BUILDING A BETTER BLOG:
31 LESSONS IN THE ART OF BLOGGING

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Introduction

Welcome to "Building a Better Blog." My name is Trent Hamm and I'm the creator of The Simple Dollar, a personal finance blog found at http://www.thesimpledollar.com. I launched the site in November 2006 and, just barely a year later, the site receives a million page views a month and has 25,000 RSS subscribers. Even more, I have spent no money at all on direct advertising for the site – I have never spent a dime to steer readers my way.

How did I do it? Every method I used to achieve this success is contained in this document. It was originally posted as a series of entries at The Simple Dollar, but the document you have here has all of that content updated, edited, and reformatted in an easy to read document.

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Please, by all means, share this document freely with anyone who may be helped by it. If you would like to give thanks to the author, please send a freewill payment of $5 via PayPal to trent@thesimpledollar.com, but all I really ask is that you share and distribute this work freely. If you wish to post this PDF at your own website, you may do so as long as you include a link to http://www.thesimpledollar.com on the same page or blog entry.

Enough with the introductions. Let's get started.

Essential Reading

The most important lesson about blogging - in fact, the most important lesson about life - is that you've never learned all there is to know about a subject. Learning is a lifelong endeavor and every day you wake up committed to learning something new is a day you go to bed having grown as a person.

That being said, there are a number of essential guides that any blogger who is considering building a long-term healthy blog should read. I'm listing these as the first part in this series because I'm going to assume that you've already read these in future posts. If you haven't, then you might be missing out on some key underlying assumptions.

These are all useful guides for reviewing if you're thinking of starting a blog or wondering how you can improve your own. I often read and re-read these materials myself, as I always discover new insights from their content.

31 Days to Building a Better Blog
http://www.problogger.net/31-days/
31 Days to Building a Better Blog is probably the most important thing that a serious blogger can read. The only frustrating part is that several of the links are broken, mostly because they go to blogs that are defunct. Another golden series at problogger is the "Blogging for Beginners" series (found at http://www.problogger.net/archives/2006/02/14/blogging-for-beginners-2/); if you've never blogged before but are thinking about diving in, this is a must-read. In fact, if you're serious about blogging at all, just add ProBlogger to your daily reading diet.

How to Get Your Blog to 100,000 Visitors and Beyond
http://www.freemoneyfinance.com/2005/12/how_to_get_your.html
How to Get Your Blog to 100,000 Visitors and Beyond is a great resource for blogging in general, but slightly geared towards personal finance bloggers, particularly those who are just getting started.

Popular Bookmarks About "blogging" At del.icio.us
http://del.icio.us/popular/blogging
This is a nearly endless list of resources about blogging that a consensus of web users have decreed to be worth reviewing. Whenever I'm stuck on a creative new idea for my blog, I go here and read and read and read until my blood-shot corneas won't allow me to read any more. Two things about this resource make it worth bookmarking: one, it's peer reviewed, so the cream rises to the surface, and two, it's constantly updated with new resources. Some of the great one-shot pieces I've found using this tool include:

Building a Better Blog
http://www.thesimpledollar.com

ProNet's 50 Favorite Blogging Resources
http://www.pronetadvertising.com/articles/my-50-favorite-blogging-resources.html

21 Surefire Tips for a Successful Blog Launch
http://www.avivadirectory.com/successful-blog-launch/

Five Essential Elements of an Influential Blog
http://www.copyblogger.com/the-five-essential-elements-of-an-influential-blog/.

One final thing: **read people who are passionate**. The blogs that I keep going back to time and time again are written by people who are utterly passionate about their topic. Read Guy Kawasaki, Heather Armstrong, Darren Rowse, or Andrew Sullivan. What do they all have in common? They're utterly passionate about what they're writing about and they incorporate their humanity into their writing. I might not necessarily be interested in their topic, but I tune into all of them every day because their passion is simply infectious. Every time I read a post there, I might not learn something new or interesting, but I always grow as a blogger.

Love What You Write

It's an oft-repeated statement, but it's true: **your blog will only succeed if you really love what you're writing about.** Without that passion for the subject at hand, it is basically impossible to maintain any level of discipline with your writing; whenever something else comes up or you simply fall into the doldrums, you'll stop writing and then your readers will stop reading and then, well, you might as well just start over.

When I think of passion and blogging, the first example that pops into my mind is Heather Armstrong at dooce.com (http://www.dooce.com/). She's a splendid writer, no question, but I would probably not visit her site very often if it weren't for the fact that her passion for her daughter and her dog oozes out of every post. The site sidetracks occasionally into poking fun at Mormons and such, but it really clicks when she's writing about the things that drive her, and that's her family.

From a completely different perspective, the passion over at moleskinerie (http://www.moleskinerie.com/) is similarly overwhelming. That site has opened the floodgates to a torrent of passion that people feel about a little black notebook, and it pops out several times a day. Most of the time, the writer is able to stand back and let the passion of others flow through him, but the end result is incredibly engaging.

Passion grips me, as well. As much as I love spending time with my family and playing with my son (right now, he's *really* into stacking up block towers about four or five high, knocking them over, and doing it again … we do this for *hours*), there are days where I almost can't wait until he's firmly asleep and I have a couple hours set aside to catch up on personal finance news and write about what I've learned. I'll flip through the Wall Street Journal, write like a madman, visit a bunch of blogs, and basically be in a complete frenzy for a few hours before bedtime. Sometimes, I'll even wake up at three or four in the morning to get in a couple more hours of reading and writing.

If you want a blog to be a success, **you need to find a topic that you feel so strongly about that you find yourself thinking about it during idle moments and you can't wait to learn more about it.** If you don't feel that way about your blog, it's probably not going to be successful.

What if you don't know what that topic is? The best way to find out that one topic that brings out your passions is to spend some time away from the concept of blogging. Focus only on yourself. What do you find yourself thinking about? What sorts of books are you drawn to reading? What television shows do you find yourself idly thinking about? What do you do in your spare time?

Once you start seeing patterns there, you'll begin to see a thing or two that you're really passionate about: it's the thing you keep returning to time and time again in your idle thoughts and your actions. Maybe it's baking cookies (I'm actually guiding someone in getting started in a really sweet

blog about this very topic). Maybe it's clipping coupons. Maybe it's baseball. Whatever it is, ***that's what you should be blogging about because that's where your heart is.***

Some people might be convinced to quit their blog because of this post. **If this post is making you think of quitting your blog, I think you *should* quit.** There are millions of blogs out there written by people who are just churning out mush without real feeling or sentiment; what the internet really needs is more bloggers who have found that one thing inside of them that rings true. If a simple post at The Simple Dollar is making you question that truth, then it's probably not the thing that will inspire great passion within you. And it is that passion alone that makes a blog great.

Addressing Your Readers

Before you even start to write, you need to think carefully about who you're writing for. If you don't know exactly who you're writing for, you're not writing for anyone and not many people will visit you.

Take The Simple Dollar, for example. When I was thinking about how to start the site, I began to develop a demographic of who would be reading the site, and here's what I came up with:

The average reader of The Simple Dollar is a person between the ages of twenty-five and forty. This person has usually encountered some significant amount of debt in his or her life. In most cases, this reader is college educated, and student loans make up a significant portion of this debt load. In many cases, this reader is or was a heavy consumerist, which means that they've likely had credit card problems in the past as well. Of course, being a heavy consumerist means that the reader will be familiar with Western pop culture touchstones. This constant reader is likely also fairly technically proficient, as they're turning to a blog for information and entertainment, which means discussion of soft technical issues is generally appropriate. There is also a significant chance that the person reading the site is a blogger, or considering being a blogger, so posts about blogging, particularly from a somewhat financial perspective, would be of interest.

Why bother with such a thing? It seems boring and kind of cold, doesn't it? I know that when I read through it with a detached perspective, I hear Hannibal Lecter in my head whispering, "A census taker tried to quantify me once…"

The reason for making a clear description of your audience is so that, once and for all, **you can clarify who exactly you are talking to with your blog**. When your blog is successful (and even not so successful), people are going to regularly stumble upon it, people you don't know at all. You can't really know their likes and dislikes and you can't be entirely sure that the material you present will engage the reader and make them want to stick around for more.

By describing your constant reader in as much detail as possible, you can get a better grasp on what that reader is like. What interests do you share with the reader? Which ones do you not share with the reader? What cultural touchstones do you share with the reader? How educated is the reader? Each time you're able to answer once of these questions, you've got a better grip on who is reading your site - and thus who you should be writing for.

It's also important to note that **the more details you can add to that constant reader, the better**. Most people can name one or two items that describe their readers, but it is often a real challenge for most bloggers to name more than that. So, right now, as an exercise, **make a list of ten things you believe about a random reader from your blog**. It's not really that hard. How old are they? What cultural things do they believe in? How educated are they? What are their interests? What experiences have they had that might have led them to your site?

Once you have this audience description, you can use it every time you write a post. As you're writing, ask yourself: *would my reader* (who you now know) *have an interest in what I'm writing? How can I make it more interesting or useful for him or her?* Because you've taken the time to figure out your audience, suddenly your blog is a more interesting and useful place - and that means more and more visitors.

Define Your Own Success

Many people are thoroughly disappointed when, after a couple weeks of blogging, the great unwashed masses of internet users haven't beat a path to their blog. After a month of hard work, they're still only seeing a handful of visitors a day - and it's disheartening.

What that person doesn't realize is that by every *realistic* web metric, they're probably already quite successful. They are just looking at the data wrong and have defined what "success" is in an unrealistic fashion.

A successful blog sees steady growth over time, with occasional sharp spikes when they post something particularly popular. BoingBoing (http://www.boingboing.net/) didn't suddenly become big one day; it took years of hard work by Xeni Jardin and company to build the blog's traffic to the point where everyone knows of the site.

Let's use an example from a blog of an acquaintance who found herself wondering why her blog wasn't a big success. She showed me her usage statistics after the first month, and they looked like this:
Week 1: 145 unique visitors
Week 2: 180 unique visitors
Week 3: 202 unique visitors
Week 4: 219 unique visitors

She lamented the fact that after a month of hard work, she was only seeing about 30 unique visitors a day, and she was thinking about quitting the game. What I told her is that I saw the beginnings of an unqualified *success* and that I'd be thrilled with this kind of growth in my first month.

Each week, her visitors are going up compared to the previous month, at an average rate of 15%. That is an incredibly impressive week over week growth rate that indicates that there's a core of material at the site that people are coming back to read over and over again.

