

the email topic *toolkit*

A **simple toolkit** for generating an **endless supply** of **brilliant topics** for emails and newsletters (and blog posts and social too) - **instantly banishing "blank page" syndrome**

WWW.IANBRODIE.COM/EMAILTOPICTOOLKIT



WELCOME!

Hi - it's Ian Brodie here

Welcome to the Email Topic Toolkit!

This is your express guide to generating an endless supply of brilliant topics for emails, and newsletters (plus blog posts, and social media) - and instantly banishing "blank page" syndrome.

If you're reading this express guide then I'm guessing two things are true:

Firstly, you recognise how incredibly powerful using valuable, insightful content in your marketing can be to attract potential clients and build the credibility and trust needed for them to be ready to buy from you.

But secondly, you probably find that in practice, creating that content is not quite as simple as some of the evangelists of content marketing might lead you to believe.

You might find yourself sitting in front of a blank piece of paper or screen struggling to come up with good ideas for what to write an email or create other content about.

Or you might find that you get started but then get stuck, Or end up starting again time after time.

Or you might just be frustrated that you find it so hard to get your best ideas and the essence of the great work you do with clients encapsulated in content you can use to market your business.

Well, the good news is the Email Topic Toolkit will fix that for you.

It's a simple way of generating an endless supply of great ideas for content.

And not just any content. **Remarkable Content.**

Content that will inspire your audience. That will stick in their memory, get them coming back for more and position you as the person they most want to work with.

If that's something that would be valuable for you and your business then read on, take notes - and most importantly, take action!

LET'S GET STARTED

what is **remarkable content**?



If we're going to come up with ideas for remarkable content for emails, newsletters and other content we first need to be crystal clear on what remarkable content actually is...

I know you're keen to get going and to start generating those brilliant ideas for topics for your emails and other content. But unless we're really clear on what kind of content we want to create, we'll end up with the wrong ideas.

So what exactly is remarkable content?

There's no universally recognised definition, but in my experience what we're looking for is content that:

- Is **highly valuable** to your audience.
- Is **engaging and holds their interest** - so they keep reading (or watching or listening).
- Is **thought provoking and triggers new ideas** - so they keep coming back and keep you top of mind.
- Inspires them to **comment and share** so that your content gets more visibility.
- **Builds credibility and trust** and moves them closer to being ready to buy from you.
- And last - but certainly not least - is something you're actually **proud of creating**.

DOWN TO BUSINESS

how do you create **remarkable content**?



Creating remarkable content starts with the recognition that all content has two essential elements...

Every piece of content - good or bad - has two essential elements:

- The **topic** you're focusing on - for example an email about team-building for small businesses or with 3 tips on website design.
- The **story** you use to illustrate the topic and bring it to life. It doesn't literally have to be a story - it can be an analogy or a case study or any way of giving depth to the topic and making it engaging and interesting.

For example, instead of just listing your main points in an email on team-building, you can make it much more interesting if you:

- Introduce your points with a story of a dysfunctional team you were part of early on in your career, or...
- Report on new research into what makes effective teams, or...
- Fill the article with examples and detailed case studies from well known businesses and what they did to build successful teams, or...
- Draw an analogy between building teams and getting the right ingredients and process for a successful recipe, or...
- Argue that in fact successful businesses don't need teamwork.

Each of these "stories" or ways of illustrating your topic makes it more interesting and thought provoking for your reader.

step 1: brainstorm potential content topics

Remarkable content comes from the combination of a valuable topic with a unique and interesting story to illustrate it.

A lot of content is created from a very writer-centric perspective: “this is what I know about and I’m going to share it with you”.

That approach can work, but if you want your audience to find your emails and other content hugely valuable, you’re far better off starting from a client- or audience-centric perspective .

That means picking a topic they actually care about.

And the easiest way to do that is to look at their problems and challenges and their goals and aspirations.

If you’re writing about something that’s a problem or challenge for your clients then they’re naturally going to prick up their ears and take notice - hoping what you say will be able to help them with that issue.

Similarly with their goals and aspirations.

So your starting point for coming up with topics for your content is to list out all the problems, challenges, goals and aspirations of your ideal clients.

