

MODULE #1: GETTING YOU AND YOUR BLOG READY

IN THIS MODULE:

This week, we'll be taking a look at what guest blogging involves and what you hope to achieve from it. We'll cover how to get your own blog (or website) into good shape *before* you start guest blogging out there, and we'll also look at potential topics for your guest posts.

Welcome to Successful Guest Blogging! Over the next six weeks, we're going to be taking an in-depth look at guest blogging – covering exactly what you need to do to find opportunities, pitch your guest posts, craft your post itself plus your all-important bio, and take things further once you get a post published.

If you've not already joined our Facebook group, head on over here:

[facebook.com/groups/successfulguestblogging2018](https://www.facebook.com/groups/successfulguestblogging2018)

It's a private group, so only fellow course members will see your posts there.

Before we get too far into things, let's take a look at what exactly guest blogging is (and isn't).

What Exactly is Guest Blogging?

"Guest blogging" means writing for someone else's blog. That blog might be tiny or huge. It might not even call itself a "blog", if it's a site like Forbes or Huffington Post – but the process of guest blogging is always pretty much the same.

As a guest blogger, your content has to go past an editor or blog owner. So, writing for a site like Medium, where you can upload your own content, doesn't count.


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The pieces you write are normally called “guest posts”. (Note: not “guest blogs” – a blog is the whole set of posts, not an individual post.)

Guest blogging is usually unpaid – though some blogs pay quite well for posts. (This is what I’d call “freelance blogging”.)

Guest blogging is done under your own name, or your chosen pseudonym. You almost always get a “bio” at the end – occasionally the start – of your post, which you can write yourself. This is a great opportunity to promote your own blog, or your products/services. Here’s an example, from the end of my guest post [Seven Sure-Fire Ways to Annoy a Blog Editor \(and What to Do Instead\)](#) on ProBlogger:

About Ali Luke



Ali Luke blogs about the art, craft and business of writing at **Aliventures**. She has two free ebooks on blogging, **Ten Powerful Ways to Make Your Blog Posts Stronger** and **Ten Easy Ways to Attract Readers to Your Blog ... And Keep Them There**. To get your copies of those, just **sign up for her weekly e-newsletter (also free!) here**.

Now that the “what” of guest blogging is (hopefully!) clear, it’s time to move on to the “why”...

Why Do You Want to Guest Blog?

There are lots of great reasons to write for other people’s blogs. You might find that one or more of these resonates with you ... or you might have a different reason entirely:

- Get some writing experience that could form the basis of a freelancing portfolio.
- Build up a name for yourself in your particular area of interest.

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- Reach new readers – and encourage them to come and read *your* blog.
- Strengthen your relationship with the host blogger by helping them out when they're busy.
- Share your knowledge as widely as possible on a topic that you're passionate about.
- Promote a product (like a book) or a service that you offer (like freelancing or consulting).
- Get a link to your website to help you rank more highly in Google and other search engines. (*A valid reason, but see my note below.*)
- Strike up a relationship that could lead to paid work. This is exactly what I did with four different blogs back in 2008: I started out by writing guest posts for them, and later got hired as a paid writer.

Note: A few years ago, guest blogging was sometimes associated with low-quality content – people were writing it just to get a link to their site, without any real interest in the actual readers of their posts. While getting a link from a popular blog is useful for your SEO (search engine optimization), I wouldn't recommend having this as your *only* goal with guest posting.

While all of these reasons can be great ones, it's worth thinking about which ones are your *primary* reasons to be a guest blogger. This might affect the way in which you go about finding opportunities, and it'll almost certainly affect the way in which you craft your bio (which we'll come onto in Module 5).

It's also helpful to have your goal in mind so you can see whether your guest blogging is helping you to reach it. For instance, if you want to guest blog to get more readers, you'll want to track things like the number of visitors to your blog and sign-ups to your newsletter list after your guest post goes live. If you don't see any evidence of new readers, then you may want to rethink your strategy.

What Do You Need to Guest Blog?

You *don't* need:

- **A blog of your own, unless that fits in with your goals.** You don't even need a website – I've occasionally seen people guest blog with nothing more than an email address where readers can get in touch.
- **A large audience** ... or any audience at all! I've often heard bloggers say that their own blog isn't "big enough" for them to be a guest poster for other blogs, but the reality is that host blogs are interested in your ability to write, not the size of your audience.
- **Lots of previous experience.** While some large blogs do ask for links to previously published guest posts, many blogs will be perfectly willing to look at your work without you having ever published a word before.
- **Writing qualifications.** You don't need any sort of degree or certification as a writer ... again, host blogs will only care how well you actually write.

