

MODULE #4: WRITING YOUR FIRST GUEST POST

IN THIS MODULE:

This week, we're taking an in-depth look at how to write your first guest post, covering the first draft, self-editing, making changes based on editorial feedback, and polishing your post for publication with images and formatting.

Once you've had a guest post accepted (hurrah!), it's time to sit down and write it. You should already have a rough outline or at least an idea of what you want to include – if not, head back to Module #3 where we look at coming up with a brief outline.

Sometimes, you'll be writing a full draft post to submit without any prior contact with the blogger – this is what some sites prefer. This doesn't change anything about how you write your first draft, though.

Fleshing Out Your Outline

If you're writing a short, straightforward post on a highly familiar topic, you might be happy working from a fairly brief outline.

Normally, though, it makes a lot of sense to spend ten – fifteen minutes creating a more comprehensive plan for your post.

Here's an example. I've already got an initial outline (from last week's module), which is this:

Six Signs That You're Ready to Write a Book This Year

#1: You've already written at least 20,000 words in shorter pieces (e.g. blog posts, articles)

#2: Other people have responded well to your writing (e.g. in blog comments, or face to face)

#3: You know enough about your topic that you could plausibly spend a day teaching a beginner about it (books need a fair bit of content!)

#4: You've created an outline for your book (or at least some notes towards it)

#5: You can, realistically, find about 3 hours a week to work on your book

#6: You're excited by the idea of writing a book (even if a bit daunted too)

A full plan might look something like this:

Six Signs That You're Ready to Write a Book This Year

Introduction – are you ready to write a book? Maybe it's something you've been thinking about for a long time but you keep putting it off.

Sign #1: You've Already Written 20,000 Words (Total) on Shorter Projects

- This amount of writing means you'll have gained a fair bit of experience.

- It also suggests that you're fairly committed to writing.

- You'll have a good sense of how easy/hard writing is for you, too!

Note: 20,000 words is around 15 – 30 blog posts (depending on length) or around 10 – 15 short stories (again, depending on length).

Sign #2: Other people have responded well to your writing

- Maybe you've had some nice comments on your blog, or emails from readers
- Or if you write fiction, perhaps your beta readers / fanfic readers / workshop group has said nice things.
- You might also have had feedback in an academic or business context (e.g. at school/university, or from your boss/colleagues)

Sign #3: You Could Spend a Day Teaching a Beginner About Your Topic

Note that this one only really applies to non-fiction writers.

- If you're going to write a book, you need to be able to produce somewhere upwards of 50,000 words – and that means knowing quite a lot! (You can research too.)
- A day might seem a really long time, but if you talk at about 4,000 words per hour, that's only 24,000 words (assuming you talk for six solid hours).
- You could rough out a plan for what you'd teach in six hours and see if you have enough ideas.

Sign #4: You've Created an Outline for Your Book (or Some Notes Towards It)

- If you've already felt enthused enough by your idea to create an outline / make notes, that's a good sign!
- At some point before you start writing the book – whether fiction or non-fiction – you'll need some kind of outline or plan.
- If you haven't done any planning yet, set aside an hour and make some notes.

Sign #5: You Can Find Three Hours a Week to Write

- A book takes a lot of writing: if you can't manage three hours a week, progress is going to feel very slow.
- Your three hours don't have to be consecutive – you can split up that time to fit into your schedule. (Give examples.)
- What would you be willing to give up (at least temporarily) to find time to write your book?

Sign #6: You're Excited By the Idea of Writing a Book!

- A book is a major undertaking: don't start on one because you feel you "should".
- It's fine to feel a bit (or a lot!) daunted – most writers do!
- If you've been thinking about / daydreaming about your book for a long time now, that's a great sign that you're ready to write it.

Conclusion – if you're not sure if you're quite ready, the key things to get in place are your outline, and your three hours a week to work on your book. Give yourself a set time

As you can see, this is a much more detailed plan. It includes all the key points I want to make, and when I draft, I can simply go through and expand on each point within each section. This saves me an awful lot of time staring into space wondering what to write next!

Drafting Your Post

Once you have a full plan, it's time to write the first draft. This always feels a bit daunting, but it's especially tough when you're writing for someone else's blog – you might find yourself second-guessing how you phrase things, or wondering how exactly to even start your post.

I find that, often, the best thing is to just dive in and write it however I can – even if I *know* it's not very good – because I can come back and edit later.

I'm going to run through some brief tips for the different sections of your post, though, that will hopefully help to make the process a bit easier.

