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This three-chapter sample is exclusively available from [Productive Flourishing](#) – with thanks to Charlie Gilkey! Chapters 3, 7 and 13 are included: hopefully this will give you a flavour of the whole ebook.

You can buy [The Blogger’s Guide to Effective Writing here](#): don’t forget to use your \$5 discount code from Productive Flourishing: “Flourishing” (no quotes)

Chapter Three: Coming Up With Ideas

Before you write a blog post, you need an *idea*.

Famous authors are often asked “where do you get your ideas?” Many find this a baffling question: ideas are plentiful and easy to come by. For a lot of writers, having too *many* ideas is the problem! A few great ideas can sustain a whole book.

But bloggers need new ideas for every post. And however much you love your topic, you’ll hit a point where you simply feel uninspired and you can’t think of anything new to say.

Why Good Ideas Matter

From the reader’s point of view, good ideas matter because they make good posts! Whether it’s a unique angle, an unusual experience, or some advice that goes above and beyond common sense, your post stands out as memorable.

Good ideas also make your life easier as a writer. Starting off a post with a weak or ill-thought-out idea doesn’t do you any favours. You’ll often run out of steam after a few paragraphs, you may not feel very confident or proud of what you’ve come up with ... and getting it written in the first place is an exercise in bloody-minded willpower.

If you find yourself feeling like this about a post, it’s worth pausing and taking stock. Is your idea really worth writing about?

A good idea can almost write itself. It might be a great metaphor, a story from your own experience that can be applied to your blog, or even an idea for an unusual post structure. It might be a piece of advice that you *know* will help your reader. Whatever it is, that idea will help you to write easily and enthusiastically.

Sure-Fire Ways to Generate Ideas

Whatever stage your blog’s at, these are methods that’ll bring up more ideas than you can write:

Make a List

This is one of my favourites because it's so simple – and so effective. I recommended this for the pre-launch stage of a blog, but you can do it at any point, and it can be especially effective when you think you've run out of things to blog about.

Get a piece of paper or open up a blank document. Start writing ideas for blog posts. Don't worry about whether the ideas are "good" or "boring" or "too wacky" – just get them down. You don't need to craft the perfect title for each post at this stage: if a fantastic title comes to you, great (you can figure out the content that goes with it later!) but it's fine to just jot down the main idea.

I do this all the time – especially for my freelance work. It's a lot easier to come up with a bunch of ideas all at once and pull one out when I want to write a piece, rather than sitting and staring at a blank screen. Here's part of my notebook, with a list of post ideas for Pick the Brain (I italicise posts as I write them):

1. Maximising Your Productivity During the Day
2. Where's All Your Time Going?
3. Have You Abdicated Control of Your Life?
4. Where Are You Waiting For Permission?
5. Ten Ways to Wake Up Ready to Rock
6. Five Games That Help You Get More Done (And Have Fun Doing It)
7. *Is Prioritisation Failing You?*
8. Creating Systems to Make Routine Tasks Easy and Hassle-Free
9. *Why "Free" Costs You a Lot More Than You Think*
10. *Do You Have Dozens of Half-Finished Projects? Here's What to Do*

