

MODULE 2: CHOOSING A TOPIC

“If there’s a book you really want to read, but it hasn’t been written yet, then you must write it.”

~Toni Morrison

“Either write something worth reading or do something worth writing.”

~Benjamin Franklin

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Writing from Your Expertise & Passion

When it comes to choosing an ebook subject, the most important place to start is within your own realm of expertise and passion. You might be able to write about “trendy” topics such as the paleo diet without following that diet yourself, but if you don’t have personal experience and passion to draw from, you’re going to end up with a dull, unappealing book. Even with a fantastic cover and catchy title, chances are it will never reach its potential because it will fail the word of mouth marketing test if readers don’t love it.

And honestly, ebooks that try too hard or are written just to make a few quick bucks give the whole industry of self-publishing a bad name, something that real authors have been working to overcome!

That doesn’t mean that you need to know everything there is to know about your topic when you start an ebook or that you don’t research and learn more as you go, but you have to start by bringing something of yourself to the table, whether that’s expertise, your personal experiences or just a lot of passion for the subject.

From [Amanda White](#):

Truth in the Tinsel is part craft book, part devotional book. It was the result of wanting to do something really meaningful with my preschool daughter during December. I wanted her to know the Christmas Story from the Bible—but understand it on her level in a fun way. The activities in the ebook are the result of three years of making up crafts and devotions for her. I think that’s part of the book’s success—it’s organic and true.

[Read Amanda’s full case study interview here.](#)

This is why the [Brainstorming Topics printable](#) begins with questions about you – your experiences, the things that are unique about you, things people ask you for advice about regularly. If you start there, you’re less likely to end up with a topic just because it’s trendy right now and more likely to end up with something that you’re excited to write about, and that really will come through in your writing.

Methods for Brainstorming

There is nothing worse than coming up with a *brilliant* idea while you're driving, in the shower or half asleep in the middle of the night...only to forget it by the time you get back to your computer! Because this has happened to me more than once, I've found ways to record them to refer back to later, although I'll admit there are still times when I don't think I could possibly forget and live to regret that decision.

Being ready to record ideas can be as simple as carrying a notebook in your purse, briefcase or glove box. For times when I'm driving, I'm thankful for Siri on my iPhone, since I can quickly ask her to send me an email without taking my eyes off the road. Even if her message ends up being half nonsense, it's almost always enough to remind me of what I was trying to remember. I've also used dry erase markers while in the shower, although I'm just as likely to yell for someone to please send me an email or write down XYZ for me.

This type of free-thought brainstorming is my favorite kind because it's usually the most effective. I almost always come up with my best ideas in these places, not while sitting down with a piece of paper *trying* to think of ideas. Which isn't to say that brainstorming on paper is a bad idea. In fact, I love a nice blank piece of paper for listing ideas, but our minds tend to work best and make the most connections when we struggle with a problem and then walk away. So I usually sit and brainstorm and then go about my daily life and let my mind do the hard work of putting the pieces in place and sorting out the good ideas from the bad until inspiration strikes!

Questions to Get You Started

Here are some questions to ask yourself as you begin brainstorming ebook ideas:

1. What are you passionate about? What do you love to talk about or share with other people?

Being passionate about a topic really does make all of the difference. Whether you're writing about earning money online, potty training or frugal living, your passion is one of the things that will set your ebook apart and make people want to share it with others. Information without passion is just boring!

2. What questions do your readers ask in emails or comments the most often? What do people often ask for your help doing?

If you're a blogger and your readers email your questions or leave questions in the comments of your posts, those are a great springboard for choosing an ebook topic because it means 1) they already consider you an expert and 2) they want to hear more.

3. Similarly, which posts are your most popular? Which get the most traffic? Which get the most comments?

Quantifying the popularity of posts isn't always easy. Some posts are popular on Pinterest. Some get shared on Facebook. Some get lots of comments.

In general, different types of posts trend in different places: Popular Pinterest posts are typically very specific – a craft, a recipe, a game-changing idea or a roundup of great ideas. Popular Facebook posts are often helpful tips or thought-provoking articles. And the ones that get the most comments on your blog tend to be those that really resonate with readers. Any of those might be a good ebook topic, and if you've got one that's taken off in all three places, I think it's safe to call it a winner!

