Why Blog? Searching for Writing on the Web

by Alex Reid

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Why Blog? Searching for Writing on the Web

Alex Reid

As Malcolm Gladwell and others have observed, it takes some 10,000 hours of dedication to a craft or profession to become an "expert."* Obviously this is a generalization that provokes as many questions as it answers, but the fairly self-evident bottom-line point here is that becoming good at anything worth becoming good at takes a lot of time. According to the 2008 National Survey of Student Engagement, the typical first year student writes 92 pages, while average college seniors write 146 pages (21). Given these statistics, we may assume that the average college student writes less than 500 pages during his or her academic career. It's difficult to equate pages with the hours in Gladwell's calculation, but I would think that even a student in a writing intensive major would not likely spend, on average, more than 1000 hours writing to get her degree. At that rate, 1000 hours of writing over four years, one would reach expertise (10,000 hours) in 36 more years. In other words, not even writing intensive courses are likely to ask students to commit the kind of time to their assigned writing that would be necessary to work towards expertise as Gladwell defines it. To make matters potentially worse, being an "expert" isn't necessarily all that it would seem to be. As one discovers with almost anything one dedicates one's time to, there is no ceiling, no final desti-

nation, on the path of mastery. There are always new challenges; there is always room for improvement. As I will discuss here, blogging is one good way to develop as a writer.

Of course, most students aren't interested in becoming expert writers. Does that sound like a condemnation of some kind? It shouldn't. I don't think there's anything wrong with not wanting to become an expert, professional writer, any more than there's anything wrong with not wanting to be a surgeon or a carpenter. On the other hand, unlike surgery or carpentry, college students pursuing professional careers will need some facility with writing. In other words, while most students will not take writing courses to become professional writers, they might take those courses to serve other goals and interests that benefit from good writing skills. Unfortunately, often the trappings of school curriculum can interfere with our ability to connect writing to our own goals and interests. General education requirements, credits, grades, and other potential rewards and punishments of academic life can crowd out our ability to find some intrinsic motivation. Even though instructors work hard to devise assignments that will inspire engaged student writing, they are also enmeshed in this same context of grades and GPAs. Students confronted with a syllabus or an assignment can find it difficult to get beyond the mindset of "what do I need to do to get an A?." Unfortunately, decades of research suggest that such extrinsic motivators can actually hurt our performance on challenging intellectual tasks like writing an essay.

What does this have to do with blogging? A great deal, at least in my view. A blog is an excellent opportunity for exploring and developing intrinsic motivations for writing. Course writing assignments are always imposed upon you. Often they come with requirements that you might find disagreeable: subject matter, length, format, due dates, etc. It can be difficult to establish intrinsic motivations in those contexts, even if your professor is willing to be flexible. On a blog, however, you control the subject matter, the length, the format, the timing of your posts, and all the other characteristics of your writing. You establish your own goals. For good or for bad, there are not likely to be many extrinsic motivations, like money, for your blogging, so your only reasons for continuing to blog will need to come from inside. Through blogging, you can discover such motivations not only for writing on your blog but for writing in general, and once you have some internal motivation for writing, you will find it easier to translate

that motivation into your academic writing, and later into your writing as a professional.

As a student in a first year writing course, you may not envision yourself as a writer. It is understandable that you may not want to dedicate yourself to the 10,000-hour journey toward expertise. However, you might want to dedicate yourself to a more modest goal. You might want to be among the best writers in your major or among the applicants for the graduate school or job that you'll be pursuing when you graduate. Part of reaching that goal will be putting in time as a writer, and a blog can be an invaluable part of the time you spend. This essay is addressed to the composition student interested in pursuing blogging. It provides some history and technical background on the weblog. It discusses rhetorical strategies for getting started and finding success as a blogger. Finally, it offers some tips for designing your blog site and connecting your blog with the other social media applications you use.

What Is a Blog? or Better, What Is *Your* Blog?

