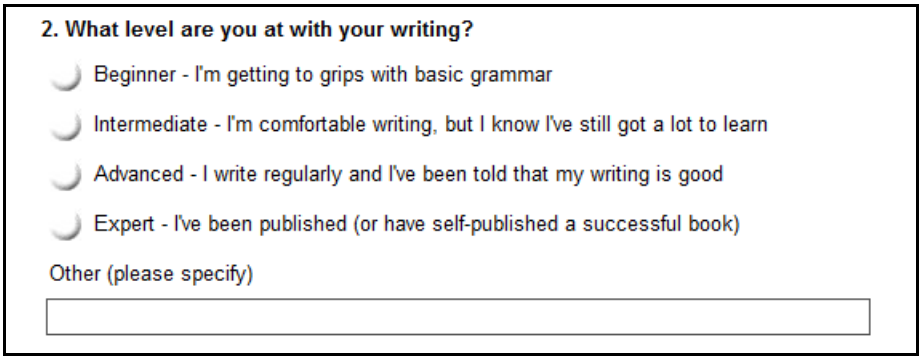
Your options can be broader than that. When I ran a survey to decide on the topic of my next ecourse, I asked:



Asking About Their Expertise

Are your audience total beginners, or do they have some experience in your area? Chances are, you've got some readers who are very new to your field but others who are more advanced. **It's worth including a question about expertise or previous experience, so you know not only what to cover in your ebook, but how much depth to go into.**

We all have different ideas of what "beginner", "intermediate" and "advanced" mean, so I'd suggest giving a clear example of what you're getting at:



In retrospect, I think my *intermediate* and *advanced* categories were too broad. The survey still helped me find out roughly how experienced most of my readers were, though.

Asking About Bonuses

If you've bought any ebooks online, you've probably noticed that authors often include lots of extra bonuses beyond the book itself.

Kelly Kingman and Pamela Wilson's *eBook Evolution* is an example:

(From [eBook Evolution](#) – you can [read my review of it here](#))

If you have enough bonuses, your ebook can become part of a comprehensive package of materials. That might not be what you're aiming for, though – and it may not be what your audience wants.

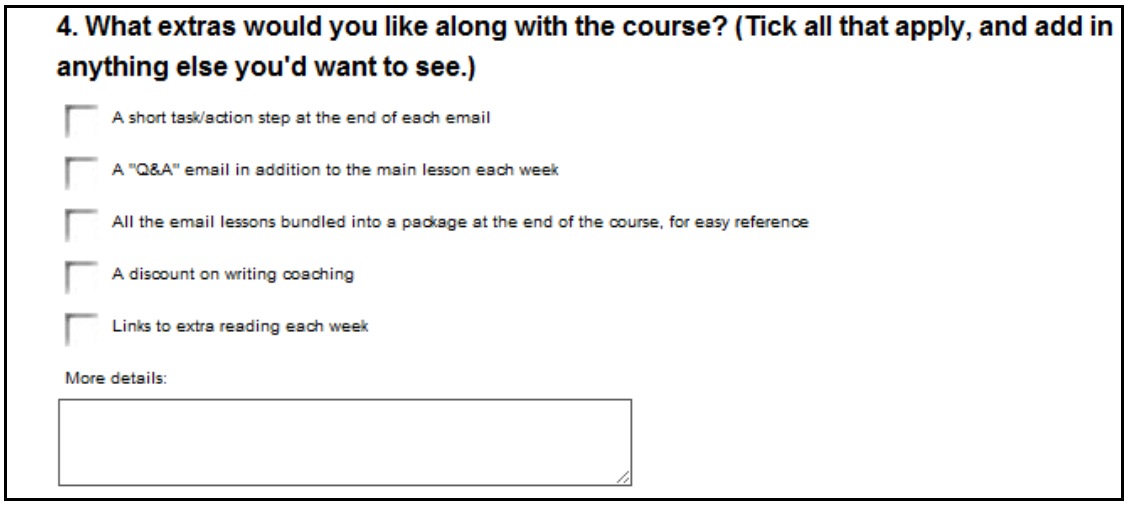
If you're thinking of including bonuses, ask a question like:

If I publish an ebook on the topic that you chose above, what bonuses would you like to see included? Tick all that apply:

- None – I just want the ebook, at the lowest price possible
- Audio interviews with other experts in this area
- Videos to demonstrate particular topics
- Extra ebooks from other authors
- Other _____

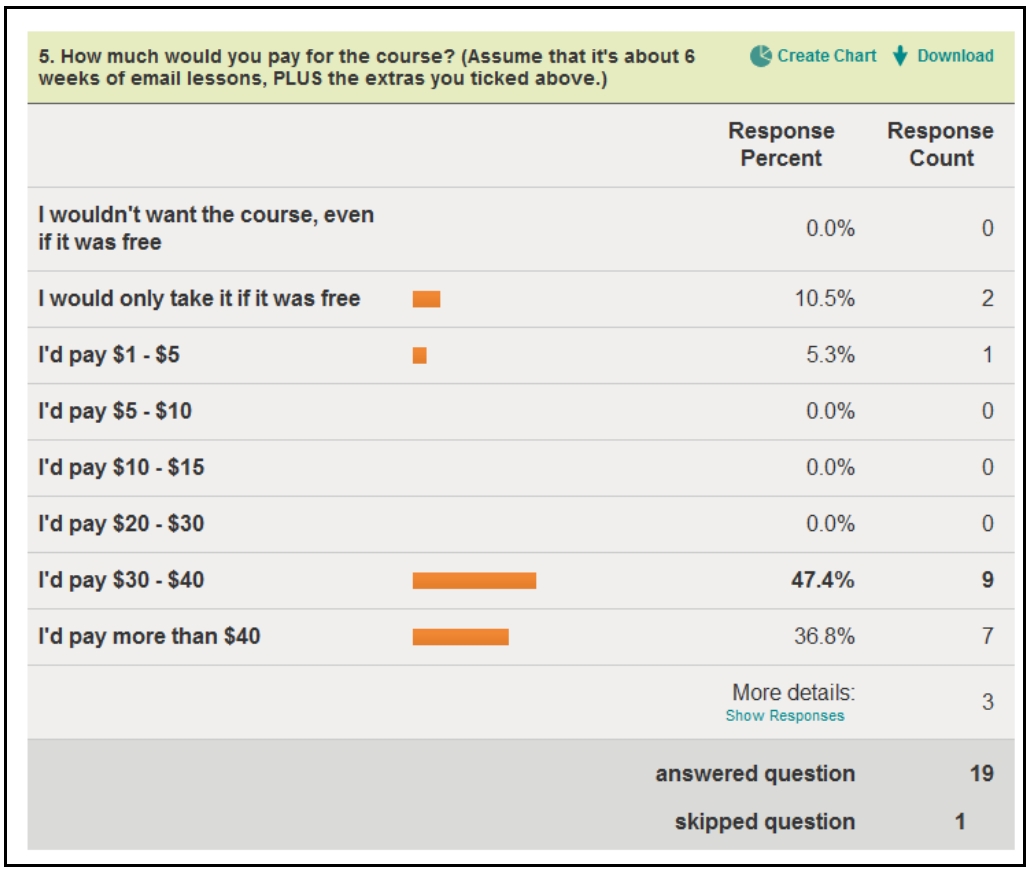
Obviously, you can change the multiple choice answers to suit you and your audience.

This is what I asked when I was creating my *On Track* ecourse:



Asking About the Price

It's a good idea to ask your audience what they'd be willing to pay ... because their ideas might differ dramatically from yours. When I ran my first ecourse, *On Track*, I was thinking of charging around $10 for it. But my survey showed that (a) there was lots of bonus material that readers would find useful and (b) nearly everyone thought the proposed ecourse was worth at least $30:



5. How much would you pay for the course? (Assume that it's about 6 weeks of email lessons, PLUS the extras you ticked above.)

Create Chart Download

	Response Percent	Response Count
I wouldn't want the course, even if it was free	0.0%	0
I would only take it if it was free	10.5%	2
I'd pay $1 - $5	5.3%	1
I'd pay $5 - $10	0.0%	0
I'd pay $10 - $15	0.0%	0
I'd pay $20 - $30	0.0%	0
I'd pay $30 - $40	47.4%	9
I'd pay more than $40	36.8%	7
	More details: Show Responses	3
	answered question	19
	skipped question	1

When you ask about price, make sure you include a "none" or "I wouldn't pay for it" option – otherwise your results are going to be skewed.