4. What are you known for offline? What is unique about you, your family, your business, your lifestyle, etc.?

Considering your online reputation is one way to brainstorm ebook topics, but your offline reputation can be a great source of inspiration too. Whether you're the organized one, the one everybody goes to for decorating tips, the one who brings healthy food to potlucks or the one who always has encouragement for the weary mom, it's okay to think outside of the topics you regularly cover on your blog. It might change the way you market the ebook, but that doesn't mean it's not a good idea!

5. What ebooks are popular on Amazon?

Start at [the Amazon nonfiction bestsellers page](#) and see what the most popular Kindle topics are, but don't stop at that page. Click through the various categories on the left that relate to the topics you blog about (for example, cooking or parenting) and see what topics show up as the bestsellers on that page. You can get even more specific with subtopics for even more ideas.

You obviously don't want to copy the exact topic of one of these ebooks, but seeing what is popular can be a good springboard for coming up with your own ideas!

6. What blog posts do you see popping up again and again?

It seems like every blog I follow has posted tips and tricks for managing email in the last several months, and with friends posting on Facebook every other week about the thousands of emails in their inbox, I think it's safe to say that email management is a hot topic in the digital age. The danger in writing an ebook about popular topics is that they've been widely covered in the blogosphere already, but if you can bring a unique perspective and simple, unique and effective solutions to a problem, it's still worth considering.

This isn't a one-time brainstorming session; it's something you can revisit and add to time and time again. Your ebook topic may end up coming directly from something you've written down, or it may end up being a variation of one or two of the topics. The key is to spend some time really focused on the possibilities and then give yourself plenty of free time without distractions to just think without trying too hard!

Evaluating the Market for Your Topic

Unfortunately, coming up with a topic you're passionate about is only half of the equation. The truth is that no matter how passionate you are about caring for a pet guinea pig in Alaska, there's just not much of a market for an ebook on that topic, and your hard work probably won't pay off.

There are several ways you can evaluate topic ideas to give you a better idea of the potential before you start pouring your time and energy into writing the ebook:

Keyword Research

While keyword research for bloggers and website owners has to do with ranking in search engines, the purpose here is to see how popular various topics and searches are in general. You may still want to work on optimizing your sales page for SEO if you'll have one (versus listing your ebook only in existing marketplaces such as Amazon.com and BN.com), but the goal at this point is just to evaluate various topics based on their popularity, which will give us an idea of the potential sales market.

The easiest way to do this is with [Google's Keyword Planner](#), which lets you search various words and phrases and then ranks those in order of the number of monthly searches and how much competition there is for each one. In addition, it suggests related keywords, which can help you brainstorm when choosing a topic, coming up with a title or outlining your ebook content.

Feedback from Potential Audience

Another option is to simply ask for feedback. I'm cautious about throwing my ideas out publicly until I'm far enough into a project just because I don't want to give somebody an idea that they can get to market faster than I can, but once you've committed to a project, you can begin mentioning it to blog readers and on social media to gauge the response. Alternatively, you could be "sneaky" about your market research and simply write a series of posts on the topic to get an idea of how popular that topic is and how interested your readers are. Then, you can use those posts as part of your ebook when you're ready to start writing. (We'll talk more about the best ways to do that later on!).

Popularity of eBooks and Blogs on Related Topics

And finally, consider how popular ebooks and blogs on related topics are. While there's danger in choosing an oversaturated niche where it's hard to make your ebook stand out, you don't want to choose a topic that nobody's writing about if the reason they're not writing about it is because no one wants to read about it!

We use a set of funny little books called [the Life of Fred](#) as part of our math curriculum. In one of the books, the main character, Fred, comes across a book titled "The Names for Toenail in 300 Languages." The author of this particular book started with 9 copies, and by the end of the chapter, the only copies he sold were the ones Fred — who believes there are only two kinds of books: the ones he owns and the ones he wants to own — buys for himself and his friends. In this tongue-in-cheek chapter, Fred has no idea why the books aren't selling, but of course my girls and I did! Who wants to read about the ways to say toenail in different languages? No matter how well done the book is, it just doesn't have market appeal.

