



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.