March 2012 Q&A: Non-Fiction

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/march2012

Hi, I'm Ali Luke, and this is the March non-fiction Q&A.

Sean: Setting up a Writing Business

The first question was from Sean, who asked about **setting yourself up as a small business, as a writer.**

This obviously varies a lot from country to country, and a good place to begin is to take a look at your government's website. Look for any advice they have on small businesses, and how best to set one up.

You might also want to look at the websites freelanceswitch.com and freelancefolder.com, which both have a lot of advice for people in the situation where they're just starting out as a freelancer, and getting everything in place.

I would definitely recommend that you keep things as simple as possible, so for me in the UK that meant setting myself up as a sole trader, rather than as an actual company. I don't have a company number and I'm not registered as a company, I just have the trading name Aliventures.

The drawback to this is that there's no distinction between business and personal finances, so in theory if I was sued for something I'd done through Aliventures then my personal finances could become all tied up in that as well.

I felt that the kind of business I'm running means that it's very unlikely that I'm ever going to be liable for something court, it's not like running a restaurant where you could accidentally give someone food poisoning.

Something else that I think I should have got in place when I started out as a freelancer was to **have a separate bank account for business purposes**, even if

it wasn't specifically a business account, because that would have made things a little bit easier. Maybe even have a separate PayPal account for personal stuff versus business stuff. It's not like a problem legally if they're the same account, but it does make it a bit fiddy when it comes to doing taxes and things to just figure out which transactions are just personal and which are part of your business.

Something else I got in place when I started out was to have an invoice template, so if you listen to the seminar on freelancing, I go through some stuff like this, things you'll want when you're getting your first clients.

Then I'd guess that my final bit of advice on writing as a business would be to make sure that you're putting aside some money for tax ahead of when you need to pay your tax, and again this varies from country to country. So, I think in the US self employed people have to pay tax quarterly, so every three months, in the UK I have to file my taxes once a year, and normally I pay in two instalments. I pay at the start of the year when I file, then I also pay midway through the year on what they're expecting me to earn. Just be aware of what you're going to be likely to have to do in terms of things like tax, because as a freelancer **you'll probably find that your writing income goes up and down a bit, and it's just good to be putting some money aside on a regular basis.**

Steve: Knowing What You Need Per Hour to Go Full-Time

There's a related question from Steve, which is about **what formula you can use to determine how much you need to charge per hour in order to be able to go full time, and all the factors that could or should be included, so things like expenses, medical insurance and vacations.**

There was a little bit of discussion of this in the Q&A thread, I think Frances linked to the [FreelanceSwitch calculator](#), which is a great one and a really good place to start.

Ultimately I would say that there probably isn't an exact formula. When I was getting ready to freelance, I saved up an emergency fund and I just naturally cut down on some of the expenses that I had. Paul and I ate out less often and things like that, and we tried to keep our spending to a bit of a minimum, so it meant that I could freelance. At this point, Paul was a full-time student, so we weren't really fussed about having an expensive lifestyle at this stage of our lives, and this did make things easier.

Something else you'll want to keep in mind here is whether you have dependants or not, and **obviously the more people relying on you financially, the more certain you'll need to be before you can freelance.**

I'd also say that it possibly doesn't just come down to how much you're making per hour, it depends a little bit what sorts of things you're going to be doing, whether you're just purely freelancing, whether you just have an hourly rate and that's all you ever get, or whether you have some other sources of income.

Right from when I started out I had websites where I sold advertising, and I got an ebook done probably within a year of starting freelancing, and things like that have added up into other little revenue streams. It's not made a massive difference perhaps on my hourly rate, but it did make things a little bit easier, particularly in the earlier days.

Steve: Selecting a Domain Name for Your Site

Steve also asked about **choosing a domain name for your site**.

This is a really important thing to consider carefully, because once you start getting into business as a writer, or once you start promoting your website to readers, you're going to have your domain name on business cards, it's going to be on other people's blogs, it's going to be linked to in a lot of places around the web. It's quite hard to change a domain name once you've got one.

Obviously you can redirect a site to a new domain name, but ideally you do want to pick something that you can stick with long term.

I'd definitely recommend going for a short domain name, so ideally not more than two separate words, because that makes it easy for people to remember.

