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Technical Blogging

Turn Your Expertise into a Remarkable Online Presence

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Technical Blogging

Turn Your Expertise
into a Remarkable
Online Presence



Antonio Cangiano

Edited by Michael Swaine



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The team that produced this book includes:

Michael Swaine (editor)
Potomac Indexing, LLC (indexer)
Molly McBeath (copyeditor)
David J Kelly (typesetter)
Janet Furlow (producer)
Juliet Benda (rights)
Ellie Callahan (support)

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If you do a good job with the headline, people will click and check out the actual content of your article. When they do so, what they expect to read is useful, interesting, unique content. Above all else though, your regular readers expect to find your familiar voice.

Your style and approach to writing, your selection of topics, your personality, and your way of interacting with your audience is what makes your blog truly unique. These elements work together to create your voice and are what you need to hone and develop as you start blogging.

You could be caring, friendly, witty, funny, clever, enlightening, bold, controversial, pretentious, off-putting, vulgar, or a downright bully. It's up to you and your character, but in my experience it pays to be humble and admit that you don't know everything while at the same time being bold with what you truly believe without the fear of coming across as controversial.

Tip 13

Don't ever belittle or mock others in your posts.

Nothing you do or write will ever please everyone, so don't try to impress or please the whole world. Write what you really think and on topics you're genuinely passionate about. Controversy works extremely well not when it's done purely for the sake of stirring the pot, but when it stems from real conviction. Convey passion in your writing and you're bound to garner a following.

Adjust your tone and content to match the blogging goals you defined and the audience you hope to attract. If you have a business blog or are a freelancer, you don't want to come across as pretentious; try being approachable instead.

Whatever voice you develop, become a bit of a storyteller. People love stories that go with useful information. So rather than putting just the bare facts out there, try to give your writing a more human element by expressing why you were facing a certain problem, how you felt, what you learned in the process, what could have been done differently, what you are still unsure about, and similar points. Provide some background and context for what you're writing about. Derek Sivers attracted a huge following to his blog at sivers.org thanks to this technique. Read a few of his posts to see how powerful storytelling can be.

5.6 Where to Find Ideas for Your Posts

Before writing a post, you should ask yourself if your idea for an article satisfies any of the following criteria.

- Do I care about this topic?
- Will readers find it useful?
- Does it tell a compelling story?
- Is the post in line with the goals of my blog?
- Does it add any value to my field?
- Does it start a conversation with the community that's worth having?
- Is it newsworthy in the context of my niche?

If the answer is no to most of these points, you shouldn't write that post. Instead, search for a topic that qualifies with a resounding *yes* to one or more of the rhetorical questions above.

Finding ideas for your posts is not too difficult when you expose your brain to other people's writing in your own field and in other niches. I highly recommend you use a feed reader such as Google Reader to subscribe to blogs that you find useful, inspiring, and entertaining. Spending as little as thirty minutes a day reading other blogs will fill your mind with new ideas.

Personally I use an iPad for my casual blog reading at night. It's given me a workflow that's very useful to me because it clearly separates work and play, leaving me feeling more focused when producing content or doing other work on my main laptop. Now, you don't need an iPad just for this, of course, but if you own a similar device, you may consider taking the same approach.

I also like to keep an `idea.txt` file in a Dropbox folder that is synchronized in the cloud. This file contains a list of ideas for my posts, which I add to whenever something new comes to mind. You can use Google Docs for this purpose if you want to have your list available anywhere there's an Internet connection and you don't use Dropbox. Either way, this file usually contains at least ten prospective headlines for each of my currently maintained blogs.

You can use tools such as Keyword Tool and Insights for Search (or Market Samurai) to find ideas for highly sought-after content and keywords (it's useful for coming up with good headlines, too). With this system in place, the real bottleneck is not finding ideas but rather finding the time to sit down and actually write out the content that's in your head.

To help you look for ideas as you get inspired by other bloggers and compile your idea file, here are some types of posts to consider.

Ask Your Readers What They Want

The easiest way to figure out what your readers really want is to ask them. Don't be shy in your posts, and feel free to ask your readers how you are doing and what they'd like to see next.

You can also run a survey once in a while to learn more about how regular readers see your blog and what they think can be improved upon. Don't take everything at face value; instead, consider the overall feedback you receive.

To run surveys for free, you can use Form on Google Docs. Alternatively, you can avail yourself of more sophisticated premium solutions such as SurveyGizmo, SurveyMonkey, or Wufoo.