Again, go for multiple choice answers, and try to give a range. For a typical ebook, you might have:

How much would you pay for this ebook?

- Nothing
- Less than $15
- $15 - $29
- $30 - $49
- $50 - $79
- $80 +
- Other _____

How to Encourage People to Fill In Your Survey

You might have a thousand blog subscribers ... but only get ten responses to your survey.

How can you encourage people to fill it in?

Offer a Prize (Think Carefully!)

I've seen some prominent bloggers – Dave Navarro especially – use their survey as a prize draw, with something awesome like an iPod on offer for the winner.

Now, this will almost certainly guarantee *lots* of survey responses! The problem is, **there's no guarantee that the people who respond will have any interest in your ebook.**

Personally, I don't offer prizes: I'd much rather have 50 responses from my core audience than 5,000 responses from complete strangers who just ticked any old box in the hopes of getting a prize.

Offer a Discount on the End Product

This is my favourite way to offer an incentive without skewing the results. Instead of giving a prize, I'll sometimes say that ***everyone*** **who fills in the survey and leaves their email address will get a $10 discount code as a "thank you".**

As well as encouraging people to respond, this helps me build up a pre-launch list of email addresses – these potential customers have a stronger incentive to buy because they've had some involvement in the creation of the ebook. They already feel a sense of ownership over it.

Join Forces With Other Bloggers

If your own audience is very small, **look for other bloggers at a similar level, who blog about the same topics as you.** Join up with them to create a survey that all of you can use.

This means that you'll each get access to more responses. You might well find that two or three topics are equally popular, so there's no need for you to create competing products!

Use Twitter and Facebook

As well as promoting your survey on your blog, make sure you use other social media channels like Twitter and Facebook. Some of your readers may well check those sites more often; others may *only* follow you on Twitter or interact with you on Facebook.

If you're tweeting about your survey, ask for retweets – especially if you don't have a big Twitter following of your own.

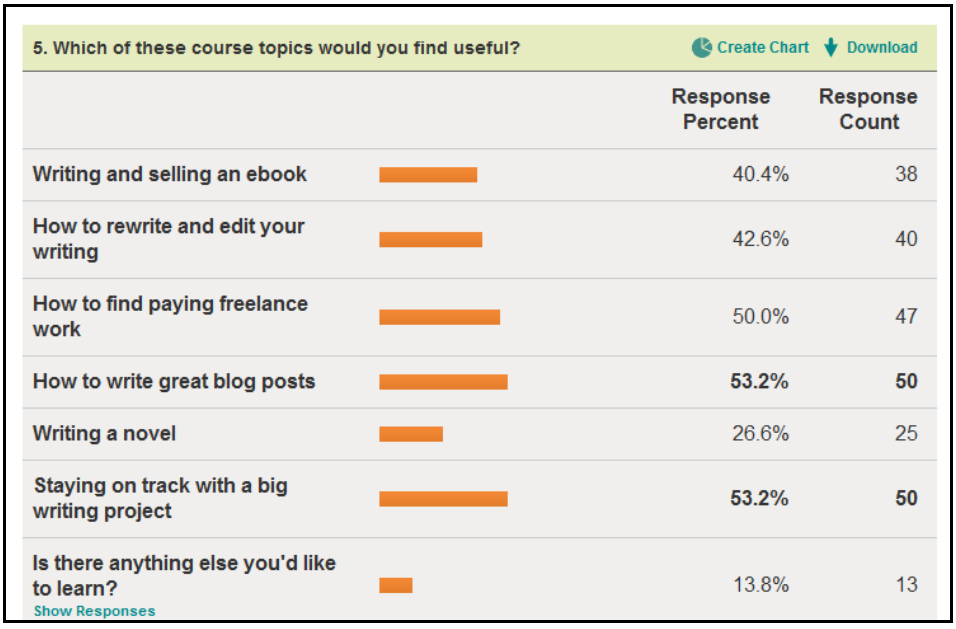
Chapter Three: Using Your Survey Results to Start Developing Killer Ideas

Once you've got your survey results – or, at the very least, a list of clear problems and questions that readers have posed in comments – then it's time to start pulling everything together.