What would happen if she was able to sustain that growth over the course of a year? During the first week of the second year, her blog would welcome **207805 unique visitors**, or about 30,000 a day. That rate of growth is basically impossible to do, of course, but it gives an idea of how strong her rate of growth really is. **This lady only sees herself as a failure because she's choosing a perspective that guarantees failure.**

A much more realistic rate of growth is 8% a week. If our hero were to sustain 8% growth every single week throughout the year (something that many good blogs do during their first year - and even sometimes their second), she would be welcoming 7,932 unique visitors in an average week at the end of the year, more than 1,000 a day. Even better, if she uses this much more realistic metric

of success, her blog is doing quite well and will still be doing just fine even if a few weeks go by without any measurable growth.

Unless you're a large media conglomerate, slow and steady wins the race, and you need to select metrics for determining your success along these lines. You should be comparing your numbers to your own past numbers, not comparing your numbers to what ProBlogger (http://www.problogger.net/) is pulling in.

The day I started The Simple Dollar, I decided I would launch it quietly, see what kind of usage I get the first week, and then shoot for a 9% rate of growth each week. I decided to count page views as my metric, as I was really interested in having visitors stick around for a while, at least during the first month (I've now moved to tracking visitors as my primary metric). For me, a visitor who reads ten pages is worth at least as much as ten visitors who read a page each. As long as I was able to stay in line with that rate of growth, my site was a success. Here's what my real numbers were the first four weeks of life:
Week 1: 11253 pages
Week 2: 11847 pages
Week 3: 22585 pages
Week 4: 19790 pages

Let's see what my "goal" numbers would have been:
Week 2: 12266 pages
Week 3: 13370 pages
Week 4: 14572 pages

I missed my goal in week two, but I made my goal in weeks three and four with room to spare, which meant that if I had some slow growth weeks in the future, I was still achieving my goals.

If you want to define success for yourself in realistic terms, here's an action plan for you.

Take the total number of visitors from your first week of non-anomalous statistics and record it in a spreadsheet. For almost everyone, this will be the earliest week you have of statistics. If your blog is an established blog, but you want to start a growth metric to define your success, choose a fairly recent week that doesn't have anything unusual about it. By unusual, I mean linkage from a high traffic site like Slashdot or Digg.

Determine the percent growth in visitors you want to see each week. My personal recommendation is 8-10% with a new blog and 2-4% for a blog established for more than a year. If you go higher than this, you're targeting a rate of growth that requires a lot of luck - these numbers are attainable through simple hard work.

Make a trend for the next year, calculating the "expected" visitor count for each week for the next year. A spreadsheet makes this calculation really easy. Put your base visitor count in cell A1, put your target percentage in cell B1 (don't forget the percent sign!), and then in A2 enter this formula:

=A1+A1*B1 When you do this, it should produce a number slightly larger than the one above it. Click on A2 and then drag the black square in the lower right corner of the cell down to the 53rd row, and you have your targets for the next year! If you want to change your weekly growth, just change the percentage in B1 and the rest of the cells will recalculate.

Record your real weekly visitor count in the spreadsheet and observe how you're comparing to expectations. Remember, if you get some big traffic spikes from sites like Digg, the traffic will go down - just enjoy the big margin of success you had that week and plot how to keep a healthy margin in the future. Also, many well-written sites go through a big growth jump at some point where they grow at about 100% a week for a few weeks. Enjoy it while it lasts, because you'll likely plateau in the near future - just remember what your real metric of success is, and don't alter it because you believe you're ahead of the pack.

This method allows you to see your true success every week, and as each week passes, you'll see that you're on track for continued success in the future.

Don't Leave Them Hanging

We all get burnt out sometimes and want to take a break from our projects, no matter how much fun they are. As much as I enjoy The Simple Dollar, I do like to take long weekends in the country where my responsibilities are far behind me and it's fine to just spend an entire day laying on the floor reading a book. Other times, I just get tired of the grind of writing so much content every night and I simply need a bit of a break from it. **As intellectual human beings, we *need* to take breaks occasionally and let our minds stretch and relax.**

The only problem with taking a break from blogging is that **you're leaving your readers behind when you go off on your merry break.** Even if it's just a few days off, your readers will notice that you're gone, and if the break is much longer, they'll stop paying attention to you and the growth you've worked so hard to build goes to waste. Even worse is the inevitable "Sorry I haven't posted in a while, I've been too busy to care about you, the reader" post, which tells your readers that you're not serious at all about blogging and also informs them that they don't really value you as a reader - so why should you stick around?

There's really only one way around this, and that's to **get a bit ahead on posting to your blog** so that in the event of the need for you to take a break from it, your blog will go on existing just like it always has and your readership (and growth) will be there for you when you come back. Most blogging software allows you to write posts in advance of their publication date; take advantage of this feature so that your audience isn't left behind.

If you're already writing at full capacity, meaning that every time you write anything, you immediately publish it, **you need to take a step back from this rate of posting and establish a more regular rate.**

Let's say you post an average of ten times a week, or one to two posts every day, whenever you have a good idea. Your audience then expects there to be something new each day on your site. But what happens if there's a family emergency and you need to leave quickly? Suddenly, three days go by and your audience is left out in the cold ... blog readers are fickle and some may have thrown in the towel already.

Instead, you should just post once a day, take those other posts, and set them to automatically publish in the future. Make sure that you have something that can be published for the next several days in the event you have to suddenly leave your blog. These extra posts are no longer a problem because you're now writing below capacity; you're writing about three "extra" posts a week, on average.

My technique is to have posts completely ready to be posted for the next few days at all times, so that if I'm called away in an emergency, The Simple Dollar will go along roughly as normal in my absence (maybe not as timely, but with good content). If I write something topical or something

really interesting that I want to get posted as soon as possible, I just substitute it in for something that is due to be posted, and move that original post back a few days. This allows me to have timely posts, but also be covered in the event of a major crisis.

Here's an action plan for getting started with posting in absentia:

Determine your rate of blogging. Take a look at how many things you've posted per day in the last month. This is the baseline your readers are currently expecting from you.

If you're blogging at capacity, throttle down on this rate of blogging. You want to be in a situation where 30% or so of the posts you write during a healthy writing period are "extra," meaning that they're above and beyond what is actually posted during that period. So, determine what your rate of posting should be (likely 70% of your current posting rate) and slowly move your blog to this new rate. You should then be able to start generating posts that aren't immediately published.

When you accumulate extra posts, set them to publish in advance according to your posting schedule, even if you're planning on being around. That way, your blog is ready to go for the next short period in the event of an emergency. Remember that you can always insert topical posts into the queue and then move the replaced post to the end of the queue, which enables you to publish things that are topical or that excite you immediately.

A quick survey of your site statistics will show you that you have *some* number of loyal readers. Using this pre-writing technique, you can keep them loyal and reward them with some of your writings even if you're not around; if your writing is building an audience, then even your temporary absence won't slow down the growth.

Don't Be Insular

Quite often, bloggers sit around crafting posts without considering the wider community around them. We write and write and write, but we get into a routine and forget to seek out interesting new links outside of our own blogs. We check Technorati to see if people are linking to us, but we forget the importance of linking out to others and connecting to the wider world.

Blogging is being in a conversation, and insular blogging is like being in a conversation with yourself: it's not very interesting for anyone else to listen to.

Conversations are what readers want, in the end. They want to read lots of perspectives on what interests them. We do it all the time; that's why we often click on lots of pages when we do a search or why we visit lots of different sites on the same topic. When we write a response to another post, or write our own comments on a news article, we are using our blog to continue a conversation with someone else. The simple act of doing this regularly not only provides infinite topics, but also draws in readers *engaged in searches for continuation of conversations that interest them*. This includes people peeking at Technorati for links as well as people searching in search engines, and both will drive traffic your way.

Breaking the insular barrier goes beyond your own blog: it stretches into interacting with other blogs as well as seeking out conversations to participate in. It helps if you imagine that your blog is a participant in an academic conference. If you just sit over in the corner quietly at your poster, no one will talk to you, but if you talk to people at their other posters and engage them in conversation, you will both grow.

Here are ten ways to reduce your insularity as a blogger and keep the conversation going. I try to do the first several every day and the remainder on a weekly basis.

Find interesting conversations. I do this by reading great link aggregators, subscribing to thought provoking blogs both within your topic and far outside of it, setting up watchlists on terms of interest on Technorati, and by searching Technorati and IceRocket for any random ideas that pop into my head.

Write a post that links to a specific blog post on someone else's blog. Don't just paste in a link and say, "Cool, look at this." Link to something that makes you *think*, and explain what those thoughts are and how they relate to your topic.

Comment on someone else's blog. If you have an immediate brief reaction to a blog post, leave a comment for them. Include a link back to your own blog, and if your comment is interesting, you'll almost always get a visitor or two.

Send an email to a blogger you enjoy. I find a well-written email, especially to a less-popular blogger, is a great way to build up conversation and meet interesting people. If you are intrigued by several posts or by a writer's general viewpoint, an email to the author is a great way to build a new conversation. For me, this often results in a new acquaintance and perhaps new blogging topics.

Drop an IM to a blogger you enjoy. Just this evening, I was contacted by a reader who had some general questions about the content of my site, and this actual conversation built into several good ideas for future posts and a new person on my buddy list. I also do the same, writing to bloggers that I like if they provide their instant messenger information. This is often a great way of getting to know a blogger who blogs on a topic that you know little about, but are interested in. For instance, if you wish to IM with me, I'm often on AIM in the evenings as tes888888.

Participate in message boards and put your URL in your signature. Not only are interesting messageboards a treasure trove of good ideas, but often your blog's URL will be seen as a continuation of messageboard conversations. Readers who like your ideas will wish to subscribe to your newsletter, after all.

Link directly to URLs of news stories. If a news story in the mainstream media interests you, don't be afraid to link straight to that story and quote from it when you're discussing it. This will actually help people find your blog, as I often search Technorati or IceRocket for URLs of news stories that pique my interest - and I'm not alone in doing this.

Participate in blog carnivals. These are effective ways of drawing in new readers. Whenever you make a *good* post, you should look for a carnival that matches the topic and submit your article to that carnival. It's an effective way of bringing your article to the attention of a whole community and set of conversations. To find out more about blog carnivals, visit http://www.blogcarnival.com/

Post a daily or weekly link aggregation. Some people literally do this using del.icio.us, which allows you to automatically create a post out of your most recent links and have it appear in your blog at regular intervals. Since I tend to be … quirky with my del.icio.us linkages, I usually do this myself in the form of the morning roundup. Basically, I just save the links that I want to shout from the rooftops, but I don't really have enough thoughts of my own to contribute to make a whole post out of.

Write an occasional post just highlighting a blog you love. I wrote a series recently highlighting personal finance blogs that I love to fill a weekend when I was travelling, and I'm planning on a similar series on blogs that simply inspire me. Not only will your readers appreciate it when you write passionately about something and point them to an interesting site, but the person you link to (when they inevitably find it) will appreciate it, too. Don't overdo it, though; save these for the blogs that you really *love* so that your paean to them will show off some real passion.

