

Stop Posting Into the *Void*.

*Learning Out Loud—and Sharing the
Practical Lessons With You*



INSIDE

- 01 **STOP POSTING IN THE VOID**
You published twelve posts. You gained four subscribers. Nothing is wrong with you.
- 02 **PHASE-SPECIFIC**
Most growth advice is written for someone ten times your size.
- 03 **WRITING COMMENTS**
The highest-return thirty minutes of your day
- 04 **RESTACKING, CREDENTIALS, & QUESTIONS**
Write lines people want to be seen sharing
- 05 **TIME IS THE CONSTRAINT**
Five to seven hours a week, in the right order
- 06 **KEY TAKEAWAYS**
Practical steps to grow your audience and build reader trust
- 07 **SOURCES**
Go to the sources

STOP POSTING IN THE VOID

You published twelve posts. You gained four subscribers. Nothing is wrong with you.

Here is the number that reframes everything: in one analysis of 9,641 Substack articles (confusingly also called posts by Substack or newsletters), only about **one article in ten** brought in any new subscriber at all — and the typical converting article brought in exactly **one**. That is not a description of failure. That is the normal shape of the work, even for publications that go on to do very well.

So if you're a few months in and the growth feels invisible, the problem usually isn't your effort or your writing. It's that new writers are handed a *broadcasting* playbook — post more, post louder, chase the feed — when what actually grows a small publication is a *relationship* playbook. **This guide is the relationship playbook, condensed.**

Watch this carefully: Two words that look the same and aren't!

Substack is really two products bolted together:

- 1 ARTICLES: An email newsletter/article/post — they all refer to the same thing**
When you "create" then Substack calls this an article. But on your profile Substack confusingly calls these articles posts, but it's a newsletter that normally has 1,000 to 1,500 words — and subscribers get it in their inbox, algorithm or no algorithm.
- 2 NOTES: A social feed called Notes.**
Short posts, like Twitter or Threads, where strangers who've never heard of you can discover you.

That Split Creates a Trap

A **follower** sees you in the feed, sometimes, when the algorithm allows. A **subscriber** receives you in their inbox, every time. Only subscribers are truly yours — and someone can follow you forever without ever getting a single email.

A post that adds 400 followers and 6 subscribers is a failure with good optics.

Every ask you need to ask for the **subscription**, not the follow. And every metric you celebrate should be checked against the same split:

BUILDS ATTENTION	BUILDS SUBSCRIBERS
Likes and view counts	Shares with real commentary attached (called <i>restacks</i>) — they put you in front of someone else's whole audience
An article that goes briefly viral	Replying to every comment on that article for as long as the conversation stays alive
Posting frequently	Substantive comments on other people's work, daily
Follower count	Email subscribers — the only readers who actually receive you

You need both. You must **Build Attention** and **Build Subscribers**, in that order — **attention first, then loyalty**. But they respond to completely different actions, which is where the next page comes in.



PHASE-SPECIFIC

This is the single most useful idea in this guide

Growth tactics are phase-specific. What works at 1,000 subscribers can be close to useless at 50 — and copying a big account's routine is the most common way beginners waste their first three months.

One writer put this to a brutal test while under 100 subscribers: they posted **Notes** at every frequency from one to fifteen a day, at every hour of the day, and reported **no measurable difference** in growth. Then they switched to spending that time leaving thoughtful **Comments** on other writers' work — and saw results within about ten days.

Comments Defined: A comment is a written response or remark added to another person's article, notes, or existing comments.

PHASE 1 Under 100 subs	Targeted comments on articles and notes near your topic. Write Notes only as practice — a shop window, not an engine.
PHASE 2 100–400 subs	Comments, daily and deliberate. Deepen ten relationships instead of starting fifty.
PHASE 3 400–700 subs	Comments still lead; Notes begin to pull their weight as your audience overlap grows.
PHASE 4 1,000+ subs	Notes become a core growth engine — now the feed has a network to show you to.

AN HONEST FOOTNOTE

That ladder comes from one writer's documented experiments, not a controlled study — and another publication runs a disciplined daily-Notes operation and reports it working. Where every source agrees is the **ranking of effort: relationship-building beats broadcasting while you're small.** Check your phase before you copy anyone's tactics — then let your own numbers, not anyone's playbook, tell you when to shift.

Insights About Recommendations:

The same phase logic applies to Substack's **recommendations** feature (publications pointing subscribers at each other). Writers who recommend others are reportedly about three times more likely to be recommended back — but one beginner who secured eighteen incoming recommendations with no existing audience gained a grand total of seventeen subscribers. Recommendations redistribute audiences; they can't distribute one you haven't built. Set them up for publications you genuinely read, then let them compound later.



