

Bloggers Boot Camp

Bloggers Boot Camp

Learning How to Build,
Write, and Run a
Successful Blog

Charlie White
John Biggs



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INTRODUCTION

In this book, we're going to teach you how to write for blogs. More specifically, you'll learn how to write content geared toward online distribution.

Blogs are a new medium. They're powerful and deserve to be taken seriously. Your own blog and your own writing can change the world or flounder in obscurity. It's up to you.

Bloggers can make money doing what they love, but it is hard work. That said, not everyone can be a successful blogger, although we hope to give you the tools necessary to get a running start.

If you're already blogging now, we'll show you techniques that will help you become a better blogger and a better writer in general.

Blogging requires regular and daily effort. A blog is like a shark—it only stays alive if it keeps moving. You can't just write one blog post per week and expect people to keep returning.

There is no magic bullet for creating a successful blog, especially if your goal is not overtly commercial and is instead a desire to share your viewpoint with the world.

We're not here to help you make a million dollars a year blogging, but we want to give you the tools necessary to give you an exponentially better chance of success.

Why us? We know why blogs fail and we know why they succeed—we have extensive experience in many forms of media and feel it's time to start sharing some of our expertise with other prospective bloggers.

The good news is that your barrier to entry is easy to jump over. At the very least you will need a computer with an Internet connection, ideally a fast one. Even that is not set in stone anymore, because now users of mobile devices may find that they will be able to blog from the streets of their cities as easily as they do from their desktops, snapping pictures to illustrate their stories directly from those mobile devices. There are no hard and fast rules, and as a blogger you are actually creating a new medium from scratch. It's time to change the world.

Here's the best news: You won't have to start from scratch, because we've already made the mistakes, found the successes, learned what works and what doesn't in the blogosphere.

We'll show you the ropes.

But first, who are we? We'll be writing this book as "we," but for the introductions, allow us to write individually. First up, John Biggs:

I currently run *CrunchGear*, a gadgets website owned by AOL, and Charlie works for *Mashable*, a social media news site. I have six writers working with me and we get about 26 million pageviews a month. In the zoo that is modern pro-blogging, we're a chimpanzee among gorillas, but we're tough, scrappy, and we write more than forty posts a day. However, I'd like to tell you how I became a blogger and what, exactly, Charlie and I are trying to teach you how to do.

The late 1990s and early 2000s brought a new world where the business section of the newspaper turned from a one-page add-on at the back of the sports page into a full-fledged section detailing the deals, IPOs, and flame-outs of the "dot-com" era. Tech news was now a big part of the landscape and the old magazines—*PC Magazine*, *PC World*—were shrinking in size and revenue. Business meant technology now, not just stuffed shirts making decisions over pensions.

It was the summer of 2004, mid-August. I was working at *Laptop* magazine, a print title that reviewed the latest laptops, cellphones and tablets. There were hundreds of new devices rolling out every year, and each needed a few thousand words written about it. Everything got a long, 5,000-word feature article, or, barring that, a shorter 1,000-word review. Brevity was not the soul of wit at *Laptop*. It was, in fact, the enemy. For all this work, the auditors were able to assess that *Laptop* was the top-selling magazine in the Honolulu airport. That's right: we were primarily popular in touristy island newsstands in the Pacific. It wasn't a very heartening situation.

I had been blogging—a fancy term for putting things on the Internet—for most of four years, starting with a site I ran called *Big Wide Logic*. It was my personal site, a goofy collection of links that I rarely updated. I also started a watch website called *Wristwatch Review* in 2003, making me one of the first watch bloggers in the world. That is not to say that either of those ventures was particularly good, serious or lucrative. I made little money from advertising—perhaps \$10 a month—but I had free Internet hosting from a friend, so at least the only thing I spent was time and attention.

However, the process of preparing stories for the sites—posts—taught me a great deal about what to look for in a good, short piece. I was just giving things a try, and back in those heady days, there was no guarantee of success. *Gizmodo* was about a year old, written by a snarky kid named Joel Johnson who took over after its founder, Peter Rojas, bolted for another site, *Engadget*. Meanwhile, there were ideas sprouting on the blogging

landscape. The Julie/Julia Project, the precursor to *Julie and Julia*, begun in early 2002, was beginning to gain a small following that led—years later—to fortune and fame for its heretofore-unknown author. The only “cool” online news source of note was *Salon*, and in 2003, shares of the company were selling for 5 cents in over-the-counter markets. There was, in a way, no reason to think anyone on the Internet could go pro.

