

BRAVE NEW WORLD

The Perfect Blog

OVERVIEW

Blogging took off in the late 1990s when tools like Blogger and Open Diary became widely available.¹ Once it was easy to do, everyone started doing it, and before you could say ‘blogosphere’ there was a gigantic, chaotic body of content—often poorly written and inaccurate—covering every conceivable topic, from every conceivable angle. Most of it crap.

But blogging has evolved. There’s still a lot of nonsense out there—no shortage of crazy people—but blogs have gone mainstream. What started off as a way for individuals to off-handedly share ideas and opinions has become a business—a highly-engineered content form used to influence voters, drive brands, and report news.

Why? Because blogging has a number of attributes that make it the perfect medium for today’s hi-tech, fast-paced, mobile world:

- Fast & Simple. In almost no time, an article or story can be up on the web.
- Cheap. You don’t need a newspaper, just a URL;
- Engaging. It’s easy to include photos, videos, surveys, links, comments;
- Virtual. Updates are easy; errors can be fixed instantaneously;
- Global. Instant, world-wide, hyper-linked distribution.

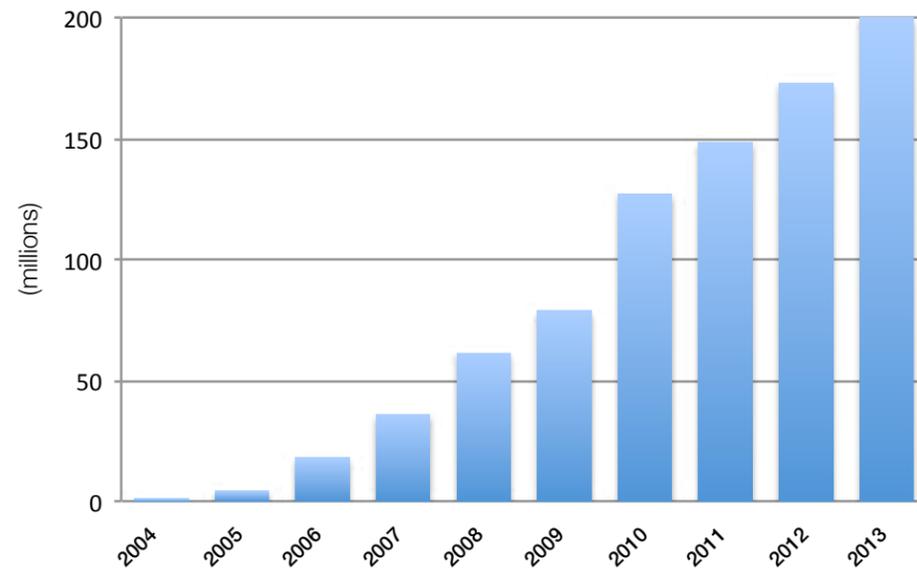
It has certainly caught on. There are now an estimated 200 million blogs,² and 2 million new posts are written every day.³ (There are over 50 million WordPress sites alone.)

Blogs are mainstream now.

They are the outcome of new expectations and realities.

Figure 1: Growth of Blogs in the New Millenium

(Source: Technorati/NM Incite)



Quality varies, but blogs have become a significant part of the web. They form the guts of sites like Yahoo!, CNN and the Huffington Post, and along with videos and photos, constitute a major type of Internet content. (Twitter, Facebook, and Tumblr are microblogs, for all intents and purposes.) Blogging is here to stay.

WHAT MAKES A GREAT BLOG?

What makes a great blog, of course, depends on the goal (for simplicity, the terms blog, article and post are used synonymously here). If the goal is eyeballs/click-throughs, then a blog's greatness is a function of traffic. In that case, the challenge is not to write high-quality, engaging content, it's an SEO play. Indeed, if the *only* goal is to get people to the page, then by definition the goal is reached before the content is seen.

Google's Penguin release in April 2012 was designed to fight poor quality content created only to game search engines. It penalized the overuse of keywords, link schemes, and duplicate content, and it's probably not Google's last word on the subject. Writing poor quality blogs simply to generate traffic is getting harder and harder. Soon it will be easier to just write high quality blogs.

