

The Mummies' Guide to Blogging



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Introduction

Welcome to the world of mummy bloggers

Whether you are already a blogger or an inquisitive technophobe, The Mummies' Guide to Blogging by 123-reg is here to offer you some advice, some encouragement and some moral support.

If you already know your WordPress from your Blogger you will have a head-start but don't worry if you don't. This guide is aimed at every level of understanding even if you have only just picked up a mouse for the first time. While there is some technical jargon, we have tried to keep that to a minimum and offer explanations where it is necessary.

The Mummies' Guide to Blogging has some useful hints and tips but it is also about the principles behind a successful blog. If you don't yet have a blog, read it, digest it and even make some notes before setting about planning your own venture into the blogosphere (the collective term for the diverse world of blogs). If you are already there, read it, digest it and make some notes as to how you could adapt and improve your existing offering to gain more traffic and create a better blog.

The Mummies' Guide to Blogging would not have been possible without the kind help and esteemed efforts of our guest writers - all experts in their respective fields. So a big thank you to Veronica Bagnole of Cite, Lee Smallwood and Sally Whittle. Details of their own projects, links etc are included in their respective chapters so please do have a look and support them where you can – you will benefit yourself too in the long run.

Another set of thank yous goes to our young volunteer artists Ella and Milly Fuell who helped illustrate this guide. Successful futures no doubt await.

Finally, don't forget to check out the latest offers from 123-reg and the wide-range of domain name and web-hosting related services we offer. Visit our special pages dedicated to mummy bloggers at www.themummiesguidetoblogging.com with additional hints, tips and offers for those mummies looking to get online or switch their hosting.

What is a blog?

In a true definition sense, a blog is an abbreviation of “weblog”, a term developed for those using a webpage to maintain an on-going chronicle of information. Many will define a blog as an online diary, but it is more than that, much more - or at least it should be. In reality your blog is whatever you want it to be, it’s just the more successful ones also make sure their blog is also what their audience want it to be.

Blogging may be the result of passion and necessity. Creativity meeting communication. Entertainment nestling alongside information. Your blog can be about you. It can be about others. It can be your original thoughts or work. It can be you flagging up or praising the thoughts or works of others. In fact, just as every newsagent’s shelves are alive with magazines on this topic and that topic, for this audience and that audience, so the internet holds a similar wealth of blogs.



A successful blog however, just like a successful magazine will have a familiar feel, and a standard theme or topic running through it. To get a reader coming back to read your next effort they need to be able to understand what sort of thing they will be getting when they return. Familiarity helps, but a cohesive storyline is even better. Indeed the most successful blogs are those that bring together the common thoughts of its readers, uniting people of shared interests and operating at the heart of their community.

That’s not to say running a successful blog is easy. Blogscope (<http://www.blogscope.net/>) a research project by the University of Toronto is currently tracking over 53 million blogs with 1.3 billion posts in the blogosphere.

Why mummy blogging is the new coffee morning?

For many parents of young children, blogging becomes a lifestyle. It offers an immediate connection with like-minded people or at least people who are enjoying (or not) similar experiences to you. If you've ever found yourself spouting stories of your children in front of your child-free friends you will know the blank looks they tend to give you. Yet, speak about your kids in a group of other parents and you could be swapping tales and anecdotes all day – that's exactly where mummy blogging excels.

In days gone by, mums looking for friendly faces and adult chatter would meet up in the local community hall over tea and biscuits, while their babies and toddlers ran riot or drew wax crayon pictures for an hour or so. That still happens, but the world has changed. For starters there aren't as many community halls to meet at. Secondly there is a growing trend for young parents or would-be parents to move out of towns and cities, either to live a more idyllic lifestyle or forced by necessity of affordability. That means many are more remote and certainly not as close to physical meeting places, meaning a trek with a kid in tow to a coffee morning is not as appealing.

Finally, technology availability and ease-of-use means there is an alternative option: the cyber-option. Online communities have been at the heart of the successful development of the internet since day one. They span across ages, creeds and gender and the cyber-mummy community is one of the strongest and most rapidly growing of them all.



