

# FROM "BLAH" TO BLOG

Writing online for students and teachers

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## WHAT'S A BLOG? WHY DO IT?

There are millions of blogs on the Internet with billions of posts. People with things to say are sharing them every minute all around the world.

What's a blog? Well, where better to look for an answer than Wikipedia? (Does that sound like something your students would say?) Here's the answer:

"A blog (a contraction of the words *web log*) is a discussion or informational site published on the World Wide Web and consisting of discrete entries ("posts") typically displayed in reverse

chronological order (the most recent post appears first)."

Think of a journal or a diary. Or your own newspaper or magazine. Or a bulletin board where you can post things that people can read.

All wrapped into one.

So why should your OR your students blog?

Great question! Glad you asked. Blogging can provide tons of value to teachers and students (or

really anyone) by:

- providing a place for logging important ideas and/or information,

- giving an opportunity to reflect about things that have happened or information that's been gathered,
- engaging in discussion with others about the information, ideas, events and

opinions shared,

- publishing content for free (or very inexpensively) and

Blogging, like many things, can be as simple or as complex as you want it to be.

quickly without the need for a publisher, an editor, a publicist, a marketer, etc., and

- possessing the value to change the world by sharing new ideas — groundbreaking or simple — that fulfill a need of others.

But isn't it hard?

Blogging, like many things, can be as simple or complex as you want it to be. At its simplest, you (or your students) sign up for a free blog and start creating content (articles called "posts") immediately.

Let's get started!

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## SPEAKER

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# HOW DO STUDENTS BLOG?

**1** **They create a blog.** Or their teacher creates it for them. From the beginning, some basic decisions need to be made:

• Will it be one class blog that all students contribute to or an individual blog for each student? (Less frequent posts or highlighting individual student work lend themselves to one class blog. Common student work and a sense of identity lend themselves to individual blogs.)

• What's the purpose of the blog? To share commentary on classroom issues? For the student to use as he/she pleases? For posting writing activities done in class? There are no boundaries, and this is by no means an exhaustive list.

• Who is the audience? Will students be writing for each other? Will they publish to other students in the area? In the United States? Around the world? Will they write for the general public? The broader the audience, the

more impact their work can have. But it can also get lost in the chaos of the Internet if the audience isn't focused enough.

**2** **They write — in a readable way.** In today's age, distractions

abound. Everyone and everything seem to be vying for our attention. Writing flowing, beautiful prose has its place (maybe in your classroom and your students' blogs!). But when we're trying to, as writer Michael Hyatt says, "get noticed in a noisy world," it pays to write to the point, and do so in an authoritative and professional way. In blog writing, that means:

- Use simple sentences.
- Use short paragraphs.
- Break text up with lists and other visuals.
- Start in a way that catches the reader's attention.
- Include your own personal experiences and opinions.
- Cite the source of your facts.

• End with a question, asking the reader to write a comment or take action.

**3** **They collaborate.** Many students in this information

age are already adept at this. They "like." They comment. They share. They "retweet." On Facebook. Twitter. Tumblr. Instagram. The list goes on. If they find something good, they want to tell others about it.

The participatory nature of blogs is the one of their most effective aspects in the educational setting. Some students might be uncomfortable engaging in oral conversations in the middle of a class. But they might be jump at the chance to debate a hot topic in the comments of a classmate's blog.

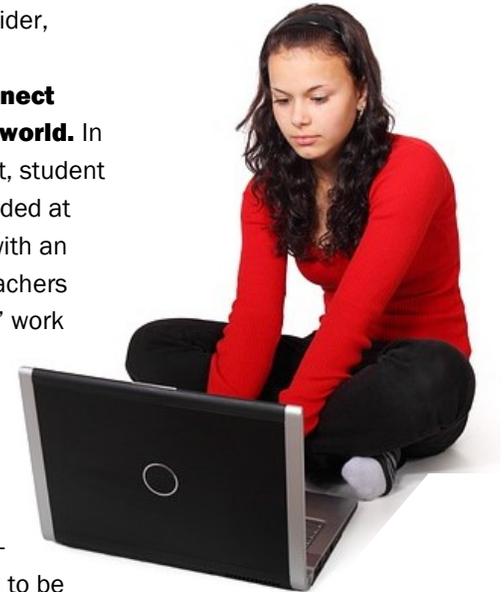
Comments — and comment discussions, which are called "threads" — promote high-level thinking. Just look at the tasks they can accomplish under the heading of "evaluation" in Bloom's Taxonomy: compare, recom-

mend, critique, consider, judge, assess, etc.

**4** **They connect with the world.** In

years past, student writing ended at the teacher's desk with an audience of one. Teachers graded the students' work and handed it back with a grade and some comments.

