

# Feb 2012 Q&A: Non-Fiction

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*This is a transcript of the audio Q&A, edited slightly for easy reading!*

*You can find the audio version at [www.writershuddle.com/qas/feb2012](http://www.writershuddle.com/qas/feb2012)*

Hi, I'm Ali Luke and this is the February Question and Answer session on non-fiction for Writers' Huddle.

So, I've had a bunch of fantastic questions this month and I'm going to be creating some extra resources to help answer some of them in a bit more depth but for now, I'm going to make sure that everyone gets at least a brief answer to their questions.

## Hailey: Wrapping Up a List Post

So let's start with Hailey, who asked "**What are some different ways to wrap up a list post?**"

In case you've not come across list posts before, they're really popular in the blogging world and they tend to be of the format *10 ways to do something* or *20 tips and techniques for something* – similar to the sort of format you might get in some magazines.

**They're really popular with readers and they're popular with writers** but one of the tough things with a list post is knowing how to round it off at the end. If you just stop with item ten or twenty, or whatever it is, then it can feel abrupt for the reader.

**One simple way to finish the post is to ask readers what was their favourite item on the list,** which one are they going to try out, or which one they like the best.

You're trying to get them to leave a comment and you can also ask them to make any additions to the list so let's say you've got nine items on your list you could ask them "*What would your number ten be?*"

**Another way to finish the list post is to point towards a related post on your blog,** so if you've given them twenty-five tips for doing something you might then want to point them towards a how-to post that goes into a bit more depth on a particular aspect of that, or some other resource that you can link them to on your site. This helps keep readers on your blog and keep them engaged.

And then something else you can do is to **round your post off encouraging readers to take action.** It's easy to read lots of good advice and to agree with it and to nod along; it's a lot harder to put it into practice. The end of a list post is a good place to ask readers to make a commitment to trying out something on that list.

## **Hailey: Getting Your First Guest Post Accepted**

So Hailey had a second question: "**Any quick tips to getting your first guest post accepted?**"

With guest posts I think **the most crucial thing to do is to choose your target blog before you write the post**, so don't just write a great post then look for a blog that might accept it. Choose the blog first and tailor your post to that particular audience.

**Once you've written your post, edit it carefully and in depth.** Take some time over the editing phase and get a friend to help you out, or post in Writers' Huddle in the Critiques forum and get us to take a look at it because you really want this post to be the best it can possibly be. Now, blog editors will sometimes want to tweak your post themselves, they may make some changes to it, but you really want to give them something that's in great condition. You want to make their life as easy as possible.

**Another way to make life easy for the blogger is to follow any guest post guidelines that they've got.** Provide them with your post in the format that they like, make sure it's the sort of word count that they ask for, if they want an image to be included make sure you include an image and so on. Just try and give them everything that they're likely to need so they don't have to keep going back and forth with you to get other pieces of the post.

If you've got a well written post and you've edited it, and sent it off with a polite brief email explaining what the post is and what it's about then you've got a good chance of being accepted. Even if it doesn't get accepted on your first target blog, you can then tweak the post a bit and send it to a different blog.

So with guest posting just give a try and jump in and keep plugging away until you do get accepted.

## **Hailey: Recommended Books on Writing and Creativity**

Then Hailey had a third question which was ***what books would I recommend on the topic of writing, creativity and producing creative work and so on?***

I'm answering this here rather than in the fiction section of the questions and answers because while it applies to both, I think Hailey may be coming from a more non-fiction perspective.

Two books that are quite good on issues of creativity and actually getting the work done and making time for your writing and so on are:

- *The War of Art* by Stephen Pressfield – that's the book that we are currently discussing in the book group forum
- “The Artist's Way” by Julia Cameron – which is a twelve week programme which you can go through if you are feeling a bit blocked as an artist

Both these books apply not just to writers but other creative folk as well so they're not just writing specifically.

If you want a very practical, down to earth book about writing, which covers fiction and non-fiction but probably a bit more non-fiction, **Jane Wenham-Jones has a book called *Wannabe a Writer?***

It's quite tongue-in-cheek, quite funny and its very light hearted and down-to-earth but it's also very good on being practical and having some really solid advice and it's a kind of encouraging fun read.

I'm going to put together a few book recommendations for the Huddle and if you've got a particular writing book you want to see added to the list just drop me an email ([ali@aliventures.com](mailto:ali@aliventures.com)) and I'll be pleased to put that on as well.

## Lorna: Advertising Your Work

Okay, so the next question is from Lorna who asked about **advertising your work, where you advertise and how it helps and so on.**

I don't pay to advertise either myself or my books at the moment, it's something I might try out in the future. Instead, I write a lot of guest posts.

