Welcome to *On Track!*

Over the next six weeks, you'll get going on your writing project – and you'll learn plenty of ways to stick with your writing. We'll be tackling common issues like initial resistance to writing and finding people to support you.

During the course, you will:

- Get started on a project. If it's a smallish one, you might well finish it.
- Learn tons of tricks for writing effectively, so that writing becomes easier and even more fun.
- Make new friends – we've got a bunch of fantastic writers signed up.

In this introduction, I'm going to explain how the course works, so that you know exactly what to expect. You might want to print this out for easy reference.

Introducing ... Ali!

You may already know me. (You may have been coached by me!) When I look down the list of members, I see lots of familiar names from my inbox, my Twitter list, my blog comments...

But maybe you don't know me very well. Or maybe you'd like to know a bit more. *(If not, feel free to skip this section, I promise I won't be offended!)*

I'm Ali Luke, and I was writing as Ali Hale until I got married last September – so you might have seen posts by me under that name, too.

All through my teens, I wanted to be a writer – and I still have occasional moments when I don't quite believe that I really *do* get to do this for a living! It's a bit like waking up to the first day of the summer holidays, every single day.

As you might have spotted in the previous sentence, I'm British. ;-) I write "holidays" not "vacations", and I spell words the British way, when I'm blogging on my own site or writing my own courses and ebooks.

Given that I'm going to be teaching you about writing, you probably want to know a bit about my writing credentials. I've been a freelance writer since August 2008, working for a number of blogs, and I've been creating products aimed at writers since 2009. Last time I tried to add it up, I found I'd written well over a thousand blog posts in the past two and a half years.

I also coach writers, working one-to-one with them to help with specific pieces of writing, and bigger-picture aims.

I've been published in the UK magazines *Writers Forum* and *My Weekly*, and have won a couple of short story competition prizes with *Writing Magazine.*

I've got a degree in English literature from Cambridge University, and a Masters in Creative and Life Writing from Goldsmiths College, London.

Whew! I think that's enough about me... so let's get onto...

How We'll Be Working Together

You'll get your course materials straight to your inbox. They are:

Course Introduction and Course Ebook: Today

You're reading the course introduction. ;-)

I'll be sending your ebook in a separate email, later today. Look out for it in your inbox.

Weekly Lessons: Mondays

Every **Monday**, you'll receive that week's lesson. This will give you:

- Clear advice on the topic for the week, with plenty of different ideas on what you can do – because not all writers like to work in the same way
- An assignment for you to try out yourself, so you can make real progress

Just like this course introduction, you'll get:

- All the lesson content in the email itself, so you can read it straight away
- A PDF (attached) with snazzier formatting, so you can save it to your computer or print it out

It's totally up to you which you read – the content is the same!

At the end of the course, on February 28th, you'll get all the lessons bundled together in one handy pack.

Group Updates: Thursdays

Every **Thursday**, we'll have a Group Update.

This will come in the same format as the lessons. It'll have:

- News and updates from the group (we want to hear about how *your* writing is going!)
- A Q&A where I'll answer your specific questions

Support and Encouragement: All Week!

All week, we can stay in touch with one another:

- You can email me any time, with questions for the Q&A, or just to let me know how your writing's going.
- We have a Twitter list of members at http://twitter.com/#!/list/aliventures/on-track-members If you're not on the list and would like to be, just email me your Twitter handle (or send me a message at @aliventures). Please use the hashtag #ontrack to make it clear that you're tweeting to the group.

Course Wrap-Up: Monday 28th February

At the end of the course, I'll send you:

- A file with *all* the lessons, so you have them in one handy document
- Success stories from the course (send yours in at any time!)
- Contact details (Twitter or email) for members who want to stay in touch

Important note: You're welcome to share the course materials with your business partner or with a close family member, and it's fine to quote a short excerpt if you're writing about the course (e.g. on your blog, on Twitter, or in a review).

Obviously enough, though, you can't post whole lessons on your blog, email them to all your friends, or put them into a book and sell it...

The Course Outline

Here's what we'll be covering, week by week.

Lesson 1: Make a Great Start – Monday 17th January

- An introduction to the course, so you're confident about what's coming up week by week

- Four ways to get past the first hurdle of getting started – so that you can get going with your project straight away

- A quick, simple (but important) assignment to get you writing – this only takes fifteen minutes

Lesson 2: Setting Milestones That Work – Monday 24th January

- Step-by-step guidance on how to split your work-in-progress into sensible milestones that'll keep you motivated

- Specific advice on what to do if your project doesn't seem to fit (for instance, if you're writing a blog that has no specific end point)

- Why deadlines matter – and how to set sane ones

Lesson 3: Your Perfect Writing Routine – Monday 31st January

- How to find your best writing time of day – this alone can double or triple how much you write in an hour

- The difference between setting time targets and word targets – there's no "right" way, so this lesson helps you figure out what works for you

- The advantages of short writing sessions – and of long ones. Again, this is all about finding the right pace for you

Lesson 4: Staying On Track, Every Week – Monday 7th February

- Four ways to solve the "I don't have enough time" problem, so that you keep on writing regularly

- Specific advice on planning different types of project – novels, blogs and ebooks – so that you can make sure you don't waste time scratching your head or running off on a tangent

- The difference between *first drafts* and *final drafts*, so that you don't get bogged down in trying to achieve perfection

Lesson 5: Sharing Your Love of Writing – Monday 14th February

- Four places to find writing support – including a couple of easy ones for when you don't have much time or energy

- A round-up of what other course members are working on, so you can connect with others

- Tips on sharing your work with a friend or a group – I know how daunting this can be, but also how rewarding it is, and how much it can help you grow

Lesson 6: All the Resources You Need – Monday 21st February

- Why you have more resources than you think – a fresh look at your own skills and experiences

- The four crucial qualities which every writer needs, with specific tips on how to build them

- The three big external resources that matter, and how to gather and create these

Contact Details

You can get in touch with me whenever you want.

My email address is **ali@aliventures.com***.* Every course email (including this one) will be sent from that address, so you can just hit "reply" and your message will come straight to my inbox.

On Twitter, you'll find me at **@aliventures.**

And you'll be getting an email from me tomorrow (Monday 17th) with your first lesson. Hope you're excited about getting started!

Ali x

On Track #1: Make a Great Start

I know that, like me, you probably have multiple writing projects that you want to work on. Maybe you're writing a blog – or two – along with an ebook. Perhaps you're fitting in your novel around your Master's thesis.

Pick One Project

It's so tempting to try to do a bit of everything – but that doesn't often lead to sustained momentum. So, for the duration of this course, I'm asking you to **pick *one* project to concentrate on.** That doesn't have to be the *only* thing you write for the next six weeks, of course, but when you tackle the assignments, I want you to be working on that key project.

In fact, before we go any further, **write it down.** Even better, send out a tweet with the #ontrack hashtag, and let us know what you're working on. Make a commitment to *this* project.

(Not sure what to pick? Go for the smallest project you have – one which you think you can finish in six weeks. Once you build up your momentum on that, it's going to be easier to tackle the next one.)

I'm going to be working on something myself, a project I've not touched in weeks – a rewrite of one of my ebooks, The Staff Blogging Course. I'm doing jury service this week, so I know I won't have much time – but I'll at least have time for today's assignment. I'll let you know on Thursday how I get on – and I'd love to hear how *you* get on, too!

In this first lesson, we'll be easing ourselves in gently. We'll look at:

- That initial resistance that *all* writers feel (it's not just you!)
- Finding the right place in your project to begin
- Blocking out time for your writing
- Two ways to make the writing process easier: prompts and timers

I'll be offering you different options to try, like "making a writing appointment". You don't have to do all of these at the same time – though you might want to combine two or more of them. If you can try some of them out this week, great! But they're not homework: they're tools for you to whenever suits you.

At the end of the lesson, I'll give you a short assignment. This is the bit I want you to try this week! It'll only take fifteen minutes, and I'll be doing it too.

Ready to get going?

Making a Start – Even When You're Feeling Stuck

It's normal to feel a certain sense of reluctance when starting a big project – or getting back into one that's lain dormant for a while.

Perhaps you've had a great idea for months, even years, but it never feels like quite the right time to write it. Or maybe you did make a start on your project, but life just got in the way, and you haven't made any progress for ages.

The thing is, you'll never feel *quite* ready to write. You'll always think that there'll be a better time – when you've got more energy, when life isn't quite so hectic, when chores have been ticked off. Writing is hard work – emotionally, mentally – and there'll always be a great excuse not to write.

So, here are some ways to jump over that first wall, and get started with your project:

#1: Find a Good Place to Start

One of the reasons we get stuck is because *we don't know where to begin*. It's hard to get going if you're not even sure that you're starting in the right place.

Like I said at the start of this lesson, if you're not even sure what project to focus on, try picking the smallest. That way, you can knock something off your list – and build up your confidence for the bigger ones.

If you have a huge project with no obvious beginning, start with whatever feels easiest. That might be a section of your ebook which doesn't require much research, or a post for your blog which is straightforward to write.

Sometimes, one particular section of a project seems especially attractive. You don't have to start at the "beginning" – if you're itching to write Chapter 3, jump in there.

Above all, don't get bogged down deciding where to begin. There's rarely one perfect place – wherever you begin, you'll end up with a complete project eventually.

#2: Make a Writing Appointment

If you're going to write, you need to carve time out of your schedule. Even if you think you have plenty of free time – maybe in the evenings, or at the weekends – make a writing appointment. Otherwise, you'll end up thinking "I'll do it tomorrow".

Block out at least an hour, ideally two. During that time, you're going to *write*.

If you're not sure you'll stick to that appointment, try:

- Getting out of your house. Take a notebook and pen, or your laptop, to a local cafe.
- Setting your writing time an hour before your favourite TV show. If you know that you really do only have an hour, you're more likely to get on with the writing!
- Telling other people – your spouse, kids, parents, Twitter followers – that you'll be writing, and that you'll need to be left in peace for an hour or two.

Really can't find an hour? Then block out just fifteen minutes – first thing in the morning works well, or straight after dinner.

#3: Give Yourself a Warm-Up

Instead of staring at the blank page, trying to force yourself to start, do a writing warm-up.

That means spending the first ten minutes of your session writing as fast as you can, from a prompt. You could use a book of prompts, have a go at the Creative Copy Challenge (http://www.creativecopychallenge.com) or just pick from one of the three below ones:

- A blue glass frog falls and breaks.

- "There's never any sunlight here."

- The worst idea I ever had was ...

You can write fiction, non-fiction, memoir, poetry ... or absolutely anything you want. The point is to get your writing muscles moving – you can delete the piece as soon as you're done.

#4: Use a Timer

Timers aren't just great for writing warm-ups. They can help you focus on your big project.

There are a bunch of timers around – I tend to use Tick Tock Timer (http://ticktocktimer.com), but you can find plenty of others. When I want to focus on a piece of writing, I typically set a timer for anywhere between 20 minutes and one hour, and while the timer is ticking, I *just write*.

Maybe you feel there's no real difference between setting aside an hour in which to write, and setting aside that hour with a timer ticking away. All I can say is give it a try – I've been amazed how effective this is for keeping me on track.

Summing Up

This first week is all about getting over that initial wall of resistance. It's your first few steps in getting back on track with your writing.