Keep Something in Reserve

Quite often, I'll find myself having more ideas than I know what to do with. I'll come up with twenty five post ideas in a day and write most of them out in a gigantic frenzy of typing, and then I'll repeat the next day.

Unfortunately, there are also times where no ideas are forthcoming at all. The words are there - you have no problem sending emails or posting on messageboards or leaving comments - but the ideas for new posts are just gone.

This is a dangerous place to be, and while [it's good to be a little bit ahead](#), every day you sit there on empty, wanting to blog but unable to, is another day that your readers are being left behind and your dreams of success are slipping away.

The best technique to avoid this problem is to plan for it as best you can by leaving inspiration for yourself to find at those times. Here are some techniques that will help you keep a little bit in the gas tank for those times when you're running on fumes.

Keep an [idea diary](#). I keep a small diary with me wherever I go. In it, I jot down any potential post ideas as they occur to me, and later I cross them off when I use them. Even better: when I see an idea that's good, but not time sensitive, and I currently have lots of other ideas around, I mark it with a few stars and literally save it for later.

Bookmark Wikipedia entries. Whenever you are thinking about something that might be worth writing about, just bookmark a reference on that topic in a "For later" folder. Then, when you're scratching about for ideas, take a peek in that folder. If you can get your interest going on a new topic, posts almost always follow.

Read a book. Go to your local library, find a book within your topic, yank it off the shelf, and head to a chair. If nothing else, you can write a summary of the book; if it really pays off, it will open the floodgates for you with many new ideas. You can do the same thing with a magazine, or do it in the comfort of the cafe at your local bookstore instead of at the library.

Continue a series. It's good to have an open-ended irregular series of posts on your site that always point straight to future topics; you can hit these up at any time when you're devoid of posting ideas.

Highlight things. I spent a weekend recently [just](#) [highlighting](#) [personal](#) [finance](#) [blogs](#) that I read. It didn't really take any creativity, I just looked at the personal finance sites I visit each day and made a list of things I like about them. In the future, I plan on doing a similar series on blogs that inspire me in various ways. Not only will posts like this enable you to get through a drought, but your readers will love the passion and the people you link to will appreciate the nod.

The most important thing to remember is that the juices *will* start flowing again - these are merely ways to help your blog survive until it happens.

Reach Out

When you visit a site on a certain topic, you usually know what to expect. When I visit dooce.com, I expect to read about parenting, for example. Yet the entries that often really pull me in are the ones that bridge the gap between the writer's specific topic of interest and my specific topic of interest. For example, I quite enjoyed a post there about a hidden cost of home ownership; it was still within the general boundaries of the parenting topic, but it touched on an area that interested me as well.

The key here is to find ways to **reach out to new audiences** beyond your established one, while **not alienating your already-faithful readers**. Whenever I add something to The Simple Dollar, I know that my readers are expecting it to have some connection to personal finance, but I'm always wondering how I can twist that concept just a bit to attract readers from different genres.

This very post is an example of what I'm talking about. The Simple Dollar is a personal finance site, but here I am posting a series on how to make a better professional blog. What's the connection here? It's pretty simple; both blog development and personal finance are all about managing and maximizing your resources and both seek to eventually help you to earn money. They both require a personal philosophy of persistence and steadiness, and they both, ultimately, come down to desire: do you really *want* to make it work. Thus, it makes sense to work on a series about professional blogging on a personal finance site, provided that the blogging series doesn't become the focus of the site.

Another *great* example of this is my recent post on [free software for Windows](#). I am always on the lookout for free software that can replace expensive commercial software, and with my recent laptop purchase, I was able to basically build a laptop with everything I needed on it with no additional software costs: full productivity suites and all. Since I saved a lot of money this way, it seemed like a natural thing to post about. It turns out that the post [really struck a chord with the tech and personal productivity communities](#) and I was able to reap the rewards with lots of new visitors.

Here are some ideas on how you can reach out to topics and communities outside of your own.

Make a list of your other interests. If you're going to write a great post linking two topics, you need to have a passion for both topics. So, make a big list of your other interests. For me, blogging, baseball, writing, technology, gadgets, personal productivity, marketing, and such started my list, which quickly grew into the hundreds.

Make an [idea map](#). Take some of those ideas and make an idea map. Pull out a sheet of paper, turn it horizontally, and write your main topic on the left and one of the new topics on the right. Then start connecting them by listing potential connections in the middle and drawing lines wherever you see a connection. I usually write further thoughts on the lines as well, so the connection is clear when I look at it. The purpose of this is to simply write down as many connections as possible.

Break the connections into potential post topics. Each connection you make in that idea map is the potential for a post. Take those connections and start working with them, massaging them. Some will come easier than others; that's fine. In the end, you should have a healthy list of topics that bridge the gap between your own topic and another topic.

Look for key community points in which to insert your post. I usually do this by searching Technorati for posts that are anywhere close to my idea. I try to find several potential links that I could use; I particularly look for posts that appear on reasonably popular sites, but not the most popular ones: ones that have 100 to 750 sites linking to them. These are usually leaders within small communities and often have a ton of interesting information; they're also often followed by people who are behind the heavy-hitting blogs. When I finally write my post, I'll usually link to a few of these. Trackbacks, Technorati, and keyword searches will often take care of the rest, but if you really want the post to get noticed, send an email to one of those popular (but not too popular) blogs you linked to and ask them for advice.

Do your research *well*. If you're inching towards another audience, they're going to know quickly whether or not you have a clue, so don't put in a statement that is just nonsensical. Do some research and make a good, accurate post before you expose your blog to a wider audience.

Remember: every time your blog does something interesting to you without jumping completely beyond the general topic, it's almost always going to be interesting to your readers.

Be Yourself

Look at the [top blogs on Technorati](#) and ask yourself how many of them are merely link aggregators or merely report dry fact; the answer is "not many." Why is this?

Simply put, **it is the human aspect of blogging that draws readers**. It is exhilirating to find someone who is passionate about a topic and wears it on their sleeve; it draws you back again and again.

Take [BoingBoing](#). It's basically a collection of cultural oddities and minor phenomena, something that anyone halfway attuned to popular culture could generate. So why did it take off and so many bad imitators did not? The writers were human, and weren't afraid to be themselves. Regular readers became familiar with Cory Doctorow's challenges as a writer in mainstream publishing and how they often connected to greater cultural issues. The humor of Xeni and Cory (and the rest) shines through as well, making them seem like human beings, people I'd like to meet and have a beer with. **The world feels less empty knowing that there are *real* people with these interests.**

The core of it is that as a blog writer, part of what you're selling is yourself. People can read about personal finance tips anywhere, so why do they come to The Simple Dollar? It's the other things that I add to the mix; the eleven secret herbs and spices that I add to the fried chicken.

Still not sure what to do? Here are some ideas.

Use more adjectives, descriptives, and metaphors. What do I mean? Read these three sentences and ask yourself which one draws you in more as a reader:

Here's a post from The Simple Dollar.

Here's a post about bad finance writing at The Simple Dollar.

Why is The Simple Dollar riding Robert Kiyosaki like a drunk man on a mechanical bull?

The first one is as dull as unflavored oatmeal and the second is only somewhat better, but the third one grabs your attention by adding more detail through adjectives (drunk, mechanical), descriptives (riding Robert Kiyosaki), and metaphor (like a drunk man on a mechanical bull). The sentence creates an interesting visualization and is much more likely to draw in the reader. Some of you might be snickering, but which one of those three sentences grabbed your attention?

Drop minor details about your daily life. Make offhand references to your hobbies and interests on occasion. Talk about your experiences as a parent, or with the ol' mother-in-law. Talk about your attempts to write and your successes at making souffle. These *humanize* you, make you seem like a

real person to the reader. If you toss just a dash of it on the site, it will bring out the flavor of your topic - and of you.

Keep a few connected pieces about yourself moving forward. In the background, I make regular references to the fact that my son is growing older. He was less than a year old when I started the site; I mentioned his first birthday in a few posts and now I am mentioning his adventures as he learns to walk. In the future, there will probably be some potty training references. Why? My son is a major part of my life, being a father is a major part of *who I am*. In this, there is growth and change, and sharing bits of this growth and change with the readers keeps them interested. Many of them have gone through this and it seems familiar; some are going through this as they read it; others aren't yet, but they can identify with the task of being a father to a toddler having seen a man carrying around his child in public.

Find your own comfort zone. Obviously, there are matters that are inappropriate for blogging, and there are other matters outside of your comfort zone. The key is to find elements of your life that you're willing to share with the world. I don't mind letting everyone know that I'm a proud father, that I'm a recovering video game addict, that I really enjoy open-ended computer games like The Sims 2, that Lost is my favorite television show, that I am near obsessive about cooking, that I was very recently a financial train wreck, that I'm a semi-failed writer, and so on. These are topics I'm comfortable with discussing; there are other topics that I have no interest in writing about on here. Figure out what you're comfortable with and have a clear line that separates your personality from your personal life.

Write some posts in a purely conversational tone at first. I do this with many posts; I just write them as I would say them to a friend, often including obscure or inside jokes, just as I would say them. In later drafts, I might neaten up things or excise some of the inside references, but the core of my voice remains there. Ask yourself how you would tell the story of this post to a friend, and you're bound to liven it up a bit.

Don't overdo it. Remember that these are just ideas to add flavor to what you're already presenting to the world. Don't make your blog a personal blog; just add little bits of flavor to humanize it every once in a while.

Length Doesn't Matter

So many blog development gurus give vastly different pieces of advice about how long blog posts should be. Some tell you to keep it nice and short because your audience doesn't have much of an attention span. Others encourage you to write at length to maximize your keywords and really engage your audience.

They're both right - and they're both wrong.

The fact of the matter is that a writer can be successful writing either short posts (like [boing boing](#)) or long posts (like [dooce](#)). This is true in every genre - take politics, where [some write at length](#) and [some are highly brief](#). Others succeed by [alternating wildly](#). As for me, two of my favorite writers on the internet are [Jason Kottke](#) and [Bill Simmons](#). One writes fifteen word posts all the time; the other one writes six thousand word essays all the time.

Anyone that tells you that all of your posts should be short or all of your posts should be long without knowing your writing style is full of crap.

The simple fact of the matter is that you should figure out for yourself how long your posts should be, and no one else. Write for as long as you feel comfortable and everything else will work out. That's not to say there aren't ways to optimize short posts or long posts or medium-sized posts - in fact, I'll get to some of these before the end of this series - but that one isn't particularly preferable to the other.

What's far more important than post length itself is whether or not you're comfortable posting. What I mean by this is that some people are simply wired to prefer expressing their thoughts in a sentence or two and others are wired to prefer expressing their thoughts in logorrheic essays.

