



The newsletter book

by Buttondown



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Introduction

The first ever newsletter I sent out was entitled “Hello World” and it sent on September 2013 to a grand total of 17 people, 2 of which were my parents.

I had just moved out to Seattle, having graduated from the East Coast, and was feeling both excited and a little lonely at the prospect of carving out a new life for myself.

I did not start out with a particularly clear or grand mission. My newsletter then, as it is today, 13 years later, tended to be half technical and half personal, having steadily grown along the way – not enough to be a household name, but enough that I could not name the number of conversations I've had that opened with “I subscribe to your newsletter, and...”. Email is a lovely thing in a world increasingly dominated by The Feed: I treasure the blessing of knowing that every time I send an email, I will get a handful of warm and meaningful responses back from it from friends known and unknown, and that there is nothing any corporation or conglomerate can do to take that away from me.

Somewhere along the way, I encountered the bad idea of building [Buttondown](#).¹ The tool I was using at the time to send my newsletters was called TinyLetter. If you've been around the internet for a very long time, you might remember TinyLetter and perhaps cherish it as much as I did. They were purchased by MailChimp, and after a while, the benefits of a company being frozen in amber (no new features that get jammed down your throat, no surprise pricing changes) dimmed relative to the drawbacks (the app is broken, and one develops a faint sense of worry with every button press that something is going to explode).

¹ I say “somewhere” despite remembering the place exactly: 425 15th Ave E, better known as Ada's Technical Books, in Seattle.

I bring this up because Buttondown began not with grand designs of “changing how creative work gets funded” or “democratizing access to marketing tools.” Buttondown began as an act of preservation: its original design was as a home-cooked meal, and only when I started sharing screenshots and updates about its development (on my newsletter, no less) did the roar of positive feedback convince me to make it something it for public consumption.

Just like with newsletters, the world is overflowing with confident and contradictory advice about how to build and run a software company. I quickly realized it was tempting but foolish to pay too much attention to this advice unless it was given by practitioners (who have walked the walk themselves) whose goals and values aligned with my own. And much like the writers from whom you'll hear in this book, the most common through-line is – whoa, whoa, that's spoiler territory.

Though at least that is a useful segue to the purpose of this book. If you are reading this, you are smart enough to realize that the newsletter company has a vested interest in people wanting to write more newsletters: but much more than that, as the team who runs Buttondown talks to more and more authors we've realized that the accumulated wisdom from watching thousands of authors grow their newsletters doesn't exist anywhere. This book is meant to be a collective answer to everyone who has emailed us asking “how do I grow my newsletter?,” and if there's one thing I *will* spoil it's that, despite our incentive to convince you otherwise, the answer has nothing to do with us or any other tool on the market.²

This book is only useful if it compels action: the best possible outcome is for you to take the next step that you've been mulling for

² The word “Buttondown” only appears five more times in this book, and only in the context of authors mentioning that they use Buttondown.

weeks, whether that's sending your first email or your fourteenth. And if you do, [email me](#) – you'll make my day.

—Justin Duke
Founder, Buttondown

The ingredients of successful newsletters

I endeavour'd to make it both entertaining and useful, and it accordingly came to be in such demand, that I reap'd considerable profit from it.

— Benjamin Franklin, *Poor Richard's Almanack*

What goes into newsletters? What makes them stick?

If you asked enough successful newsletter writers, surely the common threads would come into focus.

The newspaper process—or at least the glamorized, twentieth-century version of it, with words scribbled in notebooks, punched out on keyboards, presses stopped and headlines swapped—has been immortalized on the silver screen enough that most can recognize its broad structures, its clichés. Same for the book publishing process, with agents, publishers, and advances, book tours and paperbacks, translations if you're lucky and options if you're exceptionally so. Newsletters, not so much.

They're real, a million writers showing up and hitting send, week after week, making a dent enough to have already affected public policy and drive a collective hundreds of millions of dollars in annual revenue. They're the default way to start publishing long-form writing online, today. Yet new publishing is, all too often, only treated as significant when acquired by legacy publishers and tech firms. There's no film about a newsletter, no Netflix series about building a Substack or blog from the ground up.

What would one show in film, anyhow, to let the audience know in 30 seconds that the protagonist was a newsletter writer?

The totems are obvious enough: The laptop instead of the 1960 reporter's typewriter, the newsletter app in lieu of the printing press, the blank page with its eternal terrors. Across hours of interviews, we dug into the inflection points that newsletter writers could point to as the line between success and failure. What could a budding newsletter author learn so they, too, could go from *ISSUE 1* to one thousand true fans?

You'd think there would be more similarities across newsletters than differences, things that would lend themselves to a 12-step process that if you follow it, you too could have newsletter success.

Or so was our original thesis.

One step in front of another

"I've been writing for twenty years," says software founder Allen Pike during our call of his eponymous newsletter. "Twenty-seven years," says *CREATIVE GOOD* founder Mark Hurst, without a hint of arrogance. "Thirty," smiles New York Times journalist and author Clive Thompson. "I've written, you know, three, four million words in this format," he says of his blogging and *LINK FEST* newsletter output. Enough to fill 30 books, if a book's a hundred thousand words.

"It's literally come out five hundred and twenty six straight weeks, on a Tuesday, at more or less the same time," says Mario Fraioli of his newsletter, *THE MORNING SHAKEOUT*. "It's something that has truly been my consistent thing for, like, eight years," says Cassidy Williams of her *RENDEZVOUS WITH CASSIDOO* newsletter.

Keyboards worn out. Midnight oil burned. There the similarities ran out. The paths to newsletter success were as varied as the authors themselves.

