

By Deb Shinder

Blogging is the new national pastime--not just for Americans, but for Internet-connected people all over the world. It's an activity that spans all age groups and occupations. There are personal blogs, social blogs, and professional blogs. Whatever the topic, someone has probably blogged it. Some of us get paid to blog and others pay for the privilege of blogging (on a particular site or with particular software).

The Internet made it possible for anyone to publish content to a worldwide audience. The Web log, or blog format, has made it easier and more convenient. But all blogs are not created equal. Some draw an eager following and others languish in obscurity. Regardless of your reason for blogging, you can make your blog better, more readable and--if it's what you want--more popular.

1 Define your purpose

The first step in creating a better blog is to ask yourself why you're blogging. What's the purpose of your blog? Is it to be a public version of the personal diary, recounting your experiences, thoughts, and emotions? Is it more of a journal, where you preserve ideas and outline projects? Is it a social site, for interacting with friends, sharing links, getting to know people? Is it an editorial page, for commentary on politics, social trends, and current events? Is it a professional or hobbyist site, for sharing conceptual and how-to information about some field of study or work (e.g., aviation, computer programming, or photography)?

Sure, you can have "just a blog" that combines elements of all of these, but you may find that readers prefer you to specialize. If you want to write about your field of expertise sometimes and your favorite political party at other times, it might be beneficial to maintain two separate blogs to avoid alienating or boring your readers half the time.

Speaking of readers, an important element in defining your purpose is to know your audience. That will help you determine the voice and writing style that's appropriate for those you're addressing. You probably wouldn't use the same style when writing to stock car race fans that you'd use if your audience were made up primarily of stock market brokers.

In keeping with your blog's purpose, you should have a defined theme. For example, if the purpose of your blog is to express political opinions, the theme might be to promote a low-tax, nonintrusive government.

2 Create visual appeal

Content isn't the only thing that matters. Your blog site should also be visually appealing, or at least visually neutral. You don't want to scare away prospective readers or have them leave in frustration because the page is distracting or unreadable.

The best visual design for the page is dependent in part on your audience and theme. You can use color, font styles, and graphics to set the mood and tone--just make sure the tone matches the content. Whatever your theme, it's best to avoid dark letters on a dark background, tiny or overly fancy typefaces, and other elements that make your blog hard to read.

If your blog is hosted on a public blog site, you may be limited in how much you can change the design, but there will usually be a number of preconfigured visual themes you can choose from. Keep audience appeal and readability in mind when selecting one.

3 Use the proper tools

You can create a blog using any WYSIWYG HTML editor, such as FrontPage (soon to be replaced by Microsoft Expression Web Designer), Macromedia Dreamweaver, or the Amaya open source editor endorsed by W3C. You can even use a text editor like Notepad to compose the HTML code.

However, blogging is made much easier, faster, and more convenient if you use a dedicated blogging program or the features of a blogging Web site that lets you compose posts in the Web browser or via e-mail.

If your blog is hosted on a free public blog site, such as [Blogger](#) or Windows [Live Spaces](#), you can write your posts in your e-mail client and send them to a special address you're given when you create your account. For many, this is the easiest way to post, although it doesn't show you the formatting.

Another alternative is to use a blog program such as WordPress, Movable Type, Post2Blog, or Windows Live Writer, which offer various useful features. For example, Windows Live Writer (free download at <http://windowslivewriter.spaces.live.com/>) lets you put a button on the toolbar in IE so that if you want your blog to reference a Web site you're visiting, you can highlight the text you want to quote and click Blog It. This opens Live Writer and inserts the link and the quoted text in your blog. You can publish to your blog on Live Spaces or other popular blogs with a single click.

4 Make it easy to navigate

If you're designing your blog site from scratch, it's important to make it easy for readers to get around and do what they want to do. For instance, if you're using comments and RSS feeds, make sure it's clear to readers how to post a comment or subscribe to the feed.

You should also make it easy for readers to find past posts. Make sure archives are organized logically--not just in chronological order but in categories to make it easier to find particular posts.

If your blog is hosted on a public blog site, you can usually change the arrangement of page elements, add or eliminate elements (often called modules), and otherwise influence the navigability of the page. Keep clutter to a minimum but be sure to include the elements that readers need.

Make your site searchable, if possible, so users can find posts using keywords. You can put a free Google search box on your site (for more information, see <http://www.google.com/searchcode.html#both>).