The number of mummy blogs in the UK alone is estimated to exceed 2,500 and the sector attracts more than 10 million page views a month - according to a report in The Independent in June 2011. Yet even those figures seem conservative given the chatter on social media networks by apparent mummy bloggers. That's impressive figures from a sector that barely existed just a couple of years ago. With that success comes great potential for those who blog well to earn money and even earn a living from it all. Whereas once, this may have been limited to a few affiliate banners, many top mummy bloggers now earn money from writing reviews for leading brands. Mummy bloggers can greatly

influence opinion and some use this to their advantage by selling advertising space on their site to interested companies. Others have whole sponsorship packages supporting their former hobby as a lucrative business.

Assisting that boom has been social media. The ability to share your thoughts quickly and also others to share their feedback via Twitter, Facebook et al has helped snowball the effect of an influential post. That in turn has helped make the cyber-mummy community a close-knit one, supporting and offering advice where needed, just as they may have at a traditional coffee morning. While they may not meet in person – although there are a growing number of mummy blogger events – they communicate and interact daily via the internet, many building very strong friendships.

The world of mummy bloggers is still new, is still growing and is still showing signs of new potential off-shoots. Yet what is certain is if you have the passion, the inclination and the ability to communicate with others already doing it, getting started as a mummy blogger can be a very rewarding project.

The practical stuff

Finding somewhere for your blog to live

The success of the internet has been largely due to its ability to offer choice. Therefore it should be no surprise that blogging - just one way of using the internet - has itself hundreds of ways that you can blog and get your thoughts out there to your audience. You could of course simply create a new HTML web page by hand for every post, but that would be fairly long-winded and the internet is all about making things easier and quicker.

So there are lots of pieces of software designed to help. The most famous of these is WordPress. WordPress is the most popular blogging platform on the web and is available for free with 123-reg shared hosting packages as one of our 123-reg apps. It is open source software that has been developed by the community that use it. That also means there are thousands of plug-ins (additional pieces of software) available that make your own blog more customisable, as do the thousands of themes or skins available. Best still most of them are free - you just need to take some time to find the ones that best fit the site you want. But it is not the only option.

B2evolution and blogengine are also available free with 123-reg's hosting packages and both of those will also give you a strong blog presence. Then there are the other big names such as Blogger (now Google Blogs), Movable Type, Typepad and even Tumblr for those with a little less to post. Content Management System options such as Drupal and Joomla (both available as free 123-reg apps) also offer blogging functionality - so getting online is not difficult.

Yet if you want to stand out from the crowd, if you are really serious about making your blog work, then WordPress is often seen as the best combination, being professional looking without being too difficult to understand. While WordPress can be used for free online, hosted on the WordPress servers (so your address would be something like wordpress.com/mummiesblog), to add that extra touch of professionalism, hosting your own blog on your own domain name (e.g. mummiesblog.com) is something you should be considering. It's not difficult either and even if you already have a blog started up, say on the free WordPress system, it is still fairly straight-forward to migrate to a self-hosted option.

Choosing a WordPress self-hosted option using a 123-reg shared hosting package means you get a free domain name and free self-hosted WordPress installation. That's all on your own hosting space personalised with your chosen domain name. You also get free

email accounts with the hosting for example “mummies@mummiesblog.com” so you can continue your professional look when you are emailing potential sponsors, or media outlets you think might be interested in your blog.

If you are looking to move your site from wordpress.com to a self-hosted option visit our website www.themummiesguidetoblogging.com and download the free FAQ guide, which will help you step-by-step to move to a more professional blog.

It's not just one way

The importance of interacting with your audience

Many people forget that blogging was in fact one of the first mainstream social media tools. Often when the term social media is discussed now, blogs are overlooked but they are very much at the heart of social media and that means social media should also be at the heart of your blog.