You can use tips #2 - #4 above (setting aside time, using prompts, using a timer) any time you get stuck. You may want to turn to #1 (finding a place to start) when you finish the current section of your project.

Assignment

Today's assignment comes in two parts. You can complete them at any time before Monday 24th.

1. If you've not already done it, *write down the name* of the project you're going to focus on. If you want, share it with the group by Tweeting it (#ontrack) or hit "reply" on this email to just share it with me.
2. Now, set a timer for 15 minutes (or more, if you can manage it) and work on your project. You don't have to show your writing to anyone. Your material can be as first-drafty as you like.

Coming Up on Thursday 20th

On Thursday, I'll be sending out the first Group Update. This will include a Q&A, so if you've got any questions at all – they don't have to be based on this lesson – email me (ali@aliventures.com).

We'd also love to hear about how you get on with the assignment! Send in any success stories, and I'll be sharing those too.

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

Coming Up on Monday 24th

Your second lesson is about "setting milestones that work". This is all about avoiding that feeling of "how am I going to write a whole book?"

I'll be explaining why milestones are so important, giving you a step-by-step guide to help you break down your project into sensible chunks, and offering you some reasons to consider setting yourself a deadline.

On Track #2: Setting Milestones That Work

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

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

- Different drafts

- Major sections

- Chapter by chapter

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

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

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

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

#1: Break it Into Successive Drafts

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

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

What counts as a "finished" draft?

- A first draft gets you from the start to the end of your project. There'll be lots of missing pieces or rough edges, but you've got most of your ideas down in words – even if it seems far from perfect.

- A second draft involves reorganising, adding new material, cutting sections which aren't working, and so on. You won't usually be tweaking individual words at this stage; instead, you're making sure that the draft is coherent.

- A third draft might involve getting feedback from other people and incorporating that into your project. At this stage, you're focusing on making the whole piece flow smoothly.

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

#2: Break Drafts into Major Sections

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

- Your novel might divide into several plot stages, separated by turning points or major plot events.

- Your book or ebook might have three big sections dealing with different topics.

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

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

#3: Drill Down to Chapter by Chapter

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

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

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

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

Help! My Project Doesn't Fit!

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

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

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

- Get to 50 posts (or 10, 20, 100 etc...)

- Write guest posts for ten different blogs

- Write an in-depth series of "pillar content"

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

Should Milestones Have a Deadline?

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

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

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

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

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

Summing Up

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

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

Assignment

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

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

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

   And now – go and hit that milestone!

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

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

Coming Up on Thursday 27th

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

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

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

Coming Up on Monday 31st

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

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

On Track #3: Your Perfect Writing Routine

No two writers work in quite the same way. Some write best in the mornings, others at night. Some like to aim for a target number of words, others prefer to write for a certain length of time.

Never let fellow writers, or writing teachers, convince you that there's *one true way* to write. All that matters is that you produce work that you're happy with, at a reasonable speed.

Today, we'll be looking at different ways for you to build a routine – like setting targets, writing at your best time of day, and writing for set periods.

Building Your Writing Muscles

At the moment, you might not be used to writing very much. Perhaps you manage three or four hours of writing most weeks – or less.

You might be happy with that, in which case, great! But chances are, you'd like to do more. Perhaps you want to finish a book, create some really strong content for your blog, or even write for a living. Whatever it is, you know you'll need to write in a more focused, sustained way.

The good news is, that's absolutely possible. **Your ability to write is a bit like a muscle – one which gets stronger the more you use it.**

I've seen this in my own writing life: as a student, I wanted desperately to be a "writer" – but most weeks, I only wrote a thousand words or so of my novel – even in the vacations, when I had plenty of time on my hands. Nowadays, I write for a living, often producing four or five thousand words in a single day.

Just like building physical muscles, your writing muscles need a good routine of regular exercise. Here are some things to try. You don't have to use any of these, but they've all worked for a good number of writers, and chances are that one of them will work for you too.

(You may also find that different routines work with different types of writing. Be flexible, and enjoy experimenting.)

#1: Set Yourself a Time Target

This is where a lot of writers start out when trying to build a routine. They set a goal like "write for an hour". You tried this out in week one, writing for 15 minutes or so, with a timer running.

Time targets are great for:

- Getting into the writing habit (e.g. writing for 15 minutes every single morning)

- Focusing on the quality, rather than the quantity, of words produced. Even if you only write 100 words, you've still hit your target if you stuck with the writing for an hour.

What's a good time target? I'd suggest aiming for 30-45 minutes per day, to start with.

Or ... #2: Set Yourself a Word Target

Another popular way to get into the writing habit is to set a target number of words each day (or, if you prefer, each week). I've heard 1,000 words per day recommended by a lot of writers, Stephen King amongst them – personally, I think this is too much for most people.

Word count targets are great for:

- Steady, predictable progress – if you write 500 words a day, every day, you'll know that you can finish a 15,000 word ebook in a month.

- Forwards momentum – instead of fiddling around getting the words right, or staring into space just to fill up your writing hour

What's a good word target? Try 400-500 words per day.

There's nothing stopping you from mixing word and time targets (e.g. "write for an hour and produce at least 500 words") – though if this feels too pressured, focus on just one or the other.

#3: Find Your Best Time of Day

Are you a morning lark or a night owl? I'm definitely a morning person, and have been since my teens – I used to get up at 6am to finish off homework, rather than staying up late, because I knew I'd feel much more focused in the morning.

I know plenty of writers who, like me, do their best work in the mornings. But I know many others who work well late at night (when folks like me are struggling to string together a coherent sentence).

You probably already have a gut sense of the best time of day for you to write – the time when you find it easy to concentrate. Try shifting your writing sessions around a bit, though; you might find that you have a peak of energy at an unexpected time.

Some good times to try out are:

- First thing in the morning (you might need to set your alarm half an hour early)

- Your lunch hour – can provide a nice concentrated space of time for writing

- Straight after work when you get home (especially if you always mean to write in the evenings but never quite get round to it)

- Late at night when everyone else is in bed

#4: Write in Short Bursts

One great way to focus on writing is to do short bursts, setting a timer for 20-45 minutes and writing flat-out. If you're pressed for time – perhaps you really can only find 20 minutes per day – then this can be a good way to start building up a writing routine.

Advantages of short writing bursts are:

- You'll learn that you don't have to have a whole afternoon free in order to write

- You can write daily, and writing will quickly become a habit

- You can write fast – you won't get tired out half-way through the session

If you're going to do short bursts, be disciplined about them. Make sure you *only* write during your writing blast – no checking emails, or even checking facts. If you suddenly remember a chore you need to do, jot down a note on a piece of paper. If you need a bit of information which you'd have to look up, write a note to yourself in the text (I use [square brackets] for these) and find it later.

Or ... #5: Write for Longer Sessions

Alternatively, you might find short sessions too pressured or restrictive. Perhaps you write best when you can get into the flow of a piece – and that might mean having a couple of three-hour sessions each week instead of a 30 minute session each day.

The advantages of longer sessions are:

- You may well find you start to speed up after the first 30 minutes or so, once you get into your stride

- Writing can feel more like a treat and less like an extra chore to be squeezed in – it's easier to relax into your writing when you're not feeling pressed for time

I find that long writing sessions work well for extended pieces, like novel scenes, where I'm typically writing 3,000 words or so. Short sessions suit me for blog posts or ebook chapters that are split into short, discrete sections.

You might like to switch between long and short sessions, maybe writing for 30 minutes each weekday, then writing for a couple of hours every Saturday.

Assignment:

This week, I'm hoping you're into the swing of your current project. So your assignment is a bit bigger...

On *at least three* days between now and Monday 7th:

Write 500 words *OR* write for 45 minutes.

(If you can do this every day, fantastic!)

See how that feels – too much, or too little? Experiment with different times of day, and different places. Keep a brief log of your writing sessions so that you can figure out what works best for you.

If you get stuck, just send me an email, or let me know on Twitter (@aliventures).

Coming Up on Thursday 3rd

On Thursday, I'll be sending round the third group update. If you've got any writing tips to share, or any successes to celebrate, drop me an email – ali@aliventures.com

As usual, there'll be a Q&A – so send in any questions. They can be related to this week's topic, or they can be on anything to do with writing.

Coming Up on Monday 7th

Next Monday, we'll be looking at how to stick with your writing, week by week.

We'll dig into planning and structuring projects, so that you know how to avoid going off on long tangents. And we'll cover the difference between first drafts and final drafts, so you don't get bogged down trying to make your work *perfect* right at the start.

On Track #4: Staying On Track, Every Week

We're at the start of the fourth week of this course, so you've probably made good headway with your main project. Perhaps you've not been able to do as much as you'd hoped, but you've made some definite progress all the same.

Over the next three weeks, we'll be continuing to build great habits and set you up for the future– so you can get your project finished, and build up great writing habits for the future. This week is all about *staying* on track.

When Life Gets in the Way

This week, I've been daydreaming about getting away from it all – booking a little cottage on an island for a week, so that I can just *write*.

It's an attractive idea. But I know how much of my inspiration and energy comes from daily life – plus, I want to keep writing as a major part of my life, not something separate and remote.

Maybe you feel like you could get so much more writing done if only life didn't get in the way. I'd love to wave a magic wand and take away all the distractions and unwanted commitments in your life – but I can't do that. What I can do is share some tips on what works for other busy writers.

- **Learn to say "no".** Turn down commitments that you don't want. In particular, say "no" to anything which is going to interfere with your writing – if you're being asked to write for free, for instance, and it's going to take up time you could spend on paid work.

- **Find a regular time slot for writing**. I tend to write in the mornings, so – where possible – I avoid scheduling anything else there (calls, visiting my granny, shopping, etc). If you're not sure what your best writing time is, go back over last week's lesson.

- **Find a good place to write**. If it's next to impossible to write at home, due to kids/partner/housemates/pets etc, then get out to a coffee shop or library. One focused hour's writing will result in stronger work than three hours spent trying to write through constant distractions and interruptions.

- **Keep a time log**. For one week, write down everything you do. You could do this with a notebook, jotting down "9.15am – wrote blog post" "10.00am – checked emails" – and so on, or you could mark out a spreadsheet in fifteen minute intervals and write down what you did during each, using ditto marks where you continued with the same task as before. Not only does this point up areas which are taking up a lot more time than you realise, having to write down what you're doing also helps you stay on track.

I don't know what exact situations you're facing in your life, but my guess is that you have a pretty good idea of what needs to be done to start freeing up decent chunks of quality time for your writing. Find a way, this week, to start giving your writing a proper place in your life.

When Writing Gets in the Way

Distractions and diversions don't just come from life in general. They also crop up within your writing.

This can take several forms. For some writers I know, their distractions come from the appeal of a shiny new project. Their favourite stage is the *start* of something new – but after a couple of gripping novel chapters, or a few great blog posts, they suddenly lose momentum and switch to the next project.

For other writers, distractions come from not planning a project out. They keep throwing more and more into it, until their novel ends up running off on a huge tangent, or until their blog turns readers away because it's so unfocused.

There are plenty of other ways to get distracted by writing itself, like:

- Doing too much research

- Endlessly fiddling with sentences, trying to make them *perfect*

- Working on something easy (like a blog post) when you should be doing something harder (like an ebook)

- Taking on too many different projects at once

Of course, no project will come out just right the first time: **some cutting, editing and redrafting is always going to be necessary**. That's part of the process. I've cut out whole characters and subplots from my novel, because as I wrote, I realised they weren't working.