Those could be big issues, like not having enough sales or wanting to sell your business. Or they could be smaller day-to-day issues like not knowing what to write in your next client email or wanting to do better staff appraisals.

That long list of problems, challenges, goals and aspirations - both big and small - is your initial draft topic list.

You’ll refine the exact topic when you come to create specific emails or other content. But for now that initial list is all we need.



tips for brainstorming topics

Follow these simple tips to make your topic brainstorming quicker and more effective.

1. You probably already have a shortlist lodged in your brain of the typical problems and goals your clients have. Start by just listing the first things that come to mind.
2. Next, add to the list by thinking of the client projects you worked on most recently - what were the problems or goals those focused on?
3. Add in the questions you get asked the most by clients and potential clients - or any you see them discussing in forums or groups.
4. If you're still looking for more potential topics, consider holding informal "interviews" with current, ex- and potential clients where you ask them about their biggest challenges and goals. You can also follow this up with a survey to a wider audience. One simple idea to keep this up to date is to ask all new email subscribers or connections what their biggest problem is in the area you work in.
5. Once you have a base set of topics you can use them to generate more. For example if you have a broad, high level topic like "not enough sales", drill into what in-depth problems might be causing it "not enough leads", "not converting enough leads into paying clients". Then drill into those new topics: "initial offer not compelling enough", "not spending enough time on lead generation", "not doing the right lead generating activities" etc. If you start with a more detailed topic you can move up to what bigger problems it might be causing or be a symptom of.
6. *The most important tip: **make your topic list in advance*** rather than trying to come up with a new topic as you start to write. If you leave brainstorming topics until you're about to start creating content you'll put yourself under too much pressure and clam up or fall back to the same few common ideas. Do your brainstorming in advance and it'll be better and broader - and further ideas will come to you over time.



step 2: identify stories you can use to illustrate the topic

Any topic can be illustrated or explained in a multitude of different and interesting ways using stories and examples that harness the themes human beings are inherently interested in.

Think about the TV shows, films and books you regularly tune into and consume the most avidly.

Whether it's a drama or documentary, a sports or quiz show, the things we find engrossing tend to feature a combination of:

- Characters you care about.
- Drama and tension.
- Overcoming obstacles.
- New information and ideas.
- Laughter and escapism.
- Secrets and inside information.
- Inspiration and “feelgood” stories.
- Details and trivia.

Can you build these kinds of features into your own content to get more engagement and impact from your audience?

Of course you can.

You just need to illustrate your topic with an interesting and relevant story. **And there are 4 main categories of stories you can use.**

1. **Stories about you** and things you've done. These have the additional benefit of building your credibility and a perception that you've been in similar situations to your potential clients.
2. **Stories about your clients** and their challenges and successes. These have the benefit of showing that your support helps others to succeed.
3. **Stories from third parties.** These are stories about businesses or people that you haven't worked with, but instead have researched. It could be using publicly available material or your own primary research where you speak to them directly. These stories can showcase the breadth of your expertise and knowledge.
4. **Stories from left-field.** These are analogies or examples that wouldn't normally be associated with the topic. For example sharing leadership lessons from a famous comedian or teamwork tips inspired by astrophysics. These stories can mark you out as an original thinker and can add humour and interest to your content.

Different categories of stories tend to work well in different situations. Personal stories work well in emails to build relationships with existing subscribers. And client stories help establish your credibility. Whereas comprehensive articles tend to be better on your website to drive traffic.

It's also a matter of personal preference. You might prefer not to share too much about your personal life or experience and instead focus on examples from your client work and show how you've helped them get results.

Whichever category(s) you want to use you can make it easy to come up with ideas using “story prompts” - read on to find out how.

Use **story prompts** to quickly build a database of interesting stories

Story prompts are simple questions to ask yourself to help you remember or create great stories for your topics.

Sometimes it's just a matter of remembering an example from your past. Sometimes you have to make a new connection or head off to do some research to get your story. But in each case these story prompts will give you a great starting point to make coming up with story ideas much simpler. And they'll break you out of familiar patterns to give a much broader and more interesting range of stories.

