

Tackling Structure and Format — The 'Great Unknown' in Professional Blogging

Owen Roberts & Jim Evans

Abstract

This article addresses a gap in guidelines for those who blog professionally. It does so in a way that uniquely serves extension and research communicators. Many types of blogs have been used and described. Plenty of generic advice is available about writing blogs. However, little of it involves how to organize them. In this analysis, for example, advice about structure and format of blogs made up less than 3 percent of the 315 tips identified. A review of journalism literature identified some of the practices used in structuring news and information for media. The review also identified formats for organizing several other cousins of blogs. This article introduces a unique hybrid format for blogs, based on experiences of one of the authors. It involves a seven-step process that incorporates elements of objective reporting (explaining) with those of subjective expression (stimulating and advocating).

Key Words

Blogs, blogging, extension communications, research communications, writing skills

Introduction

Online journals, popularly called web logs or blogs, have become extremely popular among social media writers. About 152 million blogs exist, with nearly 173,000 added every day — a new one every half second (Gaille, 2013, p. 1). Blogs are a versatile and accessible medium, offering participants (bloggers) appreciable flexibility to express themselves electronically through words, photos, video and voice. Publishing platforms such as WordPress typically offer free software, a feature that represents one of the most basic tenets of social media — that is, accessibility. Anyone with access to a computer can blog, and likewise, anyone can respond to others' blog posts, creating an opportunity for dialogue and understanding. Bloggers help address the insatiable hunger for knowledge and opinion, and they have made blogs an ingrained part of the Internet.

Many types of blogs are at hand

Types and topics of blogs vary greatly. For example, sample lists include types such as personal blogs (often featuring interests, families, travel, politics, hobbies, other), corporate and organizational blogs (often for internal or external communications in support of organizational culture, marketing, branding, public relations, programming and other functions), school blogs (for students and teachers to collaborate), non-profit blogs (often for creating awareness about causes and generating support), science blogs (translating scientific information into lay terms and interests), political blogs (often for legislators, political parties, activists and others to connect with constituencies), military blogs (often for members of the military to report experiences and stay in touch with families), sports

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blogs (often used by teams, athletes and fans to share news, reactions and interests) and how-to blogs (often to share tips and reviews about gardening, music, health, food and nutrition, mobile phones, other) (WordPress, Wikipedia).

Blogs about farming and agriculture range across categories such as agricultural news and information, sustainable farming, farming big and small, international agriculture, livestock and ranching, agricultural science, and agricultural politics and policy (50 best farm and agriculture blogs, 2010; Jones, Kaminski, Christians & Hoffmann, 2011). Some of these blog types echo an early description of purposes of editorials. In a 1928 book, *Country Journalism*, Allen described purposes such as giving information, commendation, correction, interpretation and local angle (p. 194-206).

How the blogging job soon gets pesky

Key questions arise quickly in the blogging process. It is no accident 60 to 80 percent of blogs are abandoned within a month after they begin (Sedeke & Arora, p. 5). These questions include how to get started, how to maintain momentum and later, how to improve. Usually, passion for the topic at hand will prompt the creation of a blog. But once a format has been selected from the thousands of themes available, a unique and representative title created, and an inviting introduction written, the pesky task of regularly populating the blog with informative posts may prove daunting to many bloggers. Typically, bloggers are untrained writers. They may be skilled within the domain that drives their passion (i.e., animal welfare, crop protection, environmental stewardship, human health, etc.), but journalistically, they could be unprepared for or unfamiliar with how to generate content constantly. Offering a structural template for blog posts may help guide these bloggers and others who are searching for a consistent, effective editorial format for their posts.

Plenty of generic advice is available about writing blogs

Hundreds of tips are available for those who wish to blog in whatever settings and for whatever purposes — as moms, educators, legal counselors, marketers, you name it. A tiny sampling of online counsel includes advice such as:

- Write about something you love and are good at
- Find your own voice and style — be unique
- Let your readers get to know you — be vulnerable
- Define the topics
- Link like crazy, but keep the focus on your blog
- Make headlines snappy to help your blog stand out from the rest of the average titles
- Vary your topics because a good blog needs variety
- Use hyperlinks and lists
- Produce content that is rich in keywords
- Keep it short, concise
- Be factual, up-to-date, informative, straightforward
- Ask for reactions, invite questions, start meaningful discussions, acknowledge feedback

These examples come from “how to” information in 15 blogs and journal articles identified in the reference section that follows.

