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The Why, How, and Best Practices of Creating, Editing, and Maintaining a Professional Blog

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Note: This is the supplement to my thesis project, which entailed writing and editing over 85 blog posts as part of creating and maintaining a professional blog for a year and a half.

Blogging: Why, How, and Best Practices

WHY:

Making the commitment to write a blog, especially weekly, is a relatively easy and enjoyable way to improve your writing. Whether you're an aspiring novelist, journalist, poet, or someone who just likes to translate your thoughts into writing—or perhaps someone who struggles to do so and wants to get better—writing and editing a new piece every week will improve your writing and help you find and pitch story ideas. You'll have to consistently overcome writer's block, find new ideas that will capture your audience, work on deadline, articulate your thoughts to the general public, and edit your own work for content and grammar. Blogging can help you hone in on your writing voice and make you more comfortable starting new pieces, from work proposals to letters to your grandmother to beginning a column in a local newspaper. It also allows you to share your thoughts on a topic of your choice, which forces you to constantly come up with new ideas within a subject while you simultaneously develop your passion.

My own writing has improved drastically, as has my knowledge of climbing lingo, since I began my rock-climbing-focused blog in September 2014. As part of professionalizing my website, I editing every old post. In doing so, I saw a substantial decrease in the quality and increase in the number of errors the further back I went. My newest 10 to 15 posts needed a few single-word edits, where the first 20 needed major revision to bring them up to my current writing standard.

As a journalist, the over 85 blog posts I've created not only shows my dedication to writing—I've been posting weekly for over a year—but it also shows potential employers that I can meet self-imposed deadlines (and therefore will meet theirs as well), have made the commitment to constantly work on improving and developing my writing, am able to come up with new ideas weekly, have a consistent community readers beyond my mother and therefore know my audience, have a passion for rock climbing and the outdoors, and have worked to develop my writing voice through a variety of styles and mediums.

Blogs can also make you money. If you find your niche, you can build a strong community of followers by giving away your thoughts for free until your audience members feel they cannot do without your weekly content. Then you can begin to make money from advertisements, sponsorships, and other companies and publications paying to share your content on their own websites. While this likely won't happen right away and you may not want to start publicizing yourself at first, eventually having your hobby helping to support you financially is nice. I'm not at that stage yet; I still give away my content for free, but that is my long-term goal.

Many traditional media sites and other companies, especially those in the outdoor sports industry, have started their own blogs to gain readership and/or promote their products as readers have begun to spend more time on the Internet. Thus, as journalism has entered a digital age, blogging has become an important piece of it, almost an informal version of the newspaper column but with more tabs, hyperlinks, and other digital features. Blogging is also a way for companies like The North Face to promote their brand through stories of their sponsored athletes'

adventures—It’s like saying, “if you buy this gear, you too can climb in the Himalaya,” but in a way that people don’t feel bombarded by advertising.

Journalists and other writers can use blogging to their advantage, selling their own images and passions through a website that shows employers their dedication to and skills in writing as well as their personalities. This may lead to a job writing a blog or other online content for a website or news source, or, as said above, a company may decide that you fit their image well enough to sponsor you to continue to write content on your blog but with their name attached.

However, with all that said, your main goal for starting your blog should be personal growth and a genuine interest in your topic. You can begin by sharing your content on social media (more on this below in “How”) and can adjust your writing to reflect what interests your audience based on which types of posts get the most views, but ultimately I’ve found that I get the most satisfaction from developing an idea I came up with in the grocery store, writing multiple drafts, cutting out unnecessary words, and honing in on the essence of the subject in a little over 500 words.

HOW:

First, you should decide on a topic that’s interesting to others and that you’re passionate enough about and has enough content for you to write about it every week. For example, I have been an avid rock climber since I joined the UNH club climbing team in 2013, so I started a blog about climbing in which I post everything

from some of my own trip experiences to what to get your climber significant other for Valentine's Day to whether or not running benefits your climbing.

Next, you should pick a blogging platform, such as a WordPress or Blogger site, that best fits your needs. Both WordPress and Blogger have free options, but if you're hoping to make your blog professional, it helps to buy your own domain name—which you can do through WordPress for less than \$20 a year. Not having “.wordpress” or “.blogspot” in your URL sets you apart from other vacation or “my year abroad” bloggers who aren't planning to maintain a professional site. I began with a free Blogger site, which was easy to create but had very limited themes and features, and have since moved to a WordPress blog for easier embedding and greater theme and formatting options. Don't worry if you've never “built” a website before. You don't have to know HTML code to make a website, as most start-up sites have free preformatted themes and Microsoft-Word-esque toolbars for you to use along with directions on how to make your first post.

