

Best Practices for Bloggers: Dimensions for consideration

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Blogs are diverse in their subject matter. There are blogs about a broad range of topics using a broad range of tones and styles to give the site character. They have near universal reach across topics. Despite their broad ranging scope, blogs share some formal qualities and elements that make them stand out among other kinds of web sites. Blogs are web sites with regularly updated entries in the form of posts with the most recently updated information at the top of the page (Walker Rettberg, 2008). Posts may contain text, links, images, and/or other media such as video clips, sound files, or Flash movies. Beyond the basic unit of the post, other blogging elements include post titles, timestamps, blogrolls, and 'about' pages. These formal qualities and elements compose a minimal definition of blogs. This definition is not exhaustive, nor is it exclusive. To alleviate this confusion, Jill Walker Rettberg (2008) defines blogs as a medium itself, rather than a genre within the overarching single medium of the Internet. For the purposes of this discussion we agree. Bloggers choose to work within a set of technical affordances and constraints enabled by blogging software (Walker Rettberg, 2008). From there, bloggers and their readers may recognize different genres of blogging in the medium. Each choice of medium, then genre, limits or directs the blogger toward certain style and content choices. There are many exceptions, and there are many opportunities to challenge these directions in blog style.

In this guide for best practices in blogging, we propose several dimensions for navigating the affordances and constraints of the medium, the limitations of genre, and the convergences of style. Within each dimension we pose a number of questions to illustrate ethical implications of blogging. Constructing and maintaining a blog, regardless of its genre or style, requires that consequences be considered in the following categories: transparency, attribution, responsibility, face, text, truth, and citizenship.

These categories are not mutually exclusive. Questions are repeated as they take on a different sensibility depending on the approach, and may be answered differently in different categories. There is no set of best practices that will at once cover all genres and styles of blogs and hold enough definition to provide clear guidance. So, we offer this set of dimensions and questions to consider.

Transparency

Many blogs encourage a level of transparency not found in other media. Authors can post items much more quickly than in other media (such as newspapers) as Andrew Sullivan (2008) notes, and a sort of conversation often develops between the blog's readers and its author(s). Blogs offer the ability to link to primary sources while offering the author's own commentary on a particular topic, thus encouraging audience members to draw their own conclusions regarding the topic under discussion. While transparency for different blogs will vary by purpose and genre, we've included a list of questions below that we believe are important for authors to consider as they create and maintain their blogs.

- (1) Will my blog be public or private? Depending on the purpose of your blog, you may choose to make it private, or restrict access to it to only a few people. Some organizations (like news outlets) might want to monetize their blog(s) and require sign-in before allowing access. Of course, this will also restrict your potential audience (and may alienate those who view blogs as essentially public forums), so this is an important consideration.
- (2) Should I be anonymous, use a pseudonym, or my real name when I blog? For the most part, we recommend using your real name when you blog. This provides additional credibility and accountability for the postings you create, and assures your audience of your willingness to stand behind your writing. However, there are times when using a pseudonym or remaining anonymous may be useful. This is particularly true for blogs where the material being discussed is of a sensitive nature, or where the blogger might face repercussions for the material being posted (for example, posting material about one's job that might hurt the company's reputation). It is important to remember that while blogs themselves can be written anonymously, it can be possible to trace the author if care is not taken to anonymize the blog's DNS (Domain Name System) record, etc.
- (3) Will I allow others to comment on my postings? This depends on your blog's purpose. Again, if it is a personal journal (like many hosted on the [LiveJournal](#) web site), you may not choose to allow others to comment on your posts. However, this places some artificial limits on your audience and eliminates the participatory nature of blogging, which may not make allow you to reach or grow a wide readership base.
- (4) Will I moderate comments on my postings? Comments can be important ways for your audience to communicate with you and with each other. However, depending on the topics you discuss on your blog (and whether or not you are writing as an individual or representing a larger organization or institution), you may decide to have comments sent to you for your approval before they are posted. You may want to moderate for a number of reasons. Comments can run the gamut from insightful, to controversial, to inflammatory, to spam, and everything in between. You may have community standards or legal obligations to control the content available on your blog, so considering how you will handle content posted by others and how you will facilitate dialogue between audience members will be an important consideration. Moderation of this content can take different forms. You may choose to simply approve or disapprove comments as they are submitted, or you may choose to approve all comments with some simple editing that preserves the integrity of two-way conversation without endorsing the particular ideas contained in a comment. For example, the author(s) can disemvowel (removing vowels in the comment) or otherwise mark comments if the blog owner considers them to be inappropriate for the discussion (Please see #16 and #18 below for more on moderating techniques and types of comments you may want to consider moderating). Whatever technique you choose for your blog, a clear policy statement should be posted. In your policy statement, clearly outline the criteria for acceptable and unacceptable commenting behavior, and include a list of consequences for inappropriate commenting (e.g., will the post be edited, deleted, deleted and replaced by a note indicating the reason for deletion, etc?). While moderating ensures that you

have final control over what is published on your blog, it means additional time to vet comments and create a lag in the conversation among your audience members.

