

TRIS HUSSEY

Create Your Own Blog

6 Easy Projects to Start Blogging Like a Pro

Personal Blog • Business Blog • Blog for Podcasting • Video Blog
Portfolio Blog for Artists • Lifestreaming Blog

SAMS

Create Your Own Blog: 6 Easy Projects to Start Blogging Like a Pro

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INTRODUCTION

It's All about Storytelling

Welcome to my book, pull up a chair, get a drink, and let me tell you some stories. Now, before you put this book down, shaking your head, let me explain what I mean. Blogging is about storytelling. Regardless of the technology, the topic, the style, or any of that, it's about telling a great story. Blogging is about having a platform to express yourself. It's a place to let your expertise and passion show through. I've written this book to help you do just that.

Over the past four years, I've taught hundreds of people how to blog. I've led blogging 101 classes in person and online. I've guest lectured on the future of blogging and taught continuing education courses on multimedia and creating their own websites using blogs. If there is one thing that people figure out as soon as I start talking—I *love what I do*. Everyday I sit back, think, and read what the news of the day is, and then my job is to tell the world what I think. Dream job? Yeah, I'd say so.

So I wrote this book to help everyone I can to use technology to make his or her own soapbox on the Internet. While reading this book, I want you to laugh, cry, smile, and get excited. I write like I blog—I feel so sorry for my editors—and I blog like I talk. I hope you enjoy this book and, if you don't, I hope you leave me a comment on the book's blog: www.sixbloggingprojects.com.

Wait, You're a Professional Blogger?

Well, I wasn't a professional at *first*, but I became one eventually. However, like many of you reading this book, I started blogging on a whim. I said to myself one afternoon, feeling

rather dissatisfied with my job as a market researcher, that if I wanted to revive my Internet consulting practice, I should “learn about this blogging thing.” Yep, that's pretty much exactly what I thought—a whim, a “gee this could be fun” idea that turned into something that I love *and* I get paid to do.

I wasn't always a blogger, of course. After finishing graduate school, I started out in the working world running a lab at Duke University. Yep, I'm a science geek. I've always been interested in computers (a rather handy skill when pretty much all the instruments and even microscopes were computer controlled) and worked in the campus computer lab in college helping people with their computer questions. (No, I never managed to get a date helping all those cute girls with their questions.)

After a short while as a lab geek, and realizing that at 25 I had maxed out my career potential, I left academia to go back to the front lines of tech support. This might not have been glamorous, but I was good at it, and it had lots of fun moments. This was also a watershed job because it was at that job where I learned HTML and how to develop websites. That was about twelve years ago.

When I started blogging in 2004, I did it to learn about this new medium and have a place to express myself. As it happens, that's pretty much why and how blogging started in the first place—more on that later. Back in 2004, most people had their blogs on Blogger, so that's where I started out, too.

Because the blogosphere was a smaller place back then, it didn't take too long to get noticed, and by the end of the year I was being paid to write posts on other people's blogs. In

2004 this was a daring thing. There were a good number of people very much against the idea of people getting paid to blog, much less post on other people's blogs. I was one of the first people in Canada to do this and one of only a handful doing it in *the world*.

If I thought 2004 was a whirlwind in blogging, 2005 blew it away. That year professional blogging took off—like a rocket. Businesses started blogging with blogging conferences. I started to make a name for myself with “live blogging” sessions at conferences. I had some of my first sponsorships and was regularly speaking and teaching about blogging. It was nothing short of mind boggling (or maybe mind “blogging”).

Now in 2009, we speak more about “social media” than blogging. Social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter have exploded onto the scene and now we're “tweeting” what we're doing and creating “lifestreams.” Am I still blogging? You bet. I might consider it more “writing” or being a new media journalist, but I'm still blogging and helping more and more people and companies blog.

I'm writing this book to share my experiences, tips, tricks, and even spin a yarn or two with you. By the end of this book, I hope that you will be starting off blogging. Yes. Really. By the time you've put this book down, you will know enough to start your own blog and how to structure it to suit your niche.

How to Use This Book

I've written this book so that chapters 1–3 give you the tools to start blogging, but the rest of the book is tailored to what kind of blog you want to write. For example, if you want to start a blog for your business you might want to

skip from Chapter 3, “Writing and Creating a Conversation,” to Chapter 6, “Creating a Business Blog,” because Chapter 6 is all about setting up a blog for your business. I've taken the basics from the first three chapters and tailored them and expanded on them to make them relevant to a business blogger. What about the rest of the book? Well I have a secret for you, it's really hard to draw a line in the sand between a “business” blog and a “personal” blog or a portfolio blog. They are all very closely related, so although you may only want to create a personal blog, flipping to the chapter on podcasting or lifestreaming will give you a deeper knowledge of blogging overall.

Think of this book like a blog cookbook. I'm going to give you a tour of the blog kitchen in the first three chapters, which show you everything. I might not delve into all the details about some things, but I'll introduce them. Each chapter then is like a recipe for a specific kind of blog. You want a portfolio blog for your paintings? Great, start with these basic components, add some things, remove others, and viola! You have a portfolio blog!

Somewhere along this journey together you're going to wonder what my favorite blogging engine is and whether I have a bias towards it. I'm going to answer simply and openly (like a good blogger should, by the way)—yes and yes. My blog engine of choice is WordPress, and yes because it's my preferred engine I have a bias towards it. That said, I've tried and used many different engines and know one thing for certain, all of them do at least one thing well: create content.

As I take you through the various types of blogs covered in this cookbook, I'll note

whether one engine is better than another for one type of blog. Even though I really like WordPress and know the people who developed it, this doesn't mean I don't see its flaws and ignore the strengths of the other engines. In fact, it's because I've used all the engines that I am friends with the developers—I give them the straight deal and honest feedback.

Throughout the book, I include various informative elements, like Sidebars and Idea Galleries, that elaborate on or complement the current topic. There are also the following types of helpful asides:

TIP

Tips with valuable information I've gleaned from years of being a pro blogger. Essentially the stuff I wish I knew when I started.

NOTE

Notes that might be a little "Did you know..." or something to watch for when you're working on something. Like, did you know the creator of WordPress, Matt Mullenweg, wasn't even 20 years old when he released the first version?

CAUTION

This is code for "a mistake I've made in the past, so don't do it!" Things like: When someone says "backup your database files like this before proceeding..." It's a good idea to listen.

