



"SOAP BUBBLES"

NORA EPHRON, AUTHOR, FILMMAKER, AND HUFFPOST BLOGGER

When I first started blogging, I didn't understand anything at all about it. I thought a blog was like other short things, like essays for instance, which are polished and have a kind of history as to form and structure. I made the mistake of reading the comments on my first few blogs, and my feelings were hurt. And I was astonished that my blogs, whether they were good or bad, vanished after 24 hours. I was once in daily journalism, and I am not unused to publishing things that last for only a day, but for many years I've been writing for magazines and books, and it seemed to me shocking and tragic that my immortal words were anything but.

But then I saw. In fact, you might almost say the shades fell from my eyes. Blogs were different from whatever had gone before. They weren't meant to be polished, like essays. They were informal, they were temporal. The comments they engendered weren't comments at all, although they were logged and enumerated as comments; they were instead a conversation, and one of the reasons for blogging was to start the conversation and to create the community that comes together briefly to talk about things they might not be talking about if you hadn't written your blog. The short lifespan wasn't a detriment; it was the point. A blog was a soap bubble, meant to last just a moment or two. The medium is the message. The medium was high-speed and the message appeared quickly and vanished just as quickly. The odds on a blog being relevant or even comprehensible days later were remote, just as well that it lasted only a moment.

And a blog didn't have to end, as essays do. It simply had to stop.

CHAPTER 2

GETTING STARTED

Like moving to a new home, starting a blog is always an adventure. This chapter shows you how to choose your spot of real estate in the blogosphere, hang the curtains, and arrange the furniture.

Every blogger starts by asking herself two main questions:

- What do I want to write about?
- How do I go about doing that?

The first part of this chapter will look at the first question—how to choose a topic that, broadly, will keep you interested long enough that you'll give your blog a decent go. Plenty of people blog under their own names, but if you want a snazzy title or nom de blog, we'll look at how to pull that off (and the downsides of pseudonyms).

The second part of the chapter will deal with the technical side of blogging. We'll talk about the different blog hosts and the physical process of putting a blog together. Blogging has its own conventions of design and etiquette that considerate bloggers make sure to know. We'll diagram a blog post and also talk a little bit about fair use and copyright, which—despite what some people think—do still exist on the Internet.



A STAR IS BORN

Q&A WITH DYLAN LOEWE, FORMER EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF BATTLEGROUND, COLUMBIA LAW STUDENT, AND HUFFPOST BLOGGER

HUFFPOST: How did you get started blogging?

LOEWE: Shortly after Super Tuesday [2008], I began getting a number of calls from friends and family asking me questions like "Is it over for Obama?" and "What's a superdelegate?" To make things easier, I wrote up a lengthy explanation of everything they needed to know about the election to that point and why, despite the chatter in the mainstream media, Obama was well positioned to win the nomination. I e-mailed it to about twenty people, one of whom suggested I stick it on a blog. So I did that and, on a whim, e-mailed the post to Ben Smith at Politico. He linked to it on his site, which led to Noam Scheiber of *The New Republic* linking to it on his site. Four days later, I was invited to write for The Huffington Post. One week after that, [UK newspaper] *The Guardian* invited me to be a weekly op-ed contributor. It was like living through a poorly written movie script.

HUFFPOST: Tell us your favorite story about blogging.

LOEWE: I once wrote a blog post for The Huffington Post that was posted in the top slot on the front page. When they stuck me in that spot, it meant Harry Reid got bumped down into the slot beneath me. Shortly thereafter, Hillary Clinton posted on the site, knocking me out of my spot. There I was, sandwiched between Hillary Clinton and Harry Reid, wondering if I'd somehow been mistaken for someone important.

What Do I Want to Write About?

It's perfectly fine to write about your life and experiences. That's the top reason bloggers give for starting a blog—and there's no

need to apologize for it. As the second-wave feminists liked to say, the personal is political. Your grief at paying \$4 a gallon for gasoline, your struggle to combine work and family, your happiness at hearing good news from a high school friend who's serving in Iraq—all are relevant to the world's ongoing conversation.

