

IT'S A BIG, BLOG WORLD OUT THERE

Five Quick Tips to Building
a Better Blog

by Meryl K. Evans

You know that blogs have become mainstream when they're mentioned routinely on TV, both in fiction and news programs. As recent as 18-months ago, however, blogs weren't discussed with everyday friends and colleagues—only with other bloggers and geeks. “Blog” today is the “email” of 10 years ago: more people know about blogs, but don't necessarily use the technology or plan to in the future.

But the tide is turning. Technorati (<http://www.technorati.com/>) tracks millions of conversations occurring on over 30 million blogs. Blogs are not just for keeping personal diaries and sharing opinions anymore. Companies like Boeing, General Motors, and Stonyfield Farm added them to their business arsenal. It can be said that blogs are serious business.

Canadian researchers conducted a study that discovered people judge a site in one-twentieth of a second after viewing it¹. Literally, we decide whether or not a site appeals to us within a blink of an eye. Duh, right? Just backing up this fact with solid data.

With statistics like these, bloggers need all the help they can get to attract and keep readers. C'mon...admit it. Bloggers want readers and lots of 'em. Don't tell me that people blog for themselves, without caring about numbers. Maybe this is true for six folks, but most everyone wants to be seen, adored, and admired. If we didn't, we'd blog on paper instead. Oh yeah, that's called a journal or diary.

Starting a Blog

I wrote my first blog entry on June 1, 2000. A pitiful one that embarrasses me as I copy and paste it:

“This is my first blogger posting. I’ve decided to take the plunge so I can somehow keep my Web site regularly updated and embarrass myself by displaying how small my mind is compared to bloggers out there in the world like [Jason Kottke](#) or [Steve Champeon](#). Oy, now I have to find the time to spiffy up this Web site.”

If it’s embarrassing, why did I put it here? Because it’s online for all to find and read. I could delete it, but you know it’s going to be found somewhere else like the [Wayback Machine](#).

I had no idea what I was going to do with my blog. At the time, blogs most often focused on personal lives. However, what was written on the Web stayed on the Web even if you deleted it, and that concerned me. Much like the story of the town gossip who asked for forgiveness. The community leader advises her to get a pillow and go to the top of the hill and let the feathers out of the pillow. The gossip asks if she’s forgiven, but the leader responds she is to collect all of the feathers. Of course, she returned collecting very few. “Words are like feathers. Once spoken, they’re hard to gather up again.”

With that in mind, I treated my blog entries as if a future manager or client would read them. Personal online information, including blogs, has become an extension of our resumes. The first time we read a blog of someone we’ve never met, the blogger often sounds confident and in charge. In contrast, when we meet a person for the first time, that confidence doesn’t always come through right away. Entering a blog compares to stepping into one’s home where the owner feels at his or her most comfortable.

In other words, we are more apt to be ourselves when blogging, and that's a good thing. Take me, for example. Blogging takes away the barriers of my not understanding someone else, and vice versa, due to my hearing disability. It takes away the prejudice of [audism](#). Any barriers that get in the way of our behaving naturally are gone when we blog.

Why would anyone want to blog then, revealing so much to hundreds or thousands (if you're lucky) strangers?

- We do it for attention.
- We do it to show off our knowledge.
- We do it to reach out to the world and feel connected.
- We do it to attract search engines so we show up higher in the search results.

Blogging is hard. It requires discipline and a thick skin. To succeed means thinking of new topics, writing about those topics, reading other blogs to join the conversations, and contributing on a regular basis. Ironically, as I wrote this, a couple of well-known bloggers have reported they're tired and thinking about quitting the blog thing. No one should be shocked. BLOGGING IS HARD.

Evolution of a Blog

I still blog after six years. In fact, I contribute to multiple blogs with three of them my own. When I first started *meryl's notes* blog, it had no direction and commented only on personal observations. Big whoop. I didn't lead an interesting life. I hung out with my family, worked, and volunteered. I wasn't travelling to exotic places or doing daring stunts.

About the time I started blogging, I also started freelancing on the side. The blog slowly went from, “Wow, that was some *Survivor* finale” to “dealing with lousy customer service” and “the challenges of being a reporter when you can’t use the phone like most everyone else.”

Giving Birth to More Blogs

In 2002, I started another blog when I became pregnant with kid number three (back when hearing someone say “pregnant” engendered knowing looks while saying “blog” led only to puzzled-looks from people). This blog was obviously personal with a focus on pregnancy and related resources. The blog ended shortly after my little curly-haired guy arrived. (He turned three as I wrote this.) I had no desire to write about raising children—I wanted a record of what was most likely my last pregnancy.