However ... in order to keep going forwards, your work needs to go through three big stages: planning, drafting and redrafting.

Planning Your Project

I'm not going to suggest that you plan out every detail before you start. That's generally a bit counter-productive – as you write, you'll naturally change your mind on some things, and get a clearer view on others.

What you want is enough of a plan to keep you moving forwards, and to ensure that you're going in the right direction (making it easy to spot time-wasting tangents when they pop up).

For a novel, that means having an idea of how it's all going to end, knowing a few major plot points along the way, and having a sentence or two describing what happens in your first four or five chapters. You should also have some clear ideas about who your main characters are.

Fiction is tough to plan in detail, and unless you're writing for a genre with very specific plot requirements, you'll probably want to allow yourself plenty of space to explore the story.

For a blog, again, you won't need to plan in great detail. Unlike most written projects, blogs rarely have a planned end point (unless you're planning to sell the blog) – they can run indefinitely. So I'd suggest that you plan for a big milestone: perhaps making a certain amount of money, or reaching a certain number of readers.

You'll want to have some plans for the posts you'll write – perhaps just a list of titles. You can also start thinking about any extras that you want to produce further down the line, like newsletters and ebooks.

For an ebook, you'll want to do a lot more planning – especially if you plan to sell it. You'll need to figure out whether there's a market for your topic (I'd suggest running a survey to find out what your readers are most interested in).

You should be able to produce a clear outline, so that you know your major sections and chapters. Yes, your plan might still change a bit along the way, but having a clear idea of what's *in* lets you know what's *out* – so you can avoid long diversions which don't fit well.

You don't need to spend a great deal of time on planning. An hour, split across two or three days (to give your subconscious time to mull it over) might well be enough to start with. View your plan as a working document, and come back to it during the drafting and redrafting stages.

Writing Your Project

Every writer has a slightly different drafting process. I like to write fast, particularly for fiction, getting the bare bones of my story down – before going back and rewriting everything from the beginning.

But I know plenty of writers who work slowly and meticulously through their first draft. They still make some changes, especially once they've received feedback, but their work is much more polished from the start.

In the end, it doesn't make too much difference. We all end up at roughly the same point after roughly the same amount of work.

What matters is that you find a process that works for *you* – and that you distinguish between your first draft and your finished project.

First drafts can be as sloppy as you like. They can be riddled with notes to self, missing facts, clunky sentences, abandoned tangents, contradictions, repetitive bits, and so on. No-one but you needs to see your first draft. Of course, you may well find that you prefer to neaten up as you go along – that's fine.

What you don't want to do is get hung up on perfection. If you're stuck, just get *something* written, however rough, then skip to the next section. Some writers find it helps to set a timer while working on the first draft, hammering out as many words as possible in, say, an hour.

Redrafting means an awful lot more than just checking for typos. It's a process of *rethinking.* Perhaps your ebook needs to be completely restructured, or one of your novel's characters seems flat and uninteresting. Maybe your blog post could do with a much snappier introduction, or a more powerful conclusion.

Sometimes, redrafting will prompt you to revisit an earlier stage – adding to or amending your plan, or drafting a whole new section. Often, redrafting means slowing down, taking time to craft a great sentence.

As part of your redrafting, I'd highly recommend showing some or all of your work-in-progress to other people. Don't choose the best bit, either. When I'm workshopping sections of my novel, I'm always tempted to pick something that I think is good, or which I hope my group will enjoy. Instead, I make myself choose a scene that I'm unsure about, something that isn't yet working and needs some outside input. That way, the whole project gets stronger.

(Next week, we'll be looking at different sources of writing support – which will help you find people to share your work with.)

Summing Up

We've covered a lot today, so here's the quick version. There's no one perfect way to complete a writing project. But you'll almost certain find that it helps to:

- **Set aside time for your project on a regular basis**. Even if you can only spend 15 minutes a day, or a couple of hours once a week, you'll make progress.

- **Do some planning.** It's often tempting to launch straight in, especially when you're feeling excited about your ideas, or when you know you don't have much time to write. But an hour spent planning can save you weeks of unnecessary work.

- **Separate the first draft from the final polished piece.** Try to avoid huge tangents in your first draft, but let yourself explore a little – and don't worry if your writing is a bit sloppy. No-one has to see it.

- **Get feedback during the redrafting process.** You'll inevitably miss things in your own work – places where something was so obvious to you that you've not made it clear to the reader.

Assignment

You've got a choice this week, depending on where you're at with your work-in-progress.

Either...

1. Spend half an hour planning out the rest of your project. (With a big project, you'll end up with a zoomed-out overview. With a short ebook or blog post series, you should be able to get a reasonable amount of detail into your plan.)

Or ...

2. If you already have a plan, spend half an hour drafting the start of the next scene, chapter, section, etc. Set a timer and focus on just writing – don't worry about making it perfect.

(And if you're really keen, you can do both!)

Coming Up on Thursday 10th

On Thursday, I'll be sending round the fourth group update. If you've got any writing tips to share, or any successes to celebrate, drop me an email – ali@aliventures.com

If you've got any questions about writing – they don't have to be related to this week's topic – then just ask and I'll answer them in the Q&A.

Coming Up on Monday 14th

Next Monday it's Valentine's Day! So we'll be looking at how to share your love of writing with others.

We'll cover different ways to find people who'll encourage your writing, and I'll give you some tips on how best to share your work with a group of fellow writers.

Important (though optional!)

Email me (ali@aliventures.com) a brief description of what you're working on, and I'll compile a list to send to everyone on Monday. This should let us all find fellow writers who're tackling similar projects – really useful to getting feedback and support.

I'll use your first name and email address from the *On Track* list sign-up, so let me know if you'd prefer different contact details.

On Track #5: Sharing Your Love of Writing

Writing can be a lonely occupation – especially when you're working on a big project. You might spend hours every week at your desk, writing and writing, without anyone encouraging you or offering feedback.

Perhaps your family and friends are supportive of your writing, but don't really understand you – they don't see why writing matters so much. Maybe they're indifferent. Or maybe they're actively hostile, resenting the time that you spend writing, or making fun of your dreams.

But **there are plenty of people out there who love writing just as much as you do**. And even if you don't know *any* writers, you can build up a support team.

Here's how – I've started with the easiest, lowest-pressure methods:

#1: Read Writing Magazines and Blogs

Want to be surrounded by people who are passionate about writing, and who totally "get" it? Then pick up a writing magazine, or read (and comment on) a writing blog.

Flicking through a magazine – or reading the latest posts from a writing blog – isn't just a way to get solid information. It's a chance to feel like part of a world-wide community of writers.

Magazines

I like the UK's Writers' Forum (http://www.writers-forum.com) and Writing Magazine(http://writersnews.co.uk) – both with plenty of content for beginners as well as intermediate writers, and with great interviews with well-known authors.

If you're in the US, try Writer's Digest - http://www.writersdigest.com.

All these magazines have useful content on their websites, including articles and links to resources.

Blogs

There are dozens of great blogs about writing, and they're all totally free to read.

If you're not sure where to start, check out the 2011 Top Ten Blogs for Writers: http://writetodone.com/2010/12/21/top-10-blogs-for-writers-2011-the-winners/

And if you have a favourite writing-related blog, let us know about it – either drop me an email (ali@aliventures.com) or share it with the On Track (#ontrack) group on Twitter.

#2: Join a Writing Forum

Reading about writing is great, but a step up from that is being able to interact with other writers. There are *loads* of online forums aimed at writers, whether you're a novelist, a blogger, a poet, or a bit of everything.

Forums are a perfect place for asking tricky questions, trying out ideas and making new friends. You might like to check out these:

Forward Motion for Writers (free) - http://www.fmwriters.com

This is a massive forum including free classes, critique groups and more. Aimed primarily at fiction writers seeking traditional publication.

Writers Talkback (free) - http://www.writersnews.co.uk/writers_talkback

This forum is from Writing Magazine and Writers' News, though you don't need to read the magazine to join the forum. All sorts of writers, fiction and non-fiction.

ProBlogger forum (from $5.95/month) - http://www.problogger.com

This forum is aimed at bloggers and has exclusive content for members. If most or all of your writing is blogging (or related material like ebooks), you'll want to give it a look.

#3: Join a Writing Group

Writing forums and online critique groups are fun – but for the best support and interaction, look for a face-to-face group that meets locally. It's easy to drop out of a forum when your writing's going badly, but once you've made friends with other writers, you'll probably stick with in-person meetings.

It can be pretty daunting to show your work with a group, but it's one of the fastest ways to improve – and to keep up your momentum on a big project. (Towards the end of this lesson, I'll give you some tips on how to share your work.)

Try your local library, newspaper, or online classifieds (like Craigslist) for details of writing groups in your area.

Forums and Groups: Do We All Need to be Writing in the Same Area?

You might choose to join a group or forum where everyone's writing in the same area as you – perhaps you're all short story writers, or all freelance bloggers. You might even narrow it down to "science fiction novelists" or "romance writers".

I've personally benefited a lot from having a wide range of readers critique my work – whether or not it's the kind of thing they'd usually read. And I love getting to read outside my own comfort zone. Often, techniques from one area or genre of writing can shed new light on different work.

On the other hand, it can be very discouraging to have writers dismiss your work because they don't understand the conventions of what you're writing. Novelists might be snooty about your ebook. Literary writers may blast your comic romance (or, conversely, commercial novelists may roll their eyes at your thoughtful, lyrical literary novel).

Find a group where you're comfortable – but not complacent. You want to be supported, but also challenged where necessary.

#4: Finding a Writing Mentor or Coach

Writing groups and workshops are great, but – realistically – the members aren't going to have time to read huge chunks of your work-in-progress, or to offer in-depth feedback. The best way to get full support is to find someone who'll work with you one-on-one.

There are a couple of ways to do that:

Taking an MA

I took an MA in Creative Writing at Goldsmiths College (part of the University of London), and had excellent individual tutorial advice and feedback – along with lectures, seminars and workshops.

If you have the time and money to study creative writing in an academic context, it's a great thing to do – but it's a significant investment. Here in the UK, you're likely to pay £4,000-£5,000 to take an MA, and it's hard to get funding.

Finding a Mentor/Coach

You might prefer to look for a mentor or coach who you can hire for a short period of time, or for a specific project. You could, for instance, pay for a full critique of your novel – or you could work with a coach on a weekly or monthly basis while you get your ebook finished or build your blog readership.

If you're looking for professional one-to-one fiction help from a published author, I can recommend Lorna Fergusson, who's a great teacher. She offers editing (http://www.fictionfire.co.uk/page15.htm) and mentoring (http://www.fictionfire.co.uk/page16.htm)

And, as you probably already know, I also offer writing coaching – I've worked with all sorts of writers, mainly novelists and bloggers. I'll help by giving editorial suggestions, but I'll also work with

you to help you with any bigger issues around writing – like strategy, structure and motivation. You can find out more at: http://www.aliventures.com/coaching

(If you're buying coaching from me, don't forget to mention that you're an On Track member – you'll get a $30 discount on your first session, making it $49 instead of $79.)

On Track Members and Their Work

Since we've got a bunch of fantastic writers right here in On Track, I thought it'd be great to help you get in touch with one another.

These brave souls were willing to have their contact details put into today's lesson. Why not drop one of them an email to see if they'd be interested in swapping some writing feedback with you?