You might want to use your own name, that's up to you. Some people, particularly writers, will like to have a domain, so for me it would be *aliluke.com*, so *firstnamelastname.com*. Occasionally people will vary that, so Amy Harrison has *harrisonamy.com*, she has her surname first. Using your name is definitely an option and looks perfectly professional, and there's no reason not to do that.

I chose not to use my first name and surname because when I started freelancing, I was Ali Hale, and now I'm Ali Luke. When I started out this was on the horizon at least, so though we hadn't got engaged, I was expecting that at some stage I would get married to Paul and that I would probably want to change my name. I wanted to have a URL that used my name, but that wouldn't be a problem when I changed my surname.

Obviously that's a quite kind of specific circumstance, but it's worth thinking through things like that, if you're likely to be in a position where your name may potentially change. **I chose Aliventures because I wanted a personal brand, so it's a bit like the word 'adventures'**, which I like. It's got the word 'alive' in it, it sends the right messages, I think.

I'm still not entirely sold on the name Aliventures, even after four and a bit years of having that as my URL, but it was kind of the best I could come up with, and it's short, and so far it seems to be working out fine for me.

Some other things to say on domain names are to get a .com if you can, unless you really aren't a commercial company and you want to emphasise that, because **most people will just guess .com if they're not entirely sure of your URL,** and I know it's caused problems for some larger sites that don't have

.com, because people don't always get it right, and it can end up with people going to your competitors or something.

Basically, you're facing the choice between either having your own name as your URL, or having something which is a particular brand (so I'm thinking of sites like problogger.net, or copyblogger.com, or dailyblogtips.com). Or, you can have a mix of the two like I do with Aliventures, or like Joanna Penn does with [The Creative Penn](#).

Maybe another thing just to keep in mind here is to consider whether your domain name is going to limit you, so I think Daniel from Daily Blog Tips possibly feels, in retrospect, that he maybe should have chosen a different domain name, because **you're kind of stuck with the daily posting pattern if you've got a blog called Daily Blog Tips**. You can't really get away from that.

Melissa's Questions

Okay, so Melissa had a bunch of different questions, and I know she said that she didn't necessarily need answers to them all, but I thought they were all great questions. I'm going to try and touch on them all relatively briefly, because Steve and Bill had some great advice on these in the Q&A thread.

Melissa: Guest Posts Pitched by Freelancers

Melissa's first question was about authenticity and voice, particularly in regards to guest posts that sometimes get pitched by freelancers who are trying to get some links back to websites for SEO.

This happens to me a lot, I get pitched guest posts to Aliventures sometimes, I've had the same with other blogs that I've worked on. I agree with Melissa's point here, which is that these posts are often informative, but they just seem to have no voice, and they're quite bland.

Most of the ones I've seen are just a little bit generic, it feels like there's nothing special to them, and they're "off the top of my head list of tips" type

posts. I just say no, now, to anything which looks like a generic request from a freelancer. They all look kind of similar, so it's easy to spot these. I turn them down, and I say that I'm not taking guest posts. I think I've only ever had one guest post, maybe, on Aliventures, so it's something that I tend to do just by invite only, because I do want to particularly have my own voice on my blog, but also have guest posts from people who have something genuinely interesting to say, and who will say that in an interesting manner.

Melissa: Voice and Style for Guest Posting

A related question to this was **whether, when writing guest posts yourself, you should stick to your own authentic voice, or whether you should change it to suit the audience and target blog and whether, if people click through to your blog and it's a different style and voice, they'll bounce away.**

I do shift my tone, I don't change my voice completely, I think I try and write the same sort of material that I'd have on Aliventures.

So, something that I'm keen on in blogging about writing is to encourage people with their own work, and to make people feel that they can do it, and that even if things are hard, there's ways to get past that, and that it's worth putting in the time and the effort. I guess **I try to send quite an encouraging message, and that's something that I hope I keep up in my guest posting as well.**

What I do change, though, is I sometimes write in a different way stylistically. If I'm writing for Copyblogger:

- I'll use shorter paragraphs
- I'll maybe keep the post a little tighter than I would on Aliventures
- I probably won't talk about myself quite so much, because I figure readers are less interested in my personal writing practices.