Not much advice involves structure and format

Among all of the tips, one finds relatively few about how to organize and structure a blog. In this analysis, advice about structure and format made up less than 3 percent of the 315 tips identified. Furthermore, those few tips were quite general, such as “Format text for clarity and readability” (101 Essential Blogging Skills, 2007, p. 1). Another example advised, “Start off with a spectacular title to draw them in. Then make lists, bullet points, subheadings, and add pictures. Anything you can do to keep their attention and not have your posts look like big chunks of unappealing text ...” (3 Key Points to Perfect Your Blogging Skills, n.d., p. 1).

Gaining insight from journalism methods

Journalism literature features a long tradition of experience and recommendation about structuring news reports. Also, it includes advice that speaks to structure and form in settings akin to blogging, especially in terms of writing editorials. One structure editorial writers have long used involves (1) Introduction — state subject, explain issue, define problem; (2) Body — provide details, alternatives, conflicting viewpoints; and (3) Conclusion — offer opinion, suggested action, call for reader involvement (Fink, 2003, p. 291).

Beyond that, editorial writers operate across a considerable range of formats and structures. For example, Fink has offered this basic set of ingredients for writing editorials: (1) Stimulate; (2) Explain; and (3) Advocate (p. 281). Scanlan’s review of processes used by award-winning editorial writers cited guidelines such as:

- Use chronology for clarity. Get down to the essential facts, then organize them, usually in a time sequence, so you can see what flows from what.
- One story, one theme. An editorial should be a 300-word essay.
- Leads are more important than ever. Strong writing, freshness, something out of the ordinary helps guarantee they’ll read the next sentence.
- The paragraph has power, as a thought and as a pause, marking the cadence for readers.
- Endings matter. They are the punctuation mark on your opinion, on what you think and why. (2004, p. 2-4)

Huang is among those who suggest organizing information, in part, through response to the question, “How would you tell this story to a friend?” (Huang, 2011, p. 1). The approach is akin to what is described as the “Aunt Betty strategy” of sitting down to have a conversation. Other formats cited in journalism literature have been given names such as hourglass, champagne glass, broken line, stack of blocks, the circle, circling back, bookending and narrative line (Clark, 2011; Lanson, 2011).

Format advice from other cousins of blogs

Who are the journalistic cousins that incorporate some the personal characteristics of blogging?

At one level, they include venues such as op eds, columns, commentaries and testimonials that feature points of view rather than objective reporting. They involve the writer personally, but often lack the interactive nature of blogs. They engage many kinds of structure, sometimes within frameworks such as (1) problem-solution, (2) risk assessment and management, and (3) reviews of costs and benefits. Within the advertising sector, they often emphasize leading with benefits, then following up with features that provide those benefits and closing with calls for action.

Other cousins place more emphasis on process than on individual postings and points of view.

They share with many kinds of blogs the intent to encourage interaction and engagement in decision-making for shared purposes. For example, processes used by Extension Services of universities and government agencies throughout the world share similarities with blogging, in an important sense. At local and other levels, they take steps to involve and empower citizens and other stakeholders in regard to countless topics. The structure of this process involves efforts to identify needs, problems and opportunities, analyze them, then develop strategies and programs for addressing them. Beyond the mission of most blogs, Extension Services then continue into program development, program delivery and evaluation. Extension communications may or may not use advocacy.

Service journalism represents another cousin of blogs. Known for moving beyond the usual informative function of journalism, it is action-oriented and features advice as well as news (Autry, 2000; Lockhart, 2008). Rooted in magazine journalism, today it extends into the digital world, as well, to include the interactive characteristics of blogs. It shares with blogs the writer's involvement in providing information, experiences and recommendations that help audiences make informed decisions. For example, Wallace notes the difference between writing an article that examines the various sides of an issue, such as genetically modified food additives, and writing an article that helps the reader choose whether to consume and/or support such things (2012, p. 2). Digital forms of service journalism are often interactive. Articles follow many of the same formats as for news and feature articles.

