

**Notes About Blogging:
Reflections, Random Thoughts, Diving Deeper**

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“This thing is about hearts and minds, not eyeballs.” – Jeffrey Zeldman



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My Story: Getting Hooked on Blogging

I have always been a writer, personally and professionally. One of my first professional positions after college was as a technical and marketing writer for a major corporation in the technology sector. Blogs weren't on the scene then. I've written and had published peer-reviewed articles, other print pieces (magazines, newspapers), poetry, and even a book. Blogs are my favorite writing format *and* tool, possibly because hitting the "publish" key provides instant gratification for this writer. Once you get the hang of it, they can be produced pretty quickly. They can also travel far via social media. Blogging has made it easier for me to write...and as a result, I write more.

I wrote my first blog post in January 2008, late one evening, in a hotel lobby in St. Louis. I was a UCCE 4-H Youth Development and Master Gardener Advisor in Ventura County at the time. I had received a fellowship from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation (WKKF) that focused on digital advocacy, particularly around food security. My focus was Victory Gardens, i.e., using historical models from WW1 and WWII as a model for now, with a primary focus on using gardens in communities to increase food security and improve health and community functioning.

At our orientation, one of our first assignments was to consider how we could develop an online presence to promote our ideas and our work. Because I'm an avid writer, my WKKF mentor, Dr. Sue Roberts, suggested that I create a blog to share ideas about how history could influence contemporary food policy. That's how my first UC ANR blog was born.

I was fortunate that UC ANR had a technology developed in-house that enables its academics to create simple websites and blogs. That's what I did, branding myself and my work as the "*VictoryGrower*." Since then, I've produced hundreds of blog posts which have appeared on numerous websites and in a range of online and print publications.

Lots of good things fell out of that original blog post. I received publishing opportunities on online platforms, including the *Huffington Post*, *KCET*, *Civil Eats* (where I was one of the original contributor). A senior employee of the U.S. State Department saw a post I'd written for *Huffington*, and contacted me, which led to an opportunity to serve on the USDA's advisory group for its Peoples Garden at the agency's headquarters in D.C.

My daughter was a sixth grader at the time and also started a blog about books she was reading on a free, public platform. I shared one of her posts on my blog. This post was seen by the author whose book she was reviewing, which resulted in her receiving a handwritten note and a signed copy of his book.

I've blogged about other things, too, including producing a series of "Notes" on the Facebook platform about family, food and faith. In 2014, I launched my own WordPress website and blog as part of a larger promotional effort for my book about Victory Gardens. I regularly share my blog posts on LinkedIn, and have also shared UC Food Observer posts with *KCET* and *Davis Enterprise*, among others.

The UC Food Observer

In the fall of 2014, UCOP asked me to create a “brand” across multiple social platforms (Twitter, Facebook), anchored in a (nearly) daily blog to help promote UC’s Global Food Initiative. The platform for this blog is WordPress. This effort became the *UC Food Observer*, and it has become one of UC’s popular social brands. What was anticipated to be a one year assignment turned into nearly three. I took a sabbatical last year, and returned to ANR this fall to share what I’ve learned about writing, social media and communications with others. *UC Food Observer* is now an ANR brand. I learned a great deal from the *UC Food Observer* experience, particularly about blogging.

Blogging is a Big Deal

In this section, I provide a brief history of blogs, some statistics and trends, and share why I think blogging has revolutionized and “disrupted” publishing and in a larger sense, how we receive and share information.

History: Blogs started in the technology sector and moved out into larger culture (following a similar path as the ARPANET -> Internet). The first documented use of a “homepage” (which was a blog) was by Justin Hall in 1994. In 1997, Jorn Barger coined the term “weblog”; Peter Merholz shortened this term to “blog” in 1999. “Blog” was Merriam-Webster’s Word of the Year in 2004. Blogs are widely used today. By 2020, the number of bloggers in the U.S. is anticipated to reach 31.7 million. For good or bad, blogs are here to stay.

Other Trends: Blogging in both business and higher education is increasing. The number of free blogging platforms (e.g., Medium, etc.) is also increasing. These platforms often use artificial intelligence (AI) to help bloggers “build” audiences. Longer blog content is enjoying a resurgence and does well in search engines. Video content embedded in blogs is popular and tends to improve the performance of blogs. Per HubSpot, 53% of marketers say that blogging is their top content marketing priority (those of us in education can learn a lot from business). Social media platforms like Twitter and Instagram provide a place for micro-blogging, with increased character and linking options.

Implications: There are some important implications in all of this. Prior to the introduction and adoption of blogs and accessible publishing platforms, there were limited opportunities to be published. And there was a longer time required between writing something and seeing it in print.

Free and public-facing publishing platforms have made blogging accessible, widespread, and nearly instantaneous. Anyone can publish their writing...right now. It’s fair to say the format has both revolutionized and disrupted the publishing industry. The blog format has been adopted even by major media outlets. In combination with social media, blogs have changed how we get information and receive news and have shifted the balance of power. They have also changed how public relations and marketing is practiced. Research indicates blogs are enjoying increased credibility

The democratization of publishing means that more information is out there. It's imperative that we be out there, too, providing accurate, useful and credible information.

Why Blog?

Even if you don't love writing, there are still plenty of reasons to consider blogging. Here are a few:

- You can share your knowledge (research and findings) and help others (teach, Extension Delivery);
- You can help others;
- You can share your research and findings with broader (and perhaps new) audiences;
- Because blogs are short, they are an ideal place to share preliminary findings;
- You can use a blog to provide a larger context for the importance of your work;
- Blogs enable you to use a less formal writing style;
- Engage, educate, persuade (advocacy) with a range of audiences (including media, legislators, industry, clientele, peers, the general public);
- Establish your expertise;
- Increase the visibility of your program;
- Improve science literacy; and
- Call attention to the good work of others.

