Blogs

What this handout is about

This handout provides some tips for starting a blog. It addresses choosing blog topics and layouts, composing posts, publicizing posts, and communicating with readers.

What is a blog?

Blogs are websites made up of short entries which one or more writers post over time. Most blogs have a unifying topic or theme, although the content and frequency of posts vary widely across the blogosphere. Some people blog for personal reasons (to share a hobby, to vent frustration, to keep friends and family updated about a study abroad experience, etc.). Others blog to establish a professional online presence.

Picking a topic for your blog

Blog topics can be broad (such as “international politics”) or narrow (such as “pictures of potato chips bitten into shapes resembling animals”). If you plan to start blogging in order to impress future employers with your online presence, you may want to choose a topic that is either directly or tangentially related to your field. But whether for professional development or just for fun, you should write about something that you know about, that you care about, and that someone else will want to read about.

The last of these principles is probably the most difficult. **Here are some general topic areas that tend to draw readers:**

* **How-to blogs.**  If you have a particular skill set to share (such as scrapbooking or troubleshooting computer software), readers may value tips and instructions.
* **Review blogs.** People often search the Internet for reviews of movies, video games, new technology, restaurants, etc. If you are a connoisseur of something, readers may find your opinions and insights helpful when making purchases or deciding on a dining location.
* **Issue blogs.**  If you have informed opinions on current topics, readers with a similar area of interest may appreciate hearing your perspective. Issue blogs often work well as professional blogs. For example, a teacher may blog about best practices in the field or education in the news. Issue blogs can get controversial, especially when they approach potentially inflammatory topics, such as politics. If you’re blogging under your own name, be aware that potential future employers will probably find your blog when they Google you—whether you want them to or not. Strongly stated controversial opinions and colorful language may or may not be a good idea, depending on your particular career plans.
* **Hobby and fan blogs.** Some blogs share ideas and information surrounding a particular area of interest. In many areas of interest, you would be joining a pre-existing blogging community. For example, cooking blogs exist in abundance, as do blogs about science fiction television series.
* **Personal blogs.** It can be tricky to create a blog of personal anecdotes that will draw followers beyond your friends and family. If wide readership is a goal for you, choose your anecdotes carefully. There are universal experiences that everyone can relate to: love, loss, embarrassment, etc. Make sure that your anecdote draws on such themes and that it has a story arc (a beginning, a middle, and an end) and a point. Humor also sells. For more detailed tips on writing personal anecdotes, check out Chapter 3 of Jerry Lanson’s Writing For Others, Writing For Ourselves.
* **Humorous blogs.**  Blogs in any of the above categories may be humorous. If you have a gift for humor and think it would be appropriate for the context of your broader topic, go for it!

Once you choose the theme of your blog, keep a running list of potential topics for posts. Often, ideas come up organically as you stumble across a compelling article or have an interesting conversation. It’s easier to write down the topics as you think of them and return to them later than it is to conjure a topic on the spot when you sit down to write a post.

Thinking about layout design

If you are not an experienced web designer, platforms like WordPress and Blogger provide design templates. Consider how each template makes you feel and which is most appropriate to complement the content of your blog. For example, bright colors and sharp angles strike a different tone than pastels and curved edges.  Look for a design that will be easy on the eyes and easily navigable for a reader.

Composing a post

**The following principles are important to consider in this genre:**

* **Have a point.** You may not have a “thesis” like an academic paper, but your reader should be able to easily identify your main point and to follow the organization of your narrative or argument. Like most good writing, a clear, interesting post will require some planning.
* **Apply your favorite writing strategies.** Many strategies that work well in formal academic writing also work well in other types of writing. Check out our “Writing the Paper” handouts for specific strategies for all stages of the writing process.
* **Create an appropriate tone.** Blogs are a conversational genre, less formal than journal articles or academic papers. Using first person is perfectly acceptable—even preferable. Still, it is important to consider the tone of your writing, especially if you plan to use your blog as a professional tool. Think about your intended audience and how you would communicate with them verbally. If this is a professional blog, how would you have a conversation with a coworker or an employer about your topic? What tone would you strike? It would probably be more relaxed than a formal paper, but more formal than a conversation with a friend at a party. In your post, try to replicate the tone and vocabulary of your imagined conversation.
* **Be concise and focused.** Readers are likely to skim your blog post, and you want the important information to jump out at them. Stick with one theme per post so as not to overwhelm your reader. If your post seems long, consider using subheadings or bullet points, as huge chunks of text can be daunting to potential readers.
* **Proofread for typos and spelling errors!** Careless mistakes can distract readers and may turn them off from your blog.

Including photos

Photos can grab a reader’s attention and make your posts more aesthetically appealing. Be careful with copyrighted material. The creative commons on [Flickr](https://www.flickr.com/creativecommons)has images that you can use if you give the photographer proper credit. [Wikimedia Commons](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Main_Page) also contains public domain images. Whatever images you choose, be sure to cite where they came from. You want any future employer who reads your blog to know that you are conscientious when using the work of others.

Getting readers

**These following strategies will help readers discover your blog:**

* Use other social media tools to promote your posts. You can tweet the link to your latest post or set it as your Facebook status.
* Think about keywords that people who are interested in your topic might use when searching the Web. Use these keywords in your post (or better yet, the title of your post) so that your blog pops up on search engines.
* Pay special attention to the title and opening line of each post. You want the snippet that a potential reader sees on their Newsfeed or Google search to intrigue them enough that they click the link.
* Keep your posts concise. Potential readers will likely be skimming through a number of websites. You don’t want them to get bored and leave your site or to miss important points that are buried in fluff or convoluted language.

Sparking conversation

Blogs are “social media,” and provide opportunities for you to converse with your readers. To make the best use of the medium, enable comments and respond when a reader asks you a question. You want the reader to be invested in the “conversation” of your blog so that they will continue reading your posts.

There are ways to encourage interaction from your readers. You can provoke an argument, stating your opinions on a controversial issue. You can ask questions and encourage readers to respond in comments. You can also include what many bloggers term a “call to action”: something for readers to do or think about after reading your blog post. This can be something simple (“Follow me on Twitter!”) or something that demands more substantial involvement (“Write to your congressman today!”). Even if your readers do not respond to you directly in comments, the action they take privately keeps them invested in your blog.

Works consulted

We consulted these works while writing this handout. This is not a comprehensive list of resources on the handout’s topic, and we encourage you to do your own research to find the latest publications on this topic. Please do not use this list as a model for the format of your own reference list, as it may not match the citation style you are using. For guidance on formatting citations, please see the [UNC Libraries citation tutorial](http://www.lib.unc.edu/instruct/citations/).

Lanson, Jerry. *Writing For Others, Writing For Ourselves: Telling Stories in an Age of Blogging.* Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011.

Wright-Porto, Heather. *Creative Blogging: Your First Steps To a Successful Blog.* Berkeley, CA: Apress, 2011.

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