To use them, pick a topic from your list from step 1 and then bearing it in mind, ask yourself the questions from each category. Or you can focus on one category specifically and just ask the questions from there.

Prompts for Personal Stories

- Are there examples of this topic from your childhood or youth?
- Was there an inspiring adult or role model in this area in your youth?
- Are there examples from your early experiences at work?
- Was there a mentor or manager who taught you about this area at work?
- Are there examples of this from when you became more experienced and successful at work?
- What was your biggest mistake in this area at work? What was your biggest success?
- Has something happened in this area recently in your work?
- Has something happened in this area recently in your personal life of general activities outside of work?
- Do you have plans or goals for this area at work?
- Do you have plans or goals for this area outside of work?

Let's try it out...

Imagine I wanted to write an email with a tip on time management. Let's go through the questions to see what I can come up with as potential stories:

- *Are there examples of this topic from your childhood or youth?* These could be good or bad examples. In my case I got the time of my physics A level wrong and if my brother hadn't noticed my classmates all starting their exam at school I would have missed it completely. So this could be a lesson about priorities.
- *Was there an inspiring adult or role model in this area in your youth?* This could be a relative, a teacher, a family friend, anyone really. In my case no one springs to mind.
- *Are there examples from your early experiences at work?* In my case a couple of years into my first job I hit a point where for the first time in my life I couldn't juggle all my priorities and commitments in my head. I had to go through a fast learning curve to avoid disaster.
- *Was there a mentor or manager who taught you about this area at work?* One of my early consulting bosses, Maryann, was both super smart and well organised. I saw first hand how that enabled her to get more done and better

Use **story prompts** to quickly build a database of interesting stories

support her teams. Prior to that I'd thought time management was a bit of a technical and personal thing rather than being vital for good leadership. I really prioritised it after that.

I won't labour the point by going through all the questions. Hopefully you can see already that with just a few seconds thought it's fairly easy to come up with interesting stories for many of the prompts. And the key is they're stories you wouldn't have come up with had you just started with a blank sheet of paper.

Now on to the other categories.

Prompts for Client Stories

- Did any of your clients have particularly interesting challenges in this area? Or ones that are very typical of what most people face?
- Have you created any unique or unusual solutions for clients in this area? Or what might be considered best practice?
- Have any of your clients done something in this area very recently?
- Have you been asked questions in this area recently by clients or contacts?
- Are there any really big successes in this area to report from your clients or contacts?

- Are there any funny stories you can remember that happened with clients in this area?
- Are you planning any new things in this area with your client work?

Tips for Client Stories

One of the biggest mistakes people make when using client stories in content is to turn them into promotional case studies for their services. That's not what your audience will be interested in.

In any story you use there must be a learning or insight for your audience to get value from. Or at minimum it must be entertaining - not just self-promotional. So pick stories with a learning point in them.

Obviously you'll need permission if the client is named or is identifiable in the story. Even if the client can't be identified directly by others, if they can clearly recognise themselves I'd ask for permission too.

And finally, while it can be fun and interesting to mention your own problems and failures in content, when it comes to clients always try to make them the heroes. Focus on their successes and how they overcame challenges (with your help) - not just on what they did wrong.

Prompts for Third Party Stories

- Are there any historical figures or organisations that faced this issue? This could be the distant past (greek philosophers for example), modern history (Napoleon to Ghandi) or more recent (the Beatles to Oasis).

Use **story prompts** to quickly build a database of interesting stories

- Are there any contemporary individuals or organisations known for dealing with this that you can do an in-depth case study of?
- Could you compare and contrast how different individuals or organisations have done things in this area? Either historical or contemporary.
- Can you identify emerging themes and trends in this area? Is there new research or an emerging school of thought you can tap into?

Tips for Third Party Stories

One thing you'll find with third party stories is that unlike your own personal or client stories you can't always draw them immediately from memory.

You may have a vague recollection that someone famous said something about this, or you remember a case study you read once. So you'll often have to go off and do some research to find out the details.

Or if you want to do a comprehensive piece of content with multiple case studies and comparative analysis you may need to do a lot of desk research or even your own primary research where you speak to the relevant organisations or individuals directly to find out more.