Defining blogs is difficult. Typically the first answer one imagines for this question refers to the *content* of blogs. One might think of blogs as public diaries or perhaps as amateur journalism or political, op-ed websites or maybe as celebrity gossip sites. The term web log or weblog (shortened to blog) is generally attributed to Jorn Barger in 1997. Barger had been a long time contributor to early net communities like newsgroups and e-mail lists and decided to create his weblog *Robot Wisdom* at this time (Rhodes). The term could be applied retroactively to earlier sites, but 1997 is as good a starting point as any. However, at that time, one needed knowledge of HTML in order to maintain a blog. It wasn't until 1999 that the first blogging application, Blogger, was created by Pyra Labs (Blogger is now owned by Google), which enabled a far larger group of people to begin blogging. Still, at this time, blogging was undertaken by a small number of mostly "techie" individuals, who wrote primarily to share information about the web. The events of September 11th, 2001 and the subsequent military actions led to an explosion of political blogging, mostly with conservative viewpoints ("Blog"). Today, political blogs on both sides of the aisle remain popular. However, many of the most popular blogs deal with specific interests from computers and automobiles to (allegedly)

funny pictures of cats. The world of blogging has exploded this decade. Technorati.com, a site devoted to indexing blogs, has recorded 133 million blogs since 2002 representing an immense variety of interests and perspectives about what a blog can or should be.

A Sampling of Popular Blogs

According to Technorati.com, below are the top 25 blogs as of June 2010. As you will see, many deal with current events with either a liberal or conservative slant. Many others are focused on technology or entertainment. I am not suggesting that your blog needs to be or should be like any of these. However, they do represent some of the most successful blogging ventures and thus reveal something of how blogs can function. At Technorati, you can search for blogs in the specific subject areas that interest you.

1. The Huffington Post
http://www.huffingtonpost.com
News and editorial with a liberal perspective.

2. Mashable!
http://mashable.com
Social media and technology news.

3. TechCrunch
http://www.techcrunch.com
Technology business news.

4. Gizmodo
http://www.gizmodo.com
Technology reviews and news.

5. Engadget
http://www.engadget.com
Technology reviews and news.

6. Boing Boing
http://www.boingboing.net
A blog of "cultural curiosities and interesting technologies."

7. Gawker
http://www.gawker.com
New York news and gossip

8. The Corner on National Review …
http://corner.nationalreview.com
Blog for the conservative new magazine.

9. TMZ.com
http://www.tmz.com
Celebrity gossip.

10. Hot Air
http://hotair.com
Conservative news blog.

11. The Daily Beast
http://www.thedailybeast.com
News aggregator and liberal commentary.

11. The Daily Dish
http://andrewsullivan.theatlantic.com
Blog of conservative pundit, Andrew Sullivan.

13. Think Progress
http://thinkprogress.org
Current events from a liberal perspective.

14. ReadWriteWeb
http://www.readwriteweb.com
Technology news.

15. The Official Google Blog
http://googleblog.blogspot.com
Google's blog.

16. Kotaku
http://www.kotaku.com
Video-gaming blog.

17. Vulture
http://nymag.com/daily/entertainment
Entertainment and popular culture.

17. Jezebel
http://jezebel.com
Celebrity gossip and fashion.

19. The Onion
http://theonion.com
Comedy and news.

19. ArtsBeat
http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com
Popular culture.

19. Business Insider
http://www.businessinsider.com
Business and economics.

22. Political Punch
http://blogs.abcnews.com/politicalpunch
ABC White House Correspondent Jake Tapper.

23. Mediaite
http://www.mediaite.com
Politics and news in the media industry.

24. RedState
http://www.redstate.com
Conservative editorial blog.

25. TPMMuckraker
http://tpmmuckraker.talkingpointsmemo.com
Conservative editorial blog.

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Instead of a definition based on content, you might attempt to provide a technical definition of a blog. While one might create and maintain a blog using only HTML, like a traditional web page, most

blogs today operate on a web application (e.g., Blogger, WordPress, Typepad, etc.). With such blogs, individual entries are saved in a database and those entries are then called up and published on the blog according to any criteria included in the database fields. For instance, you can publish entries chronologically, which is the convention for blogs. However, you could also publish them by category (also common on blogs) or by author (if there are multiple authors for the blog) or even alphabetically by title (which is certainly less common on blogs). Blogging applications make adding content to the web fairly easy, which is one reason why there are so many blogs. Perhaps because adding a blog post is easy, blogs originated with writers posting informal, daily observations about interesting websites. Informality remains a common trait of blogging style, though certainly there are blogs with very formal prose as well.

