

A Beginner's Guide to Blogging

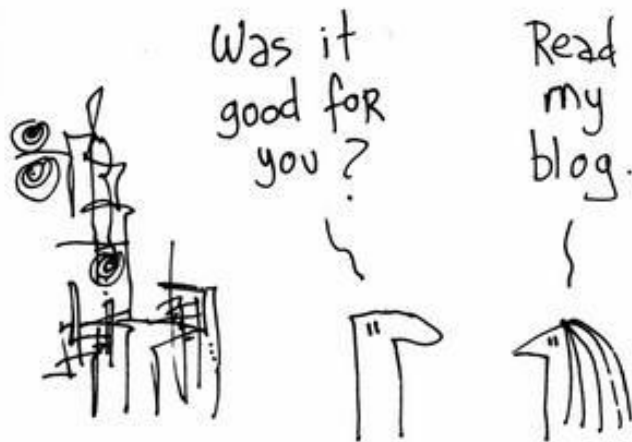


Image: Hugh Macleod, [Gaping Void](#)

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Welcome

Welcome to A Beginner's Guide to Blogging, a five part introductory guide which will:

- Demystify and show you an overview of web 2.0 technologies for online publishing
- Offer you practical advice to help you set up your first blog with technical options and considerations for developing your content and approach
- Show you some great blogs and self-publishing projects to see how others are doing it for themselves

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This guide is produced by [digital consultant](#), a creative, networked UK consultancy which helps independent businesses successfully use and profit from the web and digital tools, and provides business consultancy to the digital industries.

I'd welcome your feedback on this publication to inform future revisions. Please [contact me](#) with your thoughts or add to the comments of [this guide online](#).

I do hope this guide inspires you to launch and grow your first website or blog.

Susi O'Neill

Director, digital consultant

Part 1: So what's all this blogging and web 2.0 stuff about anyway?



Image: [Ben Sheldon](#)

As an introduction to the overall context of blogging, I'd heartily recommend you to read [this brilliant illustrated article on blogging for creative people by Pete Ashton](#).

The history of blogging

Blogging is a term used to describe independent website publishing. Blogs have been around since the mid-1990s; they started off as diaries for people who enjoyed sharing their lives with their friends or in public. [Live Journal](#) was one of the first big blogging networks. Blogging took off in a major way in 2004 when services like [Blogger](#), [Typepad](#) and [WordPress](#) offered hosted blog services for free which made it easy for anyone who could use a computer to learn how to become a web publisher and connect their written ideas to the world.

Blogs have since been used to report and share everything from reporting on human rights violations in Burma to [Belle De Jour](#) (later made into a TV drama) and [Girl With A One Track Mind](#) - two notorious London sex bloggers.

Blogs are a critical part of the landscape of [citizen journalism](#) – meaning anyone who is there and can report it can transmit news back to the world, becoming a journalist. Some journalists believe citizen journalism (blogging and self-publishing) are demoting the skills and training of traditional journalism. Others have found new ways of earning a living from blogs, creating new relationships with their readers.

Web 2.0 and user-generated content

Blogging is also part of a term you may have heard of – [Web 2.0](#) or the semantic web. Web 2.0 basically means that instead of publishing (or broadcasting) content like traditional media, websites are more iterative, allowing for conversations and [user-generated content](#) (UGC). This over-used term is used to describe video publishing channels like [YouTube](#). People are able to create content their own content and

broadcast it directly to an audience, often through **mashup** by freely using (and stealing, according to current copyright law) other material to create their own works, like [this techno remix of the Cillit Bang advert](#). [BBC Backstage](#) is an example of the broadcaster opening up part of their archive for viewers and developers to create their own remixed content legally. Allowing others to re-use and re-purpose your content is also a form of [open innovation](#) and open-source ways of working.

