

A Beginner's Guide to Blogging
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Introduction

A blog can be so much more than a traditional website. Where a traditional website is didactic, a blog is interactive. A traditional website is episodic, representing your hobby, business, and even your life, at specific points in time; a blog is linear, a journal of the past, the present, and presumably the future in the form of an online log (literally, a “web log”), but unique to the online world. While a blog can effectively imitate a traditional website, the opposite is not always true. Because a blog can be so much more than a traditional website, it can also do more for your hobby, business, or life, than you might first expect.

A blog invites its readers to join a conversation with the blogger. Once a post is made, readers may provide feedback in the form of comments or responses. This feedback often becomes the seed for a dialog. Where a traditional website usually represents a single didactic voice, a blog allows for multiple viewpoints. As a platform for discussion, blogs sometimes develop into entire communities built around the blog's topic.

Traditional websites are largely static, but a blog is dynamic. The information presented on a blog is usually stored in a database, where it can be called upon when needed. With a database in the background, a blog can effectively store and organize much more information than a static website. Because a blog can store and retrieve information, it easily functions as a journal; old information can be stored and referred to as new information is added. Instead of merely presenting a snap shot of you, your hobby, or your business, frozen in one moment of time, a blog can be a great historian.

Since a blog is online it can perform differently than printed material. But a blog can also perform differently than other online media. Both in blogs and traditional websites, internal links can be as numerous or as sparse as you wish; either type of site allows instant access to any of its pages. But blogging software can automate much of the link creation process, saving time and creating more effective links.

A blog is flexible, and can be parsed down until it looks and acts like any other website. But a typical website built in HTML can't effectively look and act like a blog. Blogs can play host to photo albums, shopping carts, and a host of other functions, and simplify their creation at the same time. On the other hand, a traditional website cannot easily create the interrelated web of articles and posts offered by a typical blogging platform.

But unfortunately, the potential of blogging is not widely understood across the Internet. Many of those who call themselves “bloggers” are operating as though

their blog were a static HTML site. Frequently, blogging software like WordPress, Movable Type, and even Blogger, is used as a content management system. Even some “professional” blogs are nothing more than online magazines or databases of articles on a particular topic. Although there is nothing inherently wrong with either of these practices, a blog has so much more to offer than mere content management.

Common practice threatens to reduce blogging to its lowest common denominator. On one extreme, blogs are self-indulging exercises in naval gazing, a collections of “musings” and “ramblings” encouraging public exhibitionism and offering an outlet for voyeurism. To the other extreme, many blogs have become the dusty archives of pedantic articles, and are as void of a personal touch and voice as a tomb. Again there is nothing wrong with either approach, but we will presume there can be more, much more, to blogging.

A blog can facilitate an enriching experience, both for the blogger and the reader. This blog will explore the creation and propagation of that experience. My sincere aim is that this particular blog will be a learning experience for everyone involved, myself included.

Blogs have been around for a few years, but most webmasters grossly underestimate the power of blogging. A simple blog can be an awesome tool, but relatively few marketers leverage their blogs for maximum gain. That's good news for you, because once you have finished reading this series you will be a step ahead, probably two or three, of your competition. In this post we will quickly walk through the first steps of setting up a web log.

So, enough of the small talk. Let's jump right into the meat and potatoes.

What is a Blog?

A blog is a site, or a portion of a site, regularly updated with new content. Good blogs are interactive and form a community around a particular topic. Several blogging platforms (software) are available, and you can add a variety features and options to any of them. But don't let their simplicity fool you; a blog can put money in your pocket if you use it properly.

How to Get Started Quickly and Easily People often use free, third-party options like Blogger.com when they first start a blog. However, it's generally better to avoid third-party services and set up a blog on your own domain. If you don't have your own website don't worry. A beginning marketer can build an effective Web presence blogging.

You can register a domain name for less than ten bucks a year through services like Godaddy.com or Name.com, and hosting is widely available for around five dollars a month.

The blogging software I use and recommend is totally free.

What You Need In A Hosting Account

When looking for a Web host, select a vendor who offers PHP and MySQL database services; you'll need these for your blogging software to work.

[Click here for the one I use and recommend.](#)

Where To Get Your Free Blogging Software

Many blogging platforms are available, but I recommend WordPress.

WordPress features solid built in capabilities and the largest selection of optional features.

WordPress is an open source project. Each new version is the handiwork of coders and software engineers across the Internet. As a result, some of the themes (pre-built templates) can be unstable. It might be best to stick with the more popular themes in the beginning stages, at least until you are able to recognize what functions should be working.

Once you have your [hosting account](#) and a copy of WordPress you are ready to install your blog. WordPress installs surprisingly easy; it takes only five to ten minutes.

Before you go through the steps of this tutorial, check to see if your hosting control panel has a feature called Fantastico. If so, find the 'Blogs' listing within Fantastico, and then click on 'WordPress'. This way you can follow a couple instructions, click a few buttons, and WordPress is set automatically! If you've set up your blog this way, skip the first two steps of this tutorial.

Step One - Create Your Database

1. The first step is to create a database where all your content and settings will be stored. Login to your hosting control panel, and click the MySQL icon. This icon will take you to the main database management page. There, look for the "New Database" box and add a name for your database. This name can be anything you want.
2. Next , create a new database user. Find the "Create User" form and fill in a username and password. This can be whatever you want, but be sure to write it all down; you'll need this information in a later step.
3. Now add the new user to the new database beneath the "Add Users to Your Database" heading, using the dropdown menus to select the user and database you wish to combine.
4. Now your database setup is complete. You are ready to install your WordPress software.

