

Identifying an Area of Expertise for Your Blog

Perhaps the most important aspect of starting a blog and becoming a professional blogger is the process involved in identifying the focus of your blog. The single biggest mistake beginning bloggers make is failing to identify a specific focus, instead choosing to write about whatever happens to come into their mind at any given moment. This is good as a strategy for writing practice, but it is very unlikely to win you any regular readers or to help you build a core audience for your burgeoning writing career.

If you want to be a professional blogger like me, Dana Sibilsky, focus on one subject and adhere to it closely. Sure, you can occasionally delve into a topic that is only somewhat relevant to your core focus every once in a while, but you have to ensure that your audience knows exactly what they are getting each time they type in your web address or, even better, click on the bookmarked tab that links to your site. So, how do you go about choosing a subject that will attract and engage readers on a regular basis?

It is important to recognize that there is a danger in pandering to the audience. Too many bloggers - professional or otherwise - get caught up in their web analytics and then focus only on writing about the subjects that perform best. This is why you see so many “Top 10” sites - it’s well known that an article organized in list form is better “click bait” than any other format. While this strategy works in some regards, you are much

better off building a core group of devoted readers who keep coming back for your insight on a specific subject.

To build this core group of devoted readers, you have to be working with the right subject. Identifying the most ideal subject matter is not necessarily as simple as you may think, so ask yourself the following questions before making a choice:

- How well do you know your subject?
- Do you care deeply about your subject?
- Are you willing to take a side on divisive issues relating to your subject?
- How much time do you already spend reading and discussing the subject?
- Why is this subject important to you?
- What topics will you discuss in your first five posts?

Before you start answering these questions, allow me to explain why it is important to ask each question in the first place and how each one relates to the success or failure of your professional blogging career.

How Well Do You Know Your Subject?

It should be abundantly clear that you should be exceptionally knowledgeable when it comes to a subject you plan to write about on a regular basis, but this is actually something of a point of contention among professional bloggers. I have spoken with writers who insist that a professional blogger should essentially be an “online scholar,” whose education or relevant experience could easily qualify them to teach the subject at the

undergraduate level, at minimum. Other writers I have discussed this with have said that bloggers are essentially entertainers and their knowledge of the subject matter is secondary to their ability to entertain their readers.

I disagree with both of these extreme opinions.

When it comes to your knowledge of the subject, I feel that you should just know it well enough to engage an expert in a five-minute conversation. If your subject is philosophy and you can confidently discuss the work of Rene Descartes for five minutes with an adjunct professor, that is more than enough knowledge of the subject matter to feel confident in blogging about it. The same goes for any other subject, whether it is fine art, politics, sports or arts and crafts. If you can briefly but confidently discuss the respective subject with an artist, a politician, an athlete or a crafting expert, then you can blog about it too.

There will certainly be instances in which a bit of research is required, but this is true of all writing in general. The key is that you have a basis of knowledge upon which you can draw and that you are able to make inferences and connections between what you already know and what you discover through research. Of course, you do have to be engaging and entertaining, but we will discuss that more in-depth in a later chapter.

Do You Care Deeply About Your Subject?

This is an incredibly important question and one that is very deserving of thorough consideration. If you are going to start a blog with the intention of making a career out

of it, you must be passionate about the subject you choose. Successful blogs offer a minimum of three to four posts per week, with the most popular blogs offering a new post daily. This can become a bit of a grind even when you care deeply for the subject matter, so be careful to avoid something that may only be a passing interest.

The other consideration to take into account is the fact that it is difficult for a writer to hide the fact that they are dispassionate about a subject. When your subject matter is truly important to you, it will be clearly evident to readers. The opposite is also true, so if you pick a subject you know to be popular in an effort to attract more readers, the fact that you are not wholly invested in the subject will actually turn them away. Do yourself and your readers a favor by choosing something that is deeply important to you.

Are You Willing to Take a Side on Divisive Issues Relating to Your Subject?

Even the most mundane subject matter is sure to have divisive issues crop up from time to time, and professional bloggers cannot always position themselves on both sides of the issue. At some point you will have to take a position that is unpopular with a large portion of your readers, and you cannot fear that doing so will alienate them or drive them away. Taking a position and presenting well-reasoned arguments will actually be quite endearing to your readers, especially to those who disagree.