Even if there's no clear connection to larger events, don't fret about it. The great thing about the web is that it frees us from the tyranny of space and airtime that has long constricted newspapers, magazines, and television shows. We aren't going to run out of space in the blogosphere anytime soon. Feel free to make your post about how your toddler looks just like Suri Cruise as long as you'd like.

If you want to take your blog to the next level, though, it helps to have some sort of theme to the majority of your posts. People who work in public relations often advise their clients to become "experts" on a topic. When you write about a particular topic or theme regularly, you become a go-to person for others who are interested in the topic. They start to check in regularly, or whenever your subject is in the news, to see what you have to say. For examples of expert blogs, check out Engadget on technology, Apartment Therapy on decorating small spaces, Eater on New York City restaurants, and Vickie Howell's Purls of Wisdom about knitting over at the DIY network site, to name just a few.

If you'd like to write about a topic, you'll need to choose the right one for you. Here's some of the best advice we've heard:

Write about what you love. "Blog your passion," says Leslie Goldman, author of *Locker Room Diaries* and HuffPost blogger. "If you love dog grooming more than life itself, the blogs will write themselves and you'll never run out of topics."

Unfortunately, many of us aren't so sure what our passions are.

According to the Pew Internet and American Life Project 2006 survey of bloggers, we pretty much write about what we know.

37% = "my life and experiences"

22% = other

11% = politics and government

7% = entertainment

6% = sports

5% = general news and current events

5% = business

4% = technology

2% = religion or spirituality

1% = a specific hobby or illness

I think of it like this: If I could take all the pages and pages of confessional material on the web and plaster it on the interior of a gigantic dome, I can envision a universal mind, and I start, by putting something out there weekly, to feel my place in it—as if I represent a couple of neurons or glands and if I stop I might make that mind lose the ability to see the color red or find its keys.

—KIMBERLY BROOKS, ARTIST AND
HUFFPOST BLOGGER

So here are some ways to figure it out. Watch yourself as you read a newspaper or magazine. What stories catch your eye? When do you turn up the volume on the radio and tell the carpool to shut up? You can even look back through photo albums from when you were a kid. What did you love to play with? What kinds of books did you hide under the covers at night? If you lose track of time when you're talking about a topic, that's a hint that maybe you'd like to write about it. The great thing about blogging is that it's not subject to the same practicalities we encounter when we try to make a living. Just because you went into pharmaceutical marketing rather than studying Fabergé eggs doesn't mean you can't blog about Peter Carl Fabergé to your heart's content.

Be specific enough to create a community—at least at first. *Wired* editor in chief Chris Anderson's blog and 2006 book, *The Long Tail*, pointed out a new business phenomenon: The mass market is disappearing. In the past, any given music album had to be popular enough to justify shelf space in every retail store—from Bangor to LA—that sold music. So we wound up with a few albums that a lot of people liked all right. Thanks to the infinite space available on the web, though, the mass market is being replaced by millions of niche markets. Since the costs of storage in one central location and a web page noting the album's existence are so low, it now makes sense for online retailers to stock copies of any CD that a few people will like a lot. If you simply offer music for download, as opposed to a physical CD, the economics are even better. It's hard to compete with the big boys (Wal-Mart, for instance). But there's money to be made by offering niche products that people are passionate about.

Good blog topics take this phenomenon into account. "Moms" is too broad a category for most bloggers to gain traction with and

build a community around. "Accountant moms who work from home" is more focused. "Sports" can be best tackled by ESPN and its ilk, but "Maryland high school lacrosse" will attract followers. You should have a good idea of who will read your blog. Who is she? Why does she care about the topic? What are you going to offer her to make a read worth her time? On the other hand . . .

Choose something broad enough to sustain your interest. By definition, a blog requires regular updating. You don't need to post many times a day (though you can, and many bloggers do), but if you want to build a readership, choose a topic you'll be able to post about at least once a week for the foreseeable future. Not sure if you're on the right track? Jot down your ideas for the first few posts you'd like to write. If you can come up with ten in a few minutes, you're good to go.

