
Chapter

12

Writing Blogs

Are you already blogging? Maybe you'd like to start blogging, but you're not sure what to blog about? The blogosphere has grown up over the last decade; blogs today cover an incredibly diverse range of topics.

If you're eager to experiment, you'll want to read this chapter for ideas about:

- Choosing a theme
- Staying motivated and inspired
- Writing a succession of stories
- Managing reader comments

What Exactly Is a Blog?

The term *blog* blends the words *web* and *log*. If you think that blogs are personal stories, such as diaries, travel journals, and accounts of family gatherings, you're right. If you think that blogs cover stories about politics, activism, economics, entertainment, and health and fitness, you're also right. The tools

Wait until you are hungry to say something, until there is an aching in you to speak.

—Natalie Goldberg

to blog have become so easy to use that these days anyone can blog, whether you're young, old, nontechnical, tech-savvy, rich, or poor. The blogosphere is a democracy. Anyone and everyone can have a voice on the Web.

The term blog is used in two ways: for a blog site, where the collection of individual blog posts reside, and for each post on the blog site.

Some people distinguish between various types of blogging and microblogging (a tweet is a microblog). However, Jon Sobel, author of "State of the Blogosphere, 2010," says that "the lines between blogs, microblogs, and social networks are disappearing" (<http://technorati.com/blogging/article/state-of-the-blogosphere-2010-introduction>).

Getting Started with Blogging

Posting blogs on any topic that you choose only takes time, planning, and access to the Internet. If you're not ready to take on your own series of blog posts on your own blog site, you can just dip your toes into the blogosphere by writing a story and submitting it to the editors of a blog site that's already established. Or, you can jump wholeheartedly into the deep end and start your own blog site.

To get started with any blog, you'll first want to gather ideas for topics to write about.

Finding Inspiration for Blog Topics

COOL!

An inspirational notebook, whether it's digital or paper, is a great tool to help you gather ideas for writing blogs. Start by thinking about and listing your passions. What gets you all fired up? What makes you mad? What makes you smile? How do you spend your weekends? Take the time to reflect on all the things that you find inspirational. Do you like old movies? Is it fun to go to museums? Is fashion your passion? Are you planning your next hike in the backcountry? Jot down anything that floats your boat in your notebook.

Choosing Topics and Themes

Common advice is to write about what you know. Although this is good advice, remember too that you'll be spending a great deal of time on any topic you choose. To make sure you don't get bored, choose a topic that you want to know more about.

The following suggestions are starting points for your own lists.

INSPIRATIONAL PLACES			
Hideaways in the city, suburbs, or country			
Places you've travelled, amusement parks, art galleries, botanical gardens, concert halls			
YOUR FAMILY			
Your ancestors	Someone who has influenced you		
A relative who is a character	What it's like being a parent, a sibling, or an only child		
Awkward family moments	How you celebrate the holidays		
Family pets	Family traditions		
YOU			
What makes you laugh?	What are your hopes and dreams?		
What causes are you passionate about?	What are your hobbies?		
What is it like to live in the country of your birth?	What sports do you participate in or watch?		
What bothers you?	What would you do if you won a million dollars?		
What games do you like?	Are you a collector?		
YOUR FAVORITES			
Books	Musicians	Artists	Comedians
Movies	Drinks	Restaurants	Recipes

try this

Draw a picture of your childhood bedroom. Make the drawing as detailed as you can. Use the picture as a catalyst for lists in your notebook.

try this

Draw a picture of your childhood neighborhood. Make sure you draw the street you lived on and all the places where you explored and played near your house. Use the picture as a catalyst for lists in your notebook.

Examine Your Life

Socrates said that “the unexamined life is not worth living.” If you examine your life, you’ll find you have plenty to blog about.

A great starting point is your childhood. Where did you live when you were five years old? Where did you go to grade school? What was your home like? A treasure trove of ideas can come from memories of your childhood bedroom. What were your parents like? Were you allowed to decorate your own room? Would your mom have allowed you to spray paint the walls? Did you share the room with a sibling? What toys did you play with? What was the neighborhood like? What games did you play with other kids on the block?

Write the Blog You Want to Read

Toni Morrison said, “If there is a book that you want to read, but it hasn’t been written yet, you must be the one to write it.” The same truth applies to blogs. If there’s a blog you want to read, but you haven’t found it yet, you must write it.

Of course, you’ll want to choose a topic that someone else wants to read as well. After all, why would you bother to post a blog for all the world to see if it’s only for your own enjoyment?

