

Don't Slog on your Blog

SEVEN TIPS FOR CYBER-WRITERS

Blogging has swept the Web like a digital pandemic. The Blog Herald ("the first blog dedicated exclusively to the news of the blogosphere") estimates that at least 100 million budding authors have become global publishers.

Unlike more expensive technologies such as Web sites or online advertising, blogging requires a modest capital budget that practically anyone can afford. All it takes is about 15 minutes of set-up time and a passion for self-expression. With next to nothing out of pocket, small firm attorneys can begin blogging, build an audience and confidently strut their stuff alongside peers. So what differentiates a blog with staying power from just another flash in the pan? It's not colors, graphics or visual allure, but the writing. Here are seven tips for the budding blog-writer.

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1

START WITH PASSION AND STAY "ON MESSAGE."

Unless you want to attract lawyer voyeurs, don't write about the double macchiato you had at the local java joint. Pick a topic that resonates deeply, first with you, and then with your target audience. Presumably, your topic will involve a legal subject in which you are already an expert. Even if your expertise is only inchoate, if it fires your engines, your readers will feel that energy. Online diaries are pass ; a consistent theme, thoughtfully presented, will cause Internet surfers to visit and return often.

2

WRITE LIKE A JOURNALIST, NOT A LAWYER.

Try to answer the basics (who, what, where, when, why, and how) in the lead paragraph of each posting. Dare to adopt your unique voice. Express an opinion, but back up what you say. Principled rants are fine sometimes — so too are thoughtful essays, or ironic observations on your niche topic.

Just like a journalist, scoop the competition. Be the first to reveal to your lay or professional audience the obscure court decision or nascent but important trend in the law.

3

DON'T WAIT FOR YOUR MUSE.

As Picasso said: "If inspiration comes to me, it will find me painting" — so too with blogging. Whether you're in the mood or not, post as often as you can.

Your postings should be a mix of longer original writing and shorter, more frequent entries (perhaps offering links to noteworthy items published elsewhere, together with your own brief commentary). If your ink has run dry, then vary the format. Consider posting an audio interview or a video presentation.

4

DON'T RELY ON A FIELD OF DREAMS.

High rankings on search engines do not come by wishing and hoping, but by optimizing your blog and your postings so that they win high marks for search relevance.

Simply building a site in cyberspace doesn't mean that readers will come. Bloggers must learn (or consult an expert) about Web spiders, bots, secret algorithms, inbound and outbound links, and search engine optimization.

5

PEN FOR THE WEB.

Your reader is less a marathon runner than a sprinter. Until you build a loyal following, readers will most likely find your blog through a keyword search. They are looking for insight on a specific topic (hopefully, the subject of your blog). Fickle readers are pressed for time and may not even start from the beginning of a posting. Instead, they will probably drill down using the cache (keyword highlighting) feature of the search engine. Therefore, use, and repeat often, the keywords that best describe the subject of your blog. Intersperse your postings with captions, easily digestible paragraphs, bullet points, bits of relevant information and photos.

6

REMEMBER: GRAMMAR, PROOFREADING, AND STYLE MATTER.

Despite the abbreviated hieroglyphics of Instant Messenger addicts, a writer's familiarity with the Queen's English still counts to readers. You might even want to reread *The Elements of Style* by William Strunk, Jr., especially Rules 11 through 14:

- Use the active voice;
- Put statements in positive form;
- Omit needless words; and
- Avoid a succession of loose sentences.

7

BLOGGER ETHICS: BE FAIR, KIND, ACCURATE, AND THINK TWICE.

Thoughtless blogging can wreak great harm. Just as the First Amendment and defamation actions can cohabitate semi-peacefully in the print world, they can jostle and joust in the blogosphere. Principled bloggers adhere to an evolving code of ethics (CyberJournalist.net offers a set of suggested norms at www.cyberjournalist.net/news/000215.php).