If you're forcing yourself to write longer or shorter posts than you naturally feel like writing, **it is hurting your blog**. You're choosing, because of the advice of some crackpot "blog expert," to stifle your natural voice in exchange for "optimal consumer contact" or some other fifty dollar buzzword that has no real meaning.

The truth is that **you should do everything you possibly can to speak in your natural voice**, "optimal consumer contact" be damned, and any obstacles you put in the way of your natural voice will water down the message you want to send and the true relationship you'll build with your readers.

Here are a few exercises to help you find the appropriate length for your writing voice.

"Free write" a few posts. Just sit down and write a few posts without any worry at all about optimizing them. Type out what you actually *want* to say and let your heart guide you, not your mind. We're talking first draft here, not a finished piece; just build up your post until your heart feels most comfortable with it. For some of you, this might be two sentences. For others (like me), it might spread across pages.

Look for posts on your blog that just didn't quite hit home for you. We all have a few clunkers that we've written in our blogs. Take these clunkers out and look at them. Where are the obvious mistakes? Much of the time, these mistakes are either of obvious exclusion or unnecessary inclusion of material. Now, try adding in the extra material you think should be there, or removing the excess that seems *wrong* to you. Is the post better now? We're not talking about "optimal consumer contact" better; we're talking better in terms of expressing the raw thoughts inside of you.

Take a week and experiment. You can even tell your readers if you like, asking them for feedback. Just take a week and write to whatever lengths feel right to your inner voice. Almost always, writers who listen to and trust their inner voice above all will write better things.

Remember, there are benefits to both short and long posts. If you decide that a major switch is in store for you, you'll likely lose a few readers initially, but in the long run you will gain more readers. Why? Your natural voice will come right out through the screen, establishing a stronger relationship with your readers and encouraging them to link to you.

Talk about "optimal consumer contact."

Respond to Comments

I receive dozens of comments each day at The Simple Dollar, both on the site and by direct email. There are times when I'd much rather spend my time working on posts or reading other interesting sites or posting on messageboards than dealing with this user feedback, but I make it a point to read every single piece of feedback and, if there's any reasonable way to make a response, fire off an email.

For starters, **you might gain a new regular reader.** The person who commented has some degree of interest in your site. Follow up on that interest and engage the reader and you'll likely guide them back to your site for further reading.

You might also spark an interesting discussion. Conversation is what blogs are really all about. They can bring about new ideas, new relationships, and potential interesting posts for your blog.

Also, **you never know for sure who you might be interacting with.** I was once contacted by a well known writer using only his first name. I didn't realize I had made this connection until the conversation had grown a bit, and that only happened because I took the initiative to respond to his comment.

Given the obvious positives of responding to comments, many of us still mess it up from time to time as we deal with some of the more sticky issues. Here are a few pointers that will help you avoid any major faux pas when dealing with comments on your blog.

Don't delete negative comments unless they're actually demeaning to the readership in general. Some people *choose* to use a harsh negative voice in their commentary. Even if you don't agree with the person, leave their comments be; they provide an alternate perspective on the content you've posted.

Respond to both positive and negative comments. No matter whether the comment is positive, negative, or neutral, the simple fact remains that the comment was left by a reader who was interested in what you've written, interested enough to bother to interact. Don't let that interest die by not responding if there is a place to respond.

If the message was in the form of a comment, reply on the site and also make sure to send an email. The person might not come back to your site just to see if you've left a responding comment. So shoot that person an email as well, including your URL. This ensures that the connection that your blog has made won't die.

When the messages get overwhelming… your blog is doing very well. At this point, you no longer need to respond to everything; just *read* everything and fire a response to the ones that are interesting to you and more likely to spur interesting conversation. I'm basically at this point with

The Simple Dollar; if I responded to every single message and comment that I receive, I'd do nothing but respond to messages and comments. I read everything, though, and respond where it's interesting or needed.

In short, your blog is a central point of a community. Whenever new people move into the community, you should take them a hospitality basket, especially when the neighborhood is small. When the neighborhood grows large, you should still keep tabs on everything that's going on and interact where there's room for you ... and be proud that your community has grown to this point.

Inspire Yourself

Although I've already covered how to overcome "blogger's block" and how to reach out to other communities, these topics really don't cover what one needs for true inspiration within one's own topic. Where does that spark come from for those truly great posts, and where can I find it?

Inspiration for great posts is much like the formation of a pearl within an oyster. An oyster lives in a relatively sandy environment, and on occasion a small grain of sand will slip inside the oyster and begin to form a beautiful pearl over time. In other words, for any great post, there is a moment of inspiration (the sand) and a period of cultivation (the formation of the pearl).

Looking at cultivation For some of us, the "cultivation" period is very short; we want to write the post as soon as we come up with the idea; for others, it's a much longer period where the idea gestates and grows until it is a perfect pearl. This is a matter of personality difference, one that is difficult to find advice on because we all write differently.

The area where we overlap, however, is the inspiration, and we all wish we had more of it. Much like the oyster in the water, though, there are a few things we can do to increase our chances of finding more inspiration.

Move to a sandier area. Subtly change your daily habits so you're more open to inspirational moments. For The Simple Dollar, I did this by adding Money Magazine and Kiplinger's Personal Finance to my regular magazine browses at the newsstand, adding CNBC to my list of "favorite" television channels that I surf through (I have about eight of them), and listening to Dave Ramsey's radio show when I'm in his listening area. These are just subtle changes, but they provide more opportunities for ideas to find their way into my head.

Keep the sand stirred up in the water. Actively seek out opportunities for ideas to come along. This includes reading other blogs on your topic, browsing link aggregators like reddit, and reading print media on your topic (for me, this would include Money Magazine and The Wall Street Journal, as well as infinite numbers of books). Engaging your mind in a topic is the best way to plant the seeds for great ideas.

Open ourselves up a little more. Question everything you read within the topic. If you read something that engages you, ask yourself what you don't understand about it, and try to find out more. Read specific subtopics that you're weak on and try to understand what they're saying (I do this with stocks).

Let inspiration come to you. At the same time, don't spend all of your time thinking about the topic. Most of the times, ideas grow in our brains when we're thinking about other things, so enjoy a wide variety of other things. Once you've set the sand inside the oyster in your head, the pearl will continue to grow even if you're focused on other things.

Don't spit out the sand. Sometimes we simply forget the core of a great idea when it pops up while we're traveling or doing something unrelated. My best strategy for avoiding this is to keep an idea diary in which I can jot down those spare ideas when they come to me, then look over the ideas later just to make sure I haven't lost that little bit of inspiration.

The world is your oyster, of course; you just need to be ready for it.

The Content Comes First

When you have a static page, it's fine to have plenty of ads on it. People visit static pages because there's some piece of information there that they need. They've bookmarked it and will return only when they need that specific piece of information, at which time it is worth it for them to dodge the ads you've put up.

A blog, on the other hand, is a living, breathing entity. People become regular readers of blogs and visit them on a continuous regular basis. They're likely to tell their friends about sites. When they visit the site, they want to see the fresh new content, not dodge ads over and over again.

Many people take ad placement information about static sites and try to apply them to blogs. They plaster ads and various other web gizmos all over the place in an attempt to grab the reader's attention in any way possible.

What ends up happening, however, is **a content overload, leaving the site almost unusable for readers.** Take a look at this example, taken from PC Magazine's news site (full URL: http://lifeofmuff.blogspot.com/2006/09/too-many-ads-not-enough-content.html). This is a site that is taking ads to the extreme, even for a static page. Yet the site is constantly updated, making the site closer to a blog than to a pure static site. The result? You couldn't pay me to read that website.

Here is the real recipe for maximizing your ad earnings.

Write good content before anything else. Readers don't come to your site for ads - they come for content. Worry about the content above everything else so that you have people to look at your ads to begin with.

Determine how static your site is. Compare the number of hits your front page, your RSS feed, and the last few days worth of posts get compared to your archives. As your blog ages, the weight will gradually shift to your more static archives, away from your front page, so you can get away with ads that are closer to those for a static site (i.e., more ads above the fold and such). As a young blog without many entrants from Google, heavy ad placements will have a negative effect on your readers and will make it hard for you to build up a long-term healthy base.

In short, minimize your ads early on and, when you build up an archive of good content and Google has assigned you a fairly steady page rank (after about six months of steady blogging or so), you can look at more advertisement placement. When you're young, the focus should be content above all, so be subtle with the ads early on so you can maximize your readership.

Positive readers attract positive readers - negative readers attract nothing. Examine your own pages and try to think like a reader, ignoring your own ad returns. If you find a page on your

site to be cluttered with ads, think about how your reader must feel. If I visit a site where the ads are overwhelming, I don't like it by default and I have minimal interest in linking to it.

Use only one ad above the fold. This sounds crazy, but it works: include only one ad at the top of the page that's visible when the window opens, and make it an image ad. This ad will stick out to your readers because it's the only one and will be much more likely to grab their attention and generate a click than a bunch of ads. *This is especially true for young blogs; if you have sites that are very static where most of your readers come in from search engines straight into your archives, you can add more ads.*

Blending text ads only works to trick readers. If you're trying to make text ads look like the rest of your site, you're just seeking to trick readers that come in from search engines. If someone accidentally clicks on an ad on your site and goes to some crummy offer that they don't like, they will think negatively about what you're doing. Many people say "blend" to maximize earnings; I say "don't blend" unless your site is highly static.

Don't interrupt cohesive thoughts with ads. If you make it so that a reader has to jump over an ad to continue reading an article you've posted, you're annoying the reader and reducing the positive feelings they'll have for your site. Ads between pieces of content (between posts) have most of the positives of such "in the body" ads, but eliminate most of the negatives.

The basic rule of thumb is this: don't annoy your readers, especially early on when you don't have a lot of readers. Hold off on the heavy ads and you'll do much better in the long run.

Money Doesn't Matter

This seems like a contradiction, doesn't it? On a series on professional blogging on a personal finance site, I'm writing that money doesn't matter? What gives?

The truth is that many people dream about becoming professional bloggers, but after blogging for a month, they peek at their AdSense account, see they've only earned $1.03, and they get very disheartened. They slow down their posting and move on to other things. A few months later, they see they've only earned $1.54 total and they abandon it entirely.

The problem is that they're viewing their success by an unrealistic yardstick. In order to build up any significant amount of income on your site, *you have to have readers*. Once you have a lot of readers, money will start to drift in, but money simply won't come without readers.

The real measure of a blog's worth is its audience. There is no other measure of long-term success. Anyone that tells you otherwise is telling you a fairy tale to sell a product, likely an SEO tool.