Today, the world is at our students' doorstep. Written assignments that used to be limited in reach can now potentially garner attention from all over the country and world — instantly. The best part about that attention is the wide variety of viewpoints and worldviews it can show students. Students and people in general from other cities and countries leave comments on student work. A simple class writing assignment can open doors to the worldviews and the everyday life of those from other cultures. Try getting that from a "grade and return" assignment.



# HOW TO PLAN FOR STUDENT BLOGS

Here are some things to consider as students write content online:

## 1. Write about class and more:

Connections to and opinions about class content are great, especially if students discuss via comments. But we're missing a great opportunity if we limit it to that. Kids don't automatically reflect on their lives and what's important to them. Their blog in your class may be their only opportunity.

## 2. Open-topic posts are good:

Richard Byrne of Free Tech for Teachers suggested that students reflect on what they've learned that week in a simple blog post. It could be open to all classes or just from your content area.

**3. Go to their world:** So what do they write about? Try to meet students in their world as much as possible. Making content touch their own lives is a connection that can last a lifetime. Pop culture, music, sports, etc. Lis-

ten to what they talk about in class. Example: How does one of their own relationships mirror the relationship that two characters from your class have?

**4. Let students pick:** Open the floor for writing prompt suggestions. You might be

surprised at the kinds of creative, relevant connections they make.

**5. Teamwork works:** Encourage students to connect with each other in

their posts to make them more personal, and not just in the comments they leave. Q&A interviews and polls work well.

**6. Do your homework:** Encourage (or require) students to link facts in their posts to real-world sources. Hyperlink web pages. Cite hard-copy texts. Use direct quotes when citing a classmate's opinion.

**7. Encourage readability:** Good blog writing crosses over from the "real world" to the classroom. Catchy introductions. A "what's it about"

paragraph early on. Bullet points and lists. Short paragraphs. Simple sentences. Conclusions with questions.

**8. Reward out-of-class blogging:** I believe in making student blogs a place where students want to go at home and on the go. I'm interested in trying incentives for after-hours activity (i.e. extra points/privileges, polls/games for interest, etc.) Real-time blog responses to events (i.e. school activities, news, etc.) can do this.

**9. It takes time:** I've found that rushing students to write and comment leads to shallow content. A little time can encourage a great digital conversation.

## 10. Emphasize clean copy:

Online writing doesn't mean text-messaging writing conventions, and some students might miss that point if you don't bring it up.

Solid spelling, grammar and idea development gives them credibility in the eyes of their readers.

**11. But don't nitpick:** Avoid the temptation to correct every spelling and grammar error. Real-life blog readers don't do that (not much at least!). Plus, it discourages their creativity and initiative. If a spelling/grammar pattern emerges, consider addressing

it privately.

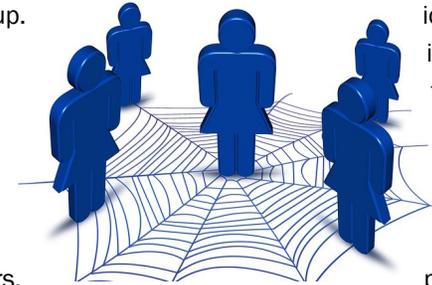
**12. Good comments are key:** Well-thought-out comments are online conversation jewels. Good ones add

ideas/information to the discussion, insert personal experiences, provide in-

sightful links/quotes, ask follow-up questions, etc.

**13. Choose a stance on comments:** I can see two schools of thought on comments: quantitative and qualitative. The quantitative stance has countable requirements (comments, words, etc.). It can assure

participation but promotes an "I have to" mentality. The qualitative stance values



# HOW TO PLAN FOR STUDENT BLOGS

quality of discussion over quantity but may result in less participation. A mix of both may be the best option.

## 14. Create respect:

The lack of face-to-face communication in online discussions makes it easy to forget that real people actually read what we write. Students can become brazen with harsh comments if they don't remember the peers they're addressing. Civility should rule.

## 15. High-five good work:

Find ways to promote quality blog posts and comments



outside of the student blog. Mention them or post them in class. Add them to the class webpage. Include them in school newsletters. The sky is the limit.

## 16. Decide on privacy:

Public student blogs can open children to the harshness and dangers of the real world, but they offer an authentic, global audience. Students thrive on outside-of-school comments. Link to student blog posts on Twitter with the #comments4kids hashtag to open them to a huge worldwide audience.

**17. Find a medium:** There are plenty of potential homes for your students' blogs. Richard Byrne lists several in this post (<http://www.freetech4teachers.com/2013/03/picking-best-platform-for-your.html>). They range from the basic (Kidblog, Edublogs, Blogger) to the complex (self-hosted

WordPress).

## 18. Break the economic barrier:

Students without home Internet access are at a disadvantage. Help them find Internet time in school (study hall, library time, computer lab time, before/after school time) or out of school (at a library, a friend's house, etc.). A phone call or e-mail to a parent could uncover the answer.