5 Stay in one place

Many bloggers experiment with different blog hosting sites and/or with hosting their own sites, especially early on in their blogging experience. It may take you awhile to find the best setup, but try to do so as soon as possible and then stay in one place so your readers can find you. Moving around to different URLs too often is sure to lose you some readers.

If you have an established blog and it's necessary to move it to a different address, try to publish a last post on the old blog that points readers to the new blog and leave it up as long as possible.

6 Engage your readers

Perhaps the most important factor in attracting and keep readers is establishing a relationship with them. Even interesting content is rendered less interesting if we don't know who's talking (writing) to us. Tell your readers who you are and something about yourself.

You need not go into a lot of personal details if your blog is political or professional, and in some cases you may not even want to reveal your real name (especially, for example, if you're posting derogatory information about your employer or the police chief in your small town). But don't just remain nameless; give readers a pseudonym by which to identify you and tell them generalities about yourself that will lend you credibility without blowing your cover. For instance, you might say that you're a middle-age male who lives in Texas and has worked in the telecommunications industry.

If you don't have a reason to keep your identity confidential, you may be able to benefit (attract the attention of headhunters in your field, become recognized as an expert in a particular area, etc.) by using your real name and providing contact information.

Regardless of whether you reveal your true identity, you can engage readers by interacting with them through the comments feature or by providing an e-mail address and responding to their input. You can, of course, use a free Webmail address or other alternative to your primary address if you want to protect your identity and/or avoid spam.

Engaging readers involves winning their trust and thinking of the reader first. If you make claims, back them up with cites and links. If possible, don't link to sites that require a subscription or even free registration (or if you must, warn readers).

7 Establish a blogging schedule

Blog readers are a fickle bunch. Once you've drawn an audience, they expect to find new content when they visit your blog. That doesn't mean you have to post every day, but you should establish a minimum blogging schedule and stick to it. Let readers know, preferably in a static text box at the top of your blog page, that you will update the blog daily, weekly, on Mondays and Fridays, or whatever. Then do it--even if some of your posts aren't particularly profound or long. Readers will abandon your blog if they think you've abandoned them.

If you need to deviate from your schedule (for example, you're going on vacation for two weeks or you'll be in the hospital or you have a family or job emergency), let readers know that you won't be posting at the regular time and give them an idea of when you'll be back.

8 Keep it concise

Speaking of posts that aren't particularly profound or long, don't think you have to wait until you have something brilliant to say before you post or put off posting because you don't have time to write *War and Peace* today. In truth, most readers have short attention spans and/or crowded schedules themselves and would prefer to read a short, pithy post rather than a long, complex one. If you do post lengthy pieces, break them up into short paragraphs to make them more readable. There's nothing more daunting to a reader than a huge mass of unbroken text, no matter how skillful your turn of phrase.

You'll also attract more readers with common words than with obscure ones, so unless you're writing for a particularly scholarly audience, follow the old KISS advice: Keep it simple, sweetheart.

9 Proofread before publishing

Even if you're an English professor, it's easy to end up with typographical errors, misspellings, and grammatical flaws in your posts if you don't proofread before you hit the Publish button. Especially if you're writing in the heat of passion or inspiration, your typing fingers can get ahead of your thoughts and cause words to be omitted or transposed, commas to appear in the wrong places, or sentences to become garbled.

Maybe you pride yourself on *not* adhering strictly to the rules, but presumably, you still want your readers to understand what you're saying. That complex sentence that seemed so brilliant in composition may read a little awkwardly once you see it on the screen.

It's difficult to catch mistakes in your own writing, because you tend to fill in what you thought you typed, rather than see what's really there. This is particularly true immediately after writing. If possible, have someone else proofread your post before you publish it. Otherwise, let it "cool off" for an hour or a day so you can approach it with a more objective proofreader's eye. And although it's best to catch mistakes before they're published, one huge advantage of Web content is that, unlike print copy, it's easy to change if you discover a problem after publication.

10 Go syndicate yourself

You don't have to wait for readers to come to your blog every day or every week. Instead, you can take your blog to them. Use RSS to feed your new blog posts to readers who sign up. This makes it easier for your readers, who don't have to remember to visit your blog Web site to check for new posts--and whatever makes it easier for readers is good for authors. You can syndicate just your post titles, short summaries, or entire posts. Most public blog hosting sites give you the option to syndicate your blog, and it's usually as easy as clicking a button or two in the configuration interface. If you want to syndicate your self-hosted Web site, see <http://www.xul.fr/en-xml-rss.html> for more information.

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