Loyal Readers

The Blogger's Guide to
Loyal Readers

by

Ali Luke

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The cover is by the lovely and talented Charlie Pabst, of Charfish Design.

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Introduction

Whatever your motivation for blogging, you'll want to have readers. Not just passing traffic – but engaged, interested readers who keep coming back for more, and who eventually become loyal fans.

- If you're blogging to market your small business, you need readers ... readers who'll eventually buy your products or services.

- If you're blogging to raise your profile within your industry, you need readers ... readers who'll spread the word, and who may include influential individuals in your corner of the blogging world.

- If you're blogging to get feedback on your writing, you need readers ... readers who'll leave comments and send emails.

- If you're blogging to make money directly from your site, you need readers ... readers who'll purchase your e-products or buy the affiliate products that you review.

This Guide is designed to help you grow your blog. We'll focus on sustainable and lasting ways to do that – not ways to get a quick traffic hit that does nothing to help you towards your goals.

Whatever stage you're at right now, whether you have three readers, three hundred, or three thousand, this Guide is for you.

Here's what we'll cover:

Part One: Getting Your Blog Ship-Shape – before you start attracting lots of readers to your blog, you need to make sure that it's looking good, and that there's plenty of great content for them to read.

Part Two: Attracting New Readers – there are plenty of simple techniques you can use to draw new readers to your blog, and we'll cover social media, search engines, emails / forums, and guest posting in this part of the Guide.

Part Three: Growing Your Blogging Influence – a big factor in growing your readership is your relationships with other bloggers. We'll be looking at how you can get to know the "A-List bloggers" of your niche ... as well as how you can encourage your readers to share your blog content more widely.

Part Four: Keeping Your Readers Loyal – as a blogger, you want readers who are loyal and engaged, who keep coming back for more, and who bring other readers along too, so this

part covers ways to ensure that your readers will want to stick around and help you grow your blog.

Part Five: Analysing What's Working – it's important that you step back on a regular basis to look at what is and isn't working in your marketing efforts. This part covers Google Analytics, as well as other statistics that you can use to figure out what's working for you and your blog.

Note: I'll be using WordPress – the blogging platform most widely recommended by experts – to give examples and step-by-step instructions where appropriate. If you're using Blogger or a different blogging platform, you'll find that plenty of the advice still applies.

Part One: Getting Your Blog Ship-Shape

You're probably keen to see your readership stats increase ... but if your blog isn't ready for new visitors, all your promotional efforts will be wasted.

This first part focuses on ensuring that your blog is in good shape, so that first-time visitors get a great impression and stick around for more.

Chapter One: Four Quick Fixes for Four Common Issues

Often, a few small changes can make a dramatic difference to how your blog comes across to visitors.

If your blog suffers from one (or even all!) of these common issues, don't feel bad about it: they're all very easy mistakes to make – and they're all quick ones to fix.

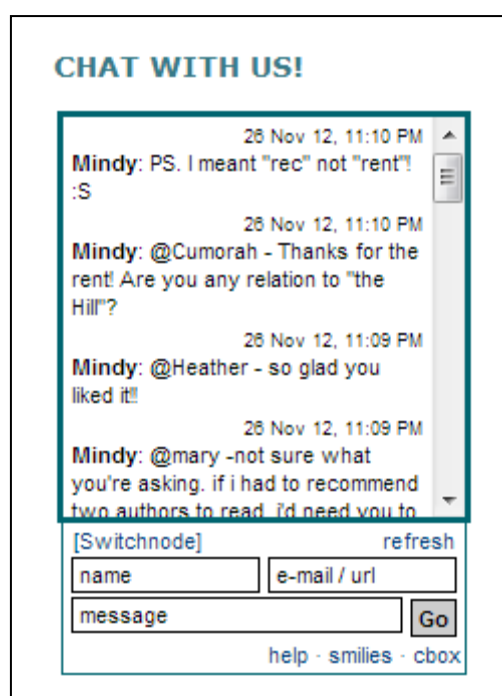## Problem #1: Your Sidebar is Cluttered and Confusing

This is one of the most common problems I see on blogs of all sizes – and it's often one that occurs with blogs that have been around for a while. Perhaps you put a few cool widgets in place when you started out, and you've slowly added more and more ... and now your sidebar is cluttered.

Having lots of widgets might sound like a great idea – as it gives readers plenty of choice – but it also presents problems:

- Readers won't be able to quickly find the information that they're looking for.
- Too many options can lead to readers taking no action at all.
- Some widgets don't look especially attractive ... and they can drag down the look of your blog as a whole.
- Out-dated widgets that you've not touched in months (or even years) may be broken or not working as you expected.

The screenshot to the right shows a widget from http://readingforsanity.blogspot.co.uk – a great blog in general, but with a slightly over-stuffed sidebar.