NEW TERM

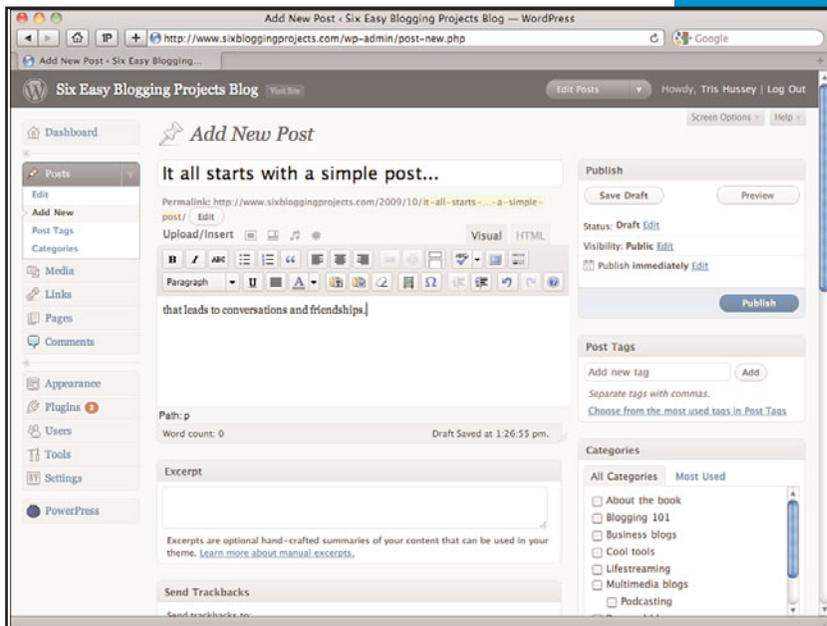
Sometimes in the text you'll see a new piece of jargon that is bolded. When you see that, you'll see an accompanying New Term element like this one that explains what it means.

If I were teaching this book as a class, I'd answer questions as I go along. Unfortunately this isn't a live class so the best I'm going to be able to do is direct you to the book's blog where you can post questions in the forum. Also, because the Internet is a fluid place, check the blog—www.sixbloggingprojects.com—for updates since this book was published. By the time this book hits the shelves, there will be several updates to plug-ins and even blog engines themselves. Although these updates won't change the mechanics of how you blog or set up a blog, they are helpful pieces of information (and will explain if a screenshot doesn't match 100% what you're seeing on screen).

Ready? Let's get down to brass tacks in Chapter 1, "Welcome to the Blogosphere: Planning Your First Blog."

CHAPTER 3

Writing and Creating a Conversation



Chapters 1 and 2 focused on “the easy stuff.” As much as it can confound and frustrate, technology is actually pretty easy to grasp. There are always those who can help you with that part if you feel lost. Writing, however, is completely up to you. It’s your voice, your words, and your story. I can’t tell your story for you, but I *can* tell you what I’ve learned about writing and writing for the Web.

What is great, and potentially scary, is that your blog is your own platform to say and write what you want. It’s your soapbox in the vast online world. Blogs started off as personal journals, but when comments were added to posts they became *conversations*. You tell your story, people read it, and sometimes they will add to it, maybe with their own experiences. The result is that you have something more than what you started with.

In this chapter, you explore all the aspects of writing a blog: finding your voice, remaining anonymous, and making your life public or keeping it private. Although there aren’t hard and fast rules about how to write a great blog post, there are some things you can do to make your writing more engaging to an online audience.

Let’s get into the whole mechanics of writing a blog post.

You tell your story, people read it, and sometimes they will add to it, maybe with their own experiences. The result is that you have something more than what you started with.

Turning an Idea for a Blog into Blog Posts

After reading Chapter 1, “Welcome to the Blogosphere: Planning Your First Blog,” you should have the general topic for your blog. After reading Chapter 2, “Installing and Setting Up Your First Blog,” you should have a blog to start posting content, but you might be stumped for how to get some posts going. This is fine; don’t worry because *everyone*, including me, has moments of “Okay, what am I going to post about today?” This section is going to help you get the post ideas flowing.

No, I’m not going to suggest strange creativity exercises or rituals. I have tried so many of them that I forgot one very important fact—inspiration is like a flock of birds. Sometimes it’s a lovely thing to watch and marvel at, and sometimes it’s an Alfred Hitchcock movie. You just don’t know until you stop and look at it for a while. That’s a mixed metaphorical way of saying: Inspiration often just hits you and often at inconvenient times, so the trick is being ready to take advantage of it when it hits you.

Capture Inspiration Whenever and Wherever It Strikes

I get most of my news and information online through RSS feeds and social networks like Twitter. I am extremely lucky to know a lot of gifted, brilliant, off-kilter, funny, silly, and generally nice people. I try to read as much of what they write and produce as I can. Their creativity fuels my creativity, and I hope my creativity doesn’t make them run screaming down the street. Because I don’t really know

when one of my friends is going to say something brilliant online, I have a couple tools to capture those nuggets of brilliance when they come up.

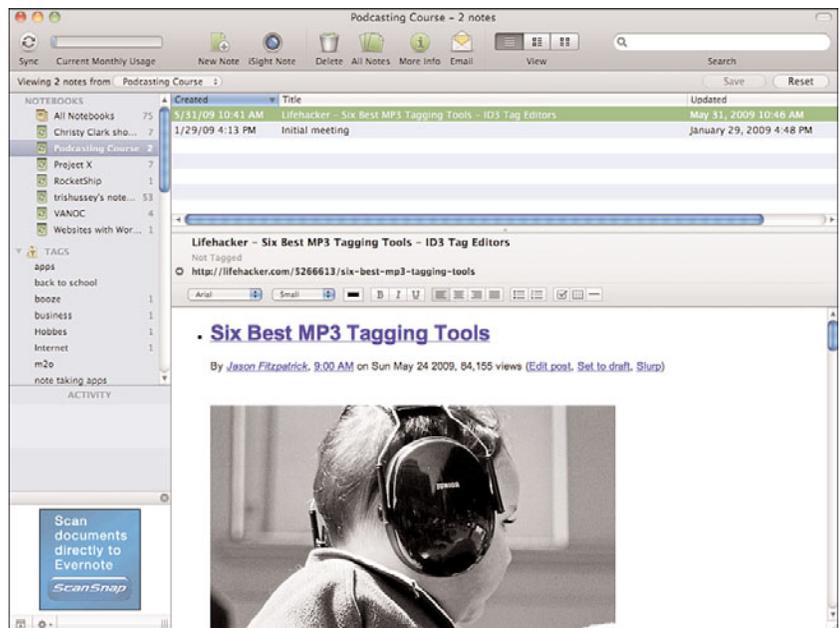
As I've gone through the process of writing this book, I've been testing and trying new software, helpful hints, and other things that fall under the heading of "Research." (They could also fall under "Making Surfing the Net Look Like Work," but I'm not going to talk about that.) Research is something that in the Internet age is a lot different than it was even just a couple of years ago. The scale of

information you can have at your fingertips with just a Google search is nothing short of mind blowing. For this reason, some very brilliant folks created note-taking apps or as Shawn Blanc calls them "anything buckets." I use two programs for anything buckets to keep track of quotes, links, pictures, and any other interesting online piece for review later.

The first app that I've been using for about a year to gather notes and track projects is called Evernote (free and paid versions, Mac/Windows/iPhone/BlackBerry/Web). (See Figure 3.1).