Of course, it's quite possible that your blog will evolve over time. Your kids will grow up. Your politics might change. You might discover go-kart racing. So it goes. With blogs, no editor will tell you that you can't change or add topics. If you write things worth reading and you're consistent about posting, over time your readership will evolve and expand with you. Indeed, some of the best-known blogs have broadened their focus over time. HuffPost had a very political focus at first but now covers everything from entertainment to green living.

Then again, with a billion people out there on the web, you might find that the community of accountant moms who work from home and love go-kart racing is bigger than you ever thought.

What Makes a Good Blog Title?

Ah, the art of titles. Some of us have been involved in other book projects before this one. The pressure to come up with a good book title usually has our fingernails looking like they were attacked by blind wolverines by the time we smack something on the dust jacket and hope it works. You know how your mother said you shouldn't judge a book by its cover? Well, people do. A good title like *The Four-Hour Workweek* can make a book leap off the shelf. Lots of people simply use their own name as their blog title, but if you decide to give your blog a title, you want that title to do a lot of heavy lifting for you. Ideally, the title should:

Avoid the "huh?" factor. Be clear. You want your target reader to know instantly that this is the blog for her.

Be short. No one wants to list a three-line blog in their blogroll. The Huffington Post is better than "Arianna Huffington and Friends Muse on Politics, Life, and Everything Else."

Stand out. We don't have to tell you that the blogosphere is crowded. A regularly updated, thoughtful blog will naturally

GENIUS BLOG NAMES

Some of these blogs/websites are no longer active, but the names do make us want to visit them: Wonkette, Instapundit, Invisible Adjunct, Stuff White People Like, Ladies Who Launch, Purls of Wisdom, The Hippocratic Oaf, One Thousand Words (on photos), The Budget Fashionista, Escape from Obesity, Tales from the Stirrups (a fertility blog), Pink is the New Blog, Wokking Mum (on cooking), Daddy's Little Tax Credits

gather readers over time. But a catchy title (tweaking a cliché, referencing a pun or well-known phrase) helps a lot.

Should I Write Under My Own Name?

A lot of people ask me if they should blog under a pseudonym. They ask me because I started writing under a pseudonym eight years ago, and it ended up being such a mess that I turned it into my real name. So I advise everyone to start out using their real name.

—Penelope Trunk, blogger and Boston Globe career columnist

Many bloggers built their reputation by using their own name as their blog title. Others write titled blogs but still make their own names public (see Gina Trapani of Lifehacker). In general, the blogosphere thrives on transparency. That makes using your own name a good idea.

On the other hand, some situations call for anonymity. If you're trying to blow the whistle on abuses in a government agency or company but you want to keep your job, you will probably need to stay anonymous. If you work for an otherwise decent company that frowns upon or forbids blogging and you want to keep your job, you will need to stay anonymous. Anonymity can also let you write from a different perspective. *Forbes* senior editor Daniel Lyons entertained readers for over a year by assuming the persona of Steve Jobs in order to lampoon the Apple CEO.

Here's another reason to stay anonymous that occurs to most people way too late: If you are a teenager or college student writing about the various debauched things you and your friends do for fun, you should realize that someday you are going to grow up. Unless you've got a trust fund, you'll need to get a job. Prospective employers will Google your real name. They will not be

amused when your manifesto on the best body shots you've ever done appears on the screen ("Oh, the Latvian indie actor with the tattoo of Joni Mitchell on his perfectly smooth chest! I taste the tequila every time I hear 'The Circle Game'").

Even if you choose a pseudonym, though, you should know that most people aren't good at maintaining anonymity for long. Eventually you will slip and reveal your identity somewhere. Or you'll post information that's so specific that only you (and your Luddite coworker who persists in printing out all her e-mails and hence can be crossed off the suspect list) would know it.

