

Title: 15 Ways to Achieve Great Blogging Format and Style

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Meta: Novice bloggers may already be great writers, but there's more to engaging an online audience than writing well. Learn about links, formatting and style.

Body:

When you're looking for information online, what does your experience like feel like? Do you open a single page in your browser, labor through it from start to finish and say, "Hooray! Now I'm in the know"? Or do you leap quickly from one website to the next, searching for best, most recent and reputable information?

And isn't it great when you find it?

Well, it's no accident. A lot more goes into writing a useful blog than just blog writing. Its format and style, that well-chosen headline or perfectly placed anchor text, make the difference between a web page that gets visitors to click and those that make them bounce.

Writing stories that get clicks takes practice, skill -- even creativity. Here are 15 ways marketing bloggers can improve their copy:

1. Write for the blog reader.

Too many bloggers think they're book writers. They aren't.

Books have *sequence*, a natural flow from beginning to end. Websites don't. They're more like a pile of loose pages connected by tight threads. Visitors look for reasons to follow the lines from one page to the next. If they don't see them, they bounce.

Blogs aren't books; likewise, blog readers likely aren't sitting down at the end of a long day to relax and enjoy a slow read. Most of time they want specific information. The faster, the better.

Think about the way you read blogs. Do you start at the first word and progress to the last, or do you skim the thing in 10 seconds?

Here's how most people read blogs:

1. **Read the headings** and subheadings to soak up the big points.
2. **Scan the lists** and formatted text to look for patterns.
3. **Check the first sentences** of each paragraph to see whether they've missed any big ideas.
4. **Drill down on a few parts** and perhaps even read them word-for-word.

5. **Click or bounce** by following a link to more relevant information (Winner!) or clicking on the “back” button at the top left.

With this kind of readership, bloggers who only write sequentially risk alienating the audience. Focusing on the *reader's* sequence helps impart the most important information first. Subject headings, bulleted lists and paragraph openers are signposts. Allow them to tell your story and save more nuanced information for filler.

Of course, when someone happens to read every word on the page, it had better flow. The big challenge for bloggers is to write content that appeals to both types of reader.

2. Write for an audience persona.

It's only natural for dedicated writers to want the whole literate world to appreciate their amazing prose, but each web page is written with a specific purpose and person in mind.

Visitors arrive at your blog because they want to know something -- maybe they don't even know what. It's your job to not only make sure they find it, but also to let them know you wrote it with them in mind.

It's one thing to let your readers know that you understand them, but far better for them to understand that you're one of them. When you've done it just right your words will be like a mirror, and your readers will feel as if they're carrying on a dialogue with themselves.

Sometimes you'll have a detailed description of your persona, other times only a faint impression. **Details matter:**

- How old are they (and what words do people that age use)?
- How much money do they have (and how do they like to spend it)?
- What do they do with their free time (and when do they get free time)?
- What are their challenges (and why do they need your help to overcome them)?

Once you know your audience, you can begin speaking their language, addressing their unique concerns, referencing that which they find familiar, and building a rapport far more valuable to them than the words on any webpage.

3. Narrow your focus to a single topic.

One page, one aim, one subject. It's easy to write 1000 words on a broad topic, much more difficult to write exactly what readers need to know about exactly what they want to know.

It's tempting to go off on tangents and share what you came across in your research, but visitors are much more likely to bounce rather than to reading something that leads them off topic.

4. Substance over style.

The volume of writing is enormous, these days, and much of it has a sort of windiness about it, almost as though the author were in a state of euphoria. . . . The breezy style is the work of . . . the person who imagines that everything that comes to mind is of general interest and that uninhibited prose creates high spirits and carries the day. – The Elements of Style, 4th Ed.

These words of William Strunk, Jr., and E.B. White may be several decades old, but they read as if describing most writing on the internet today.

When faced with their own lack of topical expertise, too many bloggers forego research and choose instead to hem and haw their way through subject matter on which the reader desperately wants useful information.

Blog readers know when articles lack substance. Few things make them click “back” faster.

Even worse, try to talk above readers heads with industry jargon, try to pull the wool over their eyes with needless affectations, and you can break in mere seconds the trust you’ve spent countless hours trying to build.

5. Brevity is best.

Evidence has shown that the human brain can process information much faster than reading text will allow, so there’s almost never a need to overstate an idea. Have faith in your audience; chances are they’re already way ahead of you.

