

# Module #8: Creating a Content Calendar Packed with Great Ideas

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In this week's module, we're looking at content calendars, ideas and planning: by the time you've finished the module and completed the assignment, you'll be in a great position to move forward with your blog over the next few weeks and months.

We'll also cover a specific framework for producing blog posts, using "batch production" – this can make the whole writing process much easier, and I hope you'll find it as useful a technique as I do!

This is our final module, and it's designed to give you the tools and techniques you need to keep blogging after Blog On. If you're stuck at any point, or if you have *any* blogging questions (they don't need to relate to this module), just ask in our Facebook group:

[www.facebook.com/groups/blogonspring2018](https://www.facebook.com/groups/blogonspring2018)

(Or feel free to email me – [ali@aliventures.com](mailto:ali@aliventures.com).)

## What's a Content Calendar ... and Why Might You Want One?

A content calendar is simply a list of upcoming dates, and posts that you plan to publish on those dates.

Here's how mine looked for June:

## Blog On Spring 2018: Creating a Content Calendar Packed with Great Ideas

June			
Week commencing	Blog post (Monday)	Newsletter main article (Thursday)	Notes/other
4th June	Choosing the Right Viewpoint and Tense for Your Fiction  (repost) <a href="http://www.aliventures.com/choosing-viewpoint-fiction/">http://www.aliventures.com/choosing-viewpoint-fiction/</a>	(7th) X ways to find support with your writing (online groups, including the Parent Writer group, local groups, classes/courses, local library, existing network/friends).	
11th June	X things to do before you start freelancing (e.g. get a professional email address, set up PayPal)	(14th) X techniques for quickly planning the novel scene you're about to write	
18th June	How to Make Your Characters Suffer  (repost) <a href="http://www.aliventures.com/make-characters-suffer">http://www.aliventures.com/make-characters-suffer</a>	(21st) Why is fiction so hard to write well?	Launch of advanced fiction & editing packs -- \$9.99 for two weeks
25th June	The Right Way to Expand a Too-Short Piece of Writing  (repost) <a href="http://www.aliventures.com/too-short-writing">http://www.aliventures.com/too-short-writing</a>	(28th) X five-minute jobs to spruce up your blog or website	

Whatever type of blog you have, a content calendar (sometimes called an editorial calendar) can be useful. Even if your blog is very much a personal journal where you write about whatever's on your mind, you can still use a content calendar to help you stay on track.

Your content calendar could be as simple as a few prompts of what you want to write about:

4<sup>th</sup> June – Viewpoint & tense

11<sup>th</sup> June – Beginner freelancing tips

At the other end of the scale, you could create a content calendar that goes far beyond just listing dates and post titles, by including the category for the post, potential tags, notes for what you want to write in the post itself, and more.

## Great Reasons to Use a Content Calendar

A content calendar:

- Helps you plan ahead with your blogging – making it much easier to post consistently, without having to scramble around for ideas.
- Lets you see a whole month's worth of posts at once (perhaps more!) – which means you can think about the bigger picture of your blog, rather than just thinking about individual posts.
- Highlights potential problems (like having several posts on one narrow topic in a row) and opportunities (like a natural chance to promote one of your products).
- Means you can let readers know what's coming up, if you want to. This can be particularly helpful if you're running a series of linked posts.
- Makes it easier to work with guest posters: you can set aside specific slots for guests posts in your content calendar, and you'll be able to let them know when their post will run.
- Lets you outsource work more easily to an assistant. For instance, you might plan several posts ahead, then you can give the titles / topics to your assistant and ask them to source suitable images for your posts.

All of this sounds great ... but the reality is that lots of bloggers *don't* use content calendars! If you're not sure it's worth it for you, perhaps you're thinking:

**“Creating a content calendar will take too long.”** Obviously, sitting down and putting together a content calendar takes a bit of time (especially if you're coming up with post ideas as part of the process). But I find that spending 20 minutes once a month on my content calendar makes it so much easier to write blog posts and newsletter articles for the rest of the month!

**“A content calendar means I can't be spontaneous with my blog posts.”** Your content calendar isn't set in stone! I often move a post or two around during the month, or change a topic for something else entirely. It's fine to adjust your plan as you're going along.

## Four Options for Creating Your Content Calendar

There are lots of ways in which you might create a content calendar. What's important is that you pick something that feels easy and natural for you: something you'll actually use. For many bloggers, that means keeping it simple, using a spreadsheet or document – or even a sheet of paper!

If you already enjoy working with a software tool like [Trello](#), for instance, then you might want to use that for your content calendar. Don't sign up for a new app or tool just to create a content calendar, though: you'll spend a lot of time learning how to use it and not so much time actually planning your blog posts!