One trap to avoid with third party stories is going with the obvious.

Something that makes remarkable content so compelling is novelty and uniqueness. Brain research has shown that we get a dopamine kick from novel stimuli. Conversely, if we've heard an example many times before we'll simply tune it out.

So make sure the third party stories you use are fresh and new and ideally unique to you. If you're going to give examples of leadership from US presidents, don't choose Lincoln or Washington or Roosevelt, try John Quincy Adams or Grover Cleveland or William McKinley. People your audience may have heard of but who they're unlikely to know all about.

Similarly, if you're using contemporary examples, don't go with the obvious on-trend people featured in the news. After every Olympics or Nobel Prize or new mountain climbing or space exploration milestone we get a slew of deathly dull articles extolling the dedication of the sportsperson, the creativity of the scientist, the grit of the explorer. And no one really pays any attention.

Instead, go beyond the obvious. Write about the unheralded coach who's mentored three generations of ice skating gold medallists. The university that's incubated more leading physicists than any other, the guy who makes the equipment all the top mountaineers use.

Look beyond the obvious and your content will be much more remarkable.

Now on to left-field stories...

Use **story prompts** to quickly build a database of interesting stories

Prompts for Left-Field Stories

This is the category of the unusual. The stories and examples you wouldn't normally expect to be linked to your topic - but somehow you found a connection that makes sense.

They're interesting to your audience precisely because they're so unexpected.

Often these strike you randomly, but you can give yourself a better chance of finding them using these prompts:

- Are there lessons to be learned from or a connection between the topic and any of your non-work hobbies and interests? I've written a lot about marketing lessons from magic, from comedy and from playing poker.
- Can you find - or force - a connection between the topic and someone from the world of entertainment or another field that everyone will know, but not associate with the topic? Sales tips from David Bowie, for example.
- Can you find - or force - a connection between the topic and a completely different industry or field? For example between marketing and sheep farming or shoe sales and microbiology?

In each case you need the lessons to actually make sense - so maybe David Bowie can help salespeople with ideas on standing out from the crowd for example.

Tips for Left-Field Stories

There are Pros and Cons to left-field stories. They're fun, they can bring home a point you're trying to make in an unusual way and they're the type of story that - if they click with a reader - will really get you remembered.

But they're relatively lightweight. They don't build your credibility in ways that personal, client or third party stories can do.

My strategy is to sprinkle them in to the mix every now and then to keep my audience engaged and keep the tone of my content fun. But I don't rely on them for the heavy lifting of building credibility.

Now you've created a long list of topics with stories to illustrate them you can begin to select the ones most likely to lead to remarkable content.

I hope you can see how quickly you can generate a list of great ideas for content by brainstorming topics based on your clients problems, challenges, goals and aspirations and then illustrating those topics with personal, client, third party and left-field stories using the story prompts.

At this point you can give your brain a rest for a while after all this hard work. But at some point you're going to need to select the best ideas to start turning into content.

You can do this on an as-needed basis. Or you can do a preliminary filter in advanced so you have your best topics ready to run with.

step 3: filter and go

With a long list of great ideas in hand your next step is to identify which to use.

The great news is that you've used a process that gives your content a solid foundation for being remarkable. You've picked topics you know your clients will care about and you're going to illustrate them in ways that are interesting and unusual and will establish your credibility.

So pretty much any content ideas you've come up with will be good.

But if you want to identify the ideas with the most potential for being great, you'll want to run them through a few filters first.

Look at each topic/story combination and ask yourself:

- IMPORTANCE
- NEW IDEAS?
- UNIQUENESS
- INTEREST
- CONNECTION
- CREDIBILITY
- EXCITEMENT

- How important is this topic to my ideal clients? Is it of urgent, strategic importance or just a minor irritant?
- To what degree will this content idea allow me to get across a new idea that will create the curiosity to engage with the content and potentially create excitement about the idea?
- How unique to me is the point of view I'll be expressing in this content? Is it commonplace or something only I talk about?
- How interesting is the story I'm going to use to illustrate the topic?
- How much does the topic and story allow me to establish a personal connection with my audience to build empathy and trust?
- How much credibility is this topic/story likely to build for me?
- How excited am I when I think about creating this content?

