How to Write eBooks That Practically Sell Themselves

These notes accompany my PowerPoint slides: if you don't have the slides, you can download them from www.aliventures.com/blogworld-eBooks

(A Pre-Emptive) Thank You!

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You're welcome to get in touch with me at any time on Twitter (@aliventures) or by email (ali@aliventures.com).

eBooks, start to finish

Like any writing project, eBooks go through four distinct stages:

- Ideas – this is where you decide what you're going to write about

- Planning – once you've got a topic, you can decide what exactly to include (and what to leave out)

- Writing – it's a lot easier to *plan* an eBook than to *write* one – we'll be covering tips on keeping going

- Editing – however great you are at writing, you need to edit

If you want an eBook that's going to sell well, then you need to get *each stage* right.

Ideas

The *idea* behind your book is what makes or breaks it. One great idea can be enough to carry your whole eBook; a so-so idea is going to make the rest of your work pretty much pointless. (However brilliant your writing, customers won't buy an eBook that they have no interest in.)

eBooks in the Blogosphere

I'm going to be discussing a fairly specific type of "eBook" – specialist publications produced and sold by their authors, usually priced around $19 – $49, generally formatted as a PDF.

They can be almost any length, though somewhere between 50 and 200 pages would be typical. With this type of eBook, a couple of hundred sales would generally be considered a success and a good return on time invested.

(If you're writing an eBook as a freebie, a lot of this will apply too.)

What Not to Do

There are a couple of very easy mistakes to make when coming up with the idea for an eBook: being too comprehensive and being too mainstream.

Trying to be **comprehensive** is tempting – you want to create the final word in eBooks. But "The Ultimate Guide to Blogging" is going to be tough to write, let alone sell. Unless you're a big name in your field, people will be suspicious of a big, comprehensive eBook: they'll question whether you really have the authority to create it.

Trying to be **mainstream** works for cheap books produced by big publishers. It's not going to work well with an eBook that you're selling to a limited audience on your own site. People will compare the price of the eBook (say, $37) with the price of similar books in the bookstore (say, $7). If your eBook is in an area like personal development or weight loss, find ways to focus on a very specific part of that (e.g. raw food).

How to Get It Right

You might have a great idea for an eBook ... but you need to make sure that it's going to resonate with your audience, *and* you need to know that they'll be willing to pay.

Don't create products and services just because you think they're cool — make sure customers think they're cool, too. – Sonia Simone

Don't design a product you like ... design a product your audience is already expressing intense interest in paying for – Dave Navarro

What They REALLY Want

You can get a great sense of what your audience wants in a couple of ways:

- Through comments on your blog (and tweets, emails, etc)

- Through one-to-one conversations with individuals – perhaps through consulting or coaching

Look out for problems that come up again and again.

One of the questions I get a lot, from blog readers and from writing coaching clients, is "How do I find time to write?" – so I created a mini-eBook called *How to Find Time For Your Writing*.

Surveying Your Audience

Once you've got a good general idea of what your audience wants, you can run a survey. You'll need to give people a few options to pick from: if you just ask them "what would you like an eBook on?" they're likely to go completely blank, or to ask for something which you've got no desire to write!

To maximise your chances of getting good responses:

- Explain what the survey is about – let readers know that their input is significant and valuable

- Keep your survey short and specific

- Use multiple choice questions for speed – but give readers the opportunity to type in their own answer if they want to

- Don't make any of the questions mandatory

- Give readers a text field where they can enter anything they want

- Make text fields big enough to type in easily – I use 80 characters wide, not 50, on SurveyMonkey

- Make sure people have the option for a "don't know" or "undecided" answer where appropriate

Specific, not Comprehensive

Once you've got a mindmap and a bunch of ideas floating around, it's time to eliminate some of them. I mentioned earlier that eBooks need to be *specific*, not comprehensive. I've given a few examples in the slide here:

- Click! How to take gorgeous photos of your kids – by Rachel Devine, from Digital Photography School (http://www.digital-photography-school.com/kidsphotos)

- 100 Writing Mistakes to Avoid – by Maeve Maddox, from Daily Writing Tips (http://www.dailywritingtips.com/100-writing-mistakes-to-avoid-book/)

- 5 Big Mistakes Creative People Make with Money – by Mark McGuiness from Lateral Action (http://lateralaction.com/moneymistakes/)

These are three very different eBooks aimed at different audiences – Mark's (on the right) is a free eBook. What they've all got in common is that they're very specific:

Click is about taking gorgeous photos of your kids. It's not about photography in general or even portrait photography.