Emily – emily.m.helms@gmail.com

I'm working on a short ebook. I'm a musician, and the goal of the ebook is to help other musicians get more from their music practice sessions.

Leslie – leslie@socialmediamercenary.com

I'm working on an ebook covering Web Analytics, Social Media Metrics, and Social Media Monitoring for freelancers and super small businesses

Sue – s.lambertv20@gmail.com

[I'm] working on blog posts. I conduct historical research, local, social and family history in libraries and archives and then write up the findings. The blog aim is to share snippets of this research with people.

How to Share Your Writing With Others

I've never met a writer who was totally comfortable about showing their work to other people. Most writers find it pretty scary to read a piece out to a critique group, or even to post a bit of their work-in-progress online.

It helps to remember that *everyone* feels nervous about their writing – it's not just you.

When you're getting ready to show your work to a group, or to a coach:

- Choose a piece which you're not totally confident about. I know it's tempting to use your "best" work – but you'll get better feedback if you pick something which you're considering reworking.

- Explain what stage you're at. Is this a first draft or a final draft?

- Tell them what sort of feedback you want. Do you need to know whether the structure works? Or do you want them to focus on the individual word choices?

- If your piece is an extract from something longer, give a very short summary of what's gone before, if that will help the reader to understand this section.

- Check for spelling mistakes and typos. These are really no big deal in a first draft, but they're distracting for readers (and they can be a bit embarrassing to you!)

- If you'll be reading your work out loud, practice it through beforehand. This helps you get rid of any clunky sentences or tongue-twisters.

And when you receive feedback:

- Take note of any disagreements: different people may have very different opinions!

- Try not to get defensive. Sure, maybe someone's clearly misunderstood your work and perhaps you think they read carelessly – but as the writer, it's your job to listen and consider carefully whether you need to make it clearer.

- Take notes, if you're getting feedback live (rather than as written comments)

- Don't be disheartened if all the feedback sounds quite negative. People often don't comment on the parts which are working perfectly well.

- Ask questions if you want advice on a particular section or aspect of your work: *Could you follow my explanations in chapter four?* or *Did the dialogue between Jake and Sue sound convincing?*

Chances are, you're going to end up critiquing other writers' work at some point. When you do, it's helpful to:

- Find some positive things to say, as well as pointing out areas which need work.

- Give feedback on the piece as a whole (e.g. the structure and ideas) as well as suggesting areas where the writing could be stronger (e.g. sentences where a word could be cut out).

- Judge the work on its own merits. Whether or not you *like* it isn't really important, unless you're in the target audience. Does it *work*?

- Make specific suggestions for changes. It's not all that helpful to say "this line of dialogue doesn't sound authentic". How would *you* change the line to make it better?

Assignment

Start building your support team, by doing one (or more!) of these:

#1: Join an online forum and write at least one post.

#2: Get in touch with one of the writers listed above, or share what you're working on with the Twitter group (use the #ontrack hashtag so your tweet stands out).

#3: Find out about a local writers' group and put their next meeting in your diary.

Coming Up on Thursday 17th

On Thursday, I'll be sending round the fifth group update. As usual, if you've got any writing tips to share, or any successes to celebrate, drop me an email – ali@aliventures.com

And, **if you forgot to let me know about your project for today's list of writers, drop me an email or tweet and I'll include your details in the Thursday update.**

There'll be a Q&A as usual, so if you've got any questions about writing support, critiquing or any aspect of writing at all, send those my way too. ☺

Coming Up on Monday 21st

Next Monday will be our very last On Track lesson – so we'll be looking at the resources which can help you with staying on track over the next weeks and months. We'll cover some internal resources (like tenacity, focus, voice and courage) as well as some external ones (like time, information and supporters).

I'll also be sending you a link to a quick survey to find out how On Track was for you, and to ask for your opinion on some future ecourse possibilities...

On Track #6: All the Resources You Need

I'll repeat this at the end, but there's an optional feedback survey for you to complete at *http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/R733GPX – you'll probably want to read the lesson first though!*

This is the last lesson of *On Track*, so we'll be concentrating on setting you up for writing success in the future – both immediate (the project you're currently working on) and long-term. We're going to focus on the resources which you need – internal and external.

Internal resources are the ones which come from within you. They're qualities like your knowledge and skills.

External resources are all the people and things which can help you on your journey. Books, blogs, writing courses, companions and allies.

Both are important – crucial. And, even if you feel like you don't have many resources right now, I'm willing to bet that you already have more than you think ... and you can easily build others.

Internal Resources: Your Personal Strengths

It's often easy to see other people's strengths and miss our own. I'm in awe of people who can paint, for instance – but I tend to take my writing ability for granted. It often takes someone else reminding me that I'm a good writer for me to really *see* it.

I'm guessing you do the same. You've got plenty of strengths already – you just might not be able to see them.

Perhaps you have expertise in a particular area. That might be from a course you've studied, a job you've had, from a volunteering position, or simply from life – practical skills like cooking, parenting or handiwork.

Don't take this expertise for granted. It's a great pool to dip into for your writing, whether you're working on fiction or non-fiction. Something which seems mundane or simple to you might be absolutely fascinating to your readers.

As well as your subject-specific expertise, you've got other attributes. They're often called "soft skills" or "transferable skills" – ones which you can use in multiple areas of your life. They're things like being meticulous and hard-working, or being great at inspiring and leading a team.

When it comes to these qualities, it's tempting to think they're just a matter of personality. Some people are just *born* hard-working and focused. Some people are *naturally* great at writing. Right?

Nope. Wrong. You don't get an easy get-out like that. **You can develop your ability to work hard, focus, and write well.** I've seen this in my own writing life: I've worked at my writing for years, and I find it much easier to focus now. I'm also a more fluent writer.

So, what internal resources – skills and qualities – should you cultivate? And how?

#1: Tenacity

This is the ability to persevere, to stick with something even when it gets hard. You know as well as I do that writing isn't always easy. There are times when you just can't seem to get a piece right, and times when you feel like giving up.

To develop this, make writing commitments and stick to them. What will you do *this week?* Write it down.

#2: Focus

It's awfully easy to find excuses not to start writing, or excuses to break off mid-way. Learning to focus means dismissing that internal voice which says "How about another coffee?" or "Why don't you just check your email?"

Don't try to focus by will-power alone. Instead, find tools that help. Set a timer and write for half an hour, without getting distracted. Switch off your internet connection. Find a quiet cafe where you can write. You'll find that you can already focus pretty well, given the right conditions.

#3: Voice

You can be a technically good writer – knowing all the rules of grammar, for instance – without making much of a connection with your audience. *Voice* is importance because it's what makes your writing unique.

To develop your writing voice, start writing from the heart. (The final chapter of *Seven Pillars of Great Writing* will help with this.) Write about topics which you care about. Create characters who are uncomfortable close to who you want to be – or who you fear becoming. No, it's not easy. That's why you need...

#4: Courage

Writing isn't physically hazardous – but it can be incredibly scary. You need courage to write what's really on your mind. You need courage to tell the people in your life that your writing is important to you. And above all, you need courage to show your work to other people – either in a workshop, or by publishing it.

I'm not very brave. The first time I read my writing out in front of a workshop group, I was shaking. But I've found that courage builds up gradually. Ask yourself "what's the worst that can realistically happen?" Chances are, it's not really that bad. So **take the plunge – next time, it'll be easier.**

All of this might sound tough – and I'm not going to lie and say that building up your writing strength is easy. But it's an awful lot easier if you don't try to do it alone...

External Resources: Getting Help

I used to think that asking for help was a sign of weakness. I wanted to do everything on my own, make my own way in the world. I'd read the "thanks" sections in books and scoff – *I* didn't need a bunch of friends cheering me along in order to write. (Not that I actually wrote much, but still...)

More recently, **I've realised that getting help is an incredibly smart and strong thing to do.** Turning to other people – either directly or by reading their books or blogs – is a great shortcut. It lets you learn from others who've trodden the path that you're on.

You already have some resources, whether you know it or not. Perhaps you've got writing books on your shelves. You have *Seven Pillars of Great Writing* which came with this course. You've got friends and family (they might not be writers themselves, but they can still be supportive). There are local classes or online courses that you can join.

Here are some of the resources that you want to gather around yourself, or create in your life.

#1: Time

Whether or not it feels like it, we all have the same amount of time – twenty four hours in every day, seven days in every week. You don't need to set aside whole days for your writing, or even whole mornings – but you do need to find some regular time each week.

One easy way to find more time is to plan ahead. **Block out a weekend afternoon or a weekday evening for writing – and refuse to let anything else creep into that time.**

Allow time for *learning* about writing, too. That might mean setting aside a weekend each year for a writing conference (I love [Winchester Writers' Conference](#) in the UK) or simply spending the last twenty minutes of the day reading a writing book. You might want to join a local writing group, find a mentor or buddy for regular meetings, or even take a postgraduate creative writing course. Because having time for writing isn't enough – you also need...

#2: Information

As you write more and more, you'll find that some things get easier – for instance, you'll typically find that you write faster. But unless you're making deliberate efforts to learn and improve, you could end up constantly repeating the same mistakes.

You can find tons of good information for free. **Start with reading great writing by other people, and look for *how* they achieve certain effects** (like suspense in a novel, or the draw-you-in hook in a non-fiction piece).

Find great websites or blogs to follow – I've suggested a couple in the Assignment, below. Consider buying a book that addresses a particular area which you're struggling with. You'll find information on everything from basic grammar to writing a novel or planning a blog.

#3: Supporters

Last week, we looked at finding companions for your writing journey. **Your supporters aren't necessarily writers themselves – they might be friends and family who take care of chores or kids while you're writing.**

Ideally, though, some of your "resources" will be other writers. Maybe they're friends from a local writing group, people you meet on Twitter, or other bloggers. They'll read your work (and you'll read theirs – learning from them too). They'll encourage you when you're feeling low, and help you when you're struggling with a particular writing problem.

Chances are, you've already got many of these resources. You probably have more time than you think. You have tons of information at your fingertips – like *7 Pillars of Great Writing* which came with this course, which you can turn to any time you get stuck.

And you have support. Even if there's not a single person in your life who's encouraging you, you're welcome to email me. Any time. ☺

Assignment

It's all too easy to come to the end of a course and suddenly lose momentum – and I don't want that to happen to you. ***Pick one (or more) of these next steps, or come up with your own:***

#1: Buy a writing book or ebook that takes you closer to your goal. I've got reviewed some here.

#2: Subscribe to two or three great writing blogs. I particularly like Men with Pens and Copyblogger. "Subscribing" to a blog means getting updates to your RSS reader or straight to your inbox, so that you don't miss out on any new posts.

#3: Find a writing buddy. Email one another regularly to share your progress.

#4: Book a coaching session. Mention "on track" and you'll get $30 off your first session with me, making it just $49 instead of $79. Or, if you prefer, you can have an email session for $34 instead of the usual $49. For more details, see my coaching page.

Coming Up on Thursday 24th

On Thursday, I'll be sending round the very last group update. As usual, if you've got any writing tips to share, or any successes to celebrate, drop me an email – ali@aliventures.com

There'll be a Q&A as usual, so if you've got any questions that remain unanswered, let me have them! This is your final chance...

I'll also be sharing with you some news about my Staff Blogging Course rewrite.