This widget could probably be scrapped, as it appears to only get infrequent use.

CHAT WITH US!

> 26 Nov 12, 11:10 PM
> **Mindy:** PS. I meant "rec" not "rent"! :S
> 26 Nov 12, 11:10 PM
> **Mindy:** @Cumorah - Thanks for the rent! Are you any relation to "the Hill"?
> 26 Nov 12, 11:09 PM
> **Mindy:** @Heather - so glad you liked it!!
> 26 Nov 12, 11:09 PM
> **Mindy:** @mary -not sure what you're asking. if i had to recommend two authors to read, i'd need you to

[Switchnode] refresh
name   e-mail / url
message   Go
help · smilies · cbox

Solution #1: Clear the Clutter!

Go through every widget on your sidebar, and decide whether it's:

- Essential
- Important
- Useful in some circumstances
- No longer needed

The exact widgets you choose to keep will depend on your blog's purpose and audience ... but the following problems and solutions will give you some ideas.

Problem #2: No Clear Way to Subscribe to Your Blog

Even if you like to read blogs by visiting individual websites that you've bookmarked, many readers will want to subscribe to your RSS feed, either in an RSS reader or by email. RSS stands for "Really Simple Syndication" – it's a technology used to provide a stream of updates from blogs, news sites, and other websites that are regularly updated with new content.

If a reader likes your blog, they'll look for an option to sign up for email updates, or a RSS button. If you have a tiny RSS link buried deep in your sidebar, they may well give up.

Solution #2: Use an RSS Button

Like this:

Your button should be linked to your RSS feed. Your RSS feed's address is usually *www.yourblogname.com/feed*. If you're using Feedburner, it will be in the format *feeds.feedburner.com/yourblogname*.

If possible, offer email subscription too – you can see how Copyblogger do this in the screenshot to the right. (You can offer email subscriptions through Feedburner – see Chapter Fifteen.)
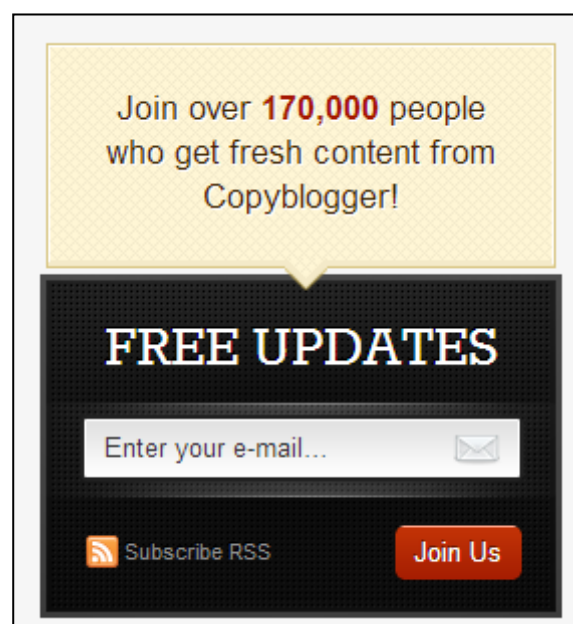
Problem #3: No About or Contact Information Visible

One of the most-visited pages on your blog is the About page, which we'll be covering in the next chapter. This should appear in your navigation (menu) – there's an example below from Daily Blog Tips.
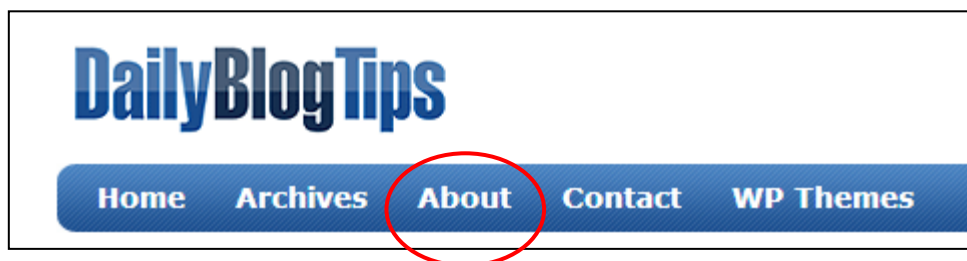
Even if you have a good About page, though, readers may not see it straight away – they'll often look to your sidebar first.

Solution #3: Use Your Sidebar

It's often helpful for new readers if you include some brief About information in your sidebar – even if that's just your name and photo, and a line or two about your blog.

The screenshot to the right shows the About Me section on Michael Hyatt's blog sidebar at www.michaelhyatt.com.

You can do the same with contact information. New visitors might be keen to follow you on Twitter or like your page on Facebook – it's a good idea to include buttons or links to your social media profiles in the sidebar.

