

Blogging: A Primer

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“Blogging is all about connecting to others. The bond between blogger and reader creates an intimacy that is a much-needed corrective to the isolation that hard times bring. I’m always amazed by the things I learn from commenters I’ve never met but feel that I know. And I’m equally amazed by the things I keep discovering about myself in the course of writing and clarifying what’s important to me.”

–Blog Mogul Arianna Huffington

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What is a Blog?

- At its core, a blog is simply a writing tool, not necessarily a particular style or type of writing. This has been a cause of much confusion.
- There are almost as many types of blogs as there are bloggers
- Blogs are a bit like columns, but without the frequency or space requirements
- The best blogs are conversation starters, not lectures; the action should continue in the comments. Think of yourself as an emcee and discussion leader.
- Many readers have no idea what a blog is. (They claim they don't read blogs, but in fact they read them every day without realizing it.)
- Yes, for god's sake, blogs are journalism. Especially when they're written by journalists.
- Get over the stereotype of bloggers writing in their pajamas in their mothers' basements. (They don't always have basements!)
- Many blogs now break news and provide commentary and analysis as good or better as traditional media

What Makes a Good Blog?

- Blogs with voice, a consistently strong (even provocative) writing tone and attitude
- Blogs that have original content and/or commentary that's not available anywhere else
- Blogs that have passion
- Blogs that are updated regularly (but not feverishly—filler is killer)
- Blogs that are interesting
- (Sounds a lot like any other kind of writing or journalism, right?)

What Types of Blogs Work?

(Caveat 1: This applies to journalism-centric blogs)

(Caveat 2: Two or of these may be combined in the same blog)

- A news column/opinion blog with a single contributor (a bit like a traditional column)
- A beat blog that focuses tightly on a specific beat and breaks news or adds context (e.g. the Cut Scene blog)
- Similarly, a short-term blog that covers a well-defined event and exists solely to cover that event (e.g. the runup to the Oscars)
- An aggregation blog that provides a definitive overview of the best of the Web on a topic (e.g. Romnesko)
- A breaking news or group blog that can have many contributors but should generally be supervised by one editor or blogger

What Doesn't Work?

- **Blogs that lack voice, passion or authority**
- **Blogs that meander away from their central topic (especially if used to air unrelated personal issues)**
- **Blogs that are not updated (several times a week at least).**
- **Grab-bag blogs that are a dumping ground for notes that will not make the paper, i.e. glorified reporter's notebooks or briefs columns**
- **Group blogs that lack focus**
- **Blogs that regurgitate information that's available elsewhere without bringing anything fresh to it**
- **Blogs that attempt to lecture, or are stilted, and fail to engage the audience or start conversations**

Blog Writing Style

- **Blogs are informal**
 - More like a letter or journal than a news story
 - Be careful about stilted “journalismese” that lectures or puts distance between you and the reader
 - You don’t (necessarily) need 5Ws and H in the lede
 - Be more casual
 - No datelines!
- **Blogs have a voice**
 - Be conversational
 - Find a shtick
 - When in doubt, write like you talk
- **Engage the audience**
 - Have opinions people can respond to in comments
 - Ask questions to be answered in comments
 - Ask the audience to help
 - LISTEN to the audience
- **Write to be read**
 - Dynamic words. Long and short sentences
 - Short grafs (easier to read)
 - “Chunk” information
 - Use subheds to break up long posts
 - Blog readers (and search engines) love lists. They’re easy to scan quickly
- **Don’t worry (too much) about correct English**
 - But watch the dumb typos and punctuation. Especially apostrophe’s
- **Edit yourself**
 - Blogs aren’t set in stone. You can go in and fix typos, clean up syntax, etc., even after publication
 - Proofread before—and after—you publish
 - If you make a major revision, note it
 - If you add a belated update, note it
 - If you screw up, tell your readers immediately

Critical Points

1: Stay Focused

- Pick a strong topic for the blog and stick to it
- Try to make it as unique as possible
- Find a niche
- Don't wander off topic
- Have a consistent point of view
- Each individual post should have a distinct subject. Stick to it. Got another subject to write about? Start another post
- Don't be self-absorbed or neurotic (unless that's the blog's theme)