Unfortunately, it's not always easy to know whether your book will hold market appeal or not. In my experience, it's easy to overestimate the appeal of a project you're excited about, and my best advice is

that it gets easier to make those decisions over time. In my early years as an entrepreneur, I had so many *great* business ideas that turned out to be flops that I probably should have just quit. But thankfully, my desire to innovate was stronger than my fear of failure, and my husband has always been very supportive, so I kept trying. Over time, my instincts and ability to evaluate my own ideas objectively has gotten better, and I am able to predict the success of a project with much better accuracy now than I was even a couple years ago!

From [Katie Kimball](#):

When I began, not many people were publishing eBooks. The blog colleagues I was imitating included Stephanie at [Keeper of the Home](#) and Laura at [Heavenly Homemakers](#). Laura has many books with narrow topics, and I thought that was a great idea. Plus, I needed something manageable.

The topics come from readers, typically, or in the case of the camping handbook, it was something I was inspired to write – I had so many ideas while camping but didn't think they were a perfect fit for ten blog posts on a Kitchen blog, so...ebook idea! I ask for topic ideas when I do reader surveys, and sometimes people will make requests on blog posts: "Can you make this idea into an ebook?"

I did a talk on ebook writing once, and this is what I said about choosing my first idea. Healthy Snacks to Go was the perfect topic because:

- My readers were asking for it – often
- It spanned multiple niches
- I had lots of material
- It was unique
- It was a "gap" for most people (hint: fill the gap!)
- Some of my highest Google searches and most popular recipes are snacks recipes from this book.

[Read Katie's full case study interview here.](#)

Creating Your Unique Selling Proposition

Once you've narrowed down your topic, it's time to come up with your Unique Selling Proposition (USP), and this is your chance to make your ebook stand out from everybody else's.

According to Wikipedia, the term itself was coined in the 1940s as a theory to explain why consumers switched brands. It's since been broadened to refer to anything that differentiates one brand (even a personal brand) from another.

I love this three-part definition that Rosser Reeves offers in an old marketing book, [Reality of Advertising](#):

1. Each advertisement must make a proposition to the consumer—not just words, product puffery, or show-window advertising. Each advertisement must say to each reader: “Buy this product, for this specific benefit.”
2. The proposition must be one the competition cannot or does not offer. It must be unique—either in the brand or in a claim the rest of that particular advertising area does not make.
3. The proposition must be strong enough to move the masses, i.e., attract new customers.

[Amy Lynn Andrews](#) uses the acronym **PFC** to address this idea. The most popular information products solve a **p**roblem, address a **f**ear and/or satisfy a **c**uriosity – and the more of those elements they include, the better!

So the question, then, is what do you bring to the table that authors don't? How can you make your ebook stand out?

Unique Selling Proposition Examples

For example, the USP of [Easy Homemade](#) is if I can make these pantry staples from scratch, anybody can. As a self-proclaimed kitchen dunce, I never would have imagined myself making homemade pasta sauce or macaroni and cheese on a regular basis, but it really is a lot simpler than I ever thought, and I share those recipes and tips in my ebook to help other people do the same.

Looking at the bestsellers on Amazon in the popular paleo niche, you'd think there would only be so many approaches that someone could take toward a paleo cookbook, yet new books are being released every day. Let's look at some of their USPs:

- [Practical Paleo](#) by Diane Sanfilippo offers you the tools you need to customize your diet and lifestyle, including easy recipes, meal plans and tear out cheat sheets.
- [Well Fed: Paleo Recipes for People Who Love to Eat](#) by Melissa Joulwan makes one main promise: recipes that *taste good* (and from what I've heard every one of her recipes delivers on that promise).
- [Paleo for Beginners: Essentials to Get Started with the Paleo Diet](#) by John Chatham targets a specific group of people – those who are just wading into the paleo lifestyle and trying to figure out what it's all about.

Do you see what I mean? My guess is that these books have similar recipes, but they each make a unique promise that appeals to potential purchasers. And Chatham's book proves that you don't have to try to appeal to everybody; it's okay to target a specific group when you're choosing your topic (just make sure there's more of them than there are guinea pig owners in Alaska!).

