

## CHAPTER 4

# FINDING YOUR VOICE

Great bloggers all share one virtue in common:  
They infuse their writing with a triple shot of  
personality. Let your personality flow into  
your blogging and your readers will find you.

—Jeffrey Feldman, editor in chief of  
*Frameshop* and *HuffPost* blogger

**T**his chapter is about writing. Specifically, it's about writing in a way that intrigues and persuades and that works with the unique format blogs allow. If you have bad memories of a teacher marking up your papers with a red pen, don't worry. What we want you to obsess about is finding your own voice and writing in a way that keeps your readers reading.

Like any craft, blogging has certain rules that good practitioners try to follow.

These rules are not carved in stone—and not just because there are eight of them and commandments come in batches of ten. “The question of what makes a blog post good is as simple and as complicated as asking what makes a poem beautiful, what makes a feature story captivating until the last line, what makes an essay persuasive, or what makes a novel force you to turn pages faster than you thought you ever could,” says HuffPost associate blog



## THE HUFFINGTON POST RULES FOR GREAT BLOGGING

1. Blog often
2. *Perfect* is the enemy of *done*
3. Write like you speak
4. Focus on specific details
5. Own your topic
6. Know your audience
7. Write short
8. Become part of the conversation with like-minded blogs

editor David Flumenbaum. Some writers are so brilliant that they can pull off anything. If Toni Morrison started a blog, she could write a stream-of-consciousness four-thousand-word rant once every six weeks, and you know what? We'd probably read it. When you win the Nobel Prize for literature, we'll read anything you write too. But until then, these rules will help keep you on track.

### Rule # 1: Blog Often

If you're blogging for yourself, it doesn't matter how often you're writing. If you want an audience, though, you need to reward visitors to your site with new content—pretty much every time they visit. We've heard the arguments about quality vs. quantity, but we believe this argument is a luxury for people who've already got a big readership. When you don't have a reputation or a big following, you want people to judge you on the work you have

produced. That means you need to have a lot of work sitting on your site by the time you start pulling in eyeballs. Plus, blogging is like anything else: You get better the more you do it. Writing often will help you figure out what your authentic voice sounds like and how you can access that voice every time you sit down to type. Definitions of "often" vary, but if you're serious about blogging, commit to posting at least two to three times a week for thirty days. As we learned from Ariane de Bonvoisin's blog, *First 30Days*, you can establish almost any new habit in one month's time. Mark on your calendar the days you plan to blog. Block off time in your appointment book. Then sit down and, to borrow a phrase from Nike, just do it.

### Rule #2: Perfect Is the Enemy of Done

Because blogging is immediate, it's also informal—and that's a good thing. No hungover college student is going to study the perfect post alongside the great American novel. It's fine to write a bunch of OK posts. In fact, a bunch of OK posts is probably better than a perfect post that took so long to compose the event was old news by the time you hit "submit."

This is why some bloggers who are also professional writers love this genre. They find it immensely liberating.

Whenever you have a thought, you can share it with your readers. You can develop snippets of a story rather than crank out a five-thousand-word feature that the reader encounters only as a finished product. You get immediate feedback, which beats waiting three months for a magazine to appear on newsstands. And as much as we like editors, we do enjoy the ability to post in real time.

Still, we know that lots of bloggers suffer from writer's block.

Write as often as you possibly can. When I first started blogging, I would write one 500-to-1,200-word op-ed-style political analysis a day, five days a week. Coming up with good content—and insightful analysis—was certainly a challenge at that pace, but it meant I was getting exposure. Eventually, I scaled down to three days a week, but not until I had established myself.

—DYLAN LOEWE, FORMER EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF BATTLEGROUND, COLUMBIA LAW STUDENT, AND HUFFPOST BLOGGER

Weirdly, it's easier to blog every day than it is to blog three or four times a week. You get in a rhythm, you don't procrastinate, you load content into your blog, you loosen up, you'll be taken more seriously by readers, and you stay engaged with your subject and with what's happening on your blog.

GRETCHEM RUBIN, AUTHOR OF THE HAPPINESS PROJECT BLOG AND HUFFPOST BLOGGER

Whenever we feel like banging our heads against the wall, we rely on a few shortcuts to create a perfectly adequate post.

The first shortcut? Just write a micropost on a small detail (see rule 4). Three to four sentences, in and out. How hard can that be? You can always post more later.

