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USING BLOGS TO ENHANCE LITERACY  
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## BLOGS AS A NEW WRITING GENRE

If literacy practices are shifting and expanding, as I suggest in both chapters 1 and 2, then writing must also be changing in the process. This makes sense, since at literacy's core writing exists as a parallel to reading and visual rhetoric. Writing and its attendant processes are altered in electronic communication, and even though we all are in the middle of these changes and might not always feel comfortable explaining why they occur, we certainly see the differences in spelling, punctuation, and grammar that now occur in online writing.

Whether educators and parents find these alternatives liberating or the downfall of civilization remains a point of discussion in contemporary society. Certainly this is not a discussion I want to pursue here, as the answers are wrapped up in political and ideological concerns that cannot be resolved within a few pages. The central issue for the discussion following this chapter is that blogging heralds a new form for writing and communicating ideas, resulting in more effective student learning. This, to me, seems a more constructive way to think about the linguistic variations that occur in students' writing processes when they blog.

First, though, we have to ask what it means to call blogs a "new" writing genre? How do blogs differ from other current and older forms of writing?

### UNDERSTANDING GENRE

Before we can decide whether a blog is a "new" writing genre, I must explain what *genre* is. Simply, *genre* means form. A writing genre, then, means the form or shape that writing takes.

Typical writing genres are letters, poems, short stories, novels, reports, and newspaper articles. In school, additional writing genres are research and academic papers, plays, histories, and essays. Some writers are considered masters of a particular genre; for instance, Shakespeare is a masterful playwright and Toni Morrison is a brilliant poet. Some writers are skilled wordsmiths in a practical genre: An advertising copywriter or newspaper reporter is often regarded as being talented enough to earn a living through words.

Most writers, though, learn a variety of genres and perform well enough to communicate their ideas to others using one or two forms. Many feel comfortable writing in genres that are connected to their livelihood; when asked to step out of their comfort zone, they defer to others. That's not uncommon, but in the information age a good number of people are learning something new about the writing they have to do: It doesn't conform to anything any of them ever learned how to write.

E-mail and text messaging on cell phones blend conversation and stenographer-like shorthand with odd punctuation. These days, people write in acronyms and show their emotions with unusual combinations of punctuation and letters. The era of long, fluid sentences and paragraphs filled with polysyllabic words is over. Information in text and e-mail messages is arranged, or "chunked" into small units that are easy to scan or skim. This marks the most noticeable shift in the writing process as it moves from paper to pixel.

And then there are blogs. For a traditionally educated person, blogs, with links, graphics, sound, and all that shorthand, acronymic, and clipped language look like hieroglyphics rather than messages. On top of that, some blogs take on a diary appearance, others function more like newspaper articles, and yet others are just a set of links and comments. The volume of writers mixing genres and breaking grammatical and presentation rules in blogging is enough to make a grammarian or English lit major cry—or at least cringe. Undoubtedly, the language of blogs is enough to confuse educators and parents, as many wonder whatever happened to the written English language they learned not so long ago.

What people are seeing is the rise of a new genre of writing—a form that blends styles, strategies, and structures to express content. A skilled writer of this new genre has to learn not only the traditional rules and

conventions for writing, but also the variants needed to reach out to diverse audiences.

Proficient blog writing depends on a writer honing a set of literacy skills that cross several genres and styles. A blogger must be part graphic designer and part technology guru as well, since writing in this new genre is not just text. In many ways, successful blog writers design their writing for effect. Bloggers design their writing for a purpose, for their readership, for the electronic medium and genre in which they are working, and for the sources the writers hope to use to illustrate their points.

### THE SIX TRAITS OF BLOG WRITING

Understanding blogs as a new genre of writing, then, is more than thinking about a blog as a different form for displaying content. As writers move into blogging, they must be conscious of six elements that affect the quality of their written content:

- Emphasis
- Tone
- Consistency
- Repetition
- Information placement
- Color

Frequently, a failure to address one if not all of these six elements can constrain blog writing. Understanding how these traits function in blogging is necessary for young writers to improve their style as well as their content presentation. Blogs, as a particular genre, often display a specific look and feel that differs from other genres, so when introducing the idea of blogging to student writers, it is important to have them visit a number of blog sites to note the variations, depending on the target audience.

Even though these terms are common ones for English majors or writers, how the vocabulary is understood in a blog setting differs from the terms' usage in print-based contexts. Over time, teachers showing

students how to implement these traits when blogging strengthens youngsters' written literacy. Students come to know when to identify the appropriate situations for using a certain style or technique, and they also learn alternative styles to address various audience needs.

My hope is that educators and parents can assist young writers in making better decisions regarding when to adopt a blogging style over an academic style. Many of the problems in student writing stem from an inability or inexperience in recognizing the audience's expectations. Students enjoy writing in the "texting mode" found in electronic communication, so they transfer that style—usually inappropriately—to their academic writing. Similarly, some students internalize the academic style to a degree that their online written work suffers by sounding stilted, and thus the content appears unnatural, pretentious, or wooden. To be competent writers for the 21st century, we have to become hybrids—those who can shift linguistic registers or styles to fit the audience's needs and expectations.