Cadence mattered, but every writer settled on a different pace. “When I first made it, I was so motivated, I was like, whoa, I should write this every day,” said Williams of her newsletter’s cadence. “Then I stopped myself, because I knew that would be really hard to sustain. And so I started it weekly.” Pike needed a lower cadence: “I set a goal that I would write at least once a month,” he says.

Then comes Pell. “I’m addicted to publishing every day,” he says, and somehow has found the stamina to have done so [for two and a half decades and counting](#).

Stats, too, mattered, but again in different ways to different writers. “I watch them,” says Mongkol. “I write a three month report to myself, to put things on paper and see how they’re doing.”

“I used to check stats daily,” concurred Pell, before backing off.

“I do a year-end review and check all the numbers,” says Pike. Then, Jane Friedman of *ELECTRIC SPEED* says “I don’t pay a lot of attention to the numbers” and uses them only as a broad indicator.

Some took unsubscribes hard; others aggressively pruned their lists down to their ideal reader base. Some built a team to support their newsletter work; others continue the hero’s journey alone.

Software didn’t ensure success, either. Most of the writers we interviewed have hopped between a handful of blogging and newsletter platforms; some have never been Buttondown users.

I’ve always felt compelled to write.

— Mark Hurst, *Creative Good*

Nor were topics as important as you’d think. “From the very beginning, my newsletter has been personality driven,” said Fraioli. “It

comes from me.” Thompson’s blogs and newsletters have been “kind of interesting stuff that I was encountering in science and technology,” not all of which was all that popular at the time (clean tech, say, two decades ago). Williams’ newsletter is a random smattering of news, a coding question, “and then also, I like jokes, so I included a joke at the end, too.” Friedman’s newsletter was more focused. “Who wants to spend time in an email?” says Friedman. “Mission oriented is how I approached it, in and out.”

Even after all of that time, writers couldn’t fully predict what their audience would love. “You have no idea what’s going to take off, so you just do a volume business,” says Thompson.

“You write however many thousands of posts and inevitably something is going to hit,” says Hurst.

“It’s always just a crapshoot,” says Pike.

“I was really prepared to write into the void for a few months,” says Chatawan Mongkol of *SOICIETY*.

Newsletters are an exercise in madness, in self-delusion. They’re the purest statement of faith in meritocracy, that the universe rewards effort, that there are others out there who think like you and they, too, would resonate with your writing. Newsletters self-select for those driven by the urge to write, by the conviction that putting your words and ideas out into the ether is a reward of its own.

“I’ve always felt compelled to write,” says Hurst. “I’ve always enjoyed it, I’ve always wanted to keep on doing it,” says Thompson.

“I cover the news in the year 2025, so I’m tempted to stop sending every time I open a new browser tab,” says Dave Pell of *NEXTDRAFT*. “But I’m addicted to publishing every day.”

You'll write your way out

Success, it turns out, is random. Arbitrary. The things that worked for one didn't for another.

But it wasn't purely random. For behind every successful newsletter is a writer. A writer who one day, showed up and decided to start publishing. A writer who continued to show up, daily or weekly or monthly, and write. Their paths varied, their plans mattered less than we'd like to think. The constants were starting and continuing to show up.

"What I really need to do is just hold myself accountable to this and get it started," Fraioli recalled telling himself. "I'll figure it out ... once it's out in the world."

"I knew that no matter what I write in a plan, the actual thing is going to be different," conceded Mongkol.

"I guess I was just happy to start a conversation with people on the topics I was interested in," recalled Hurst.

The output of a decade or three, of millions of published words, of thousands of subscribers and millions of readers, of the hopes of sponsors and businesses and book deals, of the reality of duds and false starts and silent failures, of readers and repliers and finding your tribe: Newsletters all start in the same place.

One day, someone opened a blank page, stared down the blinking cursor, and typed their first word.

Start. Show up. The rest, they'd figure out along the way.

Starting is half of the job

Decisions are made by those who show up.

— *President Jed Bartlet, The West Wing*

Mario Fraioli showed up in 2015 with a tweet. “Hey, I’m working on this thing. It’s going to come out next Tuesday. If you’re interested, here’s where you can subscribe,” he later recalled posting.

A runner, coach, and senior editor for the running-focused *COMPETITOR* magazine, Fraioli was looking for his next thing. He was increasingly known for live-tweeting races to his ten thousand or so followers, and “started thinking about doing a creative project that was all my own,” he said during our Zoom call.

He considered a blog, or even a print zine on a slower cadence. The primary consideration, though, was attention. Would people care enough to read his writing? “I wanted people to read whatever this thing was that I was going to put together and write. The most direct path to that,” he concluded, “was to meet people where they are: their inbox.”

So he drew a line in the virtual sand by tweeting (back when that’s what it was called) the announcement before he’d written the first issue, and 200-or-so of his followers came along for the journey. And he did it again for five hundred and twenty six Tuesdays, turning *THE MORNING SHAKEOUT* newsletter into the thing over thirteen thousand runners read every Tuesday morning.

Cassidy Williams showed up in 2017, with an ultimatum. “If you want people to listen to you, you need to be in their inboxes,” Udemy’s team advised before launching her *JAVASCRIPT AND REACT FOR DEVELOPERS*

course. “That is when I came up with the idea of writing this newsletter, so I could eventually promote my course,” Williams reminisced, now four hundred and thirty five issues into her newsletter.

Clive Thompson showed up in 2002, because “I wanted to keep on writing,” he recalled, during an MIT Knight Science Journalism fellowship. “You spend a year, they pay you to learn, and don’t want professional writing to take away from your time there,” he said.

