The Welcome Sequence

Seven emails that turn a subscriber into a reader

DANA OKAFOR

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Introduction

Someone found your sign-up form, typed in their address, and pressed the button. Then nothing happened. Maybe your email tool sent its stock "You're subscribed" line. Maybe your next issue landed eleven days later, from a name they had already forgotten.

That gap is where new subscribers go missing. Not to unsubscribes, which you would at least see, but to silence. By the time your issue arrives it is one more unread line in a crowded inbox, and the moment when they were curious about you has passed.

A welcome sequence closes the gap. It is a short run of emails, sent automatically, that turns a person who was interested for thirty seconds into someone who recognises your name and opens what you send.

This guide walks through seven of them. For each email you get what it is for, what to write, a short example you can adapt, and when to send it. The examples come from two fictional newsletters that run through the whole guide: The Slow Garden, a weekly letter by Mara Ellison about growing food on balconies and in small yards, and Shop Floor, a fortnightly letter by Ade Bankole for people who run small workshops. Neither exists. The mechanics do.

A few rules I keep to. No statistics about open rates, because I would be inventing them and your list is not the average anyway. No hype. Each email should take you under an hour to draft, and the whole sequence is built to be loaded into your email tool this week.

Read the sections in order and draft as you go. By the last page you will have seven emails and a schedule for them.

Email 1: The one they actually open

The first email is the only one you can be sure will get read. The subscriber just asked for it, they are still on your site or watching their inbox, and your name is fresh. Everything after this is earned. This one is given. Do not spend it on a greeting.

WHAT IT IS FOR

Email 1 does three things. It delivers whatever you promised at sign-up. It says in one line who is writing. And it names when the next email is coming, so its arrival is expected rather than a surprise.

That is all. It is not the place for your story, your archive, or a list of links. Those come later, and they land better once the reader has something in hand.

BEFORE YOU WRITE IT: CHECK WHAT YOUR TOOL ALREADY SENDS

If you use double opt-in, your tool sends a "confirm your address" message first. That is not Email 1. It is plumbing, and you should leave its wording plain. Email 1 is the first thing the reader gets after they confirm.

Most tools also send a default welcome message on their own. Find it and switch it off, or replace its contents with the email you are about to write. A reader who gets two welcomes in a minute learns that you do not read your own outgoing mail.

WHAT TO WRITE

Open with the thing they came for. If the form promised a guide, a checklist, or a back issue, put it in the first two lines. If it promised only the newsletter, say what the newsletter is in one sentence and hand them the single best thing you have written so far.

Then one line about you. Not a bio: a sentence that explains why you are the person writing this.

Then one small thing to do. A reply is the best choice. It helps future emails reach the inbox, because the reader's mail provider sees a two-way conversation, and it tells you something about who signed up. Ask a question that can be answered in one line.

Finish by saying when the next email arrives.

EXAMPLE: THE SLOW GARDEN

> **Subject: Your balcony planting calendar (and hello)**
>
> Here is the planting calendar you signed up for. It is one page, sorted by month, for balconies that get four hours of sun or less. Print it and stick it near the watering can.
>
> I'm Mara. I have been growing food in a two-metre-by-one-metre space above a bus stop for six years, and The Slow Garden is where I write down what worked and what died.
>
> Quick question, if you have a minute: what are you trying to grow this year? Hit reply and tell me. I read every answer.
>
> The first proper letter arrives Thursday.
>
> Mara

EXAMPLE: SHOP FLOOR

> **Subject: The quoting sheet, as promised**
>
> Attached is the quoting sheet. It has the four lines most small workshops leave off a quote and then eat the cost of. Fill in the grey cells and the rest calculates.
>
> I'm Ade. I ran a six-person joinery shop for eleven years before I started writing about how small workshops actually make money.
>
> One question: what is the job you most regret quoting? Reply and tell me. Short is fine.
>
> The next email lands in two days. It is about what Shop Floor is and is not.
>
> Ade

SUBJECT LINE

Say what is inside. "Your balcony planting calendar" beats "Welcome to The Slow Garden!" because the reader is looking for the thing they asked for, not for a greeting. If you promised nothing specific, use the title of the piece you are sending.