If you want to write more of an essay or op-ed post, here's a shortcut for that style:

- **What is your point?** How would you explain your point to a batty, slightly deaf relative in one sentence? Write that sentence down. This is the gist of your piece.
- Clear some space above that main point. Now think up a **story that illustrates the point**. This "**anecdotal lede**" is a staple of newspaper and magazine journalism. Reporters like anecdotes because they give a human-interest perspective on the story and tend to draw readers in. If the story happened to you, **great**. If you put in the proper links and cite the source, you can retell a story from another news source. You may have to write a transition sentence or two between the anecdote and your point.
- Now clear some space under your main point. Give a **short history of the debate**.
- Next, **argue your point from the evidence**. What makes you think you are right? Throw in two or three quotes, statistics, or stories that back you up.
- Now think about **who might disagree** with you. Why might this person or organization think you're wrong? Maybe it's because they're total idiots, but you'll write a better blog post if you address their strongest points rather than call them names.
- **Write a good walk-off line**. Or if you can't think of one,

write something like "I'll be following this story and will post again when I learn more."

**Now proofread and double-check your facts.** This last part is crucial. You can edit your post later if your facts turn out to be wrong (the blogospheric convention is to strike through the error so readers know a correction was made), but someone may have already read your mistake. The reader may have then cited your erroneous fact elsewhere—and that's how rumors get started. Pay close attention to names, numbers, and direct quotes. Screwing these up is just embarrassing. Once you're sure you're right, hit "submit." The post won't be perfect, but it will be done, and it will be accurate.

One final idea for those who really struggle with their inner critic: Try writing your thoughts longhand on an old-fashioned piece of paper that you know no one will see. Then, when you start typing, what appears on the screen will actually be a second draft.

### Rule #3: Write Like You Speak

One of us recently had the experience of attending an academic symposium preceded by a dinner. At dinner, a fascinating, funny professor kept the whole table laughing through dessert. Everyone was looking forward to his speech. But once at the podium, he proceeded to read a dull, dense paper made bearable only by the fact that most of the audience was still buzzed from the wine.

Unfortunately, like the professor, too many of us have had the life beaten out of our prose through years of academic training and corporate PowerPoint presentations. We use big words when

## Sources of Inspiration

So you're committed to blogging often with short, engaging (but not perfect) posts. Great! But what are you going to write about? Anything you feel passionate about. Here's our inspiration crib sheet.

1. **Newspapers.** Most bloggers read as many as possible—in print but mostly online (try linking to a hard copy paper and you'll see why).
2. **Political publications like *National Review* or *The Nation*.** If you lean left or right, read a publication with a different viewpoint. We bet you'll get riled up enough to write something.
3. **General interest publications.** Magazines like *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Vanity Fair*, *The New Yorker*, *Glamour*, *Men's Journal*, and *Sports Illustrated* all have fascinating features. Tear out a page to blog about later.
4. **TV news and news websites.** We get ideas while watching CNN on the treadmill. We also get ideas when the sweaty guy next to us switches (without asking!) to Fox News.
5. **Radio.** Maybe you listen to morning drive-time radio while you commute to work. Jot down an interesting tidbit while you're at a traffic light. Talk shows also make good fodder. Listen to a host whose opinions differ from yours, and answer his arguments.
6. **Large new-media sites.** HuffPost features hundreds of news stories and blog posts each day. You can also check out Politico, BoingBoing, Daily Kos, Gizmodo, Slate, Atlantic Online, Drudge, and other sites. You will never be short of information or topics to blog about.
7. **Blogs on your blogroll.** Link to their stories and discuss them on your own blog. Chances are, they'll soon do the same for you, whenever you come up with some original material.
8. **"On the street" reporting.** Are the teachers at your children's school upset by student test scores? Is the cafeteria manager concerned about the quality of the produce? Maybe your local pharmacist is worried that seniors don't understand recent changes in Medicare. All of these stories are worth covering.

## More on Finding Inspiration

Probably my favorite blogging moment to date involves a piece I wrote for The Huffington Post titled "Hillary, O.J. and R.F.K.," about Hillary Clinton's now infamous [Robert F. Kennedy] assassination gaffe. I didn't initially intend to write about the incident but was inspired to do so after a conversation with a friend. She is really smart and engaged in the election and said that she thought Hillary's comment was "stupid" but also thought people were "overreacting" to it. She happens to be white and I'm African-American, and we ended up having this really interesting exchange about race and perception in the election. During our conversation I discovered that she had been completely unaware that many older African-Americans harbor very real fears about Barack Obama's safety. After our discussion she had a better understanding of where some of the reaction to Senator Clinton's comments came from. I realized in that moment that sometimes even between well-meaning, smart people, things simply get lost in translation. So I decided to write about this gaffe and why it struck such a chord among so many people—even if that was not the intention. After the piece appeared on The Huffington Post, I actually received a phone call from someone who had endorsed Senator Clinton who said that they felt the piece was one of the most honest, yet fair, assessments of the story they had read; yet I was also thanked by others for forcing a deeper conversation about our nation's somewhat tragic history as it pertains to the safety of prominent leaders of color, all of which made me feel really proud.