WRITING COMMENTS

The highest-return thirty minutes of your day

A good comment is a small piece of writing published in front of a writer you respect — **and their entire audience**. It costs nothing, needs no permission, and it's the one growth input you fully control. Here's the pattern that separates comments that build a readership from comments that evaporate:

- 1 Choose an article, note, or comment close to your topic, and actually read the piece.**
Pick 5–10 publications near your own topic and voice — ideally writers at roughly your stage, who are far more likely to reciprocate than large accounts. Read the post, not the headline.
- 2 Briefly rephrase the specific thing they said.**
Quote or reference an actual line, so it's unmistakable that you read it. This alone puts you ahead of most of the comment section.
- 3 Add a substantive comment — one piece of hard-won experience.**
A number, a decision, a scene from your own work — something they couldn't get anywhere else. This is your writing sample, published on their stage.
- 4 End with a memorable phrase. Ask a question (sparingly).**
Close with either a line worth passing along or a question you genuinely want answered. Not "great point!" — an actual opening.
- 5 Reply when they reply.**
The second exchange is where a relationship forms. A comment is a knock on the door; the reply is the conversation.

WHY "GREAT POST!" BACKFIRES

A generic comment signals you placed **no value** on the writer's work — and everyone reading the thread can tell. One refinement worth stealing: spend many of your comments replying to **other commenters**, not just the author. Those people are already in a talking mood, the author's audience is watching, and those threads are underfished.

How much should I comment?

One source prescribes a fixed daily count inside a one-hour routine; another recommends roughly two hours a day for thirty days, arguing five days produces nothing visible and a month reliably does. The honest synthesis: this compounds slowly, and *the volume you can hold for a month beats the volume you abandon in a week*. Thirty focused minutes daily, protected, is a real strategy.

RESTACKING, CREDENTIALS, & QUESTIONS

Write lines people want to be *seen* sharing

When someone **restacks** you — reshares your post with their own note attached — you appear in their followers' feeds regardless of how small you are. That's the mechanism, and it's mechanical, not mystical. A share is a public statement about the person sharing: give them a line that makes them look sharp for passing it on.

Restacks Spark Reciprocity to Increase Followers & Subscribers

12×

roughly the rate at which restacks converted readers into subscribers, compared to likes, across 9,641 analyzed posts

30–64

words: the working length for a Note — the feed truncates at roughly 61 words behind a "show more" link most readers never tap

1 in 10

posts drove any new subscriber in the same dataset. Most pieces converting nobody is normal — which is why you log which ones do

These figures come from a self-published analysis (partly corroborated by a much larger dataset), not peer-reviewed research. Treat them as strongly directional, not precise — the practical instructions survive either way.

Put your credential in the first line — then undercut it

In the same dataset, a **specific, checkable credential in the opening sentence** was associated with dramatically higher response — while vague appeals to experience ("seasoned executive") did almost nothing. Say the concrete fact, then puncture it so it doesn't read as bragging:

"Thirty years running a homebuilder. I still got the spring schedule wrong every year."

Credibility and approachability are not in conflict. Use this in your About page, your bio, and your openings.

QUESTIONS? Endings do a job — pick one per piece/morning

Articles ending in a **statement** converted more subscribers; articles ending in a **question** converted fewer but reliably generated more discussion — which the platform reads as a live conversation worth surfacing. Both effects are real. A starting ratio to test: end roughly three-quarters of your pieces on a clear declarative line, one quarter on a genuine question you actually want answered. And always: **one subscription ask per article** (two asks is zero asks), and make it the subscription — never the follow.



TIME IS THE CONSTRAINT

Five to seven hours a week, in the right order

Time is the constraint, so here is the whole operation as a weekly rhythm. The order matters more than the intensity: **engage with other people before you publish your own work, every time.**

WHEN	BLOCK	WHAT YOU DO
Sun or Mon 45 min	PLAN	Pick next week's article from a one-page calendar (date, title, theme, format). Create an outline for the article. Also, draft and schedule the week's Notes in one sitting. One Note per day — no more than two.
Two weekdays 90 min each	WRITE	Draft the article. Never edit the same day you draft.
Your chosen article publishing day 20 min	PUBLISH	Publish, then restack your own article with a short commentary note — and restack again the next day with a short commentary note from a different angle.
Daily 30–45 min	ENGAGE	Comment substantively on 5–10 articles, notes, or comments near your topic. Restack 1–3 peers with real commentary. Reply to every reply on your own work.
Daily 5 min	LOG	Date, title, format, subscribers gained. The block you'll want to skip — and the one that makes the others compound.
Every 2 weeks 30 min	REVIEW	Prioritize your two best-performing formats — articles, Notes, or comments. Cut the worst — but only after five genuine attempts. Rewrite a winner on a new subject.

Only have three hours a week?

Keep the daily commenting block, even at 15 minutes — it's the highest-return activity while you're small. Slow to one article every two weeks rather than breaking your comment schedule: a stated, slower promise beats a broken fast one. Keep the five-minute log. Cut the Notes first — they're the most replaceable part of the system early on and you can add them later.