You may, however, feel that this adds too much to your sidebar; so long as you have clearly named "About" and "Contact" pages in your navigation, readers will usually find them without any problems.
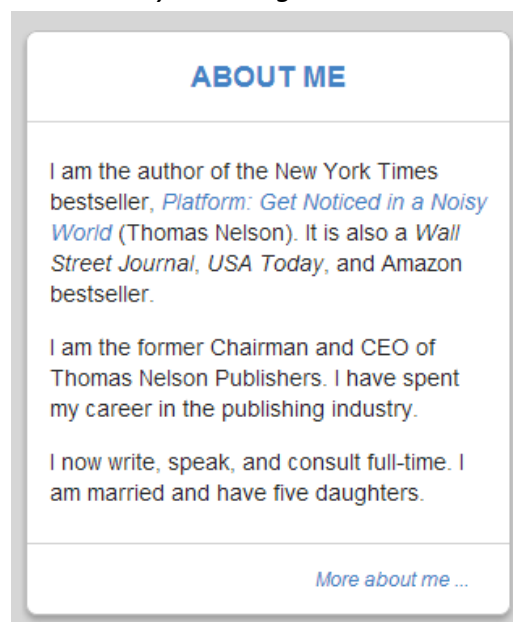
Problem #4: Cramped, Small, Hard-to-Read Text

Reading on a screen is harder than reading on paper ... and many bloggers don't make life easy for their readers. **If your default font size is small, readers may be put off from even starting on your posts.**

Font size isn't the only culprit, though, when it comes to hard-to-read text. Avoid white text on a black background – even if this suits your brand. Instead, go for black or very dark text on a white or very light background, which is much easier to read.

If the lines of text are too close together, that will also make them tough to read: adding slightly more white space will make your posts much more attractive to readers. In this screenshot from ProBlogger, you can see that there's quite a bit of space between the lines (check out the site at www.problogger.net and click on any post to see the actual font size.)

10 Years of Blogging

Ten years ago when I hit Publish on my first blog post, I could never imagined how that moment would change my life.

Having read my first blog only minutes before I spontaneously decided to give it a go myself—registered a Blogspot blog and quickly wrote my first post.

In that moment before I hit publish I had mixed feelings:

⇒ On one hand I felt excited by the potential of this new medium of blogging and wondered what it would happen.

⇒ On the other hand, I had many doubts—I had no technical experience, I wasn't a great writer, I didn't know if I had anything to say and wondered if anyone would ever read what I did write.

I had every reason not to start that first blog but for some reason felt compelled to hit Publish.

Solution #4: Change or Modify Your Theme

Your blog's theme or template is usually responsible for font size – and you can change to a new theme with a more readable font, a larger font size, or both.

If you don't want to change your theme, you may be able to modify it. Some themes allow you to change font size options – with others, you'll need to alter the CSS code.

If you're using WordPress.com, you can find help on changing the font size here:

Editors >> Font Size and Color

For WordPress.org bloggers, there's information about font sizes here:

Playing with Fonts: Font Sizes

Chapter Two: The Three Most Crucial Pages on Your Blog

When a new visitor comes to your blog, there's a good chance they'll browse around – and you want to ensure that they find what they're looking for.

All your posts and pages should pull their weight, of course … but these three pages are especially crucial:

- About

- Contact

- Shop (or Services, Hire Me, etc)

Your About Page

If you look at your blog's stats in Google Analytics (see Chapter Seventeen), then you'll probably find that your About page is more popular than your other pages.

This screenshot is from my Google Analytics for my blog Aliventures – as you can see, the About page (/about/) ranks in the top ten pages for the site. All the other pages here are either blog posts, or the home page (at the number 1 position).

Page		Pageviews	% Pageviews
1. /		1,641	▊ 12.14%
2. /essential-writing-stages/		1,434	▊ 10.61%
3. /8-writing-secrets/		982	▊ 7.26%
4. /make-a-living-writing/		870	▊ 6.43%
5. /7-serious-habits/		822	▊ 6.08%
6. /live-your-way/		797	▊ 5.89%
7. /confidence-in-your-writing/		684	▊ 5.06%
8. /writing-dialogue-tips/		482	▏ 3.57%
9. /about/		476	▏ 3.52%
10. /hard-fiction/		378	▏ 2.80%
			view full

New readers want to know who you are and what your blog is about – and you want to give them the best impression possible, in the hopes of enticing them to stick around.

Your About page should:

- **Give brief details about who you are** – this might just be your name (or pseudonym) and a short bio.

- **Focus on what your blog is about and how it can help the reader.** Unless you have a blog that's very much centred on you and your life (a diary-style blog), then you'll want to use your About page to help ensure that visitors understand the benefits they'll gain from reading your blog.

- **Mention any products you sell or services you offer.** Not only does this prompt readers towards buying, it also helps establish your credibility – if you blog about knitting, for instance, and sell your own hand-knitted baby clothes, then readers will take you more seriously.