Places to Blog (in addition to UC ANR)

ANR's website refresh provides a prominent place on the organization's landing page for ANR advisors and specialists to post their blogs. (GREAT NEWS!). You may also have an existing website on which to post your work (e.g., county or departmental website, personal page, etc.). It's okay to cross-post, although it's a good idea to change the text slightly.

There are some other good places to establish a presence, including **LinkedIn** (where you may already have a professional profile) and **Medium**. I regularly use both of these sites for sharing new posts and "resurfacing" older blog content. I mix it up.

More about **LinkedIn**:

- Free (and you're probably already on LinkedIn)
- Super easy to use
- Posts look great on desktop or mobile
- Positions most current post near the top of your profile (kind of like a "pin")
- Indexed on Google (good for organic searches)
- Great way to "resurface" posts already appearing on other platforms
- Good for prospecting (if someone engages with your content, you have a reason to connect)
- Will appear in feed of 2nd & 3rd connections
- Anyone on LinkedIn can "follow" your posts

Communicating Your ANR Story

- Can share as a “status update” and use hashtags to increase reach
- Good analytics (will tell you if readers came from link on other platforms)

More about **Medium**:

- It’s also free
- It’s owned by Twitter
- Uses Artificial Intelligence (AI) to help you build audiences for your work. (AI directs readers to articles based upon previous behavior and suggests articles. If you sign up for it, Medium also provides an email digest with suggested reads).
- Provides reading time (helpful for readers)
- Enables readers to provide “claps” for work they like
- Good analytics

I’m going to leave other platforms – including Quora – for another time.

Content/Sharing Content

When you start blogging and using social media, you realize pretty quickly that people and platforms are hungry for what we call “content.”

“Content” is a specific term essentially refers to something you produce to share information. Content includes blog posts, images, videos, Tweets, Facebook posts, articles, links, maps, tags and hashtags, metadata, etc.

If you’re putting time into producing quality blog posts, you want them to be shared and have a certain lifecycle. You’ll produce a blog post, and if you’re on social media, you’ll share it there, or someone on the ANR Content Strategy team will share it. If you stick with the *Communicating Your Story* series, you’ll learn more about how to plan for the strategic use of your content.

Places to Share Blogs

- Share content via other platforms. There are probably a number of organizations or publications that may be interested in your work, including professional associations. (My example is KCET, *Davis Enterprise*, etc.)
- Also – every social post provides an opportunity to “microblog”. Use Facebook and Twitter to feature pull-out quotes from your blog and include the link. Include the link to your latest post in your Instagram bio.
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Tips That Work

Blogging is writing – it’s easy to procrastinate because it can feel hard to get started. Here are some of my tips:

- There is no muse...there is only your “arse in a chair” (credit James Rebanks, author of *A Shepherd’s Life*).
- You need a narrative or storyline, even if your blog is 5 paragraphs long. It needs a narrative to move it along and give it shape.
- Be conversational, friendly and authentic. Eventually you’ll find your voice.
- Tell your story...what’s important to you about this?
- Be consistent...make writing and posting a practice, *even when you don’t feel like it*.
- Blogging **can be** an integral part of your communications strategy, but you can also blog less frequently by participating in ANR’s pipeline or joining with others on a thematic blog (ex: ANR’s Food Blog).
- Short is fine. Short is good. Perfect is impossible. Done is best.
- Start somewhere. Start now.

I have a general blogging philosophy:

- Be authentic.
- Keep it simple.
- Share – learn – teach.
- Share the work of others (aggregation...some of my most valuable posts).
- Be worth following – be credible, provide value, help others shine, too.
- Be patient...none of this happens overnight.
- “Class over mass” ...reaching a single policy maker may be more important than having a lot of people read the work.

Other Tips:

- Use good images.
- Limit hashtags.
- Embed a video.
- Post questions in the blog post to encourage comments (and respond to those comments to build engagement).
- **Make sure hyperlinks open in a new window.**
- People tend to skim blog posts, so use a catchy headline, good headers, video and other visual tools to engage interest.
- Use your blogs across social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, etc.).
- It’s okay to repeat yourself and use a blog post on multiple platforms.
- It’s okay to repeat yourself some, too, because probably not every reader/follower will read every post.
- ALWAYS, ALWAYS credit the work of others.

Tips from Experts

“Share your trade secrets.” – Austin Kleon, New York Times bestselling author

“Foster genuine friendships and support systems with other writers and bloggers. Collaborate, don’t compete.” – Melissa DeWitte, Deputy Director for Social Science Communications at Stanford University

“Write more simply than you would normally. Use short sentences, bullet points, pull quotes, photos and charts. Leave white space. Make it easy to scan your article.” Teresa O’Connor, “Seasonal Wisdom” (award-winning blog), “Farm Fresh Low Carb Living”

“Know your audience.” Pamela Price, editor/creator “The Texas Wildflower” (digital magazine) and “Red White & Grew”

Resources

Research

Pew Research Center: Internet and Technology

<http://www.pewinternet.org>

Podcasts About Blogging

Being Boss – Emily Thompson and Kathleen Shannon

For entrepreneurs and creatives

Full-length and mini-episodes

Good website with lots of resources

New book out!

Blogging Your Passion – Jonathan Milligan

ProBlogger – Darren Rowse

Focused on blogs

AskPat – Pat Flynn

Training

BlogHer

LinkedIn Learning (Lynda)

UC ANR Learning and Development Website

Blogging Resources:

- Blogging PowerPoint PDF
- Bibliography PDF
- UC ANR Featured Content Guidelines PDF
- Notes PDF
- Examples PDF
- Q&A (will be posted after the initial blogging webinar 12/18)