The story of an anonymous blogger being unmasked is so common it's now an Internet cliché. Jessica Cutler, a.k.a. "Washingtonienne," was fired from her Capitol Hill job in 2004 after Wonkette (another blog; see the great-name list) revealed her identity. Ellen Simonetti, a.k.a. the "Queen of Sky," a Delta flight attendant, was fired later that year after her employer started tracking her anonymous travel blog. In 2007, pediatrician Robert P. Lindeman was asked on the stand during a malpractice case whether he was the blogger "Flea" who had written about a suspiciously similar trial, ridiculing the plaintiff's arguments. After admitting that he was, he wound up paying a sizable settlement to the family that was suing him. Unmasking may not be the end of your career. *Fortune's* Stanley Bing has persisted in writing columns (and now blogging on his own website and for HuffPost) under his nom de plume, twelve years after being outed as CBS public relations executive Gil Schwartz. But there's no guarantee.

So here's our advice: Use a pseudonym if you want, but keep in mind that blog posts are available to anyone with a computer and stay accessible long after you've posted them. Ask yourself what would happen if someone found out that you're the poster behind



FREE TO BE YOU AND ME

JOHN MCQUAID, PULITZER-PRIZE WINNING JOURNALIST AND HUFFPOST BLOGGER

I was a newspaper reporter. Newspapers don't like their reporters to have personal blogs because there's no editorial control. So I set up an anonymous blog to see if I liked it, and I did, though it's hard to get attention when no one knows who you are. When I left the paper, the veil of secrecy was lifted and I started blogging under my own name.

your blog. Embarrassment? A reprimand? Losing your job? Legal action? If it's a consequence that you're not prepared to handle, then maybe you should find a less public way to deal with the issues you want to blog about.

Blog Infrastructure

After you've got a topic and a title (or have decided to keep it simple and use your name), it's time to start creating your blog.

The first thing you'll need to do is choose your blogging service. We've listed some of the most popular ones here. This is by no means an exhaustive list. But it's a start. Each website has more information on setup.

Blogger (www.blogger.com, owned by Google). This is a good first choice for most people. It's free and easy. To start, you just fill in a bit of information and can begin blogging in minutes. Since your blog will be hosted on Blogger's server, you don't need to worry about purchasing a domain name, fixing bugs, or maintaining your own server. If you didn't understand that last sentence, then this is definitely the service for you.

Sources of Inspiration

So you're committed to blogging often with short, engaging (but not perfect) posts. Great! But what are you going to write about? Anything you feel passionate about. Here's our inspiration crib sheet.

1. **Newspapers.** Most bloggers read as many as possible—in print but mostly online (try linking to a hard copy paper and you'll see why).
2. **Political publications like *National Review* or *The Nation*.** If you lean left or right, read a publication with a different viewpoint. We bet you'll get riled up enough to write something.
3. **General interest publications.** Magazines like *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Vanity Fair*, *The New Yorker*, *Glamour*, *Men's Journal*, and *Sports Illustrated* all have fascinating features. Tear out a page to blog about later.
4. **TV news and news websites.** We get ideas while watching CNN on the treadmill. We also get ideas when the sweaty guy next to us switches (without asking!) to Fox News.
5. **Radio.** Maybe you listen to morning drive-time radio while you commute to work. Jot down an interesting tidbit while you're at a traffic light. Talk shows also make good fodder. Listen to a host whose opinions differ from yours, and answer his arguments.
6. **Large new-media sites.** HuffPost features hundreds of news stories and blog posts each day. You can also check out Politico, BoingBoing, Daily Kos, Gizmodo, Slate, Atlantic Online, Drudge, and other sites. You will never be short of information or topics to blog about.
7. **Blogs on your blogroll.** Link to their stories and discuss them on your own blog. Chances are, they'll soon do the same for you, whenever you come up with some original material.
8. **"On the street" reporting.** Are the teachers at your children's school upset by student test scores? Is the cafeteria manager concerned about the quality of the produce? Maybe your local pharmacist is worried that seniors don't understand recent changes in Medicare. All of these stories are worth covering.