You may also want to give links to posts on your blog that you're especially proud of (or the ones that you want beginners to start with).

Examples:

A couple of good About pages you might like to take a look at are:

Michael Hyatt's About page

The Creative Penn's About page

These two pages are structured differently, and both take a different tone and approach. Yet they both hit all the above points for About pages – and they're both great introductions to their respective blogs and bloggers.

Your Contact Page

It's important to separate your About page from your contact details. Some bloggers try to simplify by including their contact information at the bottom of the About page – but this just makes it tough for new visitors to find.

Your Contact page should give, at a minimum, your email address. Some blogs only do this – see Write to Done's minimalist contact page to the right – but it's usually a good idea to include:

Contact

If you wish to contact us, please send an email to:

writetodone[at]gmail[dot]com

Please start the subject line with WTD (in ALL CAPS)

- Links to your social network accounts.

- A contact form to help readers get in touch.

- A brief note to set expectations (e.g. "I'd love to hear from you – fill in the form to say hi!" creates a different expectation from "I receive a lot of email, and can't get back to everyone. Please read the FAQs here to see whether I've answered your question already.")

If your blog becomes very large and popular, you can use your Contact page to pre-empt possible questions and to point readers towards other sources of help and support.

Examples:

Copyblogger's Contact page

Productive Flourishing's Contact page

Both these pages from larger blogs do a great job of prompting readers towards possible answers, as well as allowing them to get in touch if they want to.

Your Shop / Services Page

If you have any products or services for sale, it's important to make this abundantly clear. It might seem obvious to *you* that readers can hire you – the author of, let's say, a logo design blog – for your freelancing logo design, but readers may not necessarily realise that.

You don't necessarily need to include full details of every single product you have, or every service you offer, on this page. You should, though, give readers the basics about your key products and services, with links to more information where possible.

Different bloggers take different approaches to naming this page, and you may even find that you want to have multiple pages for different offerings. The main possibilities are:

- Shop (or Store)
- Online Shop (or Online Store)
- Products
- Services
- The name of your particular product / service, e.g. "Copywriting Services" or "Hand-Knitted Goods" or "Speaking" or "Consulting"

Examples:

Productive Flourishing – using "services" and "products" (the "free planners" page also contains a link to their premium planners).
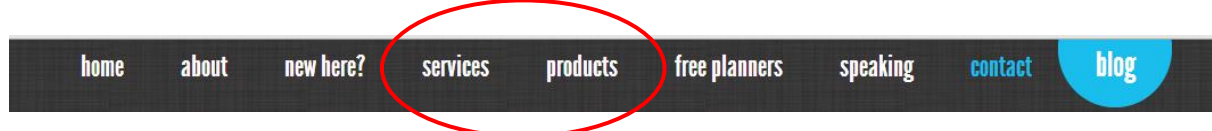
Michael Hyatt – using "Speaking", "Consulting" and "Store".
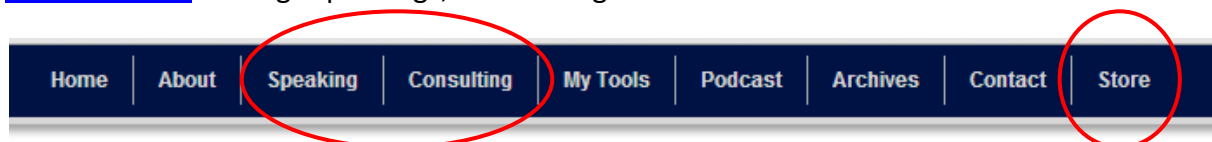
Chapter Three: Creating Great Blog Content

When new readers come to your blog, the design and layout will be the first thing they notice. You can succeed very well with a simple design, though (or even a less-than-great one) – *if* you have great content.

However, the best design in the world isn't going to make up for poor quality content. Readers might stick around briefly – but they won't become loyal fans.

When it comes to content, three common situations you might struggle with are:

1. You have a very new blog without much content.

2. You've written quite a few posts, but you're aware these aren't quite as high-quality as you'd like them to be

3. You have some fantastic content, but it's buried deep in your blog's archives – and new readers are unlikely to stumble across it.

In this chapter, we'll be covering ways to solve all three of these problems.
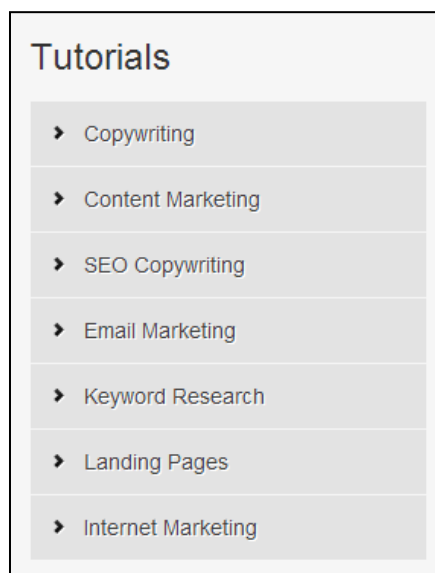
Creating Cornerstone Content

If your blog is new – or if you're not happy with the quality of your existing posts – then you're in a great position to create some very valuable, attractive content for your readers.