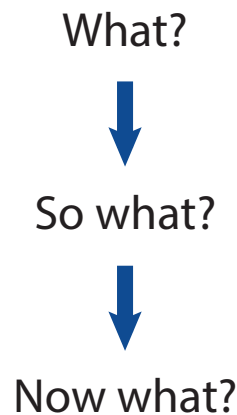
Filling a gap with a unique hybrid format for blogs

Our combined experience in writing blogs and examining research about social, interactive media prompts us to suggest a unique hybrid format for blogs. One of the authors has used it successfully in a blog, "The Urban Cowboy," that operates at the intersection of urban and rural interests. Here are the essentials of a simple, basic approach to organizing and formatting blogs.

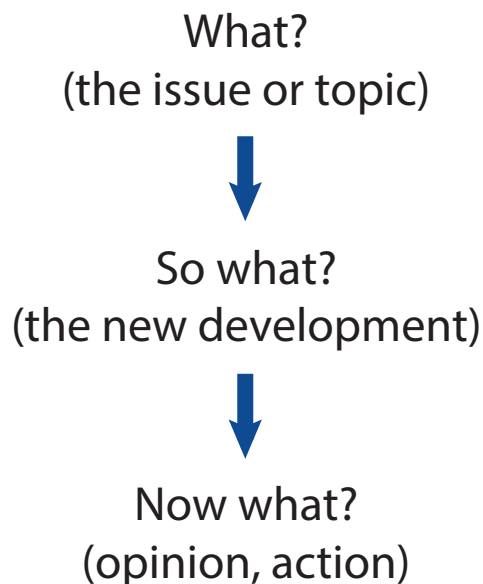
1. Think in terms of three-paragraph blog entries with one or two photos or a video.
2. Make each paragraph no more than 100 words long. So, the three-paragraph post will be about 300 words long.
3. Use one theme per post.
4. Use good editorial writing principles. Incorporate information that stimulates, explains, and advocates.
5. Commit the first paragraph to stimulating. Use it to identify "what" is involved in the theme of the post. What is the issue? Explain it in journalistic, objective style.
6. Commit the second paragraph to explaining. This information addresses "so what?" aspects of the topic. What is the new development in the issue? Why is it timely? Why does it deserve attention? Explain it in journalistic, objective style.
7. Commit the third paragraph to advocating. Use this paragraph to provide information that addresses the "now what?" aspects of the topic. What is the call to action? What should be done next, and by whom? This paragraph takes subjective rather than journalistic form.

This blogging model combines subjectivity, objectivity, news, information and opinion in a concise three-paragraph format. It arose in part from the approach to information sharing by former Canadian agriculture and agri-food minister Lyle Vanclief, who held the office from 1997-2003. Facing a heavy meeting and delegate schedule, he asked his ministerial office staff for clear, succinct briefings, based on three questions: What? So What? and Now What? He needed to know the "Coles Notes" version of the issue or topic to be discussed (what?), the new development that made

it an issue or topic for his attention (so what?) and finally, a suggested course of action (now what?). Diagrammatically, Vanclief's approach could look like this:



The approach lends itself well to the structure and content of agriculture-related blog posts. Location of blogs on the World Wide Web means they are accessible to everyone, not just those who are familiar with agriculture or a specific commodity, issue or topic in agriculture. That means beginning the post with a discussion about the topic or issue, to establish a common understanding of the matter, before launching immediately into the new development that has made it topical. Further, a blogger should present in a post the issue or topic and the new development before offering an opinion about it. In that way, the reader gains an objective introduction to the matter before the blogger comes forward with a (subjective) opinion about it. Using Vanclief's approach, the blogger's opinion is stated after the facts. In keeping with one of the tenets of persuasive writing, that opinion may include a call to action. As a result, the "what – so what – now what" approach is complete. Diagrammatically then, it would look like this:



Such an approach fits well into a three-paragraph blogging model, with one paragraph each dedicated to what, so what, and now what. The first paragraph, in which the issue is presented, is the "what" paragraph. The second paragraph, where the new development related to the issue is ex-

plained, is the “so what?” paragraph. And finally, the third paragraph, in which the writer invites feedback by asking a question or stating a call to action, is the “now what?” paragraph. This paragraph, and the comment box that follows it WordPress blog templates, reflects one of social media’s most distinguishable features: the ability for everyone to have a voice and to engage in dialogue.