More on Finding Inspiration

Probably my favorite blogging moment to date involves a piece I wrote for The Huffington Post titled "Hillary, O.J. and R.F.K.," about Hillary Clinton's now infamous [Robert F. Kennedy] assassination gaffe. I didn't initially intend to write about the incident but was inspired to after a conversation with a friend. She is really smart and engaged in the election and said she thought Hillary's comment was "stupid" but also thought people were "overreacting" to it. She happens to be white and I'm African-American, and we ended up having this really interesting exchange about race and perception in the election. During our conversation I discovered I had been completely unaware that many older African-Americans harbor very real fears about Barack Obama's safety. After our discussion she had a better understanding of where some of her reaction to Senator Clinton's comments came from. I realized in that moment that sometimes between well-meaning, smart people, things simply get lost in translation. So I decided to write about this gaffe and why it struck such a chord among so many people—even if that was not my intention. After the piece appeared on The Huffington Post, I actually received a phone call from someone who had endorsed Senator Clinton who said that they felt the piece was one of the most honest, yet fair, assessments of the story they had read; yet I was also thanked by others for forcing a deeper conversation about our nation's somewhat tragic history as it pertains to the safety of prominent leaders of color, all of which made me feel really proud.

—KELI GOFF, AUTHOR OF *PARTY CRASHING: HOW THE HIP-HOP GENERATION DECLARED POLITICAL INDEPENDENCE* AND HUFFPOST BLOGGER

short ones will do. We use words that aren't really words, like *problematize*. Our sentences drag on far past their original intentions until some punctuation mark or another puts an end to the misery. We use adjectives and adverbs rather than nouns and verbs. We hide in the passive voice, as if evading responsibility for the mess that's been thrown up on the screen.

Most writing teachers have a simple cure for these ills: They'll

tell you to go read William Strunk and E. B. White's classic, *The Elements of Style*. That's good advice. But if *The Huffington Post Complete Guide to Blogging* is the lone book you plan on reading this year, here's a tip that will improve your prose almost as much: Write like you speak.

The blogosphere thrives on authenticity. No one really sounds like a law paper, an academic paper, or a PowerPoint presentation. So your blog shouldn't sound like that either. You want your posts to sound like you at your most witty, entertaining, and relevant. Buy or borrow a small tape recorder. Tape yourself as you critique something you read in the newspaper. If you take out the "ums" and clean up the grammar, a transcription of this tape could be the start of a good post. Or don't clean up the grammar. On Rosie O'Donnell's Rosie.com blog, the actress and television per-



USE THE VOICE YOU HAVE

VERENA VON PFETTEN, LIVING EDITOR, HUFFINGTON POST

The best (and easiest) way to find your voice is to use the one you have. Sounds too easy? It's not. That's why blogging is so popular! First, think about blogging as writing an e-mail to a friend. Better yet, an e-mail to a really cool, clever friend with whom you have a great and witty rapport. (Don't have any cool, clever friends with whom you have a great and witty rapport? Make some new friends, then start blogging. Trust me; otherwise you won't have anyone to read your blog.) Second, just start writing. You don't spend hours hemming and hawing over how you're going to draft an e-mail, so don't spend hours hemming and hawing over a blog post. It's not worth the effort. Which brings me to my last point: Don't try too hard. Don't try to be funny (especially if you're not) and don't try to be serious (it's too much pressure). Don't try to be anything other than exactly who you are. It's your voice you're trying to find, after all.

sonality often just runs sentences together. Some people find that distracting and annoying, but judging by page views, it seems to be working for her.

Rule #4: Focus on Specific Details

Because blog posts are so immediate, and because there are so many blogs out there, you don't have to explain the complete context of an issue in every post, the way a newspaper or magazine story would. You don't have to fight for limited space the way a newspaper or magazine reporter would. In fact, your best bet for building buzz is to go into the specific, gory details and keep returning there.

Choose one nugget from a political speech or a proxy statement and blog about that. Do you think that \$1.6 million is a little excessive for a security detail for a CEO that nobody can recognize anyway? Do you find it funny that a company that wants to be bought for \$15 a share would pay an investment bank \$15 million to tell everybody that yep, it's worth \$15 a share? Write about a candidate's wife's cookie recipe. If you think something is news, post it. Don't wait to see if other people cover or keep covering the detail you found so interesting. If you've noticed that a columnist does consulting work for a company or interest group she just wrote about positively, get it out there.

Mainstream journalism tends to focus on conflict, rarities, and big trends. You can shape the narrative by focusing on the day-to-day—sometimes on the seemingly little things that get you riled up, sometimes on the view from your own backyard.