WHEN TO SEND

Immediately. Set the delay to zero. The reader is waiting, and every minute you leave them waiting is a minute they spend on something else.

TONIGHT

Write Email 1 in under 150 words. Turn off your tool's default welcome. Put the reply question in. If you do not have a lead magnet, pick your single best issue and paste it in below your sign-off.

Emails 2 and 3: Who you are and what to expect

Email 1 delivered something. The next two build the relationship that makes the rest of the newsletter worth opening. They answer the two questions a new subscriber has, usually without knowing they have them: who is this person, and what am I in for?

EMAIL 2: WHO YOU ARE

What it is for

Email 2 gives the reader a reason to trust you that is specific to this newsletter. It is not your CV. It is the story of why this letter exists.

What to write

Start with the moment the newsletter became necessary. There is always one: a problem you could not find a straight answer to, a thing you kept explaining to friends, a job you left. Tell it in three or four short paragraphs.

Then say what you are not. Readers relax when they know the boundaries. If you are not a trained horticulturalist, say so, and say what you are instead.

End with one line about what the reader can expect from you personally: that you reply, that you admit when something failed, that you will not pretend to know more than you do.

Example: The Slow Garden

> **Subject: Why I started writing this**
>
> Six summers ago I killed eleven tomato plants in a row. Every guide I found assumed a garden. I had a balcony, a bus stop underneath it, and about four hours of direct light on a good day.
>
> So I started keeping notes. What I planted, when, what the light did each month, what actually produced food. After two years the notes were more useful than anything I could buy, and a friend asked me to email them to her. That was the first issue.
>
> I am not a trained gardener. I am a person who has failed in a very small space for a long time and written it down.
>
> What that means for you: I will tell you what died as readily as what grew, and I answer every reply.

> Mara

When to send

Two days after Email 1. Long enough that the first one has been read, short enough that they still remember signing up.

EMAIL 3: WHAT TO EXPECT

What it is for

Email 3 sets the terms: how often you write, what a typical issue looks like, what you will never do with their address, and how to get the most out of the letter. A reader who knows the rhythm is far less likely to be surprised into unsubscribing when the first regular issue arrives.

What to write

Be concrete about cadence and length. "Every Thursday, about a five-minute read" is a promise. "Regularly" is not. Then describe one typical issue in a sentence. Then name two or three things you will not do: sell their address, send daily, pad it out.

If you have recurring sections, name them. If you have an archive, this is the place to point to it, but with one or two picks, not the whole list.

Close with the practical part: how to reply, how to keep the emails out of the spam folder (ask them to move this one to the main inbox or add you to their contacts), and how to unsubscribe without hard feelings.

Example: Shop Floor

> **Subject: What Shop Floor is (and is not)**
>
> Every second Tuesday you will get one email from me. It is one idea about running a small workshop, worked through with numbers, and it takes about six minutes to read.
>
> A typical issue: last month's was on why a full order book can still lose money, with a real job, names removed, costed out line by line.
>
> What you will not get: daily emails, sponsored content dressed up as advice, or your address passed to anyone.
>
> Two things that help. If this landed in a promotions tab or in spam, drag it to your inbox once and it should stay. And if you ever want out, the link at the bottom works, no questions asked.
>
> Ade

When to send

Two days after Email 2, which makes it day four of the sequence.

TONIGHT

Draft both. For Email 2, write down the moment the newsletter became necessary before you write anything else; the rest follows from it. For Email 3, fill in four blanks and build outward: every ___, about a ___-minute read, a typical issue is ___, and I will never ___.

Emails 4 and 5: Your best two pieces, reframed

By day seven the reader knows who you are and what you send. Now show them. Emails 4 and 5 each carry one piece from your archive, chosen for a new reader and introduced as if you were handing it to them across a table.

WHY NOT JUST LINK THE ARCHIVE

A list of ten links is a list of ten decisions. Most readers make none of them. One piece, with two paragraphs on why it matters to them right now, is a single easy yes. You are doing the choosing so they do not have to.