100 Writing Mistakes to Avoid isn't a manual that covers everything you need to know about writing. It simply deals with a hundred common mistakes, in spelling, word usage, grammar and punctuation.

5 Big Mistakes Creative People Make with Money is for a specific audience. It's not "everything you need to know about money management" or "5 common money mistakes" – instead, it's squarely aimed at Lateral Action's core audience of creative entrepreneurs.

Decision Time

Deciding what to write about isn't as simple as just picking the most popular option from the survey. Obviously, that's a factor – but you also need to consider:

- How much were people willing to pay?

- Do you have the knowledge to write it?

Once you've settled on an idea, it's time to move on to...

Planning

The planning stage is crucial for any written project. If you find yourself starting lots of eBooks and never finishing them, this could well be where you're falling down.

A good plan means your eBook is going to be easy to write – and that it's going to be easy to sell.

Mindmapping

You've probably used mindmapping before. It's a great way to start organising your thoughts for an eBook – it helps you to *record* your ideas but also to *generate* new ones. Put the topic or subject in the centre, and start jotting down everything that comes to you around the outside.

You can either draw your mindmap on paper, or use a piece of software like XMind.

Outlining

Once you're at this stage, you should have a cut-down mindmap that you can start to turn into an outline. It's useful to keep a couple of question in mind:

- Who are your audience?

- What will the book do for them?

Your answers are crucial as they affect what needs to go into the book. If you're writing about blogging and you've got an audience who barely know how to switch on a computer, then you're going to produce a very different book from someone with an audience of experienced WordPress designers.

The purpose also makes a difference. What should your audience be able to accomplish by the end of the book? Again, taking blogging as an example, it's probably a given that they should have a blog up and running. But depending on the angle of the book – its specific topic – then you may also be covering topics like how to make money from a blog or how to use your blog to land freelancing gigs.

Writing

This is where it all gets real!

You could spend weeks reading blog comments and emails, coming up with surveys, drawing mindmaps and creating outlines … and none of it will mean anything if you don't get down to writing.

The Blank Page

This is where writers tend to get stuck! We sit looking at that curser blinking away, and we don't know where to begin.

One of the problems we have is a lack of confidence. Even if you're an experienced blogger, you might be afraid that you can't write an eBook. Perhaps:

- You've started big projects in the past but you rarely finish them, and you're afraid this will be the same

- You don't think that you're a good enough writer

- You don't think that anyone will *pay* to read your writing

- You're afraid the whole thing will be a big waste of time

Let me tell you something: you *can* do it. If you've never written anything longer than a blog post, then yes, it's daunting. But it's absolutely possible.

So, here's how to conquer the blank page…

Break it Down

A couple of weeks ago, I had a guest post on Copyblogger – How to Write a High-Quality EBook in 30 Days (http://www.copyblogger.com/eBook-in-30-day/). I broke down the writing process, much as I'm doing in this talk. In fact, I didn't give readers a whole 30 days for writing – I gave them 20, sandwiched between 5 days of planning and 5 days of editing.

Now, if you're aiming to write a 20,000 word eBook, that might sound like an incredibly daunting task. Twenty *thousand* words – that's 40 pages of fairly small dense text, and once you've added images and headers and increased the font size to make it easier to read, it's probably a 100-page eBook.

But if you break that 20,000 down, you get:

1,000 words per day for 20 days

Or 500 words per day for 40 days

Now, 500 words is a shortish blog post, and 1000 words is a longish blog post. Assuming you've got an outline, you can probably write between 500 and 1000 words in an hour.

If you start on Monday and write 500 words a day for 40 days, you'd have an eBook by Christmas.

Staying on Track

Whatever the timeframe is for your eBook, you need to stay on track.

You probably have a comfortable blogging routine – maybe you're publishing posts twice a week and a newsletter once a week. You need to get into a good writing rhythm with your eBook, too.

That might mean writing every day. It might mean writing for one full day every week. It might mean that you write first thing in the morning, before you check emails or start blogging. Plan ahead with your writing sessions, and **put them on your calendar.**

It's helpful to set yourself milestones for your eBook. You might not want to fix a launch date just yet – but you could decide:

- I'll get the outline completed this week.

- I'll finish the first draft by the end of January.

...and so on.

When you sit down to write, it's amazing how many distractions suddenly appear. You think of that email that you need to send, or you want to check twitter, or you remember that you need to go and buy milk. And even if you resist those, you might just sit there staring at the blank page...

Something which works incredibly well is **using a timer**. You can use your phone or your kitchen timer or an online one like Tick Tock Timer here. Set it for anywhere up to 30 minutes and just *write*. Don't stop writing until the timer goes off.