Step Two - Installing the Software

If you haven't already done so, unzip the folder you downloaded from WordPress.org and open it on your hard drive. Usually, this is accomplished by right-clicking on the folder and selecting "extract all". Once you have unzipped the folder, find and double-click the readme.html file. This will open a set of instructions in your browser. I won't bother repeating that information here, but if you don't already have an ftp program to move files from your computer to the Web, [CoreFTP](#) is free, robust, and easy to use.

Step Three - Configure the Dashboard

Now your blog should be installed and ready for configuration. Login to your administrative dashboard, the control panel where you make new posts, adjust your settings, manage content, and more. As a matter of fact, there is quite a bit going on in the dashboard area, but to be effective you only need familiarity with the primary functions.

Find the menus at the top of the page. Links in the light blue area will be called the "primary menu", and the links in the dark blue area will be referred to as the "sub-menu". Note when you click an option on the primary menu the sub-menu will usually change to reflect new options.

Look on the primary menu and click the link to the far right called 'Options'. As you might expect, this link brings you to the main Options page. Much of the info is already filled in but here are a few suggestions:

* **Weblog Title And Tagline** - Unless you really want your tagline to be "Just another WordPress blog", you'll need to enter something here. It's a good place to use a few of your keywords.

* **Membership** - Decide if you want your readers to register, and if a reader is required to be logged in before they can comment. I would say "no" to both of these, since it discourages people from commenting.

* **Date And Time** - Be sure to adjust the time zone settings so your posts and pre-scheduling will display the proper time.

* **Default Date & Time Setting, Calendar Options** - Set these to whatever works best for you.

Here Are Secondary Options I Recommend

On the 'Writing' options page you can select your default post category, default link category, and define how many lines will be in your post box. None of these really matter to me, but the important part of the Writing options is at the very bottom of the page.

The "Update Services" option allows you to enter URLs to the directories you wish to notify each time you make a post. This feature is important since it will bring readers and increase your PR (Google Page Rank). Each time you make a new post on your blog (or edit an old one) WordPress will automatically submit a link back your post at each of these directories.

Here is the list of RSS directories you can ping each time you post. Feel free to copy this list and paste it directly into the 'Update Services' box on your writing options page. Pingomatic takes care of many directories automatically, but the others I've listed are not otherwise covered.

- * <http://rpc.pingomatic.com>
- * <http://www.blogpeople.net/servlet/weblogUpdates>
- * <http://bulkfeeds.net/rpc>
- * <http://ping.bitacoras.com>
- * <http://ping.bloggers.jp/rpc/>
- * <http://bblog.com/ping.php>

WordPress.org keeps an up-to-date list of directories or you can use the compressed edition. With Pingomatic, the compressed edition of the list is all that's needed.

On the "Reading" options page I just change one field you might want to change, and only if you plan to display AdSense blocks in all your posts. Set your Dashboard to show three posts per page, because AdSense only allows three ads on a page.

The Final Option to Address is Your Permalink Structure

By default, WordPress will generate page URLs like this:

<http://yourdomain.com/?p=1>

The default URL structure is not search engine friendly. You need your pages and links to be keyword optimized for improved SEO (search engine optimization).

An easy way to do this is to set up your permalinks so new pages have the post ID number and post title right in the URL. In this case your links would look more like this:

<http://yourdomain.com/123/titleofpost>

Because your title is included, this is a keyword-optimized URL search engines will treat more effectively than the `/?p=1` structure. Do you really want your posts optimized for someone who searches "p=1"?

Click "Options >Permalinks" and scroll to the "Custom Options" area. Then simply tick the radio box for "Custom, specify below" and enter in the box:

`/%post_id%/postname%/`

Another advantage of this linking structure is you can use a type of shorthand when you link to one of your posts. Simply put your domain name followed by the post number; you don't have to type you or copy the entire URL. It might look like this:

<http://www.yourdomain.com/123>

But WordPress will add the rest.

Notice the "Options" sub-menu will display the plugins you have installed for your blog. Once you have uploaded a plugin to the correct folder on your domain and activated it, you will return to the "Options" sub-navigation to adjust the plugin settings.

We have completed the initial "Options" set up, so we'll move to other areas of the Dashboard.

Find and click the "Manage" link in the primary menu. This brings you to a list of the posts you have made, and gives you sub-menu selections to edit or delete posts, pages, and categories.

Since you've just installed your blog you won't have posts yet, but for now just remember clicking the "Manage" link will take you where you can edit and delete your posts, pages, and categories.

For Now We'll Just Set up Your Categories on the categories page you'll see the "Add Category" form. It's self-explanatory but I do want to make a couple of comments. The categories you add here will not only be applied to the search-engine-friendly permalink structure you just created, but will also be the keywords used when your blog sends link backs to the RSS directories you added in your "Update Service" list.

In other words, it's crucial you add keyword-smart categories to your blog. Your default category is called "Uncategorized". Edit this name unless you want people finding your posts by searching for "uncategorized". Don't forget to change the "Category slug" as well, the slug is what actually comes up in your URL.

Each of your categories should be keyword intensive. This is not only for the search engines, but for the human users who browse blog directories and do keyword searches or the most-recent-pings list.

Here's a little tip if you want "friendly" sounding category names. Call the categories anything you want, but use your targeted keywords in the category slug. Don't forget to put hyphens between each of the words in your slug (you can do this for posts too, if you feel the need).

Once you're finished making categories, we'll configure your Blogroll (links list). Click on 'Blogroll' in the primary menu and you'll be taken to a list of your current links. A list of default links is listed, so delete these. Then, you're ready to define your link categories.