One August morning my editor walked into my secluded back office and asked me to clear out my desk. I was being laid off. The magazine I worked for no longer needed a technical editor to read over the pages to ensure technical accuracy. They were facing a downturn in readership and value that almost led to the title’s demise. Today, ironically, *Laptop* makes most of its money from the Web.

I left for home, dumbfounded. I was a tech guy at heart. I studied IT in college and I had quit a semi-lucrative but soul-sucking job as a computer consultant in 2000 to get a Master’s in journalism from New York University. Now, in my first real journalism job, they made me redundant. Luckily, that week I began speaking with Joel at *Gizmodo* who invited me to interview for a “reporter” position for the site. I drove to meet Joel in Brooklyn’s hip Greenpoint district, and we ate Polish food while he told me about his workday. He laid it out for me: His day consisted of long hours spent in a chair, poring over the Internet for stories to write. Some days he did nothing but rewrite press releases. He was tired and he looked burnt out, nervous and edgy. In fact, lunch was taking too long. He needed to get back to his computer, so we cut the interview short.

This didn’t sound like any journalism job I’d ever heard of. In fact, it sounded, at first, like heaven: no editors, no deadlines, no workflow. It was, at its core, the purest form of a “beat” I had seen. It was first-thought-best-thought, writ large. The job, in short, consisted of writing about cool things all day, as quickly as possible, and being funny about it.

I got the job mostly because I was free for most of the day. Blogging for *Gizmodo* wasn’t like writing for a magazine. I was up in the morning at 7 a.m. and writing until 10 p.m. There was no real work/life balance—a trap I fell into early—and there was no sense that the job ever stopped. I started working with Joel, producing 28 stories a day, and then when Joel left I hired a few other writers, including Charlie White, the author of this book. By the time I left, the site was bumping up against the 18 million pageview-per-month mark. Now it is topping out at more than 100 million.

I never went back to print.

Why did I tell that story? Well, we have been blogging since the beginning of the blogging revolution. Combine our years spent

behind the keyboard and you'll find that we've been blogging longer than almost anyone in the world.

Charlie and I grab more than 60 million pageviews per month on multiple sites. We've written more than 20,000 blog posts between us, launched wildly successful blogs, dealt with all of the intricacies of the new medium, and reveled in our success. Now it's time for us to pass this hard-won knowledge along to you, letting you learn from our triumphs, while helping you avoid our mistakes.

Here's Charlie's story:

I'm Charlie White, and in the midst of a 30-year career producing and directing television broadcasts, I started writing about technology on the Web in 1994. The Web wasn't much to look at back then. If you've been around that long, you'll remember those ancient days when Mosaic was the most popular browser, Clinton was president, and Windows 95 was considered high technology. Five years later, I was spending most of my time (while working two full-time jobs) writing about technology for a group of websites called *Digital Media Net*. One day at a trade show in 2000, several of my journalist cohorts and I decided to write short two-paragraph news stories about what we'd just seen and experienced on the show floor. The immediacy of these punchy paragraphs caught on quickly with readers, and suddenly we realized that this could turn into an entirely new medium.

Unfortunately, my short-sighted managers disagreed, so the concept lay dormant, and I continued working in the web journalism environment of the time. That revolved around webzines and portals—megasites that linked to numerous affiliated sites, all under the same umbrella. And all their content consisted of longish, magazine-like articles, product reviews, editorials and features. They weren't blogs yet.

After toiling away at that business model for a few years longer, by 2005, a technology and gadget blog *Gizmodo* caught my attention. Its traffic was starting to eclipse the numbers of the large portal for which I was working. What kind of site could garner such impressive numbers, I wondered. Surely it must have involved a staff bigger than that of *Digital Media Net*—a dozen writers or more? Hardly. All that content, some 30 posts, was cranked out daily by a quick-writing, wisecracking crew the size of a pickup basketball team. These four hungry journalists had a nose for news and a love of gadgetry and high tech. They wrote as a group, using a unique and cohesive style, where all were able to express a similar and astute brand of humorous snark. It was working—they had amassed a rabid following. I wanted to get myself mixed up with such excitement, so I contacted the site's editor, my future writing partner and the other author of this book, John Biggs, who invited me to join the blogging revolution.