The success of Twitter in particular has been heavily driven by bloggers. Watch any Twitter feed for 24 hours and you will probably see 2, 3 even more posts of links to blog articles, or re-tweets of the same. So if you are taking time to set up a blog, spend a little bit more time to set up Twitter and Facebook accounts too. (There are other social media networks as well but these are currently the biggest for your purpose).



Try and choose user names for those accounts that compliment your blog name, so it is obvious to readers that they are linked and you are the same person. Then make sure you promote your blog via those other social networks. Modern blogging software plug-ins make this easy too, enabling promotional tweets and Facebook posts to be generated automatically every time you post a blog. Don't forget to also promote your Facebook and Twitter accounts on your blog too to encourage people to follow you. Remember to use these other social media networks and you will soon be generating traffic.

Think of it like a legitimate pyramid selling scheme. If ten people visit your site and like it, they might tweet the link to their own followers of 10. Immediately you are reaching 100 people, with very little effort. Each further level brings a chance for them re-tweeting the link to their own visitors so the potential reach massively increases.

Blogging is more than just publishing your thoughts, it needs to be a social activity. You are publishing to a community you want to grow and that means you may also need to work hard at listening and nurturing your community. If you are writing a blog you should also be reading other blogs. Not only to see what your fellow bloggers are writing about or how

they are doing it, but also to inspire your own future posts. Yet, don't just read, interact. Your own best readers will be the ones who leave encouraging comments or who begin or add to the debate on your site.

Set an example and do the same on other blogs. You can usually leave details of your own blog to encourage others to come and have a look, but it is also a great way of striking up relationships and friendships with fellow bloggers.

Comments

Comments are great and essential, both on your blog and on others. They will help grow your blog but creating connections will have the biggest impact on your blog's success. There are the obvious support benefits when you need a friendly ear, but in addition, other bloggers are likely to be very active on social media networks too, so there is a great potential to gain exposure through them re-tweeting your links to their followers.

Guest blogs

Consider writing for other blog sites and let other bloggers write for yours. It can help create a bit of extra excitement for your blog – you can blog about your blog – and bring in a different set of views and thus readers too. That is important. A guest blogger is likely to promote anything they blog for you via their own blog and social network, that's potentially 100s if not 1,000s of new people hearing about your blog. Ensure guest bloggers include a link in their post back to their own blog too. This is a great way to create backlinks that search engines love too as popular sites are the ones that more people link to. If you blog for someone else, make sure you get a reciprocal link.

Considerations

Don't be scared of striking up conversations either. Be it via your blog, via email or social network sites, you will find the majority of the mummy blogger world are very friendly and love some interaction. You can both learn from each other and offer inspiration. There is almost a separate virtual social scene for mummy bloggers developing in the UK that can be a massive inspiration and way of meeting like-minded people. Don't be put off by that though. Just as blogs can be different so can the people who write them and while there are many loud, perhaps brash mummy bloggers out there who will be more vocal, equally there are lots who are more reserved and timid, but they all add to the mummy blogging community in a positive way.

Ouch! That hurt!

Why dealing with criticism is the best skill to learn

Being a parent means you have to face a lot of the less pleasant things in life you might otherwise have not encountered or swerved away from. You therefore probably have broad shoulders already, but a word of warning: being a blogger may mean you need them.

The fear of criticism is probably a big factor in stopping many getting started on their blog. Nobody likes being told they are wrong, particularly not in public and effectively in your own domain. Yet, it will happen. It has happened to every one of the successful mummy bloggers and the not-so successful bloggers. It is nothing to be ashamed of. In fact, in a sadistic sort of way you should be proud. The fact that somebody has taken time to criticise means they have taken time to read your blog too. They have taken in the content and then formed an opinion on it.



The fact that they disagree with you isn't a negative either – as we pointed out in the previous chapter all successful blogs are based around debate and interaction. If you start getting criticism you are probably on the right road to success. The key to dealing with criticism correctly however, is how you react. Have a think about the motives of the person who is being critical. Some rival bloggers leave deliberate inflammatory comments on similar sorts of blogs leaving a link to their own blog. They do so in the hope of driving traffic to their own blog from the visitor to other blogs who will click on the links in comments sections. It is a 'grey' marketing tactic but it can work.