Good options are:

**#1: A document or similar** – you could use a Word document, Google docs, or Evernote (which is what I use for my content calendar). I like to create a table for my content calendar so that it's easy to leave blanks and to juggle things around.

**#2: A spreadsheet** – this is useful if you want to keep track of several pieces of information for each post (e.g. if you want to include your intended category, other blog posts to link to, and so on).

**#3: A physical notebook** – if your notebook is big enough to fit a month's worth of blog posts onto one page or view, this could work well. You might find that it's easier to think about your blog posts without distractions when you're not at the computer, too.

**#4: A WordPress plugin** – the “Editorial Calendar” plugin for WordPress allows you to create a content calendar. These have never been a good fit for me because I like to draft in Word rather than directly into WordPress, so I only login to my blog when it's time to actually upload a post! But if you write your posts in WordPress, you might find a plugin suits you.

Of course, you don't have to stick to one of these options forever! If you're short on time right now, you might want to start out with something very simple and straightforward, like a sheet of paper where you list your posts for the month, then move on to a different method once you've tried that for a month or two.

## Filling Your Content Calendar With Ideas

I tend to come up with ideas separately from putting them into my content calendar: I like to generate ideas without thinking about where exactly they're going to fit, what other posts they might link to, or even whether they're workable at all!

While you could come up with all your ideas while staring at your blank content calendar, you'll probably find it easier to brainstorm them before you begin to figure out which idea goes where. Which leads me on to ...

## Coming Up With Great Ideas

There's no magic way to come up with ideas for your blog ... but I find all of these help me to get my brain in gear!

Note: each idea could be a fairly general topic ("writing a short story") or it could be a working title ("Ten Tips for Writing a Great Short Story"). Either is fine: I tend to think in titles these days, after ten years of blogging (!) but if you'd rather come up with ideas and fix a title at a later stage, there's nothing wrong with that.

### #1: Write a List

Sit down with a notebook / blank document and start listing ideas. Don't worry if your first few feel forced or a bit silly ... just keep going and you'll soon hit on some good ideas. I find it helps to think of this as a process: I'm not aiming for a specific outcome straight away (like "ten perfect ideas"), instead, the act of listing ideas means I'll eventually hit on some good ones!

### #2: Think Like a Beginner

This isn't appropriate for every blog, but if you're writing about a particular topic (like gardening, parenting, photography, etc), it can help to think like a beginner. What questions did you have when you were new to this? What was worrying you or confusing you? Could you write a post that would help someone else who's in the same position?

### #3: Use Some “Fill in the Blanks” Titles

Another way to come up with ideas is to take some ready-written titles and fill them in to suit your blog. Here’s a list you could start off with:

- Ten ... Ways to ... (e.g. “Ten Powerful Ways to Start Your Next Blog Post”)
- How to ... (and Why You’ll Want To) (e.g. “How to Start a Blog (and Why You’ll Want To)”)
- How I ... and How You Could Too (e.g. “How I Retired at 40 ... and How You Could Too”)
- Five Lessons Learned from Five Years of ... (e.g. “Five Lessons Learned from Five Years of Freelancing”)
- The Biggest Mistake ... Make with ... (e.g. “The Biggest Mistake Writers Make With Marketing”)

There’s no copyright on titles, and most title patterns get endlessly repeated across different blogs – so it’s fine to take someone else’s title and swap a few words around.

### #4: Think About What Other Bloggers Aren’t Covering

Are there any topics that you never seem to read about on other blogs in your field? Maybe you’ve been trying to find information on something and no-one covers it: this could make a great topic for *your* blog.

Sometimes, the things that aren’t covered are simple and straightforward (perhaps so much so, that no-one even thinks to write about them)! These can make for great topics for your posts. For instance, Digital Photography School (one of Darren “ProBlogger” Rowse’s blogs) has a post on How to Hold Your Digital Camera. It’s a very beginner friendly topic ... and a very popular post.

### #5: Use a Blogging (or Writing) Prompt

If you’re blogging as an outlet for your writing, or as a way to get into a regular writing habit, then there are lots of blogging and writing prompts out there that you could use as starting points.

Here are a couple of lists to try:

**52 Writing Prompts to Inspire Your Next Blog Post** – a collection of different prompts, mostly focused towards personal, journal-style blogging.

**365 Blog Post Ideas and Writing Prompts** – some of these are a bit repetitive or a bit too wacky (e.g. “what is the opposite of cake?”), but there are lots that could get you thinking.