Coming Up with a Title & Subtitle

Finally, let's talk about the importance of a good title. This is one of the elements of writing an ebook that can get overlooked until the end and then just thrown together, and unfortunately, as inconsequential as a title may seem, it can actually play a pretty big part in the salability of an ebook.

The key when coming up with a title is to create something that's both catchy and straightforward. You want it to roll off your tongue and stick in people's minds, but you don't want them to be so confused by the pretty words that they have no idea what you're actually selling! The good news is the subtitle gives you space to clarify the pretty words so that you can combine elements of both.

Your title should make a promise of some sort, give readers an idea of what they can expect and, perhaps most importantly, evoke emotion.

For example, Amy Lynn Andrews [Tell Your Time](#) immediately makes you think of taking control of your time rather than letting it control you. The subtitle "How to manage your schedule so you can live free." further clarifies the promises Amy's making, but even without reading the subtitle, you get a sense that this book is about finally being able to manage your time.

Similarly, my ebook, [Easy Homemade](#), is exactly what it sounds like – homemade recipes that are easy to make. It addresses the biggest issue that people have with cooking from scratch — that it takes too much time or too many steps – in two words. The subtitle, "Homemade Pantry Staples for the Busy, Modern Family" further clarifies what I mean by homemade and who my target audience is.

On the other hand, the topic of Tsh Oxenreider's ebook, [One Bite at a Time](#), isn't especially obvious at first glance, but it IS intriguing. And since most people have heard the cliché, "How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time." you get the idea that this ebook is going to help you tackle something big and overwhelming one little step at a time. Her subtitle is that much more important because it really tells you what this ebook is about: "52 Projects for Making Life Simpler."

I don't know about Tsh and Amy, but coming up with my title and subtitle didn't happen in one 30-minute session sitting at the computer. Instead, I brainstormed and thought about the ideas I wanted to convey and then tossed around ideas for several weeks before settling on what I believed was the best option.

Steps for Coming Up with a Good Title & Subtitle

For this reason, I recommend working on your title and subtitle as soon as you've chosen a topic and begun to outline your ebook (which we'll talk more about in a couple weeks). You don't have to finalize it this early in the process, but you want to give yourself plenty of time to brainstorm, toss ideas around and practice living with them before you make a final decision!

Here are some steps to get you started:

1. Make a list of the problems and solutions your ebook offers, as well as the emotions you want to evoke and any promises you're making to the reader. The idea here is to get as many words and phrases on paper as you can. Use [Google's Keyword Planner](#) to find related words and phrases and help fill out your list.

2. Once you have that list, begin brainstorming various titles. The key here is to come up with as many combinations of the words from the last step as you can *without* evaluating them or deciding what is or is not a good title. If you have a mastermind group you can turn to for help, now is a great time to get their input on possible titles. I like to brainstorm titles and subtitles at the same time, but you could start with the title and then move on to subtitles once you've settled on a title if that works better for you.

Caution: As I mentioned earlier, be careful about who you share your ideas with along the way. I am thankful to have a group of bloggers that I can go to for honest feedback at any stage of a project, and we'll talk about building anticipation for an ebook before it's ready to be published, but I think it's important to be cautious about sharing your ideas too early because there unfortunately are people out there who won't hesitate to take your idea and run with it.

3. After you've got a page full of ideas, start evaluating them, eliminating those that are no good, tweaking others and coming up with a list of 3-5 strong possibilities.

4. Once you've narrowed your title down to a few options, Google those titles and subtitles to see what comes up. Finding out that someone has already used your title for an album or another book doesn't necessarily mean you can't use it, especially if the market is entirely different, but it is something you want to be aware of so you can decide ahead of time rather than realizing it with surprise down the road.

5. Similarly, visit the Keyword Planner once again and search your top titles and subtitles. You'll be able to see related searches and keywords to help you tweak those further.

6. Finally, ask people you trust for feedback on your chosen title or your top choices. They may not like it, but that conversation can result in additional ideas that help you move closer to "the one". Write down any additional ideas and repeat the last few steps until you have something you really love.

It's important not to settle for a title that doesn't convey exactly what you want it to. While it'd be nice if ebooks could be evaluated solely on their content, the title and subtitle (as well as the design) really do play a pretty big part in the success of your ebook, and this is especially true when you don't already have a large, loyal audience to sell to!