In the blogging world, this is sometimes called *cornerstone content, flagship content* or *pillar content:* posts that will stand the test of time and support your blog as a whole.

Example:

Copyblogger's Tutorials

Copyblogger do a great job of highlighting their cornerstone content, which they've organised into Tutorials. Links to these appear in their sidebar – and they're well worth a read.

When you're coming up with ideas for cornerstone content, try:

- **Writing a series of posts that all fall under a particular topic**. You can add more series of posts in the future.

- **Focusing on beginner-friendly content.** Unless your blog is aimed squarely at an advanced segment of the market, most of your readers will be beginners (especially when they first come to your blog!)

- **Concentrating on "How to" posts or list posts – these are easy ways to deliver value to the reader.** Posts that focus on your own story might not be so compelling.

- **Thinking about your brand.** These posts need to create the right first impression. You might want to consider your writing style (formal or informal?) your use of images (humorous or informative?) and even the way you structure your posts as part of your brand.

- **Looking for keywords that relate to your niche.** Your cornerstone content will be a great way to draw search engines, as well as readers, to your blog. (For more on getting search engine traffic, read Chapter Seven.)

It's worth setting aside some quality time to work on your cornerstone content. You don't need to clear a whole day – but look for ways to find at least an hour or two when you won't be interrupted.

This content needs to be well-structured and well-written: if you have a copy of The Blogger's Guide to Effective Writing, this is a great time to brush up on your post-writing skills. You can also check out the section later in this chapter on "How to Improve Any Post, Fast" for quick tips that will help.

Creating a Popular Posts List

If you already have some great cornerstone-worthy posts on your blog – or if you've put together your cornerstone content – then it's a great idea to create a "popular posts" list for your sidebar. This highlights your best content for readers.

If you're not sure where to begin, look at your blog's stats to see which posts are currently getting the most traffic. (You might also want to consider bounce rate, and time spent on the page: Chapter Seventeen, on Google Analytics, will help you with this.) Posts with lots of comments, tweets, Likes, or similar are also great candidates for your list.

If "Popular Posts" doesn't quite fit the list you've come up with, then you can easily use a different heading – "Best of [Blog Name]" or "Top Articles" or "Start Here" or whatever suits you and your blog.

To create your list:

1. Decide which posts you want to include. You could choose the ones that have had the most comments, the most tweets, or the most views.
2. Add a text widget for your blog, and enter the titles for your posts, each on a separate line.
3. Use HTML code to add in the link to each post. It should look something like this:

Start Here Page

This is a similar concept to a Popular Posts list ... but it gives you the opportunity to go into much more depth. It's best suited to quite large blogs which have been running for at least a few months.

Instead of a sidebar list, you devote a whole page to new readers, giving them additional guidance on where to start. Different blogs have different names for this type of page – "Start Here" or "New Here?" are the most common.

Example:

Productive Flourishing's "New Here?" page

This page does a great job of pointing readers towards posts that are likely to interest them, with subheadings to separate key posts by who the reader might be.

Creating Cornerstone Content for Personal Blogs

If you're writing a personal blog – one driven by the events of your life and your thoughts about them – then some of the usual blogging "rules" might not seem to apply. For instance, if you blog about your experiences of being a full-time parent to five kids, you might be more interested in sharing anecdotes than in writing "how to" style posts.

Your blog can still have cornerstone content, though. These might be fairly in-depth posts that tell a larger part of your story (rather than focusing on a single isolated incident), or posts that work especially well to showcase your writing voice – perhaps particularly funny or moving pieces.

How to Improve Any Post, Fast

Although we don't have the space to cover every aspect of writing great blog content (that's [another Guide entirely](#)!) these tips will help you to improve any blog post – whether it's one you're working on right now, or one that you wrote a year ago.

It's always a good idea to give old content a quick polish, if you'll be including it in a "Popular Posts" or "Start Here" list – your writing skills will have improved over time, your writing voice may well have become stronger, and you might also have changed some of the goals of your blog.

Step #1: Check Your Post Structure

Many bloggers sit down with a blank document and a topic, then write their post as a stream-of-consciousness. While this is a perfectly good technique for personal journaling, or even a rough first draft of a post, it's unlikely to result in a great finished piece for your blog.

The structure of your post – the way it's put together – makes a big difference to how readable it is. If you go off on a long tangent or give information in a confusing order, readers may well give up and go elsewhere.