Why is this so? Isn't a measure of an item's worth the amount of money it generates? Of course. I'll use a simple analogy to explain. Your readership is much like the money you've invested over time; it's the result of a lot of hard work and effort. Similarly, a blog's income is the equivalent to the return on that investment. If you have a lot of money invested, you can expect a solid return on that money, right? But **expecting great income from a blog with only a few readers is like putting ten dollars in a mutual fund and expecting to quickly become a millionaire**.

In short, **the income from your blog is pretty much the worst measure of success that you can have** unless you're near the top of the top blogs on Technorati. It's similar to saying that you're not a success because your investments only made $1 this year, but you only invested $10 to begin with.

Another wrinkle is that **there is no strict relationship between readers and income outside of "more readers means more income".** There are countless variables in this relationship: total readers, propensity of readers to click on ads, value of your keywords, the current status of people participating in the advertising program, and so on.

What it comes down to is that **you should measure your success based on your readership, not on your total income**. The total income will come slowly, and it will vary; if you're looking to get rich quick, you'll *never* be successful blogging.

What metrics can you use for success, then? Here are a few good ones.

Google Analytics Sign up for Google Analytics to keep track of the visits and page views on your blog. It does a splendid job of showing you a wide diversity of angles on the visitors to your site, but two big measures of success are repeat visitors and pages per visitor. Whenever you can build increases on either one, your site is doing well.

Comment count Whenever people comment on your site, that means they're taking an active interest in what you're writing. Once they've reached the point of commenting, you've engaged them. Keep the conversation alive and you'll do nothing but build up your investment in readers.

Feed readers Hook yourself up with Feedburner to keep track of your feed readers. Some people argue that people who read feeds are just gobbling your bandwidth, but the truth is that they are readers who are engaged enough with your site to incorporate it into their regular reading regimen. They'll visit your individual posts and, even better, many feed readers are bloggers themselves who will link to you when you're interesting.

Define your own success. No matter what you use to measure your site's growth, be sure to set goals that are realistic. Don't expect 80% week over week growth - it simply won't happen over the long term. Instead, set your goals moderately and well in advance so that you have an achievable goal to work towards. For me, the goals involve page views and feed readers; if I can keep increasing these, I'm meeting my goals with The Simple Dollar.

Don't Give Up

At some point, we all get disheartened with blogging. Maybe we feel out of touch with the readers, or maybe it's simply a matter of level or slightly falling traffic. Maybe it's just a sense of isolation and disinterest in the topic.

This is perhaps the most important period in the life of your blog, and **this moment is what separates successful blogs from unsuccessful ones.** Successful blogs are the ones that reach this point and keep going, doing whatever they need to do to keep on posting.

I'm not suggesting a big recommitment to the site; these usually never work and end up in failure. Instead, the best way to keep the relationship alive is to rediscover where exactly the value is in your blog.

What you'll find out, in the end, is that what really separates blogging from other venues of writing is the *people*. You are very, very close to your audience when you're a blogger and they're with you with every single word you post. It is this relationship that is the heart of blogging, and it is people that often provide the impetus to keep it up.

Here are some ideas for keeping the flame alive.

Save the powerful comments and emails. Whenever someone posts a comment or sends you an email telling you how much they enjoy your blog, save that email in a folder somewhere. Then, when things get rough, read through the emails in that folder. Remember how much your writing has really impacted people.

Get inspired again. Read those blogs that really spurred you into blogging. For me, when I get down, I read dooce, lifehacker, and several others. Their words and interesting ideas remind me again and again how powerful and amazing blogging can be.

Talk to fellow bloggers. Relationships with fellow bloggers are vital in keeping things up. If you don't have a forum to communicate with other bloggers, then just look for similar blogs to yourself and just strike up a conversation. Ask them why they blog and what keeps them motivated.

Post a survey for your readers. Ask them what they like about the site - and also what they don't like. The important part is that surveys like this often reveal that what you're blogging is important to someone, and it is this sense of importance that provides a new direction for blogging.

Slow down your posting schedule. Some people become overwhelmed by the expectation of posting every single day, or three times a day, or twice a week - whatever their schedule is. If you find yourself feeling like you can no longer keep up, just back off with the posting schedule for a

while. I'd suggest halving it on a trial basis; go to posting every other day, or three posts every two days, and see how that fits you.

Take a break. Allow yourself a certain amount of time to just step away from the blog, with a commitment to return in a week or two weeks. Although I'd encourage you to [leave your readers with something to remember you by](), it's more important that you get your mindset right for the long haul. Step away if you have to, but step away with a *plan*.

Be Lucky

Every once in a while, you'll write a post that is a surefire winner, but quite often, our most popular posts come as a relative surprise. You'll post something and out of nowhere will come comments and people linking to the posts. How did that happen?

The simple truth is that it's luck. Finding that certain thing that gets other people engaged is an inexact science at best and a complete roll of the dice at worst. But, unquestionably, it is these "lucky" moments that cause your readership to really take off.

But luck at blogging is much like luck at many other games: it exists, but the winners are the ones who are able to leverage that luck so that it works for them rather than against them. They create situations where luck is more likely to work in their favor.

Here are several ideas for making luck exist for you - and how you can take advantage of it.

Expose yourself. Try to establish relationships with other bloggers and with your readers. Respond to comments and don't be insular. Don't be afraid to just send an email to a blogger about something that interests you on their site - you'll open the door to a relationship that will likely make you both fans of each other's blogs and will help highlight the things you do that are exceptional.

Expose your good work. If you think something you've written is potentially interesting, don't be afraid to ask for the thoughts of others on it. In most cases, it's highly tacky to ask for a link; instead, just send the link out to people you know or post it on a messageboard and just ask for their thoughts on the topic. Don't overdo this, though; save it for things that you think have a strong potential to break out. If nothing else, it might help you to get a better feel for your audience.

Write potentially interesting stuff. This seems hard, especially if you're trying to come up with enough to write about already, but it provides a great filter for you to not spend your time on boring ideas. If you come up with an idea, simply ask yourself whether or not you'd have an interest in reading this post if it was on another blog. If the answer's no, then you should probably toss that idea and look for another one.

Focus on your feed readers. I often read The Simple Dollar through a feed reader because it strips my site down to the bare content. What stands out? What's interesting? What's boring? Quite often, posts that seem great on the regular site seem less interesting here, and posts that made me yawn as I was creating them pop to life once the constraints of the site are removed.

Look at what's hot elsewhere. If you see a news story and have an immediate interesting response, you might be onto something worthwhile. The same thing goes for new fads as they're breaking; if you see something really interesting elsewhere, mention it and link to it. This way, if

you have an interesting thought on a topic that's becoming prominent, others will likely find you organically.

Guide Your Users

I like to write long posts. I've discovered that length doesn't matter, so I write and write to my heart's content until I feel like I've completed my thoughts and said what I want to say.

Quite often, though, this means I have a big block of solid text, a nearly unpenetrable slab of words that, as a reader, I would only penetrate if the topic or first few sentences drew me in. Some people are gifted storytellers and have that talent, but most of us need to make our writing navigable to our readers so that they can quickly find out what the point is and whether or not it's worth digging into the details.

Writing for a blog is quite a bit different than writing for print media. With print media, you can assume that you at least have a bit of time to draw in the reader, but with online media, the reader has many, many other things that are just a mouse click away. **You need to draw the reader's attention quickly, or else they'll leave.**

In short, **you *have* to be able to guide your readers**. You need to not only guide them through your posts, but you need to also be able to guide them quickly to other posts of yours that will interest them. Rather than seeing the short attention span of a blog reader as a disadvantage, you can use it to your advantage and rack up lots of page views in the process.

Here are several tips for guiding your users through your posts and your site.

Use bold **and *emphasis* to highlight key thoughts.** Whenever you make a major point, particularly in longer posts, encase it in **bold** and *emphasis* tags. These will embolden or italicize those pieces and make them stand out to your readers, enabling them to quickly flip through your post, get the general message you're providing, and dig into the areas that interest them. This enables your message to reach the reader within the constraints of a shorter attention span.

Arrange your post in a sensible order. Make sure your key points follow each other in an order that makes sense. Usually, this is best done by writing a draft of a post, saving it, and reading it again later; the appropriate order of the points will be much clearer when you read it again with fresh eyes.

Provide links to related materials. If you have posts on the same topic in your archives, make sure that you provide links to the older posts. This allows readers to quickly find more material on the subject if they're interested.

Provide links to archives. Your site needs to have clear access to your archives. If readers enjoy your posts, they're going to want to read more of what you've written.

Include some general highlights. It's useful to create a page on your site that includes a number of your best posts. Make this page accessible on your menubar so that readers can quickly find a sampling of your best writing.

Leverage the Past

Once you've reached a point where you have a healthy number of posts, you'll find that even your best, most original ideas overlap with ideas you've posted on in the past. Some people see this as a problem; they worry that they're out of original ideas. Successful bloggers, however, see it as an opportunity.

Let's say you've been working hard on your blog for six months, and it's been growing an audience at a rate of 5% a week. At the start of your seventh month, *66% of your audience has never read any of your earliest work*, and that's assuming no audience turnover at all. In other words, every six months, the vast majority of your audience is unfamiliar with your work that is six months or older.

This is an *opportunity*. You have an audience that you can expose to some of your best writing for the first time. You also have the power to accentuate your posts with additional information, increasing the mindspace of your blog. Even better? You have a great opportunity to get more pageviews from an average visitor.

Here are some guidelines for leveraging your older posts.

Link related points in your new posts to old posts from your archives. If you reference a topic that you wrote about in the past, add a link to it. Often, merely linking the point in your new post directly to the post in your archive is the best approach, as it allows readers to dig in deeper if the topic interests them. Over time, you'll link together sequences of these, leading people deeper and deeper into your archives. It becomes something of an organic site tour, leading people through threads of thought.

Post surveys of your archives. Every once in a while, you can post surveys of your archives. These posts can be pure retrospectives, providing a selection of links of your best older work to new readers. These are often great posts for the end of the year, or for filling space while you're on a vacation from your blog.

If you're using WordPress, try out the related entries plugin. This plugin automatically finds posts potentially related to your current post and appends them, giving your readers quick links to additional writings in your blog similar to the topic at hand. This is very good if your site is full of content-heavy posts, as the tool will automatically find supplemental content (and potential page views) for every post you make.

Maintain a "greatest hits" section of your site. Keep a brief list of some of the most popular posts on your site and link to this archive on every page. This allows every casual reader to your site to quickly find some of your best work. Keep the list short, though, or else you may overload the attention span of casual visitors and they won't visit anything at all.

Don't replace new content with old content. Some blogs figure out that leveraging your archives can be an easy way to generate post counts, so they load up their site pointing to old posts all of the time. After a while, it becomes really clear to the audience that these blogs have nothing *new* to say. In short, leverage your archives, but don't lean on your archives.