Although the quality is rarely of a professional standard, **user-generated content** can still attract audiences in their thousands - if not millions – and this peer-interactivity particularly appeals to children and young people. This has major implications for the traditional media industries like TV, radio, newspapers and publishing.

Influence and amplification

Blogs are part of the phenomena of the [amplified individual](#) – someone who has a far reach and influence on a large network (like style gurus or the cool kids at school). Brand owners and content creators are increasingly realising that, along with the traditional press, they need to reach these amplified individuals (who are described by [David Bausola](#) as 'the first one hundred passionate users') who can seed positive approval and recommendation within their network. This can spread a marketing message virally through user recommendation and is thought to be increasingly more effective today than traditional advertising and some print PR. Some commentators think [it's how Obama won the presidential elections](#).

Proving your expertise

In 2008 [Paul Boutin](#) wrote in technology-style magazine *Wired* that blogging is 'so 2004' as [Flickr](#), [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#) et al have all but killed it. Boutin is right in that just updating people about what you are doing isn't so necessary nowadays – [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#) are far more immediate ways of doing this. But blogging can be an important part of your business strategy. Blogging not only tells (and proves) what you do but shows your prospective clients you have talent, expertise and passion for your work. [English Cut](#), the Saville Row tailor, moved from near-bankruptcy to grow a successful tailoring house with a long waiting list after connecting with customers through his blog and explaining his fine art of tailoring.

Blogging isn't like broadcasting; it's not about the numbers of readers you can attract but it's about the quality of those readers and the relationship you have with them. Old blogging joke ([apologies to Andy Warhol](#)): **the internet is making everyone famous for 15 people**. One hundred passionate, dedicated followers of your blog (some may have their own blogs with one hundred passionate, dedicated readers of their own) can easily lead to an augmented, amplified network where you can quickly become known as the top expert in your area of specialism. Blogging can help build trust and rapport – people are able to understand you (and you others) from reading just a few posts or lines about what you do and how you think.

Some successful bloggers are also writers and journalists, others are expert professionals, others are just people with a passion for what they blog about. It's all about **conversations** and **connections** and the blog, like other social platforms from the playgroup to the pub, enable them to happen.

How to start

The crucial thing with blogging is to JDI (Just Do It!); write something to get your ideas down. It's an imperfect medium so don't spend too long crafting every word and thought. With blogging there is no style guide or production format – there are no rules so make it up as you go along. Initially you won't have many readers so you can learn and make mistakes as you go along. A simple writer's trick is to draft it, then go away – maybe check your email or take lunch – then come back, proof, change then publish.

Your ideas are now live. Unlike print publications, it's easy enough to go back and edit and change what you've written if you want to correct typos, change things or add updates to your post.

Intertextuality

Blogging is all about [intertextuality](#) and the [hyperlink](#) – a fancy term to say linking to other stuff on the web. If you're talking about a person, company or source, rather than describe it all just add a link which explains it and people can go there if they want to find out more. If you link to someone else's blog they'll usually get a [ping back](#) too which tells them you've linked. I find linking very time consuming and it's my least favourite part of blogging, but I know it's important to add links as you go along so all your readers are on the same page (or screen) and understand your references.

Less is more

[Pete Ashton has some handy advice on blogging length](#): **Joanne Geary**, a local paper journalist, received 34 comments on her article '[why most news doesn't need journalists](#)' – far exceeding the short word-count of the original article. Joanne's blogging prowess quickly led to [an offer to work on the digital team for The Times](#) in London – proving blogging can be good news for your career.

Blogging isn't usually about the definitive expert article – although academics like MIT's [Henry Jenkins](#) are great at this, using blogging as a mechanism for transferring and transmitting ideas that would previously have stayed inside the institution. Think of it more as creating a multitude of 'works in progress' to inform the development of your ideas and to feed your network of contacts with regular updates.