But when you’re accustomed to writing as thinking, taking a hiatus feels as wrong as it would for a runner to stop logging miles. “So I downloaded this crazy new software called Movable Type,” says Thompson, “and started blogging.” A blog turned later into a Medium publication, then a newsletter, as audiences and attentions shifted, and he discovered a new voice along the way. “What was interesting was discovering what I sound like when there’s no in-house style,” he said. Before long he’d been writing on his own, in his own voice, away from the constraints of editors and advances, for twenty-three years.

Mark Hurst showed up in 1998 for much the same reason. “I’ve always felt compelled to write, pretty much my whole life,” he said. His first newsletter wasn’t much, “just a plain text email,” he recalled, but it was something, the start of a text-based conversation about his favorite topics that he’s continued, across platform changes, for twenty-seven years.

The first issues were never that fancy, the audiences piddling, the voice and topics yet to be set in stone. But they were the first step in a journey of decades. Like the starting line of a marathon, where it takes a beat to break out from the crowd and settle into a pace, what matters more than anything else is showing up and taking those early strides.

The first step is the hardest

Starting begins before you send that first email, when the initial seed gets planted in your mind that you should start a newsletter. Perhaps you're building something new, as Williams was, and want an audience primed for its launch. Or you're at a transitory period, as Thompson was, and want a way to exercise your writing muscle and put a purpose behind your output in the interim. Maybe you just love writing, like Hurst, and feel compelled to do so, audience or none.

Newsletters make sense, for those goals and more. They're, in Fraioli's words, published where people already are. No algorithms to fight for attention, no new habits to have to build among readers, few platform considerations to worry about. You don't have to "fight through some algorithm and do this dancing peanut dance, with your top hat and your cane, so that people will read it," said Thompson. Newsletters are just you, your words, and your subscribers—subscribers you can take to any other newsletter platform in the future at your discretion.

That's appealing enough to drive the deeper questions about systems and style and stamina to the background.

Dave Pell's interests drove him in 2008 to write a newsletter about the most interesting tech news of the day, as the latest move in a writing career spanning everything from syndicated writing to a print publication for a spell. Chatawan Mongkol's impending graduation, and experience running a student journalism-focused newsletter, drove him to see what he could build in a new newsletter before finishing business school. Jane Friedman's blog eventually morphed into a newsletter. "The first newsletter I sent was an RSS to email," she recalled. "I think I was using some sort of Google tool to run that."

Allen Pike was already blogging, too, when reader demand pushed him to start a newsletter.

“I would occasionally get someone saying, ‘I wish I could get your articles as a newsletter, as I don’t use RSS,’” he recalled.

So he added it, half-heartedly at first. “The newsletter has always been a formatted email version of the writing that goes on my blog,” he said, dragged into a new publishing format by readers. And to his surprise, the newsletter attracted more thoughtful, dedicated readers who took the time to reply. “The newsletter has outperformed in terms of helpful feedback,” says Pike. “That was very much the turning point where I decided to commit more seriously to encouraging people that the newsletter is the best way to follow.”

Inspiration, at its best, is an idea that arrives unannounced and refuses to leave. One day, you could have gone on without writing a newsletter. The next, this is the thing you’re meant to do. Now you have to figure out how to pull it off.

Find a way to send emails – any way is fine

Your mind will, likely enough, eventually drift to software. You’ll think through the email newsletter platforms you’ve heard of—Buttondown, Substack, Mailchimp, Kit, MailerLite, Constant Contact, Campaign Monitor, and a host of others. You’ll faintly recall that blog platforms like WordPress and Ghost can send emails, as can LinkedIn and Medium. You’ll be tempted to Google comparisons and ask ChatGPT which platform to use. You’ll get overwhelmed by the options and wonder, momentarily, if you couldn’t get by with an ad hoc email newsletter powered by BCC (no, you shouldn’t).

We'd be lying if we didn't say we hope you'd choose to use [Button-down](#). But we'd also be lying if we didn't say that your choice of newsletter platform matters far less than *JUST STARTING*.

Any email newsletter app can send your first messages. You can worry about the nuances later on.

Hurst, in '98, started with plain text emails, moving his newsletter later to Campaign Monitor then to Buttondown as the features he wanted from a newsletter platform changed over time. Friedman started with a Google-powered RSS-to-email automation, likely through Feedburner, and later switched to Mailchimp's take on the same automation since it "allowed me to actually customize what was in that message, the header and the footer and so on," she shared.

Dave Pell started with Mailchimp, a decade and a half ago. "Using a third party newsletter service for delivery was a must," he explained, "because of the spam issues in the early days." Fraioli was less worried about the technical details, and more about the price: "Mailchimp was free up till 2,000 subscribers," he recalled of their pricing at the time, "So I was like, I'll just do that, and I'm not going to pass 2,000 subscribers, so it's not going to cost me anything."

Thompson started without a newsletter, writing on a blog, then Medium, and only later switched to a newsletter. "The desire to say something at length to a calm audience that is there to read it had not gone away," he said. "Newsletters actually satisfied that blogging urge better than blogging or social media did."

The writing and audience were what mattered; the platforms were just implementation details.

Choosing to focus your social media energies on LinkedIn versus TikTok might yield drastically different outcomes, and require entirely unique skill sets to master. Not so for email newsletters (and blogs,

generally). They're one of the last remaining bastions of self-ownership on the internet. No one owns email; everyone can make it their own.

You can always export your subscriber list and import them into another email newsletter platform in the future, if you want. You can comparison shop the various email platforms once you have a few issues under your belt and know what features are worth having. But that's for later.

What matters far more, now, is sending that first issue to your first readers.

Your audience is there for the asking

An idea, email software, and a blank page ready for your words. All that's left is to fill in the subscriber list, and you'll have a real newsletter.

Which is exactly when you'll be tempted to back out of the quest, for who will read your writing?

