

MODULE #4: GETTING GREAT EXPERIENCE ... AND TESTIMONIALS

IN THIS MODULE:

We'll cover how you can get freelancing experience when you're just starting out, and we'll look at how to gather testimonials. We'll also explore ways to display your published work on your website.

Before you start getting clients, you'll need to be able to prove you can write and that you're easy and pleasant to work with. That means having a portfolio – examples of work you've done in the past – and some testimonials from people you've written for (or edited work for).

I know that asking for testimonials can be really daunting – later in the module, I'll share some tips that will hopefully help make it a little easier.

Before we dig into testimonials, though, we're going to look at how to make the most of your existing writing experience and how to find opportunities to get your work published – even if that means writing a small number of pieces for free.

Using Your Existing Writing Experience

Chances are, you already have *some* writing experience (I doubt you'd want to freelance otherwise). While not all of that experience will necessarily be suitable to use as pieces in your portfolio, some of it might make a good starting point.

Things you could use might include:

- Writing you've done for a small organisation, publication or website (e.g. if you wrote an article for a local magazine, or you wrote the text for an amateur sports club's website).

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- Editing you've done for a friend (e.g. if you edited your friend's draft novel).
- Pieces you've written for your own blog, even if it was a while ago – if you're happy that these represent your writing reasonably well, you can use them as examples.

Things that are unlikely to be suitable include:

- Fanfiction, however well received by readers – while I'm firmly in favour of it (and think that it's often harder to write than original fiction), it's not something that your clients will necessarily understand.
- Poetry, however good it is – it won't really demonstrate to clients that you can write, say, a blog post.
- Letters to magazines / newspapers – getting these published is a real achievement and hopefully a nice boost to your confidence, but again, it's not really a demonstration of your freelancing skills.

If you've got a past piece (or a selection of pieces) that you're not sure about using in your portfolio, feel free to pop on over to the Facebook group and see what others think:

[facebook.com/groups/startfreelancing2018](https://www.facebook.com/groups/startfreelancing2018)

Finding Places to Write for Initially

Depending on how much previous experience you have, you might be able to skip this stage. But if you don't have very much experience, or if you haven't written for a long time and want to ease back into it, then this is for you.

When you're just starting out as a freelancer, you may need to write a small number of pieces (I'd say between one and three) for free. While some writers say you should *never* work for free, I think it's perfectly reasonable to do so in a strategic way.

Chances are, you know *someone* who could really benefit from some free writing. It might be a friend who sells craft products on etsy and needs some

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better descriptions, or a former colleague who's launched a business and wants help writing the website copy, or a local acquaintance who runs a local magazine.

If you can't think of anyone to approach directly, post on Facebook (perhaps in a local "news" or "community" type group) or send out an email to friends to ask if they'd like anything written.

Ideally, you want your early work to be a good fit with what you plan to do as a freelancer (e.g. on the same topics or for the same medium). You may find, though, that you need to just take what you can get initially and gradually move toward more relevant work.

If you'll be editing or proof-reading rather than writing, it can be a bit tricky to show your work in action. When you look for people to work with for free, ask them to let you share a section of their work with your edits or corrections in place ... and invite them to write a testimonial.

You're very welcome to use our Facebook group as a way to look for people who might like to work with you, particularly if you're offering editing or proofreading services:

[facebook.com/groups/startfreelancing2018](https://www.facebook.com/groups/startfreelancing2018)

In the next couple of sections, I'm going to suggest some specific avenues for finding your first (probably non-paying) gigs:


Writing for Blogs as a Guest Blogger

This is something you can do with no previous experience at all, so it's a great way to get started even if you're not planning to blog in the longer term. Many blogs don't pay guest bloggers (though they may also take on paid freelancers), but as compensation for your work, you'll get a "bio" which you write about yourself.

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Here's one of my bios:

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Ali Luke

Ali Luke's free mini-ebooks *Time to Write* and *The Two-Year Novel* are for any writer who wants to fit in some extra writing (and enjoy it more)! [You can download them here](#) when you sign up to her weekly email newsletter - which includes writing tips, discounts, and more.

Your bio is a chance to let readers know that you're available for work (or you can use it, as I've done above, to promote your blog, books, or anything else you like). Ideally, you'll have a website to send interested readers to, but you can just put in your email address and ask people to get in touch if they need help with a writing project.