You might stick with "Blogroll", or you might want your titles to read something like "My Other Sites", "Other Cool Blogs", "Friends", or whatever you like. This is up to you, but the main thing is to delete the default links. You're almost done!

The Final Step is a Few Presentation Adjustments

Click the "Presentation" link in your primary menu. This will take you to a page with thumbnails displaying the themes (pre-built template options) currently installed.

From this page you are able to switch themes as often as you like but for now let's stick with the WordPress default theme. It's far more stable than many of the other open source themes and works well in all browsers. If you just can't handle the default template (I think it looks great, but you might feel too generic), browse <http://themes.wordpress.net/> for more options.

All you do is download a zipped packet, unzip and upload it to your wp-content/themes folder, and it should appear as an option under your "Themes" tab. To select a theme, just click on its title or picture.

Once you're satisfied with a theme, click "Theme Editor" in the submenu.

This tab will take you to a box of raw code for your WordPress theme. This area of the blog gets pretty complicated so I'm going to stick with only a few basic adjustments. Avoid extra editing here unless you are a skilled coder or designer. I also suggest you backup any file before you change it.

Now scroll down the page to the bottom of the text area and find the "Update File" button.

If you see the above button you're in business, meaning you can make changes to your files from the Dashboard. If you don't see the "Update File" button you need to change the permissions of the files you wish to edit to 755 or 777 depending on your host's global settings. For more info on global settings you'll need to check with your current Web host.

Once you are able to see the "Update File" button, select "Header" from the menu of files to the right. This opens the header.php file where you will execute one minor edit to make your blog more search engine friendly.

Look inside the box of code for this tag:

```
<title>
```

By default WordPress inserts a line of code telling the script to use the Weblog Title (from your blog options) as your page title (shown at the top of the browser). Ditch this code and place a good keyword optimized title for your blog between the <title> and </title> tags. Be very careful not to delete anything extra. This little change meets part of the basic SEO every site needs. A good title tag is imperative for controlling how the search engine bots (also called "spiders") index your site.

From the theme editor you may also want to edit the footer.php file and remove the miscellaneous links back to WordPress. It's up to you, but you could at the very least add rel="nofollow" as an attribute right after the <http://www.wordpress.org> part of the link (I'll explain why in a later post).

Make Your Blog Stand Out From the Rest

Once you have your blog installed and configured, it's time to give it a facelift and get rid of the out-of-the-box look. This report is not about Web Design techniques, but I do recommend adding professional-quality graphics to your blog.

If you want to do this yourself, that's great. There are many software programs and tutorials on the Web to help you learn the basics of good design. On the other hand, you might spend a little money and save yourself a whole bunch of time by hiring a professional to build a great-looking header graphic.

Many design companies exist on the web, and blog design is a science in itself. But the top blog designers are most likely out of a new blogger's budget, so you may have to go with a talented artist who can design clean and effective graphics

for your blog. In particular, I like Design Guru Ryan and Graphics Genie, but you can Google for others as well.

There You Have It

You have taken care of your blog's basic configuration and are ready to move on and deal with bigger and better things, like running a blog.

Getting Around in WordPress

This post is the second part in a series called Blogging for Beginners. In this section we'll cover posting and creating new pages. You may want to subscribe to the Coffeeblogger RSS feed or get email updates so you won't miss any of the installments in this series.

How To Use Your New Blog

All the links and options found in the Dashboard overwhelm many new bloggers, but the truth is, using your blog is only about as technical as sending an email. You have nothing to fear.

Making A Post – The Core Function Of Blogging

The heart of any blog is the content. You need lots of good strong content to get the most out of your blog.

But for now we won't get into the "why" of blogging, or even the "how" of writing a great post. That's something Coffeeblogger will cover over time (so make sure you're subscribed to the RSS feed). What we will cover is the "where", as in "where you post to your new blog."

Here We Go

From your WordPress dashboard click on the "Write" link, the second option from the left on your top menu.

This will bring you to the area where you create content. The "Write Post" page gives you everything you need to create a post on your WordPress blog.

Creating a post is much like sending an email.

Title – Give your article a title. Use a solid keyword phrase if you can. The title primarily needs to be attractive to human eyes, but if you can drop a keyword or two in it will help you in the search engines.

Body – Obviously, the large text area is where you add the content for your post. You can type right from your Dashboard or you can copy and paste from another document.

Be aware that pasting from other documents can pose some problem. If you pull content from a Web page the font will appear in your post exactly as it does on the page you copied from, so you could end up with odd font styles, colors, and

even formatting. In the past copying and pasting material from Microsoft Word was problematic, but now you can use the Advanced Toolbar to avoid problems (click the icon at the right, the one with all the little squares in it).

I usually pasting content into Notepad and copy it from there before pasting directly into the entry, but I've started using the WordPress Advanced Toolbar. Old habits are hard to break.

Visual Editor – Though it can be disabled through “Options”, by default WordPress gives you a simple visual editor for creating posts. Use the icons above the body text area to make basic formatting changes within your content. The exact functions you have available will vary with your version of WordPress, but the visual editor is similar to a word processor. It offers user-friendly options for bold, italic, and underlined text, and converting highlighted text to a hyperlink.

Category Selection – Select the category or categories where you want your post to appear. Remember, the category you choose will become part of the actual page URL, so use a category with relevant keywords.

Save Your Post – Save a post as a draft and finish it later by clicking the “Save” button.