Let’s say, for example, that you love all things about French culture. You’ve been to France several times, and you know you want your blog to appeal to other Francophiles. First, look online to see what blogs are similar to the one you want to write but have qualities you don’t find appealing. Second, evaluate what you like and don’t like, and decide how yours will be a hundred times better. Maybe some of the blogs don’t feel sincere or don’t seem exciting enough given the topic. Third, once you’ve decided to begin your own blog and have determined the topic is France, you then need to find the niche or angle that you’ll take on this topic.

Narrow or Broaden Your Topic

When you’ve settled on a theme that you’d like to blog about, you can then decide whether your topic is too broad, too narrow, or just right for the direction you want the blog to take.

For example, a blog about France as a general topic is much too broad. To narrow the topic, focus on a more specific aspect you enjoy about France. Maybe you like chatting with expats in France, or you’re crazy about the painters who started impressionism. Make a list of everything you like about the broader topic and think through each item on your list. When you come up with a more specific topic, your audience will also be more defined.

If you've decided on a very narrow topic for your blog, and you're afraid you won't have enough of an audience or enough to write about, you can always broaden the topic. For example, let's say that you are fascinated with Japanese crafts and particularly love a pattern that you use to knit Japanese flip-flops. A blog on Japanese flip-flops seems too narrow, so to broaden it, you might try listing all the reasons you love the activity and the patterns you use to knit them. Depending on your interests, you might broaden this topic to ethnic knitting or Japanese crafts, or some more general aspect of flip-flops.

Anybody who has survived his childhood has enough information about life to last him the rest of his days.

—Flannery O'Connor

Composing a Succession of Stories

Every artist would like to have a body of work that reflects the artist's abilities and sensibilities. Besides skill and talent, the qualities an artist needs for the long range are stamina, patience, tenacity, curiosity, and courage. As a blogger, the body of work you produce requires these same ingredients.

You'll need to develop strategies to continually discover and write about new material. You'll also need strategies to stay motivated and inspired.

Staying Motivated and Inspired

If you're like most writers, there will be times when your enthusiasm lags or you just don't feel moved or energized. Some call this bloggers' block. What can you do?

Here are a few things to try to placate your muse:

- **Move.** Any movement, but especially repetitive motion sports, such as jogging, swimming, walking, or bicycling, not only stimulates endorphins, but also puts you in the right frame of mind for telling stories.
- **Listen to music.** Music boosts your brain power, lifts your spirits, and invigorates your body. Listening to an old song can stir up memories of events in your life when you heard the same song.
- **Light a scented candle.** Fragrances have a powerful effect on mood and memory. Your sense of smell is the only sense that the brain experiences directly.
- **Eat chocolate.** If you like chocolate, the smell, the taste, the texture, the sweetness, the caffeine, and the pleasant sensation as anxiety subsides and your moods elevate will pull you back into writing mode.

For more ideas, see the sidebar "Inside the Coffin."


 A graphic with the words "try" and "this" in a stylized, overlapping font. "try" is in a white box with a black border, and "this" is in a black box with a white border.

Think about a ritual you'd like to test or one that you've already developed. You might light a candle, play soft music, or chew gum. Some authors doodle or write letters as a warm-up exercise.

INSIDE THE COFFIN

Diane Ackerman describes quirky methods famous writers have developed to woo their muse in “O Muse! You Do Make Things Difficult” (www.nytimes.com/1989/11/12/books/o-muse-you-do-make-things-difficult.html). In the article for the *New York Times*, she begins, “Dame Edith Sitwell used to lie in an open coffin for a while before she began her day’s writing. When I mentioned this macabre bit of gossip to a poet friend, he said acidly, ‘If only someone had thought to shut it.’”

Here are a few examples of the rituals:

- Ernest Hemingway wrote standing up.
- Benjamin Franklin wrote while taking a bath. (Ackerman also likes to write in the bathtub.)
- Mark Twain wrote lying down.
- Gertrude Stein wrote poetry in her Ford, parked in front of her house.
- Stephen King takes a vitamin and then writes.
- Charles Dickens liked to walk 20–30 miles before writing.
- The poet Schiller inhaled the smell from rotten apples he kept in his writing desk.

Making the Commitment

Good writing takes time and effort. You’ve probably heard Thomas Edison’s wise words: “Genius is one percent inspiration, ninety-nine percent perspiration.” It’s good to listen for your muse, but if it’s not available, you still need to make the effort without it.

