



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 (@neilhimsel) 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.