Writing the Introduction

Some simple ways to begin your post are with:

- A question to the reader. (*E.g. "Do you find yourself putting off things that, deep down, you actually want to do?"*)
- A strong statement or striking statistic. (*E.g. "Worldwide, 32% of businesses use WordPress."*)
- A short anecdote. (*E.g. "Last week, I fell off my bike. After I'd dusted myself off..."*)

If you're struggling to get started, pick one of those for your first sentence – and hopefully you can carry on from there.

Writing the Main Body

The "main body" of your post is everything between the introduction and conclusion. In a "how to" post, it's the instructions you give the reader; in a list post, it's your numbered items.

Often, when you create a detailed plan, you'll have notes for each section and perhaps subheadings too. This makes it easy to write the main body bit by bit

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– and if your structure is strong, you may find the post practically writes itself: you just need to fill in the gaps.

One simple thing you can do to enhance almost any post is to pattern your sections in a consistent way.

For instance, if you have a post titled “Five Easy Ways to Improve Your Morning Routine”, you’ll almost certainly have five sections in the main body of your post, each with a subheading.

To make those sections consistent, you could do any/all of these:

- Pattern your subheadings in the same way (e.g. each could start with an imperative verb – e.g. “**Set** Your Alarm 15 Minutes Earlier” and “**Drink** a Glass of Water Straight Away”).
- Have roughly the same number of paragraphs within each section, so you don’t end up with a couple of very short sections and a couple of very long ones.
- Start each section with a quote – this could be a famous quote, a quote from another blogger, or a quote from a popular TV show: whatever works for your post and for the host blog.
- Finish each section with a “Key Tip” or “Further Reading” suggestion. I find this is a great way to add extra value to posts, plus it makes them easy to write (as you have a strong framework in place).

Writing the Conclusion

Ending your post can be tricky – but you do need to have some sort of conclusion in place.

Some blogs have quite clear guidelines about how to do this: they might ask you to have a concluding subheading then sum up the post, or they might want you to finish with a question for the reader in bold text.

If you don’t know how to finish your post, you could do one or more of these:

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- Briefly sum up the key points from the post. (E.g. "We've taken a look at...")
- Encourage readers to take action based on the post. (E.g. "Pick one of the tips above to try out today.")
- Invite readers to comment on the post. (E.g. "Which tip will you try – or do you have another suggestion to add? Leave a comment below to tell us.")

Your Writing Style

It can be difficult to know *how* to write your post, especially when you're writing for a blog that isn't your own. Should you write it in your usual voice? Or should you try to adopt the "voice" of the blog?

There are no hard and fast rules here. Some blogs will ask for a particular style (e.g. "conversational" or "warm and friendly" or "lighthearted and irreverent") in their guest posting guidelines. Others won't specify anything, but will still want posts that are in tune with what readers normally expect. And others will be keen to have your unique voice, intact!

Personally, I normally modify my style a little to suit the blog – for one blog, that might mean writing shorter, snappier paragraphs; for another, it might mean writing in a more in-depth, thoughtful way. If I'm not sure how to phrase something, I'll read a few comments on the blog and imagine that I'm writing directly to one of their readers.

Generally in blogging, a friendly, fairly informal style works well: talk directly to the reader as "you", and feel free to bring in your own experience too.

Self-Editing Your Post

Once you've completed the first draft of your guest post, try to let it "sit" for a day or two before you revise it. (If the blogger has indicated they'd like it quickly, I realise you may not have much time to spare though!)

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We're going to go through the self-editing process in three different stages, looking at content editing (the big picture), line editing, and proofreading.

Content Editing: The Big Picture of Your Post

Once you've given your draft post a chance to rest, you can come back to it with fresh eyes. Read the whole thing through (highlighting any obvious typos or other mistakes that leap out at you), and then think about:

- Is the post about the right length, or does it need to be cut down / extended a bit?
- Does the order of information make sense, or would it help if you shifted some paragraphs around?
- Have you taken too long to get started? Many writers (me included!) have a habit of writing a "warm up" paragraph or two before they really get going – which is fine, you can just cut this material when you edit.
- Have you included anything that doesn't really fit? Save it in a different document – perhaps it could form part of a new or follow-up post.
- Do you need to make any changes to the structure of your post? Perhaps you started off by adding a "top tip" to each subsection but then you forgot those part-way – now's the time to add them in.

It's important to do this big-picture editing before drilling down into line-by-line tweaks: otherwise, you might find that you've perfected an extraneous section that you later end up cutting completely.

Line Editing: The Details of Your Post

Once you're happy with the general content of your post, it's time to dig down further. Some bloggers find it helps to read their post aloud at this stage; others like to print it out and edit on paper.