—KELI GOFF, AUTHOR OF *PARTY CRASHING: HOW THE HIP-HOP GENERATION  
DECLARED POLITICAL INDEPENDENCE* AND HUFFPOST BLOGGER

short ones will do. We use words that aren't really words, like *problematize*. Our sentences drag on far past their original intentions until some punctuation mark or another puts an end to the misery. We use adjectives and adverbs rather than nouns and verbs. We hide in the passive voice, as if evading responsibility for the mess that's been thrown up on the screen.

Most writing teachers have a simple cure for these ills: They'll

tell you to go read William Strunk and E. B. White's classic, *The Elements of Style*. That's good advice. But if *The Huffington Post Complete Guide to Blogging* is the lone book you plan on reading this year, here's a tip that will improve your prose almost as much: Write like you speak.

The blogosphere thrives on authenticity. No one really sounds like a law paper, an academic paper, or a PowerPoint presentation. So your blog shouldn't sound like that either. You want your posts to sound like you at your most witty, entertaining, and relevant. Buy or borrow a small tape recorder. Tape yourself as you critique something you read in the newspaper. If you take out the "ums" and clean up the grammar, a transcription of this tape could be the start of a good post. Or don't clean up the grammar. On Rosie O'Donnell's Rosie.com blog, the actress and television per-



## USE THE VOICE YOU HAVE

VERENA VON PFETTEN, LIVING EDITOR, HUFFINGTON POST

The best (and easiest) way to find your voice is to use the one you have. Sounds too easy? It's not. That's why blogging is so popular! First, think about blogging as writing an e-mail to a friend. Better yet, an e-mail to a really cool, clever friend with whom you have a great and witty rapport. (Don't have any cool, clever friends with whom you have a great and witty rapport? Make some new friends, then start blogging. Trust me, otherwise you won't have anyone to read your blog.) Second, just start writing. You don't spend hours hemming and hawing over how you're going to draft an e-mail, so don't spend hours hemming and hawing over a blog post. It's not worth the effort. Which brings me to my last point: Don't try too hard. Don't try to be funny (especially if you're not) and don't try to be serious (it's too much pressure). Don't try to be anything other than exactly who you are. It's your voice you're trying to find, after all.

sonality often just runs sentences together. Some people find that distracting and annoying, but judging by page views, it seems to be working for her.

## Rule #4: Focus on Specific Details

Because blog posts are so immediate, and because there are so many blogs out there, you don't have to explain the complete context of an issue in every post, the way a newspaper or magazine story would. You don't have to fight for limited space the way a newspaper or magazine reporter would. In fact, your best bet for building buzz is to go into the specific, gory details and keep returning there.

Choose one nugget from a political speech or a proxy statement and blog about that. Do you think that \$1.6 million is a little excessive for a security detail for a CEO that nobody can recognize anyway? Do you find it funny that a company that wants to be bought for \$15 a share would pay an investment bank \$15 million to tell everybody that yep, it's worth \$15 a share? Write about a candidate's wife's cookie recipe. If you think something is news, post it. Don't wait to see if other people cover or keep covering the detail you found so interesting. If you've noticed that a columnist does consulting work for a company or interest group she just wrote about positively, get it out there.

Mainstream journalism tends to focus on conflict, rarities, and big trends. You can shape the narrative by focusing on the day-to-day—sometimes on the seemingly little things that get you riled up, sometimes on the view from your own backyard.

## A Difference in Voice

Bloggers cover stories differently than the mainstream media does. Posts are more personal and informal than a page-one story. Here's an example: *The Wall Street Journal* excerpt is real. Farmer Bill is a total figment of our imaginations (underlined text in the blog example indicates a link).

*The Wall Street Journal*, page 1, July 1, 2008

**Headline:** Anger Rises over Salmonella Probe

**Subhead:** Tomato Investigation Stymies FDA, as Farmers, Distributors Face Mounting Losses

By Jane Zhang, Julie Jargon and A. J. Miranda

More than 11 weeks into a salmonella outbreak that has sickened hundreds across the U.S., government regulators still have little idea where the outbreak originated. That is causing rising anger among the farmers, distributors and others slammed by slumping sales of tomatoes, the outbreak's prime suspect . . .

