culturehive

Guide

A beginners guide to blogging

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Introduction

Are you just getting into blogging, or faced with reinventing an old blog? Yes, it is a big job, but don't panic. Cultural blogging consultant Kate Feld's concise 12-point guide to getting a blog up and running is applicable to all arts and cultural organisations including theatres and performance venues, museums and galleries, festivals and touring companies. Plunge in and get inspired.

1. What is a blog?

The name blog comes from weblog, an early online journal that began life in the mid-1990s as the digital version of a personal journal, and has since evolved into something much bigger and more complex. People still use blogs to write about their personal lives, but blogs now have many other uses: from niche DIY websites publishing original content to influential independent media sites to small businesses talking with their customers. Arts and culture organisations primarily use blogs to flesh out their programmes, share news and engage with their wider audience on a more personal, dynamic and informal level than their main public-facing website allows.

Blogs are written in "posts," typically read in reverse chronological order with most recent posts at the top. The title or masthead appears at the top – be sure to choose an interesting, unique name that communicates immediately what the blog is about, and use a subheading if you need to for extra clarity. Down the side of the blog, alongside the main body where the posts appear is the sidebar, which is where links to other sites usually appear. This is where many bloggers like to maintain a blogroll, a list of other relevant sites or like-minded blogs you recommend. This is also the natural place for widgets or plugins, mini applications you can run on your blog with a variety of cool functionalities, including Twitter feeds, recent pins on Pinterest, tag clouds, or an Instagram photo slideshow. These add-ons add interest and can make your site seem more dynamic, but beware of making your blog too noisy. Overall, your content should remain the focus.

2. How to set up your blog

Many organisations choose to publish their blogs within their main website. This works well for some, but hosting a blog on a blogging platform such as Wordpress is becoming more popular. The latter allows you to take advantage of special features like advanced traffic stats, the ability to schedule the publishing of posts, up-to-date design and smoother integration with other social media tools like Twitter, Pintrest and Facebook. If your blog is hosted on Wordpress, it's fairly easy to link it to your site and use design elements like logos and colours to make it seem like a seamless part of the infrastructure.

Choose a simple, up-to-date design template for your blog and remember to revisit this regularly; websites date surprisingly quickly. Make sure your blog is well signposted, with prominent links from your organisation's homepage, and link to the blog whenever possible from other parts of the website and your social media accounts.

3. Posting

Choose a post title that clearly expresses what your content will be about. This is better for search engine optimisation purposes, but short and to the point is also the best approach for your readers, who may wander off if you're too wordy or confusing. Most posts should fall in the 300-500 word range. If you have a lot to cover for some reason, longer posts can be broken up with images or pull-out quotes to break things up visually.

If you're writing with the intention of getting more people along to a performance or an exhibition, be sure to include the basic information on where and when it is happening, along with a prominent call to action (eg: 'book tickets here') with helpful links. If your blogging platform allows this facility, do tag or categorise your posts so people can easily find all the posts about one topic and search engines like Google can classify them correctly.

To establish your blog as a reliable source of good, fresh content and develop an audience, it's important to post multiple times a week (once weekly would be the absolute minimum.) But if something goes wrong and you have a long blog silence, don't apologise. Just start posting again; it's possible readers won't notice unless you draw attention to the lapse.

4. So what do I write about?

The blank white screen can be a daunting sight, but with a little planning and some creative thinking you should be able to develop a good mix of content. If you make your blog a dumping ground for rehashed press releases and stale news items, no one is going to read it, so be creative. If you're struggling, it may help to think editorially, as if you were publishing your own magazine. A brief survey of successful and popular blogs turned up this list of different kinds of posts: interviews, artist profiles, slideshows, inspirations, audio interviews, "meet the team", vodcasts, profiles of visitors, issue-led posts, debates, mini-essays, guest posts, backgrounders, slideshows, behind-the-scenes tours, guides and tutorials (use your organisations' staff expertise as a resource), photo of the week…. I could go on!

Successful bloggers develop content plans, a schedule of what you're going to post on the blog, with weekly and monthly features as well as one-off posts clearly outlined. This allows you to plan ahead and make sure you have everything you need to publish your post in time, including related photos and multimedia content. It also allows you to keep track of what you've featured on the blog, and by later reviewing which posts perform well you can learn what kinds of content your readers respond to, and plan accordingly.

5. Style and tone

If you're accustomed to writing press releases or content for brochures or websites, unbutton your collar and loosen that tie; Blogging is more personal, more colloquial. Lose the institutional tone of voice and try to write more relaxed. Reading a blog shouldn't feel like work. You might also find that shorter sentences and more frequent paragraph breaks work better as people who are reading from a screen tend to be more prone to distraction than readers of print.

It takes a while to develop your own blogging voice, but once you find an approach that feels right to you try to stick to the same style. For group-written blogs (those with more than one main contributor), I think it's better to be clear about who's written what by putting the author's name on posts and make a virtue of the fact that your blog is a mix of multiple viewpoints, voices and styles. However, do be sure to agree a basic style guide and an overall approach to the way you are going to write about your organisation to avoid confusing your readers.

6. Hyperlinks

What makes a blog different from a printed journal? Hyperlinks, or links. If you're not using them you're not using the full power of the blog. Links add context and authority to what you're saying. They should be used as a service to the reader, to provide resources or background, a way to point them at something they might want to investigate further at the source. They provide shortcuts in your writing (those unfamiliar with a word/company/ piece of news can click on it, saving you the trouble of explaining it and potentially boring the segment of your audience that already knows.)

