

Using Blogs in the Classroom

Overview

Blogging can improve students' writing skills and build their confidence as writers. By blogging, students can take ownership of their writing, become better observers of others' writing, and develop a more immediate and powerful understanding of audience. Blogs encourage experimenting and risk-taking, seriousness and play, and they foster an increased awareness of private and public writing. Blogging blends both the freeing aspect of short pieces that can be written in a relatively low-stakes environment with the sense of claiming one's own voice and learning how to develop analysis and articulate ideas to a larger public. Guided by clear expectations of what is required in a class blog, students can see their writing develop over the course of the term. This handout describes strategies for using blogs as a writing tool in the classroom.

Table of Contents

[General Considerations](#)

[Empowering Students](#)

[Possible Uses For Instructors](#)

[Possible Uses For Students](#)

[In Practice: Choosing A Platform](#)

[A Word About WordPress](#)

[Private, Classroom-Only, or Public](#)

[Class Blogs and Individual Student Blogs](#)

[Tech Support](#)

[Resources](#)

General Considerations

Although at first it may seem somewhat daunting when considering the perceived technical skills involved, using blogs in the classroom can be very rewarding. The learning curve is not as steep as you may imagine, and many [resources for instructors](#) exist on campus. Also, some students when learning to navigate the platform initially may resist blogging. But most students change their minds as they begin to blog.

Empowering Students

Students are used to writing and communicating in the digital landscape whether it be Twitter, FaceBook, Tumblr, or email. While reading their fellow students' blogs and comments, and responding online with their own comments, students recognize the value of clarity and what makes for strong and engaging posts. Students have the opportunity to practice writing and analytical skills in their own blogs that will transfer into essays and other writing endeavors. Students are able to see their own writing as something "real" with a practical application. Creating a blog can be a bridge for students between the familiar digital world and what is being asked of them in academic essays, projects and other university-based assignments. Blogging can be seen as a gateway experience for students who will likely be using digital technologies and media in their future endeavors regardless of their discipline.

Possible Uses for Instructors

You may use blogging for:

- communicating announcements and assignments in a format that students may perceive to be more "friendly" than CTools
- sharing instructor-generated exercises or prompts
- community building
- creating a public place where student work can be "published"

Possible Uses for Students

Students may use blogging for:

- responding to readings
- maintaining a writer's notebook or journal
- posting personal, reflective, exploratory, or open entries (campus observations, "where I'm from," pictures from home, or favorite book or piece of writing)
- sharing student-generated research or links to class-related articles
- exploring visual rhetoric
- practicing writing
 - developing voice
 - working on titles, conciseness
 - considering tone
 - brainstorming, drafting, facilitating peer review
- creating a showcase for final projects
- crafting an on-line image or presence

In Practice

Choosing A Platform

Several user-friendly blogging platforms are commonly used in classrooms. No one platform is better suited to a specific discipline. Mostly the choice depends on your comfort level and personal preference when trying out each platform. For example, [Tumblr](#) works well for sharing images, quotes or brief chunks of text, or consolidating and linking to other sites. Google's [Blogger](#) is one of the flagship blogging platforms; it is intuitive and easy to start up, and allows for flexibility with color palettes and multiple fonts. Blogger and WordPress are both supported at the University by [Instructional Support Services \(ISS\)](#), the [Language Resource Center \(LRC\)](#) and MLibrary's [Knowledge Navigation Center \(KNC\)](#).

A Word About WordPress

[WordPress](#) is an all-purpose platform with multiple free design templates (“themes”) and high capacity for text, images, and video. Faculty and students appreciate the extensive how-to support features and video tutorials available on the WordPress site. If you are considering what platform to use in your classroom, Lauren Atkins of the [ISS Learning Technologies & Consulting Group \(ISS-LTC\)](#) offers this advice: “WordPress is the most commonly used content management system (CMS) in the world, so there's a fairly good chance that students will use it again later in their lives, for blogging or just hosting a website of any sort. Both Blogger and WordPress allow for text, images and video; for instructors, a better distinction might be that WordPress allows for sorting posts by author, which Blogger doesn't (currently).”

