

A P R I M E R

How repeated content turns into trust

The first book to read

Format Basics

The real reason it isn't working, even though you're working hard

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For more

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FORMAT BASICS · FIRST EDITION

It's rarely skill that's
holding you back — far more rarely than you'd think.
Usually there's just one thing
that's missing.

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There isn't a single difficult word in here. Just read it easy.

Prologue

The problem was never how hard you work

Let me start with something honest.

00

If you're reading this, you're almost certainly working hard enough already. Making videos late into the night, fussing over the color of a single caption, watching a few of other people's hits to see how they did it. And still the view count sits right where it always sits, and the followers look like they're about to grow and then don't. Some days you even catch yourself thinking, 'what am I actually doing here?'

When that happens, we usually land on the same thought. 'I guess I'm still not good enough. Maybe I should learn more editing.' But from what I've watched over the years, skill is rarely the reason things aren't working. It isn't that you're not trying hard either. What I kept noticing instead was one thing missing. That's what I want to talk about today — format.

You've probably heard the word somewhere, but you're not quite sure what it actually means. That's fine. This is written for exactly that person. I won't use a single marketing term or a piece of difficult theory. I'll explain it the way someone sitting next to you would, using only the things we all see and go through every day.

By the time you finish, at least one thing will have changed for sure. That 'ah, so that's why it wasn't working' feeling — the sense of noticing things that were invisible to you before. Even if that's all you walk away with, the time you spend here today won't be wasted. So let's start easy.

That sense of noticing
what you couldn't see before.

Chapter 1

Format? What on earth is that?

It's hard to get a grip on. Let me draw it out for you, piece by piece.

01

Let's clear this one up first. "Format? What even is that?" That's probably the real question in your head right now. Is it some editing technique for making Reels? Some strategy for growing an account? It's hard to picture. So let me draw it out for you, piece by piece.

The word format actually comes from television. Think of 'I Live Alone' — Na Honja Sanda — a long-running MBC reality show in Korea. Every week the cast is different, and the slice of daily life it shows is different too. But the way the show runs never changes. Observation cameras follow a celebrity through a day of living alone, and then a group in the studio watches that footage together and talks about it. That arrangement has been the same for years. That skeleton, the part they keep identical every single time — in TV, that's what they call the show's format.

Put more simply, a format is a show's fixed structure. The cast changes, the stories change week to week, but the structure never gets touched. That's why, flipping through channels, the moment that scene comes on we go 'oh, this is I Live Alone.' The structure is always the same.

And it's hardly the only show like this. The advice show where a different guest opens up about their troubles each week, the cooking show that uses different ingredients every time — same thing. The guest changes, the dish changes, but the way it opens and the order it moves through stay put. That feeling of 'knowing' a show comes from exactly that unchanging structure.

Now let's take one small step from here. Your Instagram account is really a TV show too. Each video you post is one episode of that show. And once you see it that way, the answer comes out on its own. A format is the structure your account — your show — keeps the same every time.

So, back to that first question. A format is not an editing technique for making one video look pretty. It's much bigger than that. A lot of people get confused right here and pour all their energy into making a single video flashier. But a format doesn't live inside one video. It runs between videos, across the whole account. It isn't a little trick you use on one Reel; it's closer to the big picture of how you're going to run your account.

That might sound a bit abstract, so let me write a format out like a simple recipe. Using that observation show from before, it goes something like this.

- 1 Show someone's day of living alone.
- 2 Watch it together in the studio and talk about it.
- 3 Wrap up with a laugh or a quiet afterglow.

Those three lines are that show's format. Your account works the same way. How you start, what you show, how you end — if you can write it in three lines, that's your format. It's okay if it doesn't come out smoothly right now. Just catching the feeling of 'ah, so that's what it is' is plenty for today.

But let's think about one more thing. Why do networks stick to that structure instead of changing it? Wouldn't something new every time feel fresher? There's exactly one reason. They want people to get the same feeling every time they watch. Someone who puts on *I Live Alone* sits down each week expecting that comfortable, familiar observation-show feeling. It's like going back to your regular restaurant for the taste you already know. So what a format is ultimately trying to do is hand you the same experience every time you show up.

Here's why that matters. People are far more at ease with a feeling they know than one they don't. When the same experience stacks up over and over, people can picture your account in their head just by thinking of it. They know what's coming next and how it'll feel, so they come back without hesitating.

And what happens without that structure? This week you make something chasing one trend, next week another, posting whatever catches your eye that day — and every video ends up with a different texture. The person making them worked hard, no question about it. But from the viewer's side the account feels different every time, and they can't get a read on it. Each piece might look decent on its own, but step back and look at the whole account and all that's left is a question mark: 'what is this place, exactly?' They can't picture it, so they can't find a reason to hit follow.

So take just this one thing away from Chapter 1.

