



# How to Newsletter

**How Ann Handley Grew Her Newsletter  
2,000% in 3 years**

**What Worked, What Didn't, Weird Metrics to Track... and Ideas You Can Steal**

# Hi, Sunshine.

## I'm Ann Handley.

### Welcome to this celebration of Total Annarchy #100!

It's the "centennial" issue of my three-year-old toddler of a newsletter!

I wrote this to mark the milestone. And to reflect on what triggered the most newsletter growth and engagement over the past 100 issues. Always with a focus on what you might learn from it.

Can a PDF be a Party? YES IT CAN.

**Let's get this party started!**



This ebook is not just an ebook: It's a Party PDF celebrating 100 issues of Total Annarchy, a fortnightly newsletter by Ann Handley. Subscribe for writing advice, marketing insights, and regular shenanigans.

**Subscribe right here.**

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## **Total Annarchy Issue #1 was born on January 28, 2018.**

It mailed to 2,111 people. Today—100 issues later!—43K receive this letter from me.

Those 2,111 people were subscribed to blog post triggers at AnnHandley.com. I can't even really call them "subscribers" in the same sense I would now—because an email alert and a newsletter are not the same thing.

The former is auto-generated. Soulless. Bloodless. More like a ping that it's time to change the batteries in your smoke detector.

Anyhooooo... let's do the math: 2K to 43K is a 2,050% increase. Yet I've grown the list with a focus on engagement, not size.

## **{List size is a byproduct, not a goal.}**

Here is my approach to both growing and writing my Total Annarchy newsletter... packaged as ideas you can steal for your newsletter.

First, let's look at growth—because growth started even before a single cursor struck a single page. Next, we'll look at the writing process I've honed over the past 100 issues—a process that keeps me fresh and excited about the next issue.<sup>1</sup> It's why I've never broken the chain in 3+ years of writing.



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<sup>1</sup> "Writing process" sounds about as much fun as scrubbing beets. But have faith, friend. It's more entertaining than you imagine.



## Part 1: How I Grew an Engaged Newsletter List

### What worked, what didn't

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► **Create what you wish existed.** For years I searched for a marketing newsletter that focused on writing and storytelling. That walked the walk—meaning, the writing was writing I wanted to read.

*Why doesn't it exist?* I used to muse, stroking my metaphorical ascot. More musing: *How can Marketing see the power in writing?*

Like... duh. Do it then, dummy. *Be your own best fan.*

► **Feed yourself first.** I get as much joy out of writing my newsletter as I hope you get reading it.

No good writing is created at gunpoint. If I hated writing it... you'd feel that. **Weird metric I use:** I try to make myself laugh in every issue.

► **Say no.** *What don't you write about?* is as important a question to answer as what you *do* write about. Marketing is big, broad, complex. I leave Rev Ops to the people who are passionate about that kind of thing.

► **Purpose defines goals.** My purpose is to nurture and have fun. That keeps me focused on what matters. What I do/don't look at:

- > *Do:* Open rates (30-40% of subscribers open each issue, as far as I can tell).
- > *Don't:* Click-through rates.

**Weird metric I use:** Open-to-Write-Back-Rate (OWBR: I made this up). Roughly 100 people write me personally after each send. If it's less than that... I think about why.

► **Do unscalable things.** A better header might be *Think Small and Grow Big*. But that feels like a book you'd see in an airport Hudson News.

The point is: Slow down. Invest where it matters.

**Weird metric I use:** If someone asks me how much time I spend on X and their face registers *WUT that's too much time...* I know I'm on the right track. So:

> Spend a lot of time on my craft. My newsletter takes me 8 hours, on average. Crazy? To some maybe. Worth it? Yes. (More on this in Part 2.)

> Obsess about the writing. I write 4 drafts over those 8 hours, over 2-3 days. I want to make each paragraph, sentence, word earn its keep.

If it's not adding anything, I cut it from the team and encourage it to try again during next week's tryouts. I'm not trying to crush their spirit, you know? (Again: More on this in Part 2.)

> Spend time on building subscriber relationships. Connecting with subscribers individually matters. More on this in a second.

> Spend time on building influencer relationships. I hate using the word "influencer" here because it feels transactional. But it's good shorthand for other newsletters, companies, marketers, writers.