“I’ll hook you up,” he typed into an instant message. “Start tomorrow.” That was easy.

Two years later, I had banged out 4,442 articles on that eclectic gadget site. Over those years, the site’s traffic grew from 7 million pageviews per month when I started to the behemoth it is today. But the money was decidedly unsatisfying, so my next stop was NBC Universal, where the mainstream media giant lured me into writing more than 2,500 blog posts, reviews and features for the SyFy-powered blog *DVICE* over the next three years. My next stop is currently *Mashable*, one of the five most influential blogs in the world with more than 11 million unique visitors each month. As Senior Editor there, I’m still learning about blogging and its new pal, social networking, and John and I are eager to pass along what we’ve learned to you.

Look: we got lucky. There are no two ways about it. But we got lucky because we were ready when the call came. You can get lucky, too. Online personalities are becoming a more and more important part of the media landscape. **You can take part of the conversation, and you can lead the conversation**, whether through the written word, photography, or video.

One blogger, our buddy Scott McKenzie, parlayed his love of books into a successful site about the publishing industry and used his contacts there to score a contract with two major publishers. Blogger Cali Lewis became famous for her no-nonsense video reviews of new technology. Political blogger Ana Marie Cox turned into a well-known Beltway pundit after scribbling for *Wonkette*. One thing made these bloggers stand out and gave them success: **perseverance and a strong impulse to produce—whether it’s a post, a video, or a rant—daily and well.**

We are not social media snake oil salesmen. We are not affiliate marketers. We don’t want to offer you a four-hour workweek. We are real journalists breaking real news. If you want a get-rich-quick scheme, the Internet is rife with them. Hit Google. If you think blogging is a sure-fire way to get free stuff from companies for being an influencer, then you’d best pack up now. However, if you want to learn how to run a successful news business and maybe make some money in the process, we’re here for you. And we mean that. Check the end of this book for ways to contact us to ask questions, make recommendations, and to just keep us abreast of your doings. Just because this is a paper book (or ebook) doesn’t mean the learning has to stop at the last page.

Enough about us. Who are you?

If our assumptions are correct, you have something to say and you want everyone else to know what it is. But there’s a big problem right now: There are billions of other blogs competing for the attention of your prospective readers. We’ll show you how to grab their attention. We’ll show you how to find the best stories, and

what to do with them after you found them. We'll show you how to make your blog stand out from all the rest.

If you can write and you have passion about your topic, blogging is easy. It should be noted that the difference between being a journal writer and a journalist is stark and important. Bloggers might write about themselves but they are always seeing the bigger picture. Bloggers might wax euphoric, hold grudges and display bias, but at their heart they are attempting to bring truth to light in the best ways they know how.

Many high-traffic blogs seem like massive journalistic entities but, as Joel Johnson once wrote, "most of the time—we're just talking." We're talking about what we like, what we don't like, what we learned today about something that you might know little about or what we stupidly think we understand about something in which you're an expert. Blogging is a form of journalism just as ballet is a form of dance. Journalism is a "process" whereas blogging—electronic writing—is a specific subtype of that process.

Being a *successful* blogger is hard. Not only will we show you how to pick the best blogging platform for your needs and how to drive users to your blog, we'll show you all the tips and tricks we've learned along the way, emphasizing quality, finding the best stories, and gathering millions of readers to a blog whose first day had none. Okay, maybe it had one reader, Charlie's dad.

Bloggging goes way beyond mere writing. It's a conversation between you and your audience. We'll show you the best way to interact with your audience, how to encourage their input, how to deal with unruly commenters, and how to attract the best commenters—which many readers think is the most entertaining part of a blog.

No longer will journalists sit in their ivory towers, comfortable with writing two columns a month. Creating a blog is like riding on a fast-moving train, and to navigate these newfound, gleaming rails of virtual steel, you'll need additional skills that go far beyond writing. We'll show you how to find or create compelling graphics, make a viral video that could spread to millions of viewers, and how to reach a world full of readers with your ideas.

