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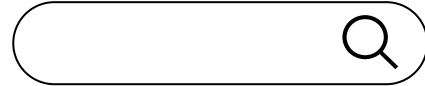
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Weblog Usability: The Top Ten Design Mistakes



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Summary: Blogs are often too internally focused and ignore key usability issues, making it hard for new readers to understand the site and trust the author.

Blogs are a form of website. The [thousands of normal website usability guidelines](#) therefore apply to them, as do [this year's top ten design mistakes](#). But weblogs are also a special genre of website; they have unique characteristics and thus distinct usability problems.

One of a weblog's great benefits is that it essentially [frees you from "Web design"](#). You write a paragraph, click a button, and it's posted on the Internet. No need for visual design, page design, interaction design, information architecture, or any programming or server maintenance.

Blogs make having a simple website much easier, and as a result, the number of people who write for the Web has exploded. This is a striking confirmation of the importance of ease of use.

Weblogs' second benefit is that they're a **Web-native content genre**: they rely on links, and short postings prevail. You don't have to write a full article or conduct original research or reporting. You can simply find something interesting on another site and link to it, possibly with commentary or additional examples. Obviously, this is much easier than running a conventional site, and again indicates the benefits of lowering the barriers to computer use.

As a third benefit, blogs are **part of an ecosystem** (often called the Blogosphere) that serves as a positive feedback loop: Whatever good postings exist are promoted through links from other sites. More reader/writers see this good stuff, and the very best then get linked to even more. As a result, [link frequency follows a Zipf distribution](#), with disproportionately more links to the best postings.

Some weblogs are really just private diaries intended only for a handful of family members and close friends. Usability guidelines generally don't apply to such sites, because the readers' prior knowledge and motivation are incomparably greater than those of third-party users. When you want to reach new readers who aren't your mother, however, usability becomes important.

Also, while readers of your **intranet** weblog might know you, usability is important because your readers are on company time. (As an example, see [IBM's use of intranet blogs](#) — among the ten best intranets of 2006.)

In This Article:

[Usability Issues](#)

Usability Issues

To reach new readers and respect your existing readers' time constraints, test your weblog against the following usability problems.

1. No Author Biographies

Unless you're a business blog, you probably don't need a full-fledged ["about us" section](#) the way a corporate site does. That said, the basic rationale for "about us" translates directly into the need for an "about me" page on a weblog: users want to know who they're dealing with.

It's a simple matter of trust. Anonymous writings have less credence than something that's signed. And, unless a person's extraordinarily famous, it's not enough to simply say that Joe Blogger writes the content. Readers want to know more about Joe. Does he have any credentials or experience in the field he's commenting on? (Even if you don't have formal credentials, readers will trust you more if you're honest about that fact, set forth your informal experience, and explain the reason for your enthusiasm.)

2. No Author Photo

Even weblogs that provide author bios often omit the author photo. A photo is important for two reasons:

- It offers a more personable impression of the author. You enhance your [credibility](#) by the simple fact that you're not trying to hide. Also, users relate more easily to somebody they've seen.
- It connects the virtual and physical worlds. People who've met you before will recognize your photo, and people who've read your site will recognize you when you meet in person (say, at a conference — or the company cafeteria if you're an intranet blogger).

A huge percentage of the human brain is dedicated to remembering and recognizing faces. For many, faces work better than names. I learned this lesson myself in 1987 when I included my photo in a HyperCard stack I authored that was widely disseminated on Mac-oriented BBSs. Over the next two years, countless people came up to me and said, "I liked your stack," having recognized me from the photo.

Also, if you run a professional blog and expect to be quoted in the press, you should follow the [recommendations for using the Web for PR](#) and include a selection of high-resolution photos that photo editors can download.

3. Nondescript Posting Titles

Sadly, even though weblogs are native to the Web, authors rarely follow the [guidelines for writing for the Web](#) in terms of making content scannable. This applies to a posting's body text, but it's even more important with headlines. Users must be able to grasp the gist of an article by reading its headline. Avoid cute or humorous headlines that make no sense out of context.

Your posting's title is **microcontent** and you should treat it as a writing project in its own right. On a value-per-word basis, headline writing is the most important writing you do.

Descriptive headlines are especially important for representing your weblog in search engines, newsfeeds (RSS), and other external environments. In those contexts, users often see only the headline and use it to determine whether to click into the full posting. Even if users see a short abstract along with the headline (as with most search engines), user testing shows that people often read only the headline. In fact, people often **read only the first three or four words** of a headline when scanning a list of possible places to go. Sample **bad** headlines:

- What Is It That You Want?
- Hey, kids! Comics!
- Victims Abandoned

Sample **good** headlines:

- Pictures from Die Hunns and Black Halos show
- Office Depot Pays United States \$4.75 Million to Resolve False Claims Act Allegations
(too long, but even if you only read the first few words, you have an idea of what it's about)
- Ice cream trucks as church marketing

This last headline works on a church-related blog. If you're writing an ice cream industry blog, start the headline with the word "church"

because it's the information-carrying word within a context of all ice cream, all the time.

In browsing weblog headline listings to extract these examples, I noticed several headlines in ALL CAPS. That's always bad. Reading speed is reduced by 10% and users are put off by the appearance of shouting.