Shorter is better, which is not to say that short-form content is better than longer copy. (In fact, many marketing experts [believe that just the opposite is true.](#)) Rather, we’re talking about paragraphs, sentences, phrases, clauses and individual words. When putting your ideas on paper, keep them short, simple and informative.

Longer sentences usually do a worse job of explaining things than short ones. Take the following:

- E.g. People who want to eventually retire should put money into their 401k accounts before the increasing costs of goods and services might limit their abilities to maintain the ways in which they live their lives after they are done working.

And compare it to this one:

- E.g. Future retirees should invest in 401k’s or inflation might limit their lifestyles post-retirement.

There’s nothing technically wrong with either sentence. The substance, syntax and style are nearly identical, but the second accomplishes in only 13 words what the first dilutes into 40.

Your word count may not skyrocket this way, but is there any doubt as to what's better for the reader?

6. Write for the common man.

Turn resolutely away from all . . . mannerisms, tricks, and adornments. The approach to style is by way of plainness, simplicity, orderliness, sincerity. – **The Elements of Style, 4th Ed.**

Your job is to communicate. But no matter how extensive your vocabulary -- whether you know that a restaurant serving overly fancy food is “epicurean” or that someone with an inappropriately cheerful disposition is “panglossian” -- you won't be communicating anything if your audience can't follow your language.

True, the artful turn of phrase can often accommodate the odd impressive word, but it had better be clear from context just what it is you actually mean. Those without post-graduate degrees in Victorian literature are much more likely to bounce off your page than to hunt down a more palatable synonym.

7. Create a sense of movement by breaking up paragraphs.

Many automobile drivers would rather go faster and farther than sit idly in traffic, even though it would mean arriving at their destination sooner. It's that feeling of getting somewhere – of movement – that makes the longer journey more enjoyable.

For blog readers, big sentences and paragraphs feel heavy. They're hard to look at and difficult to absorb. And despite their density, they leave the skimming web visitor feeling daunted and empty.

Short paragraphs, by contrast, allow the reader to osmose on the fly and keep his eyes moving down, down, down the page. They'll end up reading farther and enjoying it more, too.

8. Tell your story through headings and subheadings.

Section headers aren't just for show. They serve an important purpose for both blog readers and the search engines they use to locate your content.

Readers use headings to absorb your main points quickly; search engines use them to determine what's inside your document. If your subject headings are hasty, vague or superficial, visitors will not only find your article hard to read, but they may never manage to get there in the first place.

In a blog about health insurance copays, for example:

- A section titled *How Does It Work?* may make sense within the context of the article. To readers scanning the document, however, it merely succeeds in asking the very question they may want to have answered (and to a search engine it may mean nothing at all).
- A better section title contains an appropriate search engine keyword and describes the main point of the section: *Prescription Copays Are What Insurance Doesn't Cover.*

Think of section headings as a roadmap to your document. Ask yourself the following: If all your visitor does is read through the big bolded text, will they get a clear sense of what your article is all about?

9. Using keywords the right way.

No longer is creating pages optimized for search engines about cramming a single word or phrase into your writing over and over again. These days you'll actually be [penalized for stuffing keywords](#).

When you're given a [long-tail keyword](#) around which to optimize your post, use it in its full form only once or twice, but pepper synonyms and similar phrases throughout.

[Search engines check](#) the URL, title, meta description, body, headings, links and photos for clues as to what information is contained on a page. Your long-tail keyword should show up in all these fields. Just don't twist your words into knots to make it happen.

10. Make your content scannable using bulleted and numbered lists.

Like teething infants, blog readers appreciate it when writers cut up large or complex subjects into easily chewable bites. Bulleted and numbered lists give them a trail of breadcrumbs to follow and help them find relevant information.

Use lists generously. Just don't go overboard; not everything is best when bulleted. Here are a few tips to follow:

- **Keep it loose:** Lists are a great way to convey lots of detailed information without resorting to long paragraphs. They encourage readers to scan quickly and examine anything they find relevant.
- **Keep it tight:** List should be kept to a manageable size. Huge lists of bulleted information can seem just as daunting to readers as walls of unbroken text.
- **Make a point:** Each bullet or number should have something important to say. Avoid using them to relay long, simple lists.
 - *Exception:* Occasionally we do expect a simple series of information to be written in bulleted format; e.g. a grocery list.
- **Format for fast reading:** Lists often benefit from a bit of dressing up. A good practice is to place a brief summary of the listed item at the beginning in bolded text.