FIGURE 3.1

A clipped reference page of Evernote for the Mac.



The second app is called Yojimbo (paid, Mac only) and is one I've come across more recently (see Figure 3.2).

How do these apps work for capturing inspiration? Simple, whatever I'm doing on my computer, I can quickly capture in one of these programs. If I see a great website I'd like to note for later, I don't bookmark it in my browser, I put it in a "post fodder" or "book research" folder in one of these programs. When I'm looking for something to post or for that site when I get to a section of the book, it's right where I can find it: right alongside any other related items I've previously found. For example, in Safari (my browser of choice, not where I'm going on vacation) I can click the Evernote button or the "Archive in Yojimbo" bookmarklet and that page is stored in the appropriate place.

The idea here is that when you see a site, get an email, or whatever else you might come across, you can quickly just jot a note to yourself to save it for later. Evernote wins hands down in the "whenever and wherever" department because there are versions of Evernote for Macs, PCs, phones (the iPhone and BlackBerry versions are quite nice), and the Web; and best of all, they all sync up.

Regardless of the electronic tool, or even pen and paper (I always have a pen and small pad in my pocket), you should be ready to note it because you don't know when an idea or inspiration will strike. I've lost count of the number of potentially great posts that never came to be because I forgot them before I could note them.

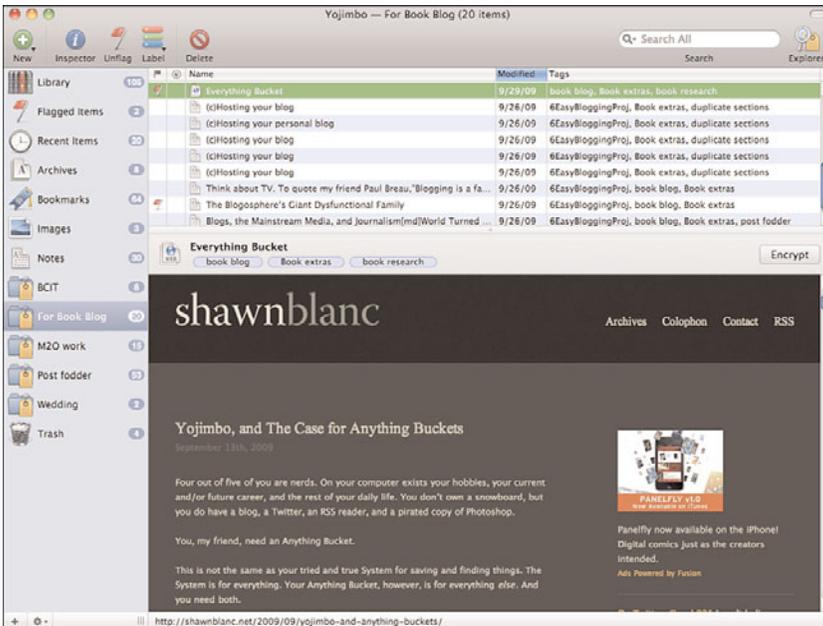


FIGURE 3.2
Yojimbo and Shawn Blanc's anything bucket post.

TURNING AN IDEA FOR A BLOG INTO BLOG POSTS

Finding Your “Voice”

The hardest, and the most fun, aspect of starting a blog is finding a tone and style that expresses “you” in written form. How do you find your voice? You just have to write and work at it until your comfortable style comes out.

No, this is not English class all over again (write a two-page essay on the role of Google in today’s info-centric society...). Just write like you’re chatting to a friend or a favorite professor or teacher.

Let me give you a couple of examples from my own writing (not that you don’t have a really good idea of what my “voice” is like). The following is a section from my own blog:

You combined the persistence of a solid RSS reader with the immediacy of a dashboard or ticker? Have your ginormous list of feeds, but mark a select few as HUD feeds? Feeds that maybe could be pushed to Twitter or tapped into by Hootsuite or Tweetdeck. Like your top 20 “I don’t want to miss a single thing” feeds, while in the background the “reader” part is building a relevancy-linked reading list? Find a way to consolidate articles on a topic, meme, headline, or concept into streams of articles. Sure be able to read your feeds like we do now (an interface like FeedDemon or NetNewsWire is good I think), but also have this information stream pulled together.

Looking for the day’s posts on RSS or Facebook or social media or H1N1? Then they are already consolidated for you. Yes, you can build “smart folders,” but you have to know the topic first to do that. Sure you can have a folder with big concepts that you’re interested in, but when news breaks, wouldn’t it be good to have something like your own Techmeme based on the sources you follow?

The following is from the Media2o Productions blog:

Is social media a fad? Yes, using the term social media is a fad. Just like “internet marketing,” “new media,” “business blogging” were all “fads.” The terms fade away, thankfully, but the ideas remain. We still have websites (more and more actually), write (aka blog), and continue to find more and more ways to interact with each other, our customers, clients, and business partners.

So while none of these 15 best mindsets are magic bullets to success, if you don’t employ them your chances of success are greatly reduced.

Neither of these sections are all that different, but the tone is more corporate or professional in the second, and the first is more informal. My voice is the tone that I use to write with when I write a post (or a document). It’s my choice of words (informal or formal), it’s my

tone (serious, funny, ironic, or sarcastic), and it's my phrasing. All put together, these give you a mental picture, or a feeling, on the post you're reading.

I don't have one voice I use in writing. I change and adapt it to the writing task at hand. You wouldn't write a business proposal like you write an email to your best friend. That said, regardless of the target audience, the best voices I read are all natural; they aren't forced, and that takes practice. Switching voices isn't always easy. You might even notice subtle changes in how I've been writing this book. Each chapter was written (and rewritten and edited) at different times. Maybe one day, I was feeling very serious and philosophical while another day more funny, which *will* and *does* come out in your writing. As you're reading the book, keep an "ear" out for how my writing voice changes. Sometimes it was accidental, and sometimes it was on purpose (like when addressing a serious topic), but it's always there.

The only way to develop your voice is to write—a lot. It might help to try to write as another person (say one of your parents). What would your dad sound like if you were trying to portray him in words? Or create a character, maybe your alter ego, someone you want to *pretend* to be and see how you would make that character come alive.

Your voice will come on its own. You might even think about writing an anonymous blog under a pen name, which might free you to experiment with different styles and topics that you might not be comfortable tackling under your real name. Who knows? Maybe your pen name might become popular.

To Anonymously Blog or Not: The Line Between Public and Private

This has nothing to do with the length of your post. It has to do with depth. How much information about yourself do you put out there for public consumption? Family? Pets? Your hometown? Spouse? Love life?

These are difficult questions, huh? I know you're thinking that you would not talk about your spouse on your blog or about the date you had last night. Yes, all bloggers think that, too, but as you become more comfortable blogging and as you build an audience for your words, it gets easier and easier to let personal details slip; details you might not otherwise want to share. Sometimes it just happens and sometimes that's okay. Other times, it can blow up in your face.