SEO Doesn't Matter

Some of you are probably sitting there stunned right now. Without search engine placement, it's very hard for a site to get a lot of attention from search engines, isn't it? Yet I'm fairly sure that (to a degree) even SEO professionals will agree with the premise here when I make the case for it.

First, what exactly does SEO do? SEO helps you to improve search engine placement by helping you identify and accentuate keywords and keyphrases on your website so that search engines such as Google will rank you highly for those keywords. Their advice revolves around several points: use your keywords and keyphrases on every page, get a lot of inbound links, and make sure that you continually have fresh content.

I argue that a good, healthy blog already does this.

First, **keywords and keyphrases already appear on most of your pages.** If you're writing a focused and well-written blog, you will already be using your site's keywords over and over without even trying. For example, the site you're reading will have the phrase "personal finance" all over the place because *I write about personal finance*. The same holds true for "debt," "investing," and many other related terms. Why? That's what I write about. Thus, these phrases come up again and again in my natural writing.

Second, **a well written blog will simply draw inbound links.** As long as you participate in the community and reach out on occasion, your site will automatically gain links from a variety of other sites - carnival links, links from your comments on other sites, and links from people who just discover you and add links to your compelling work. These links add up over time, and their diversity will appeal to the search engines: your work must be important because it's linked from a huge number of pages.

Finally, **a blogger always has fresh content.** The simple practice of blogging means that you're regularly updating your content and generating new pages. Basic blog design will ensure that these pages are interlinked, meaning that any internal pages you have that are heavily linked will boost your homepage and other pages on your site.

Search engine optimization *does* work, but most of the principles will cause much larger boosts on static sites than on blogs. Why? Blogs naturally do the things that SEO groups recommend. Note that *I am not saying that SEO is worthless for blogs*; I'm just saying that in the larger scheme of things, a blog owner is better served focusing on design and content than on SEO tricks.

Here are ten things your blog should be doing already that will help with search engine optimization. If you're doing these, then you're already doing enough; focus on the content instead.

Basic META tags should be in your template. Each page should have a META description tag and META keywords tag, but adding these to the site is as easy as dropping them into your template file. Make them once and they'll be a part of your site for good.

Each page should link back to your main URL. That way, if/when an individual post becomes very popular, it will lift your homepage (and other internal pages) due to the associated rank.

All of your posts should be accessible by clicking links from the home page. This means that your homepage should link to archives, and these archives should link to all of your posts. This way, search engines can find every post on your site.

The name of each post should be in the title of that page. Most search engines give preference to page titles that contain the entire search term, so make sure that your blog uses the title of the post in the title of the page. Usually the name of your site and the title of the post is more than sufficient for a title for an individual post.

The name of each post should ideally be in the URL of that page. Many search engines give preference to page that contain the entire search term in the raw URL, so make sure that your blog uses the title of the post in the URL in some form.

Keep your pages fairly short. Don't have individual pages that are more than 250 KB in length if at all possible. Search engines often stop at lengths in this range.

If you're doing all of these things, you're already ahead of many people. Now, sit back and focus on the content; the incoming links are the next big part you need, and content does that better than anything.

The Mini Audience

Once you've figured out who your audience is, it becomes much easier to determine whether or not content is appropriate for your site. The simple question of whether or not it appeals to this group is enough to decide whether or not it should be posted on the site.

Obviously, if your audience is broad, you have the potential to reach a very wide audience of readers, which is a good thing. However, **broad generalizations rarely resonate with your readers**. If I write a very, very general post about personal finance issues that tries to encompass everyone, I'll bore almost my entire audience by either writing something too basic to be useful or too broad to be worthwhile.

The key to getting around this problem is **defining a number of "mini" audiences**. Whenever you write a post for a blog with a wide general audience, you are going to strongly engage a segment of the audience and very weakly engage other segments of the audience. If you want to keep the weakly engaged segments around, you need to regularly write posts that will deeply engage them as well.

Here are some ideas that will help you define and write for audiences within your audience.

Make a list of sub-interests within your topic. Within your area, what are some of the specific sub-topics that you write about? For me, I have a plethora of them: frugality, debt management, financial planning, investment advice, and so on. What are yours? Often, this will overlap strongly with a list of categories for your site.

Occasionally, check that you're writing posts for each of these sub-topics. If there's one you've neglected lately, that's likely an area that you can focus on in the near future. Even better: giving yourself a very narrow focus for a new post can often fuel your creative juices.

Follow the interests in as many subtopics as you can. Someone out there is likely writing about a specific sub-topic that you want to include. Bookmark that blog or subscribe to its feed and follow what they're saying. For example, professional blogging as an income stream is one topic that I follow for The Simple Dollar, so I keep in touch with sites like [ProBlogger](). Another example? I like to write about money saving technologies, so I also follow [Lifehacker](). I also write about parenting issues as they relate to money lessons and saving money, so I keep tabs with [parent hacks]().

Write occasional posts for specific or even individual readers. If a writer writes to you with a specific question or idea, it's almost always a good idea to see if this will transform into a post. Often, the person emailing you has hit upon some sort of specific niche that isn't being covered at the moment by your blog - but nearby niches are, which means that there are readers out there that you could intensely engage with a post that touches on the topic of the reader's contact.

Don't Chase Away Your Readers

Recently, I visited a very interesting blog that focused on personal finance and political issues targeting twentysomethings. The author had a very distinctive voice and he clearly had his audience defined, yet there was still one problem: he was often posting things and making statements that were going to drive away a big part of his readership. Case in point: I was greeted with a photoshopped picture of Paris Hilton with a disconcerting comment added across her chest and a post written in rather crude language about the dumbing down of America. Twentysomethings who are reading a personal finance / political blog are likely going to be fairly conservative and are going to be interested in information on how to get ahead in this world. The author got the twentysomething demographic spot on, but he missed the boat on the rest of his audience.

What's the moral of the story here? **Don't scare away your readers.** This seems like a simple idea, but it does require some forethought and it does require a bit of a filter on your thoughts. Although some will see a "thought filter" as being anathema to what their blogging experience should be, it's a simple fact that **some statements will drive away some readers.** If this is a bargain you're willing to accept, it's your choice, but you should be aware of that fact.

How do you know if you're going to chase away your audience, though? Before anything else, you need to clearly define who your audience is. Figure out as many details about your "average reader" as you possibly can and develop a real profile for who exactly is reading your site. Is your reader likely to be a pop culture junkie? Are they liberal or conservative, or is it too hard to tell? Are your readers free spirits or the accountant type?

Here are some tips for making sure that you don't accidentally frighten your readership into clicking away from your site.

If your audience holds a certain belief to be central, don't insult that belief. For example, let's say you write about Christian theology, but through this study you discover that you are an atheist. Your site likely has a highly Christian audience, so if you proceed to post a bunch of atheist positions, you're likely going to destroy the audience you've built up. Similarly, if you post on financial issues, your audience is likely politically neutral with a slight lean towards the conservative. It would be a very poor choice to start a campaign for Dennis Kucinich for President in 2008 on your blog.

If you're writing to adults (on non-"adult" themes, obviously) and your mother would be offended, don't post it. Consider this: many blogs are read while people are burning extra time at the office. They click through the site and see a picture of a nearly-nude woman or of a man holding up a sign with an offensive slogan on it. How long do you think that window will be open? Not long, indeed. Remember that your readers are mature adults and minimize the content that might not be socially acceptable.

Avoid some topics entirely. Unless you're writing specifically about a controversial topic, you're better off avoiding it entirely unless your main topic of focus can offer a really useful and unique perspective on it. I have no intent to ever discuss abortion or sexual topics on this site; they just don't fit and all they would do is either antagonize or scare off my readers. Even if I'm thinking about those topics, it's just not a good choice to post them here.

Whenever you post, remember what the potential limits of your audience are and try not to push those limits too hard, or else you'll see your traffic decreasing over time.

Social Bookmarking

Most bloggers are familiar with the "Digg effect," a flood of traffic that comes from reaching the front page of Digg, a popular social bookmarking site. Similar traffic boosts occur whenever a site becomes "popular" in any well-travelled social bookmarking site, and the rewards are obvious: huge numbers of page views from real readers.

Sounds great, doesn't it? Who wouldn't want their site to have a huge spike in popularity? In fact, for some bloggers, it becomes so tempting that it becomes an obsession: can I sneak this post onto the front page of digg (or some similar site)? They wind up writing in order to grab cheap clicks and spend their time trolling the social bookmarking sites hoping to see another vote in their favor; meanwhile, their site is actually becoming less popular because the posts are no longer focused on the target audience and they're appearing less frequently.

Chasing fame on social bookmarking sites is a doomed exercise. You might occasionally make a big splash, but your average day-to-day traffic will suffer as your regular audience moves on. Eventually, you'll grow disheartened as the "valleys" between those social bookmarking "mountains" become lower and lower and soon your blog has lost all direction.

Here are some healthy tips for success with social bookmarking sites while keeping the focus of your blog in perspective.

Don't promote yourself. Never submit a page of your own to a social bookmarking site unless you're an involved member of that community. Regular users will check you out and if they see you're a low-frequency submitter who only submits from one site, they'll vote you down out of principle. This happened to me with a previous site on digg - I submitted pages from my site every once in a while and soon they were getting buried quite quickly with comments that indicated that I was spamming the site… which I was.

The pros and cons of links to social bookmarking on your site. Once upon a time, I included lots of links to social bookmarking sites at the bottom of each of my posts - and they got me nowhere. Since removing them, I've had much greater success with social bookmarking sites. Why is this? Many people see those icons as being pure self-promotion and they won't bother to ever click them and leave with a bad taste in their mouth. These icons can sometimes even lead to downvotes on such social bookmarking sites. Although you're somewhat more likely to have a page submitted to a social site with those links, your chances at striking gold are lessened - and they're potentially damaging to your long-term audience.

Write compelling content *for your audience* above all. If it is truly compelling, someone will submit it to social bookmarking sites for you. Both times I've popped up on major social bookmarking sites, it has been rather surprising (usually, this surprise has involved watching my site dead in the water for a little while, but I digress). I have considered that some of my posts might

do well on various social bookmarking sites, but the ones that actually made it were a bit out of the blue (in one case, the post was kind of old when it appeared).

Don't be afraid to reach out. The stuff that becomes popular on social bookmarking sites is often examples of people looking at common things through a different light. One way to do this without alienating your audience is by simply reaching out: look for new angles on your topic and research it appropriately. Every time I've had success with social bookmarking, it's been as a result of reaching out.

In short, if your audience appreciates your writing, your best stuff will organically find its way onto social bookmarking sites. Thus, your focus should be on maintaining and growing your audience, not gaming social bookmarking sites.