- (5) Should I allow advertising on my site? This depends on a number of factors: the nature of your blog (personal, journalistic, hobby-focused, commercial, etc.); the nature of your audience; and your own comfort level with advertising. Blogs of a more personal nature may be perceived as odd or a bit unauthentic if advertisements are peppered throughout postings about one's personal life. Hobby-focused and commercial blogs are probably the easiest ones to make the case for advertising, as the former might provide ad space for specific product/services recommended by the blog's author. Certain commercial blogs might also logically include advertising; however, it is important that blog content provides more value than just promoting the company's product(s). It's also important to note that the kind of advertising that appears on your site may be out of your control. For example, while Google AdWords service may allow you to specify categories of ads you're interested in including, it is unlikely that you will be able to specify or exclude certain products or companies from advertising on your blog. This makes some bloggers uncomfortable, while others do not care. If you choose to accept advertising on your site, we recommend including this information in some sort of disclosure statement.
- (6) What about sponsorship or profit-sharing links? Again, this is highly dependent on the kind of blog. Sponsorship can be a good compromise, as it allows a blogger more control over the kind of products and companies s/he is promoting. This is especially useful for hobby-focused blogs where readers might appreciate learning more about the products, services, or resources the blogger finds useful (for example, linking to particular books on Amazon.com where the blogger receives a small percentage of the sales if a person purchases the recommended book). Again, information about this sort of linking practice should be included in a disclosure statement.
- (7) What about including a disclosure statement for my blog? We recommend creating an "About" page that includes a brief biography of the blog's author(s), contact information, and a disclosure statement that includes information about how comments are handled, what (if any) information is tracked about your readers, etc. Be clear about your intentions for blogging. For fiction bloggers, it is important to indicate that the content is fiction, or performative. For financial bloggers, it's particularly important to provide your audience information about your financial interest in any of the companies that you may blog about. If you author a professional blog, include information about the organizations for which you work/support may help your audience understand your perspective and give them a better sense of how this shapes your perspective.
- (8) Should I track visitors to my blog? Collecting basic information about your visitors using web tracking tools (where your visitors are coming from, referring pages, etc.) is common practice online, and it's likely that your audience is used to this sort of information being collected about them elsewhere online. We recommend that you

create a specific list of the ways in which you track your audience and add this to your disclosure statement so it's easily accessible if individuals have questions.

Attribution

Attribution practices in blogging help readers, sponsors, and bloggers evaluate information found on blogs. Different readers look for different things in different types of blogs to evaluate the veracity of what's posted there. Attribution is how a blogger situates his or her work in reference to other work - how he or she points to others in creating their own statements. The attribution styles reflect practices common within different genres of blog. For example, more formal attribution and citation styles are employed by journalism blogs. These blogs borrow from journalistic writing styles in other print and broadcast media. More casual styles of attribution are used in other blog genres borne from personal diary or scrapbook style blogs. How you choose to notate attribution in your blog depends on the community you want your blog to fit into. Regardless of what style or technique you choose, attribution calls for reflection on how and why you may point to others' work within your own.

- (1) What are my responsibilities to my sources? Sources can be considered two ways: as informants, or as source material. Balancing the protection of your informant with your responsibility to reveal information to your readers is difficult. Your source may want to remain anonymous, or may insist upon proper attribution for the work you are borrowing. If you are bringing information into the public for the first time (e.g., posting comments from a personal interview), we recommend that you ask permission. People perceive a difference between circulating information privately or offline and circulating information online. Your source may not be comfortable being named on your blog. Keep in mind that identity can be revealed in many ways. There are ways you may reveal the identity of your source without naming names. If your source requests anonymity, you must do your best to accommodate. We encourage linking to primary source material where possible, as this encourages a broader conversation with your audience about the topic at hand.