## Selecting Ideas to Put Into Your Content Calendar

Once you’ve got a list of ideas – I’d suggest aiming for at least ten – then you can start filling in your content calendar.

I always create my blank content calendar first (by copying the previous month’s!) so that I can slot things in piecemeal. If you’d like a blank template to use, you can download either of these:

- **Word document content calendar template**
- **Excel spreadsheet content calendar template**

As you decide which ideas to include, you might want to think about:

- **Rotating between different topic areas.** On Aliventures, I try not to have too many posts in a row on a particular area of writing – instead, I have a mix of content on fiction-writing, self-publishing, blogging and freelancing. If I cover any one topic too frequently, that (understandably) puts off people who aren’t interested in it!
- **Rotating between different types of post.** For instance, you might have a “how to” post then a “ten ways to” post, then an essay-style post. It’s easy to get into a bit of a rut with blogging, especially if you have a favourite type of post – and planning things out on your calendar means you can make sure you’re offering readers a variety of types of content.
- **Allowing for weeks when you’re going to be unusually busy, or away on holiday.** If you know you’re not going to have much time to write in a particular week, you could plan for a short, straightforward post that week ... or you can make sure that you schedule in some writing ahead of time.
- **Running a series of posts.** Sometimes it makes sense to run a short (or long!) series of posts that are all linked together. You might plan this so you have several posts in a row leading up to a launch, for instance ([Michael Hyatt](#) does this a lot) – or you could have an ongoing series

once per month, like the [e-Cover Design Awards on The Book Designer](#), or [K.M. Weiland's Writing Mistakes series](#).

- **Considering what each post will do for *you* as the blogger.** For instance, is it a chance to draw readers further into your blog by linking to lots of your past posts? Is it an opportunity to encourage people to sign up for your newsletter? Is it a good post for encouraging comments or feedback? Will it give you a chance to promote your products? Or is it simply a topic you'd enjoy writing about? (That's perfectly valid, too!) You might want to look at having different underlying purposes for each post so that you can vary your calls to action, rather than always asking readers to comment (or similar).
- **Including old posts that you can update and republish.** This is something I've started doing recently: some of the posts that get the most readers are older ones (people find them through search engines or, less often, social media). I've been picking a couple of these each month to slot into my content calendar – it's easy for me (!) and it means I can update those posts that lots of new visitors are coming to. Often, for instance, I've added a call to action to sign up for my newsletter.

## How to Batch Produce Your Blog Posts

**When I was at university, a decade and a half ago, I had to write at least one short essay – often two – each week.** (On the plus side, I had extremely long vacations! Instead of sitting down with a blank screen and researching as I went along, I wrote essays step-by-step, like this:

**Step #1: Choose an essay question.** We normally had several to pick from. This was a quick step as all I had to do was to choose whichever sounded most interesting!

**Step #2: Write a plan.** I'd had lectures about whatever the essay topic was, so I knew enough to at least put together a rough plan. This would include several key points in my argument.



**Step #3: Choose quotes.** I studied English, so at the heart of every essay were quotes from whatever text I was writing about. Once I had a plan, I knew what type of quotes to look for to support my argument.

**Step #4: Draft the essay.** With a plan and the quotes in hand, the drafting process was fairly quick. It normally took me two hours or less to draft a 1,500 – 2,000 word essay.

**Step #5: Edit the essay.** I'd quite often print out my draft and start over from scratch at this stage: the structure and argument of the essay wouldn't normally change much, but this way, I could make my points more eloquently!

I always met deadlines for essays, and for the most part, I enjoyed the process of writing them. (Unlike some fellow students, who'd end up pulling "all nighters" to finish their essays.)

The process I used then is not so very different from the process I use to create blog posts – and it's served me well for ten years of blogging!

Here's how it looks:

**Step #1: Come up with lots of ideas.** I do this separately from planning, drafting and writing, because I've found that it's easiest to come up with a bunch of ideas all at once. (We covered a bunch of ways to generate ideas earlier in this module, if you want to skip back to page 9 for help with that.)

**Step #2: Plan several posts or newsletters at once.** Occasionally, I plan a single post at a time, but I normally find it's most effective to plan three or four in one go. I can get into a "planning" frame of mind, and I can also more easily spot potential links between the posts.

**Step #3: Figure out what links I'm going to use in the posts.** If I'm honest, I normally do this at the drafting or editing stage – but if I know I'm going to be linking a lot, or bringing in quotes from other bloggers, I find it helpful to start gathering links before I start writing.

**Step #4: Draft the post.** Having a plan makes it relatively easy – it's just a case of filling in all the blanks! There are some bits of my draft that I always know will need extra attention – particularly the introduction and conclusion – and I

resist the urge to try to perfect those at this stage. If I'm writing short pieces for my newsletter, I like to draft three or four at once.