Coming Up on Monday 28th

Next Monday, I'll send you a link so you can download a handy package with *all* the course materials in it – that way, you'll have them for easy reference in the future.

I'll also be sending round a list of Twitter usernames. If you're not on Twitter, but would like to stay in touch, let me know and I'll put your email address in the list instead.

Important: Your Feedback Needed!

I've created a survey at http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/R733GPX so that you can let me know what you thought about On Track.

It's entirely optional (you don't have to fill it in at all!) and every question is optional too – so you can just fill in one or two questions if you want.

This is the first time I've run On Track, but I'm hoping to run it again in the future: your feedback will help me make it even better for next time. Please be ruthlessly honest – it's really helpful to me to know what *didn't* work so well for you.

(I know I mentioned last week that I'd be asking what you'd like in future ecourses – I'm going to do that separately, on the Aliventures blog, so that you don't get overwhelmed with questions!)

On Track: Group Update #1

Hope you've been having a good writing week so far! I've been watching the On Track twitter group updates, and reading all your emails – it's great to hear about the projects that you're going to be working on throughout the course.

Leslie (@leslieajoy on Twitter) wrote in with a great tip:

I have a non-writer friend whose help I enlisted. Every day (we started on Saturday) he asks me at the end of the day what I managed to get done. He also sent me a picture he drew of himself holding a bullhorn and a whip – mainly because those are 2 items that should never fall into his hands.

If you want someone to help keep you accountable, how about asking around in the Twitter group? (Or look out for someone else's tweet so you can partner up with them!) You can find tweets from everyone in the group at: http://twitter.com/#!/list/aliventures/on-track-members

Monday's Assignment

I mentioned on Monday that I'd be spending 15 minutes working on my rewrite of the Staff Blogging Course. And I did it! Hurrah! ☺

If you haven't had a chance to do Monday's assignment yet, here it is again:

> 1. If you've not already done it, *write down the name* of the project you're going to focus on. If you want, share it with the group by Tweeting it (#ontrack) or hit "reply" on this email to just share it with me.
>
> 2. Now, set a timer for 15 minutes (or more, if you can manage it) and work on your project. You don't have to show your writing to anyone. Your material can be as first-drafty as you like.

I've been hearing about all sorts of fantastic projects – blogs, ebooks, memoirs, and more. If you *have* done the assignment already, good for you! Though, there's nothing stopping you doing another 15 minute writing burst... ;-)

Questions and Answers

I had some great questions come in for the Q&A this week – thanks! Even if you didn't send in a question, browse through the answers below – you might well find that someone else is struggling with the same problem as you.

Don't forget to email (or tweet) any questions for next week. You can be as general or specific as you like, and you'll remain safely anonymous.

Today's answers are on:

1. Optimum length for a blog post

2. Breaking down the writing of an ebook

3.   Online Masters degrees in creative writing

4. Plot problems

5. Writing for a new audience

#1: Blog post length

Is there an optimum length for a blog post?

In a word, no! It very much depends what you're writing about and who you're writing for. As a general guideline, though, most big blogs will ask for guest posts of at least 500 words – and more than 1000 words is often too much.

Look around at other blogs in the same area as yours, and see what they're doing. Gadget blogs tend to have shorter, newsy posts. Personal development blogs may publish very long, in-depth posts. You don't necessarily have to go with the crowd, but it's helpful to know the conventions before breaking them!

Don't be afraid to experiment with different post lengths, too. You might post a short, thoughtful piece – or a long, in-depth resource guide. See what response you get from readers.

#2: Writing an Ebook

I have ADHD, and while I'm on meds and have been working on behavioural modification techniques for it, the idea of an ebook is so overwhelming and hard to break down for me. I have a great idea for one, but I'm just getting a handle on breaking down smaller projects like blogging. How do I even START to break down writing an ebook?

I think a lot of people get overwhelmed by ebooks, so please don't feel alone! There are also other writers with ADHD – the blogger Srinivas Rao (who co-runs BlogcastFM) comes to mind – he's written about uni-tasking to control ADHD.

We'll be covering "setting milestones that work" in next week's lesson, which includes general ways to break down your project – but I'll give you some quick tips here:

- Write down your idea as clearly as you can. Unlike blog posts, ebook chapters do need to tie together into a coherent whole!
- List the most important parts of that idea: what big areas do you think you need to cover? You'll probably end up with between three and ten points.
- Run a survey on your blog (I use SurveyMonkey) to ask readers which of those points *they* want to know about. Give them a chance to make other suggestions, too.

This is the market-research stage of writing. Since you'll be selling the ebook yourself, you need to know there's an audience for it – and you'll want to include the content that *they* want.

Once you've got some feedback, you can start writing an outline for the ebook. Break down the major points by asking yourself "what are the steps involved in this?" or "what does the reader need to know here?" Sometimes it helps to think back from the *end* point – where do you want the reader to end up? – rather than trying to work forwards from the beginning.

Kelly Kingman's ebook *The Sticky eBook Formula* is a great guide for ebook writers – it takes you through the outlining and drafting stages, right up to revising, polishing and publishing. I wrote a review of it here, if you're interested in knowing more: http://www.aliventures.com/reviews/sticky-ebook-formula/

#3: Online Masters' in Creative Writing

Are there any good online masters' degree programs in creative writing?

I took my MA in Creative and Life Writing at Goldsmiths College – the course required attendance on Wednesdays on around 20 weeks of the year, plus tutorials.

I don't have any personal experience with online degree programs, but I asked around on Twitter, and this creative writing MA/MFA at Wilkes University was recommended as a "low residency" program. Some colleges may have options to take their programs online, too; it's worth looking around.

However, one of the best parts of my own MA was the interaction with other students, and being physically face-to-face with a group. I know that taking an online degree course may well be your only realistic route, but if you do have the option, I'd urge you to look at in-person courses too. The attendance requirement may not be all that high.

#4: Plot Problems

What do you do if you run into a plot block? Like something in the story or project you're writing doesn't work and you can't figure out how to fix it.

I feel your pain! The thing *not* to do is to keep blindly bashing your way forwards, despite the growing sense that something's really not coming together. I've done this with novels, and I've done it with (non-fiction) ebooks. It's no fun when you end up scrapping several chapters because you've tried to fight your way through a plot block, and the block's won.

The tough thing with fiction, in particular, is that your story tends to shift and change as you're writing it – however much you try to plan in advance. I usually work on the assumption that I'll have to cut huge chunks of a first draft, because the writing was a process of exploration.

In the novel I wrote on my MA, I lost a whole character part-way through draft one. She wasn't working and the easiest solution was to cut her entirely. That may or may not be a good fix for your current work.

The way I think of it is that the story is already there, and as the writer, your job is to find it. If something isn't working, it's probably not supposed to be part of *this* particular story.

As to how you move forwards … there's no magic bullet. Try walking, daydreaming, keeping a journal about your writing, inventing more back-story for your characters, talking to someone about what you're doing (the act of explaining it can often make the holes clear to you), or even working on something else for a bit.

For me, simply admitting "there's a problem here, this scene/subplot/etc isn't working" is often enough to help me move towards a solution.

#5: Writing for a New Audience

What do you do if you're writing for a new audience you don't know very well, or you're not sure what your audience is going to be?

If you can get to know the new audience a bit, that really helps. If I'm writing for a blog for the first time, I read past posts and especially the comments on them – so I can see who I'm writing for. With magazines, I look at the concerns which crop up in letters.

Some editors may provide you with reader profiles; even if you don't get given these, it's worth asking if they have any details about their typical readership.

I think it's important to be yourself – friendly, open and honest. If you've got a really strong, idiosyncratic style, tone it down a bit – but don't edit all the personality out of your writing.

If you're struggling to find the right tone, a good trick is to ask yourself *Would I read this? Would I enjoy it?* Write in the sort of way that you'd like to be written to.

In areas where you're not sure how much expertise your audience has (e.g. if you're writing about how to use WordPress), I'd suggest erring on the side of giving too much information rather than too little. You can always alert potentially-expert readers with something like *"In this section, I'm going to cover the basics of getting started with X. If you've used it before, you might want to skip this part."*

That's all the questions for this week!

Your next lesson will be in your inbox on Monday – we'll be breaking your project down into useful milestones, and thinking about setting some deadlines.

On Track: Group Update #2

It's Thursday again!

Hope your writing's been going well over the past week – whether or not you're using a timer to keep you on track.

Your Coaching Discount

I meant to include this last week – oops.

As an On Track member, you can book a coaching session with me for just $49 instead of $79. You can get all the details about my coaching at http://www.aliventures.com/coaching, though feel free to email me (ali@aliventures.com) if there's anything else you want to know.

You don't have to book your session during On Track, either – any time during 2011 is fine. Just mention "on track" when you book.

On Track Tip of the Week

I've had a great tip in from Stephanie of http://www.soulfulequine.com

Read through your book, blog post, etc. out loud with someone else who also loves to write. It's best if you allow them to read it out loud so you can listen for how they understand your writing. If you can ask a friend or family member to help that works too. I've found that this helps me dump the fluff and articulate my words more clearly. I still have a long ways go but this practice has really helped improved my writing over the last year.

In my experience, even if you don't have *anyone* to read to, it still helps to read your piece out loud. You'll spot all those clumsy sentences, clichés, awkward bits…

Monday's Assignment

Here's a quick recap, in case you've not had a chance to do this week's assignment yet:

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

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

And now – go and hit that milestone!

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

I told you that I'd be writing a chapter of new material for my updated Staff Blogging Course – and I've done it. Yay!

I've also been hearing about all sorts of great milestones – involving short stories, blog posts, ebooks, ecourses and more ... so good luck with whatever you're working on. ☺

Questions and Answers

We've had some fantastic and varied questions this week, so even if you didn't send one in, take a look at the topics below – you might well find that someone else is struggling with the same problem as you.

Don't forget to email (or tweet) any questions for next week. You can be as general or specific as you like, and you'll remain safely anonymous.

1. Finding Your Writing Voice

2. Being Self-Taught

3. Individual Feedback

4. Tweeting – Or Not

5. What Blogging Platform to Use

6. Pillar Content for Blogs

7. Short Story Structure

8. Self-Publishing a Book

9. Audio Versions of Books

#1: Finding Your Writing Voice

How do you find your voice so it sounds like you? I seem to find it easier to write for other sites when I put on a different hat so to speak. But when I write for my new site it just doesn't sound like me.

It took me months to really find my voice on Aliventures. Like you, I found it easy to write for other sites – because they had an established audience and a particular tone.

These are the techniques I used to help develop my voice (you don't need to do them all at once!)

- Have *one* person in mind (real or imaginary) and write your post as though it's just for them
- Draft quickly, without worrying about whether you're expressing yourself well
- Write about something which arises from a real-life conversation
- Pick topics which you really care about

The seventh chapter in *Seven Pillars of Great Writing* is "heart", and that relates very much to your voice, so you might want to give that a read too.

#2: Being Self-Taught

I've only been freelancing for a year and I'm completely self-taught. I dropped out of college, etc. I have this paranoia whenever I write something – no matter how much time I've spent reading up and thinking about the subject – that I'll be seen as a fraud. I end up deleting everything I write for my ebook. How do I get past that psychological hurdle?

Ack! First off, don't delete what you write – however bad you think it is. Shove it in a file and go back to it after a few days. There'll always be *something* you can use.