## 19. Cumulative products are good:

Find an end-of-the-year product students can create using their blog posts. They could create a book (print or PDF ebook), derive a Weebly website, compile a top-10 list of posts or comments.

## 20. Reflection is good, too:

When students look over their work for a year, they can see how they've grown as a writer, a learner and a person. They relearn important lessons. They combat the "I didn't learn anything in that class" mindset.



## WHERE DO I HOST MY STUDENT BLOGS?

There are plenty of sites that let students host blogs. Here are some of the more popular ones:

**1. Edublogs ([www.edublogs.org](http://www.edublogs.org))** -- This site allows students to create free blogs if

a teacher has a Educator Pro account (\$7.95/mo or \$39.95/yr). Students and teachers can create posts

and pages. Teachers can decide whether content is published before it goes live. Plus, it has mobile apps to support posts from several digital devices.

**2. Kidblog ([www.kidblog.org](http://www.kidblog.org))** -- Kidblog covers all the basic functions and makes everything free. That includes student and teacher accounts and even parent accounts so they can comment and keep up on student work. Teachers have control over everything, and mobile apps are available.

**3. Blogger ([www.blogger.com](http://www.blogger.com))** -- This Google-owned blog site is an option for some schools that offer students Google Apps for Education. Other schools may have it on their "blocked for blogs/forums" list. Blogger is simple and powerful, and it's used by many high-powered professional bloggers. When used with Google Apps for Education, teachers have control over student work.



# CREATING A TEACHER BLOG

Our classrooms can seem so far away from our students' homes. We get busy. Our students' parents get busy. Students get busy.

I've found in my teaching career that meaningful connections between families and the classroom reap huge dividends. As a teacher, I just don't make those connections as often as I'd like.

I think writing a teacher blog would go a long way to making those connections.

To be totally honest, I don't currently have a teacher blog. But, after reading them and reading about them, I think writing one may be a step in the right direction. My goal in this blog, among other things, is to be totally transparent and to share my experiences with you.

So here's why I think I should start a teacher blog (and why I think you should, too):

**1. To share information.** Deadlines. Assignment details. Projects. Parents like to know what's happening at

school. Especially because "what did you do at school today?" often ends in "I dunno" or "not much."

**2. To make connections with families.** You don't make new friends in a new environment without stepping out and introducing yourself. In the same way, you don't make engage families unless you make the effort to connect. Connections via teacher blogs probably aren't the meaningful ones – yet. But they likely will lead to the meaningful ones.

**3. To give classes greater exposure.** People should know about the great things your students are learning and doing. They want to know. Toot your own horn a little.

**4. To keep an online record of classroom happenings.** Lesson plans and artifacts are the evidence teachers use to show what they do. A teacher blog can serve the same purpose but from a different angle. Plus, any blog comments from parents or

students can serve as extra positive evidence.

**5. To reflect on what works.** We teachers often are stuck thinking about the next lesson, the next unit, the next project. It's hard to stop and think about successes and failures in our teaching. Blogs give you the medium to

do that.

**6. To have fun!** Think of the fun classroom stories, the pictures, the lessons in life you could share. A blog gives you a stage for them.

There are tons of blogging platforms to help you get your start. But, after some Internet searching, I've found

that Edublogs ([www.edublogs.org](http://www.edublogs.org)) is a great free place that isn't blocked by most school Internet security systems. They're flexible and more than a million blogs are run through them. Edublogs gets my endorsement (even though I don't earn a dime for it!).

## PUBLIC VS. PRIVATE

Teachers must decide how public they want to make student blogs. Some prefer student blogs that the world can see. That opens students up to a world of readers and potentially a world of comments to create discussion.

It also opens them up to some risks, including being identified by predators. There are steps to take to mitigate those risks, though, like removing personally identifying information from the blogs (name, hometown, etc.) and student faces.

Teachers have varying views on whether student blogs should be public or private. Sue Waters of edublogs.org posed that question to Twitter followers in this discussion (<http://storify.com/suewaters/edublogs-commonly-asked-question-should-class-and>) and got plenty of feedback. The

majority of responding teachers praised public student blogs. They liked when teachers moderate student posts and public comments. They allow students to write to a wide, authentic audience. They also liked that parents could connect to their children's work through blog reading and commenting.

To help students speak to as wide an audience as possible, a resource called Comments4Kids was created to connect real-world audiences with student blogs. Teachers can add their students' blogs to a list at [comments4kids.blogspot.com](http://comments4kids.blogspot.com) or post links via Twitter with the hashtag [#comments4kids](https://twitter.com/hashtag/comments4kids). As other people find student blogs and read them, they can leave comments to encourage, praise, ask follow-up questions or add extra information.