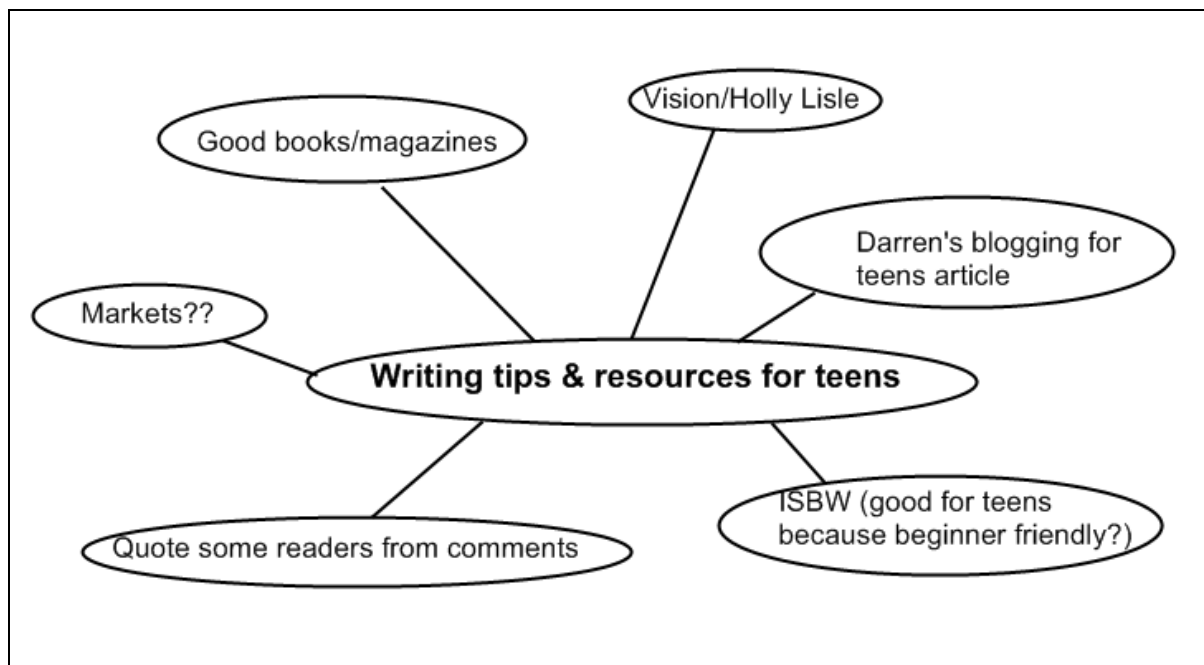
I won't necessarily write all of those posts (I've no idea *what* games might be going in item 6, for instance!) – but that's not the point of the list. Even if I only get one good idea out of every ten I write down, it's worth doing.

Mindmap

Lists work well for discrete ideas – but they're not an easy way to see connections between ideas, or to riff off one idea to get others. For this, you want a mindmap. Pick a starting point for the centre – something like:

- An existing post which was popular (*how can you build on this?*)
- One of your blog's categories (*what "core" posts would fit in?*)
- A word or phrase to do with your blog (*what resonances does this have?*)

I won't waste your time telling you how to make a mindmap; you've probably used them before (if not, just Google and you'll learn more than you ever needed to about the concept). Here's an example of one of mine:



This led to the Daily Writing Tips post: [Writing Resources for Teenagers](#). As you can see from that post, I didn't use everything from the mindmap in it, and I added some other ideas – the mindmap is just a starting point.

Riff on a Theme

When you read a blog post that makes you stop and think, consider how you could respond – not just with a “great post!” comment, but with a piece on your own blog. This doesn't have to mean writing a post on the exact same topic: just go with a particular thought that was sparked for you, or find a few notes to riff on.

Is there a potential side-avenue of thought that the other blogger didn't explore ... but which you could?

Do you disagree with them? Can you write a post that explains why?

Did they make a throwaway comment which you want to expand and take further?

You can do this with your own posts, if you want. Find an old post, perhaps one you loved writing or one which went down unexpectedly well with your readers, and find a new angle.

Here's an example. One of my posts on Aliventures was a response to what seemed to me like a prevailing attitude within the personal development niche: the idea that, once you find your passion, your work will be fun and effortless. I wrote [What to Do When Your Adventure Feels Like a Long Hard Slog](#), reassuring readers that we all have times when even things we love seem hard. In the piece, I directly quoted a couple of the bloggers who I was disagreeing with:

You might end up reading things like these two quotes and thinking "what the heck is wrong with me? Why aren't I like that?"

She is completely on fire with passion, and we're savoring every delicious minute of this time in our lives. Often when I see her now, she will jump up and say, "I am so excited. I am so *excited!*"

([Steve Pavlina Podcast #014 – Embracing Your Passion](#), StevePavlina.com)

I'm continuously motivated to drive onward and forward. I'm living every moment in joy and I can't wait to see what's next. And the reason why that's the case is because I'm living my passion. I'm doing what I love – to help others be their best self and live their best life. While I'm busy every day writing at my blog, doing my coaching and conducting speeches, it's a kind of busyness which I relish in. In fact, I simply can't get enough of it – I just want to do more and more, because I love all of this so much!

(Celestine Chua, [How to be Endlessly Motivated](#), Motivate Thyself)


I'm passionate about writing, but I don't always sit down to write feeling like I "can't get enough of it". Sometimes I sit down feeling "this is bloody hard work" or "I'm tired" or "I wonder what's new on Twitter."

Read Comments

A lot of my best post ideas have come from readers' comments. I deliberately asked for questions, problems and thoughts as part of a mini-competition, early on with Aliventures – and I got dozens of great ideas to write on. I asked people to:


Leave a comment on this post, *telling me what's stopping you from getting more from life*. Give me a question to answer, a topic you'd like me to write on, a problem you want me to offer a solution to. **You need to give me a question or a suggestion** – if you leave a comment just saying "me too", it won't count in the competition.