Don't Know It All

In high school, I was friends with an individual who repeatedly acted as if he knew everything anyone was going to say. If you got him started on a subject, he would completely dominate the conversation with minutae and commentary on every aspect of the issue at hand, while everyone else sat around staring at him.

What this individual didn't realize is that **effective interpersonal communication is a conversation, not a lecture**. If I want to be lectured, I will go sign up for a college course and let a professor lecture; he's earned the privilege by earning a high degree in the topic.

The same philosophy holds true on the internet. **If you ride a topic until there's nothing left to say about it, you've effectively killed the conversation.** People come to your blog to get a quick summary of the topic, some directions for future thought, and some links to more resources on the thought. They don't come there to have a topic written about to oblivion.

This is particularly challenging for a logorrheic individual like myself, so how do I find a balance between writing what feels right to me and writing a subject to death? Here's what I use as a guideline.

Don't write more than two hundred words on a single point. If you're doing that, you're writing too much. If you have extensive thoughts on a topic, try breaking things down into smaller sections that are easily digestible by your readers.

Don't regurgitate other's thoughts. Don't relate in your own words what someone else says on the topic. Link to them and/or quote them, but don't paraphrase them. This is the equivalent of stepping in front of someone in a conversation and saying, "What he *means* to say is…"; no one appreciates that.

Leave interesting threads in other directions, but don't follow all of them. If you try to follow every train of thought that exists, your post will get long and boring very quickly. Let some of those threads of thought dangle; you don't need to follow up on everything or simply excise them from the post.

Engage others in conversation, too. If you read a good post at another site, make it the start of your own post, but follow the guidelines here. Link to them and quote them, but don't paraphrase them, and just add your own contributions to the thought. *You don't need to cover every angle, just continue the conversation.*

Stick to your interests. I have no interest in talking about politics, for example, so when I start to rub up against politics, I let a thread or two dangle and run away quickly. What happens when you brush up against a topic, but stick to what you know? *Readers are engaged.*

Don't be a know it all; practice good conversational skills instead.

Use the Senses

The web is inherently a visual medium, and like any other visual medium, a big portion of success in the medium is sensory appeal. Many, many people recall things based upon imagery and visual impressions and blogs are no different: time and time again, we see that images help make for memorable posts.

Take, for example, the image of [Suze Orman](#) to your upper right. For those unaware, Suze is a well-known personal finance guru who uses a "trendy" personality to help promote her advice. Because of her prevalence, I occasionally post commentary on her, and so I use that image in posts about Suze.

Yet there are often times in which images are a negative. Serious sites that occasionally use highly goofy images are doing themselves a disservice. Poorly executed images are a great way to chase off your readers; instead, look for images that will intrigue your reader base.

There are several useful keys to consider when using images:

Photoshop is your friend. If you are unfamiliar with using Photoshop or GIMP, you should learn to use one of these packages at least well enough to do basic image editing and modification. These tools allow you to create and modify images to your heart's content. This is particularly true if you relied on someone else to do the visual design of your site, as you're likely reliant on other's images for anything you might include. Don't let this be the case: learn some Photoshop and let your imagination lead.

Be careful with humor. I usually try to avoid humor in image form simply because of the diverse audience. If you have a clear indication that your readership would prefer highbrow or lowbrow humor, then you're much safer, but I'm less confident about my readership (while I feel pictures of celebrities with Photoshopped comments is too lowbrow, reprinted New Yorker cartoons might be overdoing it). My one recent attempt at a humorous image (see right) didn't do so well.

Make it visually striking, but not distracting. If you use an image that blends in with the rest of the post, it will be harder for the reader to become engaged with the picture. On the other hand, an image that flashes or blinks can actually distract the reader from reading. The goal is to find images that will attract the reader's eye upon first visiting the site, but don't restrict the reader from reading the article. The best choice is a visually attractive still image.

Ensure that the image relates to the article. People often post pictures that they find amusing in articles that have no relation to the image. As a reader, I get really confused by this: "Why is there a

picture of Hulk Hogan in a story about fabric softener?" If you post an image, make sure it connects to the story in some way, either in an obvious way that doesn't require explanation or in a less-obvious way that becomes clear upon reading.

If you can use the picture for subtle commentary, do so! Recently, I offered up some commentary on Jim Cramer, a stock analyst who hosts a show on CNBC. Jim is known for being loud, fairly aggressive, and having anger management issues, which is actually part of his *appeal*. Seeing this, I tried to create an image of Jim that represented these aspects of his personality without creating an "evil" look. One glance at the picture to your upper right will tell you whether I succeeded or not.

Along with this, consider the possibility of using words that evoke the other senses: descriptive terms that relate sense, smell, sound, and touch. Some blogs may never have the opportunity to use these, but food, audio, and textile blogs are well-served to learn many adjectives.

One big recommendation: **don't force audio on your readers.** If you choose to embed a sound clip, make sure that it does not play by default. If I visit a site that automatically plays noise, I will never return to that site as it is attacking my sense of hearing (and the sense of hearing of others around me) without my choice. Keep in mind how people in quiet environments (such as the library) might feel if bombarded with audio.

The more dimensions you use to engage the reader, the more likely they are to stick around and listen to what you have to say.

Write in Series

I'm often baffled by bloggers who confess to having a complete lack of ideas to blog about when the possibilities for dozens upon dozens of posts are sitting there right in front of them. All that you need for a large number of posts is one idea that can be broken down into a lot of others and the knowledge of the art of writing in series.

Most people think of series in a very limited fashion: a detailed enumeration of a list, for example. The fact is that a series is merely any collection of posts with a common theme among them, and a well-executed series is one that provides a lot of post ideas right off the bat. Take this series, for example: it was borne out of simply making a list of the lessons I've learned from blogging and suddenly realizing that most of these ideas make for a good post by themselves. It wasn't enumerated or anything; it was merely a random collection of ideas on a theme.

In fact, **most successful blogs use series in some respect.** This is because the benefits of writing in series are numerous: it provides a forum for a more detailed investigation of an issue than a single blog post really offers, it provides fodder for a number of blog posts, and the continuation of a series provides a lot of incentive for readers to continue tuning in.

Here are some tips for defining and executing series in your blog.

Start off with a list. If you have a "big" central idea, try making a list of the ideas within this idea that you'd like to cover. The thread between these sub-ideas is the core of a series and that list can be the starting point for a large number of posts. Even better: if you can find a pre-established list of ideas, someone has handed you a list to work with.

Don't post them all at once. Your readers can get overwhelmed if you post a lot of posts on a single topic. Don't post all of the members of a series at once; instead, recognize this as a great opportunity to keep something in reserve.

When you finish a list, neaten it up. Make sure that members of a list link to an overall master post and also link directly to the "next" item in the series. This is difficult to do while you're posting the series, but when you finish it, it's well worth your time to add these options. Why? A reader from a search engine that is drawn into the article at all will be willing to follow links to more items in the series.

Have some consistency with the titles. Bloggers will be interested to know when you post a new item in the series, so be sure to include the name of the series in each post in the series. This also aids those terms (in the title of the series) to appear as terms related to your blog on search engines.

A series is not only a great way to continually provide ideas and posts for your blog even when you're suffering from a creative drought, but it can also engage your audience and keep them coming back for more.

Post Consistently

After discussing the dangers of leaving your audience hanging, it became clear that a concise description of why a posting schedule is useful and how it should work is needed. Although many professional bloggers offer up the bromide of how important a posting schedule is, it is rare to find a description of the actual process of determining a posting schedule, making it clear to your readers, and sticking to it.

First of all, **your posting schdule does not have to be daily (or more than daily).** The Marketing Profs give a [very good explanation why the supposed "rule" of a daily post is no longer important](). And they're right, to an extent: you don't *have* to post every day. Instead, you need to find your own rhythm and then develop a schedule that utilizes that rhythm for regular posting. *Do not buy into the hype that you have to post daily or several times a day; you don't.*

Rather than just blindly accepting a pace that you might be unable to follow, **spend a few weeks determining your "normal" pace.** Write for your blog as you would write normally without worrying about any post requirement. Make sure that this timeframe is rather normal and doesn't include any irregular events that would cause significant downtime in your posting. Once you've completed three weeks or so, count up your posts and divide by the number of days. This is your "normal" pace of posting.

Once you've figured out your normal posting pace, toss it out the door. Although it's a great number to use in defining your posting schedule, it's a poor number to base your whole posting schedule on. Why? *If you post at this rate, you'll eventually fall behind and give up. Period.*

Instead, **calculate what 60% of your normal posting pace is, and use this as a schedule.** For me, my "normal" posting rate is about ten posts a day (yes, many of them are this length; yes, I'm a logorrheic anomaly). Thus, my baseline schedule is about six posts a day. For many people, it could be that their normal flow is about a post a day, so their schedule should be about six posts every ten days.

Once you've figured out your approximate schedule, **arrange it so you have fewer posts on the weekends and more posts on weekdays.** For example, I post between six and seven posts per weekday (the seventh post is usually part of a cursorily-related series, like this blogging one) and three to four posts per weekend day (the fourth post is usually part of that series). If you're posting six posts every ten days, then plan for posts every Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday.

Now you have a posting schedule that matches your natural flow of writing well. Except… as you start with it, you'll find yourself building up an excess of posts. What should you do with them?

When you have excess posts, set them up to be automatically posted as if you won't be updating in the near future. If you post along normally, you'll begin to build up a block of

unposted future posts. Give them each a posting time so that they'll post according to your schedule if you find yourself unable to post due to an emergency or a planned vacation. At various times, I've had almost three weeks of future posts built up for The Simple Dollar.

If you have a timely post that needs to go up *now*, just swap it for the next post and put the removed post at the back of the line.

In the end, what you'll have is a blogging schedule that enables you to naturally be ahead of pace and prepared for the event of a disaster so that you don't leave your audience hanging.

Engage the Casual Visitor

One issue that has always interested me is how one can maximize the retention of visitors from social bookmarking sites like Digg. These visitors are only coming to your site to read a particular article; typically, they don't stay around to read other things. A similar notion is true about visitors from search engines (though their tendency to stay is somewhat higher).

What do these situations have in common? Obviously, these readers found your site through methods that didn't involve your direct recruitment. They were drawn to your site because of a specific piece of content that relates to them somehow. Even more important, this reader is often highly uninformed about your topic of discussion, but is seeking some piece of information related to your topic.

The question is how do you convert these viewers into long-term viewers. Here are some suggestions to keep those viewers on your blog and perhaps convert them to regular readers.

Give them lots of opportunities within the post to dig in further. Link specific points in new posts to appropriately-related articles from your archives. This encourages the interested reader to click on the link, which will take them to another article that might answer their question. Of course, this post should also have specific points linked to archived posts and so on. Don't *rely* on these links, though; your post should express a full thought on its own without links. The links merely serve as a way to expand thoughts and to pull in the interested reader.