Make sure you don't immediately delete a critical comment either. In fact, if you really disagree with the comment, it can pay to even highlight it. Post a civil and considered brief response to show you acknowledge it and then leave it to the rest of your audience to decide. Don't get embroiled into an argument online however, just keep it simple and polite. In some cases, the critic may have just misunderstood your post and your follow-up may clarify. If not, and their opinion differs, in most cases you will see many of your readership posting follow-up comments in defence of you and that is a great feeling and a great way to develop your blog.

Maybe the criticism is fair. It happens. Nobody can be at the peak of their game every day and sometimes if other pressures are mounting, the quality of your blog may be affected. If that's the case, again don't worry. Take a few minutes to consider the criticism. Have a look at your recent posts. How could you have improved on them? If you don't have the time to do your best at the moment, perhaps step down your volume of output and concentrate on the quality. The best blogs are enhanced with regular posts but the value of the quality of your writing is more important.

Finally, remember: we are all unique and we all have different beliefs, and that is what makes the world so exciting. It is also what makes blogging so exciting. Nowhere else could you share your thoughts publically on any topic of your choice and know that it could be read by thousands of people. Your blog is just that, your blog. Of course you want to appeal to readers, and the widest audience possible, but the more your blog differs from the 1,000s of others that are blogging on similar topics, the better chance you have of picking up new readers. So use your own individual thoughts and trust in your beliefs.

Looking good

Why design can help you appeal

Guest Author: Veronica Bagnole - Cite Design Agency - www.cite.co.uk

There are almost 200 million blogs on the internet, and whether they cover the everyday adventures of being a mum or focus on a person's travels during their gap year, every blog is unique. But blogging isn't just about what you write or who reads your posts, it's about you—your opinions, your experiences, your personality—and the design you use can help convey who you are before a single word is ever read.



Making Your Mark

First impressions count for a lot, and with readers spending less than a minute per page on a new website, you need something that will get your message to them quickly. The use of images, colours, and typography can grab a readers attention and instantly set a tone for your blog and convey what it is about.

Sometimes less is more and by designing your blog to centre on your writing, your readers can be guided to the content you want them to focus on. Be wary of using elements like bright contrasting colours, animated GIFs, and too many advertisements as they are very distracting and will make your blog appear unprofessional. Instead, create a colour palette that sets the right mood without being garish, use web-safe fonts, and don't be afraid of some empty space. Add or remove plug-ins as appropriate, but keep in mind that the more you install the slower your blog may load, not to mention the clutter they create.

Enhancing Visual Appeal

In general, people will retain visual delivery more than anything else on your page, so take the time to design something worth remembering. The better your visual impact is on a reader, the more likely they will think of visiting your blog again.

Images are a great way to add to your design, so choose photos, videos, and sound files that are relevant to your blog. However, don't overdo it; visuals should complement your writing and serve to enhance a blog post. If you put too many on your blog, you run the risk of your writing being overshadowed.

Words can also be used as visuals, which is great considering the site is all about your writing. Creative cloud tags can help gain reader interest across all the topics you've written about while presenting them in a fun and colourful way. Highlighting and pulling out quotes from your posts can also add a visual element while helping readers to instantly understand what the topic is about. The more appealing your design is to readers, the more likely it is that they'll keep checking in.

Improving Usability

A strong design helps guide visitors around the site and makes it easy for them to navigate. Internet users scan information in a "F pattern" when reading, focusing on the top of the page, the left-hand column and the text that flows from the left. Information that appears "above the fold" (the area that appears on the page without scrolling down) generally gets more attention. With that in mind, designs should place the most important and relevant information in those areas so visitors can access information quickly.

Designs that include easy navigation, relevant links, and scannable content (small paragraphs, bullet points, subheadings) also help improve the visitor's experience on the site. Blogs created with usability in mind help readers find new or relevant information without frustration, increasing their chances of becoming regular visitors.