Set goals for your writing practice and stick to them. You can establish goals by time, word count, page count, or blog count. Some writers use a timer or some other method to track the time they spend daily on their writing. See the sidebar “The Egg Timer Method.”

—Richard Bach

A professional writer is an amateur who didn’t quit.

Every writer struggles with finding quality time for writing. Some of the best authors squeeze their daily practice in while parenting, managing households, and working day jobs.

THE EGG TIMER METHOD

Author Chuck Palahniuk, in “13 Writing Tips” (<http://chuckpalahniuk.net/workshop/essays/chuck-palahniuk>), offers this first tip: “When you don’t want to write, set an egg timer for one hour (or half hour) and sit down to write until the timer rings.”

After the timer goes off, chances are that you’ll still feel like writing and continue for another hour or so. Some writers who use this method don’t have the luxury of taking the entire hour in one go. They start the timer, write for 20 minutes or so, and then turn off the timer. Later in the day, they start the timer again and write for another segment of time, stopping and starting the timer each time they sit down to write until they have met their goal of one hour for the day.

Challenge Yourself

Some writers like to give themselves challenges, which are a little like New Year’s resolutions, but you’re more likely to adhere to a challenge. Here are a few examples:

- **365, or a daily post.** This challenge is especially popular with photo bloggers. The idea is that you will post daily. For photographers, that means at the end of one year, you’ll have posted 365 photos. The difficulty with this challenge is that it’s not easy to get an excellent shot every day. You can find several 365-photo challenges on Flickr and Tumblr.
- **52, or a weekly post.** This challenge gives you more time to post quality content and is a bit more reasonable than trying to post a blog a day.
- **5-day challenge.** Challenge yourself to post new blogs for five days straight.
- **Blog Month.** National Novel Writing Month occurs during November of every year. Participants challenge themselves to write a novel in a month (175 pages or 50,000 words). Give yourself a similar challenge to write 40,000 words in the month of your choice.

Create your own challenge that suits your style and available time. Make sure you’re up for any challenge you accept, and stay honest with yourself about whether or not the quality of your posts is suffering because you have steered yourself to complete the challenge. You don’t want to lose readership because you were afraid to let go of a challenge.



Give yourself a three-day challenge, writing a post a day for three days on related topics.

Organize a Blogging Critique Group

Meeting regularly with a critique group can help you improve your writing skills and obtain feedback on your blogs. Read Chapter 13, “Re-Vision,” for more details about working with critique groups.

Sustaining Readership

Blogs are a great medium for building community, developing relationships, and cultivating loyal readers. In the best of circumstances, your readers will be excited about the stories on the blog site, will comment freely, and will develop the habit of returning to your site again and again.

How can you gain and keep your readers’ respect and loyalty? Chapter 10, “A Refresher on the Rhetorical Modes,” offers guidelines to ensure that your readers find you a credible author. You’ll find a few more suggestions in the next section.

Writing Credible Blogs

If your readers suspect that you have ulterior motives or don’t have scruples, they will not want to be a part of your blog. To keep your readers’ trust, make sure you:

- Maintain high standards for your blog posts.
- Make every effort to avoid errors. If there is an error, correct it quickly.
- Provide fair and impartial opinions and reviews.
- If you are paid to endorse products or receive gifts from the manufacturer, disclose this information to your readers.
- Give attribution to any ideas or Web content that is not your original concept.
- Don’t stuff keywords into your content. If you write naturally for your audience, the content will automatically contain keywords. (If you’re not familiar with keywords, they help search engines find your content.) Although it’s important that your Web site and content are easily found, you don’t have to sacrifice good sentence structure for the sake of inserting a keyword.

Include a Bio

Your readers will appreciate a picture of you and a short bio on the Web site so they have a sense of who you are and why you are writing the blog. Make sure the bio somehow relates to the main theme of your blogs. For example, if your blog is about skateboarding, include in your bio some information about how you became involved in the sport.

try this

Ask a buddy to spend about an hour with you and explain that you will each write a draft of the other’s bio. Decide what type of information you want in your bio, and let your buddy know. You will each spend about 15 minutes interviewing the other. After asking several questions, each of you should write a first draft of a bio. Trade your work with your buddy. Then rewrite the draft, composing a bio that you can post on your blog site.

Include Information About the Site

Add information about your site so new readers can quickly understand the main focus of the blog.