Arguably, the practice of blogging has become so vast, including people from around the world, that any definition general enough to include everyone would be of little use in helping a new blogger in a composition course decide what to do. Instead, it is necessary to begin with identifying a narrower genre of blogging practices. In a sense, this is much like the more general advice I give to my composition students about writing. It isn't particularly useful to try to understand "how to write" in a general way. Instead, you need to learn how to identify the particular writing practices at work in the specific writing situations that you face as a writer. That is, students in a literature course face different writing tasks from those in economics courses or biology courses, and writers in public relations firms face different tasks from technical writers in the computer industry or analysts at a bank. However, any writer might begin with some fairly basic *rhetorical* questions:

1. Who is my audience? What do they expect from me? What do they already know about the subject of the text I am composing? How will they react to my message?

2. What is my purpose? What is the exigency for this text? (i.e. what has motivated me to write this text?) What do I hope to achieve?

3. What is the genre in which I am writing? What are its conventions? (e.g., fairy tales being "Once upon a time . . . :" what are the familiar practices of this genre?) How are arguments made in this genre? What types of evidence will be found convincing?

These questions certainly apply to blogging. So when we ask "what is a blog?" the answer is shaped by who we wish to write to, what our purpose(s) might be, and how others with similar audiences and purposes already practice blogging. I know that when I began blogging, I didn't have a very strong idea of what my blog would be like. I knew that I would write about my professional-academic interests and experiences (as opposed to personal experiences or hobbies or pop culture). I also came to my decision to start blogging after having read the blogs of several colleagues, so I had some idea of what others with similar interests were doing. Most of all, I was already familiar with my intended audience (though, of course, on the public web, you never really control who reads what you write). I knew what other English professors and graduate students were like. I knew about their expectations for scholarly writing. That said, no one knew what academic blogging should be like, and arguably we still don't know for sure. So blogging was an experiment, an exploration into what that genre could do for me and other rhetoricians.

The specifics of my experience starting out as a blogger are likely quite different from what yours will be. However, there are some key commonalities that relate to the formation of intrinsic motivation. First was my sense of autonomy. As Daniel Pink points out, autonomy might be divided into four elements: task, technique, time, and team (94). I set myself the task of writing a blog and what the subject matter of my blog would be. I established my own technique: I decided I would write in a quasi-academic style. I wrote my posts when I wanted, and I decided to write an individual blog, though many others write blogs as a team and you might as well. As a blogger, you will have a similar autonomy over these decisions and the freedom to change as you see fit. Second was my engagement and desire to improve. The experience of autonomy when combined with a challenging task can create the optimal experience the psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi terms "flow" (4). The trick in creating a flow state is to set a task that is neither so hard as to create frustration or anxiety or so easy as to be boring. As such, it is essential that you discover a subject for your blog that truly engages you. Perhaps you might set goals of writing longer or more often or engaging more readers. Finally, as you develop as a blogger you will hopefully connect with a clear sense of a larger social or professional purpose. In the end, it is your autonomous pursuit of your own improvement as a blogger in service of this larger

purpose that will help you to uncover your own intrinsic motivation. And maybe, in the end, it will be writing that interests you after all, or maybe writing will only be one small means toward a different purpose. Either way, the experience of blogging will have helped you to uncover something that really matters to you.

Discovering What to Write

Since you are probably reading this as part of a composition class, there's a good chance that you will be asked to blog as part of the course. Within the context of a composition course there are a few general types of blogs that you might be asked to join. Certainly, the kind of blog you are asked to write will have some impact on what you decide to do, and unfortunately, the nearly inescapable carrots and sticks of the classroom can serve as an impediment to creative thinking. At the same time, as writers and creative thinkers, we always work within contexts that provide both unique constraints and opportunities. The task therefore is to gather whatever autonomy you can within the situation in order to customize your work in a way that will allow you to engage productively with your work and tap into some intrinsic motivation for writing.

Table 1. Types of course-assigned blogs.