Publish Your Post – To publish your post immediately click the “Publish” button.
Pre-Schedule Your Post – WordPress allows you to schedule as many posts as you like for automatic publication at a future time. For example, you could enter five or six articles and have them go live over the course of a week.

Scheduling posts makes sense if you write more than one article at a time. You can post one, and set the next to post in a day or two. This gives your blog a regular stream of new content, a practice which helps you retain readers (readers like to see new content when they visit your blog).

On the posting screen, find a blue table with “Post Timestamp +” (lower right-hand corner). Click the ‘+’ sign and you’ll open a dropdown table.

Tick the box next to “Edit Timestamp”, then use the drop down and data boxes to set the time you want your post to appear on the blog.

Creating Pages

WordPress also allows you to create pages for your blog. Pages are not for posts, but are great for information that needs constant and easy access. Examples might include an About Me page, a newsletter signup form, a sales page, or even a photo album. Check out other blogs to see how they utilize pages, and you might come up with some great ideas.

To create a page, click the “Write Page” option in the Write sub-menu and enter your content in the text box. You will notice pages do not use categories, but you can nestle one page under another if you select a “Page Parent” (but this is not necessary for most pages).

Managing Your Content

Once you get the hang of posting content you might want to go back and make changes or deletions. This is done through the “Manage” option in the top menu. When you click the “Manage” button, you will see a listing of all previous posts. From here you can edit or delete any post. By selecting the “Pages” tab in the sub-menu, you edit or delete any of your pages.

As you can see, adding and managing content using WordPress is fairly straightforward. Now you just need a few basic WordPress plugins and you’ll be ready to rock, but we’ll cover that in this series’ next installment.

Installing Plugins

A plugin is an optional feature you add to your WordPress installation. Plugins can make your blogging experience easier and more effective, and a wide array of plugins is available. We won’t get too involved in which plugins you should install (although I’ll share a few), but the main idea here is how to install them.

Adding a plugin is simple. Download the plugin you want to use. It’s best to get the plugin directly from its author to assure you have the latest and safest version. Once it’s downloaded to your computer, upload it to the /wp-content/plugins directory within your WordPress installation. Login to your Dashboard, select Plugins from the primary navigation, and the list of plugins should now include the one you just uploaded.

Click the new plugin’s “Activate” button.

Each plugin should (and usually does) include instructions for making it work. In most cases very little technical knowledge is required to add these features to your WordPress blog.

Basic Plugins

Akismet - Akismet is one plugin every blog can use. It's an anti-spam plugin and comes pre-installed with your WordPress installation. Akismet will greatly reduce the number of spam comments appearing on your blog (even new blogs get spam). Just go to your plugins manager and activate it.

To activate Akismet, you’ll have to register for an account with <http://wordpress.com/> to claim your API key. Once you’ve registered, simply enter this key by clicking “Options” and find “Akismet” in the sub-menu.

The plugins you use will depend upon the needs of your blog. However, here are several you might want to check out.

Sociable – Allows your readers to add you to their favorite social bookmarking and tagging sites with the click of a button.

FeedBurner FeedSmith - Detects all ways to access your original WordPress feeds and redirects them to your FeedBurner feed so you can track every possible subscriber.

Google XML Sitemaps - Generates a sitemaps.org compatible sitemap of your WordPress blog, supported by Ask.com, Google, MSN Search and Yahoo. Some say you do and some say you don't need them, but more on that in a minute.
Optimal Title - Mirrors the function of wp_title() exactly, but moves the position of the 'separator' to after the title rather than before.
Simple Tags - Extended tagging for WordPress 2.3. Includes auto-completion, suggested tags, a tag cloud widget, related posts function and mass-edit tags.
What Would Seth Godin Do? - Displays a custom welcome message to new visitors. Top blogger Seth Godin recommends treating new visitors differently from regular readers. One common use for this particular plugin is to offer your RSS feeds to new readers.

You'll notice I didn't recommend any plugins designed to help you place ads on your site. Many top-level blog gurus recommend you don't monetize a new blog, build your readership first and focus on giving them excellent content. So that's it for my short list of plugins. If you've followed the other posts in this series, then you've got a blog all set up and ready to go.

Should You Create a Site Map?

If I asked you to come to Seattle and meet me in a little cafe I like, would you attempt the journey without some sort of map or set of directions? Not if you intended to actually find the place. Sure, you might come to town anyway and take in a few of the obvious landmarks, like the Space Needle or the Waterfront. But unless I tell you where that special little cafe resides, or at least its name, just how would you find the right place?

Google seems to feel the same way about visiting our blogs. Sure, Google is likely to pay your blog a visit. It is likely to add a few of your pages to its famous index. But how is Google going to know about all those special little nooks and crannies in your blog unless you provide some sort of map?

The answer is simple, Google won't.

But unless you have lots of time on your hands and a fluent understanding of XML (the language Google expects a map to be written in), it isn't likely you will want to build a map for Google (or any of the other search engines, for that matter). Then there's the task of updating the map everytime you add a new post or make any tiny change.

But never fear, Arne Brachhold's Google XML Sitemap Generator for WordPress is here. This plugin generates an XML-Sitemap, supported by Ask.com, Google, YAHOO and MSN Search (Google came up with XML sitemaps in 2005 and the others later adopted them, hence the often-used name "Google Site Map"). A sitemap allows search engines like Google and Yahoo to index the pages of your blog more efficiently. While a sitemap isn't imperative, and search engines will find many of your pages through internal links on your blog, your site may not be fully indexed (each entry listed with the search engines) without one.