If you are an old-guard journalist, don't forget what you know. However, don't expect the safety net of process journalism to protect you anymore. You are now on your own, and you make or break your story. There's no one else to blame when the support system you had grown accustomed to is gone. There are new ways to find news, and we'll show you how to find out what's happening in the world you choose to cover. With all the electronic tools available, you no longer have to camp out at the police station to get fresh news. This is not your father's journalism. The barriers to entry are lower, the information is a whole lot easier to find, and you'll be able to put together stories and publish them

immediately, receiving feedback from your readers minutes, or even seconds, later. This is ultimately freeing and frightening at the same time.

If you are reading this, you see the writing on the wall: Formal news and publishing organizations, as they exist today, are disappearing. Aside from the dinosaurs that still roam the earth, limping along and wondering what hit them, the daily local newspaper is on life support. Magazines are hitting the iPad, and some titles exist in the ether entirely. The closest analog to what you will be doing while blogging is the old-fashioned wire service that required a unique combination of talent, skill, and precision. But it's not all about writing. It's about video, it's about audio, it's about being a one-man-band at a trade show while the rest of the "mainstream" journalistic community has the force and resources of a large news-gathering organization at their backs.

We are also not saying that the so-called mainstream media is in any way our enemy or beyond our reach. Blogs are the mainstream media for a vast group of Internet-savvy news readers. You might have heard that 60 percent of teenagers pay no attention to mainstream news, but most will be more than happy to watch Jon Stewart on the *Daily Show*. Attention spans are shorter, and they're looking for new points of view aside from the old guard. The good news? There are millions of readers hungry for fresh, punchy info, and willing to find it from almost any form of niche blogger imaginable.

This is where you come in. We are offering the beginning and intermediate blogger our secret formula: the key to building a more active, interesting, and widely read blog, as well as expanding your reach and voice to create a unique online identity. We'll show you why this new medium is different from magazines, newspapers and video, and we'll show you how to successfully attract an audience. Advanced bloggers will be able to use this book to learn a few best practices from guys who have been doing this for most of a decade. No one has codified the rules of blogging, and so that's what we set out to do.

To be a successful blogger, you need to concentrate on content production and audience gathering. There are many tools in a bloggers arsenal, but the most important is perseverance and understanding of your topic. You can blog about anything you want, and obviously you're approaching this effort from a professional standpoint. Lots of people say that bloggers write about what they're having for lunch and their cats. But, if you create a successful food blog—see *Julie & Julia*—or a site dedicated to funny pictures of cats—icanhazcheezeburger.com—you can create a successful niche, turning what used to be considered one step below journal-keeping into a lucrative and exciting business.

Let's get started!

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Laying the Foundation

What's Your Name, Private?

Maybe you're working a full-time job that is ultimately unfulfilling to you, and during your free moments you're musing about something entirely different. Or you're a journalist who wants to get in on the blogging revolution, and you've discovered a niche with little or no competition thus far. Or maybe you read a lot of blogs, consistently convinced you could do a better job yourself. Bam! You're on the road to conceiving a blog.

Many blogs exist because a fan or expert is tired of reading wrong things written about his or her topics of interest. While, in the old days, you would call these people "crackpots," now they are bloggers. However, you're going to perform this service considerably more intelligently and intelligibly than some old timer railing against the system in the editorial pages. You're going to cover the story using your unique point of view and skill set.

Blogging is still the domain of the dedicated amateur. There's a difference between an amateur and *amateurish* work, however. Amateurs grow and change and improve, and that's what we're here to do: to help you move from beginner to expert in a few steps, and to make sure you understand that dedication, hard work, and drive are all you need to become a successful blogger.

If you're currently blogging, describe what you're blogging about in one complete sentence. It should be unerringly simple. If you're blogging about technology, you'd write: "I cover mobile phones with an emphasis on devices for older Americans." If you're writing about romance novels, you'd write: "I blog about Romance novels set in historical time periods and with a strong heroine." You'll notice the level of focus you should have in your blogging experience. You are an individual writing about a certain topic with a certain expertise. If you're an older technology

blogger, write for your age group. If you're a mother, write about bicycling for moms. The key here is *niche* or, if you're thinking in terms of old media, a premise.