Type	Characteristics
Class Blog	In a class blog, the students and the instructor post to a common blog on the subject of the course. Often students are asked to post new material and comment on their peers' posts.
Individual Reading or Learning Blog	Here, though you are keeping a solo blog, you are asked to write specifically about the topic of the course. Perhaps you will write in response to readings or other assignments in addition to reflecting on your learning experiences.
Class Team Blog	In some classes, students work on group projects and are asked to keep a blog that updates the class on their activities. Here you may have a wider degree of autonomy on the subject matter of your blog, depending on the particulars of the assignment you are given.

Type	Characteristics
Individual Blog	This type of blog would give you the greatest autonomy, which can also make it the most challenging kind of assignment. For example, I might ask students to post 20 times with posts that are at least 100 words in length over the course of a semester, but provide no assignment requirements beyond that.

As with all writing, perhaps the most challenging task is finding a subject on which to write, or what we rhetoricians term "invention." By claiming an interest and reading other bloggers with similar interests, hopefully you will find a worthwhile topic. Perhaps you have already declared a major. If so, that should give you a good place to start. If not, then you might have to get more creative in thinking about a subject that you would like to read and write about. As the educational theorist and activist, Sir Ken Robinson, explains, our talents and passions are sometimes hidden, submerged by well-intentioned but misguided schooling experiences (Robinson). Perhaps you can think about the moments when you find yourself in a state of flow. Csikszentmihalyi conducted an experiment where he paged people randomly 40 times during a week and had them write about what they were doing at that moment in an attempt to discover and describe flow experiences (4). You might do something similar. Wherever you experience flow, your interests are likely close by.

Once you've decided on a subject, you need to investigate other blogs with similar interests. Read a wide range of blogs—the most popular blogs on your subject, blogs by experts on your subject, blogs by those with amateur interests, and blogs by students like yourself. Reading is an essential part of blogging. Once one gets beyond the diary blog, it is quite common to blog about what one reads elsewhere on other blogs (aka the "blogosphere"). In fact, writing about other bloggers is one of the primary ways you can build an audience and community for a blog. Researching for blog writing is much like researching for course assignments. You can begin with a general search engine. Google allows you to search specifically for blogs, or you might try Technorati.com: a site that indexes blogs. The goal here is to find a handful of the most popular blogs in your area of interest. From there, things get trickier. Most blog sites include a list of links called a "blog roll" somewhere on their sidebars. This is a list of blogs that blogger

also reads. Sampling the blog rolls of bloggers you like is a good strategy for finding other worthwhile blogs. I'm not suggesting that you have to do what everyone else does. To the contrary, one of the great things about blogging is the opportunity for autonomy the genre can provide. But reading other bloggers with similar interests can help you in understanding the kinds of choices you might make and will also aid you in finding an audience for your work.

Of course, knowing what to write about (and even what you might wish to say on the subject) and knowing how actually to compose your post are two different things. In my view, the fundamental challenges of blogging are not very different from those of any kind of writing. You require sufficient exigency to write. Where does this come from?

1. An urgency to the subject matter (e.g. a current event)
2. An important and reasonable purpose (e.g. writing a job letter to get a job)
3. A sense of authority, feeling qualified to write about a subject
4. A strong personal interest (e.g. creative writing, political writing)
5. An audience that will give you positive feedback

The familiar advice about brainstorming and free writing applies as much to blogging as other types of writing. However, blogging has a special relationship with serendipity and inspiration. As a blogger you have no deadlines. You are not required to write about anything in particular, and you're not required to write in a particular format or for a particular length. As such, you are free to write whatever and whenever you like. For example, maybe you are interested in graphic design. You take an interest in reading about graphic design and seeing examples of interesting design. You read an interesting article or see an image of an interesting design, so you write a brief post about it. You write something about what you saw and why it interested you, and you include the link. Perhaps you read something interesting in a design course or learn something during class discussion, and you blog about that. Before you know it, you've started to build a collection of brief posts. At some point, something will come of all that posting. You'll start to see a trend. You'll make connections, and suddenly you will have something longer to write. Over time, as you continue to blog, it is likely that different exigencies will emerge. More important-

ly, as you develop a writing habit, you begin to think less about needing a reason to write. Hopefully there is always some reason of course, but I think, as a writer, the act of responding to your experiences with writing becomes more natural or expected. It simply becomes what you do. As a regular writer or blogger you begin to trust that exigency or purpose will become clear through the act of writing.