- (2) How should I cite source material? You should always cite sources for any material you are quoting, paraphrasing, or otherwise borrowing from someone else. The style you choose to use should follow from what is common in your blogging genre. If you are citing a source from the web, a link and proper attribution is in order. Depending on the genre in which you blog, more links may be expected. Many blog genres are social arenas, and bloggers are expected to situate their work, using contextual links, in reference to other information on the web. Be aware that some web masters may not want to be linked to you. Links are not simply a connection; they carry meaning depending on how you frame the link from your blog. The linkee may not appreciate your frame and may request that you remove the link. When using others' images, video, or other creative content, a link may not be enough to properly cite the work. You may be violating [copyrights](#). We recommend that you always cite your source material, and heed takedown requests you may receive. When looking for source material to include in your blog posts (e.g., images, video, audio, etc), look for hints about attribution requests by the original poster. The copyright owner may have posted a [Creative Commons](#) license agreement for you to use, or

may indicate how s/he wants her or his work cited on the web. We also recommend that you use the many Creative Commons spaces online that act as open repositories for creative content for which authors allows varied use of material and give specific instructions for attribution.

Responsibilities

Like most authors, bloggers are most likely writing with some sort of audience in mind. Those readers may not agree with everything you have to say, but you have a responsibility to make what you say up-to-date, navigable, accessible and socially aware. As a blogger you are responsible to your audience, to your sponsors, to the institutions you blog for, and to the community you create with reader comments.

- (1) How often should I blog? Whether you blog frequently or infrequently depends on the kind of blog. Frequently updated blogs can build and maintain an audience more easily. However, that audience comes to rely on frequent updates, and can be easily disappointed if the post rate drops significantly. Infrequent blogging can make it hard to build a reliable audience in the early stages, but can give you the time you need to determine the character of your blog as you get started. The frequency with which you blog depends on the genre and the topic(s) you cover, the expectations of your audience in that field, and possibly the expectations of your sponsors or employers.

Use category/tags/titles wisely to encourage readership. Blogs that cover several topics, or have many posts can be difficult to navigate. Readers may want to view only certain topic-related posts, or search for posts in an archive. Using categories and tags can help readers read more selectively or search through archives more effectively. We recommend creating a limited set of categories that make sense to you *and* to your readers. Depending on your genre, topic, and readership, categories may be predetermined, or may become clear to you after you have been blogging for a while.

- (2) How do I make my blog accessible? Accessibility can mean several things ranging from browser compatibility to syndication to [Section 508 compliance](#). It is best practice to check browser compatibility. Your blog may include special design elements that do not resolve properly in all browsers. Double check your design and indicate compatibility when necessary. Many blog readers read blogs through a central tool. Rather than navigating to a blog's URL, the reader will pull newly updated content from your blog and others to display in an aggregator or feed reader. The reader pulls updates from the blog through a Real Simple Syndication (RSS) feed. RSS standardizes blog content formats to deliver to a reader. RSS feeds can be formatted to contain all or some of the blog content, and can include ads. Since many readers of blogs use aggregators to skim many blogs in one location, it is best practice to enable them to access your content via their aggregator.

Blogs should also be accessible to people with disabilities. If you blog for a federal agency in the U.S., receive federal funding for your blog, or are under contract with a

federal agency your blog must comply with [Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act](#) - the Federal Electronic and Information Technology Accessibility and Compliance Act. Commercial blogs are encouraged to follow accessibility guidelines set by the [World Wide Web Consortium's](#) (W3C) [Web Accessibility Initiative](#) (WAI).

- (3) How do I protect the privacy rights of my readers? Bloggers should commit to protecting the privacy rights of their readers. If you collect personal information, specify the way it will be used. Indicate whether or not the information gathered will be shared with a third party including hosts, advertisers, and traffic trackers. [TRUSTe](#) provides a Model Privacy Disclosures document to help in crafting a privacy policy. Privacy policies are particularly important on any blog that enables interaction. If you enable comments on your blog, either through your host or via a third party comment tool, you should indicate to the reader what information is required to interact with the blog, and how that information will be reused (by whom).
- (4) Do blog readers expect a level of courtesy in postings and comments? Blog readers do expect a level of courtesy in postings and comments. Your policy statement should include a description of common courtesies you'll follow in posting, and that you expect readers to follow in comments. It is common to find a list of behaviors that are encouraged and discouraged. Bloggers often list the qualities of comments that are encouraged, those that are discouraged, and those that will be processed by a moderator. Moderators may use different techniques in dealing with comments that do not comply with the comment guidelines. Some blogs request encoding of spoilers to keep content hidden to those who may stumble upon it; some blogs add editor comments to reader comments in response to comment policies; some blogs delete contents entirely replacing the deleted post with a notice from the editor.