No subject is free of divisive issues, so you have to be willing to present a clear and concise viewpoint in support of your position. You will also have to engage your readers who disagree - not with the goal of convincing them otherwise, just to demonstrate that you arrived at your position in a logical manner after considering a variety of perspectives. You have to be willing to take one side or another, because you will lose respect if you are always attempting to straddle a line.

How Much Time Do You Already Spend Reading and Discussing the Subject?

Blogging is a time-consuming affair, so you have to ask yourself how much more time you are willing to commit to a particular subject. If you use your free time to read contemporary philosophy or to argue about baseball on a regular basis, then the amount of additional time you spend researching for your philosophy or sports blog will not be so significant. If you haven't read up on philosophy since college or are only a casual sports fan, you may find that the time commitment required to professionally blog will swell quite a bit.

Why Is This Subject Important to You?

Answer this question in one sentence. Right now, answer it. Say it aloud or write it on a scrap piece of paper, but do it right now before reading another word.

Is it difficult to answer the question in one concise sentence? If it is, you may want to consider something else. If you were able to answer the question quickly and

without much thought, you may very well be on the right track.

What Topics Will You Discuss in Your First Five Posts?

You can take a bit longer to consider this, but write down the topics you will discuss in your first five posts. You don't have to sketch out an outline or summarize anything, just write down five headlines. For example, a philosophy blog might have a title like, "The Grateful Dead and the Influence of Zen Buddhism." The sports blog might have a headline that reads, "How Advanced Analytics Have Changed the Way NBA Teams Use the Three-Point Line." Whatever subject you are considering, write down five headlines for your first five posts in the next 15 minutes or so.

Done?

Did the topics come into your mind without much thought, or did you find yourself struggling to come up with more than just one? As a blogger, you will have to come up with new topics on a daily basis, and there is nothing worse than trying to tap a well that has long since run dry. If you choose the right subject, your head will be just swimming with ideas at all times.

One thing that many beginning bloggers worry about is the presence of other blogs that cover the same subject. Don't concern yourself with how many other bloggers are covering a specific subject or how established they are. All you have to do to be a successful blogger is to offer your unique insights in your own unique way. If you commit to being yourself and being true to your readers

you will succeed no matter how many other bloggers are out there covering the same subject.

Developing a Unique Voice

Voice is an incredibly important component of writing and it also happens to be one of those things that is somewhat elusive. You have probably heard any number of famous authors talking somewhat abstractly about how it took them a good deal of time before they were able to “discover their voice,” but perhaps you never really gave the concept of voice much thought. A professional writer - no matter what their chosen medium may be - should give this concept a great deal of consideration while actively working to cultivate it through their writing.

There are a variety of strategies that can be used in your daily writing practice that can be helpful in developing your unique voice, but it is equally important to revisit and re-read what you have written previously in order to gain a better understanding of voice and how it applies to your writing. The ultimate goal of developing voice is to reach a point in which the reader no longer requires a byline to recognize a piece that you have written, meaning that your voice is entirely your own and is therefore inimitable.

In order to properly develop your voice in writing you must first have a deep understanding of the concept. In this section I will discuss the ways in which voice can be defined while also offering some advice with regard to its continued development. I feel that it is also important to note how voice will benefit you as you seek to become a professional blogger and to also identify how to properly use voice to your advantage throughout your writing career.

What Exactly Is Voice?

Voice is the unique and distinctive manner in which a writer tells a story. This is not to be confused with style, as voice includes a variety of factors that go well beyond the way you structure sentences or organize information. Voice also includes the way you perceive the world around you and how you choose to relay what you perceive. In a lot of ways, a writer with a fully developed voice is able to access their subconscious and allow it to come through in their writing. Of course, developing your voice does not have to be this complicated, but it is nonetheless one of the most important things you can do as a writer.

Be Honest and Engaging

The best way to cultivate voice is to simply focus on writing in a straightforward and honest manner. Readers want to know and understand what it is you believe and why you happen to believe it, and being able to explain yourself in a way that is both honest and forthright is an important tool for you to have as a writer. While you may think of honesty and forthrightness in terms of what you write, it also applies to how you write it.