This is the great advantage of blogging. Out of necessity, classroom writing assignments are short-lived. They usually take place over a few weeks and then you might never write on that subject again. You take another class with new writing assignments, and there is little or no relationship between those assignments and the ones from the semester before. Blogging gives you the opportunity to write many, informal, short posts over a long period of time. As a blogger you might commit to spending 10–20 minutes, two or three times a week, for a year. In the end, you'll have 100 or more posts chronicling your thoughts and interests. Even if you don't end up writing longer posts, your blog could serve as a reservoir of ideas and links for writing assignments, especially if you choose to blog about your academic interests. Ideally though, the regular writing practice of blogging will help you discover some intrinsic motivation for writing. Outside of the extrinsic carrots and sticks of classroom assignments, you might find some value in writing itself, a value that you can then bring to your assignments.

So my advice to you is to give blogging a try. It's easy. It's free. And if you give it a decent try, you might discover some tremendous benefits that will carry you through college and into your career.

Some Technical Advice on Building a Blog

There are now many websites that allow users to create and maintain free blogs. Often these sites will place advertising on your blog instead of asking you to pay. Usually there is a pay option if you prefer to have a blog without ads. Two of the more commonly used sites at this point are Blogger.com and WordPress.com. Both sites are fairly easy to use, offer step-by-step instructions for getting started, and a range of templates for the layout and design of your blog. Later, when you become more confident with your blogging, you might want to learn about CSS (cascading style sheets) and other elements of web design that will allow you to customize your site even further, but the choices offered by either of these sites will be more than enough to get you

started. The first decisions you will have to make are the name and URL (i.e. your web address) of your blog. These are an important decisions, especially the URL. Once you create your URL, Google and other search engines will use it to link to your site. Other bloggers will use it to link to your pages. If you change your URL later, it will break all those links. The title of your blog and your URL will also be two of the main ways that your blog will be indexed by search engines. Therefore, if you want your blog to be found by readers, you should include words they might use in searching for you. For example, because I wanted my blog to by an extension of my professional, academic identity, I chose to use my name for my URL, alexreid.typepad.com. I named my blog Digital Digs because I knew I was going to be writing about digital media. Changing the name of your blog later is not a big deal, but you might want to give some careful thought to your URL (also keep in mind that many popular URLs will already be taken).

The next step will be selecting a layout and design for your blog. Here the decision you make should reflect your ideas about what the content of your blog will be. The good news is that it is easy to change the template you are using without losing any of your content, so you can always change your mind later. There are different templates that are made to accommodate different blogging styles.

- Will you write frequent short posts, maybe posted from your phone or other mobile device? Or will you write longer, less frequent posts? If you plan the former, maybe you want to have 10 or more of your most recent posts on the first page. If you are planning the latter, maybe you'll only want two or three. The length of your average post might also inform your choices for the size of the font you use and the width of the text column. Again, these are things with which you can experiment.
- Will you include many images? Some blogs are primarily collections of photos. There are some blog templates designed to allow you to display images in a grid-like fashion.
- How about video or audio podcasts? You should consider including a range of media. Maybe you will want to record your own video or audio, or maybe you'll just want to embed media you find on YouTube or similar sites. If so, you will want to make sure that you pick a template that has a wide enough text column to include the video player.

Most templates will include default font and color choices that you can customize. It's important to keep readability in mind. If you are following my suggestion and creating a blog that will address your professional or academic interests, you should make design choices that reflect that professionalism. In other words, no crazy color combinations! Of course, you should feel free to experiment, but, generally speaking, dark text on a light background is the easiest to read. Clear text is especially important if your posts will be longer than a short paragraph.

As you can see, questions of design and layout are interrelated with questions of content. The content of your regular blog posts is likely the most important part of your site, but you should also consider the content of your *sidebar*. Most blogs include one or two narrow columns with a variety of information. The advertising that appears on free blogs will appear in the sidebar. However, the contemporary blogger has the opportunity to provide a variety of media and opportunities for interaction through widgets. Popular widgets allow bloggers to include information form other social media such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Flickr (a photo-sharing site). Sites like Widgetbox. com offer millions of free widgets that are easy to add to a blog.