CHOOSING THE TWO

You have written some issues. Pick using two questions.

1. Which one made the most people reply? That is the one that lands.
2. Which one best shows what the newsletter is for? That is the one that sets expectations.

If those are the same piece, use the second-most-replied-to for the other slot. If you have fewer than five issues, take the one you are proudest of and the one that solved the most concrete problem.

Send the concrete one first. New readers want to be useful to themselves before they want to be interested in you.

REFRAMING, NOT FORWARDING

Do not forward the old issue with "in case you missed it" on top. They did not miss it; they were not here yet. Write a fresh opening that does three things.

- Names the problem the piece solves, in the reader's terms.
- Says in one line what you would do differently now, if anything. This is what makes an old piece feel current, and it makes you look honest.
- Tells them what to do with it: read it now, save it for a specific moment, or try one thing from it this week.

Then paste the piece in below, or link to it, and stop. No second topic, no "also".

EXAMPLE: THE SLOW GARDEN, EMAIL 4

> **Subject: The four-hours-of-sun problem**
>
> If your balcony gets less sun than every seed packet says it needs, this is the piece to read first. It is the issue people reply to most, usually to say they were about to give up.
>
> It lists what actually grows in four hours or less, in the order I would plant them, and what to skip entirely. One change since I wrote it: I now start the salad greens two weeks later than I say here, after a cold May taught me a lesson.
>
> Read it this week, before you buy anything.
>
> (The full issue is pasted below.)
>
> Mara

EXAMPLE: SHOP FLOOR, EMAIL 5

> **Subject: The job that looked profitable**
>
> This is the piece that explains what Shop Floor is about better than any summary I could write. It walks through a single kitchen job, quoted at a healthy margin, that lost money by the time it was installed. Every line of the leak is costed.
>
> If you only read one thing I have written, read this. Then open your last three quotes and look for the same four lines.
>
> (The full issue is pasted below.)
>
> Ade

A NOTE ON LENGTH

The opening is short on purpose. Two paragraphs and an instruction. If you find yourself explaining the piece, you are rewriting it; stop and let the piece do the work. The reader will forgive an old date at the top of the pasted issue. They will not forgive a preamble longer than the thing it introduces.

WHEN TO SEND

Email 4 on day seven, Email 5 on day ten. Three days apart gives the reader room to try one thing from the first piece before the second arrives.

TONIGHT

Open your sent issues. Pick the two. For each, write the three-part opening: the problem, what you would change, what to do with it. Keep each opening under 120 words. If you have no archive yet, write the two pieces you wish existed and use those; the sequence works the same, and you will have two issues in the bank.

Emails 6 and 7: The ask, and the door left open

Two emails left. By now the reader has received something useful, met you, learned the rhythm, and read your two best pieces. The last pair does two things new writers tend to skip: it asks for something, and it makes staying easy.

EMAIL 6: THE ASK

What it is for

You have earned one request. It should be small, specific, and good for the reader as well as for you. There are three kinds worth making. Pick one, not all three.

- **A reply.** Ask a question that helps you write the next issue. "What is the one thing you are stuck on right now?" For a list under a thousand people this is the best ask there is, because the answers become your next six topics.
- **A forward.** Ask them to send the newsletter to one specific kind of person. Not "share with your friends" but "forward this to the one person you know who is also trying to grow food on a balcony."
- **A purchase, if you sell something.** Only if it exists and only if it fits. Say what it is, who it is for, what it costs, and who should not buy it. A plain description persuades this reader more than a pitch does.

What to write

Say plainly that you are asking for something and why. Readers do not mind being asked. They mind being manoeuvred into it. Make the ask the whole email: one paragraph of context, the ask itself, and a thank-you.

Example: The Slow Garden

> **Subject: One question for you**
>
> You have had a week of me. Now I would like something from you, and it is small.
>
> Reply to this email with the one thing about growing in a small space that you cannot find a straight answer to. One line is enough.
>
> I read every reply, and the questions that come up most become the next issues. A good share of what I have written started as an answer to an email like this one.