We are concerned only with content people actually read or see or hear, content that forms part of a community, content that is created not to generate traffic but to inform.

Great blogs take time.

That doesn't mean SEO is not important. Even for communities where content is created specifically for the benefit of members, search traffic is still an important part of outreach (along with social media), a way to find new members and connect with other related communities. But there's a big difference between writing a blog to drive traffic and writing a blog to inform. The first will never result in high quality content because the economics don't support the required investment.

To create a great blog takes time. Churning out 250 words on a subject—stuffed with keywords and links—may be enough to support traffic plays (for now), but it's practically useless to a reader who wants to really learn something about the subject.⁵ It takes time to write a great blog.

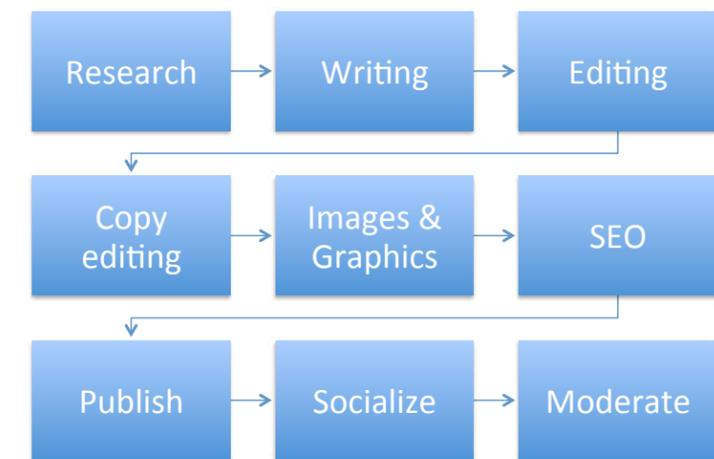


Figure 2: Behind the scenes of a Great Blog

The true measure of a blog is its usefulness.

Within the context of writing to inform, what ultimately makes a blog great is how useful it is. Originality, design, humor, all help draw in and engage the reader, but at the end of the day the *value of the blog* rests in the difference it makes. Has the reader learned something? Has a new insight been provided? Another side of the story told? Does the reader know how to do something they didn't know how to do before? That's the test of a great blog.

In theory, a blog should be whatever length necessary to be useful, but in practice blogs typically fall into two categories: short-form blogs 400 to 600 words, and long-form blogs 800 to 1,000 words. Blogs shorter than 400 words rarely impart enough information to be useful; blogs over 1,000 words are less likely to be read (a big part of blog appeal is brevity).