My own blog is a fairly typical example of blog design. As can be seen in this image of my current site (see fig. 1), the blog has three basic parts: a banner, a sidebar, and the main text column.

The banner is your opportunity to create a strong identity for your site. As you can see in the other images here (see figs. 2–6), I have gone through several banner images during the years I have run my blog.

The colors that dominate your banner will then inform the color choices that you make elsewhere. For example, the blues and grays in the banner image appear as font and background colors in the sidebar. My sidebar includes several widgets. There's Tungle, which is a web application where my students can make appointments to meet with me. I also have my Twitter feed and a "blog roll" (a list of blogs I read), which is powered by Delicious. In addition, I have a list of recent comments posted to my blog (see more on commenting below). Though my blogging application, like all blogging applications, has its own commenting system, I use Disqus, another social media site, which allows commenters to create identities that they can carry from one blog to another (wherever Disqus is used). Finally, the primary part of the blog is the main text column. I have taken my own advice and

Latour's composition manifesto and post-critical composition studies

From Larval Subjects I picked up on Latour's composition manifesto. The manifesto makes arguments that should be familiar to any reader of Latour, but it's clear focus on composition should be of especial interest to rhetoricians (though, of course, he fails to make the connection between composition and writing even while managing to connect to music, painting, dance, etc.). Basically, Latour differentiates between composition and critique, which I actually see as a re-enactment of Ulmer's discussion of hermeneutics and heuretics: critique/hermeneutics are about revealing a hidden world; composition/heuretics are about building a world from the rubble of critique. As Latour writes, "While critiques still believe that there is too much belief and too many things standing in between reality, compositionists believe that there are enough ruins and that everything has to be reassembled piece by piece."

In fact, one might go back even further with Ulmer to his late 80s essay "The Object of Post-Criticism" to see one starting point for what Latour is discussing (though clearly Latour has been making this argument at least since We have never been modern as well). It's not really origins or ownership that I'm interested in here, but I do think that it's interesting that Ulmer comes to a post-critical composition through his reading of Derrida, who has been so antithetical to these discussions otherwise. In that 80s essay, Ulmer connects Derrida's pharmakon with his own development of the saprophyte (mushroom). In The Two Virtuals, I read the saprophytic process as analogous to ripping (as in rip, mix, burn) as a part of (de)composition.

In object-oriented discourse there is simultaneously a great interest in rhetoric, as we can see in both Bogost and Harman's work, and some hesitancy in focus on the textual, which I think comes out of creating some distance from the correlationist emphasis of texts underlined by the mainstream Derridean catch phrase, "il n'y a pas de hors-texte." As I noted above, we can see it in Latour's list of compositional practices, where he notes composition "has a clear root in art, painting, music, theater, dance" (as if we haven't spoken of the composition of texts for centuries, with the OED citing the original use of composition in reference to words in 1388). Levi Bryant notes the same thing regarding Latour that "Composition here does not refer to write, but rather to composing or building out of heterogeneous actors."

Of course I take issue with this, not with Levi's reading of Latour, which is correct, but with this separation of these to definitions. I would argue that writing is composing is "building out of heterogeneous actors," because of course written composition is NOT ONLY building from words. And it is not only words plus punctuation symbols, margins, kerning, leading, and all the other elements of typography. It is NOT ONLY all those things PLUS all the material, technological apparatuses of written composition (now turned to "multimedia" digital composition).

A text is a composed object just like any other object. Texts may be especially important objects from a human perspective (and a humanists perspective). They are the objects that I tend to study. And we have special methods and technologies for studying them just as other objects are studied with microscopes, etc. Knowledge about texts is composed just as knowledge in the sciences is composed (as Latour has so famously demonstrated). We even have "labs" in written composition where knowledge about rhetoric/composition is sometimes composed.