The five-rep rule

Never judge a format — Articles, Notes, or Comments — on one attempt. A single result from a highly variable system tells you almost nothing — run five genuine tries, then decide. And when a piece unexpectedly takes off, **drop the plan and reply to every comment for as long as the conversation is alive.** That's what converts a spike of attention into subscribers.



KEY TAKEAWAYS

Practical steps to grow your audience and build reader trust

- ✓ **Followers aren't subscribers.** Only a subscription reaches an inbox — ask for the subscription, not the follow.
- ✓ **Check your phase before copying a tactic.** Under a few hundred subscribers, thoughtful daily comments outperform publishing more articles every time.
- ✓ **Comment like a writer, not a fan.** Rephrase the line, add one piece of substantive, hard-won experience, end with a memorable phrase, reply when they reply.
- ✓ **Write to be Restacked, not agreed with.** Restacking other related content with commentary converted readers at roughly twelve times the rate of likes.
- ✓ **Lead with a checkable credential** — then undercut it. Keep Notes between 30 and 64 words.
- ✓ **Expect most posts to never convert a subscriber.** Roughly one in ten did in the data — so log everything, and judge and adjust formats (articles, notes, comments) only after five attempts.
- ✓ **Protect the system, not the week.** Commit to 90 days; expect nothing, nothing, then a burst.

ABOUT THE NUMBERS IN THIS GUIDE

The statistics here come from a self-published analysis of 9,641 posts (partly corroborated by a separate ~18.8-million-post dataset) and from individual writers' documented experiments — none of it peer-reviewed, and platform mechanics change. Nothing here promises a specific subscriber count in a specific timeframe, because no honest source supports one. What the evidence does support is a **ranking of activities by reliability** — and that's what this guide is.

WHY THIS GUIDE IS FREE

Everything above boils down to one principle: **generosity first, asks later**. We'd be poor students of our own material if this playbook arrived behind a paywall. It's distilled from the working manual behind Butterfly Boardroom's own growth, cross-checked against independent writers' public experiments — and it's yours to keep, use, and forward to any writer who needs it.

If this helped, that was the whole point.

If you'd like more practical, honest leadership and personal-growth playbooks, Butterfly Boardroom publishes them one useful idea at a time. Always free.

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SOURCES

Go to the sources

This guide is built on the generous work of people with more experience and hard-won insight than I have. Every writer below shares what they've learned in public, for free or nearly so — which is the whole spirit of this guide. If something here helped you, **go subscribe to them, comment on their work, and restack the pieces you love**. Consider it your first rep of not posting in the void.

01 I Analyzed 9,641 Substack Notes. Here's What 99% of Writers Are Doing Wrong.

SINEM GÜNEL & OREL · WRITE · BUILD · SCALE

The dataset behind most of the numbers in this guide — the 12× restack-versus-like finding, the credential hook, the 31–60 word sweet spot, the question-mark effect, and the one-in-ten conversion reality. A rare piece of genuinely data-driven Substack advice; follow them for more where this came from.

02 Notes Boost Challenge

SARAH FAY · SUBSTACK WRITERS AT WORK

The weekly collaborative thread that inspired this guide's take on boost threads done right — real comments, real reading, no link-dropping. Sarah Fay's publication is one of the most respected teaching resources for Substack writers; the challenge is for her paid community, and worth knowing about as you grow.

03 How to Do Sarah Fay's Notes Boost

PUBSTACK SUCCESS

A practical, friendly walkthrough of how to participate in a boost thread well — what to post, how to engage, and how to get real value from it rather than treating it as a link dump. A good on-ramp if the collaborative-thread idea is new to you.

04 Substack Just Revealed How the Notes Algorithm Works. Here's What They Said.

WES PEARCE · ESCAPE THE CUBICLE

A firsthand report from Substack's NYC event, where head of machine learning Mike Cohen explained that the feed is built to help readers discover and subscribe — the claim this guide leans on when it says reach isn't awarded for quality. Wes writes candidly about his own growth; worth a follow.

05 The Substack Notes Algorithm Is Simpler Than You Think

CASANDRA CAMPBELL · REALLY GOOD BUSINESS IDEAS

The clearest explanation we've found of the audience-overlap mechanism — how engaging with writers whose readers resemble yours teaches the feed to connect you — built carefully on Substack's own documentation. Casandra's research-backed breakdowns are exactly the kind of teach-first work this guide admires.

06 Why Your Substack Isn't Growing: The Real Fix!

RIZA · RIZABA.SUBSTACK.COM

The honest first-person experiments behind this guide's phase ladder — testing Notes at every frequency and hour while under 100 subscribers, and the eighteen-recommendations test. Documented trial and error like this is worth ten opinion pieces; go encourage more of it.

Portions of this guide also draw on "The Butterfly Notes Engine," a training manual credited to Sarah Fay's Substack Writers at Work, and an unpublished synthesis of the same material — neither publicly available. All figures reflect these sources as written; platform mechanics change, so re-check anything you plan to rely on.