Your first step when editing a post – old or new – should be to make sure that the structure is solid. If you've included paragraphs that aren't relevant to your main point, cut them (you might consider saving them for a future post). If your post doesn't flow logically, move the paragraphs around.

Bonus tip: To prevent structural problems in future, always create an outline for your post before you begin to write.

Step #2: Strengthen the Introduction

Your introduction has a crucial job to do: it needs to grab readers' attention and make them interested enough to read on. Sadly, many blog posts introductions don't work as effectively as they should – and may even put readers off by being over-long and unfocused.

To strengthen your introduction, you could try:

- **Cutting the first paragraph** – some writers find they often produce a "warm up" paragraph that doesn't really say anything

- **Removing any extraneous details** – in almost all cases, the reader doesn't need to know the backstory of this post (e.g. "I was wondering what to write about today, and I decided to choose a topic close to my heart...")

- **Opening with a (relevant) question**, such as "Do you ever procrastinate?" This can create an instant sense of connection, as the reader is prompted to think about their answer to your question. It's also a great way to get the word "you" in right at the start of your post.

Bonus tip: If you struggle to write introductions, try writing them after you've completed the rest of your post. That way, you'll know what you're introducing.

Step #3: Add a Call to Action

If you've not come across the term "call to action" before, it simply means asking the reader to do something. (We cover calls to action in greater depth in Chapter Sixteen.) The best place for this is at the end of your post – where readers will be making a decision on what to do next.

Your call to action should be something that helps you to meet your current goals for your blog. For instance, if you want more subscribers, your call to action might be:

Enjoyed this post? Click here to get the RSS feed, so that you don't miss out on future posts.

If you want more comments, your call to action might be:

Which of these ten tips will you try out this week? Let us know in the comments...

Bonus tip: When you plan your next post, think about what you want people to do after reading it. That way, you can craft a piece that naturally leads into your call to action.

Step #4: Edit for Accuracy and Clarity

Editing doesn't just mean checking for spelling mistakes and typos – it also means ensuring that your sentences and word choices are clear. When you edit, look out for:

- **Clumsy sentences that run on too long, or that lose the reader half-way.** The best way to deal with these is usually to re-write them as two separate sentences.
- **Jargon that you haven't explained** (unless you're confident that your audience will already understand the word or phrase). It's often helpful to spell out acronyms the first time you use them.
- **Facts and figures that you might need to double-check.** It's a good idea to check that all your links are working, too.
- **Any grammar or spelling mistakes**, or words you accidentally mistyped – don't rely on your spell checker to spot these. Some typos, like missing words, won't get picked up.

Bonus tip: Read your post out loud when you edit – you'll spot areas where the words don't flow as smoothly as they should, as well as typos and other mistakes.

Step #5: Include Images and Formatting

One great way to enhance your posts is to include an image (or several images). These can be used to:

- **Draw the reader's eye** – especially right at the start of your post.

- **Add useful information** – perhaps in the form of a graph or screenshot.

- **Break up long sections of text** – if your post runs over 1,000 words, consider using a small image within each sub-section.

- **Set the tone, or reinforce your brand** – perhaps you always use cartoons to signal that your posts are light-hearted, or you take your own photos to emphasise the personal nature of your blog.

As well as images, you can include formatting to make your text easier for readers to take in. This means adding:

- **Subheadings to signpost major posts.** Make them clear and descriptive, as search engines will pick up on these too.

- **Bold text to emphasise key sentences or points.** Try to be consistent in how you use bold text (e.g. the first sentence of each subsection) as it can start to look choppy and distracting otherwise.

- **Blockquotes to set out any quotations that you include.** Your blogging software will have a button for these (it often looks like double quotation marks).

- **Bullet points to set out individual items.** If you have a list within a paragraph, this can be hard for readers to take in; splitting it out with bullet points creates more white space on the page and makes the list much easier to read.

Bonus tip: Keep your sentences and paragraphs short. This goes a long way toward making your post more readable – even if you forget to include much formatting.

Step #6: Edit Your Post's Title

The most important element of your post is its title. **If you get this wrong, you'll miss out on a lot of readers – and the rest of your post, however brilliant, won't get the attention it deserves.**

If your post has been around a while, you *may* want to consider whether or not it's a good idea to edit your title – if you have lots of links to that post from other blogs that use the existing title, it could potentially be confusing for readers. Generally, though, I'd say that the benefits of a great title far outweigh any possible confusion caused by changing it.

(Do be careful, though, not to change the permalink of your post when you change the title – even if your permalinks normally match your titles. Otherwise, you'll have broken links.)

Great titles:

- **Are specific rather than general**, e.g. *7 Simple Ways to Grow Great Tomatoes* not *Growing Tomatoes*.

- **Often use numbers.** Just take a look at the Popular Posts list on Daily Blog Tips and you'll see how many of those have a number in the title.