Your family and friends, perhaps; they won't complain if you send them a first draft. Your social networks hold promise, as do subscribers to any blogs or channels where you've already been publishing. And you can always take up the proverbial bullhorn and promote your writing, as hard as that may sound today.

Pell started with colleagues: "I only sent it out to people who ran or worked at companies I invested in and/or advised," he said, then "word got out and people started to ask to be added to the list."

Mongkol started with friends, and Reddit: "The first issue I sent to nine people I knew," he said, "and I promoted it on Reddit." And that worked, with 60 subscribers on the list by the time he sent the second issue.

Pike and Friedman both started with their blog audience, as yet another way to follow their writing. Only later did they try promoting their newsletters more widely.

Thompson “did not advertise” his newsletters at all, he says. Aside from sharing on Twitter and Mastodon, “I have no idea how people found it.” And he’s restarted his list multiple times, leaving older followers in Medium as he migrated his writing efforts to a newsletter.

Williams and Fraioli both started with their Twitter audiences, and grew, in Fraioli’s words, “from my consistent presence on Twitter and, then again, just word-of-mouth.”

From Mongkol’s nine friends to Fraioli’s initial 200 signups from a pre-launch tweet, none of the writers started with a massive audience, but neither did they start out with an audience of zero. You need at least a few people to serve as a sounding board, to read your first issue and hopefully share it with their friends. You need to promote your upcoming newsletter in any channel where you have even the smallest audience, then re-promote that first issue wherever you can.

But you don’t have to worry about it too much. You don’t need that thousand true fans, not yet. “The single biggest change is going from zero, no audience at all, to one person,” says Thompson, especially that first person who you don’t know personally who signs up just because they like what you’re writing.

Plus, you have this tiny window of opportunity, right at the beginning, to find yourself and discover your voice. “When you’re a very on-line person, you’re always editing yourself to accommodate the least charitable reader you have, which is no way to write and publish,” says Friedman. “You lose your own sense of self and voice because you’re hearing that horrible person that you know is on your list that’s going to take issue with something innocent.” You don’t have that. Not yet.

That's a gift for the present, a chance to build up your writing muscles for the months and years ahead when you will have a larger audience.

Starting, imperfectly

Most of the things that worked out over time, Pike told us, were things that he “did sort of accidentally and then gave a bit more attention once they started to work.” The only way to know was to try.

“You’ll always have that anxiety when you publish, and I don’t think that will go away,” said Mongkol.

“I was writing personal essays in a personal voice,” recalled Thompson of parts of his newsletter, “and it was scary in a way.”

Which, for most of us, puts us back into analysis paralysis. Is this name ok for a newsletter? Did I pick the correct software? Will people actually want to read my newsletter? What if I post about it, and no one shows up?

I’ll figure it out, what it’s gonna be and how it’s gonna evolve, once it’s out there in the wild.

— *Mario Fraioli, the morning shakeout*

“I kicked the can down the road on starting it for a while,” recalled Fraioli, worrying about the branding, the design, the details that add up to a newsletter and yet don’t matter all that much in the grand scheme. That is, until a designer friend told him “Dude, don’t worry about the logo. Just put it out.”

Thus the fateful tweet, “so that I would actually stop dragging my feet and get the thing out into the world,” he said, and the first newsletter issue went out the following Tuesday. It was hard enough to get

started; there were infinite tiny details, and you'd never hit the asymptote of perfection if that's what you were waiting on to ship.

"I'll figure it out, what it's gonna be and how it's gonna evolve, once it's out in the world," he decided, and mailed his first issue to his 200 early subscribers. Then he did it again, and again, every following Tuesday, until it became enough of a success to make it worth tweaking all the things that a real newsletter deserves.

Before you start, the first email is all that matters. After that, it's all about maintaining momentum.

Show up

Sometimes magic is just someone spending more time on something than anyone else might reasonably expect.

— Teller, quoted by [Allen Pike](#)

“I was so motivated,” said Cassidy Williams after sending the first issue of her newsletter. “I should write this every day.”

“And then I stopped myself, because I knew that would be really hard to sustain.”

Some newsletters are a sprint, a 5k race, a daily [pop-up newsletter](#) with a baked-in expiration date. Others are for the long haul. Twenty, thirty years, three or four million words, hundreds of weeks, one after another. They’re a marathon, not a sprint. The only way you’ll keep going, for the long haul or for a shorter, faster burst, is by building systems you can fall back on when motivation wanes.

“I have not missed a Tuesday,” said Mario Fraioli. That’s easy, at first, when you’re motivated, when new subscribers keep showing up, when a reader sends a kind reply. It’s far more difficult when you’re tired, when your first child arrives on the scene, when someone sends an angry reply or unsubscribes, when your newsletter lands in inboxes and no one’s there to read it. It’s seemingly impossible to do consistently for a decade, as Fraioli has.

“The only thing that matters is your reliable publishing schedule,” recalls Mark Hurst as the best advice he’d heard for keeping a newsletter going, from longtime blogger Justin Hall. “You have to be disciplined to keep that up.”

Deadlines are your friend

Fraioli's virtual line in the sand, announcing his impending newsletter launch on the following Tuesday, got his first issue into inboxes on time. That same Tuesday deadline has kept him sending emails consistently every week since.

His goal is to write the newsletter early and “schedule it to send at 2:50 Pacific, on Tuesday mornings.” Sometimes scheduling it requires burning the midnight oil, something it'd be much harder to find the willpower for without the looming deadline. “I've had a few nights over the years where I finished it around that time or a little bit later,” he said, but it's hit inboxes within that time window every Tuesday, for well over a decade.