How many responses do you need? I'd suggest aiming for at least 15 – if you don't have many replies, it's easy for things to get skewed. I've found that, once I've hit 20 or so responses, the others tend to follow the same pattern.

Analysing the Results

Your first step is to look at the graphs showing your multiple-choice options: this is a quick and easy way to see what looks like being popular.



5. Which of these course topics would you find useful? Create Chart Download

	Response Percent	Response Count
Writing and selling an ebook	40.4%	38
How to rewrite and edit your writing	42.6%	40
How to find paying freelance work	50.0%	47
How to write great blog posts	**53.2%**	**50**
Writing a novel	26.6%	25
Staying on track with a big writing project	**53.2%**	**50**
Is there anything else you'd like to learn? Show Responses	13.8%	13

You don't necessarily have to go with the leading option: often, you'll find that two or three options are all quite popular. It's worth drilling down further – if you're using the free version of SurveyMonkey, you may want to look through every response individually.

You might find, for instance, that two options are tied on popularity – but that one is considered more valuable (ie. people would pay more for it).

Individual Written Responses

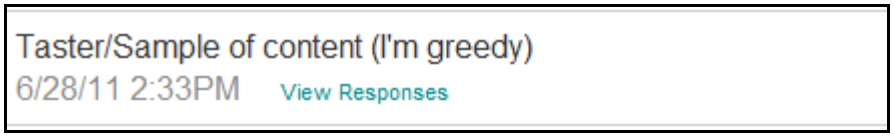
In some cases, readers will throw up an idea that you hadn't thought of. Give these serious thought – if someone took the time to write a response, they probably feel quite strongly.

When I ran a survey to find out what my newsletter readers wanted, I asked:

5. When I release a new paid-for ebook or ecourse, would you like: Create Chart Download

	Response Percent	Response Count
Early notification about it	63.2%	36
A discount for the ebook/ecourse	**82.5%**	**47**
Several reminders before the early notification and/or discount ends	35.1%	20
No emails about it at all	7.0%	4
Other (please specify) Hide Responses	5.3%	3

One person filled in the "Other" field with:



Taster/Sample of content (I'm greedy)
6/28/11 2:33PM View Responses

It hadn't occurred to me to offer free samples to my newsletter list – but the idea seemed obvious as soon as it was suggested. I decided to implement it for future promotions, as you can see on my newsletter sign-up page: www.aliventures.com/newsletter.

Mind-Mapping Your Ebook

If you have lots of survey responses, it's useful to pull them together so that you can "see" the ideas. This often helps you to find connections and to come up with new ways to develop the ideas that you already have.

One of my favourite ways to do this is to use a mind-map. **A mind-map typically has one key topic in the centre with other related thoughts branching off.** I'll run through the process of creating one below – you might want to make yours as you read.

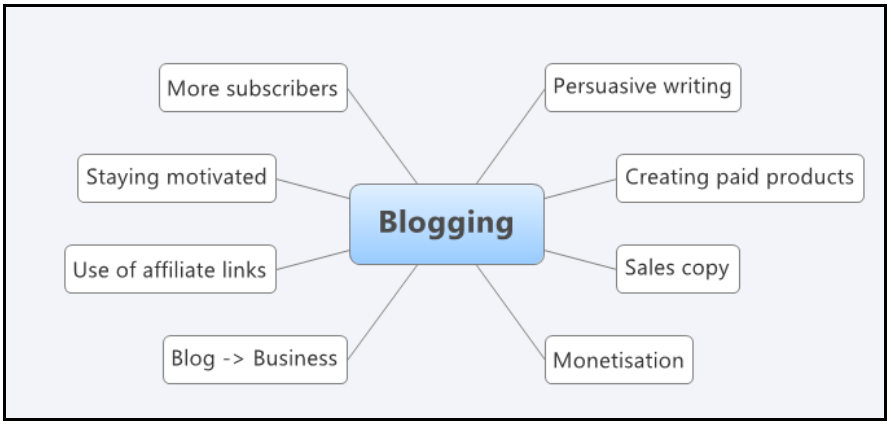
Once you feel that you've got a clear picture of your results, grab a blank sheet of paper or use a mind-mapping program.