We'll discuss this in-depth further on, but our goal now is to find your focus. What do you write about? What are you passionate about? What topic will carry you along through the trials and tribulations that come with blogging?

If you haven't started blogging yet, you're actually lucky. So far, your blog is only the germ of an idea, and what you're doing right now might not feel important. That is not true. Whether you realize it or not, right now, you're doing the most vital work that will ever be done for your blog: that is, you're choosing the direction the site will take from now on. You're carving out the niche of your blog, and what you decide now will ultimately determine whether your work will be successful.

What do you need to be a good blogger? Besides the technical equipment, you'll need to possess a way with words and perseverance. The Internet is littered with dead blogs that had little of those two characteristics. Of the millions of blogs currently in existence, many are dormant, many are unread, and many are just plain bad. Our goal, in short, is to help you avoid the pitfalls many bloggers fall into, and in the process, make a little—or a lot—of money doing what you love.

What the Heck Is Blogging?

Blogging at its most basic level is the keeping of an online journal. At its most transcendent, however, a blog encompasses the journalism every nonfiction writer aspires to, an achievement this book will help you embrace.

A *blog* is a website that's organized in usually short articles called *posts*. Don't call the articles themselves "blogs"—if you must put the word "blog" in there, call them blog posts. The newer entries are always placed at the top, while older entries scroll down as each new one is added. As time passes, your readers encounter each story laid out in this reverse chronological log format.

Why is it called a blog? A writer and programmer named Dave Winer created the first "web log" when he built a site called Scripting.com. The site featured the reverse chronological (newest stories first) arrangement. A web log, then, would be similar to a captain's log—a place to store snippets of information. Winer's idea quickly became known as a *weblog*, a term that has since evolved into its shortened and most familiar form, *blog*.

Winer created a basic system for distributing his ideas about programming and hardware, and incorporated something called

Really Simple Syndication or RSS, allowing readers to access his posts from programs called *newsreaders* (we'll talk about those in Chapter 5). This, in a sense, divorced the blog from the website on which it was hosted.

A newsreader pulls in data from an RSS feed and displays it separate from the original site. Newsreaders, for example, do not show the original layout of the site from which the information is sourced. This is an important distinction: people who use RSS readers may never visit a site they read in their newsreader.

This movement of blog to newsreaders changed blogging considerably. For the first time, the content on a page could exist as a standalone entity, devoid of advertising, images, and other clutter. Blog posts had to drag the reader from a newsreader to the website and create a fan where there was once a passive consumer. Many bloggers see the divorce of content from website to be a bad thing. After all, it reduces pageviews and potential ad revenue. However, with the right content, you can force the reader to put the two back together again, creating a unique opportunity to turn a mass of "grazers" into an audience.

True blogging did not take off until a Silicon Alley rivalry began between Nick Denton, a former *Financial Times* journalist, and Jason Calacanis, the publisher of *The Silicon Alley Reporter*. Denton began a site called *Gawker* and focused on New York gossip. When that site grew popular, he expanded his empire, starting a technology and gadget site called *Gizmodo*, where both your humble narrators began their blogging careers in the mid-2000s.

At the same time, Calacanis was creating a rival blog network called Weblogs Inc. His goal was to saturate the market with niche blogs written by low-paid but dedicated editors. Both sites grew out of the ashes of the dot-com bust, and both publishers found themselves with a surfeit of talent. Calacanis, however, poached one of Denton's writers to start *Engadget*, and when Weblogs Inc. was sold to America Online, the first blogging millionaires were born.

These two organizations were the first to meld content management, advertising, and cheap labor to create a blog network designed, through synergistic linking, to build traffic. In fact, it can be argued that Weblogs Inc. and Gawker Media were the first sites where "traffic" was a main concern, in contrast with the years preceding the founding of these organizations, when media operations saw the web as, at best, a distraction.

Gawker Media, and to an extent, Weblogs Inc., defined a methodology and style that critics excoriated and eventually adopted. The goal of the blog was a stream of content so overwhelming that it required frequent updates. This was coupled with a conversational style that spoke of "outsider" journalism, a suggestion that the writer was in a beleaguered underclass,

not beholden to the vagaries of the entrenched media. This plan worked well for years until, of course, blogs became entrenched media.

