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Weblogging 101, or Hey, Me Too: A Tutorial for Writers

Part 1 of 2

by Mark Anderson

Have you ever thought of starting a weblog? If so, you're not alone. More than a million people have gone online with their own weblog, or "blog," since the beginning of the phenomenon in 1999, and uncounted numbers are being added every week. In fact, weblogs seem to be the one true growth industry on the internet these days, picking up where online retailers, corporate sites, Internet portals, and bad movie review sites left off as the next wave of compelling destinations on the World Wide Web.

Much of this explosive growth can be attributed to the relative ease in which one can start a blog. Almost anyone who can read a set of instructions and has a computer can have one, and for those a bit more technically inclined, the available software is becoming increasingly more powerful and sophisticated, letting users unleash their creativity in ways once only available to hardcore computer programmers. Throw in the fact that many of the tools needed to blog are free, finding a place to put your blog has never been easier, and there's a whole Web filled with helpful souls ready and willing to share their experience, and it's easy to see why blogs have become so popular.

For writers, blogs can hold a special appeal. With a blog, anyone can publish their work, in any format they choose, while a built-in audience awaits on the other side of a computer screen. While finding that audience isn't always easy, especially with the sheer numbers of fellow bloggers clogging up the pipe, thankfully there are a few tricks that can help tip the odds in your favor. And blogs can help with the mechanics of writing, too, whether in setting and sticking to a writing schedule, experimenting with a new style, or simply finding or refining your voice. And the value of getting instant feedback can hardly be discounted. In short, blogs almost seem

tailor-made for writers.

But what, exactly, is a blog? According to Rebecca Blood, early blogger and noted weblog historian, blogs are a personal web site that serves as a kind of "short-form journal, often updated several times a day, that acts as a record of the blogger's thoughts: something noticed on the way to work, notes about the weekend, a quick reflection on some subject or another." All of the blogging software out there lets you keep an archive of all of your posts with little or no work, turning your words into a kind of historical records of what you wanted to say, while the home page of a blog keeps the most recent posts up and easily available to your readers (these, and most other features of a blog, are usually customizable by the user). Many blogs are "link-heavy," filled with hyperlinks to other webloggers, news sites, or issue-related chat boards. While most blogs are, indeed, of the personal, this-is-what-I'm-doing-at-the-moment variety, many others focus on computers, the arts, or politics (in fact, much of the current debate about the potential war in Iraq is being carried out in weblogs).

One of the newest trends in weblogs are "photoblogs," sites made up primarily of pictures instead of text, and many of these are absolutely fascinating. Weblogs can range from the downright amateurish to the dazzlingly professional, and while many consist of entries no longer than a couple of sentences each, others have become respected voices or broken new ground in their fields through dedication and offering compelling content to their readers.

Let's take a look at what it takes to get a weblog up and running, shall we? Before you get into the nitty-gritty of setting up the blog, you must first ask yourself a number of questions: do you want your own domain name, where are you going to host your blog, and how confident are you about your computer skills? Luckily, that last question doesn't have to be answered right away, as you can start your blog with some entry-level software and work your way up the ladder as you become more familiar with what weblogs can do and how they do it.

A "domain name" is the same thing as an internet address (such as <http://www.writeronline.us/>), and can be important in developing a unique presence on the web. As an option, some blogging software offers the user the opportunity to "host" their site on the software providers' computers for free if the user also accepts advertising on his or her site (an attractive benefit for those just starting out). However, this choice requires the user accept a web address that contains the software provider's name in the web address (for example, Blogger, a popular blogging software, makes every user who