Honest writing is done without any pretense and comes across to the reader as natural and effortless. Any writer who has ever labored over a particular word choice or revised a single phrase over and over again knows that writing can often be anything but natural and effortless, but the fact remains that it must seem that way to the reader. When you write and revise, take great care to

make choices that reflect your voice and simultaneously engage the reader.

Write to Inform, Not to Impress

As a professional blogger it is your job to both inform your readers and to ensure that they are engaged and entertained by the way you choose to present the information. Many writers mistake the goal of entertaining and engaging for the goal of impressing their audience. This can be a significant miscalculation that alienates readers and prevents you from ever developing a core group of readers, so make sure that you understand the difference.

Consider the following: Imagine you are at a party and decide to conduct an informal survey on the literary preferences of the attendees. Given the choice between reading say, William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* or John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars*, most would undoubtedly choose Green's work of young-adult fiction to Faulkner's innovative masterpiece. This is because that while most would acknowledge that Faulkner's work is superior, it is also, at times, completely incomprehensible.

Rather than writing to impress a very narrow audience, instead endeavor to write clearly and concisely while focusing on the message rather than the way the message is delivered. This does not mean that you have to oversimplify your writing; it just means that you have to ensure that what you are trying to say is not obscured by how you are trying to say it.

Recognize Your Influences Without Ripping Them Off

Whether we realize it or not, we are all influenced by the voice and style of other authors and some of that influence will creep its way into our voice. I am guilty of this and most other authors are as well, and that is perfectly acceptable. When you first learn to speak you adopt patterns of speech based on those around you, which is why there are pronounced regional dialects and accents. This happens with writing as well, and it is often a subconscious occurrence.

The authors that you read most frequently will affect how you write and will influence what is still your own unique voice. While having varying influences is entirely all right, you must also be careful not to engage in imitation. A look at the world of sports blogging will reveal a whole host of Bill Simmons imitators, and a quick look at the world of political blogging will demonstrate countless misappropriations of even the most obscure of Hunter S. Thompson's work.

The next time you sit down to write a column on how the President's dogs are "decadent and depraved," or feel like weaving in countless pop-culture references that are only tenuously linked to the topic, take a moment to ponder a different approach. The reason Thompson and Simmons -- however disparate their voices may be -- are frequently imitated is because their voices are unique and honest. Try to be the one whose voice is imitated rather than the one who is imitating.

Identify a Goal and Write Fearlessly

When you finally sit down to write, make sure you do so with a specific goal in mind. Whether you intend on writing a post on how to crochet or a post on diplomatic relations between foreign countries, make sure you understand what you want to accomplish and what message you intend to get across. Once you have identified this, write fearlessly and without any regard for what the reader or anyone else might think. Just write what comes naturally until you have accomplished your goal.

This is how you write with fearlessness. Writers sometimes get caught up in what their audience might think or say in response to a statement and this is certainly natural (especially when your readers begin quoting lines out of context in the comments section to criticize you). You have to consciously avoid this consideration while writing your first draft. If you read your post again and you feel that something is too controversial or is at risk of being misinterpreted you can always make an edit to cut or clarify the statement.

Your Process Is Your Own

When I first started writing professionally, I had an editor who laid out a specific process she wanted me to follow while crafting a piece. I don't remember exactly what it was because, frankly, it didn't help at all. In fact, it made things harder on me. Whatever process you choose, use it and use it confidently. I know writers who obsessively edit and I know others who feel that their first draft is always their best draft (the latter authors still edit their work, but just to clean up grammar and clarify anything that is unclear).

I feel that I work best when I write freely from start to finish and then walk away and do something else before returning to what I have written. This gives me a fresh set of eyes and allows me to read and revise more effectively, but that does not mean this will work for you. Choose a process that makes you feel comfortable and stick with it, even if an editor asks you to do otherwise. As long as the final product meets their editorial standards, how are they going to know what process you used?