Plenty of writers don't have a college education. (There's a great, powerful article by full-time novelist and ebook-publisher Holly Lisle on [Experts, Professionals, and College](#).) Where I live, here in the UK, only around 50% of people go to college – in my parents' generation, it was 10%.

I know it might not feel that way to you, but being self-taught says some great things about you. For instance:

- You have the motivation and self-discipline to read, learn and think *on your own* – without a professor prodding you along.
- You've formed your own conclusions and ideas.
- You're not relying on stuff you learnt years ago. Think how fast our world is changing – the people who're *real* experts are the ones who keep up with new developments.

Ultimately, the way you get past that hurdle is to write the ebook. Show it to someone who also works in your field, or who's written on similar topics. Ask them for their honest feedback. There'll probably be improvements to make, but there'll be plenty of good stuff in there.

That probably sounds pretty daunting right now. If you prefer, start off by saving all the nice tweets and emails that you get – every time someone praises your abilities, *keep that* to remind you. It took me a long time to really believe that I was a good writer – but after enough people had said it, I couldn't keep refusing to listen.

#3: Individual Feedback

Can I get you to read my piece and send me some feedback?

I've had variations on this question/request from a few On Track members, so I thought I'd cover it in the Q&A.

I love hearing about what you're working on. It's great to see your emails and tweets that tell me you've completed an assignment – I'm sitting here cheering you on! ☺

I would love to have the time to give individual feedback to each and every person in On Track. Sadly, if I offered that, I'd be doing nothing else for the next six weeks. So I'm afraid I can't make comments on individual pieces, unless it's in the context of a question for the Q&A.

If you are looking for detailed, individual feedback, you're more than welcome to book me for a coaching session. Like I mentioned above, as an On Track member, you're entitled to a $30 discount on your first session – just mention "On Track" when you book. (You can get all the coaching details at http://www.aliventures.com/coaching.)

#4: Tweeting – Or Not

I'm not currently tweeting. If this is something you recommend perhaps I should get it set up. Any suggestions/recommendations?

There's no *need* to tweet, but a lot of writers are on Twitter, and just this month I've seen an article in a mainstream writing magazine that advises writers to get tweeting!

I love Twitter because it's very easy to chat to people – perhaps folks who you'd be intimidated to email. It's also nice to be in touch with other writers at your own level – you can tell them what you're working on, share your goals, and celebrate one another's successes.

If you're curious, why not give it a go? It only takes a few minutes to set up a Twitter profile, and you'll find that many of your favourite writers are on Twitter - including big names like Neil Gaiman (@neilhimself) and Alexander McCall Smith (@mccallsmith).

You can also get in touch with all of the On Track group by going to http://twitter.com/#!/list/aliventures/on-track-members and "following" anyone you want.

Twitter can seem a bit odd when you just start out and haven't had the chance to get to know people - but stick with it for a couple of weeks, and engage in conversation by using "replies" (typing

@ then someone's name to send a message to them – bear in mind that other people on Twitter will be able to read the message too).

I'm @aliventures on Twitter, so if you include "@aliventures" in a tweet, I'll see your message. :-)

#5: What Blogging Platform to Use

My eventual goal is to have blogging be a money-making enterprise but perhaps just for my first falling-on-my-face stuff it might be better to try a basic site? Until I find my voice? What is your recommendation?

I went through several blogs before eventually starting Aliventures, and most money-making bloggers will have a similar story of early blog-experiments, often using the Blogger platform.

The choice really is yours, and depends on how comfortable you are with technology. Blogger (www.blogger.com) is free and very quick to set up, but doesn't have anything like the flexibility and power of other blogging tools.

Wordpress (www.wordpress.org) is free, but you'll need to pay for hosting and for a URL. You'll have thousands of templates (designs) to choose from, including free ones and premium ones, which you pay for. Wordpress has quite a steep learning curve, especially when you're just getting started - you'll need to sort out web hosting, etc, and that can be quite daunting when you're new to it.

I'd suggest that, to start with, you try out Blogger. You can get started quickly and focus on the important bit – writing! :-) If you build up your confidence and your following there, you can set up a new blog and either move over your posts or just put up a post saying "Please visit my new blog here."

#6: Pillar Content for Blogs

In lesson 2 you mention 'pillar content' in relation to blog writing - could you expand on that a bit please?

You'll see the phrase "pillar content" used quite a bit in the blogging world. It means blogs posts which:

- Tend to be longish (maybe 1,000 words or more) and pretty comprehensive

- Cover some "pillar" of your area – for instance, if you were writing a blog about learning to play the guitar, one piece of pillar content would probably be "how to tune your guitar"

- Are just as relevant in a year's time as they are now – so typically not based on a current news story

These are the sorts of posts that you might link to in your sidebar, or highlight on a page aimed at new readers.

They don't need to be massive or cover every last thing about your topic, but they should be the sort of post that would appeal to the majority of your audience.

If you want an example of regular content versus pillar content, look at these posts on Daily Writing Tips. Avoid Capital Offenses When Using Job Titles is a fairly typical post for that blog – shortish, focused on a very specific topic. It's a good piece, but I wouldn't call it pillar content.

Now, compare that with Story Writing 101. It's considerably longer and covers a much broader topic. This *is* pillar content.

Pillar content isn't necessarily *better*, but tends to be good for bringing in search engine traffic, getting links from other bloggers, getting retweets, and showing your expertise. It's worth spending extra time on the writing, as new readers will probably keep visiting your pillar pieces in the months and years to come.

#7: Short Story Structure

In the first chapter of *7 Pillars* there was a link to story structure in short stories which I found really helpful, but I was wondering if you had any more advice on structure (or other things) that is specifically targeted at short stories?

Short stories don't necessarily need the same structure as a novel. Some short stories don't have much plot, but aim to create a particular mood or effect. "Slice of life" stories might explore a typical day (or week/month/year) in a character's life, without much concern for plot.

Other short stories revolve around a "twist in the tale" – the reader is intentionally misled into thinking one thing, only for the author to reveal something which puts the whole story in a different light. Here in the UK, this type of story is fairly popular in weekly women's magazines.

So – there's no one "right" structure for a short story. It depends what market you're aiming at – literary short stories tend to be less plot-driven than commercial ones, for instance. I'd recommend reading a number of stories in your particular genre, and breaking down how they're structured. For instance, is there a clear beginning, middle and end? What seems like the most important element – theme, plot, characters, setting/mood..?

For a short story to succeed, I'd say that it has to feel coherent and complete. The reader needs to believe that the story has started, continued and ended in a deliberate way. Unless you're writing for the literary market, that means having well-drawn characters, an interesting plot, and a clear end. (And yes, I know how hard that is to get right when you've only got a few thousand words to play with!)

#8: Self-Publishing a Book

I've toyed with the idea of self publishing my [non-fiction] book but I know it's a little premature for me to act on that just yet. What are your thoughts on self publishing a hard copy of a book or creating a Kindle version? I know that's a loaded question but that's the over achiever coming out in me. :-)

This depends a bit on your book's subject. Some self-published books and ebooks do very well. You need to be sure that you've got the audience to market to, though – maybe on a blog, or (for hard copies) at live workshops, seminars or talks.

I've self-published several ebooks, and the ones which have done best have been aimed at helping people take their small businesses further in some way. In my experience, your audience are more likely to buy something when it has a clear *monetary* benefit to them, or when it covers information that isn't already available in book form (e.g. something on a fairly new area of technology, like blogging).

I'd suggest creating a Kindle version first, or indeed publishing your book as a .pdf or .epub file on your own site (I use www.e-junkie.com to sell my ebooks – they manage payment etc). If you believe there really is sufficient demand, you could look at having a hard copy created.

Although digital publishing is becoming much more common and mainstream, there's still a bit of a sense that "proper" books are produced by a traditional publishing company. This is particular the case for fiction. (I know your book is non-fiction, but I'm putting this in for On Track's fiction writers!)

Ultimately … it's very much up to you! It won't cost you much to produce a Kindle or self-hosted ebook, so you could give that a try first – and potentially publish a print version (or approach print publishers) if that does well.

#9: Audio Versions of Books

What are your thoughts on providing an audio version of your book to your readers?

If you can do it well, it's a great idea. Lots of people prefer to listen to audio rather than read – so why not make your writing easily accessible to them? You can also charge more for an audio book than a text one (whether that's paper or digital).

Give it some thought beforehand, though, because:

- Poorly produced audio can make you look a bit unprofessional. It doesn't need to be perfect, but make sure it's not full of crackles or reverb.

- Audio files are larger than text ones, so take up more space (e.g. on your web server, on your customer's computer). This may or may not be a problem for you.

- It takes considerable time to record audio, especially if you're doing it well. You might want to bring out the audio in stages, or after a text version of the book.

You might want to survey your readers to find out how many of them want an audio version – this should give you some idea of whether or not it'll be worth your time to produce one.

That's all the questions for this week. If you've got a question (it doesn't need to be related to this week's lesson or to 7 Pillars) then send it in!

Your next lesson will be in your inbox on Monday – we'll be looking at writing routines, so that you can find plenty of time and space for writing over the next few weeks.

On Track: Group Update #3

It's Thursday again!

Hope your writing's been going well over the past week – and hope you're getting into a good writing routine.

Congrats to Amanda!

Huge congratulations to On Track member Amanda from A.D. Freelance, who emailed me to say that she's been given a writing trial with About.com (a huge, well-known site with tons of great articles covering a wide range of topics).

I've been given a month's trial at about dot com for the digiscrapping writing position! As my new website/blog was the site I was setting up to impress the guys at about dot com it's even more imperative that I get to grips with this course, the site and the articles. After all a guaranteed income for writing about something I love and that ties in with my new site/blog is not to be missed!

(If you don't know what "digiscrapping" is, I didn't either! It means "digital scrapbooking", and, like paper scrapbooking, it's a way to preserve memories in a creative and engaging way.)

On Track Tip of the Week

Birdy Diamond, from The Avian Empire, wrote in to recommend 750words.com

I love 750words.com as a writing tool. 750 words a day, kyool badges, and neat metadata for you to look at so you can know where your brain is at.

Several writers (including other On Track members) have told me how much they like 750words.com, so if you've never come across it, check it out. It's particularly aimed at people doing morning pages – something recommended in Julia Cameron's book "The Artist's Way" – but there's nothing stopping you using it for any sort of writing you like.

Monday's Assignment

Here's a quick recap, in case you've not had a chance to do this week's assignment yet:

On *at least three* days between now and Monday 7th:

Write 500 words *OR* write for 45 minutes.

(If you can do this every day, fantastic!)

See how that feels – too much, or too little? Experiment with different times of day, and different places. Keep a brief log of your writing sessions so that you can figure out what works best for you.

If you get stuck, just send me an email, or let me know on Twitter (@aliventures).

Questions and Answers

After a packed mailbag last week, I've only had a couple of questions in this time. I'm hoping that's because you're all busy writing...

Remember, you can send in questions on *any* aspect of writing – they don't need to be related to the *On Track* course content at all. You'll remain safely anonymous, of course.

1. Redrafting and editing

2. Ebook layout

#1: Redrafting and Editing

I'm now working through the second draft and have completely changed the entire guide. It is now longer, different parts, less formal and the layout is completely changed. I am happy with the way it is looking but am worried that I may finish it, and then completely change it again. I know editing is good, but can you ever have too many changes, and too many edits?