This is really an argument that I have been trying to articulate since reading Ulmer in grad school, though certainly the recent work of DeLanda and Latour, along with my encounter of object-oriented discourses, has really crystalized it. In particular I have long been interested in this movement away from critique, which in composition studies is connected to the post-process movement. Even though I consider myself to be "post-process," that term has always been an umbrella for a heterogeneous range of scholarly practices that share in common a departure from the "process approach" to teaching writing, which is really the bedrock of rhet/comp (and is likely still the mainstream way in which writing is actually taught in the US). As those in the discipline know, the primary post-process approach is one that is characterized by a Foucauldian, cultural/ethnic/gender/feminist studies approach to discourse, ideology, representation, and power in which the pedagogical experience is one of unveiling (just as Latour notes all critique promises). While I believe (and I think most object-oriented folks would agree) that such critical approaches made contributions to the humanities,

Fig. 1. A screen capture of my current blog, www.alex-reid.net.

digital digs

an archaeology of the future

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digital digs

an archeology of the future

Figs. 2–6. Examples of different banners I have used for my blog.

used dark text on a light background. You should experiment with font, font size, and spacing. Because my posts tend to be long, I have emphasized readability by selecting a simple font and adding some additional spacing between the lines (i.e., more than single-spaced).

The final major step is deciding how your readers will access and interact with your blog. You will have the option of creating an RSS feed. RSS stands for "real simple syndication." As I mentioned, blogging applications like Blogger and WordPress work by creating a database of your posts. Using this database they can also create an RSS feed, which is a file that is automatically updated every time you post something new. Your readers can subscribe to this file using any number of desktop and web-based applications. This way, they will be able to check easily whether or not you've posted a new entry. People who read blogs often keep track of a number of their favorites. It would be difficult to do this if one had to visit each site to see if there was new material. By subscribing to blogs using what is called a "blog aggregator," you only have to check in one place to see which of one's favorite blogs have fresh material. Since, as a blogger, you will probably be reading many blogs in your field, I suggest you create a free account at one of these blog aggregator sites for yourself. Google Reader is a popular web-based aggregator.

An RSS feed will allow your readers to interact with your blog in a wider range of contexts, including reading your posts on mobile devices. The other key element of interactivity is your blog's comment

function. As you may have noticed from blogs you have visited, most sites allow readers to post comments on posts. Commenting is an important social aspect of blogging. Not only do comments allow you to learn what your readers are thinking, they also provide a way to strengthen your relationship with your readers and keep them coming back. Of course, comments also have their drawbacks. The most obvious of these is comment spam. Much like email spam, comment spam are random comments on your posts that include links to (often questionable) websites. Most blogging applications include filters to try to keep out spam, but you will still need to be vigilant. One option is to turn on comment moderation, which means you will have to approve messages before they get posted. However, this is sometimes discouraging to genuine commenters. You'll have to make that decision for yourself. Also, you may have to make a decision at some point about what to do with critical and/or belligerent comments. Should you delete them? Should you try to block that poster from making further comments? Should you respond or ignore them? There are no easy answers to these questions, and it may be that you'll not face this problem as a blogger. In the end you will have to decide what is and isn't appropriate for your blog. For example, if you start blogging in your class and a classmate comments in disagreement with you, what will be the fallout of deciding to delete or ignore the comment? As you will discover, the choices we make as bloggers reflect upon our identity and reputation. Of course, this is often the case with writing; blogging is a great place to learn how this works.

Finally, Give Yourself a Month

If you decide to start blogging, give yourself a month to try it out. Start out easy by using one of the templates offered on whichever blogging application you decide to go with. If you already are invested in other social media sites like Twitter or YouTube, and you want to share those things in your sidebar, that's fine, but if you aren't, that's fine as well. Just focus on blogging. The main task of every blogger is to seek out interesting topics and write posts about them. Set an ambitious but reasonable goal for yourself that reflects your interests. Maybe you want to post at least one short message every day. Maybe your goal is to get two longer posts each week. Once you've set that goal, stick to it for a month at least. It takes time to develop positive habits. I often

think of writing as I do running. As a runner, it took me a while to recognize how running feels and what I was capable of doing. Eventually I realized I could run regularly and that, though I would exert myself, I could consistently meet my goals. Similarly, a blogging regimen may seem intimidating at first, but if you meet your goals for a month, you will have direct evidence of your ability as a writer. And though blogging may not ultimately be the kind of writing you really need to do as a student or a professional, the experience of a regular writing practice will form a strong foundation for meeting your future writing challenges.

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