

MODULE #3: GETTING TO GRIPS WITH PLANNING

IN THIS MODULE:

This week, we'll be looking at how planning in advance can make you more creative. We'll think about planning for your project as a whole, and about planning individual sections of your project (like posts for your blog or scenes for your novel).

Some writers love planning, in great detail. They're the ones with 60-page outlines for their book, or a detailed content calendar for their blog.

Other writers prefer to wing it. (They're often called "pantsers" from "seat-of-your-pants writing".) They might launch in a novel knowing little more than the main characters' names.

Both camps have part of the answer. Planning is really important (and can save you a lot of time later on) but planning every single step of something may mean you struggle if it doesn't quite go quite how you were expecting.

How Do You Currently Plan?

You may well already be doing more planning than you realise. Perhaps you don't do your planning on paper, but instead you mull over your writing project while you're commuting to work, or doing the dishes.

You might also have something that doesn't necessarily look like a chapter-by-chapter plan, but that serves a similar role. Maybe you have a notebook where you jot down ideas for your novel-in-progress, for instance, or you have a regular "pattern" of posts on your blog (e.g. a "how to" post every Monday and a "weekly round up" post every Friday).

If you can't see the point of planning, think of it this way: the work of figuring out your story, or deciding what you want to write about on your blog, or knowing what to include in your non-fiction book, has to be done at some point.

You don't necessarily need to do it before you write your first draft. Some writers like to treat this draft as an exploratory piece of writing, where they can try out ideas – keeping some and discarding others.

If that's how you like to work, that's fine: but do recognise that you'll likely end up spending a lot of time on this "figuring out" process. Doing at least a little bit of up-front planning can make the writing itself go much more smoothly.

Planning Doesn't Make You Less Creative

Some writers are resistant to the idea of planning because they feel that the core of creativity is invention. They like to make things up as they go along, because that feels creative to them. Writing a list in advance doesn't.

I think this is a rather narrow and reductive view of creativity.

Coming up with ideas is creative, of course, but so is figuring out the intricacies of a plot, or deciding on the best structure for your book chapters. Editing is a creative process, too – choosing what to keep and what to discard; selecting just the right words for the job.

Many writers find, in fact, that creativity flourishes best when they have some constraints.

Think of it this way: if I asked you to "write a short story of any length, about anything you like", you might feel a bit blank. If instead I asked you to "write a 2,000 word short story that tells us about three pivotal moments in 40-year-old Rachel's life so far", you'd find it much easier to come up with ideas.

When you have a plan for your novel / book / blog posts / etc, you free yourself up to create the best work you can ... without constantly having to hunt for ideas, and without having to keep trying to figure out whether the current part you're working on fits into your project as a whole.

Can You Plan Too Much?

There's a famous quote that "no plan survives contact with the enemy". My husband and I definitely feel like this sometimes, when we plan out our week only for things to go off the rails due to poorly kids, tantrums, unexpected school events, and broken nights.

When it comes to planning a writing project, "too much" is very much dependent on whether you like to plan in meticulous detail or whether you like to have a rough idea of where you're going.

However, I do think it's possible to over-plan at the start of a project.

Before you begin putting down the words of the project itself, it can be quite tough to see how it's going to work as a whole.

When I first planned my novel *Lycopolis*, I tried to do a chapter by chapter outline before I'd written much of the plot. I found that I'd included way more in the outline than would actually fit in an 80,000 word novel.

So I'd suggest having a "big picture" plan at this stage that leaves room to fill in the details once you start writing. And that's what we're going to take a look at next...

How to Plan for Your Project as a Whole

I'm going to look at three key types of project in this section: novels/short stories, blogs, and non-fiction books. If your project is a bit different, do feel free to pop into the Facebook group to ask for guidance (or email me – ali@aliventures.com).

Planning a Novel or Short Story

It can be hard to plan a novel in advance: you might feel that you don't yet know all the story, or you don't want to pin it down too soon. This is often my own experience with novels – I'll have a good idea of what happens in the first few chapters, but the middle is much hazier!