I got 30 comments, with loads of great questions, many of which I used as the basis of posts:

Colin August 17, 2009 at 1:57 pm 

I've got a question! When my business is ticking along reasonably nicely – just like right now, I've got enough clients to be comfortable – I find it very hard to convince myself to spend time on branching out into other areas. Any advice on how to motivate yourself when you're not terrified you're going to starve?

... led to [Staying Motivated to Develop When Business is Going Well](#)

Wilma Ham August 19, 2009 at 2:36 am 

Hi Ali

Thank you for the e-book.

My question is, how do you know if you have done enough?

When I was employed it was easy, at least I had the weekend off. Now I am working for myself I do find it hard to stop because who is telling me when enough is enough?

It is a bit like when you start renovating the house, the more you do the more you see what else needs doing.

...led to [Why You'll Never Be Finished \(And How to Figure Out When You've Done Enough\)](#)

When you're stuck for inspiration, go back to the comments on an older post, and see what people are asking for. If your blog is new or yet-to-be-launched, find another blog in your niche and read through some of the comments there.

Even if a comment doesn't *spell out* an idea for you, it can often get you thinking.

Forums

Like comments, forums are a rich source of inspiration *from other people*. Find a large forum that covers the same topics at your blog, and look for:

- Questions people are asking (you'll often only need to read the post title)
- Common problems that people have – what seems to crop up again and again?
- Posts which are “sticky” or popular

Tip: If you're a member of a forum and you write posts based on forum questions or problems, leave a message on the forum to let people know that you've written something on your blog in response, with a link to your blog post.

Sneaky Ways of Generating Ideas

Sometimes, you sit and stare at your sheet for an idea list or a mindmap, and nothing comes. You go through comments and forums, and you've either covered everything before, or it's way off-topic for your blog. This is when you need to get sneaky with your idea generation. Here are some of my favourites methods:

The Titles Game

There's no copyright on titles or headlines, so don't be afraid to "borrow" great ones and use them as a model for your own post titles. (I like to use Copyblogger – see right for a quick list of titles there.)

This is a great way to come up with titles that work – it's also a method of finding ideas.

Find a popular blog – or use the front page of Digg, or a glossy magazine – to get a list of titles. It's best if these are from *different* niches than your own blog.

Use each title as a template. For example:

5 Steps to Going Viral on Twitter

could become:

5 Steps to Going Green in the Office

Why No-One Links to Your Best Posts (And What to Do About It)

could become:

Why No-One Laughs at Your Funniest Jokes (And What to Do About It)

Five Grammatical Errors That Make You Look Dumb

could become:

Five Blogging Mistakes That Make You Look Dumb

popular articles

[The First Rule of Copyblogger](#) ↩ 102

[10 Secrets to More Magnetic Copy](#) ↩ 100

[The Eminem Guide to Becoming a Writing and Marketing Machine](#) ↩ 128

[The 7 Harsh Realities of Social Media Marketing](#) ↩ 140

[The 7 Deadly Sins of Blogging](#) ↩ 202

[Blogging is Dead \(Again\)](#) ↩ 132

[Is Commenting on Blogs a Smart Traffic Strategy?](#) ↩ 264

[The #1 Conversion Killer in Your Copy \(And How to Beat It\)](#) ↩ 170

[How Twitter Makes You A Better Writer](#) ↩ 239

[Is Your Tribe Holding You Down?](#) ↩ 183

[Why You Can't Make Money Blogging](#) ↩ 207

[5 Steps to Going Viral on Twitter](#) ↩ 228

[How to Use Twitter to Grow Your Business](#) ↩ 283

[The Inigo Montoya Guide to 27 Commonly Misused Words](#) ↩ 383

[How to Write an Article in 20 Minutes](#) ↩ 223

Free Writing / Automatic Writing

If you've spent any time in the creative writing world, you might have heard of the technique of "free writing" or "automatic writing". You simply take a blank piece of paper or blank screen, set a timer, and **write about whatever comes into your head until the time's up**. You don't stop, self-censor or delete, just keep the stream-of-consciousness going.

I've found this a useful technique when warming up into a writing session, though for me, it's not the best way to generate ideas. Give it a try, though; it works really well for some people. If you're finding it very hard to put words down without perfecting each sentence, or if you feel like you've got blogger's block, this is a great way to get through that barrier.

