

USING BLOGS IN THE CLASSROOM SUPPLEMENT 2: BLOGGING BASICS (FOR STUDENTS)

Blogging Basics

Although nearly obsolete, it can be helpful to think about the original term web-logs. Blogs are a way of recording your thoughts online, and like any “log” they can take many different forms, from brief descriptions of ideas to a longer more diary-like narrative, and many styles in between. Blog content can contain text, still images, audio, video, links or some combination of these methods of communicating. While reading this guide, remember that your instructor will give you *specific* guidelines for how blogging will work in this particular course.

Writing a blog should include consideration of tone, visual rhetoric, links and community, chronology, revision, and posting frequency.

Let’s start with tone. You can create a particular tone in a blog entry using many of the same techniques you would use in any other piece of writing: attention to audience, voice, diction and description, etc. Because you are publishing online, you should also consider the following aspects of your post: length, spacing, interactivity, and spontaneity or thoughtfulness.

*** Length:** We are less willing to read long pieces online. The average reader will click away after reading 380 words—and that’s when reading about a topic in which they are already interested. Writing concisely online means that more people are likely to read your post. It also means that if you have something important to say, you should consider placing it close to the beginning of the post, and that you have a very limited space in which to “hook” your reader. Consider using the post title and/or the first sentence as ways to grab your reader and keep them from clicking away.

While some bloggers write at length, these tend to be people who: 1) have already attracted a loyal audience; 2) who are using the blog form as a personal record or diary; or 3) who alternate long and short posts and who expect that their readers may skip around on the blog.

You can add a jump to another page to keep the main page post visually short.

Readers will often skip longer posts that sound “institutional.” Some institutions deal with this by having distinct personalities for the different bloggers who contribute to a site, while others keep the tone consistent yet more casual no matter who is writing.

*** Spacing:** Because we tend to skim more online, consider writing shorter paragraphs and separating extremely important sentences or key points with white space, which makes them easier to read.

Use bulleted lists or make important sentences into their own paragraphs.

If you are quoting from other sources, you might consider ways to make those quotations stand out or find ways to visually highlight the fact that you are placing quotations in new contexts.

* **Interactivity:** Blog readers in the greater blogging community tend to fall into two categories: commenters or lurkers. Lurkers are readers who do not comment often, but who may visit the blog frequently. The question of how interactive you want a post to be is connected to the question of what kind of community you want to build around your blog. Do you want to invite comment or to encourage your readers to answer a poll, for example? In this case you might end your post by specifically asking for feedback. Writing posts that start conversations that continue in the comments is a good way to build a community of readers. You should also consider whether you will respond to these comments or participate in that conversation, and how.

For blogging in class, your instructor will tell you the expected guidelines for commenting and responding.

* **Spontaneity:** It's not considered unusual to write a bit more "off the cuff" in the blogging world. Readers are sometimes attracted to new media sources because of the feeling that they are hearing the most recent thoughts of the person writing, or because they get the most relevant information connected to current events. A spontaneous post can still be thoughtful, however, although it may take some time to develop this style. While some institutions are using blogs to inform their clients/supporters/fans about their status, these readers expect a more casual tone from online communication, and often appreciate the feeling that they are getting "extra" or "behind-the-scenes" information. Very short (one line!) posts can be fine if they accurately convey information to your intended audience.

* **Links and community:** Linking to other sites, especially to other blogs is the best way to create a community around your blog and to gain readers. Most serious bloggers track links and can tell when you have linked to them. They will often go look at your links (unless they are a huge site) and may become a reader. If you really admire another blog or web site, you can link to it in your blogroll—a list of links in the sidebar of your blog. Your instructor may choose to use the blogroll in another way; for example, all your classmates' blogs may be linked there.

* **Links in general:** Consider linking any phrase, word, or image to additional content that your reader might find useful. This is a very broad statement: while anything "could" be useful, linking every word is distracting and overwhelming. If you link an image, notify your readers in the caption. For example: "Click the image to link to www.colbertnation.com" Or credit the source in the caption another way – "Thanks to Stephen Colbert's Colbert Report for the image." It's also considered a breach of blog etiquette to mention another blogger or web site without linking to them.

* **Visual rhetoric:** While some bloggers are devoted to mainly text blogs, their numbers are diminishing. We are visual creatures, attracted to images. The use of images or videos can both engage the eye and provide information in a format different from or in conjunction with text. Briefly, consider using images or video when the image would do more work for you than text is able to accomplish in a short form, or where you have an image that would provide illumination, reference, humor, or interest—whichever fits best with your blog's tone and style. Always provide credit and a link to the image.

Here are a few other things to consider:

* **Chronology:** Don't constrain to a single post information that you consider important to readers. While you might write a post that contains this information, also place it in a sidebar or a static page of your blog. One example is "About me" information. Similarly, if you're continuing a discussion in a new post, link to the other posts where the previous discussion took place.

* **Revision:** Everyone makes mistakes, no matter how often you edit. After clicking "publish," however, you should consider that your readers have seen the post and will notice changes. Changing all but the smallest typos without notifying your readers erodes the authority of your blog. Use the strikethrough editing button to make any substantial revisions.

* **Frequency:** Blogs that are updated less than three times a week have a much more difficult time maintaining a consistent readership and building a community. As a medium, the defining aspect of a blog is the frequent updating of content. Most platforms easily allow you to schedule posts in advance.

* **Voice:** Finally, bring your own voice to your blog. Engage the class or the larger blogging community with your own astute observation, analytical insight or wry sense of humor. As mentioned, your instructor will give you more specific guidelines and expectations for blogging in a particular course.

Adapted in 2013 from Charlotte Boulay's original text