Although it is assumed that most people blog as themselves, and use their real names, some of the best and most famous blogs are written anonymously. *Washingtonienne* and *Belle de Jour* were both written by women who chronicled their sexual escapades online and became very famous for it. *Washingtonienne* was revealed to be an aide to a U.S. Senator, and *Belle* has recently revealed herself and is a highly respected researcher. *Belle's* anonymity didn't stop several books and a TV series based from being created based on her blog. Although names were never revealed by either blogger, the writing experiences were very much real. There was a blog penned by "Fake Steve Jobs," who wrote as if he were Steve Jobs, but in a mock parody of all that is Apple. It was witty, biting, and damn good stuff. People loved it and in the tech world, the discussions about who Fake Steve Jobs really was were almost as good as Fake Steve's writing.

It was an interesting day, almost anti-climatic when Fake Steve revealed himself to be Daniel Lyons of *Newsweek Magazine*. All the speculation was over—no more guessing who might be behind the satirical and funny posts. Sadly I was never considered to be one of the possible people behind the blog.

Washingtonienne and Belle de Jour might be two extreme examples, but they aren't alone. People pen blogs for many reasons (and books and articles) anonymously. Maybe they don't want their friends to know they write; maybe the topic clashes with their public persona. Maybe, like Fake Steve Jobs, they wanted to write some parody or satire that could only be done behind the safety of a pen name. Whatever the reason, nine times out of ten, it's a good one.

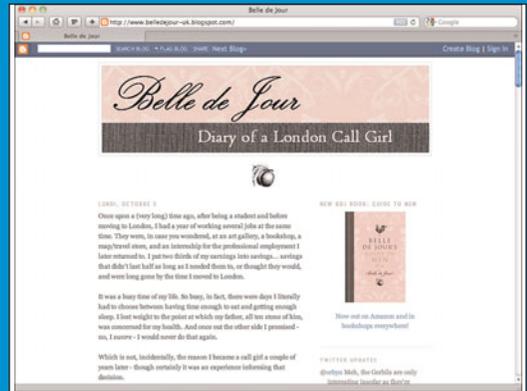
What can happen if you blog publicly or if you blog anonymously and you're outed? I've seen friends I've known for years fired from their jobs. There have been court battles where blog posts have been used as evidence against parents in custody fights. That doesn't even start to cover the standard libel suits that have been filed (and some have been successful).

CAUTION

Anonymous or not, you have to stand by and live with what you write. There are real consequences to telling tales out of school, speaking ill of someone, or any other unsavory thing. You can't hide behind "oh, it's just a blog" because a public blog on the public Internet is just like any other publication.

IDEA GALLERY

<http://www.belledejour-uk.blogspot.com>



BELLE DE JOUR

Belle was crass, frank, gritty, brazen—and real. The stories of Belle's life as a high-end London call girl fascinated people. Even if some might have been offended at her frank and open discussions of sex, sexuality, and the sex trade, you couldn't ignore her vulnerability or humanity. Her writing pulled people in because it was so real, not to mention the fact that it laid bare (couldn't resist the pun) the sex trade. She didn't name names, but the look into her life was—and still is—enthraling.

Her blog became a TV series and a series of books not because she wrote about sex, but because her writing gripped us. Her writing struck a chord with people. We all understood the need to love and be loved. We understood that sometimes you have to make hard, unpopular choices. Belle chose to become a call girl and she doesn't paint a rosy picture of it. She paints a *real* picture of it.

This isn't career day at school mind you; she doesn't advocate a life in the sex trade. Even if her topic isn't your cup of tea, you should read a few of her posts to see how she pulls you into a conversation and makes you feel like she is talking to you across a café table. I bet you'll go back to read more. All good writers, like Belle, leave you craving *more*.

Now, what about you? Are you going to write as you or under a pen name? Before you decide, you don't actually have to decide. I'll tell you right now that I have a couple anonymous blogs out there. I have anonymous blogs to explore different sides of my writing. Writing about different topics stretches my creativity. Stretching and pushing yourself is a critical aspect of being a writer.

When you're deciding whether or not to be anonymous, think about whether you would mind someone from your job, church, or local watering hole reading your posts and knowing that you wrote them. None of that should necessarily stop you from writing about what you want, but it just might stop you from writing about these things so openly. You might also not want the whole Internet to know exactly who you are, where you live, or the names of your family members. Although I do blog as myself, my children don't choose to (my daughter has a private blog), so they are only mentioned by initials and I don't post their pictures publicly. The same goes for other people in my life. They didn't ask to be drug into the wide-open land of the Internet, so I keep a lot private. I also make a lot public.

I've taken strong stands on mental illness, education, learning disabilities, my own health, and sometimes politics. I take those stands because sometimes it's the right thing to do; sometimes individuals need that chorus of voices calling for change. I feel I've been given a tremendous responsibility by having an audience. Even if it isn't a huge audience, I know it's a far-reaching one. So, I take a stand. Sometimes it isn't popular; sometimes I cringe

as I select "Publish," but I haven't had many posts that I regretted posting. If nothing else, anonymous or not, always write from your heart, be proud of what you write, and stand by your words.

*If nothing else, anonymous or not,
always write from your heart,
be proud of what you write, and stand
by your words.*

There are degrees of anonymity. You can blog as Jane Smith, but just not tell all about where you live, or blog as Bob the Delivery Guy and be a pen name. It's your choice. One of my friends is a "Daddy Blogger" and blogs under the name "Genuine." His family members are Mrs. Genuine, Genuine Girl, Genuine Boy 1, and so on. There is a layer between the world at large and his family. Is he anonymous? Nope. His name is Jim Turner. He and I were business partners in a company together. Oddly enough, he's far more famous as Genuine than as Jim (at conferences he writes "Genuine" below his real name). Go figure. Just mull that over for a minute, because now you're getting to the really fun stuff.

So the question is "Where does your public life end and private life start?" This isn't a question I can answer for you. Bloggers usually find out by crossing the line. In doing so, you'll learn from experience what topics you want to keep off limits.

Write Until You've Said Your Piece

One of the most common questions I'm asked is "How long should a blog post be?" I often give a rather impish answer of "as long as it takes for you to say what you have to say," but that is a cop-out answer. Generally a blog post is short, about 200 words or so. I think it became that way because geeks have notoriously short attention spans. That's not to say that people, including myself, don't write longer pieces. It's just in general, blog posts are short. The short-form post is something that seems to fit in well with today's fast-paced society; however, there is a *huge* drawback to it: People often just regurgitate the same ideas and links without adding anything to the conversation. Trying to squeeze some original analysis into 200 words isn't the easiest thing to do, but it is worth it when you really pull it off.

I've read great posts that are around 6–10 words long (a single sentence) as well as epics of thousands of words. One isn't better than the other. When you're writing a post, just write it out. Don't worry if it's too short or too long. Say what you want to say and when you're done, see what it looks like. You might want to split a longer post into a part 1 and part 2 (or 3, 4 ...); series posts are *great* ways to keep readers coming back (don't forget the age-old cliffhanger!).