You *do* need:

- **To be able to write competent, well-structured blog posts.** Module 4 of this course is all about crafting and editing your post, so don't worry if you're not 100% confident on this yet.
- **Some degree of patience and flexibility!** You might find that a blog accepts your guest post, but wants to schedule it to run in three months' time. You may have a post accepted – but the host blog wants to make significant edits.
- **Some level of comfort with technology.** As a guest blogger, you will need to be willing to get to grips with new things: for instance, you might be asked to format posts in a particular way, or upload them to the host blog. (Don't worry, we'll be covering these sorts of things during the course.)

Getting Your Own Blog Into Good Shape

This might seem like a slightly odd place to begin – after all, guest blogging is all about getting out there onto other people’s blogs! Whatever your goals are, though, your guest posts are very likely to bring some attention your way: new readers, visiting your site for the first time.

Note: If you have a static website rather than a blog (e.g. an author website where you advertise your books) skip this section – I come onto static websites a little later on in the module.

For the purposes of this section of the module, I’m going to assume that you have a self-hosted WordPress website – many of these tips will also apply to hosted WordPress sites too (ones that you log in to via WordPress.com).

You want your site to give a good first impression. You *don’t* want it to look cluttered, outdated, poorly maintained, or generally amateurish.

I’m not expecting you to spend hours this week redesigning your blog or writing dozens of new posts. There are a few quick things you can do, though, to make sure your blog is ready for an influx of new visitors.

These are my top three:

#1: Declutter Your Sidebar

One of the most common mistakes I see bloggers making is to have a cluttered sidebar. Your sidebar will appear on all your posts, so it’s well worth spending a few minutes pruning it down.

Here are a few things to remove:

- The “meta” widget that comes as default with WordPress [check]. You don’t need it; your readers don’t need it. Keeping it in place makes your blog look amateur.
- The “recent comments” widget. I’ve never seen this really work well on a blog. Either it shows comments that are embarrassingly old (because

not enough people are commenting), or it shows spam comments (because you've not managed to zap them yet).

- Your recent Twitter posts. By all means have a link to your Twitter account, but don't plaster the posts themselves onto your blog. Chances are, they'll look incongruous and out of place.
- Any widgets that create a sense of visual clutter – tag clouds are a common culprit, as are Amazon carousels of books.

If your sidebar is looking a bit bare about that, or if you're wondering if you've got *any* widgets worth keeping, here are two that I'd always recommend:

- An "About" widget, giving your name (or pseudonym) and brief details about you / your blog. This is handy for first-time readers who might be trying to figure out who you are and what your blog is all about. You can link from this to your full About page.
- A "Sign Up" widget for your email list, probably right at the top of your sidebar. (If you don't have an email list, don't worry about that for now – but do put creating one on your "to do" list for some time soon.)

#2: Create a New Header

In most themes, your header will appear on every page. This means it's important to get it right. If you're using whatever default came with your blog's theme, spend a little time creating a new one.

I like using the online tool Canva, where you can choose a (free) image and add text over the top: play around with different fonts to find out that you like.

This is also a good opportunity to review your tagline, if you have one (or to consider creating one, if you don't). Does it succinctly sum up what your blog is all about, or does it need a bit of editing?

#3: Update Your About Page

It's very easy for About pages to end up getting out of date: maybe the details of your personal life have changed (e.g. you've moved house, had a child) or the details of your blog / business have changed (e.g. you no longer offer a particular service, you've published a new book).

Read through your About page to make sure it's up-to-date. Make sure, too, that it actually forms a good introduction to your blog: if it's very focused on you, perhaps you might include a bit more about what the reader can expect from the blog.

This can also be a good place to link to a few of your favourite / best posts, so that readers can easily find those and dig in.

If you've got a bit more time, or if you come back to this module later on during/after the course, I'd suggest that you also:

#1: Make Sure You're Blogging Regularly

You don't need to blog every day, or even every week – but if you want new readers to stick around, you need to have fairly regular content. That might mean posting once every two weeks or once a month.