Using Twitter

Like the headline game, this is a way to relax into your blogging – and to turn Twitter into a productive use of your time (well, maybe!) The aim here is grab some random inputs and see what your mind does with them.

You could:

- **Pick one of the "trending topics" to write about.** Don't worry about what it means, if it's something obscure – give it a twist that's meaningful to *you*.
- **Take the most recent tweet on the screen,** and find something in that which could lead to a blog post. Generally, the "*harder*" you think this will be, the better the results!
- If you're really feeling apathetic, **ask your Twitter followers "what should I blog about today?"** And then pick *two* of the answers and combine them.

Chapter Seven: Structuring Your Blog Posts

Templates are a great starting point, and I use them all the time myself, as I'll show later in this chapter. It's much easier to start with a rough structure in mind than to sit down in front of a blank screen.

In the next few chapters, I'm going to go through every stage of a blog post, and show you in detail how to write a post that flows well, engages readers, and is as easy as possible for you to produce.

But first, I'll deal with a couple of objections:

“My Posts Are So Short, I Don't Need Structure”

Even if your posts are typically just 100 – 200 words, you'll want some sort of structure. Every post has a beginning, a middle and an end. Even if your "introduction" is a single sentence (perhaps a hook to draw the reader in) and your conclusion is simply the words, "What do you think? Let us know in the comments" – that's a structure.

“If I Plan Everything Out, Writing the Post Will Be Boring”

Some bloggers like to sit down and simply write about what's in their mind, without making any sort of plan (they're sometimes known as "seat-of-the-pants" writers). While this might be your natural way of writing, it often leads to false starts, or posts which don't quite work – or which need a lot of revising to get them to work.

Most bloggers will find that planning makes the writing smoother, not more boring. It's no fun to get half-way through a post only to realise you've gone off on a huge tangent.

So with those objections out of the way, let's take a look at the different elements of a post:

The Most Basic Post Structure

At a minimum, each post has:

- **Title**
- **Introduction**
- **Middle**
- **Conclusion**

(This is basically the same as the timeless story structure: Title, Beginning, Middle and End)

The **title** may determine whether or not a reader carries on to read your post (especially if they come to your post from a link or a social media site). Your title needs to describe what your post does, in compelling terms.

The **introduction** to your post should draw readers in. That might be with a short anecdote or even a joke; it could be a clear, concise explanation of what this post will do for them.

The **middle** of your post is, obviously enough, the bulk of the content. This is your list, your review, your manifesto, your thoughts on a topic, etc. This is where you deliver exactly what you promised in the title.

The **conclusion** of your post is where you finish up. Try to make this feel like an ending – it's easy for posts to come to a sudden halt. Tell readers what to do next: should they read another post? Leave a comment? Subscribe to your blog? Buy your product?

Chapter Thirteen: Your Style and Voice

So far in this ebook, I've focused primarily on the *content* of your blog posts: the subject matter that you're covering, and the structure of this. Your blogging style or voice is the *way in which you present this content*.

Many bloggers become popular not because they offer amazing, unique content that can't be found elsewhere – but because they write in a way that readers love.

If you're a fan of Naomi Dunford's [IttyBiz](#), that might partially be because Naomi is a great source of expert advice for tiny businesses ... but you're probably reading partly for Naomi's potty-mouth style, her honesty, and her willingness to make fun of herself.

The only personal finance blog I read is Trent Hamm's [The Simple Dollar](#). This is partly because I love Trent's high-quality content, but also because he writes in a very clear, accessible and personable way.

When you find your blogging voice:

- Readers may subscribe simply because they love your style
- Some of your readers will become die-hard fans: they'll start to know the “you” behind the writing
- You'll find it easier to write posts – like finding your natural stride when walking

So how do you go about developing a blogging voice?

You Already Have a Voice

Throughout my time as a writer, I've often felt that I don't have any particular voice and style. In fact, I do (and others have pointed it out to me). If you feel that you don't have a particular style – especially if you're used to writing in a lot of different tones, for different mediums – then try writing something that's as natural and easy as possible for you.

Show your writing – preferably several pieces of it – to a trusted friend. **Chances are, you do already have a natural voice.** Your writing voice is a bit like your accent: *you* might not think you speak with an accent, but someone from a different part of your country would be able to instantly identify it!

Finding Your Natural Voice

If you've studied English or Journalism, you might have been taught to write in a particular style. You may simply not have done much writing at all in the past, apart from emails and the occasional report or set of minutes. Perhaps you admire a particular blogger's style, and you've been attempting to emulate them in your own writing.