Now you should choose a name and a theme. You want your name to be representative of your topic, but more importantly it needs to be memorable. I originally called my blog “CoffeeTapeIbuprofenClimb.com,” but it was much too long and too hard to say—ibuprofen is a mouthful—when people asked me what my site's name was. If your domain name is too long or complicated, people won't remember it when they go to tell their friends about it, and, even if they do, their friends will never remember what it's called to look it up. I've since shortened my name to CoffeeTapeClimb.com (I own the domain name), which is still a bit long, but much easier to say—CoffeeTape.com, sadly, was unavailable. Two of my favorite

catchy website names are Semi-Rad.com and DuctTapeThenBeer.com. Where the first is short and snappy, the second rings well and is composed of simple, everyday words that give one a great mental picture, aiding in remembering the name.

Once you have a name, you need to choose a theme (the basic preformatted look of your website). This is really up to you and how you'd like your blog to look, though I recommend simpler themes that let readers focus on your content instead of the crazy neon swirls in the background. Pick a theme that plays to your strengths, for example one that displays a mosaic of pictures on the home page if you're also a photographer or a simple black and white theme if your focus is on prose. Readability on multiple devices, i.e. laptops, smartphones, and tablets, is key, and one of the reasons that I moved my site to WordPress was its mobile-friendliness. Don't pick strange or small fonts or themes with difficult-to-read photo captions. You want your site to be as user-friendly as possible, as readers won't read even the best posts if they have to struggle to find or see them.

The next step is to write your first post. This can be something as simple as telling your audience why you chose to blog on this subject, what your plans for content are, and which day(s) of the week you'll be posting. Aim for 500 to 800 words, as most people won't read to the end of long, wordy pieces. You'll then want to consider writing an "About" page to tell readers who find your blog in six months know who you are and what you aim to do with your blog, whether you'll be posting gluten-free vegan recipes every Wednesday or writing a nature-inspired poem or essay every Friday. This also allows people looking for information on your topic to find you through keyword Google searches, which can help boost your readership.

Now it's time to get creative. Andrew Bisharat, *Rock and Ice* magazine editor at large and creator of the climbing website "Evening Sends," recommends that bloggers keep posts between 500 and 800 words with a clear call to action, an engaging title with keywords (for searchability), and one strong picture. However, I've had success deviating from this format as well. I stick to the 500-to-800-word rule when writing "how-to" and personal narrative pieces, but sometimes my entire post is a picture or includes multiple pictures. For example, every month or two I try to make a visual post, such as creating success-baby climbing memes or a flow chart on whether or not you should date another climber. These posts are great for when you need a week off from formal writing, and they appeal to members of your audience who don't always have the time or attention span to read through 800 words about your last trip to someplace you thought was awesome. Additionally, if I'm posting my own recipe for "climbing cookies," I'll include several images detailing the ingredients, baking process, and finished product. I try to vary my style every week to keep content interesting and connect to a larger readership. So far I've created photo galleries, essays, mock and real gear reviews, personal narratives, memes, "How-to" posts, recipes, charts, and "the art of (doing something)" pieces.

Whatever your post is about, make sure to include at least one strong visual, whether it's a picture or a hand-drawn chart. This makes the post more visually appealing when shared on social media—people are much more likely to click on an article with an interesting picture—and the post itself will be more inviting if you break up the text with images that illustrate your topic.

Don't get stuck in only writing 500-800-word pieces. As I said before, I like to create posts in a variety of styles, but you can also embed videos on the subject or social media posts from Instagram or Twitter if they illustrate your point. For example, I wrote a post about the mental and physical benefits of yoga for climbers, in which I included a photo of my yoga mat at the top and embedded a YouTube video of a rock-climbing-focused yoga session at the end. Think about all of the options (videos, photo galleries, etc.) that you have posting online versus writing in print, and use them to your advantage. Most news sites have begun providing more videos and other visual elements as part of their stories, so readers expect to see more than lines of text when they click on a website—don't lose readers because they think your content is visually unappealing.

Once you're comfortable with the look of and content on your blog, begin to promote yourself on social media. Share your weekly posts on Facebook, tweet links to your content, and/or change your Instagram name to that of your website and put a link to your website in your bio. You can also create a Facebook page to promote your website and invite your friends to like it.

Invite others to not only view but also give you feedback on your content, so you can tailor your posts to your audience. That being said, don't be afraid to respectfully post about controversial or seldom discussed aspects within your topic, as this may open conversation about them. For example, I wrote a piece on the privilege many climbers have, using myself—a white, middle class female who will graduate college debt free—as an example to help others recognize that their upbringing is what set them up to take a year off after college or quit their jobs to

live in their vans and climb around the United States; not everyone has that privilege/ability.