Blog style: Farmer Bill (Florida)

Title: And we trust these guys to monitor our drugs?

Nearly three months after the FDA said tomatoes might be the cause of the latest salmonella outbreak, they're now saying they don't know for sure. Thanks, guys! Could you have mentioned this before my tomatoes died on the vine? (Thanks to all of you who have written asking if Barb and I are OK. We have savings. We'll get by.)

I've just learned from John that Western Growers called for the House Agriculture Committee to investigate the FDA's total boneheadedness on this issue. The National Restaurant Association says the outbreak has cost the food industry some \$100 million. And we still don't know where the contaminated tomatoes came from. Or if the problem is tomatoes. Now some people are saying jalapeño peppers are to blame.

Oh, I know, the FDA is trying hard. They're busy. There's a lot of stuff going on up there. Like not approving cancer drugs. (Thanks to Jen for the links on the FDA and the Provenge controversy.)

## Rule #5: Own Your Topic

Mainstream reporters have "beats"—areas in which they're responsible for finding and breaking news. Likewise, if you want to be treated as an expert in your blog topic area, you should think of the topic as your beat. Know who the key players in that area are. Read their books. Interview them. Have them guest blog (that is, write a special post for you). Get copies of studies when they come out. E-mail the publicists for companies that sell products or services related to your area, introduce yourself, and ask to be put on press release distribution lists. Go to conferences. The more you know about your topic area, the better informed your opinions will be. This is important because a good blog errs on the side of being strong. Don't couch your voice in qualifiers. Writing is a risk. You're putting your ideas out there to see what will happen. Owning your topic area increases the chance that your ideas will be insightful and right.

## Rule # 6: Know Your Audience

Blogs are interactive. After a while, you'll see which posts get the most comments and which wilt like untouched spinach on a picky eater's plate. It goes without saying that you should try to write more of the kinds of posts that get your readers excited and fewer posts that don't. Someday your public may love you so much that they'll eat their spinach if you tell them to. But why bank on it?

I find that the blog posts that take the least amount of time turn out to be the most popular posts. I did one on what to wear when it's a hundred degrees outside, and everyone wanted to talk about that. But I can do twenty



## CREATING "POLITICAL SPACE" AND CHANGING HISTORY

STEVEN CLEMONS, PUBLISHER OF THE WASHINGTON NOTE  
AND HUFFPOST BLOGGER

The Washington Note has broken numerous stories—but really my favorite involved starting the fight against John Bolton's confirmation as U.S. ambassador to the United Nations. My blog transformed itself from being a general-commentary political blog into one that was almost singularly obsessed for twenty-one months with the effort against Bolton's confirmation. I was at dinner with a foreign-policy expert when I heard news of George W. Bush's nomination of Bolton in March 2005—and I just couldn't believe it. I used to be the head of the Nixon Center in DC and thus am not an easy flack for the United Nations, but I couldn't imagine anything more destructive to America's place in the world via the United Nations than sending John Bolton there. Some of the key senators who didn't like Bolton told me that John Bolton was an obscure bureaucrat going for a job no one cared about—and that only if people like me created the "political space" would they be willing to do anything. So a number of us—triggered by some posts of mine on The Washington Note as well as some other smart thinking and dedicated work by key NGOs in Washington—took on Bolton and created that "political space." I ran into Karl Rove on a number of occasions during this time—once at the colonial-era liberal arts school on Maryland's eastern shore, Washington College. Rove told me at a reception, "Steve, we are going to get Bolton confirmed. We are going to check off that box." And I said, "No, not gonna happen. The Washington Note and its readers aren't just out around the country—they are senators and House members, intelligence and military officers, policy practitioners on the Hill and inside your own administration. They are Democrats, Republicans, and independents—and George Bush was wrong on this choice of our ambassador. He's going to lose." And Karl Rove and John Bolton did lose.

interviews, all this research, write a thoughtful post—  
and get no comments.

—*Marci Alboher, Shifting Careers columnist  
and blogger for The New York Times*

### Rule #7: Write Short

We live in an ADD culture. Though you can write as much as you want on the web, we know from experience that unless the reader can see the end of your post eight hundred words in, a good portion of them will stop scrolling down. Even eight hundred words is an intimidating block of text. Break it up with a picture or pull quote, and definitely with some links. If you find that you can't do justice to your point in eight hundred to a thousand words, consider breaking the thought up into two or more posts. David Bromwich, a professor of English at Yale and HuffPost blogger says, "A good post is a single thought or observation or anecdote, clearly expressed and directly conveyed. An essay may cover several topics; a post easily grows tiresome if it aims for more than one."