CAUTION

I do place one caveat on longer posts (500 words and greater): People find it hard to read a lot of text onscreen. If you have long paragraphs without breaks, readers might skim through the post. The solution to this is pretty easy: shorter paragraphs!

If You Post It, They Will Come: Posting Frequency Answered

How often should I post? This might be the number one question people ask about blogging, along with "How do I post links and images?" The honest answer is that it's up to you, but if you are trying to build traffic and a profile for a professional or business blog, you need to post *at least* three times a week, and not all in one day. Honestly, a post a day should be your goal if you want to build a readership and traffic. Yes, that might seem difficult at first and it does require a significant time commitment, but once you get going you might not be able to shut up.

If you feel like you have to post more than once a day, I suggest spreading the posts out over the day. You can do this two ways: One is to just hold off on posting, and the other is to use the post to the future feature available in most blog engines (see Figure 3.3). I recommend the latter, because it gets the post out of your system.

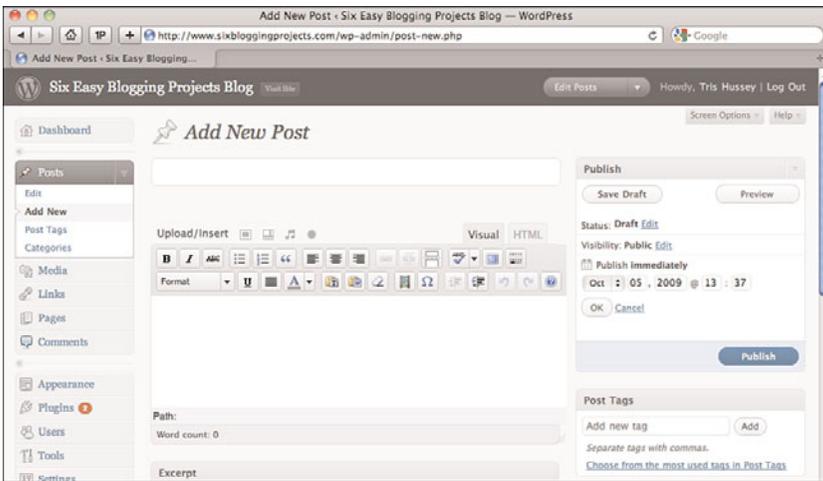


FIGURE 3.3

Part of the WordPress post editor showing the time-date adjustment panel.

In addition to gaining *readers* by posting every day, search engines index your blog more frequently, if you post frequently. Each post ties into the previous ones and strengthens the associate between your blog and the keywords you use. After a solid month of posting five times per week (or more), your ranking in the search engines will increase significantly.

Your First Post

So your first post. The “Hello world, here I am. Time to listen up” statement.

Uh huh.

Right.

Chances are your first post will suck. Oh yeah, it is pretty much guaranteed that you’re going to look at it in month or so and die a little inside. You’ll want to delete it. Expunge this dreck from the world.

Don’t.

Your first post is something of a birthday statement. It’s what you’re going to look back on and smile after your blog has been around for a year or so. But, yeah, it will still suck and really that’s okay. Just get the first post out there and out of the way. No, you don’t have to write some great expressive post about what your blog is about; just a “Hi, yeah this is the first post, I’m going to talk about [insert topic], hope you enjoy it...” is great. Don’t worry or stress about post number one.

This Is Practice

As you’re writing, remember that these posts are practice. You might hesitate to post them. You might want to read and edit them over and over again. You might think that they aren’t good enough. Well, they *are* good enough and you *should* post them. Sure, check for spelling and grammatical errors, but don’t go and edit the post over and over. Don’t try to work and rework your post for just the right turn of phrase. It isn’t worth it. I’ve said it

before and I'm going to repeat it again, ready? Listen. No, seriously, this is important.

Your first post will suck, and that's okay because all first posts suck.

I think my first post, which I wish I could share, but I lost it in a blog move, was something like this:

Here's a cool thing I found today. I think this collaboration tool is cool. [Link]

This is a riveting piece of writing, isn't it? This is a post full of passion and depth, inspiring you to think in a whole new way about collaboration tools. Yeah, not so much. This is why you just keep writing. It gets easier and eventually you find a voice to write in that expresses who you are. Experiment with short posts, long posts, lists, reviews, a brain dump of links, and so on.

Your first post will suck, and that's okay because all first posts suck.

At the beginning, writing and posting might seem like a struggle, especially if you're not used to writing on a regular basis. It *does* get easier—I promise. When I talk about sources of inspiration, you'll see that I don't just pull ideas out of thin air. Nor do I think my writing needs no improvement. I appreciate the feedback I get on my posts, and especially this book, because often a gentle critical look can help bring out the great writer that you are.

Before you get worried or excited about the content of your blog posts, always remember that blogging isn't rocket science. There aren't rules that you must follow to make a good blog post. When my friends and colleagues ask me "Is this an okay post?" I generally say that it's

fine. Sure I might help them fix a link or move a picture around, but generally that's it. Why? Because it's *their* story not mine. Yes, if it's a post trying to make a point, I'll read and offer suggestions for clarity, but that isn't often.

I hope that you are more inspired and think that I'm dead wrong about writing. Stop shaking your head because it's absolutely true. I want to get you *thinking* about *your* voice and story, and if you don't agree with me about my take on writing, that's great. It's your blog, not mine.

Writing Your First Post

Let's get into the nuts and bolts of posting. The following examples use WordPress' post editor, but many blog engines use the same components and icons in their editors so it shouldn't be too difficult to make the transition.

CAUTION

As much as it is the word processor of choice for most of us, regardless of platform, Microsoft Word *sucks* as the tool for you to write your posts. Why? Because when you copy and paste from Word into your post, Word brings along a ton of extra "stuff" in the formatting code that makes it not display properly when someone views it in your blog. Yes, you can avoid this problem with a couple extra steps, but frankly everyone forgets to take those steps, so just write in a simple text editor or a blog editor, which is even better.

The post/page editor in WordPress should look familiar to you if you've used a web-based email service like Hotmail, Yahoo Mail, or Gmail (see Figure 3.4). All of these online writing tools share similar icon sets and even sometimes background technology!