Emphasis refers to the placement or arrangement of information to gain the reader's attention. Because of the smaller size of a blog entry, emphasis is crucial. The writer as blogger has to pull in the audience almost immediately to ensure a short post will be read.

What information should a writer emphasize on a blog? Clearly, any pressing new material should be entered, as should interesting links to off-site websites, newspaper articles, graphics, or other information that supports the central topic or idea. Surely any item that seems relevant to the blogger's overall theme and audience's interest should be emphasized. Whatever the writer decides, the information should always contain pertinent, high-quality content and be well-written. Poor content and writing leads audiences to think the blogger has *bloggerhea*, or producing a high volume of low-quality or irrelevant material. Sites labeled as being *bloggerhea* tend to be ignored by most people.

Once writers develop their content and prose, they must pay attention to the placement of this information on the blog. Most online readers prefer a symmetrical style, with a balance between open space and text or images. An uncluttered blog site appears more inviting and restful for readers. If there are too many elements on the page, a hallmark of an unskilled blogger, readers' eyes have to dart and move too quickly to take in the necessary information. If an audience has to work too hard

to gain desired information, then it will leave quickly or fail to return a second time. Neither is a good outcome.

To achieve both balance and emphasis, skilled bloggers use boldface fonts, catchy headlines and subheadings, and graphics to call attention to a new posting. Blog entries usually have a dateline or time marker as well as reverse postings, so the most current entries are placed at the top. Since most blogs have weekly or monthly archives, readers can be referred to earlier archived postings to acquire older information.

Fonts, headlines, subheads, graphics, date and time markers, and archives help the blogger place information in the easiest, most retrievable way possible for the reader. As with print-based writing, successful bloggers make the reading experience as simple as possible for the audience.

Balancing graphics, fonts, colors, text, and images on screen has not always been a trouble-free task. Unlike writing a paper for a class assignment, where software tools allow margins and fonts to be preset and graphics can be dropped into the text with ease, in the past bloggers had to learn how to program HTML (hypertext markup language) code. And today's advanced bloggers learn XML (Extensible Markup Language) or RSS (a more robust version of XML) code.

However, novice bloggers and their teachers do not have to learn how to code. With the advances in blogging software programs, writers can use predesigned templates to provide a shell that properly aligns the balance of empty space to text and graphics. Sometimes these templates provide designated archival headings, profile information, and user-friendly items such as calendars, clocks, and digital counters to personalize a blog. Knowing some HTML or RSS code is useful, as it gives the writer a bit more flexibility in personalizing a template or offers total creativity in designing one's own template. But novices can start blogging with no code experience whatsoever.

In fact, in the early stages of blogging, it might help younger writers to begin with a template, then learn whatever HTML or RSS code is needed later to layer in sound, links, news updates, and other items. Starting with a template allows the student writer to focus primarily on the writing and placement of information, which are the two central elements of successful blog sites. As students master writing content and

balancing it within a template, then they can be encouraged to learn some HTML code, as it will contribute to their digital literacy.

While it is difficult to say exactly how bloggers should balance the information readers see on screen, here are three tips:

- Make sure the content is clearly written and fresh.
- Consider why the audience wants to visit the blog.
- Consider the context for the blog.

Top blog sites have clearly written prose that offers a fresh perspective. Well-trained bloggers always keep in mind why their audiences stop and visit (to gain new information, to be entertained, to read opinion, and so on). They write for a purpose. But it's equally important to consider the blog's context. Developing a blog for a class grade is very different from putting together a daily journal of teenage activities. Student writers must take into account what the expectations are for the blogging task and think about the standards of conduct required to meet the mental image a teacher, administrator, or parent has if the blog is for a school-based assignment.

People's expectations and standards vary widely, so there is no reason why teachers, school administrators, and parents can't discuss what they expect for blog use with youngsters. Such conversations are an opportunity to teach a wider understanding of emphasis and balance to young writers.

Very broadly speaking, tone is the emotional connection writers establish with their readers. Tone comes from the language and images bloggers use to present a subject to their audience. Emphasis and balance contribute to tone, as these elements can provide a sense of either harmony or chaos, calmness or movement, to the blog. Good blogging practices follow five very simple rules related to tone:

1. Keep the language and the content clean. A standard many bloggers use is that if Grandma would blush at what is said, then delete the line or change the wording.
2. Make sure the information presented is your own. Cite or link if not.

3. Don't disclose confidential or personal information, which can make you a target for stalkers, bullies, or other online predators.
4. Use a pen name to avoid unwanted correspondence.
5. Realize that once a post goes out, it cannot always be removed.

Great bloggers, like great writers, know that material can be presented without the use of "blue language." Part of the skill of blogging is how well you can use vocabulary. The creative use of language shows respect for readers. Educators and parents can show students examples from literature or elsewhere for inventing words or phrases to articulate certain thoughts.