2. Help Your Readers

- Be a trusted guide to your readers about the subject you blog about
- Be an expert on the subject
- Be passionate
- Keep it fresh—don't blog about old news or things that are widely available elsewhere
- You don't have to have strong opinions to be a good blogger (see Romenesko). But it helps.
- Provide value to the reader
- Again, don't wander off topic

3. When and How Much to Blog

- Write whenever you want
 - Once a day? Once a week? Several times a day?
 - It may be all of the above
- Write whenever you have something to say
- Write as long or short as you want
 - One or two grafs is fine
 - So are 10 or 15, if the topic is good enough and you've got enough to say
 - If you've got a long list of something (awards, etc.) link to it rather than filling the blog with it
- Blogging shouldn't be a chore
- All that said, blog consistently and steadily
- When in doubt, post

4. Practice Promiscuous Link Love

Add links where you can, liberally
To support points

- To show examples
- In blogrolls
- It's OK to write a short post that primarily quotes/links to another interesting blog
- "Good things I read today" lists (aggregation)
- Add lists of related posts to your own posts
- Get links to your blog
- Comment on other blogs
- Make other bloggers aware of your blog
- Trade blogroll links
- Cultivate other bloggers (even the competition)

5. Write to be found

- Write for search
 - Snappy, SEO-aware headlines
 - Balance between cute and informative
 - Avoid "slanguage," which is Google-proof
- Make the subject of each post clear
- Use tags/keywords to add signposts for the search spiders
- Search engine spiders prefer pages that are frequently updated
- But: Write for people, not search engines

6. Care and Feeding of Comments and Community

- Participate in your comments (at least read them!)
 - Don't feel a need to respond to everything
- Learn to know—and cater to—your regular commenters
 - Over time, they'll feel like your blog is theirs. That's a good thing
- You probably have at least 100 readers for every one who comments
- Get ideas, feedback, guidance from the community
- Use the conversation in comments to expand on and refine a point
- Got a big question? Pose it to your audience and let them answer it. "What do you think?" is catnip
- Don't engage trolls
 - Sometimes a direct e-mail to them will calm them down or shut them up
- Let the community discipline itself. It usually does

7. The Blog as Brand

- Establish a personality and stick to it
- Think of yourself as the emcee/maitre d'/curator of your blog community
- Think of a blog as an online resume/journal, and as the icon of your personal brand
- Do a good About page. Have some fun with it—give it some personality

- Include an e-mail contact address

8. Practice Safe Blogging

- Be professional
- Be transparent
 - If you've got some sort of conflict or self-interest, say so
- Be careful about shooting from the hip (don't worry, we've all done it)
- Libel laws apply to blogs, too
- Give credit (and links) where credit is due
- Remember, your blog will be in Google forever, or close to it
 - Think about future employers finding it
 - Establish some boundaries about posting personal info
- Blog unto others as they would blog unto you

Miscellaneous Tips and Best Practices

- There's nothing wrong with doing reporting for a blog
- Use illustrations, charts, photos (but be copyright-aware)
- Understand (and use) blog formatting conventions, e.g. block quotes, which words to make links, etc.
- Show and refer to your greatest hits
 - Not everybody reads your blog as often as you do!
 - Write followup posts

Geek Stuff

- Know what RSS is and why it's valuable. Use it as a tool, as well, to watch other blogs and to create aggregated feeds in your blog
- Watch your stats. See who's linking to you and where traffic is coming from
- Understand which posts are more popular
- If you use Twitter, tweet your blog posts
- Use Facebook to build a community around your blog
- If possible, get a unique URL to brand and link to your blog