Once you have installed the plugin and built your sitemap, the plugin will keep the sitemap updated whenever needed. I also recommend you allow the plugin to create a robots.txt file for you, but more on that later.

I was going to tell you how to submit your sitemap to Google, but you can thank Lorelle VanFossen for her post informing me sitemaps are now autodiscoverable. She said:

"In case you missed the news, Google's Webmaster Central announced that in accordance with the new Sitemap.org, you do not have to submit your XML sitemap to Google or other search engines any more. Instead, you can make your sitemap "autodiscoverable" by directing the visiting web crawler to the location of the sitemap."

Webcrawlers will be directed to your blog's sitemap through your robots.txt file, so be sure to let the plugin you've installed create that file for you.

Now that I've convinced you to run out and create a sitemap, pronto-like, you should know not everyone agrees to their importance. Check out Garry Conn's post "Search Engine Sitemaps" and decide for yourself.

Reciprocal Links

You launch your site on the World Wide Web - with reciprocal links you are attaching your site to the web. Reciprocal links create paths to your websites and search engine bots as well as visitors follow those paths.

With a good reciprocal link campaign, you are creating a spider web with your site in the center. All those paths leading to and from your site build that web and help anchor your site. Your site is at the center of this web, and best of all your site is less likely to be hurt by the ever changing whim of search engines.

The information here is only what you need to know to add good reciprocal links to your websites. It is not necessary to understand the nuances of page rank in link trading – or to know every little trick some site owners use. This is an easy process, requires no expenditure at all – and carries long term ongoing benefits for your site.

Exactly what is a "Reciprocal Link" Anyway?

This is a "trade" - you put a link on your site pointing to another webmaster's site and he does the same for you. How simple is that?

Done right, it's not quite that simple. The focus of the site you trade links with, the design and quality of that site, where links are placed, etc. determines how much benefit a link will add to your site.

Just a tad of linking history here:

In 2000, it was common for new webmasters to "exchange links" with hundreds of sites. The majority of content sites contained multiple links page with 80-100 links to other sites on each page.

Where there is opportunity, someone will exploit it. So, software developers launched scripts that would automate parts of linking program and online entrepreneurs built membership sites where all the members could link to each other.

The software was a great help - but the link member sites often fill up with new site owners indiscriminately linking to anyone who suggests it. Google responded by changing the value given to some link trades.

By 2002, smart site owners placed no more than 25 links per page and shortly after that they stopped naming those pages "links". They became "sponsored sites", "partner sites".

In the next couple years, a Google insider leaked the information that "Google values one way links much higher than reciprocal links". Blogs, sites and tutorials began telling new site owners to focus on one-way links. The crowd rushed to find as many ways as possible to get one-way links . . . and guess what happened last year? You got it - information "leaked" from Google indicated that one way links are not carrying the weight of importance they once did.

Reciprocal linking is often ignored by new sites seeking to build traffic - they concentrate on one-way links, on PPC, post all over forums and blogs. They believe the advice "reciprocal linking isn't worth it now".

But experienced webmasters did not stop trading links with other sites. They refined their methods, combining reciprocal links with one way links.

What are the benefits of exchanging links with other webmasters?

There are several:

1. It's free - totally, completely, no-hidden-costs free
2. It's spider-bait! Finding links to your site on many other good sites, the spider bots travel the link paths to your sites again and again. The little search engine bots say, "Aha, all paths lead to this site - must be very important site!"
3. Site stability. The maze of links anchors your site and connects it to other sites on the web. The internet is an interactive community - To the great Google, it is much better to be connected to others in the community than floating alone in cyberspace.
4. Branding. Using the right anchor text helps brand your niche and your site or name. For example [firepow](#) is for wordpress auto installing and is anchor texted.
5. Traffic. Yes - you do get traffic from reciprocal links. Using a strong anchor text and interesting description will increase the traffic potential.

What Does This Mean For You?

The rules for two way links in 2007 have changed. You don't need or want hundreds of link exchanges. You choose link partners carefully and you check your links monthly to make sure they remain active.

Do you leak page rank? Yes, a bit. If you have a PR5 site with a reciprocal link to a PR3 site - it's not an even trade. If you place a link to another blogger's PR4 site on a PR4 page on your own site -- and his link back to you is on a PR0 site, it's an "oops". But for new site owners, it's not a big deal.

As a general rule you will be trading links with sites of page rank similar to your own site. There is no benefit to a high ranked that links to a low ranked site; it's a loss for them.

If you have a PR3 home page, you can increase your chances of getting high ranked sites to link to you by adding them to a linking page with only 10 links on the page. The more links on any one page - the less value there is to each link.

About Page Rank

Download and install the Google Toolbar (and for better performance, use it with Firefox). This will show you the Page Rank of the page you are viewing. Page Rank is a measure, rated from 1 to 10, of the "importance" Google gives to that page.

Ahhh - the great mystery, except there is no mystery at all. Page rank is exactly what it sounds like - it is the rank of importance that Google assigns to a page! It serves little real purpose except when you are linking with other sites.

"Common knowledge" can be dangerous. Bloggers comment confidently Page Rank means nothing and all that counts is where your site ranks in the Google lists. Site placement in Google can change drastically and quickly, so staying on top may require close monitoring and repeated effort. Reciprocal links, once secured, only need to be checked every month or two.

Google placement is extremely important but it does not follow that page rank means nothing. When requesting reciprocal links, Page Rank enables you to link with better sites. Linking is perhaps the most important reason to gain good Page Rank unless you're looking to monetize your site with paid reviews, but also the easiest way to get that PR.