The advantage of guest posting from my perspective is it doesn't cost me any money, it just costs me in terms of time, and it is a really good way of bringing in new readers.

Rather than an advert that people tend to ignore, especially online, a guest post gives them a great piece of content, they get to see me in action as a writer through my guest post and at the end of the guest post they will be a link in my bio that points them towards:

- My coaching page ([www.aliventures.com/coaching](http://www.aliventures.com/coaching)) so they might hire me as a coach
- My ebook site ([www.bloggers-guides.com](http://www.bloggers-guides.com)) so they might buy my ebooks
- Or just to my blog ([www.aliventures.com](http://www.aliventures.com)) to encourage them to stick around to get to know me a bit before I try and sell them anything at all.

And so far that's been a really effective strategy for me and it's one that I recommend if you are starting out, trying to advertise yourself.

## Rebecca: Making Money from Your Writing

The next question is from Rebecca, who asked about some pointers for first time money making on the internet.

There are lots of different ways of making money online and sometimes figuring out where to begin is the hardest thing, but pretty much everything boils down to three different methods:

**Method #1: Writing as a direct service – writing for hire.**

Method one is you're writing as a kind of direct service so, writing for hire. That might mean writing a blog post for someone and they pay you \$50 or it might mean writing a book as a ghost writer and they pay you considerably more – or anything in between really.

You don't just have to look at writing here, if you are great at editing that's an option too, or proof-reading. There's lots of different ways in which you can sell services as a writer.

**Method #2: Selling a written product**

The second way is to sell a product, a written product, so that might well be an e-book if you're online. That's a way to make money from each individual sale of the product.

In some ways this is perhaps better than providing services because you're not just getting paid per hour of your time. You can get paid again and again and again for the same work and the drawback there is it's a bit more uncertain so if you write an ebook you don't know if you're going to sell zero copies or thousands of copies and you are taking a bit more of a risk.

**Method #3: Selling Advertising**

And then the third way to make money from your writing is by creating a written resource which you can sell advertising on. So say you've got a blog and put adverts up on there, those bring in revenue for you. (Or you can put up links to affiliate products and those affiliate links bring in money for you as well.)

I don't like this method so much because I don't think it adds such good value at the other end – the people clicking on the ads – and I don't think it's such a secure way of making income. You have to do a lot of building up a good website or whatever it is, before you can start making any money from the adverts.

**What I would advise Rebecca, and anybody else who is thinking about how they can make some money from their writing online, is to really think about what you want to do.**

Don't just jump for the first job that looks simple or straightforward because there are loads of options out there and some of them might be options that aren't all that visible. See what other writers are doing.

Don't be afraid to contact people and ask "hey, how did you get started, have you got any tips for me" – most writers will be really happy to share some ideas with you.

And of course if you want to bounce around any ideas in the Huddle that what we're there for and I know that a lot of Huddlers have got or have had various paid writing gigs online and offline and I'm sure they would be very glad to share some of their expertise.

## **Carole: Finding Your Voice as a Writer/Blogger**

The next question is from Carole who asked about finding your personal voice as a writer and particularly as a blogger.

So the first thing to say here is that **is does take some time to find your voice**, so if you feel like you are not quite there yet, be patient, keep writing, your voice will emerge.

But something else to do is to **write on topics you really care about**: things that make you angry or make you enthusiastic or just get you really fired up ... because then you're more likely to write in an authentic way and it's more likely to be true to you.

And another thing you can do, a really practical thing, is to **read other bloggers and to see what they do and how they do it**. If you're reading a post that really draws you in, that feels like it is speaking directly to you, that makes you feel like you know the author, then that's not just chance or magic or luck or something.

It's deliberate on the part of the blogger and you can see how they are doing it by taking a close look at how they use sentences, how they use words, what sort of language they have, what exactly it is that makes that impression.

You might even find it helpful to print out some posts from your favourite bloggers so that you can compare their style see what things they might have in common or what they might do differently.

**Something else to keep in mind is that your voice doesn't have to be dramatic.** Some bloggers do have a really strong voice – maybe they are quite controversial or they've got a really particular way of writing and it's unusual and it's distinctive and its very them.

But sometimes you get bloggers who've got a much quieter voice – very down to earth, friendly, low key. I'm thinking of bloggers like Darren Rowse from ProBlogger or Chris Garrett. They're both very lovely guys in real life and on their blogs they come across in the same way: they're nice, they're friendly, they're gentle, they're not in your face about it but they seem very approachable through their writing.