Don't try to say everything in a blog post – just maybe saying one thing on your subject, or comment on one activity or situation. Think of a blog post as a very short story. It's all about relevancy: people now suffer from **data overload** – the online universe creates too much information to take in, and readers will pick out headlines that appeal to them, those which meet their interests or solve their problems. Keep your posts succinct and avoid posting dozens of articles per week. Use a truthfully descriptive but catchy subject line.

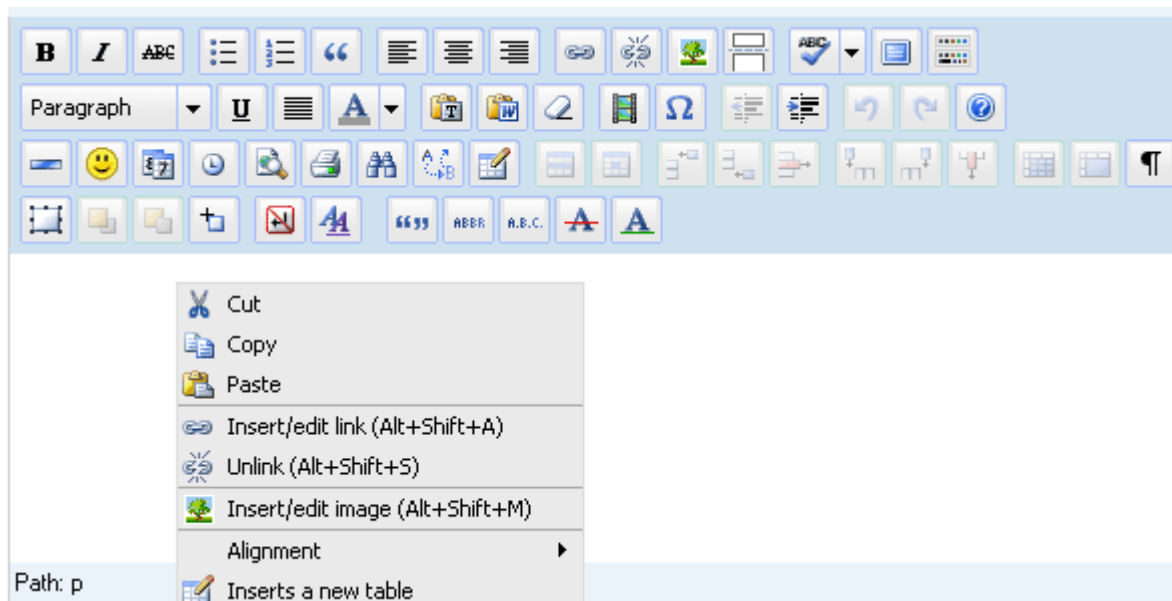
Starting a conversation

More so than traditional media, the web is an active and interactive medium; you can use a blog not just to tell but to share and discuss. Blogs are usually enabled with comments turned on (you can turn them off if you choose to, or for the company background pages of your blog). Engage with other people's blogs to start a conversation with them, which will help build connections, your status as an expert, and creates links back to your own blog.

Part 3: Online editing: structure, categories and tagging

Using a web page editor

All blog platforms use a **WYSIWYG** (what you see is what you get) text editor which looks a bit like this:



If you have drafted your blog post in **Word**, I would recommend to cut and paste the text and put it into **Notepad**, as Word adds in lots of formatting than can make your blog look nasty when you publish because web pages are created in a language called **HTML** which doesn't speak the same lingo as Microsoft's Word.

Don't add lots of formatting like **bold** and *italics* or **different fonts** into Word as you'll lose it all when you add it into the web page editor. It's a real pain :- (You can then add links (tip: remember to select 'open in new window' if the link is external site, i.e. NOT to another page on your website), and add **bold to emphasis keywords**.

The web works best as a multimedia platform so adding images and video with a caption or description is a good idea. If you don't own a picture yourself you can hyperlink to a picture on an existing website (on a PC right mouse-click then select 'copy image location') like the pictures above. It's best practice to add a credit underneath to the photographer or site it's taken from. If the copyright owner takes offence and writes to you, be sure to remove their image immediately.