If your site is new, it's possible your page rank is PR0. That doesn't mean you can't get good link partners. It does mean that you need to be realistic. Reciprocal links are mutual benefits for the two sites involved. There is no incentive for a PR4, PR5 or PR6 site to link to a low or no PR site - unless the high PR site is owned by a good friend.

Write a simple and friendly email to use when requesting links from sites which do not have a "submit link" form. Avoid the newbie mistake of lecturing the other site owner about the value of reciprocal links! If they have a linking program, they know about trading links.

The email below is a good place to start when writing your own. Write one up on notepad and save it to your links folder.

Dear [their name here if you have it]

I added an active link to your site and would appreciate a reciprocal link from you. You can find that link at [give the exact page URL where the link appear on your site].

The information for a link to my site is:

Title: xxxxx

URL: xxxxx

Description: xxxxx

I'd appreciate an mail when the link to my site has been added. Thank you for your consideration.

Your Signature

P.S. I really liked your site. (only if it's true)

Now save that short email in the same linking folder

Many websites use link manager scripts and will have a form to fill out to submit your link. For these submissions, use Roboform or the form filling function in a browser such as Firefox will save time and typing for you. NOTE: When a form asks where you placed their link, always give them the exact page location URL. Do not list your home page and expect them to look through your site for the link.

Finding Sites to Link With

Use good old Google search. In the search box, enter "your topic" "exchange links" ("exchange links" will result in a better search than "link exchange").

You can also try other terms:

- "your topic" "partner links"
- "your topic" "link partners"
- "your topic" "add link"
- "your topic" "reciprocal link"

You get the idea.

This is the tedious part of linking. You need to visit those sites and look for:

1. Page rank of the home page
2. Is topic relevant to yours?
3. Site quality
4. Is there a visible link to the partner link pages?

Many sites will have a form to fill out "submit link" to request a reciprocal link. Others will have a link to send an email.

Judging a Potential Link Partner's Site

You are looking for a quality site. Does the site load quickly? Are images used well/overused? Is there real content on the pages or is it an MFA (made for AdSense) site plastered with ads everywhere you look?

Use "consumer think" - would you look at more pages on that site? Is it attractive? Is it interesting? Is it keyword optimized and SEO friendly?

Now check out the location of the reciprocal links on that site. The links should be no more than 2 clicks (and preferably one click) from the site's home page. Beware of webmasters who add your site to their "directory" which requires 4-5 clicks to find the page where links appear. Do not request a link from such a site. The PR of the link you receive is based on the Page Rank of the exact page where your link appears, not the home page of the partner site.

Stick to similar themes, topics and niches. If you have a site about horses, it makes sense to trade links with other horse themed websites. Once you have some of those links in place, you can expand a bit into other pet categories and still retain theme based links. You would never link with insurance (unless it's pet insurance), "make money", or skin care sites as they have no relationship at all to your own website topic.

Some niches have a wider range of potential link partners. A site about orchids could link effectively with any number of garden sites without having links outside the niche area.

Remember - the narrower your own sub niche site, the more you can widen your link partner search in that niche. If you are developing an authority site you can link to sites which are related to any one of the topics on your own site. You will stay within the same general theme of your site because that is the target market for your site topic and keywords. Though a pet person may well have an interest in clicking on your dog training link, someone looking for fishing gear will pass you by.

Never link to any site that does not have a live link to its own partner or link pages visible on its home page. Not all sites have link trade policies so if a "sponsored sites" or "partner sites" or "submit" link does not appear on the home page, move to the next potential site. You will not be linking to common sales pages and mini-sites used to promote products.

Once you begin a linking program, you will begin to receive emails from site owners requesting a link trade. Do not automatically accept these. Always check out the site for relevance to your topic and for link pages easily found.

A Good Shortcut

There is always an easier way - and this one will save a lot of time and frustration. Do the search above and find a site that meets your requirements as a link partner. Take a look at their link pages. Are they doing a good job of getting related sites to link to them? If so, good for you; you've just discovered a goldmine. You now have a list of sites which are related and have link exchange programs, too! You just open those links in a new window one by one, decide if they are a good fit for your site. If so, add them as a link on your own link page - and submit your site for consideration through their "submit a link" page or email.

Making the Link

Did you notice that in the text above I said "add them as a link on your own link page"? That is the first step in requesting a link. Before requesting a link from another site, add their site as a live link on your link partner's page. Don't play games with "if you do, I will" - just do it.

When creating your linking pages for your site, do not name them:

- links1
- links2
- links3

Instead use your anchor text as page titles such as:

- "make money partners"
- "home business partners"

Getting the Link Bank

Impatience will not work here and can damage your chances of getting good reciprocal links. When you begin linking, you may be adding links daily or a couple times a week. The other webmaster may be checking links only monthly or even every other month.

Keep in mind you are requesting a "service JV" with the link trade partner. Be professional, be polite, be patient. If you receive a "sorry, can't do it" reply - don't take it personally. On occasion, you may have a rude reply. 90% of the time this comes from someone new who doesn't know the value of linking - the other 10% are from higher ranked sites with arrogant owners. Don't explain, don't answer, just move on. About 6-12 months from now, it like those people will be asking you for a link. When that happens, you are still polite and graciously agree - and then put their link on the last page of your link partners - a PRO page (nice has limits; payback is a "feel good" moment - even if only you know about it). Add the link to your site, fill out the form or send email requesting a link back from them, and move on to the next link.

After a month, you can start checking to see if your links have been activated on their site. Some will send an email - some will just activate the link. Some may move it to a different link category. Go through the link pages of the site and use "edit/find" to locate your site in the source code to find your URL link. Then view the actual link on the HTML page.