Remember, your plan doesn't have to be a linear outline. I've used all sorts of different tools when planning novels: I've created mindmaps to show character interactions and to brainstorm ideas, for instance, and once did a visual storyboard with images showing the key plot points. I've also used spreadsheets to help me keep track of different scenes and the timeline of the novel.

(You can, of course, use similar tools when you're going from a first draft to a second draft – in fact, this is often when I find myself replanning and reshaping the raw material of the first draft into something that more closely approximates a novel!)

What's the minimum level of planning you should do? For any type of fiction, whether it's a full novel or a shorter piece, I'd suggest having a clear idea about where the story begins, how it ends, and some key points along the journey. You should know who your protagonist is, what their goal is, and who or what is opposing them (the antagonist, or antagonistic force).

If your novel or short story is going to have a non-linear structure – by which I mean you're not telling it chronologically – then this is a good time to pin it down. For instance, if you're going to have a chapter in the "present day" and a chapter in the "past" (B.A. Paris's *Behind Closed Doors* is a good example of this), then you'll want to figure out that structure up front and decide how it's going to work.

Planning a Blog

I love blogging as a medium: it allows for a huge amount of flexibility, the ability to experiment, and a short writing-to-publishing time, with plenty of audience interaction.

Blogs do present a bit of a challenge when it comes to big picture planning, though. While a blog has a beginning – the day you write your first post – it doesn't necessarily have an end! Most blogs are designed to run indefinitely (though of course there's nothing wrong with creating a blog that you plan to run for a defined period of time, e.g. to chronicle your experiences across a calendar year or during a particular stage in your life).

Assuming that your blog doesn't have a planned end date, then, how can you do big picture planning? You could plan out the next 10 or 20 or even 50 posts on your blog ... but there's no obvious stopping point.

One way round this is to come up with repeating themes for your blog. For instance, if you publish four posts each month, you might want to have two "how to" posts, one "encouraging" post, and one "quote" post where you bring together lots of opinions from other people.

With your blog, too, you may well have a goal in mind that goes beyond "writing regular posts". If you want to make money from your blogging, for instance, you'll need to figure out how to do that ... and actively plan towards it. (This is quite different from a novel or a non-fiction book, where you normally plan to make money through sales. You can sell products through your blog, but you're very unlikely to be selling the blog posts themselves.)

Because of the open-ended nature of blogging, I know how easy it is to simply think about the next few posts ... rather than taking a step back to look at the big picture. So if you're a blogger, this is your cue to take a bit of time to think about what you want to achieve with your blog over the long term – perhaps the next year or two – and make plans accordingly.

Non-fiction book

Non-fiction books tend to benefit from more systematic outlining than novels ... and publishers will normally want a detailed chapter-by-chapter outline, if you're going to down the traditional publishing route.

A good way to begin is to get all your ideas down on paper: I like mindmaps for this. Once you've collated your ideas about the topic, you can start to think about how best to piece those together in a coherent book. Which chapters should come first? Does it make sense to divide your book into different parts (each of which would contain several related chapters)? Are there some topics that don't really fit in the book as a whole, but that could be a useful appendix?

At this stage, you'll probably want to create a linear outline with a working title for each chapter, plus perhaps a few bullet points about what you expect that chapter to include. You might find that you change your mind about the plan slightly as you write (e.g. maybe an idea that you thought would take up a whole chapter is more like a section of a chapter) – but having a fairly clear structure and outline in mind from the start should make the writing of your book much easier.

Planning Individual Sections of Your Project

As well as planning your project as a whole, you'll probably find it helpful to plan on a "micro" level – planning each little bit before you write it.

If you're a blogger, that might mean writing an outline for each blog post; if you're a novelist, it might mean "roughing out" a scene with some notes about what happens, how tension escalates, and perhaps about what different characters say during the scene. For a non-fiction book, you might jot down a detailed outline for the next chapter.

Planning individual sections like this is a great way to save time as you draft: you won't get half way through a blog post only to realise you've gone off on a huge tangent, for instance.