Chapter 1, in one line

A format isn't some difficult technique. It's the structure your account — your show — keeps every time, so that it gives people the same experience whenever they watch.

Chapter 2

Why does it matter this much?

Why good videos alone aren't enough — explained through people, not theory.

02

Right about now you might be thinking: 'Okay, I get that having a structure is good. But is it really that important? Can't I just make good videos?' I understand that completely. So let me explain why good videos alone aren't enough — again, no difficult words, just how people work.

Here's the thing about people. When we can guess what's coming next, we relax. When we can't, we quietly drift away. We do this every single day. We're careful around someone we've just met, because we don't know who they are yet. But after a few times, we get comfortable and start trading jokes without noticing.

Trust works the same way. Someone who says something different every time you meet them is hard to believe, no matter how good it sounds. And someone who's the same whenever you see them earns your trust without even trying. Why? Because being consistent means being predictable, and being predictable puts people at ease. That's just how we're built.

Following someone on Instagram comes from exactly that feeling. If an account looks like it'll keep showing you things you like, you hit follow. Following is really a small promise: 'I'll keep watching.' But when what gets posted is different every time, there's no guessing what's coming, so nobody feels like making that promise. They tap like once and scroll on.

Let me add one more piece. There's a machine on Instagram that's on our side. People call it the algorithm, but there's nothing complicated about it. Think of it as a delivery person who knows everybody's taste. Their job is one thing: find the people who'd like your video and bring them to it. But to deliver anything, they first have to know what this account is about. A cooking account goes to people into cooking; a workout account goes to people who work out.

When something different goes up every time, that delivery person gets confused. 'Who am I even supposed to take this to?' So they scatter it to a few people here and there, and if the response is lukewarm, they quietly stop delivering. What we usually call 'the algorithm didn't pick it up' is often just this: the delivery person doesn't know where your account is supposed to go.

So here's how I put it. Setting a format is how you win over the people watching and get that delivery person's help at the same time.

And it quietly solves some of the problems we all run into. Burning a whole day in front of a blank screen wondering 'what do I post today.' Finally having one video take off, then landing right back at square one with the next. Looking at a video that pulled great numbers and having no idea why it worked, so you can't do it again. I wouldn't claim a format is the whole reason for all of that, but these things do happen a lot when there's no structure. When you don't have to rethink the beginning and the ending from scratch each time, getting ready is a little lighter — and since you have a record of what you kept the same and what you changed, you have something solid to look back on when one of them works.

Chapter 2, in one line

People and algorithms both relax around what they can predict. And a structure chips away at the burden of starting from zero every single time.

Chapter 3

So you're saying post the same thing every day?

There's one misunderstanding here. Clear it up and this gets a lot lighter.

In Chapter 1 I said a format means keeping the frame and changing the contents every time. Which is right where a worry usually creeps in. 'Keep the frame? So I have to post something similar every day? Won't I get bored, and won't people get sick of it?' It's a completely natural worry. And there's one misunderstanding hiding inside it. Clear that up and this gets a lot lighter.

Think about home cooking for a second. The side dishes your mom puts on the table are different every day. Rolled omelet today, fish tomorrow, seasoned greens the day after. And still, all of it feels like 'mom's food' to us. The menu changes daily, but that big feeling of mom's food stays exactly the same. Now flip it around: mom's food one day, unfamiliar takeout the next, someone else's cooking the day after that. When the identity keeps changing, the feeling of 'mom's food' never forms at all.

A format is the same. You keep the big frame familiar and change only what's inside it. So it isn't dull repetition. The frame is familiar, so people come back comfortably; the contents are different every time, so nobody gets tired of it. Holding both of those at once — that's a format.

The neighborhood café you always go to works the same way. The owner greets you with more or less the same smile every time, and you end up in the seat you always sit in. But the conversation is different every day. One day it's the weather, another day it's whatever's been hard lately. The big frame is comfortably the same while the talk inside it is new each time — so instead of getting tired of it, we keep going back.

One more thing here. Inside that familiar frame, it helps enormously to have one scene of your own that never gets left out. That scene you repeat exactly the same way every time — I call it a signature. The word sounds fancy, but the meaning is dead simple. It's the one scene that makes people go 'oh, that's his thing.'

My story

Let me tell you about mine. I don't do it anymore, but back when I was just starting the account, I began every video by putting on lip balm. It wasn't some grand directing choice. I wanted to give a signal: 'okay, I'm ready to talk now.' To me it was just a small habit, nothing more.

But because I kept repeating it, something funny happened. People started calling me 'the lip balm teacher.' People who met me in person would bring lip balm along as a gift. And I had never once talked about lip balm.

One lip balm, and I was stuck in people's memory. That's what a signature does.