- **Have adjectives.** Words like *easy, simple, straightforward* or *quick* can help lift a title. You can also try *secret* or *little-known* to create a hint of mystery. *Powerful, great, killer,* and *must-know* all help make your post sound more interesting ... but do make sure your post can live up to the hype of the title.

Bonus tip: Come up with three or four possible titles for your post, and choose the best. You might want to ask friends for their input.

Chapter Four: Claiming Your Content (Google Authorship)

One simple trick you can use to get more traffic is to set up Authorship on your posts, through Google+. This means that you'll almost certainly get more readers clicking on your post in Google's search engine results (and on many blogs, Google makes up 90% or more of search engine traffic).

This is what posts looks like with authorship enabled, when they appear in Google's search engine results:
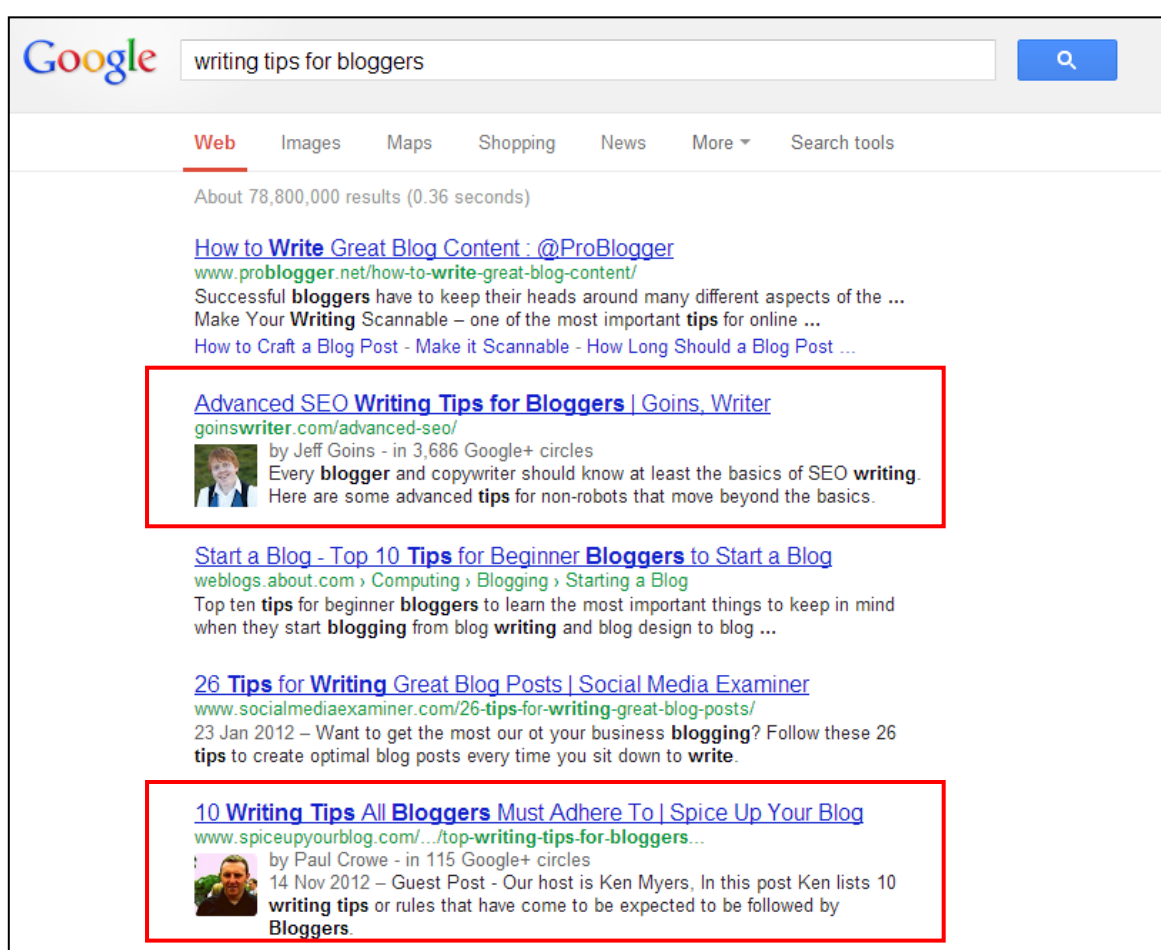
Even though the indicated posts don't come top of Google's search engine results, they draw the reader's eye because of the images alongside.

They also have extra information – like the author's name, and the number of Google+ circles that they're in. **A reader is more likely to click to read a piece by an author who they already know and like, and they may also be impressed by an author who's in a large number of Google+ circles – as this indicates online authority.**

The good news is that setting up Google+ authorship is free and straightforward. Here's how to do it:

Step One: Set Up Your Google+ Account

1. If you don't already have a personal Google+ account, set one up.

2. Upload a photo, ideally of yourself: this will appear in Google's search results, so make it a good one.

3. Consider filling out your profile fields – occupation, education, location – to let people know more about you. This can help readers feel more connected to you.