**Step #5: Edit the post.** Unlike with my university essays, I don't start over from scratch! My writing style for my posts is informal and conversational, and the draft is usually in reasonable shape. The introduction and conclusion normally get the most attention, and I'll read the post through carefully and tweak anything that doesn't quite work (e.g. clunky-sounding sentences).

**Step #6: Upload the post to my blog.** At this stage, the text itself is complete – though I'll usually do a final proofread. This is when I add an image, set the category, put in the “read more” link and so on. (Actually, my assistant does this step for most of my posts these days ... which is another great reason to batch produce posts, because it makes it easier to hand tasks over.)

**You don't have to follow the exact same process as me.** You might find that you want to break some of these steps down even further, or you might want to tackle things in a different order – perhaps you like to find an image for your post when you're planning, for instance, instead of after you've edited.

**But by creating posts as a batch, you'll find that it's much easier to keep up your blogging momentum.** I know that I have plenty of days when I don't have time to write, but I do have the time to spend 20 minutes coming up with some ideas, or fleshing out some ideas into simple blog post plans. Then when I do have writing time, I've got a plan all ready to go – I don't waste any time staring at a blank screen.

## Why Planning Your Blog Posts Ahead of Time Helps So Much

One of the most important stages of the batch production process is planning – and even if you decide to only plan one post at a time, you'll hopefully find that alone is helpful.

Having a plan makes it easier to:

- **Break through the initial resistance to writing.** Sitting down to write a blog post can feel hard. If you've already got a clear idea and a plan, a big chunk of the work is already out the way – which makes it easier to push past that resistance.
- **Draft your post across several writing sessions.** While I think it's usually helpful to draft a whole post in one go, I know that's not always practical – if you're writing something particularly long, for instance, or if your writing time is limited to 10 minutes here and there. A plan helps you do a little bit at a time without losing your thread.
- **Make the most of your writing time.** If you don't have a plan, it's easy to end up wandering off on a tangent that you later have to cut out – or otherwise, you might have to keep stopping and starting as you try to figure out what needs to come next. A plan keeps you moving efficiently in the right direction.

We took a look at planning back in Module 2 (for classic/essay-style posts) and Module 4 (for list posts), but here's a quick recap on what a plan might look like:

Post Title
Introduction
Key point 1
Key point 2
Key point 3
Conclusion
Call to Action

*(you might have more, or fewer, than 3 key points)*

Here are a couple of worked examples:

**Initial idea:** Parts of your novel that need a lot of rewriting (beginning & end)

**Title:** The Two Scenes in Your Novel That Will Need the Most Rewriting

**Introduction** – novels are complex and need a lot of rewriting ... but some areas will likely need more attention than others

[Key point 1] **Your Opening Scene** (*the first chapter of Lycopolis went through about a dozen different versions*)

[Key point 2] **The Climax of Your Novel** (*not necessarily the final scene*)

**Conclusion** – don't be surprised or dismayed if you find yourself rewriting the beginning and end of your novel again and again – it can be really tough to get these right.

**Call to action** – link to <http://www.aliventures.com/novel-in-two-years/>

**Initial idea:** Being “too busy to write” is a problem with your life in general, not just your writing

**Title:** Are You Too Busy to Write? Then That's What You Need to Fix

**Introduction** – one of the most common problems I hear about from writers is that they can't find the time to write, or that they're too busy to write

[Key Point 1] **The Problem (Probably) Isn't Your Writing** (*“finding time” is hard if your writing doesn't engage you, yes ... but you can have a great project to work on and still struggle to find time*)

[Key Point 2] **The Problem (Probably) Isn't Your Work Ethic** (*if you procrastinate terribly, then yes, fix that – but being busy or overwhelmed doesn't mean you're procrastinating*)

[Key Point 3] **The Problem is ... Everything Else** (*day job, family commitments, volunteering, housework, etc*)

[Key Point 4] **And the Solution is to Do Less, Not More** (*it's not about cramming in more writing – it's about making space for your writing by looking at everything else that's taking up your time*)

**Conclusion** – I can't tell you what to do less of, because I don't know what commitments you have. But you can ditch, delegate or at least delay some of them. (Give examples.)

**Call to action** – join the newsletter to get my free mini-ebook "Time to Write"

Your plans might be more or less detailed than mine. You might just want to write down a few words to jog your memory. What matters is that you have a plan – a shape for your post, so that when you sit down to write, you know exactly where you're going.