- Write about what you've been working on lately (just be sure it's not confidential).
- Write hands-on guides or tutorials for subjects that you are an expert on. Spread these guides across multiple posts to create an engaging series.
- Tell a story about your past failures or successes.
- Quote and link to an interesting idea found elsewhere on the Web, but be sure to add your own commentary. Disagree and stir controversy if that's truly how you feel about the issue.
- Write an essay or even a rant about a subject you care about. It could be something that grinds your gears or simply a topic you believe more readers should know about.
- Interview popular people in your field (more on this in the next chapter).
- Review books, services, gadgets, or products that are relevant to your niche.
- Collect, organize, and present links to relevant resources all in a single post (e.g., "White Papers on the Scalability of Web Applications").
- Create cheatsheets (e.g., HTML5 Cheatsheet). If possible, include both an HTML version and a PDF version for printing.
- Collect interesting data about your industry and compile it into a useful infographic. If you are not a designer, you can usually commission it to designers who specialize in creating infographics that go viral online.

Check out Visual.ly for inspiration and to find good designers who specialize in infographics.²

- If you run a business, consider writing about your social media campaigns, A/B testing experiments, and sales and earnings figures. Traditionally this would be considered bad advice, but being open and frank in posts on such topics has allowed several companies to become the center of attention.

5.7 Case Study: Math-Blog.com's Headlines

Now that you have a solid understanding of the importance of well-worded headlines and at a least a general idea of the type of content that people value, let's take a peek at our first case study. When discussing domain name choices in [Chapter 2, A Rock-Solid Plan for Your Blog, on page ?](#), I mentioned my math-related authority blog, math-blog.com. I'm going to show you some statistics for both the most and least popular articles from that site.

My intent is to show you how I applied most of the principles discussed in this chapter and the results that you stand to achieve by following them.

Your mileage will certainly vary, and there are other factors that determine how well a piece does visitor-wise. Nevertheless, I'd like to offer this unique glimpse into the stats of a relatively popular niche blog.

The Web Pageviews column doesn't include feed readers, email subscribers, and other readers who didn't actually visit the post on my site. It also excludes search engine bots and other crawlers (rightfully so), because the stats are pulled directly from Google Analytics, which filters such hits out.

Let's start with the top ten performers. (Of course, older articles have an edge).

Rank	Post Title	Web Pageviews
1	13 Useful Math Cheat Sheets	269,908
2	3 Awesome Math Programs	246,522
3	A 10 Minute Tutorial for Solving Math Problems with Maxima	166,034
4	Ten Must Read Books About Mathematics	109,118
5	The Most Enlightening Calculus Books	99,231
6	Refresh Your High-School Math Skills	57,676

2. visual.ly

Rank	Post Title	Web Pageviews
7	The Nicest Math Book I Own	44,002
8	10 Remarkable Female Mathematicians	35,528
9	On the Importance of Mathematics	31,223
10	Forget Pi, Here Comes Tau	22,415

Now, let's look at the worst five performers, ordered by the least popular.

Worst Rank	Post Title	Web Pageviews
1	Help Us With Your Feedback by Taking Our Survey	178
2	Switching From FeedBurner Email to Aweber for My Newsletter	238
3	An Apology to My Feed Readers	306
4	Eberhardt Rechtin and the Barrier Course...	311
5	Protecting Valuable Intellectual Property in Octave	382

Can you see how what we've discussed relates directly to both the best and worst performers? Notice how the top articles were both attractive to social media users (the immediate traffic) and to search engine traffic, which keeps coming for several months or even years after the articles were published.

Now consider the five worst performers for a moment. The worst one has no appeal to either social media or search engine traffic. It also doesn't offer anything that's useful to the reader. In practice, a few thousand people actually read that article via feed and more than a hundred people bothered to provide me with excellent feedback. It's worth having, but it's the kind of post that has virtually no appeal to nonregular readers.

The second and third worst articles, in terms of circulation, are both service updates. Again, nobody outside of affected regular readers really cared about them. They were necessary announcements, but no value is really being offered to the majority of visitors stopping by the site.

The fourth and fifth were good articles with plenty of value. In the case of the fourth-worst performer however, very few people really know who Eberhardt Rechtin is. The headline comes across as obscure and catchy only to the narrowest of audiences.

Objectively, the fifth should have performed better. Certainly, Octave (an open source alternative to Matlab) is still pretty much a niche and the article is relatively new, but a post on protecting intellectual property should have fared better. I would have expected at least a couple thousand new visitors above

and beyond the few thousand regular subscribers who read it (again, such additional feed/email viewers are not reflected in the numbers shown in the table).