If I'm posting for, say, Copyblogger or for Men with Pens, I'll focus on business writing, as opposed to fiction writing, for instance, whereas on Aliventures I try

and balance between the needs of people doing fiction and the needs of people doing non-fiction, and I'm not just focussed on bloggers.

So, my advice would be to **make the post feel like you, don't completely change your style just because you feel that's what the blog wants**. They might well be very open to something that's in a slightly different voice – that's often one of the great advantages of having guest posts.

But do study the types of posts that they produce and look at things like:

- the lengths of posts
- paragraph lengths
- the kind of language that seems to resonate
- the audience that the posts seem to be aimed at, so whether those people are perhaps in a slightly different area of your niche than your blogging usually is, or whether they're beginners or more advanced than your regular audience

... and just try and tailor things a little bit.

I think that, **unless there's a really, really jarring difference between your guest post and your actual blog, people are still going to stick around.** I mean, to be honest, if there's a bit of a difference, they might stick around just out of curiosity, so it's not necessarily a problem if your guest post isn't something that would be a complete fit for your own blog.

Melissa: Writing About Unfamiliar Topics

Then the next question from Melissa was**, how do you write about topics that you know nothing about and still be authentic as a freelancer, and she's thought about interviewing.**

I'd say, yes, interviews are definitely a good way to do that. You'll see this used a lot in magazines, for instance, where experts are often quoted in articles, and that's a good way to really use somebody else's expertise and to get their

message across. These are perhaps people who wouldn't have the time or inclination to write a whole article themselves.

Obviously you can research, and even if you really know very little about something, there's probably a good chance that the audience that you're writing for also don't know a lot. You're unlikely to be writing for a highly specialised publication, I would think, if you're being recruited to write about a topic that you're a complete beginner at, so probably the best thing to do is just to focus on providing information in a clear, easy to understand way.

I think this came up in the Q&A thread as well, that people sometimes just want quite clear-cut information, they're not too fussed about it being written in a really interesting or engaging manner in the case of non-fiction, so sometimes just being good at getting a message across is all that you need.

Melissa: Writing About Something You Disagree With

Melissa's next question was whether you write about things that you don't believe in or give advice that you don't agree with because that's what your audience or target blog want.

There was a bit of discussion around this as well, and I think Steve mentioned that you kind of have to draw the line somewhere as a writer, and this is quite a personal choice on what exactly you will and won't be willing to write about.

For me, if it's a case of something like a different audience – I think Melissa gave an example of people wanting budget fashion tips – then I think that's okay, because it's about context. You're perhaps writing for different people than you'd normally write for, but you're not writing something that you completely disagree with. You might personally have no interest whatsoever in fashion, but that doesn't mean that you can't give useful advice for people that do.

It's also different if you're, say, ghost-writing for somebody, so I've ghost-written sales pages, for instance, for products and services that I personally haven't used, and probably wouldn't buy, just because they're not my kind of

thing. Not because I think they're a scam or anything, just because they're not of interest to me personally.

I don't have a problem with ghost-writing a sales page, but as a freelancer I wouldn't write a review of a product or service that I hadn't used, and have my name on the review, so it's just a slightly different emphasis and, I suppose, responsibility, for that kind of content.

What I wouldn't do personally was write something that I felt was unethical or immoral in some way. This is a very personal issue of what exactly you do and don't consider as something that you would be happy to put your name on, basically. I think Melissa did point out that some freelancers do use a pen-name for their freelancing content, and you can do that, and again this is a kind of personal thing.

What I would say is that once something is published on the internet, it's likely to be there indefinitely. It's very hard to get things removed completely from the internet, because even if they're taken down from one site they may well have been copied on others, and people can potentially find out a pen-name or put two and two together, so do be careful that what you're putting out there is stuff that you'll still be happy for people to find in, say, five years' time.

Melissa: Dealing with UK English vs US English

Melissa's next question was how to deal with the differences in spelling and grammar, if you're writing for an American website and you're British, and obviously vice-versa would also apply.