Whatever technique you choose to handle comments, be clear about posting it so readers have access to the guidelines. Comment moderation guidelines should include statements regarding: 1. whether comments will be moderated at all; 2. the kind of comments that are encouraged; 3. the kind of comments that are discouraged; 3. how inappropriate comments will be handled; and 4. a link policy.

- (5) What responsibility does the audience have to the blogging community? Blog readers are an active audience. They often expect to participate in comment discussions, but can often forget the leadership role they play as an active audience member. You may choose to exercise more or less control over the interactions between your audience members at your blog site. It is your responsibility to set the tone of interactivity in your blog space. You should commit to maintaining a convivial space on the web. Encourage respectful behavior. Outline what you consider to be disrespectful behavior in a comment policy statement. Include remedies for moderating comments, and be sure to follow the rules you outline in your own posts as well.
- (6) How should I handle damaging statements made in my blog's comments? Unless your blog is designed as a trolling blog (this activity is not recommended), you should commit to maintaining a convivial space on the web. You should encourage

those who comment to respect each other, and not make damaging statements under your title. You may enumerate to any degree the kinds of anti-social behavior that will not be tolerated on your blog. Remedies range from altering the inflammatory text to dilute it to deletion of posts to banning readers from commenting entirely. Damaging and anti-social comments include, but are not limited to: racist, sexist, and homophobic statements; advertisements; purposefully argumentative political commentary; self-promotion; and personally identifying information about yourself or others.

Face: Personal and professional blogs

The personality you display on your blog can be personal or professional. People blog for many reasons, and the distinctions of personal or professional are not mutually exclusive or tied to any one blogging genre. Personalization and Professionalism exists as a spectrum. Your blog may shift at times being more professional, and at times being more personal. Your affiliations and your audience will help you determine the face you present in your blog. If you are blogging as a representative of an organization, the face you present should fit with the face presented on the web by the organization itself. Consider the audience you will attract to your blog; consider their expectations. Regardless of your genre, you should consider whether you want your readers to see a personal or professional face when reading your blog.

- (1) What constitutes a personal or professional take? The way you present different aspects of your blog will indicate to the reader your level of professionalism. The tone of your posts, your technical and design choices, and your stated and implied affiliations all add dimensions to your public face. The topics you choose to cover in your blog, and more importantly, the tone in which you write about them will influence the seriousness with which your readers read your blog. You may treat trivial topics seriously, or vice versa, but consider how that choice will impact the readers experience of your blog. Similarly, the design elements you choose for your blog indicate a level of savviness on the part of the blogger, and will influence how the reader reads your content. Choose design elements that do not interfere with the content of your posts if the content of your posts is the primary source of content on your blog. Additionally, where you choose to host your blog indicates a dimension of face to your readers. There is a diversity of commercial blog hosts such as Wordpress.com and Blogger.com. With these free commercial hosting services, you may have less control over design, and may be required to use a host-specific domain name to point to your blog.
- (2) How much information is too much information? Keep in mind that unless you technically limit access to your blog through password protection or blog within a closed community, everything you post is publicly available. Any information you post is publicly available, linkable, copyable, and stored somewhere. Digital data is easily transformed, and it is easy to lose control of the information you offer once it is publicly available. Information on the web is highly accessible and pliable. Do not disclose facts, stories, rumors, opinions, or creative content on your blog that you do not want public. If it is important to disclose this type of information, you can

choose to include a disclaimer to warn the reader of what is coming or to explain to the reader limits on acceptable reuse of your content.

Text: Images, music, video, audio, and the protection of creative content online

No matter what kind of content you will include in your blog post a policy statement on attribution. Include a standard for how you will indicate attributions in your posts and how you expect readers to indicate attribution of cited material in comments. Also include a policy on reuse of your original content. Be aware that many blogging hosts offer widgets and tools for cross-pollinating data through your different sites in your web presence. These widgets and tools make aggregating and cross-posting creative content simple, but can easily violate copyright laws and the expectations of other people posting content to the web responsibly.