At this stage, you're trying to make sure that every sentence, phrase and even word of your post is as effective as possible. (So, no pressure...!) You'll be looking out for things like:

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- Very long, complex or clunky-sounding sentences that need breaking up or rewriting.
- Ambiguous sentences or phrases that aren't very clear and could be read in two or more ways.
- Issues of consistency – e.g. if you've capitalised "Government" in one part of your post, it should be capitalised throughout.
- Mistakes with spelling, grammar or punctuation. These are very easy to make when drafting (and can be hard to spot, too).
- Words that you use too frequently – this can start to sound a bit repetitive, and you might want to rephrase a couple of sentences to have more variation.
- Words that don't have quite the right meaning, or that have the wrong connotations. For instance, the words "peculiar" and "unusual" mean pretty much the same thing, but "peculiar" tends to be used in a slightly negative way.

With a guest blog post, your goal will normally be for your writing to be as fluent and unobtrusive as possible: you want your reader to be able to take in your post easily and smoothly. As you edit, you're smoothing out your writing to remove any "wrinkles" that might trip up or confuse the reader.

Proofreading: Polishing Your Post

When you're drafting and editing, it's easy for mistakes to creep in. These could be simple typos (where you hit the wrong key), spelling mistakes (where you wrote e.g. "too" when you wanted "to"), or mistakes that get introduced during editing (where you tweaked half a sentence but forgot to change the other half to match).

The difficulty with these is they're not always easy to spot while you're writing/editing – after all, you tend to know what you *think* you wrote! **So it's always worth doing a final proofread before sending off your guest post, just to make sure there aren't any glaring mistakes.**

Don't agonise for ages over this, though. Even if a typo does slip through, it's not going to stop the host blog from accepting an otherwise great post.

Adding Formatting to Your Post

You might choose to do this during the editing phase, or after you've finished your post. At some point before sending it to the blog editor, though, you'll want to add a bit of formatting.

In most cases, that means:

- **Bold text.** Some blogs use this quite a lot; others are more sparing. (Take a look at a few posts on the host blog to see what's normal for them.) You might want to put a key sentence in bold within each subsection of your post.
- **Italic text.** Typically, blogs use this either to emphasise individual words, or to put in text that's an aside. Again, it's worth taking a look at a few existing posts to see how italics get used (if at all).
- **Bullet points.** These are handy for lists, and can be created in pretty much any wordprocessor. You can use regular bullet points or numbered ones, depending on what suits your list. If you have multiple paragraphs for each point on your list, though, I'd suggest using subheadings rather than bullet points.
- **Subheadings.** These are great for breaking up longish posts (more than, say, 500 words). Ideally, you should use "Heading 2" in whatever wordprocessing software you use, or "Header 2" in WordPress – unless you've received different instructions from the blog editor.
- **Links.** It's a particularly good idea to link to other posts on the blog that you're writing for – this is helpful for the blog, as it leads readers to more of their content. You can also include links to other resources – including your own blog posts, books or other content, *if* those links are relevant. (The editor will probably remove any overly self-promotional links.)

If there's anything in your post that you want formatted in a special way, the easiest way to indicate that is by putting a comment on the text (which is straightforward to do in Word, Google Docs, etc). For instance, if a particular piece of text is a quote, you might put a comment to say that it should be in "blockquote style".

Including Images in Your Post

Some blogs will ask you to source copyright free images. There are lots of sites for these, but two I particularly like are Pexels (www.pexels.com) and Pixabay (www.pixabay.com). Both of these have a wide range of images that can be freely used without needing to pay or even attribute the photographer.

Depending on what the blog prefers, you might:

- Suggest potential images by giving them the links to a few that would work with your post on Pexels/Pixabay.
- Download the image(s), resize them if necessary, and upload them into the blog's dashboard. If you need to resize or edit images, Paint.NET (from getpaint.net/download) is handy free software. Note that the free version works fine on Windows 10, you don't need to pay for the Windows 10 app!
- Create your own screenshots (e.g. if writing a "how to" guide) and send those in whatever format the blog prefers – .jpg is by far the most common.

Sending the Right File Format

Different bloggers have different ways of working, but almost all the bloggers I've written for want their guest posts sent as either a Word document attachment or as a Google document link. Hopefully that's easy for you as:

- If you don't have Word, you can save Google docs in Word's .doc format.
- You can use Google docs with your existing Google account, or you can create a new free account.

Sometimes, if you'll be writing several guest posts for a blog, they'll ask you to upload those posts directly into WordPress for them. They'll normally create an account for your blog and give you login details.

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Very occasionally, you might be asked to supply a post in HTML format. (This used to be more common when I started guest posting ten years ago – I don't think I've been asked for it any time recently!)