Call out the good work of others. Share the love.

***Don't expect and ask for reciprocity—that's not friendship, that's coercion.***

("Actually it's *quid pro quo*," some pedant shouted from the back. *Whatever, Pedant. No one likes it.*)

► **Ditch the forced opt-in, lead magnets, popovers.** Yes, they work. No, they aren't for everyone.

If you use them, make sure you're clear on your goals vs. you just read a Best Practices article on how to grow your newsletter list. (I guarantee \*THAT\* was behind a popover.)

For a hot minute I once implemented an email signup popover on my site. I took it down a hot minute later. It wasn't me. I'm more interested in the quality of the list than the size of the list.

**{I want a reader's relationship with me to be, ultimately, the trigger that would grow the list.}**

I bolded that because it was a revelation to me. And it's important.

► **Obsess over onboarding.** You'll never get a second chance to make a first impression, as the great Greek god Pinterest sells as a frameable poster in his Etsy store.

Pay attention to that first touch. What does a subscriber get when they sign up for your list? What's the vibe you're giving off? The tone you set?

> *High-five!* They should get an immediate, friendly, human Welcome high-five message from a real person.

Write that Welcome message in your voice and tone. Do not use your email provider's default. "That's a wasted opportunity," Greek god Pinterest warns.

> *Set expectations.* When will you mail? What will you promise to deliver?

I learned this by realizing what didn't work (again): One woman unsubscribed via hate-mail when she received her first issue of this newsletter early on a Sunday morning. "I don't want to think about work on the weekend!!!!" she said.

Yes! With 5! Exclamation! Points!

A little aggressive with the punctuation. But fair enough.

Now I make sure new subscribers know exactly what they'll get. And when.

**Pro tip:**

**{Setting expectations neuters rage.}**

> *Create an easy ask.* Invite subscribers to write back and tell you a bit about themselves. When they do, you get useful information about who is on your list—and also help ensure future deliverability.

**A weird metric I use:** I aim for 50% response rate to this specific Welcome email—in other words, I want half the people who get it to answer me. About 30% currently do.

► **Prompt sharing.** In each issue, subtly invite your current subscribers to share your newsletter with others. I say *subtly* because if you sell too hard you'll come off like you care more about your next subscriber vs. the one right in front of you. Nuance is your comrade here.

► **Create reading momentum.** White space is oxygen.

Use it.

Let your words breathe.

I love long sentences. But newsletters need short sentences. Short paragraphs. Short sections. Don't make 1,000 words feel like 1,000 words.

- ▶ **Promote on social, but...** Important: Share the value, not the event. (Another mistake I've made.)

**NO:** "The latest issue of my newsletter just dropped > [LINK](#)." (Who cares?)

**YES:** "How I learned to avoid writing by committee > [LINK](#)."

- ▶ **Other list growth tactics.** There are lots of trickling feeder tributaries that together flow into a steady stream. Like:

- *Direct referrals* from current subscribers who pass it along to friends.
- *Social referrals* from current subscribers who share it on social channels.
- *Soft sell in speeches, podcasts, etc.* ("If you've liked what I've had to say... please subscribe...").
- *Referrals from people whose work I celebrate.*

- *The most unlikely places.* My favorite example came a few weeks ago from new subscriber Avi:

 **I actually first heard about you from, of all people, my chiropractor, who, when I hinted at the possibility of writing for him told me he does all his own copywriting and no way was he gonna spend money or time on someone to write for him! His source of writing knowledge? Everybody Writes by Ann Handley! „**

But! The biggest trigger to growth, happiness, joy all around:

**Make something no one else does.**





## Part 2: How I Write This Beloved Newsletter <sup>2</sup>

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This is how I write every newsletter. Hour by hour.

In Part 1 I said I spend 8 hours writing this newsletter.

Did I leave the impression that I spend those 8 hours in a row, chained to my desk? Slaving over a hot laptop? Sweating out each word and collecting them like precious nectar before distilling them (*plink!*) onto the page?

It's not like that. Here's what it IS like.

*Note:* I wrote this schema in the second person ("you") vs. my own point of view ("I"). I want it to be useful for **you**. So I wrote you right into it. Literally.

Try this on.