Another great way to stay on track and to actually get your writing done is to **use social media**. Tell everyone on Twitter that you're going to be writing for the next hour – or tweet your wordcount. Post an announcement on your FaceBook page about your upcoming eBook, and start generating some excitement. Being accountable to your peer group and to your readers is very powerful.

So that's how to actually get the writing done – now I'm going to touch on the writing itself.

Conversational Style

Some people, when they write an eBook, adopt a totally different voice from their blogging one. They feel the pressure of writing a *book* rather than a blog post, and they end up adopting a dry, academic style.

Don't do that. Your regular readers will want your eBook to sound like "you" and new readers will need to be drawn in by your voice. If you make your eBook conversational and friendly, it's going to sell better – especially if you're providing a free sample.

It might be appropriate to modify your style a little bit, depending on how you normally write. For instance, if you have a lot of long, rambling, personal digressions on your blog, these may not be appropriate in an eBook.

If you get stuck while you're writing, think *how would I say this in an email to one of my readers?* Write it like that.

Encourage Action

You might not always need to give action steps on your blog, but it's a *really* good idea to do this in your eBook – it adds a lot of value for readers, and it means they're more likely to spread the word and tell their friends how great your eBook is.

If you're anything like me, you've got a whole stack of eBooks and information products sitting on your hard drive – and plenty of books on your shelves. You've probably *read* quite a few of them without actually taking action. And that means that you've not really gained much from them.

Here are a couple of examples of ways to encourage action: you can have "pause" points in the text, like Charlie Gilkey does here with this yellow box, or you can list

actions at the end of each chapter or section, like Chris Garrett does with these "next step actions" at the end of his short Guest Posting workbook.

When you're giving action steps, make them really clear and concrete. Use the imperative – *find blogs ... send enquiries ... write posts ...* like you would if you were writing a recipe.

Once you've got the content written, it's time to move on to ...

Editing

This is a crucial stage of the writing process. It's when you have the chance to shape your creative (but possibly messy) first draft into something polished, something that you feel good charging for and that your customers feel good paying for.

Get Feedback

Ask around for fellow bloggers and eBook writers who can help by giving feedback on your book. Ideally, you'll want them to be in your target audience – so you might want to ask your blog readers. You could also try forums like Third Tribe, or people you know on Twitter or FaceBook.

When you're asking for feedback, it's really helpful to give people specific questions, like "Did you understand Chapter 8?" or "Were the links between sections clear?"

You'll want to let them know what stage your eBook is at: tell them it's a first draft, a little rough around the edges, and you're not too concerned with typos but you do want to know whether the whole thing hangs together.

You'll want to ask, ideally, between about 5 and 8 people for feedback – if you only have one or two responses, they can be a bit skewed, and if you have dozens of people responding, you're going to get overwhelmed.

Redrafting

I tend to split my editing into two stages; the first of those is redrafting, and that's when I take on board the feedback that I've had.

Redrafting is when you make *major* changes to your eBook. You might be cutting out whole chapters, or adding in new ones. You might be reordering information or rewriting large chunks of the text. You might well be adding in any missing pieces like photos or case studies.

Save each version of your eBook separately – that way, if you don't like the way you've redrafted something, you can always go back.

Once you're basically happy that all your chapters are in the right order and that you've included everything that needs including, it's time to move on to the nitty-gritty of editing...

Close Editing

At this stage, you're filling in any last bits of information – you can see in the slide that I've left the introduction until last...!

Don't just look out for typos and spelling mistakes, though those are important – pay attention to the flow and style of your sentences. I've rewritten a few things here because they were a bit long-winded.

This is also a good opportunity to put in any last bits of formatting: you can see here that I've put a sentence in bold, for instance

Look out for chances to add in chapter references – if you've said "later in this eBook" then giving a specific chapter is helpful.

Which brings me on to your final editing task...

Chapter Headings

When you're planning and writing your eBook, you're probably putting in fairly short, descriptive titles. I'm going to use *How to Launch the **** Out of your EBook* as an example – it covers topics like "your target audience" and "writing your eBook". Those are great topics, but they'd make terrible titles. The problem is, a lot of eBook writers just use the first words that come to mind as a title.

Now, Dave and Naomi know a thing or two about titles, so they didn't use those. They came up with much more engaging titles:

"The Simple Strategy for Making Your Blog Attract Your Target Audience"

"The Biggest Problem With Writing Your EBook (And How to Solve It)"

These are also titles that would work just fine for blog posts. And that's something to keep in mind when you're writing your own title headings – imagine that you're going to publish this chapter on your blog, and give it a title that would really grab attention.