Another blog came to life as the pregnancy-cum-baby blog ended. In preparation for an upcoming cochlear implant, I gave birth to *Bionic Ear Blog*. Originally, the blog covered the cochlear implant process and living with the implant. As the *Bionic Ear Blog* matured, I added entries about my life as a deaf person as I was still discovering things about being deaf after 30 years.

During this process, I learned why I blog and keep blogging. Because of my hearing, with blogs, there’s no “I can’t understand you” happening. I don’t miss a thing when reading blogs and participating in conversations unless a blogger adds podcasts. For once, I’m not immediately judged because of my imperfect speech and inability to understand everything that’s said. Really, people think you’re dumb if you keep saying, “What?” and lose track of the conversation.

Together *Bionic Ear Blog* and *meryl's notes* became proof that while I've always known I have a brain, being deaf can make people think otherwise. On the blogs, I'm equal to everyone and don't feel disabled.

Blog Benefits for Businesses

meryl's notes keeps my Web site's content fresh and attractive to search engines. Having gone full-time almost a year ago, my web site is more important than ever as it's my the number one marketing tool for my business. I struggle with cold calling and in-person networking, which often lead to hang ups or looks that tell me I'm inferior (see *audism*, [page 4](#)). I don't rely on blogging alone—my marketing arsenal also includes email newsletters, individual emails, instant messaging and online social networks.

Blogging won't work for everyone. In deciding what marketing avenues to pursue, businesses must evaluate blogging just like they do radio ads, newspaper ads, and direct mail. Don't let anyone tell you to start a blog because it's the coolest and latest thing. Blogs aren't a fad, but what you see today in blogs won't be there in two years. It'll be different—more integrated. For example, MySpace² has a blog tool integrated into profiles along with many other features.

Businesses can investigate discussion forums, mailing list discussion groups, wikis, blogging, email newsletters, knowledge-bases, online chat, feeds (these aren't edible unless you call them "brain food"), and more. Stock exchange experts encourage diversifying. The same applies to business content and information sharing. Diversify. Some people hate getting email newsletters and rather get a feed. Others don't know XML from NFL or RSS from KISS. Branching out ensures you reach people who have different preferences in how they get their information.

Information Overkill

There is simply too much information on the internet for the average person to access everything. Your regular rounds about the internet amounts to dipping your toe into the Pacific Ocean. Knowing all of you are as information overloaded as I am, I set out to randomly surf thousands of blogs, covering many topics, trying to separate the good blogs from the “could-be-betters.” Everyday, I scanned, glanced, and zipped through endless news, articles, blogs, and any other content my eyes could handle on [my two monitors](#) (yes, two, and I don’t ever want to go back to one). I wanted to dig beneath a blog’s good looks. This spontaneous experiment provided a valuable lesson of what features—content aside—make or break a blog.

You might think some of these are “duh” or “common sense ideas,” but after surfing hundreds and maybe even thousands of blogs, these mistakes appeared again and again. We should be making other mistakes with our blogs, new mistakes, not these five. Here are the five tips to building a better blog—ensuring that it’s the best blog possible and that you give readers what they need before they leave.

1. Small banner

If you can’t see the content without scrolling, then your banner (also referred to as a header) is too big. This valuable screen estate is known as the active window or “above the fold³.” Your site only has a few seconds to prove itself and hiding the goods below the fold lowers your chances of getting someone to stick around.

While scrolling up and down is rarely a big deal, a reader might not want to bother scrolling when casually browsing blogs or Web sites. Why take the chance? As I surfed from blog to blog, I wanted a snapshot of the page as soon as I arrived. I’m busy. I’ve got sites to go

to and sites to see: I'm not going to make an effort to crawl around for content. Banners are meaningless when they take up too much screen estate.

HOW TO CHECK TO SEE IF THE BANNER IS TOO BIG:

View your blog with your monitor set to 800x600 (while 1024x768 is common, using 800x600 helps you view your content the way it's likely to be seen when considering browser toolbars and other objects shrinking the 1024x768 space to a smaller space). If you want to go the extra mile, check the page within a frame as seen on most blog exchange sites⁴. With sites like About.com and blog exchanges, it's not unusual for a blog or Web site to end up in a frame, which pushes the content further down. See [About.com](#) for an example of a frame that holds steady while you scroll and read.

WHILE WE'RE ON THE SUBJECT OF SCROLLING...

Believe it or not, horizontal scrolling happens more often than we think. Though many mice come with sideways scrolling capabilities, people complain when they come across a site with a scrollbar for right and left scrolling. Hard to believe? A search on "[scrolling sideways good bad](#)" shows few—if any—supporters and plenty of complaints.