You can use any ranking system you want: H/M/L, 1-5 etc. It's just to give you a subjective view of your most powerful content ideas.

No content will score highly on all criteria - but as you put together campaigns with multiple pieces of content you'll be able to tick all the boxes over time.

The rating also tells you what you might want to focus on when you create the content. If an idea for an article naturally scores high on importance and uniqueness but low on connection you might want to look for ways of writing the content that get more of your personality into the mix so you build that personal connection.

So now let's look at how we put this process into action and start getting results from it...

BONUS

boost your idea generation

So far we've covered a simple method for generating great content ideas based on your current experience and knowledge. But we can get more ideas and boost your existing ones with some additional steps and tools.

The first thing to bear in mind is that just like your body needs to take in good nutrition to perform well, your idea-generating brain needs to be fed too. Here are some options:

- Read widely. Books not just websites and social media. And don't just read within your own field. The best new ideas often come from the "adjacent possible" - areas far enough outside your own field that they're novel, but close enough that you can see how to apply them back home.
- Takes notes on what you read. You'll remember far more and you'll be able to refresh from your notes when needed and spot new connections. Don't take traditional book notes - just note down useful ideas and examples you spot and thoughts that get triggered. Look at something like a "Zettelkasten" or "Second Brain" system for note taking.
- Keep your eyes and ears open in day to day life to spot examples you can use. Talk to people. Pay attention to what's going on rather than isolating yourself with your head in your



phone and your ears plugged with headphones.

- Again, take notes. Makes sure you always have some way of writing down what you observe. They say the difference between a professional comedian and a normal person is that when a normal person sees something funny they laugh. When a comedian sees something funny they write it down.
- Review your notes monthly or quarterly through the lens of idea creation for content.

You can also augment your knowledge of what your clients care about with targeted online research using free or paid tools:

- Google Trends will tell you at a macro level what is becoming a hot topic.
- Answerthepublic.com will graph out for you the questions people ask on Google about a topic.
- Buzzsumo.com will show you what's gaining the most traction on social media right now.

And, at the risk of jumping on a bandwagon, you can always ask ChatGPT for ideas. I suggest you use a prompt which asks for unexpected, unusual or out of the box ideas for articles on your topic.

take action: **get results**

Having a powerful process for generating content ideas is one thing, but results come from actually taking action.

Now you've got a process for creating remarkable content ideas you can use it in a number of different ways.

You can use it ad-hoc whenever you need to come up with an idea for an email (or a blog or social media post).

Or you can revisit it on a regular basis to keep your ideas fresh.

But by far the most important way to use it is to make an initial long list of content ideas.

Making that initial list gives you four key things:



1. It means that whenever you need to write an email or create other content **the pressure for ideas is off**. You already have a great list of brilliant ideas you can just pick from and get going. I've found this makes a huge difference to your speed and ease of writing. Instead of staring at a blank page for ages first, you can get straight to work.
2. You've **primed your subconscious brain** with a whole bunch of starting points for further ideas. In the next few weeks more ideas will pop into your head: in the shower, out walking, relaxing with a book. You won't be able to stop yourself generating more great ideas.
3. You'll **know where your gaps and weaknesses are** content-wise. Maybe you don't have enough in-depth credibility building content and you need to do some research. Maybe you need to speak to clients and get permission to use their stories. You now have a clear picture of where your gaps are and you'll be able to fill them.
4. You're now able to look at the bigger picture and **create campaigns of related content** using your full list of ideas. For example a series of emails on the same topic. You'll be able to go deeper in key areas by using multiple different pieces on that topic but illustrated in different ways. Creating linked campaigns of related content will compound their impact.

And the best time to take action: **right now**.

YOUR NEXT STEPS

get started **now**



'Over the years I've found that the number one predictor of whether someone will successfully implement just about anything is simply whether they get started straight away.

It's going to sound a little harsh, but if you say to yourself "those ideas sound great...I'll get on to it next week" the reality is that you won't.