If you're struggling to create regular content for your own blog, you might want to hold off on guest blogging until you get into a consistent routine. Alternatively, you could create a "landing page" on your website where you promote your book/product/service and use your guest post bio to link to that.

#2: Make Sure Your Posts are Easy to Read

This might seem a bit obvious – but is it easy for people to read your posts? Is the font too small / too light? Are the gaps between lines and paragraphs appropriate? If I go to a blog that has tiny grey text, scrunched up but with weirdly huge gaps between paragraphs ... chances are I won't be back.

You can often tweak the font size/colour by going to Appearance → Customize in your WordPress dashboard.

#3: Set Up an Email Newsletter

If you don't already have an email newsletter, I'd definitely recommend setting one up. You can do so for free with MailChimp (they only charge once you have more than 1,000 subscribers). Once people have signed up for your newsletter list, you might want to send them:

- Each blog post as it comes out, in full.
- Or ... a summary of each blog post, plus a link to it.
- Or ... an exclusive newsletter, with an article that isn't published on your blog at all.

If You Have a Static Website ...

As a guest blogger, you don't *have* to have a blog of your own. Maybe you have an author website, for instance, where you showcase your books – but you don't have a blog or news element.

That's fine! Host blogs rarely care whether or not you have your own blog: they just care how well you can write.

It's still important, of course, to make sure your website is in good shape before you start encouraging lots of new visitors. If you've only got a few different pages, I'd suggest looking through them all to make sure that everything's up to date.

If your site is one where people can order books/products, or contact you to hire you, do double-check that all the appropriate buttons and contact forms are working (occasionally, WordPress updates can break things like contact forms).

But please don't feel pressured to add a blog if you don't want one. During one of my busiest guest posting periods, I didn't have an active blog of my own at all: I just pointed readers to a website where I sold ebooks.

If You Don't Have a Website At All ...

Can you guest post without a website? Absolutely (I've seen it done)! There are several reasons why you might go down this route, including:

- You want to get some freelancing experience before launching your website.
- You aren't interested in having a website, but you want to promote (say) a book of yours on Amazon.
- You don't have your own website, but you're promoting a charity or good cause.

All of these are fine, and we'll look at options for wording your bio accordingly in Module 5.

What Could You Guest Blog About?

Once you're reasonably happy with your website, it's time to think about potential topic areas for your guest posts.

Normally, it makes sense for your guest post's topic to tie in with your blog itself – but you want to reach out to a broader niche or (if you're freelancing or thinking of changing tack with your own blog), you might want to choose a different topic altogether.

If you're guest blogging with an eye towards paid work, you might also want to go quite broad in terms of topics: there are quite a lot of blogs in most niches that accept guest posts, but only a handful of those will also have the willingness and capacity to pay writers!

When you're thinking about the topics you could blog about, some good avenues to consider are:

- **Things you've already written about.** This might be for your own blog, for a magazine or other publication, or even for a full book. What did you most enjoy writing about? What do you already know a lot about? (Ideally with a guest post, you don't want to have to do tons of research.)
- **Your professional life.** Think about all the jobs you've done. What knowledge and skills have you gained from each? (E.g. if you're a computer programmer, you might know how to code in C++, but you might also have gained project management skills.)
- **Your personal life.** What have you accomplished over the past decade or two? Maybe you graduated from university, found a job, lost weight, got married, started a family, got out of debt... you could potentially write guest posts on topics related to any of these.
- **Your hobbies and interests.** Maybe you love knitting, geek culture, fashion, gadgets, watercolour painting, hiking, great coffee, golf, coaching kids' sports ... think about what you like to do in the evenings, at the weekends, or when on holiday.

Don't worry about making your list comprehensive. All you need is to get enough down on paper that you can pick a few good topic areas to focus on initially.

Here's my list (*note that if you've taken my Start Freelancing course, you'll have seen most of this before*)!

Have written about:

Healthy eating and weight loss (my first blog, which I eventually sold).

Tips for undergraduate students (my second blog, long defunct).

Blogging – extensively!

Writing – both fiction and non fiction, again, quite extensively!

Parenting – mostly informally, on Facebook.

Professional life:

Babysitting: childcare ideas, working as a teenager.

Full time job in a small IT company: various technical skills, office politics, finding and starting first “proper” job.

Working as a self-employed writer: becoming self-employed, blogging, speaking, selling products online, ebooks.