- (1) How can I protect my own work, and how can I be sure I am not violating someone else's copyrights? Before you use someone else's creative content, always be sure to check for some copyright notification. You may be looking at a reuse or reposting of someone's work, so you may have to do some web sleuthing to find the original author's initial posting to determine whether your use of it is allowed. After you've determined that you can reuse someone else's creative work, always attribute it with a name and a link if possible. To protect and share your own work, we recommend using [Creative Commons licenses](#). With a Creative Commons license, you can use a simple icon and link to indicate what types of reuse you deem acceptable, and how to cite your authorship. There are many media commons (such as Wikimedia) available online where you can find creative works of all formats that authors indicate as reusable with a Creative Commons license.
- (2) How should I handle photo-manipulation or photoshopped images? Before reposting an image, audio, video, or music file that you suspect has been tampered with, do some research to find evidence of the manipulation. Telling a story using manipulated images may distort the truth, and readers will call your intentions into question. If you post a creative work that has been manipulated in order to manipulate the truth or opinion of a story, you have a responsibility to inform your readers either before you post, or after you discover the manipulation. You should make a good faith effort to determine whether the file you are posting has been manipulated or not before your initial post. If your blog has a running theme of posting manipulated images as commentary, you should indicate to your readers that the content has been manipulated, and that the manipulation is part of your commentary. Manipulation in this sense indicates some sort of ill will, malice, or social engineering to tell your story. Manipulated creative content can also be a creative remix of previously existing creative work to make a new statement. If you are posting a remix, treat it as you would any other creative content, seek out permission to repost and standards for attributing authorship. When posting remixes, also include proper attribution and links to the original material used in the remix you are posting.

Truth

For the purposes of this document, we assume that the blogs you are writing are meant to convey the truth as you experience it. Even anonymous or parody blogs are likely to maintain some sort of "true" authorial voice that remains relatively unchanging. However, what happens when events, new information, or personal experiences change what a blog author thinks about a particular topic? In this case, we encourage authors to be transparent and forthright about the changes they may make to already published postings.

- (1) What do I do if new facts emerge, or there are corrections that need to be made to older posts? We encourage making corrections to postings if the truth changes. Deleting old postings is not recommended, unless there is a compelling reason to do so. It is best to strike-through facts that are no longer accurate and provide clear updates to the posting that indicate the changes that have been made since it was first published. We assume that as additional information emerges about a topic (especially when it involves current events), a blogger may have a new opinion on the topic. In this case, it might be best to create a new posting that links together individual posts about the topic, so that readers can see how the author's perspective has been shaped over time. Again, we encourage a policy of transparency (see above), as this builds trust with both your audience and the larger communities of which you are a part.

Citizenship

Part of what makes some blogs unique is their ability to serve as public forums (on a miniature scale) where individuals potentially engage in deliberative dialogue about social issues. This is especially true in journalistic-type blogs, although it's possible that individual posts on even the most personal of blogs will deliberate over important issues of the day. This means that bloggers have the responsibility to be good public citizens and remain conscious of their ethical responsibilities to the larger communities of which they are a part. In particular, we encourage bloggers to consider the potential impact of that which they write - especially when writing about other public or private citizens. Increasingly, the lines between what is considered public and private information is blurring, making it important for bloggers to consider how their work will impact others.

- (1) How do I know what privacy individuals about whom I write should be afforded? This is a difficult question, and it's likely that each blogger will individually have to decide how they will handle disclosure of private information. In general, we encourage bloggers to be circumspect when revealing information about private citizens, who are generally afforded more privacy rights than public figures. As with many of the guidelines we've offered here, the genre and purpose of the blog will largely inform the blogger's choices in revealing private information. Blogs focused on public figures may have widely different approaches to dealing with the revelation of private information about these individuals. For example, a celebrity gossip blog will likely reveal information of a personal nature that would be distasteful or potentially libelous if this sort of material was written about an ordinary private citizen. At the other end of the spectrum, there are times when even the most ethically minded journalistic blog might reveal private information about an individual if it serves a larger purpose of informing the public about important issues

of the day. For more information about the differences between public and private figures, see the [Citizen Media Law Project's web site](#).

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Appendix - Exemplars

This is a list of blogs and other links we think are especially effective in their approach to the above ethical issues. We have arranged them by genre.

Excellent "About" page/disclosure statement

[Kottke.org/about](http://kottke.org/about) (professional blogger)

[Alex Halavais, About](#) (academic blogger)

Code of Ethics

[Society of Professional Journalists](#)

[Word of Mouth Marketing Association \(WOMMA\)](#)

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