If you can't find the link after 4-6 weeks, send a polite email to the webmaster and give it a couple more weeks. If there is still no link, you can send a simple email stating that you are unable to find a live link leading to your site and will be removing unreciprocated links on your site at the end of the month. This is good time to give the other site owner an "out" by saying "I can't find the link" rather than "the link is not there".

Some sites will link with you - and some won't. Be considerate and don't take any rejections personally. If you choose sites well as describe in this report, you will have a very good chance of receiving links from most sites you requests them from.

One Note: If you have a brand new site, it can be frustrating. You have a PR0 and may be turned down by higher PR sites. You want the links for popularity of your site . . . and it's harder to get good links until your site is popular. Vicious circle - but getting links back from a few good directories and getting some one-way links through article submission will help you get that popularity, too. To get exposure for your blog, it is best to build a good site, submit a few articles, submit to directories and then begin your reciprocal link campaign.

Link Cheats

There are (surprise, surprise!) webmasters who will cheat reciprocal link partners. Some will add your link and then a few weeks later, remove it. To build their own page rank, a few webmasters will use the robots.txt file to block the link directory they are building. This benefits them because they are getting the link partners' link in to their site - but are not allow their own linking pages to be spidered. If you suspect this might be happening, you can find out easily. In the address bar of your browser, type "www.the-domain-name.com/robots.txt" and you will be able to see if the webmaster is blocking any directories in his site. Another good validation method is to use a site spider service to see if you can view the partner's link page "like a search engine would see it". Best free tool I've heard about is the link checker at Instant Position. Remember, you are only interested in the page where your link is posted – not in the partner's root domain.

Choose Your Own Pace

Linking and exchanging links is an ongoing activity for your site. Trade a few links a week with other webmasters and the results will begin to show for your site. If you are building multiple sites, set aside a couple hours a week and add

two links to each site. This is a low pressure activity, slow and steady will get results.

Once you have 20-30 good link partners, stop a bit and keep monitoring your links to make sure they remain active. As you gain more Page Rank, add a few more links with sites of higher PR.

A good strategy now is to add only 10-15 links on one page (remember to title the page with your anchor text). In 2007, reciprocal links remain a highly useful tactic for your site – but it's quality of the links you trade, not quantity, that

Google is looking at.

Free Tools To Automate Link Exchange

There are excellent products such as SEO Elite that will help you with both search engine optimization and link exchange automation.

There are also scripts from \$97 to \$200 which will fully automate a linking program. In the past, these were necessary for those who were adding hundreds of links. We no longer add such a huge number – and your link can simply be an HTML page or pages on your site.

Also free and useful are several free link scripts worth checking out:

- <http://www.mylinkhelper.com/>
- <http://linkmachine.net/>

The most useful function to look for is a script that will check your links on your partner sites to make sure they are remaining active and can be found.

If you don't use a script that offers a form for submitting a link request through your site, you can have a "submit your site" link at the bottom of your home page and add an HTML page with instructions to email you to request a link.

What About Memes?

A meme is "a cultural item that is transmitted by repetition in a manner analogous to the biological transmission of genes" (Dictionary.com). But that's not going to do much to help you understand blogging memes. "Internet memes" are the second cousin of blogging memes, but speak more to the viral way some things spread across the web; a good example would be the "dancing baby" or Burger King's "subservient chicken".

A blogging meme is a type of internet meme which solicits active participation on the part of other bloggers. It often consists of a series of questions the blogger is expected to answer, which may be on a certain topic or completely random. It's much like a "tag, you're it" game. You post your answers on your blog, link back to the blog which tagged you, then tag someone else; each blogging meme will have it's own set of rules.

The meme I was tagged for asks me to post five random facts, link back to the person who tagged me, and tag five others.

Aside from fun and interesting information, blogging memes can also be a great source of traffic and backlinks. If the person who tags you has a high-traffic blog, that blog's readers might check you out to read your responses to the meme. Since each of those you tag will link back to your blog you will automatically receive backlinks, so it would be worth tagging popular blogs, especially if you already have established some sort of an online relationship with them.

Keep in mind, not every blogger will have the time or interest to respond to your tag. If a popular blogger has no idea who you are, it isn't likely they'll respond. But on the other hand, if you tag bloggers with blogs similar to yours in size and topic, blogging memes can be one of the bread and butter posts your blog needs for growth.

If you would like to jump in on a meme or two, check out The Meme List for some ideas.

The False Economics of Blogging

I grew up in a small town. Like many small towns, the downtown district of my hometown has spent much of the last 20 years searching for an identity. The buildings are old, parking is limited, and commerce has moved to strip malls and mega retailers in newly developed areas. It has been interesting to watch the various ways downtown merchants have attempted to monetize the district. In some ways, blogs run in a parallel universe to shops in the downtown district of my hometown. They develop false economies in order to survive, they come and go quickly but a few of the strong survive, and there are often several empty storefronts waiting to be filled. There are valuable lessons for bloggers in the comparison.

The False Economy

One of the first big restoration movements in my hometown was what I'll call the "antique mall syndrome". In case you're not familiar with the concept, basically someone rents a storefront and sublets spaces to vendors who peddle their own "antiques" (which are often just garage-sale fodder).

My hometown's antique-mall phase was touted as the answer both to its many empty shops and its identity crisis. These antique malls made for interesting browsing, and created a certain amount of traffic. The problem is, they created what I call a "false economy" (yes, it's my own term). The shop owner now seems to have a successful retail business. It is full of merchandise, it is attracting attention, and the traffic count is growing. It is now a

hub of activity, but there is one small problem. The owner is making money, but not because anyone is buying merchandise.