So how do you find a blog to write for? Try:

- **The blogs you already read.** Have you ever seen a guest post on any of them? If they've taken one guest piece, chances are they'll take more.
- **Writing-related blogs.** You don't need to be an expert on writing – you could, say, share your experiences of attending a writing group or a writing conference for the first time.
- **Blogs on the subject areas you'd like to write about.** A quick Google should turn up plenty; you could also try the site AllTop.com, which is a directory of larger blogs.
- **Blogs that friends/family/fellow Start Freelancing members read.** Ask them to recommend blogs on a particular topic, or simply blogs that they like.

When you've got a target blog in mind, make sure you've read a few recent posts to get an idea of their style. Check they definitely accept guest posts (look on their Contact page, or look for a page of guest post guidelines or "write for us".)

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The next two parts of this module should help you with planning and writing the article; do make sure you read the blog's submission guidelines carefully as some like a pitch first, then the full draft. (For your early pieces, I'd suggest writing the whole thing anyway and then pitching it – that way, you can be confident you're able to deliver! You can always tweak it and try it for a different blog if the original one isn't interested.)

Some larger blogs may ask for links to work you've already had published; smaller ones generally won't care – they'll be able to tell you can write from the post you send them.

Other Places to Begin

If you'd rather not write for blogs, or if you want to do something else as well, you might try:

- **Local newspapers and magazines.** If you've ever read any of these, you'll know the standard of writing generally isn't super-high – I'm sure you're more than good enough to write for them! Look for the editor's email address and send a pitch, suggesting two or three possible articles you could write.
- **Local advertising magazines.** In our area, we have three different advertising magazines that drop through the door each month. These make their money from ads (and people use them as directories of services) – but most of them also include short articles. (*You could also look for any ads that are in dire need of editing, and contact those advertisers to see if they'd like a free copyedit.*)
- **Writer or blogger friends.** If you're looking to edit or proofread, chances are, you've got a friend who'd be more than grateful for a hand. Ask around! If your friends are novelists, be clear about how much you're willing to do – e.g. maybe you can edit three chapters for free, but they'll need to pay if they want more help than that.
- **Writing "samples" to publish on your website alone.** I'm not so keen on this method as it lacks some of the credibility that comes with actually having the piece published by someone else, but it does give you something to put on your website for potential clients to look at.

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Planning and Researching Your Piece

I don't want to go into tons of detail here, as I know you may already have quite a bit of writing experience! I'll focus on writing articles (for blogs, magazines or email newsletters) – but lots of the advice here will apply to other types of writing too. If you're writing something quite different, like an advert for a local company, do ask in the Facebook group and I'll be happy to dig out some resources more tailored to you!

Hopefully, this part of the module will help you as you write your first piece or two, but also as you continue freelancing: e.g. if you're writing for free, you may want to focus on work that requires little or no research – you could come back to the section on research at a later date if you need it.

How to Structure Your Article

Like any piece of writing, articles have a beginning, middle, and end. Some titles lend themselves to a pretty specific structure (such a "how to" article), others give you more options.

For ease of both reading and writing, break up your article into subsections – normally, each of these will have its own subheading. This is particularly important for blogs and online magazines, because readers generally won't have the same attention span as people reading print.

I'd suggest coming up with a good title, if your current idea is more like a general topic, then listing 2 – 5 key points that you want to cover – these can become your subsections.

Here's an example:

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Idea:

Writing faster

(this is the sort of article that can come from personal experience – perhaps you've been blogging or writing fiction regularly for months and you've found some good ways to get more done in less time)

Title:

How to Write Twice as Many Words in Half the Time

(something like "How I Wrote 52,067 words in One Month" could work for a blog post, but is probably a bit "me"-focused for most magazines)

Plan:

Introduction – focus on the problem: having lots of commitments and little writing time, and struggling to make much progress.

First subheading: **Write at Your Best Time of Day**

How to figure out when you're at your best

What to do if you can't use your best hours to write (e.g. you're at work)

Second subheading: **Write in Short Bursts**

Why this works better than trying to write continuously for two hours

Quote from writer(s) using this technique

Third subheading: **Get Rid of Distractions**

Turn off the internet!