Checklist for a Successful Blog

- 1. What's the blog's topic or what event will it cover? Blogs with relatively narrow topics do better than loosely defined blogs. Either way, the topic of each blog needs to be clearly defined. A strong personality or voice can serve a similar defining function.**
- 2. How is the blog different? You're unlikely to find many topics that someone else isn't already blogging about. Look at the competition and help your reader understand why your blog is special.**
- 3. How will your blog supplement what appears in print and online? Blogs must contain original material – newsworthy reporting, useful information and/or strong commentary. Some of the best blogs have a live and fresh feel precisely because they take readers inside the news; others work because they bring a distinct voice and attitude to a topic.**
- 4. How will you moderate comments on your blog? Active user comments typically account for 10-25% of a blog's traffic and are a key to success – but need to be moderated. Are you ready to review comments that appear to violate the site's discussion policy and delete them if necessary? You also have to participate in the comments—or at least read them to find out what your readers are saying in response to your posts. Even when it's painful.**
- 5. How and where will your blog be promoted? Successful blogs typically “live off the land” by attracting bloggers who link to them and a loyal audience. But promotion on Variety.com and in print is very helpful. Work with appropriate editors on both sides on a realistic promotion plan.**

(Note: Much of this checklist first appeared in a WashingtonPost.com internal memo, which inspired several other parts of this primer.)

A Few Blogs I Like

(in no particular order)

Nationals Journal—A good beat blog, covering the Washington baseball team. Breaks a lot of news before it appears in print or on the Web site and interacts well with commenters. The community feel among the commenters is excellent—in some ways, they've turned into a fan club for the beat reporter.

<http://blog.washingtonpost.com/nationalsjournal/>

Bits—A good group-written beat blog, on technology, from The New York Times. Nice mix of news, analysis and a bit of attitude!

<http://bits.blogs.nytimes.com/>

Andrew Sullivan—One of the best high-volume bloggers: 20-30 smart posts a day on politics, culture, etc., almost always of high quality, interesting and thought-provoking. His personal crusades are always passionate and interesting, and he very effectively quotes and links to other sources, too.

<http://andrewsullivan.theatlantic.com/>

Huffington Post—The giant collection of blogs of all shapes, sizes and types, mostly about politics and culture. When they're good (Steven Weber, Nora Ephron, Steve Young, Huffington herself), they're very, very good. HuffPost also does a good job of aggregating interesting content from a wide variety of other sources.

<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/>

PaidContent—Excellent example of a blog turned into high-quality journalism, with scoops, analysis and good reporting.

<http://www.paidcontent.org/>

Romenesko—The journalist's daily journal. More of an aggregation of links than a traditional blog (it's 99 44/100 opinion-free), but incredibly valuable because it's so authoritative—reading it, you know you've been shown every important development in journalism that day.

<http://www.poynter.org/column.asp?id=45>

Reflections of a Newsosaur—Excellent, serious analysis of the journalism business by somebody who really knows his stuff.

<http://newsosaur.blogspot.com/>

Buzzmachine—A highly opinionated thinker about journalism, technology and related topics; always provocative, and actively engages with his commenters.

<http://www.buzzmachine.com/>

Fivethirtyeight.com—Groundbreaking political analysis blog that combines stats and reporting and absolutely exploded in popularity during the campaign. Each item usually draws hundreds of comments.

<http://www.fivethirtyeight.com/>

A VC—Passionate, sometimes quirky musings of a star venture capitalist. The comments are where some of the best action is.

<http://www.avc.com/>

Lefsetz Letter—A pure rant on the music industry. Passion plus, and incredibly entertaining. (Think Howard Beale in “Network.”) Just wish it had comments.

<http://lefsetz.com/wordpress/>

Joe Posnanski—A Kansas City sportswriter who’s made long-form blogging an art form, because he’s passionate, conversational and writes well.

<http://joeposnanski.com/JoeBlog/>

By Ken Levine—Terrific blog by a veteran TV writer/sportscaster. Always interesting, lots of inside info, usually hilarious, and very active comments/community.

<http://kenlevine.blogspot.com/>

Achenblog—What happens in the comments on this quirky Washington Post blog—basically, the community has taken the whole thing over and talks among itself sometimes regardless of the original post—is astonishing. It’s a great example of the power of community.

<http://voices.washingtonpost.com/achenblog/>

Recovering Journalist—My favorite blog of all!

<http://www.recoveringjournalist.com>