Chapter titles are important because (a) you might want to use them on your own sales page and (b) people who review the book may well quote the titles.

And so, with your chapters in place, that's the eBook done!

Recap...

We've covered:

- Ideas – how to make sure your eBook is guaranteed to be really popular with your readers

- Planning – how to come up with a great outline for your eBook, so the writing itself is much easier

- Writing – being confident, staying focused and writing in a style that's accessible to readers

- Editing – making your eBook as good as possible

Sales Pages

I'm not going to say much about sales pages: the whole idea here is that your eBook is going to do most of the selling for you.

Sales pages cause a lot of anxiety. They're not a big deal and anyone can write a sales page – there's no magic trick here. A very basic sales page needs just a few elements:

- **A headline** – you could just use the title of your eBook, though it's a good idea to come up with something compelling, like Darren Rowse's title here.

- **A buy button** – pretty essential! Make it clear and prominent.

- **A chapter list** – you don't have to do this, but if you came up with good chapter titles, it's an easy way to show your eBook's contents

- **Testimonials** – these are optional, but they make a huge difference. Some of the people who gave you feedback may well be willing to write a short testimonial.

- **A guarantee** – this helps give your readers confidence, especially if they've never bought and eBook before.

Where Next?

Once you're written one eBook, you're going to find it easy to add to it – which means more value for your readers and more money for you.

Bonuses

One simple way to add value is to include bonuses. You might do this before you launch the eBook, or you might add them in the future. It's nice to give bonuses to existing buyers for free.

Your bonuses could be:

- **Detailed case studies** – if you do case studies, try to make them ones that readers can easily relate to. If you're writing an eBook on "Making Your First $100 From Your Blog", you probably don't want a case study about how ProBlogger makes money.

- **Audio / video** – many people prefer listening or watching, instead of reading. You could produce an audio version of your whole eBook, or you could interview some experts to give extra advice. Videos might be a huge help if you're trying to teach something that's hard to describe in words and photos – perhaps a video of *how* to knead bread.

- **Templates** – these could be spreadsheets, documents, html web pages, almost anything that will help save your reader time and effort.

- **Consulting** – this is a pretty big add-on, but if you want to create a premium version of your eBook, you could offer one-to-one consulting, or group consulting.

I've given an example from *Become a Travel Ninja*, which is one of Chris Guillebeau's *Unconventional Guides* (http://chrisguillebeau.com/travel-ninja/). Customers can either opt for the basic version – the guide, spreadsheet and audio Q&A – or for the complete version with sample itineraries and a bonus audio session.

At some point, of course, you're going to end up with so many bonuses that you've no longer got "an eBook plus extras," you've got a whole new digital product…

Expanding an EBook

The Sticky eBook Formula is a really great eBook by Kelly Kingman from Sticky eBooks (http://stickyeBooks.com/the-sticky-eBook-formula). Earlier this year, she got together with Pamela Wilson to expand it into a whole set of tools – eBook Evolution (http://stickyeBooks.com/landing/get-eBook-evolution).

The eBook is priced at $27 – the whole eBook Evolution package is $147.

You might not necessary want to expand your eBook into a huge product – perhaps your audience won't want to pay that much all at once. Instead, you might try…

Creating a Series of EBooks

I've given a couple of examples of series in the slide. The first thing you can see is that each book in the series is branded in the same way: there's a consistent style that makes it very obvious that they all go together.

Series are great for you and they're great for the reader. It's much easier to write a book in a series than a totally new one with no context, because you've already established things like the layout, writing style, audience and so on. They're also easy to sell!

They're great for your readers because they'll know what to expect. If they've bought one or two eBooks already, they'll be confident that others in the series will also be useful.

A series gives you a lot of extra options. You can offer a package deal, which gives readers the chance to get all the books at a discount. You can bring on additional authors to write books in the series, which is what Rockable Press have done – I've only shown three of their eBooks here, but they have quite a few more with the same branding.

 If you do release a book in a series, it's a great idea to email people who've bought your previous eBook and give them a discount code.

And Finally...

Writing is a kind of magic. I've sometimes compared it to spinning straw into gold ... except without the straw.

When you write an eBook, you start with nothing: a blank page. But by hitting keys on a keyboard, you turn that page into something you can sell. Something that helps people all around the world – people who you'll probably never meet face to face, but whose lives you may well have changed through your writing.

Ali Luke is the author of the *Blogger's Guides* series, including **The Blogger's Guide to Irresistible EBooks**.

Get your copy at:

www.bloggers-guides.com