Adding Value

While you can use a blogging template as it is given to you, incorporating your own design helps place more value on what you are doing. You'll have more pride in your blog, feel that it represents you better, and place importance on its role in your life. Others will view your site as more professional and will want to continue seeking out your thoughts and opinions. Not only that, but a strong design can also help improve your Search Engine Optimisation (SEO). A design that includes strong keywords, descriptive image tags, easy-to-navigate text, and good links, will perform better in search results and bring more visitors to your site.

There is no ideal design for a blog because what works for one person may not reflect another person well at all. The key is to let the design of a blog work to serve you and your readers, after all the blog should be a representation of you in all of its aspects. With a little work, your blog can become a website that people want to visit because they like what they read, they like what they learn, and they like what they see.

Veronica Bagnole

Cite Design Agency - www.cite.co.uk

SEO - Search Engine Optimisation

Making sure people know where you are

Guest Author: Lee Smallwood - SEO consultant of www.digitalflares.com

You will probably hear a lot about search engine optimisation. Some claim it to be an art, some a science. In practice it is actually mainly common sense. Especially on-page SEO, the art of making your blog content easy for search engines like Google to find, understand and index. Here are a few quick tips to maximising your content.

Tip 1: Keywords

Decide what keyword you want to use for a specific post, or your blog generally. If you're writing a product review the keyword might be the product name, otherwise it might be a short phrase describing an issue or activity "Manchester dance classes" for example. Basically, what is the key concept that somebody wanting to know about that subject would use to search for it in a search engine.

Once you know what a keyword is, you need to use it. Ensure your keyword is in the post title, and again in the first 50 or so words of your post. You might want to repeat it every 100 words or so in your post (but don't over-do it, you want your blog to read like a blog not a robotic use of keywords).

Tip 2: H1 Tags

Your blog content is published to the web as HTML content. Within HTML there is a type of content called 'H1' or 'Header 1' tags. These are used to bold up sections as headlines in terms of looks for your page but they are also vital bits of HTML that tell search engines what your post is about.

Depending on your blog platform and theme, your blog may automatically use your post title as the H1 tag – and this is good for SEO, providing your headline incorporates your keyword.

To check if this is happening on your blog, open a post in your browser and right-click on it – then choose 'view source'. This will open the HTML version of your page, and you can quickly use CTRL+F to find the 'H1' tag. It will look something like this: <H1> post title </H1> – note the pointy brackets. If you find your post title isn't the H1 tag, you can change

these fairly easily in most WordPress themes using the 'create post' editing controls, while in Blogger you will need to go and edit your HTML template to ensure that 'post-title entry-title' is set to H1 class.

Tip 3: Image file names

Image files that come from a digital camera will tend to be named something like IMG_234234.JPG. This is useless for SEO. Before uploading a picture to your blog, get into the habit of saving it to the right size on your computer, and giving it a relevant file name – ideally one that incorporates your chosen keyword. If you want your site to be associated with a specific keyword/content, then you might incorporate that into the file name too.

Tip 4: Alt Tags

Alt tags are like computer labels that attach to image files to be read by search engines and should describe what an image is. They are important for people who may be visually impaired, and those who turn off images on their internet browser. But they're also great for SEO. In WordPress when you add an image to a post, you can usually define alt-text for the image in the 'add image' menu. In blogger, you go to the 'edit html' version of your post and you will see something like alt ="" – just add your alt text between the quotation marks and save as usual.

Tip 5: Meta Descriptions

Meta text is the text that appears below a web page link in search engine results – while it's not important for SEO, it's crucial in persuading people to click on a link. Your meta description may be pulled from the first couple of sentences of a blog post (which is fine if you write relevant intros) but it may not – so it's worth checking. Try to ensure keywords appear in your meta descriptions and it's crucial not to make them too generic – you need a different meta description for each post to get the best results.