BEST PRACTICES:

Stay consistent. If you say you'll post every Monday, you'd better have something up by noon every Monday. This shows readers that you're dedicated to providing them with content when you say you will. They'll start to visit your site every Monday to check out what's new, but even one week of nothing new on Monday and you'll lose people.

Ask first. Credit second. While anything on social media is technically public and therefore fair game to use as content without permission, it's always best to ask first, especially for images on Facebook. While I occasionally embed Instagram posts by professional climbers into articles without permission, it is clear by the embedded format that the image is from Instagram and the athlete and photographer receive credit. NEVER screen shot an online image, from social media or otherwise, and use it as your own. I always ask permission before using friends' Facebook photos, especially if they include children, and credit the photographer and the poster's Facebook page in the photo caption. If you have a friend who is a professional photographer, link their website in your photo captions or at the end of your posts as a thank you for their letting you use their content. ALWAYS credit photographers for their work, and if you take a photo from a website, credit the photographer and the website. For example, I used some photos from climber Alex Honnold's website to illustrate an interview I did with him, so I captioned them:

“Photo by Jimmy Chin and courtesy of Alex’s website.” You can, and should, also tag people who appear or create the photos in your posts on social media, as this will both allow them to share the information with their friends—boosting your readership—and let them know when you used their content (after you’ve already gotten the okay from them to do so). In general, I try to take my own photos whenever possible.

Hyperlink relevant information. Think of hyperlinks like the best possible way to cite your sources and bring in content that otherwise would make your post too long. For example, if you’re taking information from a magazine article you read online, you can write “according to Neil Gresham’s *Rock and Ice* article ‘XYZ’ on recovery after training” and hyperlink the article name in the text. This shows your readers that you have researched this topic and therefore are credible, and it allows them to click on the link to get more information on the subject. You can save space in articles by hyperlinking definitions, such as linking to a website about bikram yoga or to your favorite YouTube abs workout instead of taking time to explain what each entails in the post. Most importantly, hyperlinking is a way for you to credit ideas that aren’t your own. As a blogger, similar to being a journalist, your job is to present truthful information, and part of that is being transparent about who/what your sources are.

Cite your inspiration. One of my favorite outdoor websites and inspiration for my own writing is Semi-Rad.com, written bi-weekly by Brendan Leonard. I got the idea to make flow-chart posts after reading one of his charts on “Pooping in the Outdoors,” and, even though I chose a different topic, I still credited him as my

inspiration (and hyperlinked his chart) in the post. This is a nice way to build community between similar blogs, and sometimes if you credit someone they'll link or share your content too.

Respond to criticism cautiously. While I've received many positive comments on my posts, I've also gotten everything from a short "Please stop" to sexist rants telling me that "Every guy (unless gay) would like to get into your pants." Knowing how and when to respond is often difficult, and negative comments can be discouraging and make an already bad day worse. But, as long-time blogger Susannah Breslin wrote in a *Forbes* piece on dealing with Internet criticism: "To put yourself out there is to expose yourself to criticism."

First, know that you cannot please everyone and any sensible person who isn't interested in your content has the right to simply not click on it. Now, know that not everyone is sensible, and sometimes they're quite terrible when hiding behind a screen. If a comment is obscene (R-rated) or highly offensive to the majority of your audience, consider simply deleting it and moving on, especially if the commenter has made other inappropriate remarks in the past. However, if the person is respectfully disagreeing with you, you should leave their opinion where it is and decide whether or not you can respond in a respectful manner immediately, in a day or two, or should not respond at all. For borderline offensive or unnecessarily rude posts, I've found a short response is always better. Call someone out on a sexist comment, but don't turn your post into a rant—this will only escalate the situation and make you look bad. As Darren Rowse explains in "How to Handle Criticism: a Practical Guide," respond to posts; don't react to them. Instead, show

that you have authority on your site to maintain a respectful, collaborative environment but are also open to other's opinions and views. You shouldn't discourage readers from making comments other than "This is awesome!" Rowse suggests taking the emotion out of negative comments and viewing them as feedback from readers who took the time to tell you that they didn't like something. Constructive criticism can help you improve your writing if you use it to tweak your future content, and readers commenting back and forth can boost your page views and keep them invested in your content. If someone does make a "This is bad" comment, consider responding with asking them if they could elaborate on what they don't like and what they think might make your blog better instead of becoming defensive—you might learn something if they post back.

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