Write in a different environment, outside your home/workplace

Become more aware of when you're being distracted

Fourth subheading: **Count Your Words at the End of Each Session**

If you're not already doing so, track how many words you're writing

This can be motivating; also lets you spot patterns & see what's working

But don't keep checking the word count *during* writing sessions

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Conclusion – challenge reader to change *one* thing for their next writing session and see what effect it has

If you feel that you're struggling to "get" how to structure an article, take a few articles from your target magazine or blog, photocopy or print them, and then go through with a pen and figure out the major sections.

How to Research Your Article

Hopefully, you're writing about something that you at least know a bit about – so you can create a rough plan even if you know you're missing some details. If you're really starting from scratch, do some quick, basic research (Wikipedia is fine here) so you've got some clue about where to begin.

It's best to plan before you research in detail, so that:

- **You can immediately see if you're going to have any major problems** – like a key area that you know nothing about and can't easily learn about. (This is unlikely, but possible if you're writing about something quite specialised.)
- **You know what sorts of materials you'll need** to support the points you're making. If you just research a topic without any plan, you could spend hours and hours reading without making any real progress.
- **You can brainstorm names of people you know** – or know of – who might be able to help.

Some articles require virtually no research – and these are handy ones to focus on when you're not yet getting paid! If you're writing something based on personal experience, or something aimed at beginners in an area you're very familiar with, you might only need to check a quick fact or find a link or two after writing the piece.

Other articles require a lot of research, and you might want to interview someone who's an expert on the topic, rather than trawling through dozens or hundreds of potential resources on your own.

When you're researching facts, look for:

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- **Authoritative sources** – such as government websites, well-regarded books on the topic, or academic papers.
- **Several sources saying the same thing** – if three separate sources all agree (and they're not all just rehashing the same original source), then you can probably be confident that the fact is correct.
- **Recent sources** – this is where the web often trumps print, because books – at least in some areas – can date fast.

Don't spend ages researching every nuance: just gather the basics that you need to write the article you've planned. You can always come back and do more research if you later find you want to include more detail.

If you're looking for people with expertise who you can quote, you might want to try [HARO \(Help a Reporter Out\)](#), where you can submit a query and receive loads of responses from people who will be only too happy to be quoted in your article.

Getting Testimonials About Your Writing

Although clients will be able to get some idea about your writing abilities from your portfolio, not all potential clients will know how to tell good from bad writing. Plus, they won't know whether your portfolio clips went through extensive editing, or whether you're difficult and obstructive to work with.

This is where testimonials come in.

What Are Testimonials?

Testimonials are nice things said by people who've worked with you. With their permission, you can publish these on your website – ideally with their name too, but with their initials if they're happy with that.

Here's an excerpt from the "[Nice Words](#)" page on [Lauren Holden's site](#), showing some fairly typical testimonials:

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"Lauren is an extremely talented freelance journalist. She understands and applies her experience to any brief. I have used Lauren across a wide variety of projects, as her proactive nature and the creativity within her writing makes her a pleasure to deal with. She is both efficient and a quick worker." Sarah Groarke – **Barry M Cosmetics/SN&CK Media**

"Lauren is a great and rare mix of ability and professionalism. She consistently delivers well written and thoughtful content for both me and my clients on time, on brief and across a variety of subject matters. I have no hesitation in recommending Lauren to anyone looking to hire a writer." Phil Byrne, **Positive Sparks/Formerly H2 Company (Leeds) Director**

"Lauren's exactly the kind of writer you always hope to find – she sticks to the brief, hits her deadlines (or surpasses them) and best of all, writes like a dream. She's also a bloody nice person who knows exactly the right questions to ask – it's a wicked combination that means she always delivers brilliant, insightful features. I wouldn't hesitate to recommend Lauren." Sianade Curry, **Commissioning Editor, Cloth magazine**

Testimonials are not:

- References – which are normally supplied direct to employers, and might never be seen by you.
- Reviews – which tend to be more balanced and impartial.
- Case studies – which you write yourself, about the work that you did for a particular client.

All of these also have their place, but here, we're focusing on testimonials.

Asking for Testimonials

Once you've had a piece published, ask for a testimonial from whoever you worked with. You can safely assume that if they published it, they liked it!