Page structure

Unlike a newspaper, people ruthlessly scan blog articles looking for sections that match their interests so you need to structure the content well. Firstly, the title needs to be compelling so people are likely to stop scanning their RSS feed or scrolling down the site and stop and click. It should describe accurately what your post is about but make it fun, intriguing or relevant.

Keep to **short paragraphs** - no more than eight lines in each. Use plenty of sub-headings (H2 and H3 in the

editor) to break up the text. Add links frequently, but not every few words – curate the reader to just the most useful things they may want to know about next. Videos hosted on [YouTube](#) often have an option to embed the video onto your site.

Keywords, tagging and categories

You will often hear keywords discussed by **search engine optimisation** (SEO) specialists and other web geeks. [Here's an article all about it](#), but as a novice blogger for now don't be too concerned – just remember to include the main words people may use in a search engine or everyday parlance in key places in your post like the title and first paragraph.

More importantly, you need to add **tags** which are keywords to describe the article. This is so website search engines can find your article, and search engines within blogging network create 'trending topics' based on frequently used tags.

For example, this page is about:

Tags: keywords, tags, tagging, web, categories, editing, wysiwyg

You also need to create **categories** within your blog; this helps people to find and navigate around your content. It could be 'business', 'personal', 'case studies' or whatever suits you (and you can easily change it later).

Part 4: Tech Talk - RSS and selecting your blogging platform

Using an RSS Reader

Most people will read your blog using an **RSS reader**. **RSS** (Really Simple Syndication), also called **feeds**, is a way of reading a number of blog feeds from one webpage. RSS automatically updated the latest blogs feeds straight to your desktop. You can also monitor news and job listings easily using RSS. More and more sites now offer feeds, which you can identify by a small button usually orange, like this:



It usually says next to it either **RSS** or **XML**. To read the feed you need an **RSS reader**. [Internet Explorer has a built in RSS reader](#) and [Google Reader](#) is the version for Gmail which are two of the easiest to use. [Here's a review of some other popular RSS readers](#). The advantage of using RSS to read blogs and other news feeds is it allows you to take in a greater volume of information and search through that information far more quickly and efficiently than by email.

RSS feeds allow you to create [web mashups](#) – you can add feeds to your own website or Google Homepage, websites like Channel 4's [Who Needs The Sea](#) links in content from Media Guardian and other sources. [Yahoo Pipes](#) is a service that allows you to create websites just made up of links from other sources.

Platforms for blogging

There are five technical options worth consideration for your first blog which are described in more detail below. To decide which one to use will depend mainly on your level of technical skill and what the main content is of your blog. Here are five options, described in more detail below:

1. Free online blog services

Various free services exist to help you start blogging by using nothing more complex than a computer keyboard and a web browser, like [Blogger.com](#) or [WordPress.com](#).

2. Self-hosted blog software

[Blogger](#), [WordPress](#) and other blogging tools are available as a free open-source download which you can host in your own web space. Be aware that setting this up requires a small amount of web know-how but the development and design options are far more versatile.

3. Vlog – a video blog

A vlog is a video diary; [vlogging](#) is video blogging. Your video could be shot on a mobile phone or mini DV camera and uploaded and hosted on a video hosting website like [vimeo.com](#) or [youtube.com](#). Due to the issues of streaming and hosting video, I recommend a hosted service over a self-hosted option.

4. Photo blog

If you'd rather tell your story in pictures instead of words, a photo blog is a great way to do it. You could use a regular blog platform like [Blogger.com](#) or [WordPress.com](#) to upload photos, but a photo sharing

service is a may better way to do this. Flickr.com is the daddy of photo-sharing services - you can add pictures, categorise them and add captions that can be several hundred words long.