Here are a few items you might include in the About section:

- A very brief, clear description of the blog site's main focus
- Who the main contributors are for the site
- The motivation for starting the site
- How long the site has been in existence

Include Guidelines for Reader Comments

Let your readers know that you welcome their comments, but also that you have a few guidelines they need to follow if they want you to post their comments. Make sure you moderate all comments to ensure a safe, fair environment on your site.

Encourage Reader Comments

Respond to reader comments quickly and frequently. Although Happy Talk is generally discouraged, when responding to readers, you'll want to be a little more chatty and sociable. If you use short, choppy sentences, the reader can interpret your responses as cold or negative. If the reader asks a question, don't just answer with one word, "No," or two words, "You cannot." Give a longer explanation. You might say something on the order of, "Thanks for your suggestion. We did try that tactic, and honestly, it didn't work out well because," and finish the sentence with the reason.

Here are a few more suggestions:

- Ignore rants and flames. If you try to respond to them, you'll get tangled up in someone else's emotional drama.
- Be gracious when someone corrects you.
- Keep an upbeat tone.
- Remember to praise and thank your readers for any ideas, creativity, enthusiasm, and encouragement.

The Eskimos had fifty-two names for snow because it was important to them; there ought to be as many for love.

—Margaret Atwood

Keep Content Fresh

Some bloggers republish older posts with a few new twists and a slightly different title. Your loyal readers have good memories, and you don't need to rehash old content if you have strategies for developing fresh content.

The main idea behind the following tactics is to mix it up by relying on multiple authors, media, genres, and storylines. The variety not only helps you to come up with more ways of posting, but keeps the delivery of your posts well paced and novel:

- **Collaborate with multiple authors.** Authors can contribute posts individually, or several authors can collaborate on single posts.
- **Ask guest authors to contribute.** Ask an expert on a topic related to your blog site's theme to write an article. You might also be a guest on another blog to get more exposure for your blog site.
- **Mix up the media.** Post photo blogs, vlogs (video blogs), podcasts, and animations.
- **Add posts with a variety of genres.** Add different types of posts, such as instructions, reviews and critiques, white papers, announcements, contests, and so forth.
- **Add feature stories.** If you've watched the *Rocky and Bullwinkle Show*, you know that each episode has regular features, such as *Bullwinkle's Corner*, *Mr. Know-It-All*, and *Dudley Do-Right of the Mounties*. Devise similar types of feature stories for your blog site with fresh content in repeated formats. For example, you might have a "Did you know?" blog that appears regularly with random, interesting facts related to your blog's theme. Another example might be a regular feature called "Mama's Kitchen" that features recipes and meals related to your blog's theme.
- **Follow your dreams.** Why not follow your wildest dreams and highest hopes with your blogging? If you're having fun composing the content, your audience will have fun reading it.

Pursue Your Passions

When you're having a blast researching and writing your blog, your readers will feel the excitement in your work. Writing for a responsive audience has a lot of rewards, but the best part is that you get to plan and execute all sorts of fun activities and adventures, and call it research for your blog.

Challenges

The best way to get better at writing Web content is to write, write some more, and rewrite. The challenges in this chapter focus on self-examination and writing blogs.

Freewriting

The freewriting challenge in this chapter asks you to practice writing with blogging in mind.

Freewriting works best when it is timed. If you tend to write quickly, set the timer for ten minutes. If you tend to take a little more time, give yourself 15 minutes. Remember that with freewriting you don't need to worry about accuracy, grammar, spelling, and so forth.

A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN



In her essay "A Room of One's Own," Virginia Woolf states, "... a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction." You can read the full text online at <http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks02/0200791.txt>.

Where is it that you work best? Write about your writing room or space. Describe what it looks like and smells like, and how you feel as you are writing in it. Is it messy or neat? Empty or full? Expansive or tiny? Do you have a formal desk? Do you write sitting up or lying down?

Suggested Exercise

Exercises are longer projects that will take more time to complete. You can find more complete instructions, learning outcomes, and criteria for critiquing your work at www.write4web.com.

POST A BLOG

Post a blog on a topic of your choice, or select one of the following suggestions for your topic:

- What will the World Wide Web look like in five years?
- Are blogs literature?
- If you were forced to write a blog a day on any topic, what would it be and why would you choose it?
- If you had to put only one bumper sticker on your car, what would it say?
- What sport or athletic activity do you enjoy? What are the main benefits of the sport?

Up Next

By now you probably have a good idea of what you want to write and some strategies to keep writing. The next chapter, “Re-Vision,” asks you to take a second and third look at stories you’ve written. Some say that writing is rewriting.