It's also a good way to "batch" elements of the creative process. For instance, you might sit down and plan out your next four blog posts in detail – it could take an hour or so. Then, when it's time to write the posts, the initial work is done for you: you just need to sit down and essentially fill in the gaps.

I find this type of batching hugely useful for blogging and for non-fiction, and I wrote about it a while ago on Craft Your Content's website:

craftyourcontent.com/why-create-content-in-batches

I've never been able to integrate batching into my fiction-writing process, but by all means give it a go for fiction too: you might have a very different workflow from me.

Again, there's no "right" way to create a micro plan. Some writers like to use mindmaps; others just jot down a linear outline. It's up to you – and you might like to switch between different methods depending on the type of content you're creating, or on how easily the ideas are flowing for you.

With blog posts, you may want to use a simple, consistent template each time. My plans generally look something like this:

- Intro (often with a few notes of what to include here)
- 3 – 7 key points, often with a subheader or a sentence or two about what to include in each
- Conclusion

You may want to come up with some more detailed blog post structures that you can easily re-use – I've got some guidance on that here:

aliventures.com/six-ways-to-structure-a-blog-post

Outlining Individual Novel or Short Story Scenes

This is something I don't tend to do as consistently as I'd like! I definitely think that some upfront planning – even if it isn't a straightforward outline – can make it much easier to write a good scene.

From your big-picture planning, you might have a very brief description of a scene e.g. "Joseph confronts Peter about the text messages" but turning that alone into 1000+ words isn't an easy task!

At the start of your writing session, you could spend 5 – 10 minutes jotting down some ideas. Mine often include bullet points about key moments in the scene (X confronts Y), plus a few lines of dialogue that I want to include ... I like writing dialogue so this comes easily to me!

If you're more on the "planning" end of the spectrum than I am, when it comes to fiction, you might also want to figure out exactly how the scene starts and ends. My editor friend Lorna Fergusson has some great advice for this: "get in late, get out early". Don't start the scene with a lot of stage-setting and preamble ... and don't let the action fizzle out at the end.

Outlining Sections of Non-Fiction

With non-fiction, you'll probably want to outline full chapters if they're short, or sections of chapters if they're quite long. You can treat this in a similar way to planning out blog posts – especially if your chapters have a fairly consistent structure.

When you plan in advance like this, it makes writing the chapter a lot easier. You'll be able to spot problems before they occur: areas where you might need to do more research, for instances, or places where the material might fit better in a different chapter.

If you're struggling a bit with motivation, too, having a detailed outline can really help as you can see how far you've got through the chapter and how far you have left to go.

Whatever you're working on – whether it fits into one of the categories that we've discussed or not, and whatever stage you're at – planning ahead should make it a lot easier to get the writing done. Do come and share your own tips and planning methods in the Facebook group, too.

How the Assignments Work

During this week and the rest of the course, your only assignment is to reach the writing target you set yourself in week two. (If you didn't set yourself a target yet, just set one this week.)

ASSIGNMENT

Your assignment this week is simply to reach the target that you set for yourself last week. You might have a single target, or a minimum plus an ideal target.

Even if you don't quite get as far as you hoped, it's fine to "check in" for your reward stamp anyway – just tell us how you got on:

[facebook.com/groups/ontracksept2019/learning_content/?filter=987285784941008](https://www.facebook.com/groups/ontracksept2019/learning_content/?filter=987285784941008)

If you prefer not to use Facebook, you can email me (ali@aliventures.com) with "Module #3 check in" or similar in the subject line.

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 email me at ali@aliventures.com.

Here's what to expect in Module 4 next week:

MODULE 4:

Next week, from Monday 14th October, we'll be looking at the drafting and redrafting process ... and how to make it work for you.

We'll cover different ways to go from "blank page" to "finished draft" and we'll also take a look at the key stages of the editing process.

Of course, the most important thing is not to read the material but to get your writing done – so as usual, we'll be checking in and sharing our progress.