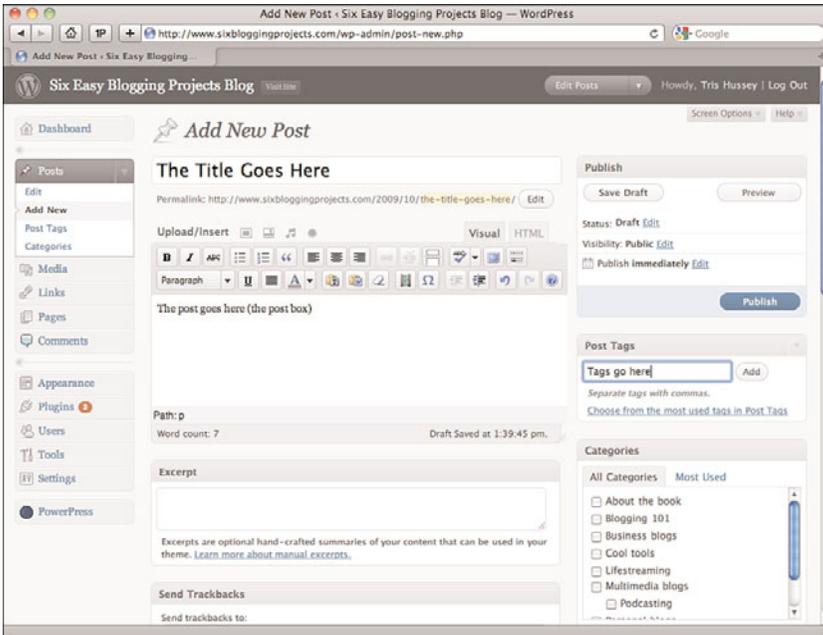


FIGURE 3.4

The post editor in WordPress, which is similar to other online writing tools.

The layout should be pretty easy to follow. The title goes in the skinny bar at the top, the post itself goes in the larger box below the formatting buttons, and the tags go to the right in their own box. Categories are also set on the right, chosen with check boxes (or created ad hoc by clicking the Add New Category link).

When you are ready to post, click the Publish button, and you are done! If you are worried about losing your work, or want to finish a post later, click the Save Draft button. The draft post shows up in the post list noted with

“Draft” next to the title. WordPress has a handy autosave feature that stores a copy of the post as you write it. The default is to save every five minutes, so if you accidentally close your browser tab or window (that has happened to me more times than I like to remember), your browser crashes, or your whole computer crashes, WordPress will have a version (the last saved one) for you. I, however, don’t trust autosave functions. I still proactively click Save Draft if I’m working in the browser, and you should too.

Let's pull this all together now. There is a button, located in the upper right corner of the WordPress dashboard, called New Post (refer to Figure 2.11). When you click this button, you get a blank post. If you fast forward in your mind, once you've written something to post, it will look something like Figure 3.5.

This post is ready to go. The title is there, the post is all there, and I have tags set (right side) and categories chosen (right side, below tags). I skipped putting an image into this post because for your first post, just write and get something out there. If you are confident enough to include an image, go for it. The only thing left to do is click the Publish button and make the post live on the Internet as shown in Figure 3.6.

THE MAGIC PASTE FROM WORD BUTTON

If you're like me, you have a love-hate relationship with Microsoft Word. Sure you *have* to use it (because everyone else does), but you don't have to *like* it. Earlier I mentioned how copying text from Word to your blog engine brings along extra stuff. This extra code changes the font of that post from all the other posts and the rest of the blog. The extra codes could even turn the whole layout of your blog into a jumbled mess. Don't do it.

But wait, "I like or even need to write in Word," you say. Whether it's a dictate from the boss or a personal preference, there are valid reasons to use Word, and it's because of them that the Paste from Word button was created (I call it magic).

Here's how you find it.

In WordPress, look in the post editor for an icon that looks like two lines of colored squares (it's the last button in the top row—or only row until you click it) and click it. You should see a button that looks like a clipboard with a very familiar "W" on it. That's it.

Select your post in Word and copy it to the clipboard (Edit menu, Copy or control-c). Next, click in the post area where you want the text to start (usually the top) and then click the Paste from Word button to paste your post into the window that pops up. Finally, click Insert. If the little window doesn't go away after you click Insert, click its close box in the upper right-hand corner.

If your text has underline, italics, or bold text, that formatting will be preserved in the post and put in as proper HTML code.

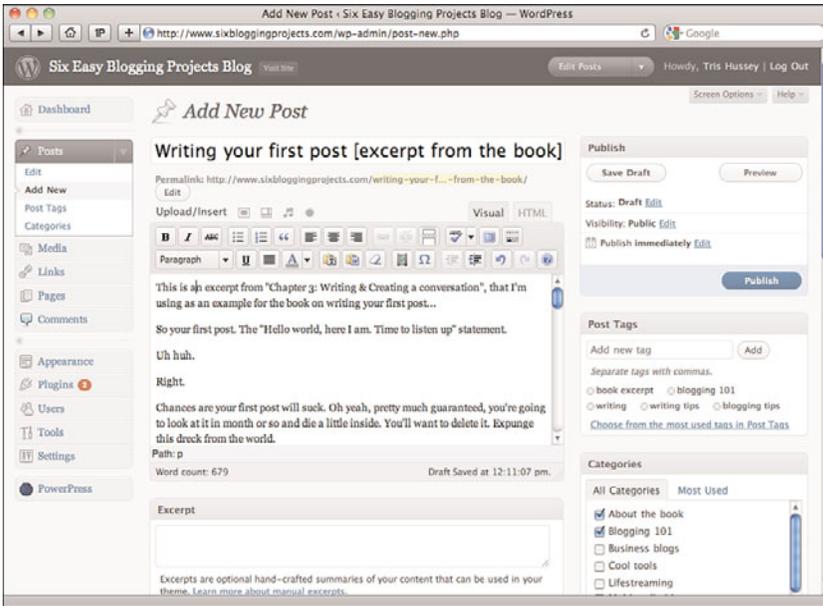


FIGURE 3.5

Post in WordPress' post editor ready to be published.



FIGURE 3.6

The post now published and live on the Internet.

If you look carefully at Figures 3.5 and 3.6, you'll notice that the body of the post in the editor looks like it's in Times New Roman font (it is actually). In the post, it's in a different font (Lucida Grand, for the fontaholics like me). This is all part of the magic of blog themes and style sheets. Often people tell me they want to change the font in the post editor, because they want it to look like that when it's published. Sure, you *can* do that, but you *shouldn't* do that because this is what your theme's style sheet does. If you don't like the font your theme uses, changing it isn't difficult, but that's a little advanced for right now.

That's it, really. Keep your first post simple, don't over think it, and just do it. It is as simple, and as hard, as that.

Drinking from the Information Fire Hose: Using the Internet to Power Your Posts

"But what should I write *about*?" I'm asked that over and over again, and sometimes when I suggest topics I even get "Oh, no one would want to read about *that*." No, you're right, I suggested it because I want to see you write really bad stuff (sarcasm).

In seriousness, getting that spark of inspiration is something that is hard to explain. The bolt from the blue *does* happen, just not often. I get most of my ideas from other people who intersect with me. Sometimes it's an electronic intersection; sometimes it's in real life (IRL). The key I've found is when you become inspired, don't

dismiss it. Run with it for a bit in your head, on paper, or electronically. Just see where it takes you.

Now, let's get to those intersection points.

Other Bloggers

I can't speak for everyone's friends, but I am lucky enough to be surrounded by some of the most brilliant, creative, and scary-smart people I've ever known. Looking at the things *they* create, share, and link to always gets something going in my head.