Two examples of how this approach looks in practice can be found in these blog posts:

Reduce food waste to keep costs low, says report

Source: Urban Cowboy (www.urbancowboy.ca)

By Owen Roberts

July 29, 2014

As a society, we spend a lot more time and energy dealing with the waste we produce than preventing it. According to a new report, *Developing an Industry-Led Approach to Addressing Food Waste in Canada*, that’s not the right approach to Canada’s \$27-billion food waste problem. Everyone in the food chain is affected, from consumers to farmers. Farmers lose significant profits by paying to produce food that gets thrown away.

In fact, up to 40 percent of what farmers produce gets thrown away. That means there’s a lot of room for improvement to keep money in grower’s pockets to ultimately keep the price of food in check. According to Dr. Martin Gooch, the report’s co-author, food waste is highest during fruit and vegetable season, when consumers purchase in bulk to save money but rarely end up consuming everything. Consumers purchase more and no longer aim to can or preserve food to stretch out their use period. The kitchen is where most food is wasted, with over half of food waste attributed to consumers.

If people are going to waste less food they need guidance such as recipes and options, and smaller sized packages even if they’re less economical. I think people would rather pay more for a smaller quantity and use it all than pay for a larger amount and watch it rot. Advanced storage options for some commodities to lengthen shelf life are being researched with support from the Ontario government at the University of Guelph. You can read the full report at <http://goo.gl/mMtBHj>.

A battle won in Washington. A white flag to win the war.

Source: 50 Shades of Hay (<http://50shadesofhay.wordpress.com/>)

By Madeline Rodrigue

November 11, 2013

Approximately 90 per cent of corn and soybeans in the United States are genetically modified. These GMO crops are incorporated into many products including an estimated 80 per cent of all processed foods. Although there is scientific consensus that GMOs are safe for human consumption, anti-GMO lobbyists warn consumers of phantom consequences. The most recent anti-GMO campaign is based on consumers’ “right to know” what’s in their food.

On November 5, Washington State’s Initiative-552, which would require mandatory labeling

of productions containing GMOs, was rejected in the polls by nearly 100,000 votes. Similar legislation failed in California last year. In both cases, the Grocery Manufacturers Association and large biotech companies like Monsanto and DuPont Pioneer spent millions of dollars to avoid labeling.

This paints a bad picture for consumers. Mark Lynas, GMO advocate, describes the right to know campaign as “bad science but good politics.” The more biotech companies fight product labeling, the shadier they appear. Too often transgenic technology is lumped together with Big Ag policy. These are not synonymous. The bad reputation of Big Ag politics taints the numerous benefits of GMOs in the eye of the consumer. It’s important that consumers recognize transgenics as a technique, rather than an ingredient. Establishing trust between consumers and biotechnology might come down to labeling and transparency, whether or not it is warranted by science. The challenge is creating a label that is not cautionary, but rather one that consumers feel comfortable with and biotech companies willingly provide because they have nothing to hide.

Summary and conclusions

The analysis and techniques presented here address a significant gap in guidelines for bloggers to use in organizing their posts. Most existing advice about blogging centers on writing styles. The unique hybrid structure presented here offers a simple way for bloggers to integrate factual information with current developments, personal perspectives and advice. This approach to structuring blogs has proved useful for students, most of whom are first-time bloggers. It helps them organize their thoughts, develop their arguments, and back up their opinions.

Leading with a journalistic, fact-based style to introduce the topic objectively can be especially useful for communicators who work in settings of science, research, extension and education. This introduction opens the way for discussing new developments, and ultimately, offering opinion and advice in the “Now what?” section of a blog post.

This structure for blogging also offers special potential and value in other settings and for other reasons:

- It can be useful for communicators in commercial settings such as public relations and other forms of marketing communications. It encourages bloggers to base their perspectives on what is known, factual and believable to readers.
- It fits nicely with risk communications across a wide variety of issues related to food, agriculture, natural resources, and life and human sciences.
- It encourages completeness, conciseness and easy flow of thought that can increase reader-ship.
- It heightens authority and credibility of bloggers by positioning them as writers whose subjective views extend logically from a factual base.

Essentially, this structure can be helpful for anyone who needs help concisely explaining a complex topic to a broad audience as well as attempting to increase knowledge and influence opinion and action.

Further research could be based on suggestions, examples, questions and feedback about this approach to organizing blogs.

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