## **Hailey and Graham: Finding Images for Blog Posts**

So the next question was asked by a couple of people, by Hailey and by Graham, and that was about **finding good images for blogs, royalty free photos that you can use in blog posts.**

So Hailey mentions that she uses Flickr but it doesn't always have quality images for the things that she's after. Flickr's the best site that I've found so far for royalty free images – it's easy to search for creative commons images. (If you're running a blog that makes money in any way, so you've got ads up or anything like that, then make sure your search for images that are licensed under the *commercial* creative commons licence.)

I've not found anywhere better – if other people have recommendations, please do post them in the Huddle.

**There are sites where you can get high quality photographs quite cheaply but not for free like istockphoto** (and if you google stock photography you'll find plenty of others) but you do need to pay usually a few dollars each time for the images.

On Flickr, they're free but you need to link back to the photographer who created them. There are no rules about how exactly you should do that – linking back to the creator – but what I normally do is put in italics, directly after the image, "*Image from Flickr by [the username of the person]*" and link that username to their name. So just look at a few blogs that do that sort of thing and see how they tend to cite the photographer.

## Hailey: Choosing Which Image to Use

And so a related question from Hailey was how you choose which image goes with which post.

It's tricky and it can sometimes take a really time to find a good image. I have to limit myself and go "*I'm only going to look for ten minutes and then I'm going to pick something*" because it can be virtually impossible to find exactly what you want.

**Sometimes it's useful to go for something which is a little bit abstract** so maybe it conveys a sort of emotion or feeling rather than necessarily being exactly about the topic you are writing about.

I prefer not to use images of people on my blog because I think that's kind of distracting and a little bit confusing for the reader. If there's images of people and you can see the face and the individual then they're usually images of me myself cause I think that helps build up a good rapport.

And that's an option which you can use in general, which is to simply **take your own photographs**. If you can't find the images that you need, create your own. It doesn't cost much to get a good digital camera these days and even if your images aren't the best quality it can create a nice personal connection with your reader because those images were taken by you.

## Jam: Capturing Attention with Titles

So the next question was from Jam who asked “**How do we capture our readers attention through great titles and are buzzwords really necessary?**”

So, in blogging in particular, a great title is one that is clear, tells the reader what to expect from the post, and is not too clever or cutesy – because that not only confuses readers but it also confuses the search engines and you want to be able to get relevant search engine traffic to your post through keywords.

**So your title needs to quite clearly state what your post will be about.** And it's great if you can throw in a number, maybe not with every single post but numbers do help get people's eyes onto your posts. You'll see magazines use numbers a lot – in fact if you are ever stuck for title ideas pick up a magazine, look at the front cover and see what titles and what phrases they have on there.

And as to whether buzzwords are really necessary I think it depends on what you have in mind. It definitely helps with titles to throw in some adjectives so to say things like “*Ten easy ways*” or “*Ten simple ways*” to do something rather than just “*Ten ways*” – so really push the benefits of reading the post.

**Words like *cheap* or *free* or *simple* or *straightforward* or *expert* or *secret* ... all of those help to create a certain impression for the reader.** Obviously you don't want to promise something that you can't deliver, otherwise people will just be disappointed, but it really does help grab people's attention getting some of those words into the title.

A great exercise you can try is to go to Copyblogger, look at their blog and look at the sidebar of popular posts and see if you can use a similar headline template for your own blog. You can do the same thing with a magazine or any title that strikes you and seems to work, see whether you can create a spin on it that will work for your own audience.

## Jam: First Paragraphs / Introductions

And Jam had a second question and that's **whether there's a perfect first paragraph or introduction for a blog post or a non-fiction piece in general and how do you know whether your first paragraph or introduction is any good?**

There's no one right answer. There's no one perfect way to create a paragraph or introduction at the start of your piece. What you need to do, within that introduction is to hook the reader, to give them some sort of promise about what's to come, to get their attention and to keep them reading.

If your introduction is good, people read the post (or the article or whatever the piece is) and there are lots of different ways to do that. One is to start with some questions, so **ask something that gets the reader thinking.**

**Another way is to open with an anecdote.** Tell a mini story and some people like to put part of the story at the start of the article or post and then come back and finish that story later on, perhaps at the very end of the post, to give it a kind of frame

It's hard to get introductions right and when you're working on them I think the best thing to do is write it how it comes out, get on with your post or article, and then go back to the beginning and work on editing the introduction. It might even be the case that you just want to post a paragraph or two of your piece into the Writers' Huddle forums so that we can help you get it right.

So that's all of the non-fiction questions and I'll be back next month with another Q&A. So keep asking questions in the forums, and I look forward to seeing you there.