

TIPS FOR WRITING A BETTER BLOG POST

Anyone can blog. All you need is a computer, some software and basic writing skills, and you can post your opinions and share your experiences with the world.

But not all blog posts are created equal. The best posts are lively, factual, tight, clear and concise. They tell a compelling story. Make a cogent argument. Paint a detailed picture.

A good blog makes you think. It makes you care. More than anything, *it makes you want to respond*. A blog isn't a lecture or an essay. It's a conversation.

With this in mind, here are 10 tips for writing effective blog posts:

1. Remember your audience.

- a. Who will your most important readers be?
 - i. Are you “talking” to internal audiences (Duke students) or external audiences (policymakers; prospective employers; conservationists; consumers, voters etc.)
 - ii. Remember: You can't write for everyone in the same blog. Custom-tailor what you write to the interests, needs, and education level of your primary audience.

2. Get to the point.

- a. What's your “nutgraph”?
 - i. A nutgraph is a short paragraph that sets the scene and tells the reader what your post is about.
 1. Example: “This morning, we hiked along two miles of deserted beach at the southern tip of Midway to observe a colony of monk seals that winters there. I was appalled to see ankle-deep piles of debris littering the sandbars where the mother seals and their calves were nesting. Our guide told us that clean-up crews can't keep up with the volume of trash that washes up daily. New measures are needed to protect this one pristine refuge and these amazing animals.”
- b. Put your “nutgraph” up front. Don't bury it.
 - i. Most readers give you only 20 to 30 seconds to make your point before they quit reading and move on to something else.

3. Have an opinion. And a personality.

- a. The most compelling blogs express a plausible prejudice on a subject, and support it with facts or personal observations.
- b. Don't be afraid to show emotion or a sense of humor. You should have a passion for what you write about. Otherwise, why bother?

4. Use concrete details and descriptions.

- a. Don't tell me you had an “exciting” day “studying” monk seals in their “native habitat.”

- i. Instead, tell me what the seals looked like. How big were they? What color were they? What noises did they make? How many were there? Where did you see them? How close did you get? What did you learn about them?

5. Be brief.

- a. Aim for around 250 words or less per post.
- b. Short, declarative sentences work best in online copy.
 - i. If you must use a long sentence, follow it with a short one. Or a fragment.
- c. Don't introduce too many new ideas or points in one post.
 - i. If you want to cover many ideas that relate to one another, consider a series of posts that link to each other.

6. Write short but descriptive headlines or titles.

- d. Include keywords in your headline or title for search-engine optimization.
 - i. Keywords at the start of titles are thought to be more powerful than words at the end.
- e. Avoid jargon or acronyms that most people won't understand.
- f. Keep titles short – under 50 letters if possible – so the whole title appears in search results.
- g. Does the title tell what the post is about? It's better to be clear than clever.
 - i. WEAK: "The New Battle of Midway: NPS Clean-Up Plan Needed for NWHI, ASAP, or Refuge will Be DOA!"
 - ii. BETTER: "Marine Debris Poses Mounting Risks on Midway"

7. Make your post scannable.

- a. Only 16% of people read blogs word for word, so use subheads, boldface, italics, photos and other visual tools to draw readers to your main points.
- b. Bullet your lists.
 - i. Studies show that blog posts with lists of bulleted points get linked to more frequently than those with points written in essay style.
- c. Keep paragraphs short.
 - i. White space is your friend. Nothing is harder to read than a solid block of copy on a computer screen.

8. Link like crazy.

- a. One thing that sets blog posts apart from "dead-tree journalism" is that bloggers can link directly to supporting information or reference materials. Readers expect this. But remember: Linking to external sites takes the reader off your blog.

9. Ask me what I think.

- a. End each post with an invitation for readers to respond and tell you what they think. This is a conversation, after all, not a lecture.

10. Mind your manners.

- a. Your blogs express your own opinions but will be posted under the aegis of the Nicholas School so there are rules you must follow.
 - i. No obscenity or profanity.
 - ii. No plagiarism or copyright infringement.
 - iii. Do not libel anyone.
 - iv. Ask permission before taking and posting someone's photo or quoting them.

STILL UNCERTAIN? For examples of successful environmental blogs, take a moment to check out:

- Environmental Defense's Climate 411 blog at <http://environmentaldefenseblogs.org/climate411/>
- The Green Grok at www.thegreengrok.com
- *Grist* at <http://gristmill.grist.org/>
 - Check out how the bloggers on both sites use short headlines and subheads to pique your curiosity and telegraph their "nutgraph" to you even before you read the text itself.
 - *Grist* headlines tend to be more clever; Climate 411 headlines tend to be more straightforward, but they both work because they engage you.
 - Notice the conversational tone to the writing, even when the bloggers cover something technical like IPCC Reports.
 - Look at how short most of their sentences and paragraphs are. And how many links they use.