2. Short articles

Some blogs consistently have content with over 800 words. Shoot for around 500 words or fewer. Save the longer stuff for newsletters, magazines, and other appropriate outlets. Also, use bold face type and bolded headers in the longer articles to help readers with scanning.

While the occasional long entry is okay, doing it on a regular basis doesn't impress. Instead, it drags. Readers want to read the heart of the content and get out. They don't want to spend time on a blog entry when there are thousands of blogs out there. Multiply thousands of blogs with hundreds of entries and you've got a winning recipe for information overload.

When you do post a longer than normal entry, consider posting an excerpt of the entry on the home page rather than the whole entry. If a reader wants to read more, then she can click for the rest of the article. If not, the next entry is further up the screen trying to entice the reader to stick around just a little longer.

3. Readable

Obvious? Not according to the hundreds of blogs I've visited. While bright colors may be cool to tweens and teens, they ain't cool for serious blogs. Not only are colors a problem, so is font size. How many times have you heard someone complain, "The font is too big!"? If I have to squint, then I'm not visiting again. We can use our browser's options to change the font size, but it won't work for all sites. Giving font size control to readers lets them figure out what works best for them. You may have selected a reasonable font size, but browsers, Macs vs. PCs, and monitor resolution settings can shrink it. [Text Sizing](#) shows how text looks in different browsers and different PCs.

While browsers like Firefox (which I use as my primary browser) can change text on Web sites with fonts that can't be changed, not everyone uses Firefox nor do they know how to change the text size using their browsers options.

How to fix the font size problem

Two options.

- 1 Ensure your site can be resized using the browser's resizing feature. If not, revisit the site's font settings. Check it with multiple browsers.
- 2 Offer two or three size options so all the user has to do is click on an option to make the font larger or smaller.

Go to [Blue Flavor](#) to see how helpful it is to be able to change the text size in Internet Explorer.

Also, use italics *sparingly*. Many people have trouble reading words in italics. If you often quote resources and they're more than a paragraph long, it might be better to use quotation marks, indentation, or both.

Italics slow down reading, give us headaches, and create a difficult reading experience as we squint, drag our cursor over the content in attempt to see it better when it's selected (or copy it into word processor).

Speaking of difficult to read, a terrible trend has come to light that doesn't show signs of slowing down. I'm guilty of this with Bionic Ear because I was too lazy to change the template: Gray text on white. Gray has become the new black and stylish it's not! Stop it! Don't make me start a "GRAY Group: Gray reads awful, y'all!" Dorky, I know, but change the font to "#000000" or "black" and you won't ever hear me speak of GRAY Group again.

4. Frequent

When a blog isn't regularly updated, why should people come back to it, bookmark it, or save the feed? They don't.

After all, there are many more blogs out there where the bloggers make the time to update at least two or three times a week? While a CEO of a big company might be an exception from frequent posting, it doesn't apply to most of us.

5. Silent

Arriving on a blog and getting greeted with music can freak out the reader especially if he doesn't share the blogger's taste in music. In most cases, there is no way to turn off the music from within the site.

Think about your least favorite type of music? What would you do if you hear it when you arrive on a blog?

Even though I don't have perfect hearing, unexpected music in a blog has sent me jumping out of my Aeron chair (it really works for me) a few times and not for good reason. This problem appears often on MySpace and after pressing pause to stop the music, the music restarts at the slightest movement.

In addition, many surfers are in an office or other public setting as well. Not all of them have headphones plugged into the PC and get embarrassed when music starts blasting out of the blue especially if they're on a conference call or are checking a personal blog during work time (not that any of us do that!).

RECAP

Here's a recap in case you missed any of those nice tips. Build an almost perfect blog with the following ingredients in the not-so secret formula:

- 1 Small banner
- 2 Short articles
- 3 Readable
- 4 Frequent
- 5 Silent

I tried to make a cool abbreviation out of these by using other words and everything sucked. So this will have to do without a mnemonic.

Lagniappe⁵ – Give them more than they expect

I try to surprise and delight my clients by adding extras. I want to do the same for you.

While these features aren't as important, they tell new readers what your blog is about. Figuring out the blog's topic from one or two posts isn't always possible especially since most bloggers stray from their typical topics from time to time. These are tips to orient your readers and give them a better experience.

HAVE AN ABOUT PAGE

The About page doesn't have to be long. Just simply say what the site, blog, or both is about. Also telling a little about you never hurts. Sometimes I find someone's postings so fascinating that I want to know more about his or her background. Yeah, yeah, you don't like to talk about yourself because you don't want to come across as big-headed. Seriously, the information on the About page could lead to opportunities.