It'd be lovely if people supplied testimonials without being asked, but this rarely happens. This does *not* mean they'll mind supplying one: on the contrary, most people will be glad to have the opportunity to help you (especially if you worked with them for free, or if they got on well with you).

If you are going to be working for free, it's worth introducing the idea of a testimonial early on – e.g. "I won't charge for this – but would you be willing to write me a quick testimonial in return, if you're happy with my work?"

Using Existing Praise from Your Client

Quite often, if you've worked with someone, they'll have sent a "thank you" email for some sort – especially if you worked with them for free. You can use this as a short testimonial (with their permission, of course).

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You may want to excerpt a couple of lines from the email, potentially do some very light editing (e.g. bringing together two lines that were originally separated by other text) and send that back to them, asking if they'd mind you quoting it on your website.

Asking for a Testimonial

I know it can feel a bit awkward to ask people for a testimonial. Try to keep in mind that most people will be delighted to have the opportunity to help you! If you already don't have an email (or message etc) from them that you can easily use as a testimonial, just ask directly.

If you've written a guest post...

Hi *[name]*,

Thanks so much for giving me a chance to blog on *[name of site]*. I've really enjoyed interacting with your readers in the comments – they're a lovely bunch.

Would you have a moment to write a quick testimonial for me, about my writing and/or the experience of working with me? I'm launching a website for my freelance writing and I'd love to have a few words from you to include there.

Thanks again, and all best wishes,

[your name]

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For someone you worked with a while ago...

Hi [name],

It's [name] here – we worked together on [project] back in [year]. Time's really flown!

I'm now getting into freelance writing, and I'm about to launch my website. I wondered if you'd be able to write a quick testimonial for me?

Oh, and if you happen to know anyone who's looking to get some writing work done (or if you need anything yourself), do drop me an email.

Thanks so much, and all best wishes,

[your name]

You don't need to use these verbatim, of course: feel free to switch the wording around to suit your own style and your relationship with the recipient.

Template Testimonials to Send Your Clients

Some clients will have written plenty of testimonials before, and they'll know the sort of thing you need. Others, though, may ask you for some guidance.

Here's a simple set of questions you could use:

What was it like working with me?

What did you think of my writing?

Did you get a good response from your readers? (or Did you make more sales than before? or whatever would be appropriate for that particular client)

Once you've extracted their answers from the separate questions, put them together (with a little bit of editing if needed), then send the whole testimonial back to them and check they're happy for you to publish it on your website.

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Using LinkedIn Recommendations

If you and your client/editor are both on LinkedIn, it often makes sense to ask them to write you a recommendation there. That way, it's easy to prove that it's real, and people in your LinkedIn network will see it.

You can then copy and paste the recommendation onto your website (with a link to the original on LinkedIn) so that it's included with your other testimonials.

How to Add Testimonials to Your Website

When you publish testimonials on your website, it's helpful to include as many of the following as possible, in order to demonstrate that your testimonials are genuine rather than invented:

- Full names and company names.
- Images (headshots or company logos) – which help add visual interest.
- Links to the testimonial-giver's website, Twitter account, or similar.

So, once you have a testimonial, I'd suggest that you email the person who supplied it to:

- Thank them from providing it (this is also a good opportunity to say how much you enjoyed working with them, if appropriate)
- Check if you can include their name (and company, if applicable) on your website. If they say no, ask if you can use their initials or their first name only.
- Ask for a headshot (or company logo) to put on your website, if they're willing to provide one.
- Ask if they'd like you to link to their website/Twitter profile/etc from your website.

When it comes to displaying the testimonials on your website, you could either put them all on a single page (called "Testimonials" or "What Clients Say" or similar), or you could position them within your "Services" (or "Writing", "Editing", etc) page.

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There's no right or wrong here, but if you only have a few testimonials, I'd suggest incorporating them in your Services page. They can be a useful way to break up the text and you'll be sure that potential clients will see them while considering whether or not to hire you!

Adding Portfolio Pieces to Your Website

This often goes hand-in-hand with getting testimonials, so I've included it at this stage of the module. Once you've got some pieces for your portfolio, you need to decide how to display them on your website.

Before we go on, though, there's one crucial thing you need to check...