Other priorities will take over, you'll begin to forget how enthusiastic you were and how much you believed it would help you, and you'll put it off to the next week...then the next..
.then the next.

On the other hand if you set aside just 30 minutes **right now** to go through each of the 3 simple steps I've just outlined you can have your initial list of topic ideas on paper in just **30 minutes**.

Reading a guide like this is great to tell you what to do, but it can have the unfortunate side-effect of actually making you feel like you're finished and your "blank screen" problem is solved.

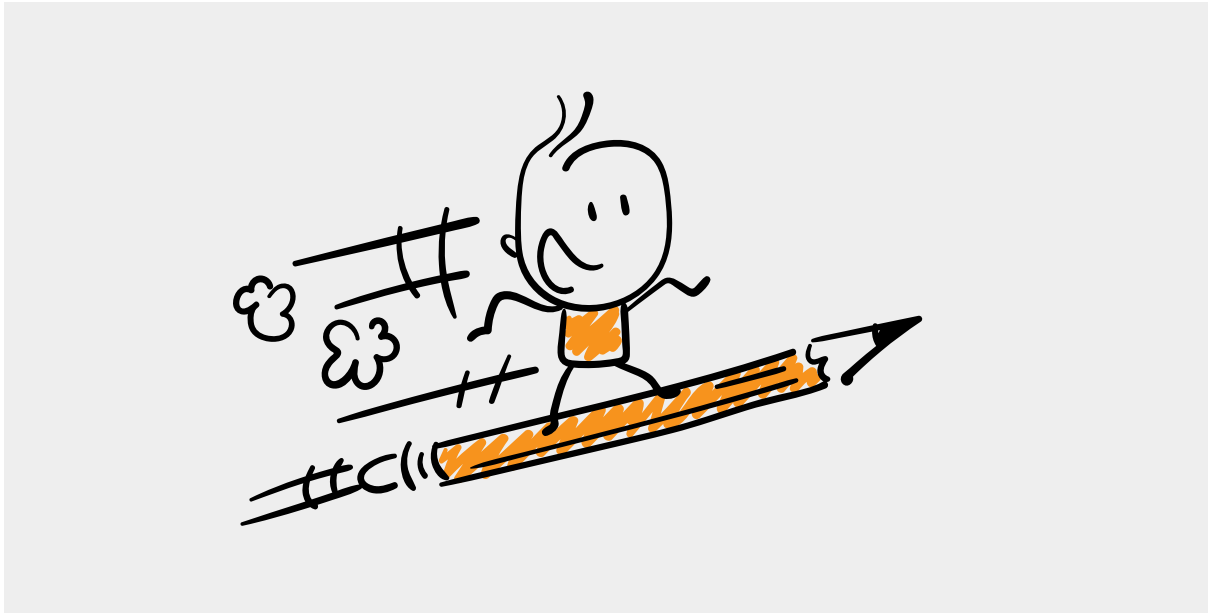
It isn't.

You need to put what you've just learned into practice and ideally do it right now while it's still fresh. That will give you the best possible chance of waking up tomorrow morning knowing you can write brilliant emails whenever you need to based on your pre-created topic list.

And if you want to go faster and get the benefit of my experience and examples...read on...

TURBOCHARGE YOUR PROGRESS

with monthly **email template packs**



*If you want to get better results from your emails and newsletters **even faster**, then you might want to sign up for my **Monthly Email Template Packs***

Every month I create a new template pack with themes and frameworks that allow you to put your own ideas, insights and examples into an effective structure that your readers will find engaging and will naturally lead to a call to action.

The templates make it incredibly quick and easy to write powerful newsletters and valuable content emails that get results.

The first month's pack has templates on...

- The Real Secrets
- Lessons from Pop Culture
- Answers to Submitted Questions
- Listicle with a Personal Touch
- Advice to My Younger Self

Each template has a detailed implementation guide and full example for you to learn from and apply.

They're the best way I know to save time, get better results from your emails and newsletters and learn how to really write powerful emails.

If you're interested you can get more details here:

www.ianbrodie.com/email-templates

I look forward to seeing you as a member!

- Ian