DOs

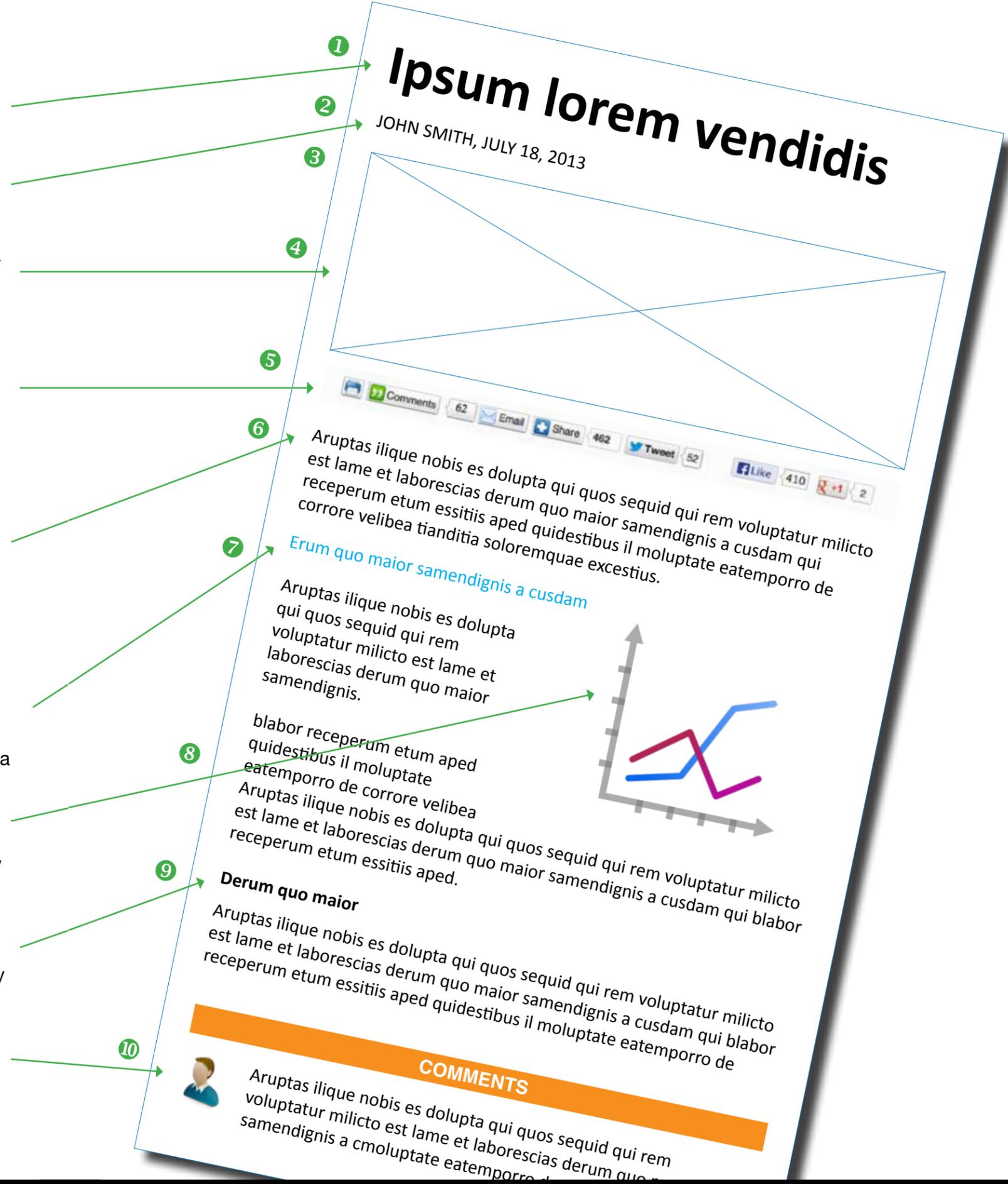
1. Left justify only. Leave right margin ragged;
2. Set font size in CSS at 100% (or 1 em), this allows the user to size the type with the browser;
3. Use standard sans-serif fonts like Arial or Helvetica;
4. Use high contrast text colors. Almost-black on white is best. Gray text on white may look 'cool' from a design standpoint, but it's hard to read;
5. Keep the blog on one page. It's faster and easier than clicking through multiple pages.

DON'Ts

1. Do not put ads inside a blog;
2. Do not auto-initiate music, videos, or soundtracks of any kind;
3. Do not publish inappropriate or uncivilized comments. Moderate feedback and block trolls.

THE TOP 10 FEATURES OF A BLOG

- 1. Title**
Most important is an accurate and interesting title.
- 2. & 3. Author & Date**
Make it easy for people to cite the blog.
- 4. Header Image**
A picture's worth a thousand words - a bad one, not so many. Get a good image.
- 5. Social Media**
Always make it easy to print, share, and 'like' the blog.
- 6. The Lede**
You must capture the reader's interest immediately. Write a strong lede. It should state the main point and have an interesting fact or angle to snag the reader. Remember: A blog has a beginning (the lede), a middle (the main body which presents data, quotes experts, discusses viewpoints), and an end (a conclusion that tells the reader what it all means.)
- 7. Related Links**
Place related links where they are relevant. In a different color. Open in a new tab. Mark as No Follow.
- 8. Graphics**
Include graphics whenever possible. They can help make a point and they break up the text making the blog more approachable.
- 9. Sub-heads**
Put sub-heads in bold. In black. They help users scan the blog.
- 10. Comments**
Always enable (and moderate) comments. They foster engagement.



Blogs are the building blocks of online communities.

Consumers want—and look for—valuable information, and reward those companies that provide it.