Tip 6: URLs

Finally, don't forget to ensure that your blog post URLs (sometimes called permalinks) are search optimised. Sometimes blogs will simply number new blog posts – so you'll see leesblog.com/p=304. That's a missed opportunity to tell search engines what the post is about. The quickest and simplest way to do this is to set your blog options so that automatically new posts are given a URL like leesblog.com/month/title. In Typepad and WordPress you can also individually edit specific URLs so that they incorporate keywords in a set order, for example.

Lee Smallwood - SEO consultant

Follow Lee's social media blog at www.digitalflares.com

Enjoy it

Passion is the ultimate sales tool

Guest Author: Sally Whittle - Editor of www.tots100.co.uk and www.whosthemummy.co.uk

Congratulations – you’re a blogger!

You’ve done the technical business of setting up your blog and giving it a name. Perhaps you’ve customised the colour scheme and created your own header images. You’ve even published a few posts.

What now?

If the world worked the way I wanted (and, obviously, it should) then everyone would immediately declare, “Why, Sally has published a post!” stop what they’re doing and whizz over to my blog to enjoy my latest thrilling missive about the latest TV hit or my reasons for believing a certain brand of summer shoe are a travesty to footwear.

Unfortunately, it doesn’t quite work that way and we all have to market our blogs, particularly when we’re starting out. The good news is that making a splash with your blog needn’t be hard work. Just follow my three idiot-proof (well, they worked for me) rules for new bloggers:

BE SOCIAL

Blogging is like a virtual village – and if you want people to visit your home, you need to go and knock on a few doors. Signing up for things like the Tots100 means people will know your blog exists, but it will also introduce you to loads of amazing blogs written by other mums and dads. Check out lots of blogs and when you find one you like, subscribe to it, or add it to your bookmarks. Try and comment on blogs where you can – even the most established blogger still gets a thrill when someone new comments on one of their posts.

BE PASSIONATE

One of the most common mistakes bloggers make is thinking that to be successful they need to be like the ‘top’ bloggers. Nonsense. The best way to build a successful blog is to be yourself. Blog about things you like, things you do, stories that make you laugh.

The great thing about blogging about things YOU are passionate about is that it

immediately makes your blog unique – just like you. There's nothing wrong in sometimes taking part in memes, themes and weekly workshops, but don't let them overwhelm your blog – remember that your blog's greatest asset is you, and people will always feel a connection to stories that are honestly told.

HAVE FUN

Nine out of ten new blogs are abandoned within a few months, often because blogging has become a chore for the writer – just another obligation to fit into an already busy day.

All bloggers go through this phase. You start to think, "Oh, I don't have anything exciting to post today," or "Why haven't I started to get more comments yet?"

When you hit this phase try to remember WHY you started to blog. I bet it wasn't to impress anyone with exciting stories, or to get 20 comments on a post.

It was probably to capture family memories, or to make a few friends online. Or maybe it was just a place to have the occasional rant when things aren't going your way.

This means it doesn't really matter if nobody comments on a post, or if fewer people visited today than yesterday. It doesn't matter if you don't post something for a week, or if you post something that isn't cheerful and optimistic, because you're having a rotten day. Or if you feel like being silly, or writing about something completely off-the-wall because it captured your interest and you just wanted to share it.

It doesn't matter because this is YOUR blog where you post YOUR thoughts about YOUR life. And I think there's something very special about that.

Sally Whittle – Editor of www.tots100.co.uk and www.whosthemummy.co.uk

Get in touch

We would like to hear from you

The Mummies' Guide to Blogging brought to you by 123-reg.co.uk wants to hear from you.

Our new look site will be featuring guest blogs from the best mummy bloggers (and some daddies too) and we're looking for new bloggers to feature there.

If you think you have what it takes, send an email to mummybloggers@123-reg.co.uk with the subject guest blogger and a brief message about you, your blog, its URL and why you think your blog should be featured on The Mummies' Guide to Blogging.

- Are you a mummy blogger?
- What do you blog about?
- What inspired you to get blogging?
- Do you have any handy hints and tips you want to pass on to other mummy bloggers?



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