My favorite authors for showing students how to generate humor, creativity, and respect for audiences include Chaucer, Shakespeare, Kurt Vonnegut, and Mark Twain. They write clearly and cleanly, and they inspire various tones in their work depending on the subjects they handle. Educators and parents can select their favorite authors, whether contemporary or classic, to show students their expectations for keeping the language respectable and acceptable for a wide readership. Working "blue" is useful for many talented stand-up comedians and can garner laughs, but for most professional contexts it's more reasonable to present a modest persona when online.

Besides keeping one's language in check, skilled bloggers ensure that whatever is posted is theirs alone. Many Internet users, especially younger students, believe that if something is online, it is fair game for appropriation without citation. That assumption is incorrect. Most Internet material is copyright-protected unless indicated somewhere on the website, and people who download and use the information as their own without permission or attribution are plagiarizing. Plagiarizing is academic fraud and can ruin a young student's future collegiate or professional career.

Another area where novice bloggers err is in the disclosure of private or confidential information. There are many reasons why students' school locations and names should never be made public, and these reasons parallel why workers should not reveal where they are employed. Beyond community embarrassment if in-house secrets are told, sometimes retaliation can occur. Retribution for blog commentaries can be quite vengeful, as has been seen in the business world, where people

have been fired or denied tenure for what they posted on a blog. Regional newspapers are filled with stories of schools and school districts banning the student use of blogs because some naive blogger spreads rumors about classmates, teachers, administrators, or the school community. Later chapters in this book will address specific student-related concerns regarding why personal information should not be revealed on a blog site.

The Electronic Frontier Foundation, a watchdog group for Internet use, states clearly that bloggers do have first amendment rights to publish what they want. However, bloggers need to realize that they alone are responsible for the consequences of speaking their minds. The best rule for teaching students how to blog without reprisal is this: Don't publish secrets, but if you feel you must, use a pseudonym to protect yourself and your location.

Unless bloggers are well-known or public figures, most adopt a pseudonym or pen name. Using a pseudonym is a long-established practice in writing, as it protects the writer's identity. Authors use pen names whenever they feel their work is too risqué, upsetting to some readers, or too revealing of their real life and could expose innocent individuals.

A pen name provides a personality or a character that a blogger can use to write freely about a topic. It also encourages bloggers to write with an honest voice, or at least with a more vigorous voice and keener observations, than if they wrote under their real name. Sometimes, depending on the subject matter and content, a secret identity can protect bloggers from public or familial outrage.

For student writers, a pen name provides privacy from online predators or others who might cause harm. I encourage my students to use pseudonyms rather than their real names and locations because personal information should never be freely divulged on public space, given the issues surrounding identity theft and bullying or stalking. Savvy educators and parents should talk to student writers about these issues and encourage them to use an online name that differs from their given name.

Skilled bloggers understand the need to protect intellectual property, and they take great care in making sure borrowed information is cited. On a blog, there are many ways to cite a source. You can link directly to the source, creating a "permalink" (permanent link that archives the

source material long after the blog's front page changes). Or you can take a snippet of the original text, highlight it on your blog, and then link to the source in case readers want more information. Lastly, you can simply provide citation material, either in an informal or formal manner, so viewers can search on their own for additional facts or data.

The last point about tone that student bloggers have to realize is that with some blogging software, once a post is sent it can't be deleted. This is why you should never blog when feeling angry, retaliatory, or vengeful. Many of the major blogging software packages now offer a way to remove a post, but all too often once something goes into the blogverse the damage has been done. If possible, educators or parents should have the offending blogger delete or edit the post as quickly as possible and then explain why the redaction occurred.

However, some people never learn their lesson, whether in life or in the blogosphere. The best action to take if a young blogger continually violates the terms and conditions educators or parents set is to remove the offending blog from access by Google. This step is really a last resort, as it prevents people's right to access the blog. For those who are unfamiliar with this process, simply go to [www.google.com/remove.html](http://www.google.com/remove.html) and then select the appropriate action. Educators or parents do not have to create a scene, run to the media with a press release, or initiate an in- or out-of-school suspension. All adults have to do is put the student in a blog "time out" of sorts. This sends a message that the misbehaving blogger's actions will not be tolerated without broadcasting the problem to the community.

Better ways to control abusive blogging exist than creating a huge to-do. Rather than posting to a blog in anger, student writers should be encouraged to find more constructive ways to handle their emotions before publishing hurtful, libelous, or slanderous comments. Remember, as society is learning these days about mean girls or violent boys, adults must take charge of the situation and bring about change, lest these abusive youngsters become abusive adults. A number of school-based social problems that spill over into blogs or the Internet can frequently be handled proactively if school leaders and parents talk to youngsters about appropriate tone and content for blogs before they begin their blogging experience. If this fails, then consequences should be meted out—like Google removal.