5. Micro-blogging

Services like **Facebook updates** or Twitter are 'micro-blogging' - Twitter allows you to send short updates up to 140 character - that's the same length as one mobile SMS message - to your friends and network and is good for having conversations and sharing links.

How to use Blogger and WordPress

The two most popular blog platforms are Blogger.com and WordPress.com. Both offer an advert-free hosted online service which you can set up in a matter of minutes. Both also offer a version of their software to download and host on your own site, which you can tweak it if you know a bit about web development. See WordPress.org's famous five minute installation guide.

Generally, Blogger.com (owned by Google) is thought to be easier to use than WordPress.com, although WordPress has a number of plugins (free and charge-for) which can enhance the functionality of your blog. In fact, WordPress is so advanced that many commercial and non-profit companies use it in preference for building websites as the **Content Management System** (CMS) is more powerful than those developed by many web agencies. [Here's one I helped to set up for the social enterprise Ecoworks](#) in just a few hours.

You can use WordPress for creating a regularly website too with **pages** instead of **posts** which form static pages like a normal website. You can also mix both static pages with posts in your own blog. I've used both Blogger and WordPress and actually find WordPress easier and way more versatile, with prettier templates. It's the more 'serious' one bloggers use, but you can't install adverts on the hosted version whereas you can with Blogger.

The free hosted versions of both have a limited number of templates called 'themes', which you can easily change when you want; the version you host yourself can give you unlimited options for design and functionality.

Video blogging

Vlogs (video blogs) often range from slick produced commercial video shorts to to crude, unedited clips of someone talking directly into the camera and expressing their opinions which you'll see referenced in interactive dramas like KateModern and LonelyGirl15 (originally created for YouTube). Video can be used to enhance your text blog, or you can set up a channel on a major hosted video platform like YouTube (the big one) or Vimeo (generally a bit quieter and more serious). [See how to create a YouTube channel](#).

To create a channel, you just create an account and start uploading videos which can be in any of the major digital video formats. You may want to compress the video yourself to get a better version, but the website will heavily compress your video to enable it to be streamed. Note: there are limitations on copyright material, nudity and some videos have even been taken down for featuring copyright music in the background. With free platforms, you have to play by their rules (and sometimes their unfathomable whims).

If you intend to create a video diary, the key is to focus less on quality and, like text blogs, more on compelling but brief content. An optimum length for an 'episode' is two to five minutes the length of a pop video promo; interviews can work in longer form but people tend to 'scan' (fast-forward) online video much like they do text.

Vlogs to check out:

[Rocketboom](#) is a three-minute daily video weblog based in New York City covering information and commentary ranging from top news stories to quirky Internet culture with a heavy emphasis on international arts, technology and weblog drama. It is created on a shoe-string budget but can engage with large audiences. Unlikely the 'uni-directional' TV news, the web platforms allows for deeper engagement and conversations with an international audience.

My secret indulgence on YouTube – [TDKnuckle](#) – a 16 year old comedian who makes funny and very professional little videos and has thousands of fans. If I was a teenager today I'd never want to watch children's TV again once you've explored YouTube – TV made by young people for young people – [as an old sketch in The Young Ones once predicted!](#)

Two other vlogging services to check out:

[Qik](#) live video broadcasting from your mobile to the web - this is generally best for 'live broadcast' stuff, you could have a Qik session and invite your peers and friends.

[Blip.tv](#) - entertainment website with user generated content (better quality than YouTube) offering with an advertising revenue share – one to watch for video producers.

Flickr for photo diaries

Firstly, check out [photographer Kirsty Hall's guide to using Flickr](#) and the [Flickr FAQs](#). Flickr is owned by Yahoo so you'll need a Yahoo login (which is free) to access the service. When you upload your photos add good captions and **tags**, this is part of the Flickr community to allow others to find your images (although you can choose that only your Flickr friends can see your pictures if you want). You may also want to consider releasing your images under a [Creative Commons](#) license – this allows you to let others use your images under conditions you set – like **non-commercial but attributable**. Many photographers have found Flickr and the Creative Commons license a great way to get noticed and sell pictures to magazines and websites.