Be generous with links, and readers will respond positively. Blogging comes from an open source mind-set, and best practice in blogging can seem counter-intuitive to those accustomed to a corporate or organisational mind-set (sending people to somewhere other than your own site, or linking to your competitor, acknowledging good activity by others in your field.) But a bunker mentality has no place in blogging.

7. Using photos and illustrations

Use pictures to break up the visual monotony of blocks of text. The way you can do this varies depending on your blog platform or website.

Make sure you only use photos you have permission to use – either photographs you/your organisation owns the rights to or images you have been specifically given permission to publish. And always credit the photographer clearly, with a link to their site when appropriate (I like to put credits in italics at the bottom of the blog post, but you can also put the credit at the bottom of the photo itself.)

If you'd like a more generic photo for simple illustration purposes and don't have anything suitable on hand, there's no need to pay for costly stock photos. Use Flickr advanced search or Google Image Search to find free, Creative Commons-licensed images and always credit the photographer and link to their Flickr page or professional site.

8. Multimedia content

Embedded audio or video within posts adds another dimension to your content. If you're writing about a concert that's coming up at your venue, embed a YouTube video of the musician performing and let their music speak for itself. Everyone from publishers to theatre companies to music labels are in the business of making video trailers these days, and if you ask you'll find there's already something ready for you to use.

Or even better, make your own content. Record an audio interview with a visiting artist on your smartphone using a simple app like Audioboo, or pique interest for your Autumn season by making a short video of your Artistic Director talking through the highlights, and publish that on the blog. It might sound scary if you've never tried it before, but it's easier than ever these days and your audience doesn't care if the content isn't BBC-quality. But some people just respond better to audio and video content than text on a screen, so mixing things up broadens your blog's potential reach.

9. Social media

No matter how wonderful your blog post might be, people aren't going to read it if they don't know it's there. As soon as you've posted, start spreading the word with social media. Tweet a short, attention-grabbing summary of the blog post with an embedded link to the post. I like to use a login-enabled url shrinking service like Bit.ly to shorten the link because it enables you to track your clicks in real time. Write an update with an eye-catching photo and a link to the blog post on your organisation's Facebook page. And if you use them, be sure to add the post to Pinterest or Google+. Don't feel you have to, though – you'll know

which social media platforms work best for your audience, and using one or two social media tools effectively is much better than spreading yourself too thin trying to cover all the bases,

10. Comments are good

Some will disagree, but I think it's really important for cultural organisations to enable commenting on their blogs. By not allowing comments on your posts you shut down an important channel for engaging your audience. Do allow comments (but only on posts, and only moderated comments so you control what's on your site.) Respond to every comment, good or bad. Don't be afraid of healthy debate. If someone leaves a negative comment, thank them for taking the time to let you know, but don't be afraid to politely express an opposing view. Ask for their email or invite them to write to you direct as the comments section on a blog post isn't the place for a detailed conversation. Responding coldly to a negative comment makes you look unprofessional, and failing to publish a genuine but negative comment makes you seem scared and over controlling. But if someone is being profane, insulting or you get the sense they're just trying to shock, feel free to ignore their comment. At the end of the day, it's your site and you get to decide what goes on it.

If you don't get any comments at all, don't despair. These days a lot of the commentary and discussion about blog posts is happening on Twitter and Facebook, which is increasingly where people access links to posts. If comments and public feedback is an important part of what you're trying to do with the blog and you really want a lot of input from the community, take care to write posts in a way that explicitly invites comment.

11: Stats and clicks

Keep track of who's reading your blog by reviewing your statistics, or stats. These record page views, incoming links and other social media referrals. If you're using Wordpress or Blogger you'll already have inbuilt stats pages to look at, or you can register with an external service like Google Analytics to track your blog's progress. Pay attention to where your traffic comes from and act accordingly; also note what types of posts solicit the best responses and longest linger time. Your page views should be on an upward curve overall, with small ups and downs related to when you post and don't post. Blogging is a long game: don't expect immediate results or instant return on investment. Give it a year to see progress if you're starting from scratch.

12. Stay inspired

In order to write an engaging blog, you have to write from a place of passion and curiosity. So, try to think like a writer. Keep a notebook in your pocket so you can jot down ideas and impressions. Be curious about what you're writing about. If you've been in your organisation for a long time and are feeling a bit jaded, use the blog as an outlet to try and reconnect with the interest and passion that led you into this work. Try to see things with new eyes, and take risks with your writing instead of saying things the same old way. You may know all about what it's like to design costumes for a production or watch the installation of an ambitious art exhibition, but your audience doesn't. Unpack it for them.

And don't forget that reading other blogs is almost as important as posting to your own. The best and most successful bloggers regularly keep up with lots of blogs, so get reading. Pay extra attention to good blogs from organisations that are similar to your own. Study them; take them apart to see how they tick. Try to emulate them. And don't be afraid to engage with them (through linking or collaborations.) You may be surprised what can start on a blog!

About the author

Kate Feld is a writer and blogger. She is the editor of the award-winning cultural webzine Creative Tourist, and writes a blog about her city, Manchizzle, which The Guardian called "The pick of Manchester culture and hub of blogging goodness." She works with arts organisations across the northwest on blogging, online content and social media. She also coaches individuals and businesses as a private consultant.

http://www.manchizzle.com/
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