You don't need to know any HTML for this: just create a draft post on your own blog, enter the text of your post there, complete with any bold/italic/bullet points/etc and then click the "Text" tab. Copy the HTML code into Notepad (Windows) or TextEdit (Mac) and save it as a .txt file, then send it to the editor.

Working With the Blog's Editor on Edits

Many editors will be happy to publish your post as-is, perhaps with a few tweaks for house style.

Some, though, will want you to make more significant changes or revisions. They might do this by emailing you their request, by commenting on your document (whether it's in Word or Google docs), or by making changes using "Track Changes" so you can approve/reject the edits to your text.

Whatever the editor's exact process, it's important to:

- **Be reasonably responsive about edits.** If you can't make the edits very promptly, that's fine: just email them to say something along the lines of "I'll need a bit of time to make those changes – I'll get them to you by the end of next week."
- **Recognise that if you *don't* want to make the changes, that might mean withdrawing your blog post.** Ultimately, it's your post! It's fine to decide that the proposed changes would turn it into something you *don't* want. But know that this may well mean the blog won't be able to publish your post.
- **Try to be easy to work with.** I'm sure you are! 😊 But a few bloggers get overly defensive about their writing, and that's not likely to endear them to editors. By all means question an edit or suggestion that you disagree with, but try to do so reasonably politely!

- **Avoid assuming that the editor will catch any/all mistakes.** Even if they have a fairly rigorous editing process, it's still important to edit your own work before sending it in.

What if You and the Editor Don't Get Along?

Some editors are easier to work with than others! Hopefully, you and the blog editor will get along very easily, you won't need to make many edits, and you'll look forward to writing for them again (if that fits well with your guest posting goals). This has been my experience with almost all my guest posting and freelancing.

Sometimes, though, you might feel that the editor just isn't someone you want to continue working with. This isn't necessarily about the volume of revisions: it might be about the way in which the editing process works.

For instance, one of the blogs I currently freelance for has a very streamlined, consistent editorial process where my posts go through a content editor, back to me for revisions, to a line editor, back to me for minor edits and approval of changes, and finally to a proofreader. It's great because the process works smoothly and my posts always end up improved by it.

Another blog I used to freelance for, though, changed editor part-way through my working relationship with them. The old editor had been great to work with: the new one was a nice guy, but asked for extensive, substantial revisions – often saying something like “let's try it this way, but we might change our mind and do it the original way”. I was being paid a flat rate per post, so this was rapidly eating into my hourly wage ... and I decided not to write for that blog any longer.

There are so many blogs out there that it's not worth struggling to write for one that's not proving a good fit for you.

Your Module #4 Assignment

ASSIGNMENT

Your assignment this week is in three parts, and you can tackle as many (or few!) as you want. I realize there's quite a lot to do here, so please don't worry if you can't get through it all.

#1: Write a detailed outline for the blog post that you pitched last week. (If you didn't pitch a post, that's fine: pick one on your list to outline.)

#2: Write a full draft of your blog post.

#3: Edit your post, looking at the big picture, then the details, and finally proofreading.

Once you've completed the assignment, or got as far as you're going to get, come and "check in" on Facebook to get your reward stamp for Week 4. If you're willing to, share your top idea with us (or as many of your ideas as you like):

[facebook.com/groups/successfulguestblogging2018/learning_content/?filter=2222561074421213](https://www.facebook.com/groups/successfulguestblogging2018/learning_content/?filter=2222561074421213)

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.

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.

[How to Format Your WordPress Blog Posts \(Insights Based on 2,500,000- Words of Experience Publishing Content\)](#), Bill Widmer, codeinwp

This highly detailed post gives lots of advice on how to format your posts – and explains exactly how to add different types of formatting in WordPress. It's aimed at bloggers in general, but there's plenty here that's relevant for guest bloggers.

[Five Easy Ways to Write in a More Conversational Style](#), Ali Luke, Aliventures

A lot of blogs ask for a “conversational” style of writing – but what exactly does that mean? In this post, I break it down into different things you can do in your writing (and give examples of each).

[How to Edit Your Own Work: A Self-Editing Checklist](#), Dan Shewan, WordStream

This is a great post with lots of specific tips and advice for editing your work (it's also a really well-structured post, so you might want to take a look at it just to see how Dan's put it together – my only quibble is the lack of conclusion).

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 next week:

MODULE 5:

Next week, from Monday 10th December, we'll take a look at how to craft a compelling guest post bio. While your bio will only be 50 words or so, in many ways, it's the most crucial part of your post because it's the bit that helps you reach your goals. We'll cover what to include, and look at lots of examples.