See what works for you.

Trash what doesn't.

Adopt what might.

Adapt as you wish.



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<sup>2</sup> Is "beloved" the right word here? Yes. Beloved by true fans. But also beloved by me. Remember: *No good writing is created at gunpoint*.

## {Hour 1: Pay all your bills}

Catch up on any movies or TV series you've never gotten around to seeing. Change the oil in your car. Invest your time in scrolling Instagram. Commit to making something really complicated for dinner. (Attempt to source something called "katsuobushi" for the recipe?)

It might seem like you're avoiding writing with all these procasti-stractions.

But NO! You are not avoiding!

In between all the bill-paying, binge-watching, katsuobushi-sourcing... you've been sorting a few ideas in your head.

You've been thinking about a question that one guy asked you. An experience you had that stuck in your noggin. A conversation that keeps coming back to you.

Some nugget of intelligence or half-scrap of an idea you jotted down during your daily romp with your diary. (Trouble keeping a daily journal? [Try this.](#))

You were *mulling* during that procasti-straction-ating.

You were thinking, whether you wanted to or not. Your fetal ideas were starting to sprout limbs and grow tiny, powerful muscles.

Thinking is pre-writing.

And pre-writing is the key to writing.

## {Hour 2: Close your door}

(This is important. Why in a sec.)

You pluck one idea to explore in this week's newsletter.

You adhere bottom to chair. Open up laptop. Affix hands to keys with permanent adhesive. Move them around so the letters form words and the words form longer strings of words.

Full sentences? Structure? Flow? Grammar? None of it exists!

You're writing—even if it feels like a pantomime of writing. Like you're just going through the motions.

## {Hour 3: Forgive yourself}

You expect beautiful and graceful gliding across the keys. You expect elegant prose.

Instead you get the writing equivalent of a baby learning to walk, but way less cute.

Your writing is stiff-limbed and unsteady, Franken-stepping across the page. About to crash horribly at any moment.

*Keep going.* Do not move butt from chair until you've got 999 words.\*

\*(The exact number I use. 999 feels easier than 1,000. Just like \$.99 is way less than \$1.00. Ridiculous head games.)

You won't use all those 999 words. Most will be *isht*. That's okay.

Keep those Franken-steps lurching forward.

*Did you leave all your awkward baby steps on the dance floor?*

This is Draft 0. This is The Ugly First Draft. Walk away. Give it overnight.

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<sup>3</sup>Sometimes you fall in love with a phrase or word or sentence. You can't bear to cut it, even if you know you should. I have a file in Google Docs for these words. It holds things I wrote and am proud of, and can't bear to delete forever. The file is titled "Darlings."

## {Hour 4: Draft 1 starts to rise up}

Your door is still closed. Take Draft 0 from yesterday. Read it through in your head. Feel it in your hands.

Start to help it become Draft 1.

> *Key idea.* Is the main point there? Is it clear? And right up front?

> *Logic.* Does it flow? What do you need to move around to help the flow?

> *What's missing?* Do you have data? A point of view? What information would make your piece feel comprehensive? Fair? Real? True?

> *What can you cut from your newsletter team this week?* What's a distraction? What's indulgent? What feels too precious, like you're trying too hard? *Nurse... Scalpel!* Cut it.<sup>3</sup>

>> *What you cut is often the opening, when you spend too much time setting up the newsletter instead of getting right into it.*

## {Hour 5: Draft 2 opens the door.}

See who is standing there? Your subscriber. (“Hi, Petunia!”) Invite Petunia in.

Did you notice how just one subscriber is standing there—not your entire list? That’s because the landing outside your door isn’t big enough to hold all those people. Rewrite to one person: one Petunia.

Draft 2 is Petunia’s point of view. Step into her shoes. Slip on her skin. See through her eyes.



**The most important part of a newsletter is the letter, not the news.**

At the top of the newsletter, write: “Dear Petunia.”<sup>4</sup>

You are putting a pillow over the face of anything with a whiff of “Dear Valued Customers.”

Does Petunia...

- > Immediately understand the key idea?
- > Follow your logic?
- > Does she feel a flash of recognition? Did you deliver an *It-Me!* Minute?