This brings us to another important point. There is a certain unpredictability to blogging, no matter how careful you are with your headlines, content, and promotion. Depending on a multitude of variables that are not under your control, articles that you think will be a home run end up flopping entirely. Conversely, posts you put together in ten minutes are sometimes received with great enthusiasm by tens of thousands of readers.

Ask many famous musicians and they'll tell you how their most popular hits were almost cut because they didn't meet the artist's own standards. Yet audiences absolutely loved them. Don't censor your creative output. Let the public be the judge of your writing.

Where Traffic Is Coming From

To complete this case study, I want to share with you where over a million visitors came from.

- 48.55% was *referral traffic*. Almost half of my visitors came from other sites that link to mine.
- 36.29% was *search traffic*. More than a third of these visitors came from search engines (primarily Google).
- 14.04% was *direct traffic*. These are people who entered the URL of my domain or of one of my articles directly into the address bar of their browsers. Typically these are regular readers who visit the site from time to time.
- 1.12% was *campaign traffic*. In my case, this number mostly represents the newsletter subscribers who clicked on my messages and ended up on the blog. This number can generally include paid ad campaigns as well, if you run any.

The referral traffic came from the following sites.

Rank	Referral Site	Visits
1	StumbleUpon.com	197,893
2	Reddit.com	71,168
3	Digg.com	65,611
4	Maxima.SourceForge.net	44,728

Rank	Referral Site	Visits
5	News.YCombinator.com	38,004
6	Delicious.com	17,030
7	En.Wikipedia.org	7,459
8	JustMathTutoring.com	5,746
9	Popurls.com	5,163
10	Facebook.com	3,323

As you can see, most of these are social media sites (in part because that's where I tend to promote my articles). Note also how, as I mentioned in the previous chapter, Facebook is far from the top referral, and Twitter doesn't even appear in the top ten. (Please note that Digg performed very well years ago, but now it's pretty much dead.)

5.8 Get Readers to Explore Your Content

In the previous chapter I briefly addressed the issue of getting your visitors to explore more of your content. In particular, we covered how certain sidebar widgets can encourage your readers to visit additional popular or recent posts on your site.

You can turbocharge your efforts to guide your readers to more of your content by taking the following five steps.

1. Install a plugin such as Yet Another Related Posts Plugin. It will allow you to automatically display a few related posts at the bottom of each new post. In my experience, the CTR (click-through rate) of related posts is high when people liked the one they just read.
2. Create a sticky Getting Started page that guides newcomers through your blog. Organize a collection of introductory posts you've already written as well as information about how to subscribe, join the newsletter, participate in the comments, share your content, and other similar topics. Make this page a useful guide to getting started with your blog, then promote it within your own blog as much as you can.
3. Do the same with a "Best of" page. Unlike the Getting Started page, this should just link to your best posts, perhaps organized by category or some other logical criteria. This too should be promoted within your blog as much as you can (definitely link to it from your home and About pages, for example).

Blogging Clients

Many advanced bloggers tend to prefer desktop blogging clients over the default web interface that's available for WordPress, Blogger, or equivalent blogging engines.

Hacker types may enjoy blogging directly from TextMate, Vim, or Emacs, given that these text editors can be configured to post directly to your blog either through a blog generator, such as Jekyll/Octopress, or via the remote API that's available from WordPress, Blogger, and others.

These three programs excel at editing text, but there are more user-friendly solutions out there that were designed specifically for bloggers who want some help with their workflow to maintain multiple blogs, create drafts, take notes, and so on.

For Mac, I recommend MarsEdit. For Windows, it's hard to beat Windows Live Writer by Microsoft.

Mobile devices and tablets have blogging clients too, particularly for WordPress. Explore some of these options before committing to one client.

4. Create a Table of Contents page. WordPress already has archives, but these are not as nice as having a list of posts that have been organized by month all included on the same page. For my blogs, I use the WordPress plugin called Clean Archives Reloaded, which allows me to achieve the look shown in [Figure 16, A table of contents, on page ?](#). Blogger doesn't offer this capability, so you may have to settle for its Blog Archive gadget in the sidebar or come up with some clever piece of code to showcase such a list within a page.
5. Assign tags to your posts. Through them, users will be able to quickly access similar posts. This is also beneficial from an SEO standpoint, as it increases your blog's level of interlinking.