I talk more specifically about building your online community in Chapter 4, "Building Community," but within your community there are always people who send you interesting links and such directly. Many of them inspire you with a comment they leave on your blog. The real great stuff from you often comes from all the other "stuff" they do online. Bloggers call all that stuff, when it is all put together, a *lifestream*. I cover building a blog from *your* lifestream in Chapter 10, "Creating a Lifestreaming Blog." For now, just visualize a website where *everything* someone puts online can be read—pictures, shared playlists, shared links, posts, and updates from Twitter. Yes, that's *a lot* of information.

NEW TERM

The notion of a lifestream is a pretty new concept (late 2008 to be exact) that means pulling all the things you post online into one flow of information. For example, blog posts, pictures on Flickr, shared bookmarks, and favorite songs from music sharing sites are all shown together on one page.

Let's start small though. My two favorite ways to get inspiration from the community (and just small segments of larger lifestreams) are Twitter and Shared items from Google Reader.

Twitter is a *microblogging* service where people share “tweets” of 140 characters or fewer with people who follow them (like being friends on Facebook) and read the tweets of the people *they* follow. I follow and am followed by several thousand people right now.

NOTE

You can follow me, too, on Twitter. Go to www.twitter.com/trishussey to find my Twitter profile.

NEW TERM

Microblogging emerged in 2006 to describe services like Twitter where you post content that is very short in length (in Twitter's case, there can be no more than 140 characters).

I read the tweets from the people I follow in an application called TweetDeck (www.tweetdeck.com) that enables me to segment people into groups (like Friends, News, and Folks) so I can read more and not miss something that is important to me (see Figure 3.7).



FIGURE 3.7

Organizing tweets using TweetDeck.

DRINKING FROM THE INFORMATION FIRE HOSE: USING THE INTERNET TO POWER YOUR POSTS

So along with the wit and news my friends share, I also get updates from sources like CNN, CBC (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation), and a myriad of tech websites. Combined, this makes for a lot of potential inspiration, but it doesn't end there. Google Reader is the leading **RSS** reader and has a function where you can share articles you like as a public list. Like Twitter, people follow your shared items list and vice versa. The larger and more diverse the number of people you follow, the more varied kinds of articles you will see. Figure 3.8 gives you a look at a small portion of the shared items I've received in one day.

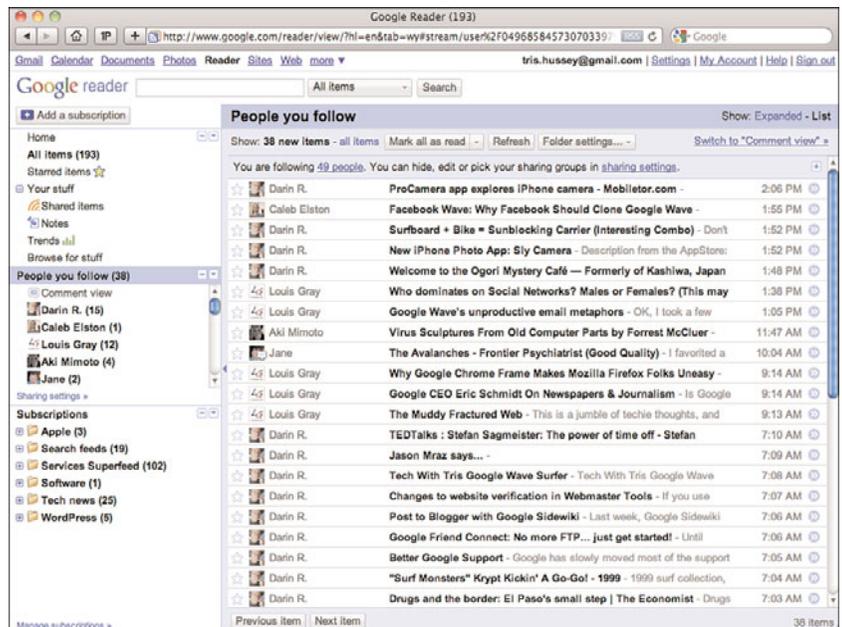
NEW TERM

RSS stands for "Really Simple Syndication" and is, simply, a series of technologies that produces a computer readable version of the posts on a blog that other computers can use to check for new posts. People use RSS readers to follow the sites they enjoy. The RSS reader checks the feed for the sites you've subscribed to and automatically downloads new posts for you. It's like getting an email from all your favorite websites whenever they publish something.

It doesn't matter what time of day or night, what the topic is, and so on, the community of people I follow and who follow me as well are a *constant* source of inspiration and support. So, if your community doesn't inspire you, come visit mine, we'd love to meet you.

FIGURE 3.8

A look at my shared items in Google Reader for one day.



“Real” World

Contrary to popular belief, geeks do have lives and do venture outside. Fine, geeks often carry laptops, cameras, iPhones/Blackberries, but they’re out in the “real” world. As you would expect, the real world can always provide something to write about. Going to a conference, a store, the local coffee place, and even walking down the street can provide you with much needed fodder. If you aren’t inspired by real life, you need to get out more.

Geeks like to share what they know and have learned. To do this, they like to hang out together and generally geek out. In Vancouver, they have regular meetups for bloggers and people interested in PR and social media, and photowalks to just wander around and take pictures. There are even Tweetups, which are meetups organized through Twitter. Often, meetups are purely social, just time after work in a pub. But meetups, like Third Tuesday, bring in guest speakers to talk about blogging, social media, and society. These semi-structured social times are only *part* of the inspiration the real world brings.

*The world around you is inspiring—
remember to open your eyes.*

How about a good or bad encounter with someone at a store? Did you get awesome, over-the-top service or something that makes you want to never go there again? How about just something you see on the street that strikes you funny. Take a picture of it with your cell phone if you can, and use that as the seed of a post.

The world around you is inspiring— remember to open your eyes.

Reader Comments

Chapter 4 goes more in depth with comments, but here is a short bit on how comments inspire me and my writing. As a reminder, part of blog posts and blogging is the capability of people to leave comments on the posts you’ve written. These comments can be everything from “That was awesome” to “You’re completely wrong!” to “Yes, but have you thought about this angle...” and all of these can be sources of inspiration for your writing.

Sometimes there is nothing more inspiring than people reading your post and taking it in a whole new direction. It’s very gratifying to me when someone reads what I wrote and then sees something else in the post that is *more* interesting than what I wrote. When that happens, and it will, build on it by writing a follow-up post. You might even think about asking the commenter to contribute to the post. This kind of writing symbiosis is one of the greatest parts of blogging. When your readers feel that they are also *contributors* to your blog, it only serves to strengthen your larger community. You also start to build a loyal following who will cheer you on when you get that book deal!

Great comments like that are amazing gifts. Don’t waste them!

Writing with Search Engines in Mind

“Well, just look it up on Google...”