## Module #8: Recap

This module has, I hope, given you a good basis for building on as you go forward for your blogging. We've taken an in-depth look at content calendars, and we've covered:

- **What a content calendar is**, and why they're so useful for almost any type of blog, whether you're blogging to make money or simply as a hobby.
- **Different ways in which you could create a content calendar** – using a document, a spreadsheet, an app, or simply a notebook.
- **How to come up with plenty of ideas** that you can then choose from for your content calendar, through brainstorming or simply writing a list.
- **Some key considerations to keep in mind when you're slotting different ideas into your calendar**: varying the types of post and the subjects you cover, and thinking about whether you want to link posts together in a series.
- **Why “batch producing” your posts can make the writing process easier** (and a lot more efficient): you can come up with lots of ideas at once, write several short plans, draft your content, and then edit.
- **Why planning is particularly important**, especially if you're short on writing time, as it allows you to work on posts bit by bit.

As always, if you're stuck at any point, do come and ask for help in our Facebook group:

[facebook.com/groups/blogonspring2018](https://www.facebook.com/groups/blogonspring2018)

(The group will still be available after the end of the course, and I'll keep popping in from time to time to answer questions and to celebrate your successes with you ... so please do keep us posted on how your blogging goes!)

## **Module #8 Assignment and Check In**

**This week, your assignment is in three parts:**

**#1: Come up with a list of 10 post ideas**

**#2: Choose four of these and put them into your content calendar**

**#3: Spend 5 – 10 minutes planning each of those four**

It's fine if your content calendar is just a list in a document or on a bit of paper for now, and it's fine if your plans are very brief. The idea is to get *something* down for your next four posts so you've got somewhere to go after Blog On!

Once you've come up with some ideas and plans, or got as far as you're going to get, check in here to get your reward card stamped:

**[facebook.com/groups/blogon.spring2018/permalink/257597685019084](https://www.facebook.com/groups/blogon.spring2018/permalink/257597685019084)**

Please feel free to share your four best ideas (and your plans, if you like) in the Facebook group. If you've got quite a bit to share, it might be easiest to upload a document rather than paste it all into a comment.

If you prefer not to use Facebook, email me with "Check in" in the subject line.

Don't forget, you need to check in by the end of **Sunday 22<sup>nd</sup> July**. (It's fine to check in even if you haven't finished the assignment.)

## **Module #8: Recommended Further Reading**

**Why You Should Create Content in Batches (and How to Do It)**, Ali Luke, Craft Your Content

If you want to learn more about the idea of batch production, I've got a whole post on it here, with tips for each stage of the production process, and some thoughts on why it's such a useful way to approach writing for your blog (and/or newsletter).

**How to Write a Series of Posts for Your Blog**, Darren Rowse, ProBlogger

If you're thinking about incorporating a series of linked posts into your content calendar, there are lots of good tips and things to think about here.

**The Surprisingly Simple Secret to Knowing What Your Readers Want**, Linda Formichelli, Smart Blogger

This is an in-depth post about surveying your readers, with links to survey tools you can use plus suggested questions to ask (and why). It's geared for bloggers who are thinking about launching a product, not just looking for content ideas - but there's a lot here that any blogger might find useful.



## What's Coming Up Next

Well done on finishing the final module of Blog On! This isn't the end, though: our Facebook group ([facebook.com/groups/blogonspring2018](https://facebook.com/groups/blogonspring2018)) will remain up and running, and I very much hope you'll keep us updated there on how your blogging goes over the next few weeks and months.

I'd love to hear how the course was for you, and I've started a Facebook topic here where you can leave feedback (good or bad!):

[facebook.com/groups/blogon.spring2018/permalink/257599041685615](https://facebook.com/groups/blogon.spring2018/permalink/257599041685615)

Also, I updated the materials a *lot* from the previous incarnation of Blog On ... and while I hope everything came together well, I'm sure there are areas where you might have wanted more guidance or a different focus. I'd love your suggestions on what I could change to make Blog On even better for the next cohort:

[facebook.com/groups/blogon.spring2018/permalink/257601358352050](https://facebook.com/groups/blogon.spring2018/permalink/257601358352050)

In the autumn (probably starting late September), I'm going to be running a brand new course, **Successful Guest Posting [Blog On #2]**.

Whatever your blogging goals, guest posting is a great way to get your name out there, to create pieces for your portfolio, and to reach lots of new readers. **I very much hope you'll come back and join us for that course ... don't forget that your reward card gives you a hefty discount!**

I'll post details in the group nearer the time, and if you're on the Aliventures newsletter list, you'll receive an email about those too.

You're always very welcome to get in touch with me at [ali@aliventures.com](mailto:ali@aliventures.com) at any time.