4. Links Don't Say Where They Go

Many weblog authors seem to think it's cool to write link anchors like: "some people think" or "there's more here and here." Remember one of the basics of the Web: Life is too short to click on an unknown. Tell people where they're going and what they'll find at the other end of the link.

Generally, you should provide predictive information in either the anchor text itself or the immediately surrounding words. You can also use [link titles](#) for supplementary information that doesn't fit with your content. (To see a link title in action, mouse over the "link titles" link.)

A related mistake in this category is to use insider shorthand, such as using first names when you reference other writers or weblogs. Unless you're writing only for your friends, don't alienate new visitors by appearing to be part of a closed clique. **The Web is not high school.**

5. Classic Hits are Buried

Hopefully, you'll write some pieces with lasting value for readers outside your fan base. Don't relegate such classics to the archives,

where people can only find something if they know you posted it, say, in May 2003.

Highlight a few evergreens in your navigation system and link directly to them. For example, my own list of almost 300 Alertbox columns starts by saying, "Read these first: [Usability 101](#) and [Top Ten Mistakes of Web Design](#)." Also, remember to **link to your past pieces** in newer postings. Don't assume that readers have been with you from the beginning; give them background and context in case they want to read more about your ideas.

6. The Calendar is the Only Navigation

A timeline is rarely the best information architecture, yet it's the default way to navigate weblogs. Most weblog software provides a way to **categorize postings** so users can easily get a list of all postings on a certain topic. Do use categorization, but avoid the common mistake of tagging a posting with almost all of your categories. Be selective. Decide on a few places where a posting most belongs.

Categories must be sufficiently detailed to lead users to a thoroughly winnowed list of postings. At the same time, they shouldn't be so detailed that users face a category menu that's overly long and difficult to scan. Ten to twenty categories are appropriate for structuring many topics.

On the main page for each category, highlight that category's evergreens as well as a time line of its most recent postings.

7. Irregular Publishing Frequency

Establishing and meeting user expectations is one of the fundamental principles of Web usability. For a weblog, users must be able to anticipate when and how often updates will occur.

For most weblogs, daily updates are probably best, but weekly or even monthly updates might work as well, depending on your topic. In either case, **pick a publication schedule** and stick to it. If you usually post daily but sometimes let months go by without new content, you'll lose many of your loyal — and thus most valuable — readers.

Certainly, you shouldn't post when you have nothing to say. [Polluting cyberspace](#) with excess information is a sin. To ensure regular publishing, hold back some ideas and post them when you hit a dry spell.

8. Mixing Topics

If you publish on many different topics, you're less likely to attract a loyal audience of high-value users. Busy people might visit a blog to read an entry about a topic that interests them. They're unlikely to return, however, if their target topic appears only sporadically among a massive range of postings on other topics. The only people who read everything are those with too much time on their hands (a low-value demographic).

The more focused your content, the more focused your readers. That, again, makes you more influential within your niche. [Specialized sites rule the Web](#), so aim tightly. This is especially important if you're in the [business-to-business \(B2B\)](#) sector.

If you have the urge to speak out on, say, both American foreign policy and the business strategy of Internet telephony, establish two blogs. You can always interlink them when appropriate.

9. Forgetting That You Write for Your Future Boss

Whenever you post anything to the Internet — whether on a weblog, in a discussion group, or even in an email — think about **how it will look to a hiring manager in ten years**. Once stuff's out, it's archived, cached, and indexed in many services that you might never be aware of.

Years from now, someone might consider hiring you for a plum job and take the precaution of 'nooping you first. (Just taking a stab at what's next after Google. Rest assured: there will be some super-snooper service that'll dredge up anything about you that's ever been bitified.) What will they find in terms of naïvely puerile "analysis" or offensively nasty flames published under your name?

Think twice before posting. If you don't want your future boss to read it, don't post.

10. Having a Domain Name Owned by a Weblog Service

Having a weblog address ending in blogspot.com, typepad.com, etc. will soon be the equivalent of having an @aol.com email address or a Geocities website: the mark of a naïve beginner who shouldn't be taken too seriously.

Letting somebody else own your name means that **they own your destiny** on the Internet. They can degrade the service quality as much as they want. They can increase the price as much as they want. They

can add atop your content as many pop-ups, blinking banners, or other [user-repelling advertising techniques](#) as they want. They can promote your competitor's offers on your pages. Yes, you can walk, but at the cost of your loyal readers, links you've attracted from other sites, and your search engine ranking.

The longer you stay at someone else's domain name, the higher the cost of going independent. Yes, it's tempting to start a new weblog on one of the services that offer free accounts. It's easy, it's quick, and it's obviously cheap. But it only costs [\\$8 per year to get your personal domain name](#) and own your own future. As soon as you realize you're serious about blogging, move it away from a domain name that's controlled by somebody else. The longer you delay, the more pain you'll feel when you finally make the move.

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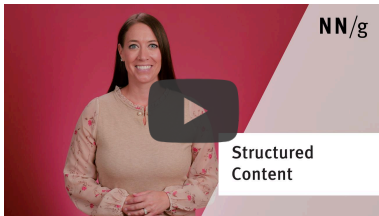
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