All the examples here are from XMind, which is available for free.

Step #1: Put your core topic – one that was popular, and that you want to write about – in the centre.

I'm going with an ebook topic that's been popular in every survey I've run:

Step #2: Jot down any key subtopics or ideas from your survey respondants:



Keep in mind your audience's level of expertise. If most are beginners, you might need to cover very basic steps. If most are advanced, you might need to bring in expert knowledge.

Step #3: Make a note of any bonuses that were popular (and anything else that your readers have asked for):

- Editing checklist
- Critiques of their blog posts
- Writing faster
- Improving vocabulary, grammar, spelling

Step #4: Add any other ideas that you've got at the moment.

This is as far as you need to go for now.

In the next chapter, we'll be using your mind-map to choose one idea and develop it into an outline.

Chapter Four: Creating a Roadmap For Your Ebook So That You Stay On Track

Your outline is going to become your roadmap.

You'll use it to stay on track as your write your ebook, so take the time to make sure you're more or less happy with it. Of course, you can change the order of chapters and add in whole new sections later – but **you'll find that the writing goes more smoothly if you have a solid outline in place.**

Having One Clear Idea for Your Ebook

One of the big mistakes that I've made with ebooks is to be too comprehensive. I've tried to cover *everything* about a particular topic – but this doesn't work too well.

From the reader's perspective, a "comprehensive" ebook looks huge and overwhelming. They might be concerned that it won't go into enough detail on the areas that really concern them.

And from your perspective, a "comprehensive" ebook is a huge challenge. If you're trying to create the definitive work in your field, you're likely to get stuck after a chapter or two. Plus, it's hard to make a clear sales pitch for an ebook that covers everything under the sun.

If you write several ebooks on related topics, you can easily market them together (we'll be coming back to this in Chapter Twenty-Five). For instance, I currently have three ebooks in the Blogger's Guide series:

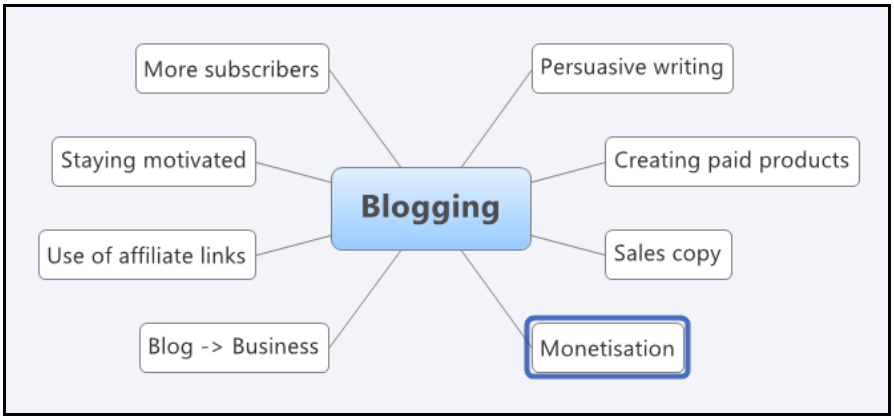
- The Blogger's Guide to Freelancing
- The Blogger's Guide to Effective Writing
- The Blogger's Guide to Irresistible Ebooks

I didn't try to write "Everything You Need to Know About Blogging" because that would either be (a) incredibly long or (b) too general and basic.

Is your idea specific enough? If you're not sure, ask yourself:

- Would this fit into a clear category on my blog?
- Can I sum up the concept in a single sentence?
- Do I have plenty of ideas for other, complementary, ebooks?

If the answer to any – or all! – of those questions is *nope*, then you might want to narrow your idea down a bit more. Pick *one* sub-topic from your mind-map to focus on:



Give your ebook a title; this doesn't have to be set in stone, and you can always change it later. The first draft of The Blogger's Guide to Effective Writing was called "Writing Blog Content" – again, you can see that I had to fight the urge to be comprehensive.

Creating Your High-Level Outline

There's no one "right" way to outline an ebook, so I'm going to go through a few different methods. Different writers think in different ways.

The idea at this stage is to get a high-level outline, which, roughly speaking, means a list of major points or chapters. You don't need to know what goes in each chapter – though if ideas come to you as you're working through the outline, go ahead and jot them down.