Personal life:

Finished university with a 2.i degree.

Successfully lost weight and kept it off (during uni onwards).

Developed strong time management skills – during uni, job, self-employment.

Got married and now have two kids (age 3 and 5 currently).

Hobbies and interests:

Reading – especially contemporary fiction, anything with a fantasy/SF/supernatural edge.

Writing fiction (which could also go under “professional life”).

Board gaming (“Euro” style games, kid-friendly games).

Cult TV – mainly sci-fi.

As you can see, it’s a pretty rough list, but it offers plenty of ideas of things I could potentially guest blog about.

Which Topics Fit With Your Goals?

When you're starting out with guest blogging, it can be tempting to target pretty much every blog that you think you could *possibly* write for.

But it's worth spending some time considering which of your topics really fit well with your goals. For instance, if I wanted to promote my course "Blogging Basics," it probably wouldn't make much sense for me to write guest posts about sci-fi novels or weight loss. While there might be some sci-fi fans and dieters interested in blogging, I'd do better to focus on a blog *about* blogging.

Identify two or three topics that you could focus on. You might potentially want to look for areas where your topics intersect, too: for instance, I could write a post on "How to Find Enough Time to Blog When You Have Young Children", combining blogging and parenting, and pitch it to a general blogging-related blog like ProBlogger.

How the Assignments Work

Each week, you'll have an assignment to carry out (based on what we've covered in that week's module). Successful Guest Blogging is a practical course, so even if you don't have much time, I'd encourage you to do as much as you can on the assignment – you'll get a lot more out of the course that way.

I suggest keeping your assignment answers in a single document, or in an Evernote notebook or similar – or, if you prefer, in a physical notebook. That makes them easy to find if you want to refer back to them at a later point.

ASSIGNMENT

Your assignment this week is in three parts. You can tackle as many or as few as you wish – but the more you do, the faster you'll progress!

#1: Write down your reason(s) for guest blogging: feel free to share these with us when you check in on Facebook.

#2: Spend an hour getting your blog ready for new visitors. Don't worry if you can't do everything in an hour: make a list of things you want to tackle in subsequent weeks.

#3: Think of at least three topics you could guest blog about. Again, feel free to share these in our Facebook group.

Once you've completed as many of these as you want, come and "check in" on Facebook and you'll get your reward stamp for Week 1. If you're willing to, please tell us what you did and how you got on.

[facebook.com/groups/successfulguestblogging2018/learning_content/?filter=410067196194810](https://www.facebook.com/groups/successfulguestblogging2018/learning_content/?filter=410067196194810)

If you prefer not to use Facebook, you can email me (ali@aliventures.com) with "Module #1 check in" or similar in the subject line.

Module #1: Further Reading

All of the further reading is optional, but if you want to find out more about something we've covered, it's highly recommended! If you find other useful resources, you're very welcome to share them in our Facebook group.

81 Topic Ideas for Starting a Blog That Matters, Caleb Wojcik, Fizzle.co

This post is a compilation of lots of different ideas: if you're stuck for topics you could write about, maybe one of these will spark off some thoughts for you. Some are very broad, some are highly specific.

The Top 11 Benefits of Guest Blogging, Vikas Agrawai, SearchEngine Journal

Although several of these benefits are quite business-focused, even if you're coming at guest blogging from a slightly different angle, you'll find some great reasons to give it a try.

8 Important Admin Tasks to Do When Launching a New Blog, Darren Rowse, ProBlogger

This post runs through a bunch of things you should do when you set up your blog. Even if your blog's been running for a while, you might want to double-check that you've done everything on this list, *before* you bring in lots of new visitors through your guest blogging!

What's Coming Up Next Week:

Well done on reaching the end of this week's module. Remember, if you have questions at any point, please do ask in our Facebook group. If it's something you'd prefer to discuss privately, you can send me a message via the Facebook group or you can email me at ali@aliventures.com.

Here's what to expect in Module 2 next week:

MODULE 2:

Next week, from Monday 19th November, we'll be looking at where to find guest blogging opportunities. As well as thinking through some general sources (like the blogs you already read), we'll cover sites that can help you track down blogs that welcome guest posts.

We'll lay the groundwork for how to approach blog editors, and we'll go through common expectations as well as how to use any available guest post guidelines on the blog.