Clive Thompson uses his deadline as a way to focus his downtime. Instead of doomscrolling through social media, he'll read through his 150 or so RSS feeds, filing away things that could be worth including in his next issue before getting back to other tasks. “I know another one has to come out in a couple weeks and has to be filled with amazing stuff,” he says. “There's an audience that's expecting it. The pressure is on.”

I find the faster I write the newsletter, the better it is.

— Dave Pell, *NextDraft*

Deadlines set a scope for how much time you can spend on an issue. “It takes me about 4 hours a day to do NextDraft,” Pell says, a focused time window that scopes the task of curating the best stuff from hundreds of RSS feeds. “I find the faster I write the newsletter, the better it

is.” The self-imposed time limit is a subtle quality control filter of its own.

Allen Pike, initially, thought writing routinely would come easy. “I’m independent. I can write as much as I want,” Pike remembers thinking. “Then I’m swamped with all this stuff. There’s always something else.” The only way to send consistently was to “set a goal I would write at least once a month, and that’s become basically the end of every month.” That commitment made it easier to carve out the time to write and send the newsletter. “Without that self-imposed deadline, I will often just rewrite and diverge,” he says.

Williams, after her early enthusiastic start, settled into sending her newsletter weekly, and “slowly but surely figured out how to write it consistently over time, which is very hard,” she says. “There’s going to be a day where you lose that motivation and discipline has to take over, which is very, very hard.”

“If you’re going to do monthly, do monthly. Weekly, weekly. Daily, daily,” says Hurst. “Whatever you choose, that’s what you have to do. 99% of the success of any newsletter is consistency.”

That’s because deadlines both hone your sending skills and make your newsletter part of your readers’ routines as much as primetime sitcoms turned TV shows into cultural events before streaming smoothed out launch windows.

There’s going to be a day where you lose that motivation and discipline has to take over.

— *Cassidy Williams, rendezvous with cassidoo*

“It’s consistency and the predictability of when it’s going to arrive,” says Fraioli. “It’s become a regular part of people’s week. People write me and say, ‘I read it while drinking my coffee before I get off my run on Tuesday morning,’ or someone who’s in Europe says, ‘It’s my lunch read on Tuesday.’”

“It has become almost a brand,” says Pike of his monthly publishing cadence. “People will say, ‘I missed your article. I just realized, oh, it’s the third of the month and I hadn’t seen your article yet,’” he says. That’s enough motivation to keep sending on schedule.

And you might have to miss a Tuesday at some point, preoccupied at a work conference or, God forbid, a hospital stay. Missing one scheduled day doesn’t mean it’s all over. But it does mean you need to jump back in as soon as it’s healthy to do so.

Stay curious

Deadlines and reader expectations keep the clock ticking. They don’t excise the terror of the blank page, though. Inspiration is more fickle. Your systems have to continually give you new ideas to build into your next issue, paired with the confidence that subscribers want to read what’s on your mind.

Pike’s deadlines force him to save ideas for later. “I have hundreds and hundreds of drafts that are incomplete, and sometimes I’ll come back to them.”

Chatawan Mongkol turned newsletter prep into “an hour every day” project, cataloging the most interesting things he finds from feeds and Google Alerts in a spreadsheet. “Usually I have a pretty good idea of the top story by Monday or Tuesday,” leaving the rest of the week to fill in the details before his Friday sending schedule.

Williams and Thompson alike weaponized their routine reading and online procrastination into an infinite source of newsletter ideas. “I started to come up with better systems,” says Williams, training herself to save interesting articles encountered throughout the week to a bookmarking app. “When it comes time to actually write the newsletter, I can pull those links from there.”

“I’m always reading stuff, and I’m encountering interesting things,” says Thompson. “All my blogging has really just been eavesdropping on me as I’m talking to myself.”

Usually I have a pretty good idea of the top story by Monday or Tuesday.

— *Chatawan Mongkol, Soiciety*

As your audience grows, as your newsletter takes on a life of its own, it’s easy to forget that you’re in control of what your newsletter becomes. “If you’re comfortable writing in your own voice, it’s much easier to keep up,” says Williams. You started out writing for yourself; subscribers showed up to read that version of you.

“The only time I’ve felt burnt out or like I was off track was when I was trying to write about what I thought other people wanted to read,” said Fraioli of a period in 2020 when he felt like he needed to share an opinion on everything in the running news cycle. Then he decided: “I’m going to chase my curiosity and my interests. Every good thing—the number of subscribers, the partnerships, other opportunities that have opened up—can all be drawn back to that,” says Fraioli.

A steady source of material and a north star centered around the things you love are the antidote to burning out.

“I don’t play to the audience,” says Hurst. “I write what I think is important.”

Tune out most of the noise

You shouldn’t worry about stats. The issues you put the most effort into might not do as well as you’d hoped; the ones that blow up might be the ones you rushed out to hit the deadline. You have to keep hitting send, trusting that the consistent effort will pay off over time and that the weekly fluctuations are merely noise.

“I used to check stats daily,” says Dave Pell. “These days, I rarely do.” When he does check stats, he’s focused on “opens (to make sure people like the newsletter) and clicks (to make sure I am sharing stories of interest to people).” Little else matters.

You get what you measure, Or more precisely, as Goodhart’s law states: “Any observed statistical regularity will tend to collapse once pressure is placed upon it for control purposes.” Jane Friedman has seen that in her writing as it has evolved over the years. “If I want to get a high open rate, I know exactly what to put in that subject line or what material to cover,” she says. “But that doesn’t interest me.”

“There is a big danger in getting dopamine from numbers going up when those numbers are not actually forwarding any of your core goals,” says Pike. “I have a preference to write to more people. That makes the work higher impact,” and so checks total subscribers and which issues performed the best once a year or so.