Can You Use This Particular Piece in Your Portfolio?

In most cases, if you've written something that's been published, it's fine to use it on your website. For instance, if a blog has published your guest post, they're definitely not going to mind you linking to it!

There are some situations, though, where you'll need to check with an editor (or employer) before putting a piece in your online portfolio. For instance:

- If you wrote / edited something as part of your day job, your employer may not be happy with you using it in your website portfolio while you're still working there. This is the sort of thing that depends a lot on the type of work you do, the size of company you work for, and so on. If you need to keep quiet about your freelancing (e.g. if it might make your boss angry that you could be looking at leaving the company), then steer clear of using any day job projects in your portfolio at all. If you can be open about freelancing on the side, always ask permission rather than just assuming it's OK to mention/link to those projects.
- If you wrote something as a ghost writer, it's quite likely that the client will *not* want it in your portfolio. Most people aren't very open about using ghost writers! You can still ask them for a testimonial, and you

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could write an anonymised case study where you explain the process of writing and how the client was delighted with the result.

- If you wrote something that was published without any name on it, the client may not want it in your portfolio. (This most often applies to things like adverts and web copy, which rarely have an indication of authorship.) Most clients will be fine with you including these ... but do ask first.

In general, if in any doubt, ask! Here's a template email you can use:

Hi [name],

I really enjoyed writing [name of article/etc] for you. Would it be okay for me to include it in my website portfolio? (I'd use a screenshot of the article and link to the full version on your site.)

Thanks,

[your name]

Do make it clear how you plan to include the piece in your portfolio: a screenshot and link is quite different from you asking to republish the whole piece on your site (which clients might *not* be okay with).

Which brings us on to...

How to Display Your Portfolio Pieces on Your Site

There are lots of different ways you could show off your portfolio pieces to your prospective clients. The first step is to create a single page called "Portfolio" or "Samples" or "Examples" or whatever will make most sense to your clients.

On that page, you've got various options for how to display your portfolio pieces. Here are some possibilities:

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#1: A Simple List

You could simply list your published work, with the titles of each piece linked to the original version online (if applicable) or with the publication name after the title (if it was published in print).

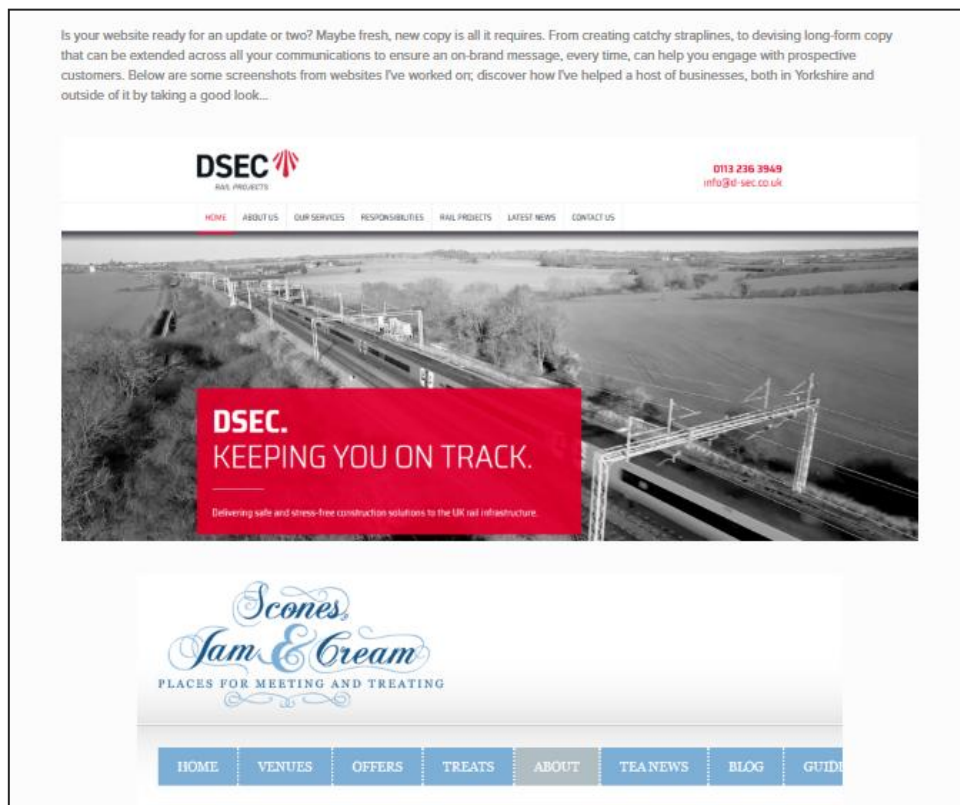
This is quick and simple to put together, though not necessarily all that useful for your clients – especially if most of your work is in print. It's a format quite frequently used by freelancers detailing their book / print publications.