> Thank you.
>
> Mara

Example: Shop Floor

> **Subject: If you know someone with a workshop**
>
> A direct request. If you know one other person who runs a small shop and quotes their own work, forward them last week's email, the one about the job that looked profitable.
>
> That piece is the one that convinces people the newsletter is worth a spot in their inbox, and a forward from someone they trust does more than anything I can do from here.
>
> That is the whole email. Thanks for reading this far.
>
> Ade

When to send

Day thirteen, three days after Email 5.

EMAIL 7: THE DOOR LEFT OPEN

What it is for

The last email marks the end of the sequence and the start of the regular newsletter. It tells the reader what happens now, gives them a way to shape it, and offers a graceful exit. A sequence that simply stops leaves the reader unsure whether they are still subscribed. One that ends on purpose feels like being shown to a seat.

What to write

Three parts. First, what changes: from here they get the regular issue on its normal day, and the next one arrives on a named date. Second, one way to tune it: the archive, a reply with preferences, or simply "if you want more of X, tell me." Third, the exit: an unhurried, unguilted line about unsubscribing. Saying it out loud costs you nothing, and it makes the people who stay feel chosen rather than trapped.

Example: The Slow Garden

> **Subject: That's the welcome. Here's what's next.**
>
> This is the last of the introductory emails. From here you get The Slow Garden every Thursday, and the next one is this Thursday.
>
> If you want to read backwards, the archive is linked at the bottom of every issue. If you only want the planting-season letters and not the winter ones, reply and say so; I keep a short list.
>
> And if it turns out this is not for you, the unsubscribe link is right there. I would rather write for people who want it.

> Thanks for sticking around. See you Thursday.
> Mara

When to send

Day sixteen. After that the subscriber is simply on the regular list.

TONIGHT

Pick your one ask and write it as a single paragraph. Then write Email 7 by filling in three things: the regular day, one way to tune the letter, and the exit line in your own words.

The schedule and the template

Here is the whole sequence in one place. Days count from the moment the person confirms their subscription. If your tool measures delays in hours, day two is 48 hours.

Email	Day	What it does	Subject line pattern
1	0	Delivers what was promised, one line about you, a reply question	The thing they asked for, named
2	2	Why the newsletter exists, what you are and are not	"Why I started writing this"
3	4	Cadence, format, what you will never do, inbox housekeeping	"What [name] is (and is not)"
4	7	Your most concrete piece, reframed for a new reader	The problem it solves
5	10	Your most representative piece, reframed	The piece's own title
6	13	One small ask: reply, forward, or buy	"One question for you"
7	16	End of sequence, what is next, the graceful exit	"That's the welcome. Here's what's next."

LOADING IT INTO YOUR TOOL

Every mainstream email tool has a feature called an automation, a sequence, a flow, or a drip. They all work the same way: a trigger, then a list of emails with delays between them.

1. Create a new automation with the trigger "subscribes to list" (or "confirms subscription" if you use double opt-in).
2. Add seven emails and paste each draft in. Set the delay before each one from the Day column: 0, then 2 days, then 2, then 3, 3, 3, 3.
3. Turn off any default welcome message the tool sends on its own.
4. Subscribe yourself with a second address and let the whole sequence run. Read each email on your phone. Fix anything that reads wrong.
5. Switch it on. People who subscribed before today will not get it unless you add them by hand; that is fine. It is for the people who come next.

WHAT ABOUT THE REGULAR ISSUES

While the sequence runs, the subscriber also gets your regular issues on their normal day. That is good, not a problem: they see the rhythm for real instead of reading about it. If your tool offers to exclude subscribers in an active sequence from your campaigns, leave that option off.

WHEN TO CHANGE IT

Revisit the sequence when Email 4 or 5 is no longer your best work, when your cadence changes, or when the replies to Email 6 keep asking something you could have answered in Email 3. Once a season is plenty.

THE FILL-IN TEMPLATE

I have turned every email in this guide into a fill-in version: the structure, the blanks, and the subject line pattern, with the examples stripped out so your own words go in. It is a single document you can draft into in one sitting.

To get it, reply to the email that delivered this guide with the word SEQUENCE, and I will send it over.

Draft tonight. Load it this week.