List related posts. Whenever a user sees a post, they should find links to similar posts on your site. This is particularly true for search engine visitors: once they find a page on your site, it may or may not answer their question, but similar posts might address their needs, and providing a link will keep a user reading, which is what you want. For WordPress users, there's [a great plugin](#) that does this automatically; for users of other blogging software, you may have to really work to find other ways to do this.

Make some of your best posts easily available. You should keep a list of your best posts either directly on your sidebar or on a page linked to on your sidebar. If a person visits from a search engine or a social bookmarking site, they're looking for *good* stuff, so pointing them to potential sources of good stuff is always a strong idea.

Engage them directly. If a post of yours shows up on a social bookmarking site, you might want to stick a paragraph that introduces your site on the top of that popular post for a week or so. This paragraph should include a one-sentence description of your site and a few links to your absolute best posts. Although I don't usually follow this practice, I have seen it be successful in practice, particularly if your blog is rather obscure and this is your one moment to be seen by a large group.

Answer your email if at all possible. Quite often, casual viewers will fling a question at you if they see your site and are interested, but you didn't immediately sate their interest. This is an opportunity to, in the worst case, pick up a reader or, in the best case, pick up a lot of readers. Answer courteously, quickly, and accurately if at all possible. If you're to the point where you're receiving dozens of legitimate emails an hour, you can reconsider this, but your blog is probably so successful you have no reason to be reading this, anyway.

Talking to Other Bloggers

Many bloggers operate in a bubble. This bubble includes themselves and perhaps a small number of bloggers that focus on topics similar to their own. I know that this is often true, even for me: I talk to a lot of other personal finance bloggers, but I rarely communicate outside of my own "circle."

So why write about talking to other bloggers? Simple. Since I started The Simple Dollar, **every time I have engaged a blogger outside of my own "circle" of blogging associates, the interaction has been worthwhile.** This even includes somewhat negative interactions, like my [debate with several non-personal finance bloggers over Wesabe](). This positive response may be surprising to some (including myself, as I didn't have this experience with earlier blogs), but I've found there are several keys to positive interactions with other bloggers.

Before you begin, though, you should **define what you're looking for**. I'm often looking for intelligent people to discuss things with; usually, this comes down to finding an interesting blog that covers a topic I'm unfamiliar with. If the blog is interesting enough that it makes me *want* to become familair with the topic, then I don't hesitate to write to the author of the blog. This may or may not lead to links, but for me I don't really care too much - it's about meeting new people and growing as a person, which will in itself improve me and by extension my blog.

First, **never begin an interaction by merely asking for a link**. This is, of course, assuming that you want to actually want to begin a worthwhile discussion with that blogger; if all you want is a link, then go right ahead and ask. If you open up by asking for a link, you're basically telling that blogger that all you want is something from him or her.

Second, **try to engage the blogger right off the bat.** The best way to do this is to ask questions about their blog, both content-specific and otherwise. If you're engaged enough to write to the blogger, you're probably engaged enough to have read several posts, so they should be able to provide you with enough fodder to ask questions.

Write something engaging that can trigger a response. A frothing "I luv ur blog!" email will make a popular blogger smile, but it won't get anything in return. Since you're hoping to establish a conversation, you're going to need something more meaty than that. You can express an admiration for their blog, but there needs to be more content to your email, particularly something that triggers a response.

Include a link to your own blog, but don't shove it in their face. I usually just include it as my signature right beneath my name, just enough so that if they find my email interesting, they might click on it. I usually don't mention it any more than that at first unless they ask about it.

Look for opportunities to meet other bloggers. I live in rural Iowa, so my opportunities to meet other successful bloggers are rather slim, but I am always looking for opportunities for blogger

meetups and conventions. Attending such events can not only bring about interactions with other bloggers, but it can also make you feel much better about your own blog, reinvigorating you with the spirit to blog.

Remember, above all, **blogging is a conversation and bloggers are good conversationalists.**

Don't Clutter It Up

When a visitor comes to your site, the first thing they're looking for is *content*. They want to see what you've written and they don't want to be distracted by confusing things. The more confusing options you throw out there, the less likely they are to feel welcome on your site and the less likely they are to stick around.

Simplicity is good; clutter is bad. Successful sites generally keep the clutter in the sidebar and out of the way of the primary article. Even clutter outside of the primary article can be bad if it's unclear and without obvious purpose to the casual reader.

Quite often, the design intention is good: a blogger wants more things that are useful on the site. The problem comes in when a casual reader arrives and is overwhelmed by options that are less than clear. Here are several common mistakes that some bloggers make when designing their site.

Social bookmarking icons We've all seen the row of icons that covers the bottom of a post, each one linking to a different social bookmarking site, right? If you haven't, [here's an example](). For casual users, these are just plain confusing, even if you have a tool tip popping up that says "add to furl" or "add to delicious" … those statements make little sense to people who are just searching Google for a key piece of information. On the other hand, for experienced users, the icons are still a waste because most of us have our social bookmarking sites of choice already integrated into our browser toolbar. These icons don't have an audience and they're just distracting to most users.

Site metadata icons These include buttons that link to Feedburner and to other sites that aggregate RSS feeds, as well as to all sorts of additional sites. An example of this that doesn't go too far into overkill can be found on the right hand bar of [pfblogs.org](). These are fine in small doses - one or two that link to something interesting can be fun - but some sites go into overload mode and the whole thing becomes distracting for the casual user.

"Gadgets" Many people have a penchant for including gadgets of all kinds on their site, often in multiples. For an example, see [User Generated Content](), which includes several such gadgets on his right hand bar. While these are all right for a personal site, if a casual user pops in, it's basically information overload time and they back away slowly. I recommend never using more than one such gadget, and making sure that it aligns appropriately with the rest of your content.

The most important thing to remember at all times is that **a visitor comes to your site to read the latest postings and nothing else.** The more things that you throw at this user, particularly those that create a "busy" display, the harder it is for that casual visitor to read your post. Thus, it's always better to minimize the extraneous material on your site and focus on your content above all.

Don't Forget the Fundamentals

When I'm actively blogging, I often assume a great deal about my readers and their pre-existing knowledge of my topic. I often go so far as to assume that, even after I've researched a topic, I'm roughly on par with them in terms of really understanding the topic, so I focus on my own reflections on a complex issue without explaining it.

Whenever I do this, **I punch myself in the arm.** Why? If I do it too often, a large bruise will start to appear, both on my arm and my blog. People will see it, not understand it, and avoid it.

How do you solve the problem of attracting beginning readers without alienating your regular audience? My solution is to make roughly one fifth of my posts focus specifically on very fundamental issues, such as [the difference between APR and APY](#) and [how compound interest works](#). My regular readers usually read these as well and the posts tend to attract a *lot* of comments, as these experienced readers look for places to fill in holes that I've missed.

In short, **occasional "fundamentals" posts do not alienate your regular reader base - and can attract new readers**.

Here are several avenues you can take for identifying and writing posts on fundamental topics in your area.

Make a list. Take fifteen or so recent posts on your blog and make a list of every word that refers specifically to something within your domain. Maybe you write an art blog and you discuss artists all the time. Maybe you write about NPR and regularly refer to contributors. Maybe you write a financial blog and drop the term EPS all the time.

Write a blog post explaining, in your own words, what exactly each term means. Don't assume the reader is stupid; treat them as if you are explaining the topic to a friend. Imagine, for example, that you're a literature blogger and a friend stops over, pulls a book off your shelf, and asks, "What's this about?" Would you talk down to that person? Probably not (unless you're massively condescending). Imagine that the person you're writing for is that friend who just pulled a book off the shelf.

Encourage comments on these posts. Such posts tend to attract lots of comments (for me, anyway), but it can't hurt to even request comments at the end of that post. This encourages your regular audience to fill in gaps (and feel smart) and your new readers to ask questions that they might have. Never forget that blogging is a conversation and you'll be fine.

Occasionally (not always), link to your explanation by linking the appearance of that word in future posts. Readers who come to your site and are confused as to who John Hodgman is or what [APY](#) is can just click on the word and be whisked to another blog post on that specific topic.

After you've done a lot of these, post a compendium. This post can just list all of the "fundamentals" posts you've made. Once you've created this, add it to your site's sidebar along with a link that says something like "Getting Started" or "[Your Topic] 101." This way, when new readers come along, they at least have a chance to understand your most recent "deep" post.

Your content will bring new readers to the site, but if you put forth a bit of extra effort to make their entrance easier, they might just stay around for a while.

Celebrate With Your Readers

As you continue to blog, your regular readers will eventually grow accustomed to your voice as a writer, even if you write in a mostly factual fashion. Over time, you'll come into contact many of your readers by email and comments and you'll begin to establish a relationship of sorts with them.

What does this mean? **When a major event occurs in your life and especially in relation to your blog, *don't be afraid to share it.*** If you purchase a house or have a child, share your joy with your readers. If you're linked to by a major site or reach a certain threshold that you set as a goal for yourself (500,000 visitors or 1,000 posts), let your readers know about it.

To put it bluntly, **if something fills you with joy, share it**. The optimism and happiness that comes from the event will flow out of your writing right to the reader and they will feel a bit of joy as well.

This doesn't mean that you should flood your blog with stuff like *My child just said "poop" for the first time!* (unless you're running a parenting blog or something). Save celebratory posts for truly major events, or semi-major events that relate to your blog.

Here are some tips about celebratory posts that will maximize their effectiveness and impact for the reader.

Mention events that match the theme of your blog. For example, since this is a personal finance blog, I've mentioned significant debt eliminations on here, such as the [paying off of my truck better than a year early](). It's something that excited me greatly and it also fit the theme of this blog. I also plan on blogging (in detail) my first home purchase, which is coming in the next year.

Include a picture if possible. If you have a new house or a new child, a photo or two can really show the excitement of the moment. You can even post a video if you want; stick it up on YouTube and include that video in your post.

Don't overdo it. If you experience a life-changing event, it's great to mention it once in a celebratory manner, but don't let it take over your blog. Your readers are there to read about the topic at hand, not your new child. A celebratory post is a great way to build attachment between the reader and the writer, but only if done occasionally. If the life change causes you to have a new major interest, start another blog. Very few blogs can make such a transition; [dooce]() is the only one I can think of, as it changed from a professional rant blog into a parenting blog.

If you met a goal, set a new goal and talk about it. If you're posting to announce your site has had 100,000 visitors, state what your next goal is, what you learned, and how you're going to get there. If you're posting to celebrate losing ten pounds, talk about how you did it and what you plan to do next. Make it about more than just meeting that specific goal and tossing confetti in the air.

And with that, Building a Better Blog is finished. Let's celebrate!