#2: Screenshots and Scanned Copies

Another option is to create a portfolio of large images: screenshots of online work and scanned copies of offline work, presented at a legible size.

This is reasonably quick to put together, though it won't always be clear exactly which bits you wrote and some work may not be easily readable in the screenshot/scan. It works best for short pieces (like adverts, simple web pages, or very short articles).

Here's an example:



(From laurenholden.co.uk/digital-and-print-copywriting.)

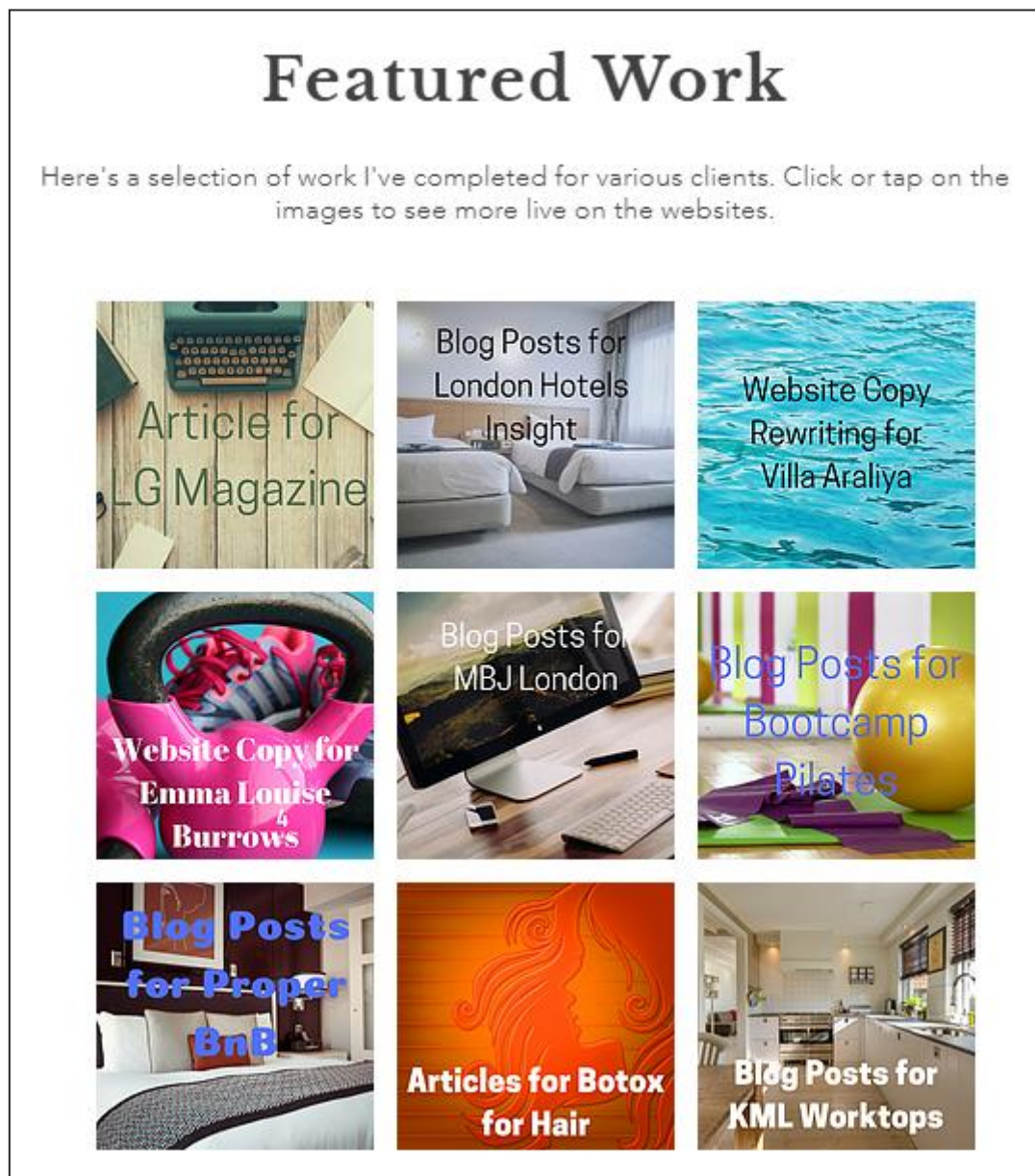
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#3: An Index of Images