“If you write for the love of the game,” says Williams, “you get more genuine content.” A friend’s newsletter had 200,000 subscribers but negligible open rates, because he “optimized for maximizing subscriber eyeballs rather than for maximizing his own content,” she shared. She

optimized, instead, “to provide something valuable to people,” and built a more sustainable business out of an audience a tenth of the size.

“I decided, back in 2002, that I only wanted to do it for fun and for social intellectual value,” says Thompson. “That’s why I’ve never really cared that much about the size of my audience.” Hurst agrees: “I’m very excited whenever anyone subscribes,” he says. “But because I’m not doing it for a living.” With that focus, no stat other than consistency matters.

Mongkol instead, from the beginning, set out to build a business around his newsletter. What shape it’d take, that was yet to be determined, but the goal gave the stats meaning. “I write three-month reports to myself,” he says. “The goal right now is to try to stay above a 50% open rate.” That metric gives him a way to gauge success from promotions and ad campaigns. And when people unsubscribe, or reply with complaints, he sees it as a positive, honing his audience down into one that resonates with the focus of his writing. “It doesn’t discourage me just because I’m not trying to get those readers.”

Unsubscribes are, perhaps, the hardest stat to accept. “Early on, I would check every week who unsubscribed, and see if I recognized who the person was,” admitted Fraioli, back when his list was mostly family and friends. “At some point, it got big enough that I stopped caring.” Because the people who leave don’t matter nearly as much as those who stay and keep reading years later.

“Every week, someone replies to the email and writes me back, and some of those people have been doing that for close to ten years,” says Fraioli. “Those feel like more meaningful interactions,” the things that matter far more than the daily ups-and-downs of stats and vitality.

I don't know at what point I'll have to say, I can't respond to everyone, anymore.

—Jane Friedman, *Electric Speed*

Even the positive stats, the growing audience and soul-feeding replies, have to be taken with moderation. Every writer we talked to intended originally to respond to every reply. Every one of them had to scale that back, over time, and learn to tune out the inevitable negative comments.

“I used to always respond 100% of the time,” said Pike, but now, “I don't beat myself up if I miss one.” The same goes for not taking annoyed replies too seriously. “You know you have something that's getting popular when people are taking time to tell you how wrong you are,” said Hurst, and you have to rephrase the negativity in that light to keep it from discouraging you from sending the next issue.

Your strategies will change over time. Friedman mentioned wondering if she'll have to scale back replies, in the future. “I don't know at what point I'll have to say, look. I can't respond to everyone, anymore.” The newsletter is, after all, the reason people signed up in the first place, the thing that drives the replies themselves.

“I try to respond,” said Mongkol, after admitting that he's already had to stop replying to every message. “I appreciate when people reply. But I don't hold myself to it.”

Because if you do, if you hold yourself to respond to every reply, to adjust course each time based on stats, you'll keep yourself from holding to your sending schedule. And that's the start of a death spiral for any newsletter.

The same goes for stats. “Something goes viral in Hacker News,” said Hurst, “the clicks shoot up, and then the back side of the slope is a

mirror image of the upside.” If that whiplash feels too demotivating, if the stats become little more than distractions and heartache, you might go all the way and turn them off, as Hurst did.

Keeping at it, for the long haul

Writing a newsletter consistently is work. Hard, worthwhile work that’s worth treating with respect. “My newsletters are my body of work,” says Friedman. “When I die, I consider them more important than my books.” Going at it haphazardly will prevent you from writing the newsletter your readers deserve. The only way to consistently publish instead of staring at the blank page when it’s time to start writing, to ensure you won’t burn out when everything doesn’t go as you hoped, is to learn to focus on what matters and tune out the rest.

You can run a sprint, or a marathon, or a lifetime of marathons. The last option is equal parts hard and fulfilling because it often means admitting defeat in today’s race instead of pushing through and showing up to the next race injured. Your deadline is an aspiration, a goal, a guideline to keep you on track instead of a set in stone law that you can’t break even when you’re at a breaking point.

Because the worst thing you could do is to flame out for good, halfway through your newsletter race.

And then you win

Whatever it is you're seeking won't come in the form you're expecting.

—Haruki Murakami, *Kafka on the Shore*

4,150 miles. 100,000 feet in elevation change. Mountain majesty to ride-over country's waves of grain. "I'm going to do this as long as I can," Thompson thought, and what started out as a trick to get in more exercise by biking whenever he could in lieu of taking the subway culminated in 14-mile rides, then 28, then 50. Then cycling from New York City to Philadelphia and Providence, Rhode Island and Montreal. And one day, "I got on my bike here in New York, and I kept riding until I hit the Pacific Coast."

There was no medal at the end, no reward for having conquered the continent. "It was fun," says Thompson, "because I've met all these people and seen all these crazy nooks of the country." Biking around the city had given him a window into clean energy mobility, and so he'd started writing on his own about biking, walkable cities, and public transit. "This was me writing personal essays in a personal voice about my life and stuff I was doing myself, and was a little scary in a way."

Not for long, though, as readers loved the new window into Thompson's life. "People would have these wonderful conversations about what it was like," Thompson said of his more personal, bike and transit-focused writing. "It got me really excited about this." Editors, early on, weren't as interested, but as the clean tech revolution gathered speed, Thompson had a library of content to point to, and suddenly "I went from kind of tucking one little environmental thing into my coverage a

year to 50 to 60% of what I write about now is this stuff,” says Thompson.