Editing is definitely good. But so is finishing!

In Monday's lesson, we'll be covering the difference between first drafts and final drafts, and looking at how to stay on track as you go through the drafting process – so I'm hoping that will help.

In general, I think that longer projects (like ebooks, books, novels...) need more redrafting than shorter pieces (like blog posts). It's often hard to "see" the structure of something long, and you may realise that your first draft has lots of missing pieces, or isn't in the best order.

It's useful, then, to do one redraft which looks at structural issues: do you need to add or remove whole chapters? Would your material flow better if it was in a different order? Do you have any sections which are a bit repetitive? (These sorts of questions apply to fiction as well as non-fiction.)

After that redraft, you can hone in on the smaller-level stuff. That means looking at the transitions between sections and paragraphs, for instance (see "Flow" in the *7 Pillars of Great Writing* for more on that). You'll also want to check for typos, grammatical errors and other little mistakes.

Problems come up when you keep thinking of new ideas to add, or new ways to arrange your material. It helps to keep your focus quite specific: any brand new material could be split off into a separate ebook, or maybe a blog post. And there's rarely a *perfect* order for your chapters or sections – so don't spend forever jiggling them around.

If you go too far on editing individual words and sentences, you may find that you edit some of the heart out of your writing, too. So by all means edit out clunky bits or mistakes, but don't be afraid to keep in some of your unique metaphors or turns of phrase.

With online content, it's easy to revise or update your material if you later decide that you want to add to it – so don't be afraid to put it out there and get reader feedback, too.

#2: Ebook layout

How do you create the layout of your ebook? What programs, font size, embedding pictures?

I use Microsoft Word 2007, which does the job just fine. I tend to bump the font size up to about 14 for ebooks – otherwise the pages can be a bit cramped and hard to read on a screen.

You can embed pictures by opening them up in a graphics program, highlighting the bit you want (or the whole thing) and clicking "Copy", then using "Paste" in your document. If you click on an image, click the "Format" tab and click "Compress Images", you can compress all the images in your document to make the file size smaller – great if you're distributing it via email or download.

You may want to turn your pages to landscape format, like I do in *7 Pillars of Great Writing*. This is becoming more and more popular in ebooks, because many people read them on wide screens. On the other hand, you might prefer portrait – better for printing and for smaller monitors.

When laying out the text, start new chapters or new sections on a new page. (Don't do this by hitting Enter – use the "Page Break" feature, which is under the "Insert" tab in Word 2007.) If you have a page with a single paragraph or less, try reworking your text to bring it all back onto one page – or bump a second paragraph forwards onto that mostly-blank page.

Use the "Styles" feature to create your headings and subheadings – it makes it very easy to reformat them all at once. And put in a table of contents, too – this will automatically pick up on your different levels of headings. You can see my contents page in *7 Pillars* for an example.

This is a big topic and I've covered it pretty briefly, so if you've got any follow-up questions, just let me know.

That's all the questions for this week. If you've got a question (it doesn't need to be related to this week's lesson or to 7 Pillars) then send it in!

Your next lesson will be in your inbox on Monday – we'll be covering a lot of ground, looking at what to do when life gets in the way of writing, how to plan, and the difference between first and final drafts.

On Track: Group Update #4

It's Thursday again! Hope your writing's been going well over the past week, whatever stage you're at in your project.

Important Reminder...

On Monday, I mentioned that next week, we'll be looking at ways to find people who can support your writing. Seeing as we're all in a writing course together, it'd be great if you can hook up with fellow On Track members!

If you're happy to take part, **shoot me an email (ali@aliventures.com) or a tweet (@aliventures) to let me know what you're working on** – you don't need to give me a long description. I'll compile a list of members and projects, so you can find other people who're working on something similar.

Monday's Assignment

Here's a quick recap, in case you've not had a chance to do this week's assignment yet:

You've got a choice this week, depending on where you're at with your work-in-progress.

Either...

#1: Spend half an hour planning out the rest of your project. (With a big project, you'll end up with a zoomed-out overview. With a short ebook or blog post series, you should be able to get a reasonable amount of detail into your plan.)

Or ...

#2: If you already have a plan, spend half an hour drafting the start of the next scene, chapter, section, etc. Set a timer and focus on just writing – don't worry about making it perfect.

(And if you're really keen, you can do both!)

Questions and Answers

I know I packed in a *lot* in Monday's lesson – if you'd like me to go into more detail about any part of it, just let me know, and I'll cover that in the next Q&A.

This week's questions are on:

1. Keeping writing enjoyable

2. Planning and managing your time

3. Citing references in ebooks and blog posts

4. Setting – and meeting – deadlines

#1: Keeping writing enjoyable

How do you keep a longer writing project enjoyable? I tend to find I get to a stage in writing where it all just seems like work and becomes laborious. This makes it hard to keep my motivation up and keep the momentum going. I'd love some suggestions on how to keep the pleasure of writing flowing, especially when you know you're not just writing for pleasure but aim to sell your work too.

I suspect that almost every writer goes through the same thing. I certainly know a fair few with unfinished novel/book manuscripts tucked away … sometimes, that first initial flush of enthusiasm doesn't seem to last too long.

A few things which help are:

*   **Take a break from writing** (or at least from that particular project). The times when you're *not* writing are often just as important as the times when you *are* writing. You might find you get new ideas, or that you simply come back feeling refreshed.

*   **Get into a routine**. I know that "write from 9am till 11am" sounds very work-like and not particularly inspiring, but if you let days or weeks go by without writing, it becomes harder and harder to get back into your project.

*   **Let yourself enjoy it!** With some projects – particularly those which you're hoping to sell, or at least share with the world at large – it's easy to get a bit bogged down in trying to fulfil a plan, or match up to certain standards. A spirit of fun and play is important in keeping your creative energy alive. Give yourself the chance to explore and experiment.

*   **Focus on the reader**. For me, no piece of writing is complete until it has a reader. If I'm producing something which isn't intrinsically exciting, but which has value for the reader (like a software user guide, for instance), I'm often encouraged by thinking forwards to how it'll help people.

*   **Talk to someone about the project, or get feedback.** This doesn't work for every single writer, but many find that they get energised by sharing their work-in-progress. When readers respond enthusiastically, it's hard *not* to feel inspired again!

#2: Planning and managing your time

How do you plan your time to work on all your writing? I write for a blog, freelance, and am trying to create an ebook and fit in work and a life. How do you do it all?

I make sure I have regular time slots for my regular work – for instance, I usually write three – four paid blog posts a week, and I try to do these on Mondays.

With bigger projects, like your ebook, you could try working on it for half an hour (say) at the start of your day. It's very easy for these bigger things to get missed out, because they're rarely urgent – but they're often pretty significant milestones in your journey as a writer.

You don't necessarily need to work on all your projects every week, though. When I was taking my Creative Writing MA last year, I'd sometimes work on my novel almost every morning, and then take a break for several weeks to catch up with my paying work! So long as you're switching deliberately between different projects (rather than letting your ebook sit untouched for six months because you got busy), then you should be able to keep everything moving along.

My freelancing partner-in-arms, Thursday Bram, has a fantastic free ebook all about time management for writers – you can find out more and download it here. It's targeted towards freelancers, though pretty much anyone who writes will find it useful.

#3: Citing references in ebooks and blog posts

When writing a nonfiction work, such as an ebook or blog post, how do you decide whether to cite or reference a piece of information, and if you do, how much detail should go into the citation (i.e., author only, or author, title, and publication date, etc.)? This is my first ebook, my previous writing experience having been for academic papers and an article for a professional journal, so I'm used to using lots of citation, footnotes, etc.

It depends a lot on your subject matter, and on what your readers will expect! My ebooks are generally about blogging and writing, and I don't have any footnotes at all – the only citations I put in are when I've quoted someone or when I'm using a particular blog post as an example.

When I put in a quote, I give the author's name and the book title (or blog post title) and linking to the book on Amazon (or to the blog post).

If you want to put in citations and footnotes, I think there's absolutely no reason not to. Readers will probably be impressed! My rule of thumb is to ask myself what the readers would find useful – probably author and title, so that if they're interested, they can do further reading. Author's name alone doesn't do much except prove that you have a source. Unless it's something like an edition of a journal, I don't think you need a publication date.

Do you own any ebooks on similar topics? If so, have a look at what they do, in terms of citations. You don't necessarily have to do yours in the same way, of course, but it can be useful to know what's fairly standard in your area.

#4: Setting – and meeting – deadlines

How do you set appropriate deadlines or workloads when working with writing clients? I'd like to get started doing some writing projects for clients (ghostwriting, copywriting, and staff blogging all interest me), and even went so far as to build a website, but I'm not good about setting and meeting appropriate deadlines, and the thought of unknowingly setting what turns out to be an unrealistic deadline and then blowing it scares me off from getting started. (Especially when I've now read in several copywriting books that missing a deadline is *the cardinal sin you must not commit*).

Nowadays, I normally have a good idea of how long a project will take. But when I started freelancing, I wasn't very sure at all – plus my own deadlines for my personal writing projects tended to be, at best, highly optimistic!

What I did was allow plenty of extra time when I offered an estimate. So if I was emailing on Monday and thought I'd have it done by Wednesday, I'd say "I'll get it to you by Friday." I've *never* had a client object that I turned in work too early. ;-)

Smaller projects tend to be easier to estimate for: you probably know roughly how long a 700 word blog post will take you, but a 10,000 word ebook is a lot harder to judge. So if you can, start small!

I'll often give an estimate for the first draft, rather than the whole finished thing – e.g. "I should have an initial draft to you by Wednesday 16th, and then we can discuss any changes you want." This takes the pressure off a bit, because neither you nor the client are going to expect the draft to be perfect.

Missing a deadline really isn't the end of the world (or of your career). Clients are human too, and they understand that life sometimes goes a bit haywire. If you do think you're going to struggle to meet a deadline, get in touch with the client as soon as possible, and let them know. If you can provide part of the project, that's often useful – e.g. sending five pages instead of eight, and telling them that you get the other three done by Friday.

If doing client work seems a bit intimidating, can you do something like guest posting? It's a good route into staff blogging (and you mentioned you're interested in that), you can set yourself a deadline, and you'll get an idea of how long it takes you to write a typical post.

That's all the questions for this week. If you've got a question (it doesn't need to be related to this week's lesson or to 7 Pillars) then send it in!

Your next lesson will be in your inbox on Monday – we'll be going through different sources of writing support, like blogs, magazines, forums, groups and coaches/mentors. We'll also have a list of On Track members' projects, so if you've not been in touch yet, let me know about yours!

On Track: Group Update #5

Hope your writing's been going well! I've been hearing about some great projects: if you want to share your work with someone, check out the list below...

Birdy Diamond - phoenyxravenswing@gmail.com – Websites, Podcasts & Fiction

We are working on website writing & podcast prep (which involves more writing). We are also gearing up to start working on a requested story about one of our characters from our "For Love of a Rose" universe, Daray.

Pam - pbennett11@yahoo.com – Blogging

I'm definitely interested in being supportive and being supported in my writing. i'm working on getting a blog started.

Emily – emily.m.helms@gmail.com - Ebook
I'm working on a short ebook. I'm a musician, and the goal of the ebook is to help other musicians get more from their music practice sessions.