A variation on #2 is to use screenshot (or scans, etc) at a small size, with each small image linking to the original or to a larger scan.

This takes longer to put together, but it (a) lets clients see all your work quickly and (b) allows them to easily read pieces they're interested in.

Here's an example:



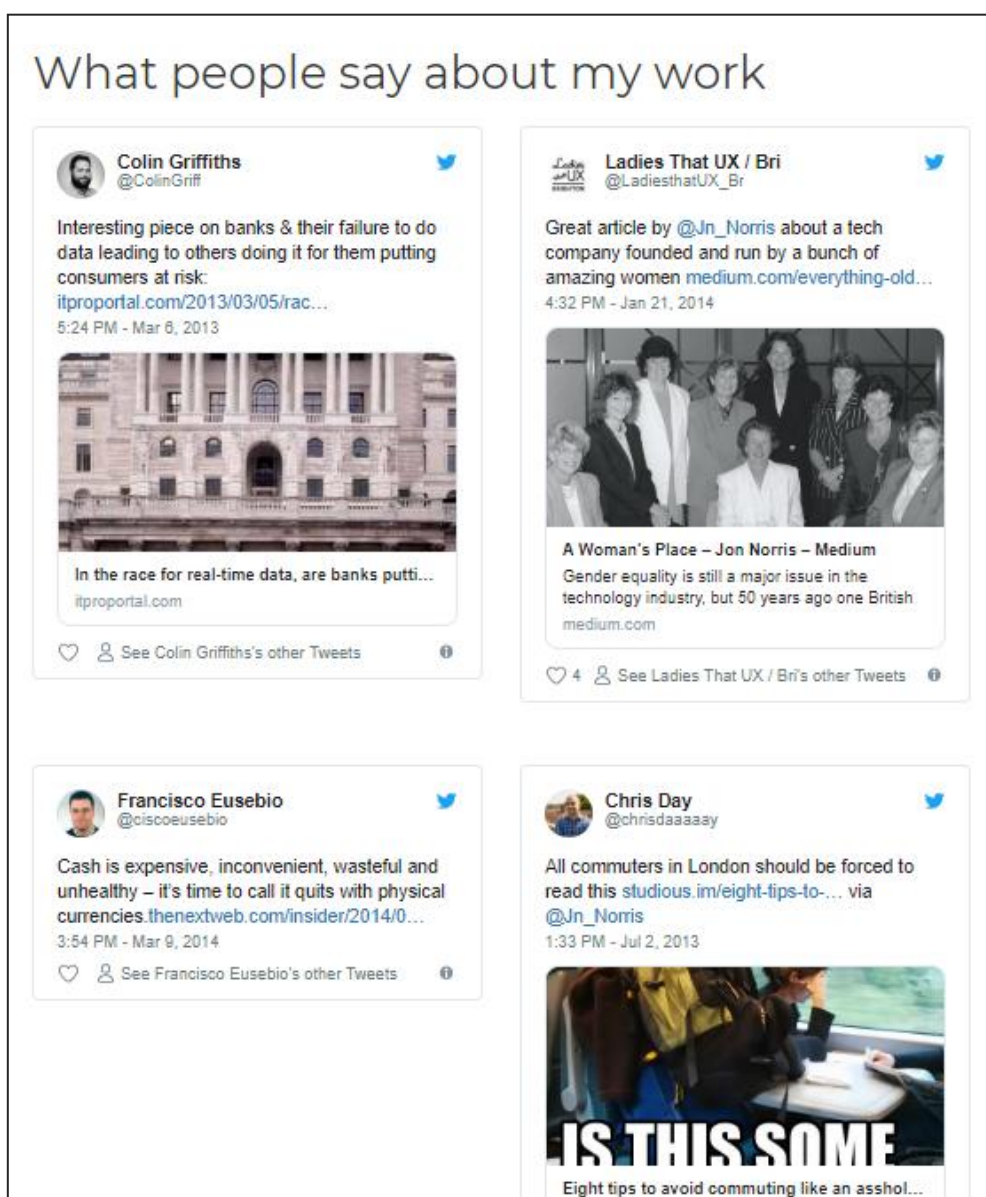
(From laura-ellis.com.)