11. Using links to send internal content.

Marketing writers are like ushers. They help people who don't know where to go find what they're looking for.

Link to other pages on your blog and website. The utility of linking to relevant information is one of main features that sets blogs apart from other forms of content. Think about where you'd like to go if you were the visitor. Be helpful.

Perhaps you made mention of a topic more fully covered in another of your website's blogs. Great! Now link to it.

Maybe your site has the perfect interactive tool to help visitors solve whatever problem they're researching. That's real nice. Now link.

Say your readers have reached the end of your article. Don't just settle for the usual "contact us" rigmarole; offer other pieces of great content from your website. After all, if they made it down this far, chances are they're primed to read more.

12. Using links to cite external resources.

Your website may not be the end of your visitor's journey. Heck, chances are it's just the beginning. After all the internet is a big place, and there is a lot of good information out there besides yours.

Still, when you invite a reader to click on a link that leads to a different website, you risk them leaving you behind, so your vote of confidence in that content had better be worth it.

Linking to highly-ranked outside resources not only [scores you points towards SEO](#), it also lets your website visitors know you're providing them with the most useful information available and not just funnelling them down the path towards your product or service.

How do you want to be remembered: as the company that pointed your visitors in the right direction or the one that tried to keep them from it?

Use of external hyperlinks is usually acceptable under the following conditions:

- Citing **primary sources of information** such as research studies, editorials and interviews.
- Leading to **in-depth material** on a subject you've lightly covered (only if your own website lacks more detailed information).
- Pointing visitors towards **other entities you mention**; e.g. you happen to talk about [Six Flags](#) in an article about roller coasters.

Avoid linking to competing web pages, such as a blog with the same subject and scope as your own or content from an industry rival.

13. Link keywords to highly ranked websites.

There's a reason you never see "[Click Here](#)" anymore.

Search engines check links for relevance, so the words you use as anchor text ought to relate to the content it leads to. Use descriptive phrases – the kind of thing you’d put into a search engine to find the same content – as opposed to individual words or statistics.

Search engines also check the domain authority of the website you’re linking to. Connecting to popular websites can help yours rank, but linking to those with authority lower than your own can pull you down in the search results.

Many browser extensions such as [MozBar for Chrome](#) provide instant domain authority ratings for the websites you visit.

14. Embedding user-generated content.

Social media sites love it when you share their stuff, so make free and liberal use of the privilege.

Embedded links may look like a string of rubbish in your word processor, but on a live website it will seem as though you’ve sliced out a section of Facebook, YouTube or Twitter and pasted it right into your blog.

It looks professional, which readers appreciate, and makes your content more dynamic, which they love. Best of all, those who created the post, tweet or video get notified and are then likely to share your content with their friends, followers or subscribers.

```
<iframe width="560" height="315" src="https://www.youtube.com/embed/ZnuwB35GYMY"
frameborder="0" allowfullscreen></iframe>
```

15. Include meta descriptions and social media posts when writing blogs.

Sorry, but your work isn’t done after you’ve stroked that last period. Actually getting your writing read means making sure people can find it.

Another reason bloggers aren’t book writers is that books have covers. Blogs don’t. So how is anyone supposed to know what’s in your blog post before they read it?

That’s where [meta descriptions](#) and social media posts come in. These should be short, punchy sentences that speak to the heart of your content and make users want to click on your story.

- **Meta descriptions** show up on search engines and some social media websites; they’re those little blurbs you read below the page title. Moz recommends making them no longer than 150 and 160 characters.
- **Social media post** best practices vary by platform. With Twitter, you only have 140 characters to tell people why your article is a must-read, while in Facebook you’re free to more elaborate.

Writing for internet users is a unique creative endeavor.

Always write with your audience persona in mind. What do they want, and how do they behave? Don't assume they've come just to read your blog; chances are they're hoping to get what they came for and move quickly onward.

With the right formatting your blog should make a fast and easy read for those don't have the time, but your writing should have enough depth to satisfy those who do. Keep your focus on a single subject, and make sure you speak to it. Don't get lost in the maelstrom of your own prose. Write plainly, honestly, truthfully.

Don't ignore the importance of proper linking. It can make or break your visitor's experience. If you find yourself making grand statements without backing it up with proof, chances are you'll end up looking like less an expert than someone lacking expertise.

And, finally, make free use of social media to enhance and promote your content. There's no one "right way" to make a great marketing blog, but there sure are a lot of ways to make one right.