Both the ISS-LTC and the KNC are able to provide support to faculty as you prepare to teach blogging and other new media; both also are available to work with students in an instructor's classroom, workshop or computer lab settings. For more information, please see [“Tech Support.”](#)

For additional support, access the following documents: [Supplement 1: “Using WordPress”](#) (Lauren Atkins, Instructional Technology Consultant) and [Supplement 2: “Blogging Basics”](#) (Charlotte Boulay, creator of Sweetland's “Rhetoric of Blogging” course).

Private, Classroom-Only, or Public

You may find it useful to talk with a consultant at ISS-Learning Technologies & Consulting Group (ISS-LTC) about what might best fit your classroom needs when deciding about whether to make classroom blogs private, classroom-only or public (and to what extent public—for example, searchable by search engines or not). Please see [Tech Support](#) for more information.

A class blog or individual student blogs could be completely private and classroom-based, with the only users and viewers being you as the instructor and your enrolled students. A class blog also may be completely public and accessible to anyone online. The benefit of making a site public is that it creates a broader sense of audience and of participating not only in the university community but perhaps a global community as well. However, if the site is public, be aware of copyright issues when posting articles or class readings; CTools is a more secure location for sharing copyrighted material.

Class Blog and Individual Student Blogs

There are many ways to use blogs in the classroom. Some instructors choose to create a class blog that all enrolled students can contribute to by adding comments or by making individual posts. Here is a screenshot of a **class blog** from WRITING 200 – winter 2013.

The screenshot shows a web browser window with the address bar displaying 'Writing About Perform...'. The page title is 'Writing About Performance in the New Public Sphere'. The navigation menu includes 'WELCOME', 'ANNOUNCEMENTS', 'SYLLABUS', 'COURSE PROJECTS', 'ASSIGNED POSTS', 'VOLUNTARY POSTS', and 'QUICKFIRE'. A featured image shows a pair of scissors with the hashtag '#MakeItWork' in red text. Below the image, there is a 'Contributors' list with names like Alec, Dylan, Betsy, Breanna, Catherine LeBar, Danielle Masur, and Shelley. A 'Welcome' section follows, with a paragraph of text starting with 'Do you ever read blogged recaps commenting on the latest episode of your favorite guilty pleasure...'

A class blog can:

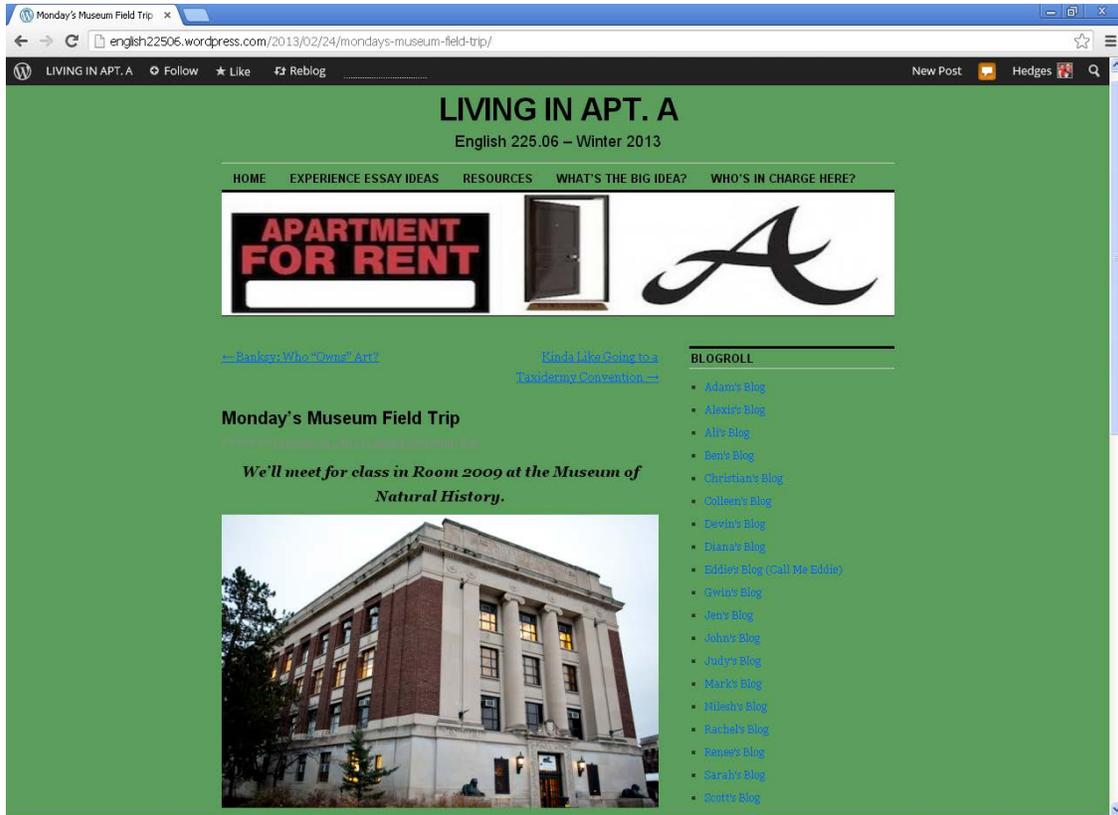
- unite all class announcements, assignments, and exercises in one space or hub with the instructor as the operator of the site
- provide a workspace for students to share thoughts, drafts, or projects in a relatively low-stakes environment
- provide a venue for quieter students to “speak” and contribute ideas

Below is an example of a **student contributor “post”** from WRITING 200 responding to the instructor’s prompt.

The screenshot shows a student blog post. The title is 'A little slow on the uptake'. The author is Dylan, dated September 11, 2012, at 3:00 AM. The post content begins with 'So...I've never had a class where I've needed to post a blog response for every reading assignment. So I sincerely apologize to any of my classmates that felt jilted by my lack of response in preparation for today's class. I'm very sorry. In response to the articles, I didn't have much knowledge of what the "public sphere" even was before reading, especially relative to the media. The "public sphere" to me sounded somewhat like an even more amorphous definition of society. However, upon reading both articles, I was able to determine both what the public sphere is and how it differs from the media...sort of. The introduction to McKee's article didn't exactly do a great job of distinguishing between the two (especially when he wrote "the public sphere - or 'the media'" (1). But upon reflection, I've determined that the media serves as a more concrete manifestation of the idea of the public sphere. For example, media could consist of channels that relay information to the public, where the public sphere would consist of the audience for said media. The media does the directing, the public sphere does the reception and interpretation. There's more interaction in the public sphere, while the media simply translate and present. At least from the general ideas I took from McKee's article.'

One benefit of my late posting is that I get to draw on the discussion we had during class today in order to formulate my response. That being said, my mind was blown today during class when we were discussing everything that could be performance. Whenever I think of performance, I think of theater. It's