If this is all too esoteric, rest assured that it's important to understand who the major players are in this space and how they operate. You can learn a great deal, for example, about how *Engadget* covers a technology press conference or how *Politico* handles an election. If there is one rule to live by, however, it's this: **Everything about blogging is being made up on the fly.** As successful as these sites are, there are few "best practices" to follow, and the ones that exist, we will outline in this book. Blogging has moved far too fast to codify any sort of "style guide" or list of do's and don'ts, which is why we decided to write these chapters.

These two organizations now essentially rule the blogosphere. Although there are plenty of more popular blogs out there, sites like *Gawker* and *Gizmodo* defined an entire genre of writing—a snarky, New York-centric voice that speaks to both the experts in technology, media, and sports as well as the dilettantes. Great bloggers are good at making readers feel like they are part of a privy conversation full of gossip, lore, and insider knowledge. Anything less and you're basically reading a newspaper clipping.

Calacanis and Denton got rich with their blogging empires, but this is not to say everyone involved in those early years of blogging got rich quick. There were plenty of bloggers—millions—who made absolutely no money and accomplished nothing. This book will give you the tools to avoid that frustrating fate.

However, by taking the Denton/Calacanis model and expanding it, many blogs have found their niche and discovered a potent advertising model. The result? In less than a decade, a new medium was created. The most exciting part of this revolution is the way it's harnessed the immediacy of the Web, and given a voice to those who might not have had such an opportunity a mere 10 years ago.

Think about it: At the turn of the century, the majority of people had no far-reaching voice to reach the masses. They could try to be published in journals or magazines. Their quests for stardom were often driven through attempts at being in the "it scene" or sending out demo tapes to bored A&R men. Now, however, the average Joe or Jane (or Justin or Jenna) can become an Internet sensation overnight. Bloggers are brought on as experts in mainstream news programs, and blogs often force mainstream journalists to get off their duffs and actually research a story. For instance, a blogger broke the Bush-Gore recount, and blogs helped aggregate the Afghan War documents released by Wikileaks.

Blogging is still a new medium. News organizations are still floundering in the shoals of misunderstanding and assessing new ways of selling content in a world where content is free. Blogging is changing the way we think about news and opinion, and it's moving eyeballs away from established news sites and toward upstarts. This, then, is the opportunity for you to capture—and it's also the juggernaut you're up against. Even as they deride the blog revolution as the work of amateurs piggy-backing on their expensive content, media organizations are trying desperately to copy the magic that defines many of the biggest and best blogs in the world. They will, in short, fail, for a few simple reasons.

First, most news organizations are “too big” or at least entrenched in an older newsroom mentality. We will discuss this mentality—and its usefulness—in later chapters, but as it stands large news organizations don't have the flexibility to mix fact, opinion, and original reporting in a way that tracks with their original mission. This could obviously change—and it will over time—but until it does, there are many blind spots to take advantage of in the blogosphere.

One prominent example of a news organization embracing new media is *The Daily* produced by News Corp. Created as the world's first well-funded online-only news magazine/newspaper (it's hard to tell what it is just yet, but think of it as *Newsweek* meets a tabloid newspaper), Rupert Murdoch invested \$30 million in *The Daily's* creation and maintenance. This is a testament to how big news organizations feel about on-line—after years of being unable to beat them at their game, they've finally decided to join them.

Second, the blog is a powerful medium when used correctly. The nascent blog format gives writers tremendous flexibility. That means you can be your own boss and write about anything you want. It's all in your hands, but you can't just write at random. Your goal is to introduce your readers to the most compelling topics in your world at that moment, and then bring your own unique insights to those topics. Add more facts you've found elsewhere in your world, or blurt out those nagging notions you have rattling inside your head. Mix in some of your own perspectives that readers might not have ever thought of on their own. Entertain and surprise them with your wit, your personal experience, and your well-supported opinions.