I'm British, I've grown up with British spellings and British idioms, and you can probably tell if you're listening to this that I've got a very British accent, so I do have to watch this, because a lot of the sites I write for are American. They're based in America, and they have a predominantly American readership, and they use US spellings and so on as standard.
I just change the spellchecker in Word, I usually do that after I've written the post, actually, so then I just go through and change all the 'colour's, so that

they don't have a 'u' in, and so on. For me it's easier to draft in my regular UK English, because I don't get distracted by trying to type things differently.

It's worth keeping in mind that some differences are quite subtle, so it's not just spelling, there's also words that are used completely differently. So, you might know for instance, in the UK what we call a 'handbag', a kind of lady's shoulder bag or a clutch, is what's in America often called a 'purse', and what we call a 'purse' in the UK is I guess what Americans would call a 'wallet', it's what we use for a lady's wallet.

There are some other differences, like I think Americans say 'market' for what we would call a 'supermarket' in the UK. There are various words like this where it's worth knowing that what, to you, is a perfectly normal, everyday word, won't necessarily translate in an international context. You might want to look up a list of US English to UK English words online, there's quite a few of those, and it can be quite illuminating.

Something to keep in mind more generally here is that some language is regional, so even if you live, say, in the American South, rather than North, there may well be idioms that sound natural to you, but might not sound natural to somebody else who's reading.

Melissa: How Long Should You Wait to Follow Up About a Guest Post?

Melissa's next question was how long you should wait to follow up on a guest post response, and how you would go about following up.

If I've sent in a guest post submission, and I don't hear anything back after, say, at least a week, probably two weeks, I would just send a short, polite email saying something like, 'I just wanted to check you got my guest post submission.' I'd reattach it just in case it had gone astray somehow, or in case their spam filter had eaten it.

It's not rude to do this, people are often a bit reluctant, but emails do sometimes get lost. I once submitted a guest post to a large blog on blogging, and I left it about a month. I hadn't heard back, and I just figured they didn't want it, and then I got an apologetic email from the editor saying he'd just found this in his inbox, and he was sorry he'd not got back sooner, and that they loved the post, and so on.

He said something along the lines of 'if you ever send me something and I don't get back to you, please follow up', so in some ways it's actually politer to follow up than to leave somebody in a situation where they feel bad and they're embarrassed that they didn't get back to you.

Melissa: Finding References and Studies to Support Articles

Melissa's final question was **when you're writing more journalistic type articles, how you find references and studies and academic papers etc on the net, to support the claims that you're putting in**.

I agree with Melissa that referencing other blogs is not ideal if you're doing this kind of work. It's fine if you're writing very general blogging content, but if you're writing something that really needs to be well-researched and really needs to be *seen* to be well-researched, then it can be tough to find sources online.

Again, there was a bit of discussion of this on the Q&A thread, and some good advice there. A few things that I do, **I look on government websites, or academic websites.** So I believe, in the US, academic websites end with a .edu domain suffix and government ones end with .gov, in the UK it's .ac.uk for academic websites and .gov.uk for government ones. So, obviously these websites aren't infallible, you need to still apply a bit of thought to what kind of web page it is, but these resources are more likely to have authority behind them than somebody's blog.

Then something else to consider is whether your local library gives you access to any online resources that you could use. Most libraries in the UK

have access to the Oxford English Dictionary and, certainly with my library login, I don't just get the dictionary, I get loads of other resources, like reference books, biographies, encyclopaedias, lots of stuff that I can search online for free.

Beyond that, it may be worth looking into getting subscriptions to particular journal sites, if they're something that you're likely to use a lot, even potentially looking to see if there's some way to do that through an academic institution near to you. So, when I was a Master's student, I had access to a lot of journals by being a member of Goldsmiths College in the University of London. Now, obviously that would be quite an expensive way to go about getting access just to journals, but you might find for whatever reason that being affiliated to an academic institution could be useful.

So, I think that's all the questions. We had a lot of discussion going on in the thread too, so you might want to check back to the Q&A thread. I'm actually going to lock it now, so that new questions don't get posted in the old thread.

If there's something that you do want to discuss more generally in the forums, please feel free to start a topic in Writing Chat, and get the thoughts of other people in the Huddle, because there's a ton of expertise out there, and I'm hoping we can all give each other a hand.