How many times have you heard or said that? If you’re like the majority of North Americans,

you've probably said it a lot. Looking up information through a search engine—Google being the reigning champion—has become standard practice. The take home of this idea is that if you want people to get to *your* site/blog/whatever, then you need to make sure that not only Google knows about you (that isn't very hard), but that you're *writing* so people will find your content when they are looking for your topic.

How do you get to this search engine nirvana? Believe it or not, just by starting off with a blogging engine, you're already ahead of the game. Search engines love blogs because they automatically link all of your site's content together. Even better, as you link to your own work, use categories, and tag your posts, you build connections that search engines can use to better understand and index your content. As great as blog engines are at the basics of SEO, there are some really easy things you can do to dial your SEO up to an 11. Now let's get you the rest of the way there with a few tips.

TIP

Did you know that Google does math? Oh yeah, and that's not all. The following are some of my favorites, which can be entered into Google's search field:

Who is [put in a name]?

What is 30c in f (converts from Celsius to Fahrenheit)

What is \$1 CAD in USD (converts from Canadian dollars to U.S. dollars)

For the moment you're going to take for granted that Google and the other search engines have found you. Yes, I know it doesn't happen overnight, but most blog engines automatically ping all the search engines when you post, so within a few weeks to a month you're being indexed.

TIP

If you've gone the DIY/self-hosted route for WordPress, then I recommend you install the plug-ins: Google Sitemap Generator and All In One SEO. These two plug-ins help all the tips I'm going to give you work even better. WordPress plug-ins can be found at www.wordpress.org/extend/plugins/.

One of the key parts to having people find your blog via search engines is understanding how people actually search for things: *keywords*.

NEW TERM

A keyword is the term used for the words people use to find something through a search engine.

Keywords

Put yourself into the shoes of someone searching for your topic. What words would you use to find a topic? What words in the title or the excerpt will get you to click that result? Don't just think, "Oh, of course someone will search for x." If you follow that track, very often you'll be wrong. It's okay. Initially, your gut will be wrong, but there are some tools for you to try out to check how often certain words are used.

These tools include:

- ▶ Google Adwords Keyword tool
(<https://adwords.google.com/select/KeywordToolExternal>)
- ▶ WordTracker free keyword tool
(<http://freekeywords.wordtracker.com/>)

For example, Figure 3.9 shows what Google's tool shows for the term "blog."

When you're writing posts, it's a good idea to learn what keywords people use to look for information on your topic. Because so many people use the word "blog" (and variants), using a term like weblog might not bring many people to my site. However, there are some ways to use the variety of terms people use to search for things to your advantage.

Once you have your keywords, run a few searches with them. What results do you get? What catches your eye? Follow the links to those sites and see how the content is written. I bet you'll notice how important terms are repeated often in the text, not in a strange way, just often. You should also notice how the authors use synonyms and variations of the keyword terms as well. This is because Google and the other search engines are putting more weight on the *content of the page* than they were in the past. It isn't a battle between who could write better code for pages; it's between who can *write better content for pages*.

The screenshot shows the Google AdWords Keyword Tool interface. The browser address bar displays <https://adwords.google.com/select/KeywordToolExternal>. The page title is "Google AdWords: Keyword Tool". The main heading is "Keyword Tool". Below the heading, there is a section for "How would you like to generate keyword ideas?" with two radio buttons: "Descriptive words or phrases" (selected) and "Website content". A text input field contains the word "blog". There are checkboxes for "Use synonyms" and "Filter my results", and a "Get keyword ideas" button. To the right, the "Selected Keywords:" section is empty, showing "No keywords added yet" and a "+ Add your own keywords" link. Below this, there is a table of search results. The table has columns for "Keywords", "Advertiser Competition", "Local Search Volume: August", and "Global Monthly Search Volume". The "Match Type" is set to "Broad".

Keywords	Advertiser Competition	Local Search Volume: August	Global Monthly Search Volume	Match Type
blog		37,200,000	68,000,000	Add
blogs		3,350,000	6,120,000	Add
fail blog		Not enough data	823,000	Add

FIGURE 3.9

The Google Adwords Keyword tool to see how often people search for "blog" and similar terms.

Writing for Search Engines

Diversity is critical to your success with search engines. How many different ways do you know to express an idea? How many words do you know that mean pretty much the same thing? Can you distill an idea into a short sentence?

These are all key to writing for search engines.

It isn't a battle between who could write better code for pages; it's between who can write better content for pages.

The operating principle is to write keyword rich. The title of any blog post you write should have the words that describe what the post is about. If your post is about investments and the stock market, then those words should be in the title. By the same token, the content of your post should include words like investing, stocks, securities, and so on. Write normally, but write *diversely*. Flex that vocabulary. Use different words and phrases in the post to explain the point. This makes your copy keyword rich. Your post will be indexed for the breadth of those keywords, which means that when people search for something like investing, your post is strongly associated with not only investing, but all the other shades of meaning. Search engines will take this to mean that your site might be more *relevant* to the searcher.

Google and other search engines strive to learn human language and shades of meaning. They try to tie words to ideas and concepts so the more words that you use to describe a concept, the better your post will be indexed.

Categories and Tags

Blog engines, like WordPress, use categories and tags to help you organize your posts into topic areas. Categories and tags are very similar, but easy to differentiate by just thinking about your kitchen's silverware drawer.

A category is like the silverware drawer itself; the drawer holds a lot of similar and related objects. In the drawer you have those metal objects you use to eat. If you were writing a post about those objects, you would put it in the category of "Silverware Drawer" but then tag the post with "utensil, fork, stainless steel, desert fork, and Oneida."

I'm betting that you have figured out the post is about stainless steel desert forks made by Oneida. The tags help readers and search engines connect all the dots together to put your post into *context* with other posts on your blog and blogs all over the Internet. You can see by extension if the tags for another post were "utensil, knife, stainless steel, steak, serrated, and Oneida" you'd know what that was about. If someone wanted to see all of the posts you wrote about your vast collection of Oneida silverware, clicking on the tag name in any of the posts with that tag brings up *all* the posts with that tag (knives, forks, and even spoons).

So, categories are big buckets for content. When you're thinking of good names for categories, think of the major concepts you'd use to look for your topic and what you're writing about. Categories might be the keywords that are *almost* too general, but still enough to get you in the right general direction. You don't want to have too many categories on your blog. My rule of thumb is around a maximum of 10.

Summary

This has been a very diverse chapter, hasn't it? A lot goes into writing good blog posts—finding sources of inspiration *and* remembering them for later, and then going through the process of just writing, getting that idea down. Posting is, really, just a small step, just one click. Then you need to think about how people will find you and your nascent blog.

It's not about learning tricks for search engines, but rather *habits*. Writing, creating categories, choosing tags, and even writing titles are all *proven* ways to help search engines find and index you properly.

The next chapter focuses on writing to encourage discussion and reaching out to other bloggers in your area of interest.

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