Researchers take note: **Becoming a blogger is the fastest way to become an expert on a particular topic or niche.** You are immediately seen as someone in-the-know, and with a big enough audience, you can turn that experience into ad dollars, a book contract, or simply a completed thesis. **Most popular blogs were created by writers who wanted to share what they knew.** *Slashdot.org* began as a joke by two friends who wanted to write

about open source software. They describe their success thus and we think it defines the essence of the blogosphere quite nicely:

Slashdot is successful for the same reasons anything else is. We provided something that was needed before anyone else did, and we worked (and continue to work) our butts off to make it as good as it could be.¹

We couldn't have said it better ourselves.

What Is a Blogger?

Let's get a handle on what bloggers really are, and what they actually do. Are they stars, journalists, dilettantes, rabble-rousers, hacks? Yes, but not all at the same time. They're mavens, critics, opinion leaders and inciters of riots. Some are whiners and complainers, naysayers and contrarians. Some are lovers, others are fighters, many are both. But before they can earn any of those labels, first of all, they must be **filters**. The best bloggers are able to sift through enormous volumes of information every day, and pick out the few shiny nuggets that will fascinate their readers. Bloggers know where to find the best stories, and who to ask that all-important question, "What's up?" They know how to filter out topics that are of no consequence, and zero in on those that will grab attention. Even if you are the greatest writer in the world, if you choose topics no one cares about, you will have few readers.

The closest analogy we've been able to find for a blogger to a real-world professional—and this is not to say that blogging cannot be a job—is that of a wire reporter. In the old days, the news wires supplied a steady feed of information to readers around the world and almost everything of import was reported over them. Ironically, with the rise of blogging, wire reporting actually makes up most of the content that appears in daily newspapers, and thanks to reduced staff sizes and budgets, many papers are going online-only. It is online, where the price of paper and ink is immaterial, that a news organization can really shine—or flop.

Bloggers are also editors or, if you want to stray from journalistic terms, curators. Just as a magazine needs someone to pick out the stories that appear in its pages, bloggers select the stories that will appear in their feed. Much has been said about bloggers "copying" other news stories. This is not true. At worst a blogger will cut out a paragraph from another story and add a bit of commentary. At best, a blogger will make a story his or her own. Better yet, a

¹Slashdot. About Page. n.d. Web. February 4, 2011.

blogger will write her own story that will guide the conversation. This is done by news organizations all the time: one magazine or newspaper will release an exclusive and hundreds of other organizations will “report around” the original story, publishing their own angles. Read any of the best news sources—the news is usually old. It has been reported elsewhere and expanded by a reporter.

Then we have the second statement: that bloggers are not journalists. To suggest that bloggers steal and newspapers “report” is disingenuous, especially considering the budgets and manpower available to both organizations (read “none” and “decades of talent and hundreds of individuals dedicated to the newsgathering profession”). This isn’t to say that bloggers have license to be sloppy. On the contrary, bloggers have the time and energy to get things right, interesting, and well-phrased—and they have an endless amount of space in which to tell their story.

Blogging gives you a chance to show your readers everything you know (and expose everything you have yet to learn) about your topic of choice, but that’s just the beginning. Immediately after you’ve published your blog post, the conversation continues when your crowd of readers responds with everything they know about your post’s chosen topic. The result is a body of knowledge—sometimes brand-new—that’s a combination of the topic you’ve introduced and the collective knowledge of your readers. When you’re talking about thousands of readers, their collective knowledge far surpasses that of any one person. It’s called crowdsourcing, and it encompasses so many facts, figures and details that it can be daunting.

Our official definition of blogging: **It is journalism written on a short deadline.** If you are a blogger, you are a journalist. Soon, the reverse will be true. Just like journalism, blogging requires dedication and accuracy, but unlike journalism, bloggers in most cases do not have the old-fashioned safety net of the editorial process to fall back on. In the old days, a newsroom featured “writers,” “editors” and “photographers”—we put all of those in scare quotes because most of those positions were staffed by people with no business being in those positions—and “layout” people. The writers sent text to copyeditors who fixed the text. Photographers took assigned photos, and everything went to the layout team who then sent things to the printer. As you can imagine, the business of producing anything was fraught with difficulty, and large news organizations were large because of this long chain of command required to produce one issue.