<sup>4</sup> Or whoever. *Dear Stuart. Hiya Octavia. Yo, Mama.* Petunia is a proxy for your subscriber here; use whoever you’re thinking about.)

## {Hour 6-7: Draft 3 adds voice, style, fun, sparkle, humor, fizz & ginger.}

- > *Count the number of Yous.* If you run out of fingers... you're doing great.
- > *Consult something like [RelatedWords.org](#)* to help inspire word choice or lively metaphors.
- > *Add context with anything curated.* “Here’s why I’m sharing this useful thing with you; here’s why I believe it’s important.”
- > *Sprinkle in questions.* “What do you think?” Audience feedback allows you to grow/adjust your focus. (Again: Letter. Not news.)
- > *Create momentum inside each newsletter.* Make each sentence earn its keep. Is it a drag on the action? Cut it from this week’s lineup. Make each word earn its keep. *Does it propel Petunia forward?*

> *Add open loops.* An open loop in writing is a teaser. It’s the start of a story that the reader will scroll to satisfy. Maybe you ask a question at the start, and answer it toward the bottom. Maybe you start with a story Petunia wants to get to the bottom of.

> *Create clear copy hierarchy* through white space, bullet points, images.

> *Think bridge not tower.* Your newsletter is a bridge to your other Marketing. Your social media, especially. *Do you have a LinkedIn or Facebook group?* Highlight questions or discussions in the newsletter. *Have an Instagram?* Share its images in the newsletter. It goes both ways, of course: Let social show your newsletter some love, too.

Finally:

> *Trust Petunia.* Don’t over-describe or over-prescribe. Leave room for Petunia’s imagination to curl up in your writing.

> *Relax. Have fun. Loosen up your fingers. Open your heart.* If your newsletter feels like you’re writing with a taser aimed at your sensitive nibs... you’re doing it wrong.

## {Hour 8: Run Draft 4 through an AI writing tool}

I like Grammarly. Hemingway Editor is less powerful. But fun, if only for the Ernest name-check.

Adopt or reject AI's suggestions. It's enormously satisfying to be confident enough in your writing to reject a robot's fixes.

Send Draft #4 to your longtime editor. All writers need an editor. Especially the best ones.

## {Hour 8 ½: Read it out loud. Happy? Load Final Draft into your newsletter platform of choice.}

(For me it's AWeber.)

- > *Tweak again within the platform.*
- > *Schedule. Tee it up.*
- > *Get up in the middle of the night to tweak again before it mails in the morning.*

But then... *Let go with love.*

Your newsletter is no longer yours. It's out in the world, standing on its own two pixels.

## {Hour Now: Joy + Regret}

These two things happen post-send for me, simultaneously:

> *Regret.* It's not exactly what you wanted to write. It's not exactly what you envisioned when you planned this in your head.

Forgive yourself again. It's the best you can do right now. See you next time.

> *Joy.* HIGH-FIVE YOURSELF. You're gorgeous. You're killing it. You're doing GREAT.

Writing—like life—is complicated.





## How to Newsletter: 29-Point Checklist

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- Create what you wish existed.
- Say no. *What don't you write about?*
- Let purpose define goals.
- Create your own metrics.
- Do unscalable things.
- Connect with subscribers individually.
- Build relationships with other newsletters, companies, marketers, writers.
- Ditch the forced opt-in, lead magnets, pop-overs. Yes, they work. No, they aren't for everyone.
- Obsess over onboarding.
- Socially share the value, not the event.
- Obsess about the writing.
- Keep sentences short. Keep paragraphs short.
- Write with your door closed...
- ... edit with your door open. (To paraphrase Stephen King)
- Write to one person.
- Put a pillow over the face of anything with a whiff of "Dear Valued Customers."
- Use You like you picked up a lifetime supply at a BOGO sale.
- Use RelatedWords.org to help inspire word choice or lively metaphors.
- Add context with anything curated.
- Sprinkle in questions to draw your reader out.
- Make each word, sentence earn its keep.
- Add open loops.
- Create clear copy hierarchy through white space, bullet points, images.
- Think bridge, not tower.
- Trust your reader. (She's smarter than you think.)
- Use an AI tool as a first edit.
- Find a human editor who gets you.
- Load. Tweak. Schedule.
- Let it go with love. ❤

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