Twitter and micro-blogging

[Twitter](#) started out as a phenomenon amongst teenagers who used SMS style updates through their mobiles and the Twitter.com website to inform what they were up to and co-ordinate meet-ups. It's become popular amongst web geeks and now brands, CEOs and other early adopters are getting in on the action. Read [Tim O'Reilly's blog: Why I love Twitter](#).

It's also become something of a medium for self-promoting celebrities, brands and businesses too – both those seeking to connect with local as well as global audiences. There's even services like [Yammer](#) – known as 'enterprise micro-blogging' - a sort of internal Twitter service for businesses which helps team members stay in touch with each other using short-form messaging.

All you do is send a message, of a maximum of 140 characters, answering the question 'what are you doing?'. Twitter is less about telling a story and more about communication – making connections, friends – and customers. It allows you to practically tell people what you're working on, listening to, where you're going or post links to items of interest (like a new post on your blog). For people who love to chat but like writing less, it's proved to be a powerful medium with Tweets (Twitter posts) frequently cited as a means for disseminating ideas rapidly, getting rapid answers to question or solve problems from your Twitter network, and getting to know people (online or 'real world') a little bit better.

Why not check me out and follow me on Twitter? I'm [@susioneill](#).

Part 5: Blogging resources

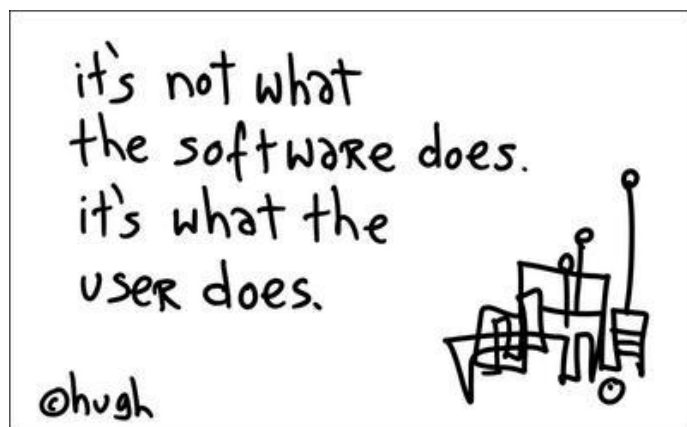


Image: Hugh Macleod, [Gaping Void](#)

Thanks for reading the guide. I hope it's inspired you to think more about establishing your own blog or using blogging within your own social networks or website. Here are a few more articles and website I'd recommend looking at, particularly if you're a creation business or practitioner.

Articles about blogging:

Merlin Mann: [What Makes for a Good Blog?](#)

4Talent magazine: [Anatomy of a Blog Series](#)

CopyBlogger: [The ultimate blogger writing guide](#)

Web Guild: [Beginners guide to using Twitter](#)

Blogs worth reading:

[Ash10](#) - Pete Ashton's digital and social media consultancy

[Copyblogger](#) - advice for copywriters and digital authors

[Seth Godin](#) - the guru of permission marketing online

[Boing Boing](#) - fun stuff, weird stuff, techno stuff, interesting stuff

[Lateral Action](#) - deeper thinking posts on creative industries and creative thinking

[T Shirts and Suits](#) - David Parrish's savvy advice for business thinking for creative businesses

Good luck with your blogging - unleash the geek from within! I look forward to reading about and seeing your experiences in glorious hyperlink. If you've used this guide to create your own blog, [please add a link in the comments online](#) to share with others or [contact me](#).

Susi O'Neill

Director, digital consultant

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Website/Blog: www.digitalconsultant.co.uk Twitter: www.twitter.com/susioneill