It didn't stick because it was flashy. It stuck because it repeated, identically, without ever being skipped. So a signature isn't about inventing something impressive. It's about never leaving out one small thing you already do.

A signature doesn't have to be a big production either. Ending every video with the same line, or always starting with the same object in your hand — those can all be signatures. What matters isn't how flashy it is. It's that it shows up every time, without fail.

And here's why a signature is so powerful. People can't remember every one of your videos, but that one repeating scene they will remember. And that scene sits right at the center of the 'same experience every time' we talked about earlier.

So there's just one thing to hold on to today.

Chapter 3, in one line

Repetition isn't boring. It's the thing that puts people at ease and brings them back.

Chapter 4

So where do I start?

One small thing anyone can try right now.

If you've made it this far, you're probably wondering 'so what do I actually do?' We won't go anywhere difficult today. I'll give you one very small thing anyone can try right now.

First, take out a sheet of paper and answer this question.

What could I do every day
without getting sick of it?

Why does this question matter? Because a format only gains its strength when you can keep it up for a long time. However good the thing you pick looks, it's no use at all if you're worn out two months in. So before you go copying whatever worked for someone else, the first step is finding what you can keep doing without running out of steam.

If you're stuck on what to pick, try these hints.

- 1 What people ask you about unusually often.
- 2 What everyone else finds tedious but you lose track of time doing.
- 3 What you've already been doing naturally for years.

The seed is usually somewhere in there. The harder you push to find something big and impressive, the further away it gets. Recognizing what's already inside you comes first.

Here's an example. Say people often tell you, “give you a couple of things from the fridge and you'll have a whole meal on the table.” It's the kind of thing everyone else brushes off as nothing, but you find it fun and lose track of time doing it. That's the seed, right there.

So something like ‘making a meal out of whatever's in the fridge’ could be the starting point of your format. You don't go looking somewhere far away and grand; you find it in what you already do naturally. It's much easier on you, and it lasts much longer.

And one more thing. Take two or three accounts you already like and look at them today with slightly different eyes. Not the content of the videos — look for what that account does the same way every single time.

Beginning — how it starts

Middle — what scene always shows up

End — how it wraps up

Split it into beginning, middle, and end like that, and the account's structure slowly comes into view. And once you've got the eye for spotting that repeating structure, every account that's doing well starts to look like a textbook.

That's as far as the first step goes today. It doesn't end here, of course. Once you've found a seed you won't get sick of, what's left is shaping it into a format people love, and reading the response to find your direction. It's nothing to be scared of. It isn't done on instinct — there's an order and a method to it, so you just walk it one step at a time. What matters is that you don't stop here.

And let me flag one thing in advance. What we looked at today is still the structure of a single piece of content. How you start one video and how you end it — that arrangement. Even just this makes the work much easier.

But people don't remember an account and come back to it because of the structure of one video. They come back because of the consistent experience that structure creates when it repeats across the whole account. Which means the format of your content eventually has to become the format of your account. How those two connect — that's where the real story starts.

Epilogue

A format isn't something you're born with

One last thing I really want to say.

People look at an account that's doing well and usually think, 'that person just has good instincts. I don't have that kind of talent.' I saw it that way for a long time too. But after watching a lot of accounts up close, I found one thing the ones doing well had in common: a clear structure. Some of them planned it from the very beginning; for others it settled into place naturally as they went. Either way, it means this isn't purely a matter of being born with it. And if there's a method to something, you can learn it and get better at it.

This might come out sounding like bragging, but there's one thing I want to say. I've been digging into this format thing pretty deep. Not stopping at how content gets put together, but going further — into what makes the person watching relax and what makes them turn away. It turns out to be the study of people, in the end. And I believe format solves a good chunk of the problem you're dealing with right now. I'll keep working to be someone you can trust to ask about it.

Here's everything we looked at together today.

1 A format is the structure your account keeps so that it gives the same experience every time.

2 With it, both people and that delivery-person machine can recognize you.

3 It isn't doing the same thing every day. It's keeping the frame and changing only the contents.

Just holding on to those three will noticeably change how you look at accounts from now on. Now it's your turn. Even if it's only for today, look at your own account — and the accounts you love — through the lens of 'format.' You'll see something you couldn't see yesterday, I promise. And if that makes you think 'huh, maybe I should give this a proper go myself' — then this little book has done its job.

And if format has become even a little interesting to you, I have one request. Lend an ear now and then to what I talk about on my account. That's where I keep unpacking how to find a format, how to refine it, and how to keep it going for the long haul. If you look at my account again with the eyes you picked up today, things you used to scroll past might land differently. That's how we build it up together, one piece at a time.

And if a question about format comes up while you're reading, don't sit with it on your own. Leave a comment on something I post, or send me a DM. The more specific your question, the more precisely I can answer it.

Change always starts with curiosity.
If any part of today's story made you curious,
you're already standing at the start.