The vendors are paying space rent, the vendors are paying for advertising, the vendors are paying commissions and fees for whatever is actually sold. Although they dream of being successful retailers, most of the vendors are nickel and dime operators and they're happy just to break even. Some months they pay out of their own pockets to keep their spaces, but they view that as an inevitable part of owning a new business.

But the store as a whole only needs to make enough sales to keep its vendors interested. When one vendor leaves there is usually another to take the place. The store does not need to meet a real need of the customer, it only has to keep its vendors hooked. It gives a false impression of success, based on false economics.

The Revolving Door

One of the notable characteristics of my hometown's downtown district is the rapid turnover of its tenants. Because the storefronts are sometimes inexpensive to rent, many shops open with poor planning and insufficient capital. Often, vendors from the antique malls attempt to build their own false economies but lack the connections to attract and maintain vendors.

Because they lack the resources or fortitude to purchase or create their own products, these retailers often stock their shops with consignment merchandise. These shops fail because of:

- A failure to plan, or poor planning
- A lack of capital to sustain them through infancy
- Failure to meet the needs of the customer (the public or the vendors)

A tremendous amount of resources are wasted on these shops, financial, physical, and emotional. While opportunities are available for prospective business owners to gain the training they need to open and sustain a successful business, most of these owners do not seek it.

A few of the strong do survive but remain on the fringe. They might be unusually tenacious or willing to live off limited resources, but they are not what could be called successful. Their businesses are emotionally, physically, and financially draining.

The Empty Shop Syndrome

In the midst of all this rapid turnover of shops in the downtown district, at any given moment many storefronts are empty. These empty shops serve as a deterrent to shoppers; experience has shown when too many shops remain empty in an area, buyers go somewhere else. But these empty shops look like opportunity to those who have dreamed of owning a shop someday.

The cost of entry is low and there are few hurdles to jump before you can have a shop of your own. Potential shop owners see the activity at the larger antique malls and expect they can do just as well. They set up a retail business on the

assumption there is retail activity in the area without realizing the area is suffering with the antique shop syndrome.

Interestingly, neophyte shop owners often decide to rent a storefront before they have anything to put in it. They might not even have a complete vision of the type of business they will open. They are pursuing the dream of opening a business first, and figuring out the details later.

The same problem which enables the downtown district's decline also perpetuates itself. It is a difficult cycle to break because it is a difficult problem to recognize, but eventually the entire district will fail.

Blogging Suffers These Same Ailments

Some blogs appear to be financially successful but are actually parasites living off the blood, sweat, and tears of others. They sell advertising spaces in their sidebars, and they sell editorial space in their posts. The amount they charge is small enough that none of the advertisers are hurt deeply, but both transactions result in few or no sales. The advertisers hang on with the belief they are building their brands and success is just a matter of time.

As these blogs increase their traffic they can charge more for the space, but there is no impetus to build quality, targeted traffic which will benefit the advertisers. There is no real reason to produce quality posts which will truly benefit the reader. These blogs serve nobody but the blogger.

But like the ailing downtown district suffering with the antique mall syndrome, these blogs create a false economy. There appears to be happy readers and happy advertisers, but in fact there may only be a happy blogger.

In the second stage of this false economy, others try to emulate the apparent success of these busy little blogs. Because the cost of entry is very low new blogs spring up right and left, but these are blogs without a plan, without a real purpose, and without a real passion. The mortality rate is high for these infant blogs, although a tremendous amount of resources are spent in the hopes of keeping them alive.

A few of the strong do manage to survive, but it is not a marriage based on love. One day the blogger will wake up and wonder why they have spent so much time in this relationship; they will roll over in bed, tell themselves they just don't want to do it anymore, and that will be the end of their blogs. They won't have the energy or passion to keep things going, and the blog will fold. It will fold, but not before inspiring other bloggers to follow the same road.

It sounds ridiculous to say anyone will rent a storefront without having a clear idea of the business they will operate there, but it does happen when the threshold to entry is low. In a similar fashion, many bloggers start a blog without

a clear idea of what sort of blog they will operate; it only seems more acceptable because fewer resources are at stake.

Many bloggers throw a few ideas against the wall to see what sticks. This method works for some, but many become too discouraged to continue. Either way, a little forethought and planning could not only save wasted resources (money, time, spiritual and emotional) but it could also perpetuate the birth of more meaningful blogs and more bloggers with a passion for their topic.

The blogosphere does suffer many of the same ailments which plague a dying downtown district. It suffers from the antique mall syndrome, the revolving door, and the empty shop syndrome. 98% of the blogs in existence today are inactive. Bloggers start their blogs with expectations, but in the long run the vast majority of these expectations remain unmet.

Blogging as a community and an industry suffers as well, as readers turn to more effective, well-planned venues for information. All the empty shops and rapid turnover creates the impression blogs are neither a viable business option, nor a valuable asset for the online world, so potential readers and businesses go elsewhere.

Conclusion

Blogging is an activity fraught with myth and legend. You will be given very good advice by amateurs and horrible advice by professionals, and the reverse is true as well. Ultimately, you will have to learn from experience and develop your own set of opinions. Whenever possible, it is a good idea to base those opinions on research and practical experience.

But either way, now you have a basic understanding of how you might setup and approach your blog. These are the fundamentals, from here on out you will be able to find your own way.

To Your Blogging Success,
<http://www.firepowreviewed.com>