We could go on about this, but you get our point. Readers will too if you keep it short.

### Rule #8: Become Part of the Conversation with Like-Minded Blogs

The best writers learn from others. "You wouldn't try to make a movie if you'd never seen one," notes Katherine Goldstein, HuffPost associate blog editor. So if you want to take your blog to the next level, spend some time scrutinizing posts from bloggers you admire. How do they draw you into their posts? How do they

make their points? How do they find their stories? If you like a blog, post a comment saying so. E-mail the blogger and ask for a critique of some of your posts.

You should also ask your readers for their opinions. What do they like and dislike about your posts? What would they like to see more of?

It goes without saying that if you ask for comments and criticism, you should also be willing to offer feedback when asked. If a new blogger comes to you for advice, make time to give it. For starters, we all benefit from reflecting on what works and what doesn't. And second, you never know who will turn out to be the next Ana Marie Cox or Josh Marshall.

We'll discuss comments and the idea of building a community around your blog more in the next chapter.



## FINDING A VOICE

JASON LINKINS, REPORTER, HUFFINGTON POST

I wish I could say that I was on the forefront of the blogging movement, but the truth is, I was a very late adopter. Which isn't to say I was late to the web itself. Long before blogging became popular, I was fascinated by the fresh perspective of web content and had put together my own website. Against the good advice of others, however, I remained resistant to blogging. There was just something about the format of blogging that didn't feel "pure" to me. I mean, how does the immediacy of blogging compare to the opportunity presented by four hours of hard coding in HTML? Or painstakingly updating multiple pages? Or archiving content by hand! Oh, yeah! That was probably the best of all!

As you might suspect, I had a moment where the scales finally fell from my eyes. For me, that moment came on Saturday, July 3, 2004, at a party in Washington DC's U Street neighborhood. It was there that I witnessed my friend, a grown man, in an attempt to demonstrate to his girlfriend that he loved her and would always be there for her, dress up in a tiger costume and leap through a ring of fire. Right then and there, I knew that everything had changed for me, because I walked away from the experience with the intense desire to tell the story of that evening to others. (My friend's girlfriend dumped him about a month later, which probably goes to show something, I know not what.)

I've made a handful of different attempts at blogging. Some were personal, some were conceptual. Some were successful, some were not. If there was a defining characteristic to the successful blogging I've done, it's the voice—that way of bridging the gap from brain to page. When I've felt comfortable with the voice of the blog, I've stuck with it. When it starts to feel fake to me, I quickly lose interest. There are many reasons for this: Obviously, good writing connects to a specific side of yourself that's stimulated by the thought of reaching other people. But blogging, and the way it encourages you to get your thoughts lined up in your mind and formed into words relatively quickly, can help reveal those aspects of language and writing that you love the most.

For me, I gravitated toward language that's punchy and rhythmic, analogies that chal-

lenged my observational skills, and long, satiric loops of logic. And, before long, I discovered that I could take my massive moral failings and countless personality defects and transform them into selling points. And somehow, in four short years, I went from blogging about tiger costumes to writing full-time about politics for The Huffington Post. Could the same amazing upward climb happen for you?

Probably not! Still, blogging regularly can breed that spark of voice—and its evolution—and like a new operating system for your mind, the constant return to the exercise of writing breeds a greater capacity for expressing your ideas sensibly and relatably. This was, to me, the practical demonstration of an idea I once expressed to one of my English professors—that if reading expanded the heart of one's intellect, the practice of writing provided the intellect with tone and definition. "And if you know what's good for you," my professor said, "you will get the hell off of my front yard before I call the police."

And I did so, quickly. Because, man, I did not need that hassle.

## CHAPTER 5

# COMMUNITY: CREATING AND BUILDING IT

As we advance in the Internet era, the reasons people go online have changed. In the late 1990s, we thought everyone would want to e-mail, shop for pet food, or read whatever information a company or organization chose to put on its home page. Media outlets created websites to expand their readership, but they basically uploaded their daily print content—nothing more and nothing less.

It's become fashionable to refer to this mind-set retroactively as Web 1.0. Now we're deep into Web 2.0. It's a buzzword that means different things to different people, but the gist is this: ✦ When people go online these days, they want to be able to interact with the people and content they find there. As they interact, they create communities that are united by like interests or temperaments. These communities don't have to suffer from the limits that differences in geography, race, sex, age, appearance, or class have put on us in the past. You, a mom in New York, can converse for years with a mom from Illinois whom you've never actually "met." But when she has to put her cat to sleep, you will send reams of sympathy e-mails. We've heard plenty of stories of