These are a few exercises that can help you find your own voice. There's nothing mysterious about this – your voice is just the way you express yourself in writing.

Journal

Keep a journal, for a few weeks. You don't necessarily need to write every day, but give yourself at least a couple of sessions each week to sit down and write about whatever's on your mind. Be as creative (or as boring!) as you want ... no-one's going to see this but you.

Writing Prompts

Set a timer for ten minutes, and write – without stopping or going back to edit your work – on one of these topics:

- A letter to yourself, ten years ago
- Why you love (*your blog's topic*)
- Ten simple things that make you happy
- One aspect of your personality that you want to change
- Something that makes you truly angry
- What you're afraid of

You could also try using a quote as a prompt – see James Chartrand's Copyblogger post: [One Foolproof Way to Blast Writer's Block](#) for more on this.

Reading Your Work

Take several pieces of your own writing, either from your own blog or from one of the exercises above. Look at these closely, with a pen in hand (or, if they're on the computer, with some easy means of annotating them). Consider:

- Where does your writing sound easy and natural?
- Is there anywhere it comes across as stilted or convoluted?
- Do you use humour in your writing?
- Are your sentences short or long?
- Do you have any particular catch phrases or stylistic quirks?
- What pleases you most in your writing? Where does it sound really *good*?

Ultimately, your writing voice will develop over time. Many bloggers start off with a slightly bland or stilted style – and develop a unique and compelling voice. **Don't put off blogging because you feel that you've not yet found your voice.** Keep writing, and your voice will emerge over time – and it'll continue to develop.

You Aren't Stuck With Just One Voice

In day-to-day life, your voice shifts depending on context. Maybe you use language with your friends that you'd never use in front of your grandma, for instance. Or perhaps you're perfectly at home using specialised, even academic language in your place of work – but you talk in a much simpler way with your children.

You also modify your voice depending on your mood: not just speaking more softly or loudly, but also using different words and different patterns of speech. Maybe your sentences are shorter when you're angry, or you tend to babble when you get nervous.

In writing, just as in life, you're not stuck with one single voice. I deliberately used a different voice in [my free ebook *Quit Your Day Job*](#) than in my usual writing on Aliventures; my blog posts tend to be more thoughtful and theoretical, using longer sentences and gentle language – the ebook is sharper, snappier and more direct.

Although you'll want to keep your voice fairly consistent for your day-to-day posting, there's value in being able to control and vary your writing voice. Sometimes, you'll want to “speak up” by injecting more energy, excitement or urgency into your writing: when running a product launch, for instance or recommending an affiliate product that you love. Other times, you might be writing on an issue which you feel particularly strongly about – perhaps one which makes you angry. You may choose to use more forceful language than you normally would.

Guest Posting on Other Blogs

One of the best times to modulate your voice is when someone else has offered you a platform. When you guest post on another blog, don't simply write a post that would fit seamlessly into your own blog – spend some time absorbing that other blogger's voice and accent, and write your post *just for their blog*.

I'm not saying that you should try to *copy* another person's voice – that's going to be hard for you to do, and won't bring the best of your work to their blog – but you can definitely take on elements of their style.

All this means is reading a handful of their posts, figuring out where your style is different from theirs and how you can modify your tone of voice to suit theirs. You might:

- Use shorter, sharper sentences
- Introduce humour
- Write in a more thoughtful and introspective way from usual
- Add particular features (like quotes or images) that you don't normally use

You can even deliberately reference features of the host blog's style: I did this in my guest post for IttyBiz, [Guaranteed Goal Achievement: Your Daily, No-Excuses Target](#), writing "*Here's what you need (and as Naomi would say, cue big ass red text)*"

Does “Proper” Writing Matter?

Many newer bloggers (especially those who find writing a struggle or a chore) are hung up on writing “properly”. They're concerned about grammatical issues, and have a sense that there are obscure rules of writing which must be obeyed.

Your blog is not homework. No-one's going to knock marks off if you split an infinitive, end a sentence with a preposition, or start a paragraph with “And”. Think of your blog as more akin to a piece of creative writing than to the sort of writing you learnt in school.

However, some of the “rules” of writing aren't easily negotiable. For example, there's the rule of “subject-verb agreement” which you probably know instinctively. Which one of these sentences is wrong?

The children play.

The children plays.

You *know* that the second version is incorrect, because “plays” is the singular form of the verb, used if there’s only one child – you would say “the child plays”.