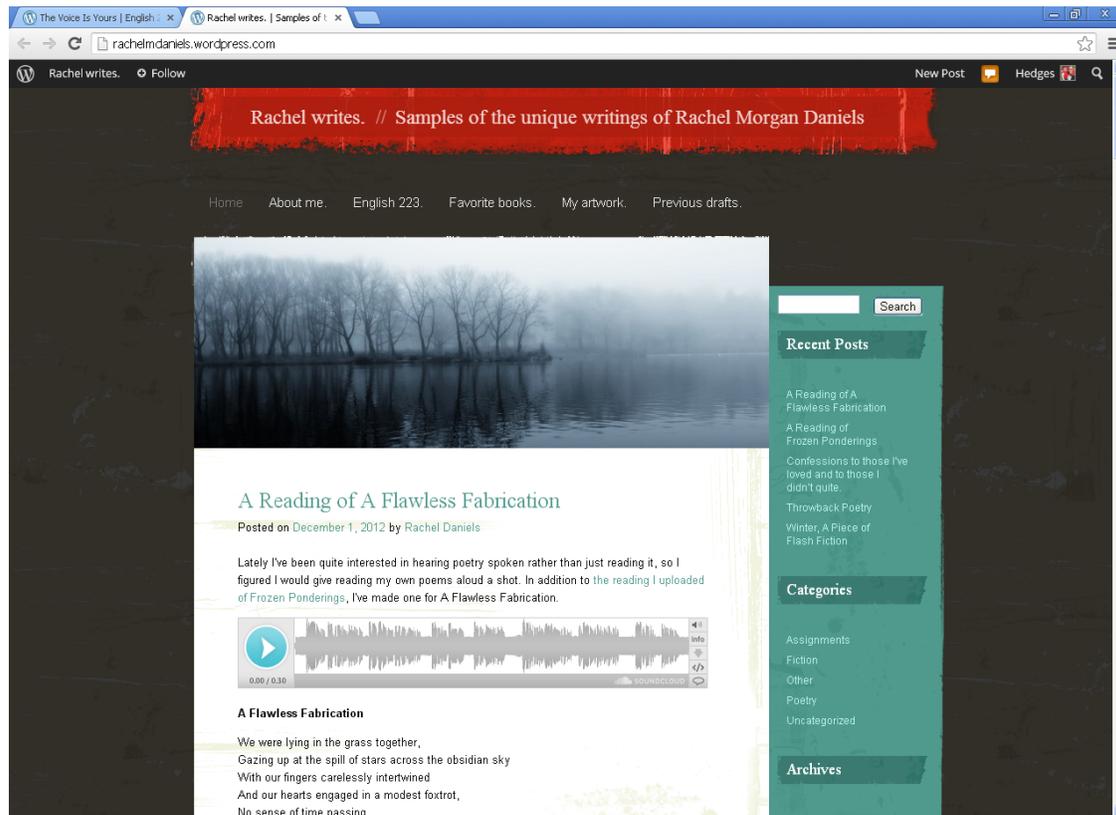
Some instructors create a class blog and ask that each student also create an individual blog. Here is an example of a *class blog with individual student blogs* from English 225 – winter 2013.



An instructor's class blog can:

- serve as a focal point for writing exercises, models and prompts
- communicate useful classroom information, announcements, online links and readings
- include links to all the individual student blogs in a comprehensive list so that students can easily find each other's sites for reading, commenting or peer-reviewing

Here is an example of a *student blog* from English 223:



A student blog can:

- provide a workspace for assignments, brainstorming, process-oriented activities and questions of design and visual rhetoric
- help students develop a sense of audience, voice and ownership
- serve as an archive of the writing process by storing drafts and works in progress
- display and publish final polished projects and new media projects

For further reading on the uses of blogging and on how individual writers can contribute to the blogosphere in original ways, consult [Supplement 3: Andrew Sullivan's *Why I Blog*](#) and [Supplement 4: Rebecca Blood's chapter "Finding Your Voice."](#)

Setting Up Individual Student Blogs

It may be helpful for you to create a course blog before class begins; you then can use your site as a model as well as for other pedagogical purposes. Here are three possible options for set up:

- before class meets, send material ([“Using WordPress” guide](#)) to the class and ask that students set up their accounts and sites before the first class session [For more information, consult [Supplement 5: Getting Students Ready to Blog.](#)]
- during class time, teach the students how to set up the site
- during class time or outside of class time, invite ISS-LTC or KNC to hold a workshop for creating a blog

Tech Support

You will find a broad range of support exists for faculty choosing to include blogs in their courses. Some important university resources are explained below.