CHOOSE A BLOG TITLE OR USE A TAGLINE THAT SAYS WHAT THE BLOG IS ABOUT

A long time ago, I used *meryl's notes* in my Web site's menu. It dawned on me that Joe or Jane Smith or even my mom wouldn't know it was a blog. So I changed it to *meryl's notes - blog*. Since I'd been using that name for so long, I just added a tagline to overcome this rather than start with a new title.

SMILE! ADD A PHOTO

I believe having photos of people on a company Web site and blog humanizes the company because it puts a face to the faceless corporation. Unfortunately, some people choose lousy photos (referring to poses and facial expressions, not looks) that annoy more than they help. To play it safe, tuck the photo on the About page so people don't constantly see your mug every time they read your blog. A blog enjoys more eyes than the About page. Many of you will argue for posting the photo on the blog page and I can be convinced by most of those arguments. So, this one, I'll leave to your better judgment.

[Ted Demopoulos' blog](#) includes a photo, an easy to find email link, and an About page (off the screen).

WHERE THE @(#)*\$ ARE YOUR ARCHIVES?

I can't tell you how many times I wanted to look for older postings and spent too much searching for archives. While most people want to read the more recent entries, occasionally we want to dig into older stuff. Of course, you've posted some wonderful stuff at a time when you had fewer readers, right? Let us discover those gems without struggling.

BE ACCESSIBLE

Too many times when I wanted to reach the blogger, I spent 30-plus minutes searching the site for contact information. Not everyone is an A-list blogger like Robert Scoble...and his email appears wide open for all to find and use. If you're overwhelmed with email, create a separate one for your Web site.

Another way to be accessible is to open comments on your blog entries. Yeah, that damned comment spam made this a problem, so that's why this doesn't appear in the top five tips. Blogging applications are finding ways around spam, so when possible, open your blog to comments.

Business bloggers who shut off comments are sending a message that no one is welcome to challenge their commentary and that they're afraid to hear what the public has to say. Blog readers are smart and know when a blogger is putting on airs as opposed to being upfront and honest.

If you have great content, then the rest is easy. Just add the five tips. If you go the distance and add the extras, then you're set. If not, expect folks to click away within a blink of an eye after arriving on your blog. After all, you and I know it's a big blog world out there.

ENDNOTES

- 1 From "The Importance of Being Pretty" in [Wired](#) News. January 18, 2006.
- 2 Forgive my mentioning MySpace twice in this thing even though many of the pages break these rules and the rules of Web standards design. I'm a realist and know how popular this place is. Even my kid has a space there.
- 3 "Above the fold" comes from printed newspapers. Newspapers are sold at newsstands by being folded in half with the top front page showing. Editors place the hottest stories in this prime estate to entice people to buy the newspaper.
- 4 Blog exchange sites: [Blogexplosion.com](#), [Blogadvance.com](#), [Blogclicker.com](#), [Blogsoldiers.com](#), and [Blogmad.net](#).
- 5 Giving customers a little extra that they're not expecting.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

[Meryl K. Evans](http://www.meryl.net) (www.meryl.net), content maven and long, long-time blogger (www.meryl.net/blog/) by today's standards, has written for *The Dallas Morning News*, *PC Today*, Pearson, O'Reilly, InternetVIZ, and others. In fact, www.meryl.net was listed as one of the 101 Best Web Sites for Writers in 2005 by *Writer's Digest* in its May 2005 issue. When she's not working as a writer, editor, and researcher, she's reading, volunteering, or tinkering with gadgets. Meryl likes gadgets so much that she even has a bionic ear (www.meryl.net/ci/). The native Texan lives in Plano—just a gallop north of Big D—with her husband and three young'uns who make her laugh every day. Contrary to the Texas tall tales, you won't find her or many Texans wearing 10-gallon hats and cowboy boots.

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First, make sure you have the latest version of Acrobat Reader 6 which you can download from <http://www.adobe.com/products/acrobat/readstep2.html>. If problems persist, it may be due to your Acrobat Reader settings. To correct the problem (for Windows), a reader, J. Hansen, suggests going to your Acrobat Reader Preferences > Options > Web browser Options. Check the "Display PDF in Browser" option. Then click on Save to Disk .

KEYBOARD SHORTCUTS

	PC	MAC
Zoom in (Larger view)	[CTL] [+]	[⌘] [+]
Zoom out	[CTL] [-]	[⌘] [-]
Full screen/Normal screen view	[CTL] [L]	[⌘] [L]

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