Now, however, the blogger does all of those things and more. The blogger is a one-man band, a lone news organization. If your goal is to write about your kittens or your life, you are not a blogger. You are a diarist. However, if your goal is to cover news that no one else is covering within your niche, you are a journalist and you are

expected to run like a journalistic organization. While your readership will not mention it at first, the assumption is always there: *“This person is someone whose work I’m reading because of his skills and expertise. I expect the writing to be strong and clear, the pictures to be sharp, and the layout to be conducive to long reading.”* At the very least, this is what is expected of a beginning blogger.

But go ahead, break all of our rules. Write a blog about yourself and fail to find a niche. Focus on how cute your hamsters are—we’re sure the hamster-fan blogosphere is booming. However, in our experience the best bloggers have a niche, write as if they were writing for a paying audience, and offer more than just a link and a smiley face emoticon.

To treat blogging as anything other than journalism—to say it’s a hobby or a self-indulgence—is to completely miss the point, and in the end, it is an insult to the hard work of pioneer bloggers who fought long and hard to gain access and respect in an entrenched industry. Bloggers are members of the mass media.

The news cycle is so fast that the only way to get a message across will be through short-form posts and the occasional longer piece. This does not mean journalism is dying—it is just evolving. We’re here to hasten the change.

Being a blogger isn’t all fun. Be prepared to bask in the iridescent glow of your readers’ adoration one day, and wallow in the snakepit of their hatred the next when they all disagree with you. Posts you thought might be blockbusters fall flat, with no one commenting at all. Another you thought might just be a throwaway turns out to be a tremendous hit. Most days fall somewhere in between those extremes. Either way, while you’re probably not an expert on everything you’ll be writing about, chances are, one of your readers is an expert. Take special care to get your facts straight with everything you write, because there are always multitudes of readers who are more than eager to set you straight.

The Four Questions

Before you start blogging, you need to ask yourself four simple questions. Answer them as truthfully and as specifically as possible. Remember: what you decide to write about is what you will be thinking and dreaming about 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. There are no vacations for bloggers.

- What are you going to write about?
- What are you passionate about?
- What do you know about?
- Who are you?

These are the four questions you must spend lots of time contemplating. Let's start dealing with those questions in reverse order, ultimately arriving at the answer to the first one.

Who are you? Yes, older readers are now humming that song by The Who, perhaps helping them focus on this crucial point. *Who, who, who, who? I really wanna know.* To be a successful blogger, you must be a self-starter. You need to be a quick thinker, organizing your thoughts and expressing them immediately. And, you need a thick skin, because invariably, visitors to your blog will disagree with you, and express their dissenting opinions in the cruelest possible way in your comments section. In short, they will tear you apart. If you've lived your life where everyone constantly expresses approval of everything you do, you might be in for a rude awakening when you start writing your new blog. Are you tough enough to take it? Do you have the consistency to regularly update your blog, giving readers a good reason to return day after day? Figure out who you are, and decide if you are really a blogger. Do you have the time? Do you have the energy? Blogging is a daily endeavor and is often unrewarding—until it's surprisingly rewarding.

What do you know about? Expertise gives you an enormous head start over any competitors. For example, if you can identify any cellphone on sight, and you know the model numbers of each of Samsung's 150+ cellphones with which the company is now brand-spamming the world, you're going to be way ahead of hapless competitors who've decided to write about cellphones and are only knowledgeable about the one cellphone they happen to possess. You're the one who should be writing about cellphones. If you don't know more about a topic than almost all of your readers, what exactly do you plan to bring to the conversation? In an ideal situation, your own wealth of knowledge and personal experience will be enlightening for your readers. If you have neither, you might want to either learn everything there is to know about your topic, or choose another.

Your expertise can be wildly obscure. There is room for everything on the Internet. If you are a radio technician, don't be afraid to write about your career. If you're a horse breeder, share with your readers your experiences with the stallions on your ranch. Someone somewhere will want to know something about what you do.

This is especially true if you run a business—by adding a blog to your business homepage you can quickly and easily create a captive audience of people who want to hear what you have to say. For example, Northern Brewer (NorthernBrewer.com), a brewing supply company in St. Paul, Minnesota, created a blog and video podcast based on brewing. With a camera and a little free time, the company's bloggers built a way to share their point