TO BLOG OR NOT TO BLOG

According to Content Plus,⁶ 70% of consumers prefer getting to know a company via articles rather than ads. It only makes sense. If you provide value—without trying to sell something—you build credibility.

The ‘community model’ (fully described in an earlier white paper—**Reaching Customers Through the Internet**),^D is the perfect way for businesses to build on-going, long-term relationships with their target audiences. In this model, blogs (aka articles/posts) form a body of knowledge relevant to the interests of a given audience, and visitors (*de facto* community members) return again and again to the site to learn, share, and participate.

In effect, the sponsor creates an exclusive online community, free of competitive ads, unaffected by the SEO arms race, where the sponsor can reach, message, and convert potential customers, *having first earned their trust*.

Many experts on blogging stress the ‘Call to Action,’ but it is out of place in a community setting. Selling is never done within the content. Typically, there are ads on the site featuring the sponsor’s products and services—and there may be other ‘action calls’ such as registering for a newsletter—but they are not part of the blog. Any ‘call to action’ within the blog compromises the editorial independence of the content. In a community setting, blogs are there to inform, not sell.

Here’s food for thought. Research by the Custom Content Council found the following:⁷

- 78% of people believe that organizations providing content are interested in building good relationships with them;
- 77% of people understand that an organization’s goal for content is to sell them something, but are OK with it as long as it provides value;
- 61% of people feel better about a company that delivers content and are more likely to buy from that company.

Thus, the question is not, *To blog or not to blog?*, but rather, *How often to blog?* The data suggests that once a day is the minimum—visitors expect new information when they return to a site and you want them coming back every day.^A And don’t make this common mistake: Sixty percent of businesses have a blog, but two thirds of those have not posted new content in over a year. Those blogs are effectively dead and cannot easily be resurrected.

Set a schedule. Write high quality content. Build a community. It takes time to blog right, but it’s worth it.

SOURCES/RESOURCES

¹ Until then the only way to create a web page was to code it in HTML. Blogger was bought by Google in 2003. For a brief history, see: http://www.rebeccablood.net/essays/weblog_history.html. The term ‘blog’ is a contraction of web log.

² SmartData Collective. See: <http://smartdatacollective.com/node/44748>. As of December 2012, there were 634 million total websites (see: <http://news.netcraft.com/archives/2012/12/04/december-2012-web-server-survey.html>).

³ Digital Buzz. See: <http://www.digitalbuzzblog.com/infographic-24-hours-on-the-internet>. Wikipedia: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/WordPress>.

⁴ See: <http://wkdq.com/new-study-people-search-the-internet-for-three-basic-reasons>. For a more in-depth analysis of Internet usage see: <http://www.ntia.doc.gov/press-release/2013/new-ntia-report-explores-how-and-why-people-connect-internet>.

⁵ Content farms argue they are creating content based on the most popular searches and are responding to demand. While that may be true, it does not justify writing superficial—often inaccurate—content that helps no one. The ‘demand’ is for the topic; there is no known demand for poor quality, badly written blogs.

⁶ Content Plus infographic. (<http://www.contentplus.co.uk/marketing-resources/infographics/anatomy-of-content-marketing>)

⁷ Custom Content Council. Research Report, 2011. (<http://www.customcontentcouncil.com/news/roper-finds-majority-consumers-value-custom-media>)

Recommended Resources

A. **An Introduction to Business Blogging**. Hubspot, 2012. (<http://offers.hubspot.com/an-introduction-to-business-blogging>)

B. **The Ultimate Guide to Blogging**. The Content Marketing Institute, 2012. (<http://contentmarketinginstitute.com/2012/04/ultimate-guide-to-blogging/>)

C. **The Enterprise Blog Post Optimization Guide**. Chad Pollitt and Steven Shattuck, 2013. (<http://connect.relevance.com/free-download-the-enterprise-blog-optimization-guide>)

D. **Reaching Customers Through the Internet**. Think Glink Media white paper, 2013. (<http://thinkglinkpublishing.com/whitepapers/community>)

Ilyce Glink is a well-known real estate and personal finance expert whose radio programs and syndicated columns reach millions of people every week.

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CONTACT US AT:
www.thinkglinkmedia.com
(847) 242-0550

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