It all started by deciding, one morning, to bike instead of taking the train. Then he kept at it, mile after mile, until he’d built the expertise and voice right when the world was asking for it. Suddenly writing about how “the U.S. could be a little more walkable, a little more bikeable” was landing new writing assignments, turning into the crux of his next book. Same for everything from biophilia, wooden skyscrapers, and solarpunk among Thompson’s other diverse interests. “I have all these things in my head because I have been collecting them for this small but passionate audience in the Link Fest,” he says.

The destination is nebulous

“When I started the newsletter, I had zero premonition that it was ever going to become something I made money off of,” said Mario Fraioli of *THE MORNING SHAKEOUT*. “Nor did I plan to write it for ten years straight. I was going to continue to write it as long as I found it interesting.”

“I still try to hold by that.”

But something funny happens when you show up, week after week, for years. Somewhere along the way to publishing your hundredth or thousandth issue, you’ll stop and realize hey, I’ve built something. Something with heft, permanence, staying power. Something of your own. Something that matters to people. Something that defies definition, that morphs with your interests and opens new doors and closes others in the process. Something with a gravity that pulls you into its orbit, that eternally manages to be interesting.

“I will Google something very weird and narrow that I’ve been following for twenty years,” says Thompson, with millions of published words to his name, “and the first hit will be a blog post I wrote in 2006.”

It’s that recognizable voice, honed over years of continuous publishing, that continues to bring in readers. “This is why a certain chunk of people get me,” says Thompson. “They encounter this massive ice shelf of words that I’ve written, and they can get a sense of me through it.” Unlike early cohorts of subscribers who are testing the waters, latter subscribers know what they’re signing up for—and they’re more engaged as a result. “I’m in dialogue with the same weirdos who care about the same strange things science and technology and culture that I care about.”

“I write what I think is important,” says Mark Hurst. “You can read it, or you can leave. I’m gonna be writing this either way. That’s freeing.”

The friends you make along the way

“The single biggest change,” says Thompson, “is going from zero audience to one person.” What starts as a watercooler chat becomes a keynote address. You go from saying what’s on your mind to realizing that people are holding on to your every word. That takes you into a different mindspace.

“Once I got to maybe a hundred subscribers, I would get a meaningful number of replies,” recalled Allen Pike, “and that was the thing that made me decide to put more weight on the newsletter.” You get accustomed to putting your thoughts out there, and then keep readjusting over time as your content changes.

People sign up to read about writing or running, news or nuance, but not about you as a human. Or so you think. “I was like, no one cares

about a note from me,” remembers Jane Friedman thinking of the early evolution of her then roundup-style newsletter. “They just want the tools or the resources, and then they want to get out. Who wants to spend time in an email?”

But then she added a personal note to the top of her *ELECTRIC SPEED* emails, and discovered the “personal, more intimate side of email,” in Friedman’s words. “There are people who only want to read the note, and they don’t care about the rest.”

Once I got to maybe a hundred subscribers, I would get a meaningful number of replies.

— *Allen Pike*

Dave Pell, with his news-focused *NEXTDRAFT*, found something very similar. “I was among the first bloggers/newsletter writers to get a press pass to the Democratic National Convention in 2004,” he recalled. “When I shared that news, I got a ton of responses and new signups. My readers were psyched about it. It was a good reminder that the personal connection to readers is the core value of newsletters.”

And it’s not just things that take the newsletter in new, more professional directions that get attention. “I get more comments about a mention of my beagles than I do about a mention of a news item,” says Pell.

Those people who show up to cheer you on when you’re cycling the States or on the convention floor can also come through when you’d least expect it. Readers would “send me things,” ideas to include in his newsletter, said Thompson, and it hit him that *THE LINKFEST* “was becoming this social enterprise. I was actually learning more because it

wasn't just me looking for stuff, it was other people who send me things.”

“Several of them have become good personal friends over the last thirty years,” says Thompson of his blog commenters and newsletter repliers.

It was a reader, a “recovering attorney,” who took Fraioli’s newsletter administration to the next level, when it started becoming a business in its own right. “He was a subscriber from early on, and was like ‘Seems like things are going really well,’” Fraioli recalled. “‘Yeah, they are, but the brand partnership thing is becoming a full-time job,’ and he’s like ‘Oh, I could help with that.’”

It was another newsletter writer who helped Cassidy Williams turn her newsletter’s sponsorships into a more profitable venture. “I had no idea what to charge at the time,” she recalled. Then at an online meet-up, talking to someone else with a sponsorship-powered newsletter, she mentioned what she was charging and they responded “You could add a zero to that.” “It was very, very helpful,” says Williams, and aside from paying the bills that the newsletter would otherwise incur, it “helps me stay consistent because I’m accountable to the people who are sponsoring.”

Sometimes it’s the little, indirect things that matter most. “One of the most valuable things that has happened to my list is when someone recommends you to their audience,” says Jane Friedman. “And I try to do that as much as I can. When I find a newsletter or something or someone I really like, I recommend it in my free newsletter,” paying it forward and building a mutually beneficial community, one link at a time.

A newsletter, if you can keep it

With hundreds of issues and thousands of subscribers on their lists, each writer started and keeps going for their own reason. Williams' newsletter brings in enough to pay its own bills, along with her child-care costs. Pell, Fraioli, and Friedman each turned their newsletters into businesses in their own right; Chatawan Mongkol plans to, testing the waters first with a tip jar and weekly sponsors. Pike's writing helps, in roundabout ways, seed interest in his businesses, while Thompson and Hurst both find newsletter writing to be reward enough of its own.

None of them had the path figured out when they started. They, to a person, built their business and longevity plans on the fly.

"Being a three-dimensional earnest human on the Internet and building trust over time with an audience is something that is really valuable," says Pike, "but you have to be really conservative about not mining out that value and hollowing out what you've built."