Allow Your Voice to Evolve Over Time

Your voice is uniquely your own, and one of the things that makes us human is our ability to change. This applies to our writing voice, as you should not fear the fact that your voice will evolve over time. This is a good thing, so don't get overly concerned if you notice that your writing is evolving. Go back and re-read your work from years gone by, but do not try to return to your voice of the past. Simply focus on writing honestly and fearlessly. Your readers will appreciate it.

Writing Skill Refinement

If you are interested in taking on a career as a professional blogger you probably understand that writing is the primary skill involved. Yes, you need to have an understanding of how to manage a website and how to use a writing platform (don't worry, we'll delve into that in a later chapter), but writing is the undeniably key skill you must possess and you must be willing to work on consistently. Writing refinement takes a great deal of practice and there will never be a time in your writing career when this practice becomes unnecessary.

Even the greatest writers spend a good deal of time practicing, and some of the best writers will tell you that they look at everything they do as somehow relevant to the practice of writing. A conversation with a passerby can be a study in dialogue, while watching a film can help you understand the importance of even the subtlest imagery. Writing practice is all around us; it's just a matter of recognizing it for what it is.

Recognizing opportunities for writing practice, of course, is not always easily accomplished. When you watch a film you may not immediately understand that the solitary fly perched atop a bowl of fruit is intended as a symbol of death or decay. In fact, you may not even notice it is there, and if you do you may just think that someone in the scene left a window open. When you begin perceiving things through the writer's lens, however, you will start to notice all those seemingly minor details so that you are able to make any connections later on.

So beyond paying close attention to the world around you and thinking of the ways you can make use of a snippet of dialogue, what other ways are there to practice and refine your writing? There are countless methods, and not all will necessarily be appealing to you in particular. Just like the writing process you employ, your practice should also be uniquely your own. Consider the following as both general advice and as individual writing practice strategies and simply adopt what works best for you:

- Read often, and read attentively
- Devote small blocks of time to practice each day
- Take revising seriously, but don't agonize over it
- Welcome any and all feedback
- Own your mistakes and learn from them
- Appreciate the writing process

I have found that abiding by the preceding guidelines for writing practice has been extraordinarily helpful for my professional writing career, and I believe that understanding how to use these guidelines in practice can help anyone refine their writing skills and improve their ability to write consistently well.

Whatever You Read, Read It Closely

When I read anything, whether it is a novel, a newspaper, an instructional guide or even the description of a sitcom episode, I try to be mindful of how the piece is written and determine what the writer's goals were while they were writing the particular piece. This is something that most people have to consciously set out to do, as it can be easy to just pay enough attention so that you just get the "gist" of it. Writers who are attentive while reading the work of others begin to recognize the true depth of a work and can understand how to effectively utilize the many subtle tools available to writers.

When I read something -- especially creative writing, long form journalism and op-ed pieces -- I look for a few things in particular, including:

- Structural elements
- Patterns or callbacks
- General writing techniques

The structure of a long form piece of journalism is particularly interesting as the author has a lot of options in terms of introducing the subject, providing context, including alternate perspectives and building suspense. The way in which these pieces are structured can be identified through a process similar to reverse engineering, which may help you see how the author initially outlined their article.

I also look for patterns and rhetorical tools in the writing, which can also be a lot of fun. Sometimes you will see

that a particular columnist's heavy reliance on a specific pattern or rhetorical device makes their writing seem stale. Without looking for the pattern, you may not have been able to pinpoint the problem. When you recognize this in the work of others, you will start to see it in your own work as well.

No matter what you read, read it attentively. Pay close attention to every bit of punctuation and try to hear the music of the words when they are read aloud so that when you read your own work you are able to do so critically.

Writing Practice Is Important

Here is the most common advice writers get from other writers: Write every single day, no matter what.

Writers do not have to adopt some sort of monastic devotion to the art of writing, though some do and it works very well for them. There are stories of great writers doing very odd things and I don't think they are necessarily suitable for everyone else -- or anyone else, for that matter. An example: Friedrich Schiller, a German poet and philosopher, kept a drawer in his desk filled with rotting apples because the pungent and overwhelming odor helped him focus on his work.

Here is my advice: Just think about writing every single day.

I keep a journal and I write in it just about every day. It is a small, plain notebook that fits neatly in any bag I carry, allowing me to write whenever the spirit moves

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