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#4: More Unusual Options

There's no one "right" way to do your portfolio, and if you want to brand yourself in a slightly unconventional or offbeat way, you may want to get creative about how you put it together.

For instance, freelancer Jon Norris uses tweets from other people to showcase his work along with what other people say about it. Note these aren't what I'd call "testimonials" as they were written by readers rather than clients, but they still demonstrate that his writing is regarded as good:



(From jonnorris.work/freelance-writer-brighton.)

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If you're editing, rather than writing, showing the finished piece (e.g. your client's published edited work) won't demonstrate much, as people viewing your site will have no idea how much editing you needed to do! Instead, ideally, you'll want to share a "sample" of a few edited pages – with your client's permission, of course – as a screenshot, webpage or even a .pdf download.

Your Module #4 Assignment

ASSIGNMENT

Your assignment this week is in two parts:

#1: If possible, find a piece of work you've done in the past few years, and ask someone appropriate for a testimonial.

#2: Find an opportunity to write something for someone who'll publish it (either online or in print). This doesn't need to be paid, and it can be something very short / simple. You're welcome to ask around in our Facebook group to see if anyone would appreciate your services, particularly if you're setting up as an editor.

Once you've completed the assignment (or done as much of it as you're going to manage this week), come and "check in" on Facebook and you'll get your reward stamp for Week 4. If you're willing to, please tell us what you did and how you got on.

[facebook.com/groups/startfreelancing2018/learning_content/?filter=1131358350372875](https://www.facebook.com/groups/startfreelancing2018/learning_content/?filter=1131358350372875)

If you prefer not to use Facebook, you can email me (ali@aliventures.com) with "Module #4 check in" or similar in the subject line.

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Module #4: Further Reading

All of the further reading is optional, but if you want to find out more about something we've covered, it's highly recommended! If you find other useful resources, you're very welcome to share them in our Facebook group.

[Easy-Peasy Testimonials When You Have No Clients](#), Andrea Emerson, AndreaEmerson.com

In this piece, Andrea explains how she used past feedback on her writing (even when this wasn't related to her freelancing) to give her some initial testimonials for her site. She also includes an email template that she used when contacting people to ask if she could quote them.

[How to Create a Freelance Writing Portfolio with Zero Experience](#), Courtney Hall Lee, Medium.com

Courtney advocates writing "spec clips" for your portfolio – which isn't my favourite method, but which is better than nothing! Her tips on pitching blogs and other publications are solid, and she offers some good suggestions about other places you might write for initially.

[Find and Pitch the Perfect Guest Posting Opportunities](#), Ali Luke, ProBlogger

If you're interested in writing guest posts, this post (by yours truly!) explains exactly how to find opportunities, develop your ideas and write great pitches – with template emails both for pitching your post and for following up appropriately if you don't hear anything back.

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What's Coming Up Next Week:

Well done on reaching the end of this week's module. Remember, if you have questions at any point, please do ask in our Facebook group. If it's something you'd prefer to discuss privately, you can send me a message via the Facebook group or you can email me at ali@aliventures.com.

Here's what to expect in Module 5:

MODULE 5:

Next week, from Monday 12th November, we'll be digging into what you need to get in place as you move on to paid freelancing work.

We'll tackle setting your rates and the key factors you need to consider here, including how to charge (looking at the pros and cons of per project or per hour rates – neither is "right" or "wrong").

We'll also figure out the parameters of your business – like the hours you'll work, and the ways in which you'll be available to your clients.