[ISS-Learning Technologies & Consulting Group](#) (ISS-LTC)

- works with faculty individually in planning, learning, implementing or evaluating a blogging platform to prepare for integrating blogging into a class
- offers pedagogical support for course blogging projects regardless of the platform used
- holds faculty workshops with KNC
- visits classes for introduction to WordPress workshops
- hosts open WordPress labs for students with individual questions

[Knowledge Navigation Center](#) (KNC) and [Faculty Exploratory](#)

- works with faculty individually for specific classroom needs
- consults on Photoshop, GarageBand, iMovie, InDesign, and more
- hosts workshops for faculty or student classes at the KNC or Mac Lab in Shapiro (UGLi)
- manages [TechDeck](#) in Shapiro (UGLi) providing tech support for students

Notes on Blogging in the Classroom

In faculty meetings, many instructors have commented on how amazed they are about the quality of the writing and analytical thinking when students have the opportunity to use blogging as a medium. Instructors were able to see how strengths could be identified in the informal blog posts or comments and then were able to help students transfer these strengths to other academic writing. Here are several instructor comments that address the benefits of using blogs and offer thoughts about how their classroom blogging could be improved in the future.

“It’s often very useful (not to mention a real pleasure) to read student writing in a different, more personal voice. It’s easy to see how some students are stymied by their perceived expectation of a “formal,” “academic” tone, when in fact they have a well-developed and engaging voice in the blog.”

“One thing I learned about blogs: reading discussion blogs or class blogs are better with prompts or questions provided by me. Asking them to just write something in response to readings causes them too much and they write very little.”

“One thing I really loved about blogs was the opportunity to have students blog about their writing process while it was going on. I had a separate blog just for blogging about process and gave them a few prompts to respond to. This really created community between students as they shared their struggles in progress. I found it was important to have a set number of blog posts required (4) and clear deadlines for completing them.”

“I loved that students could include multimedia in their process and reading response posts. I liked when they'd post a cartoon or an image of their process along with their writing. I didn't require it, but most students took the opportunity to always post images or songs or other media.”

Resources:

Andrew Sullivan, “Why I Blog,” *The Atlantic*, November 1, 2008

<http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2008/11/why-i-blog/307060/>

Rebecca Blood, “Chapter Two: Finding Your Voice,” *The Weblog Handbook: Practical Advice on Creating and Maintaining Your Blog*, 2002

Rebecca Blood, “Weblog Ethics”, *The Weblog Handbook: Practical Advice on Creating and Maintaining Your Blog*. Cambridge: Perseus Publishing, 2002. 114-121

http://www.rebeccablood.net/handbook/excerpts/weblog_ethics.html

Rebecca Blood, “Weblogs: A History and Perspective,” September 7, 2000

http://www.rebeccablood.net/essays/weblog_history.html

Rebecca Blood, “Rebecca’s Pocket: Ten Tips for A Better Weblog,”

http://www.rebeccablood.net/essays/ten_tips.html

Charles Lowe, Purdue University, and Terra Williams, Arizona State University, “Moving to the Public: Weblogs in the Writing Classroom,” *Into The Blogosphere*

http://blog.lib.umn.edu/blogosphere/moving_to_the_public_pf.html

Rebecca Mead, “You’ve Got Blog,” *The New Yorker*, Vol 76, Issue 34, p 102, November 13, 2000.

Blogging 101 – An introduction to reading and writing a weblog: Blogs – anatomy, Blogs – why read, why write. <http://unc.edu/~zuiker/blogging101/readwrite.html>

Gunther Kress, *Gains and losses: New forms of texts, knowledge and learning*, Computers and Composition 22 (2005) 5-22

Meredith Badger, Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, *Visual Blogs*

Into the Blogosphere, http://blog.lib.umn.edu/blogosphere/visual_blogs_pf.html

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