"The majority of your writing, ideally, should be helping the people who are reading," he continues, "and then over time you earn the right occasionally to ask for something back." And if writers like your work and are happy to cheer you on and support you when you share something personal, they'll be equally happy to check out your latest book or app or support your favorite cause if you don't make that the sole focus of your newsletter.

As long as you enjoy what you're writing, the path to monetizing your newsletter or turning it into something bigger isn't always so direct. It could be as simple as turning on a paywall, adding a tip jar, or bringing on sponsors. Or it could be as nebulous as your newsletter informing your other work in a virtuous cycle, and building your thousand true fans that you can lean on when the time comes.

“My money comes from my journalism,” says Thompson. “My intellectual growth and self-satisfaction and ideas come from blogging and newsletters.”

“The reward for having persisted for twenty-seven years is that I’m still here, and I still get to write and persist some more,” says Hurst.

There’s no finish line, no long-term goal you’re shooting for with your newsletter. It’s there, for as long as you can keep the streak going, ready for you to send out another newsletter issue whenever inspiration and your routine strike, filled with likeminded fans who’ve signed up for this journey with you. It, at its most basic, is a list of subscribers and an archive of what you’ve written. Thousands, millions of words, that somehow together are greater than the sum of their whole.

One day, you’ll open a new blank page, stare down that blinking cursor, and type your newsletter’s last word. But not today. Today, you’re going to write and send again, winning the eternal battle against entropy one word at a time.

How to not run a newsletter into the ground

I'm [Nick Disabato](#), an independent designer & writer. I've run [my newsletter](#) since 2012, writing letters to thousands of people every week. After some years flitting between newsletter platforms that didn't really understand my needs, I landed on Buttondown in 2022. Four years later, I got tasked with designing & editing this book.

I don't think my newsletter is any better or worse to "follow" than any of the thousand others on Buttondown. Certainly others are larger, more widely read, more "successful" by any metric. But I've been doing this for a while and think there may be some things to teach everyone about what I've learned writing every week.

Writing every week

The most important thing I do in my newsletter is to write every week. Really for me, newsletter writing is a question of *DISCIPLINE*. I show up to the work, put in the work, and try to give it my best shot. Obviously it's never perfect, but doing this has allowed me to honor the practice of writing to people.

Not everybody needs a lockstep cadence like mine, but I've found this is what works for me. Above all, it keeps people engaged & interested. And it makes me ask myself: what do I have to share today? It's an honor to have people really care about what I'm doing and how I'm doing it. I never take it for granted.

Coming up with ideas

Sometimes I can sit down and hammer out something quickly for my newsletter. It might be timely or just weighing on my mind. Most of the time, though, I need to be prompted with an idea.

I've personally found that my idea-generation brain never engages when I'm actually trying to write. Too much pressure. So I've decoupled the two activities, and I occasionally spend whole afternoons generating dozens of ideas to write about. I never write about all of them; the goal is to get enough that I can pick from a large set of options and go from there.

For years I've used Naomi Dunford's [1-hour content plan](#) to come up with dozens of ideas. It's pretty simple: come up with some broad-stroke topic areas that describe your area of expertise, then find some sub-topics, then find as many things to write about under each sub-topic as you can. I never look back at my original topic lists, so the list of lists can evolve with me.

Growing my audience

Since [we don't advertise](#) or [use social media](#), word of mouth is all we have for sharing our work with the world. That means we rely on our readers to tell others, and we need to put out good work in the first place.

My list will not grow if the work isn't good. There are no hacks. There are no substitutes for a quality product.

Instead, we work hard to write well & often, and then we sometimes ask people to share our letter with their audience. In practice, all of our

buttondown.com

growth comes from three sources: [book](#) sales, appearances in the wider world (podcasts, conferences, guest blog posts, etc), and other people recommending us. The latter is by far the biggest cohort, by design.

Building a routine

I've written about 95% of my letters on Monday mornings. My brain is freshest before lunch and early in the week, so that's my peak time for focus & intentional work. I edit the letter on a morning later in the week, and then I send it off to be queued.

Again, you don't have to pick a specific time at all. Just find what works best for you and stick with it.

Talking to people

We know a lot of people care about open rates, click rates, and view rates. We care the most about *REPLY* rates. Why? Because if we're doing our job, then we've struck a chord with our writing. Who knows, maybe people will even share it, too.

Again, this may not work for you. But we've found that it works for us. Perhaps the real lesson in this writing is to learn, listen, be unafraid of moving off the beaten path, and make something that's well & truly *YOU*.

What I look for on newsletter platforms

I want my newsletter platform to help me write text efficiently and put it in front of people. I want the barriers between me & my audience to be as thin & permeable as possible. I want deliverability to be high, because I know how hard that is to pull off at scale. I want to be able to write, schedule, and receive replies. I want to add as much branding as I can, and no more than that. I want to know I can get help when I need it, which is often, because I don't know how computers work.

I want something that will work simply & easily. I want it to get out of my way. I want something that will last. That's why I've chosen But-tondown for so many years. I'm really grateful it exists.

Colophon

Written by [Ryan Farley](#) & [Matthew Guay](#) of [Pith & Pip](#) in 2024. Edited & typeset by [Nick Disabato](#) of [Draft](#) between June & August 2026.

Typography

The primary font is Auto, designed by Akiem Helmling, Bas Jacobs, and Sami Kortemäki. It was issued through Underware in 2004.

Buttondown: newsletters for creators like you

This book was made by [Buttondown](#), a newsletter platform that helps you write, create, and grow your audience – and then gets out of your way. Since 2016 we’ve helped thousands of creators write their newsletters easily & quickly, with high deliverability & world-class support.



For more on us, and to join us today, take a look at buttondown.com.