If you’re a native English speaker, a good rule of thumb is that if you’d say it out loud, you can write it. If English is your second language, you may want to study grammar in a more formal manner.

In general, a natural writing style which doesn’t stick to the “rules” will seem more lively and vivid on the screen. Good ways to get a feel for this include:

- Reading blogs from several very literate writers with very different styles. I’d recommend [Copyblogger](#) (which has great writers but features several different ones) as a good place to start.
- If you find speaking your thoughts easier than writing them, try using voice-recognition software.
- Your writing needs to *make sense* and sentences shouldn’t be so complicated or convoluted that readers think you’ve made mistakes.
- In general, short sentences and short paragraphs work well on the screen.

Different Styles for Different Types of Content

You may want to switch your style for different posts on your own blog, especially if you throw in a special post that’s not part of your usual mix.

This might mean:

- Writing in a more personal, warm style for a post that updates readers on some aspect of your life (if this isn’t what you usually blog about)
- Using a “just the facts” tone for a quick newsy post, so that readers focus on the content
- Deliberately choosing to adopt a voice or perspective that isn’t really your own (see the ProBlogger post [5 Things You Should Know About My Dad the ProBlogger](#)).

If you’re looking to make an impact with a particular post, you can:

- **Swear.** Obviously, this won’t make much impact if your normal brand involves you being pottymouthed (a la Naomi Dunford and Johnny B Truant) – however, it can be powerful if your language is normally mild. Do think about whether this will go down okay with your audience: I used the word “crap” in a post for Dumb Little Man, which duly was edited out!

- **Get excited.** If you're normally quite calm in your writing, conveying real excitement can get your readers just as hyped up as you are. This can work when promoting a product – whether your own or an affiliate one – but don't overdo it.
- **Change the length.** Do you normally write 1,500 word epics? Then write a 100-word post that says something profound. Do you write 200 or 300 word short-and-snappy posts? Then write a really in-depth guide – a piece of pillar content.

Multiple Writers on One Blog

It's not uncommon for large blogs to use multiple, regular writers – either because the blog is a collaboration between two (or more) friends, or because it's grown to the size where the editor can afford to hire writers.

In terms of style and voice, you could run the blog in several different ways:

One House Style

Some blogs use a team of anonymous, paid writers ([Mark's Daily Apple](#) is an example). In this case, you'll probably want to encourage writers to work in a particular "house style" so that the content all reads similarly.

Advantage: Readers will always know what to expect: your blog is consistent.

Disadvantage: A homogenous style inevitably ends up being fairly bland.

Guidelines

More commonly, blogs will allow each writer to work in their own "voice" – but will provide certain guidelines. If you're collaborating with others on your blog, it's worth putting together some thoughts about the direction of the blog as a whole. Is humour welcome? Is swearing okay?

Advantage: You'll get a mix of voices and styles, but readers won't be horrified to come to the blog one day and find something *totally* different.

Disadvantage: Having guidelines in place is no guarantee that people will use them!

Editorial Input

Most blogs with a team of writers will have a single editor who reviews and edits content. This could involve proof-reading (changing spellings or fixing mistakes), or could mean rewriting chunks of text to keep it in the right style. When I started writing for [Dumb Little Man](#), Jay used to heavily rework my introductions to posts to provide a snappier opening – I got better at doing this myself over time! Almost every blog I write for will change my post titles at times. Some will pick their own images to accompany posts.

Advantage: This gives a lot of flexibility, and ensures consistent quality.

Disadvantage: A lot of time input from the editor is needed – and the editor needs to be present (ie. not busy or on holiday) to review posts.

Anything Goes

Finally, some blogs simply let writers do what they want! If you've got a trusted, quality team, this can be a perfectly good method of allowing everyone's individual style to shine through. Writers produce their own posts – not just content but title and images too – and publish it either when they want, or according to a group schedule.

Advantage: No editor is needed, and each blogger may feel a stronger sense of ownership over the blog.

Disadvantage: If the writing style varies wildly, some readers may be put off. There's also no quality control in this model, so you want to be *really* sure of your team.

Final Thoughts on Style

Don't try to force yourself into writing in a particular style. Figure out what's fun, what comes naturally, and how you *enjoy* writing. The best way to develop your style is simply by continuing to blog on a regular basis – you'll be able to look back in six months or a year and see how you've found a truer voice.

Enjoyed This Sample? Get the Ebook!

I hope these chapters are useful on their own, but
if you're keen for more, [buy The Blogger's Guide to Effective Writing here](#)

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Thanks for reading!

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