Step Two: Add Your Blog To Your Google+ Account

You need to add the name and full URL of your blog to your Google+ account. There's a special section of your profile for this, called *Contributor to*.

(If you write for multiple different blogs, you can list them all.)

1. Go to your Google+ homepage.[1]

2. Click the Profile button (on the left-hand side, circled below).

3. Click Edit profile (the blue button at the top of the page, circled below).
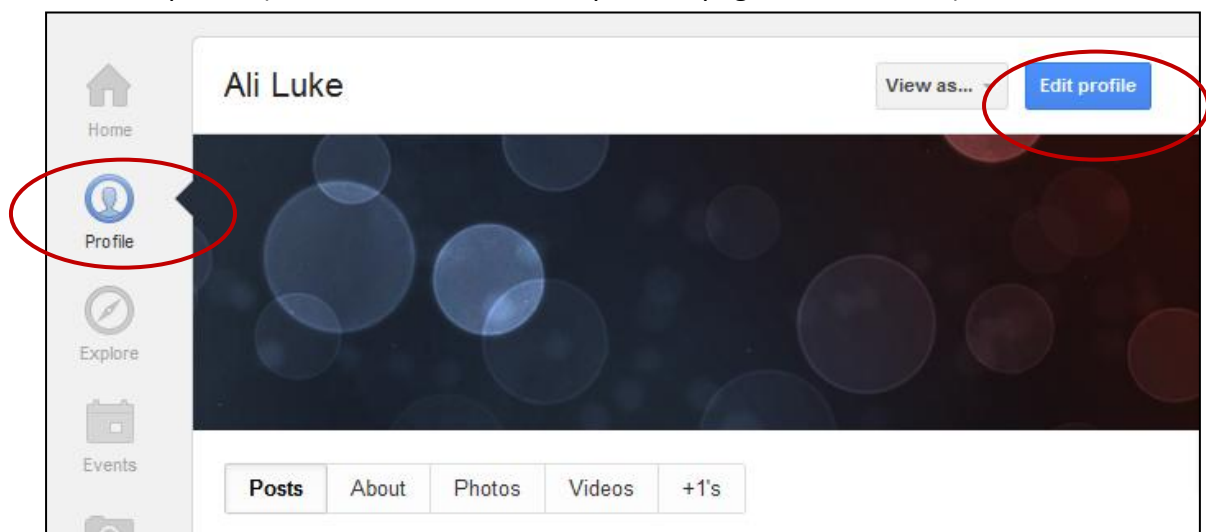
4. Scroll down to the *Contributor to* section and click anywhere on it to open the editing view.

5. Click on *Add custom link.*

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[1] plus.google.com

6. Fill in "Label" with the name of the blog and "URL" with its full web address:

If you want, you can add more sites. Once you're done, click the blue Save button.

Step Three: Add Your Google+ Account Link to Your Blog

1. In your address bar, copy the URL up to the end of the long number. Mine is:
   https://plus.google.com/114597783775575791940
   (If you're back on the Google+ home page, click *Profile* to get yours.)

2. In every blog post that you write, you'll need to include a link to your Google+ page. There are several ways to do this, but we recommend using a simple plugin.

3. Install the [Google Author Link plugin](#) and activate it.

4. Go to Users → Your Profile and add your Google Profile URL (under Contact Info). This is a new field created by the plugin. Click Update Profile at the bottom of the page.
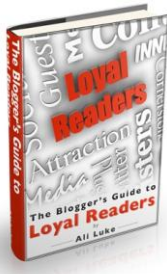

5. Go to Settings → Google Author Link. Select an author for the home page (optional).

It may take a few days for Google to make updates. Once it does, your content will have your photo and other details alongside in Google search engine results:
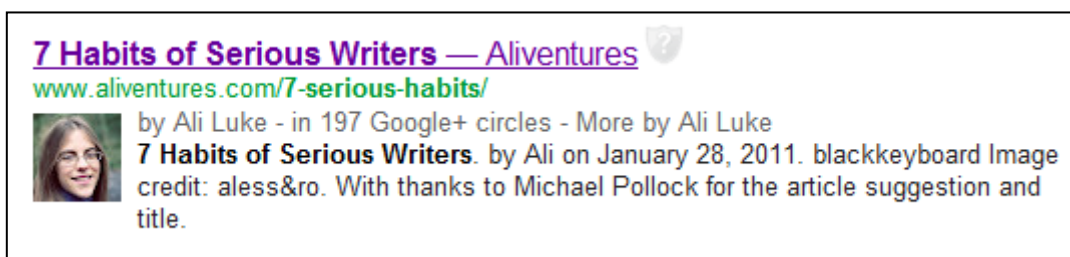
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