Leslie – leslie@socialmediamercenary.com - Ebook

I'm working on an ebook covering Web Analytics, Social Media Metrics, and Social Media Monitoring for freelancers and super small businesses

Sue – s.lambertv20@gmail.com – Blog posts

[I'm] working on blog posts. I conduct historical research, local, social and family history in libraries and archives and then write up the findings. The blog aim is to share snippets of this research with people.

Congrats to Solo!

This week, Solo from solo.lafrance.org emailed me to say:

I've finally got the courage to redraft and handwrite my entry into my legacy book for my grand-daughter. Now the love is flowing in the heart of my writing, and I fynd as I write with my arm and wrist and fingers, the pen talks from my heart, more than my head.

The redraft is impossibly so much better!! I've cut excess words, redundancies, and added phrases that better express myself. The work is more accessible and more immediate.

I am liking this process very much!!

(Note that Solo's idiosyncratic spelling of "fynd" isn't a typo, but part of her unique style.)

Huge congrats to Solo! I know she's been working hard on this project, and it's going to be a beautiful book and very special legacy for her granddaughter.

Monday's Assignment

Here's a quick recap, in case you've not had a chance to do this week's assignment yet:

Start building your support team, by doing one (or more!) of these:

#1: Join an online forum and write at least one post.

#2: Get in touch with one of the writers listed above, or share what you're working on with the Twitter group (use the #ontrack hashtag so your tweet stands out).

#3: Find out about a local writers' group and put their next meeting in your diary.

Questions and Answers

Next Thursday will be the very last group update, so if you've got any questions, now's the time to send them! (You can email me on ali@aliventures.com, or find me on Twitter as @aliventures)

This week's questions are on:

1. Storing your writing and notes

2. Writers' forums

#1: Storing your writing notes

What do you recommend as a good way to organize and do housekeeping on a regular basis for one's writing?

I think all writers approach this differently, and might even have several different methods for different projects. I like to have a specific notebook for each novel I write, so that all the notes are in one place. I'm picky about the *type* of notebook too: I like to be able to lay it flat easily, and I like

thick paper and a hardback cover. (You can see my notebook in the photo at the bottom of my coaching page here - http://www.aliventures.com/coaching/)

For my non-fiction work, I keep notes and ideas in a piece of software called The Journal, from David RM software. Ideally, I'd revisit them on a regular basis – in actuality, I quite often forget all about the notes I've made (though, then it's a pleasant surprise to find I've already outlined five blog posts...)

When it comes to storing your writing itself, not just your notes:

- Keep a backup – either online (you can use a service like Dropbox, or even email the file to yourself) or on a USB pen or external hard drive. You might also want to print and keep a hard copy.

- Consider saving the sections of a project as separate files. I like to keep all my novel scenes as individual files, to make it easy to find them (and potentially reorder them). One HUGE file can take a while to load. If you do use separate files, give them useful filenames: I went for the format "Draft X – Chapter X – Viewpoint Character's Name".

- Be particularly careful if you work on several different computers. It's all too easy to end up saving five different chapters of your ebook in five different places. I find a USB pen helps solve this.

Ultimately, it's really up to you how you store and organise your writing and your notes. You want a system that's easy and quick to use, but which lets you find what you're looking for again.

#2: Writers' forums

You advised us to join a writer's forum. I want to ask what writers forum did you join and what forum you think gave you the most benefits as a writer?

I've never belonged to a writing-specific online forum. I started going to a local writers' circle when I was 14 (back in the days of dial-up internet!) so I got plenty of feedback from that. During my MA, I had plenty of feedback from fellow students.

In recent years, though, I've been a member of several blogging-related forums. I tried the ProBlogger community forum but found that I wasn't really making the most of it. I'm now in Third Tribe (which is a paid membership site), and have had some fantastic writing feedback from other members there.

When I've wanted specific writing advice, I've approached individual writer friends, and I'm often in touch with them by email – we swap work back and forth.

I'd actually suggest that, if you're able and willing to, you'll probably get more from a face-to-face group than a forum. It's up to you, though!

Your final lesson (!) will be in your inbox on Monday – we'll be looking at the resources which will help you as a writer, and covering ways to cultivate these.

On Track: Group Update #6

It's the very last group update today. (Aww...)

If you've already done the survey, thanks! If not, it's at http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/R733GPX - this is your chance to give me feedback on the course. (You're also welcome to email me, of course: ali@aliventures.com.)

Congrats to Stephanie!

Stephanie wrote in this week to say:

I have one small success and I feel is a step in the right direction. I'm working on a course called Axiomatic.   The course will be centered around an ebook I wrote. I'm still working on editing the book but it's coming along. Its title is Guiding Principles of Natural Horse Care - Powerful Concepts for a Healthy Horse.

My success, is that I created a sign-up page with some information about the upcoming class at the domain http://www.naturalhorseconcepts.com I also created a simple banner for the course and placed it on the side bar of my website http://www.soulfulequine.com The landing page is not really a full blown landing page yet, it's very simple and the copy is probably not the best, but it's something.

Big congrats to Stephanie! Getting a landing page up is a really key step – even if it feels like a small one. It takes a lot of bravery to make that first step in getting a course or ebook ready for sale. Also, great work on a very slick, professional website: it's easy as writers to feel that our *words* are all that should matter ... but readers inevitably judge those words by the way they're packaged.

Contact List

Plenty of On Track members are on Twitter, if you want to hook up with them. You can find the full list at http://twitter.com/#!/aliventures/on-track-members/members or use this list below:

AB: http://twitter.com/herblackness

Ainslie: http://twitter.com/ainsliehunter

Amanda & Millie: http://twitter.com/AmandaandMillie

Birdy Diamond: http://twitter.com/BardicRaven

Cal: http://twitter.com/CalOlson

David: http://twitter.com/dckirba

Emily: http://twitter.com/EmilyMHelms

Ije: http://twitter.com/IjeUde

Karen: http://twitter.com/HiringHowTo

Kapil: http://twitter.com/KapilApshankar

Laneth: http://twitter.com/LanethSffarlenn

Leslie: http://twitter.com/leslieajoy

Matty: http://twitter.com/mattyblu

Milo: http://twitter.com/milomclaughlin

Pete: http://twitter.com/Peatee53

Prime: http://twitter.com/prime_sarmiento

Roberto: http://twitter.com/artypartyvictim

Solo: http://twitter.com/Guadalupesolo

Stephanie: http://twitter.com/stephkrahl

Stephey: http://twitter.com/stepheybaker

Tim: http://twitter.com/timsbain

Tracy: http://twitter.com/tlewilson

Willie: http://twitter.com/williehewes

And Sue, who isn't on Twitter, would be happy to hook up with other On Track members via email: s.lambertv20@gmail.com

My Ebook Rewrite...

Back in week two – a whole month ago now – we were setting milestones, and I told you that:

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

Well, I'm thrilled to be able to tell you that I did it! The whole rewrite is finished, and the Staff Blogging Course has now become *The Blogger's Guide to Freelancing*. You can see it for yourself at www.bloggers-guides.com ☺

World-Changing Writing Workshop

Prime tweeted about this, and thought it would be something that interested On Track members. And I agree!

Pace and Kyeli Smith (@pacesmith and @kyeli on Twitter) run an annual online World-Changing Writing Workshop. You can buy the "workshop in a box" from 2010 on the World-Changing Writing site and you can read my review here.

Or, keep an eye out for this year's Workshop. Pace and Kyeli haven't confirmed all the speakers yet, but I can let you in on the fact that I'll be one of them. Woo! ☺

Monday's Assignment

Here's a quick recap, in case you've not had a chance to do this week's assignment yet:

Assignment

It's all too easy to come to the end of a course and suddenly lose momentum – and I don't want that to happen to you. ***Pick one (or more) of these next steps, or come up with your own:***

#1: Buy a writing book or ebook that takes you closer to your goal. I've got reviewed some here.

#2: Subscribe to two or three great writing blogs. I particularly like Men with Pens and Copyblogger. "Subscribing" to a blog means getting updates to your RSS reader or straight to your inbox, so that you don't miss out on any new posts.

#3: Find a writing buddy. Email one another regularly to share your progress.

#4: Book a coaching session. Mention "on track" and you'll get $30 off your first session with me, making it just $49 instead of $79. Or, if you prefer, you can have an email session for $34 instead of the usual $49. For more details, see my coaching page.

Questions and Answers

This week's questions are on:

1. Chapter outlining for non-fiction

2. Ebook cover and banner ad design

#1. Chapter outlining for non-fiction

How do you chapter-plan for a longer work of non-fiction? Let's say you have a broad subject in mind for a non-fiction book, how do you decide what to leave in and leave out? How do you decide how to order your chapters? Any other related tips on deciding what goes where in a larger outline?

There's no one right way to outline, but with something book-length, I find it helps to be clear about what I'm *not* including. For instance, I decided that neither of my blogging ebooks were going to have lots of technical details on how to set up WordPress or choose webhosting (as there are plenty of other resources on that, and I wanted to focus on the writing bits of blogging).

It's not always obvious, though, whether a particular chapter should be in or out. I sometimes ask other writers to look at my outline, to get their thoughts (and I've had friends send me their outlines, too). Sometimes, another person can have a clearer view – they're not so close to the project as you are.

You might want to think through:

- The title or potential sales copy for the book: what will your readers expect and want?

- Your audience: how advanced are they? Will you need to cover everything in a step-by-step way, or can you take basic knowledge for granted?

- Is this a stand-alone book or part of a series? You don't necessarily have to put everything you know on this topic into one book.

I usually aim for a list of potential chapters first, then order them. I ask myself what people will need *first*. I try to put the more advanced material towards the end of the book. I look for chapters which link together or build on one another, and try to group them together sensibly.

Inevitably, I find that I need to reorder things as I go along – so don't get too bogged down in this stage: your perfect chapter order will probably only emerge once you start to write.

#2: Ebook cover and ad banner design

What would you recommend for designing your ebook marketing images and cover? I realize the best approach is hiring someone for this, however, if that's not in the budget just yet what would you recommend? I'm not a graphic designer but I'm pretty good with creating my own banners, modify images, etc.

When I started out with ebooks, I created my own covers (using stock photos from istockphoto.com and MS Word). I then used a bit of software called eCover Software Pro (reviewed here) to turn the flat images into things which looked a bit like book covers.

They weren't *too* bad, but I'm really not a graphical person, so I pretty quickly moved on to paying someone to do it for me!

You can see one of my early efforts here: http://www.aliventures.com/quit-your-day-job/

If you can't afford to hire someone, I'd suggest buying some good stock images and using Paint.NET or another free image editing program. I use MS Powerpoint 2007 to create button-type images using word art and styles etc – you can also use that (or Word) to add shadows and perspective to your images.

You might want to ask a few friends (perhaps on Twitter) to take a look at your images and give you some feedback: what looks great to one person doesn't always work for another.

Once you've sold enough ebooks to pay for cover design, though, it's probably worth paying someone. My cover designer for the Blogger's Guide ebooks was Charlie Pabst, of Charfish Design. He's a great guy and if you tell him your budget, he'll be able to tell you what he can do within it.

The logo for On Track and the cover for *7 Pillars of Effective Writing* were done by my younger sister, Jo. They're fantastic, aren't they? (Proud big sis!) ☺

Don't forget to do the survey! http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/R733GPX

Next Monday (28th), I'll be sending you a package of all the course materials, so that you can keep them safe on your computer and refer to them whenever you want.