I'm going to take you through three popular methods for creating outlines:

1. Mind-mapping
2. Index cards
3. Linear writing

I'll explain each one, and give you an example of what it looks like.

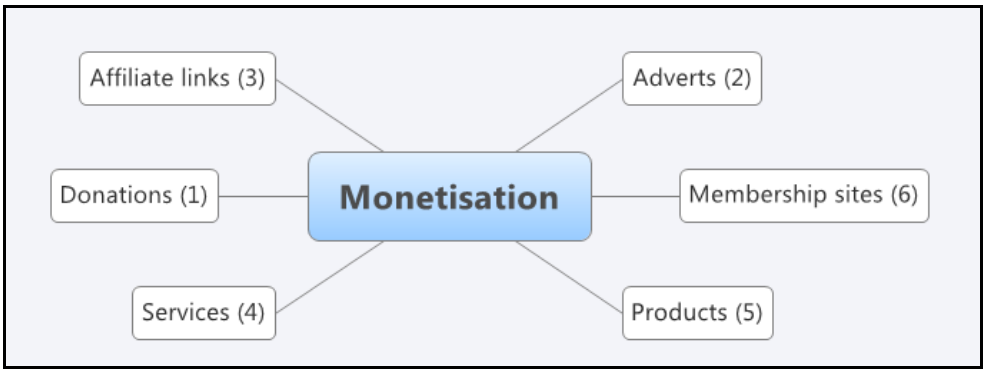
Method #1: Mind-mapping

You can use a mind-map to create your whole outline if you want. I'd suggest starting a new one, because your initial idea-gathering mind-map might be getting cluttered.

Put the title in the centre of your mind-map, and jot down chapter-level ideas around it. It's up to you how many chapters you want – you might find it helpful to think of each one as a long blog post, exploring a single key part of your topic.

You may want to join together any related chapters with lines. To indicate the order of chapters, try jotting numbers alongside your ideas.

Here, for instance, I've ordered the possible chapters so that they start with the easiest methods to implement:



Method #2: Using Index Cards

This method is popular with novelists who're figuring out how to fit their story together. Your ebook almost certainly won't be as long as a novel (and you hopefully won't have to plot any murders or love trysts...) but index cards can still be useful.

Get yourself a corkboard and a pack of small cards, or use post-it notes and a big sheet of paper. Write one chapter idea on each card.

Once you're out of ideas, start sorting your cards into an order. You might find that more ideas come to you at this stage, as you spot gaps or connections.

(Image from Flickr by terriem)

Method #3: Linear Writing

This might be the way that you've done outlines in the past – and for some writers, it works perfectly well. This is a good method if you feel that you've already got a clear idea in your mind, and that it's obvious what major points you need to cover.

Start at the top, and write down key points or chapter headings, in sequential order. It's easiest to do this on a computer, so you can go back and insert other chapters if you think you need more detail.

I've put my first outline for this ebook over the page. As you can see, I've added in a lot of other material for the finished product – but the general shape is there in my outline:

Introduction – why write an ebook anyway?

Difference between free and paid ebooks.

Part One: Developing Your Idea

To Find Out What They Want, You Have to Ask Them

Don't Try to be Comprehensive

Writing an Outline

Part Two: Producing Your Ebook

Setting Yourself a Deadline

Staying Motivated to Keep Writing

Writing Style – How it's Different From a Blog Post (e.g. more depth)

Getting feedback and revising your ebook – how to find people to help you

Part Three: Selling Your Ebook

Asking for testimonials – why these are crucial

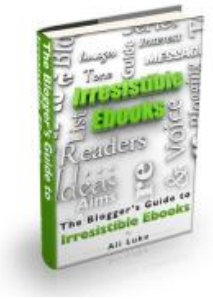
Your sales page: tips on how to write it – give some sample structures, sentences, etc. Mention Premise.

Pre-launch: Building up an email list

How to promote your ebook – e.g. guest posting, Twitter, competitions

It's not just about the money: use your ebook as the first step in a sales funnel. E.g. ebook buyers might later purchase your services.

Now that you've got an irresistible idea and a roadmap – your outline – it's time to start the actual writing. That's what we'll be tackling in Part Two of this ebook.



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