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by Susannah Gardner and Shane Birley



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About the Authors

Susannah Gardner is the co-founder and creative director of Hop Studios Internet Consultants (www.hopstudios.com), a web design company specializing in custom web solutions for content publishers.

Hop Studios brings an insightful concern for community building and editorial workflow to bear on each project — backed by solid design and interface interaction skills. The company builds many types of sites, but specializes in those with copious, rapidly changing content or with a strong journalism, education, or editorial component (like blogs!).

Susannah is also a freelance writer and author; she is the author of *Blogging For Dummies*, 2nd Edition, *Blogging For Dummies*, 3rd Edition, *Buzz Marketing with Blogs For Dummies*, co-author of *BitTorrent For Dummies*, *Dreamweaver MX 2004 For Dummies*, and *Teach Yourself Visually: Dreamweaver MX 2004*, all from John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Prior to running Hop Studios, Susannah worked in the Online Journalism and Communication Program at the University of Southern California, writing curriculum, teaching, and conducting research at the intersection of technology and journalism. She was a senior editor of the Online Journalism Review, the media industry's only Internet-focused journalism publication. Susannah also spent four years at *The Los Angeles Times*, one of six editors responsible for launching that newspaper's web site. During her time at LATimes.com she established the site's multimedia lab, which produced ground-breaking web audio, video, and animation. She also launched and edited MetaHollywood, an online-only publication that covered new Hollywood technology and was LATimes.com's single largest revenue source in 1998.

Susannah earned bachelor's degrees in Print Journalism and American literature at USC. To learn more about her web design company, visit www.hopstudios.com.

Shane Birley is a Vancouver-based web developer, creative writer, and blog consultant with more than 15 years of experience in developing web sites. In January 2006, he cofounded Left Right Minds Initiatives with his partner Allyson McGrane.

Left Right Minds is a creative solutions company for nonprofit societies, charities, and businesses. The business evolved from Shane's work with developing web sites (through his previous company, Vicious Bunny Creative) and Allyson's ongoing work with nonprofit arts groups. Both partners have experience giving workshops about their areas of expertise and in training others to use new technology and business skills. In addition to web development, the company manages and represents performing artists with the support of the Canada Council for The Arts.

As a partner in Left Right Minds, Shane is now working to develop web sites using content management systems that enable his clients to edit and update their own web content. He regularly gives workshops on blogging and did extensive research for *BitTorrent For Dummies*. Shane has a background in improvisational theatre and a B.A. in English — these qualifications enable him to translate difficult computing concepts into easy, plain language. To learn more about his web company, visit www.leftrightminds.com. He also writes a personal blog at www.shanesworld.ca.

Dedication

This edition is dedicated to the memory of Derek Miller, whose humor and courage while facing cancer were chronicled on his blog Penmachine (www.penmachine.com). Derek died in May 2011. He is missed by so many in Vancouver and around the world.

Authors' Acknowledgments

Susannah: Another year, another edition, and this year there are so many more blogs out there! This year's greatest thanks must go to all those dedicated and fascinating people who start blogs; there are more of you than anyone can keep track of, and our world is richer for all those viewpoints.

You, dear reader, are likely to join the ranks of those I just thanked, but you deserve some special attention for taking the journey to the blogging world by reading this book. I appreciate the opportunity to be a guide into this world that I enjoy so much.

Shane Birley has helped me on every edition of *Blogging For Dummies* I have worked on, and is an invaluable writing partner. Get this, people — he meets deadlines! And he does so with cheerful aplomb, clean copy, and so far he hasn't sent me an invoice either. Thanks, Shane.

The team at John Wiley & Sons are always great and this year is no exception. Amy Fandrei responds to e-mails almost before I write them, and Jean Nelson has been as easy an editor to work with as I can remember. Debbye Butler did a great job with the copyediting. There are so many others at Wiley who are part of getting a book like this finished, many of whom I don't know by name. They are nonetheless appreciated.

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Shane: It has been a few years since the 3rd Edition of *Blogging For Dummies*, and I am quite happy to be helping out yet again. My first and hugest thanks goes out to Susannah for allowing me the opportunity to collaborate with her on this edition. She is an incredibly wicked-awesome person, and I am very thankful to count her as one of my good friends. I must also thank Jonathon Narvey who has helped me keep writing and has become one of my biggest fans — and I his. He has helped me get back into top writing form when I thought I couldn't do it anymore.

Thanks to everyone on the Northern Voice committee — I love the opportunity to help create this annual personal blogging and social media conference (it happens every year in Vancouver, BC, you should come!). It keeps me honest and blogging at Shanesworld.ca. And a shout-out to the guys at Dyscultured, a tech and pop culture podcast who invited me to join their merry band. Not to mention the fabulous (and shorter than me) Monica Hamburg who hangs out with me for the S&M Rants podcast.

As always, I appreciate the love and support of my family: my mother who bought me my first TRS-80 computer, when I really wanted a Coleco video game console; my father who taught me everything about life, love, and the pursuit of great beer; and my sister, Kristen, who may be taller than me, but still knows I am the bigger and older brother and I will always know more than her.

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I am sure I have forgotten some people but you know who you are and I thank you.

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Some of the people who helped bring this book to market include the following:

Acquisitions and Editorial

Project Editor: Jean Nelson

Acquisitions Editor: Amy Fandrei

Copy Editor: Debbye Butler

Technical Editor: Paul Chaney

Editorial Manager: Jodi Jensen

Editorial Assistant: Amanda Graham

Sr. Editorial Assistant: Cherie Case

Cover Photo: © iStockphoto.com / pheonix3d

Cartoons: Rich Tennant
(www.the5thwave.com)

Composition Services

Project Coordinator: Nikki Gee

Layout and Graphics: Joyce Haughery,
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Proofreader: Toni Settle

Indexer: Estalita Slivoskey

Publishing and Editorial for Technology Dummies

Richard Swadley, Vice President and Executive Group Publisher

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Composition Services

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Introduction



Allow me to be the first to welcome you to the blogosphere, an exciting and energetic space online that people are using to reach out, build communities, and express themselves. *Blogging For Dummies*, 4th Edition, is designed to help you through the process of starting a blog quickly, and it gives you the tools you need to make the most of your experience in the blogosphere. The entire book is updated and includes several new chapters since the last edition. Keeping pace with the World Wide Web is a challenge!

This book is designed to be useful for all kinds of bloggers, whether you're the CEO of a major corporation or a hobbyist with a passion for communicating. I focus on what makes a blog work — and how a blog can work for you. Also, I realize that not everyone has the technical skills necessary to start a blog, so I provide options for all levels of experience.

This book is useful to you, whether you're taking part in the conversations in the world of blogs or becoming a blogger yourself. I cover everything from technology to legal issues, so you can go forward knowing you have a resource that covers every aspect of this exciting medium.

About This Book

Whether you're building a blog as a rank beginner or redesigning an existing blog to make it better, you can find everything you need in these pages. The fact that you're holding this book likely means you have some ideas about starting a blog — and I want to get you started right away!

The first part of the book gets you blogging quickly and safely. Chapter 1 introduces you to blogging, Chapter 2 walks you through the world that is the blogosphere, and Chapter 3 helps you choose the software and tools you need to get started. In Chapter 4, I show you the fastest and easiest way to get started immediately with your very own blog.

However, you don't have to memorize this book or even read it in order. Feel free to skip straight to the chapter with the information you need and come back to the beginning later. Each chapter is designed to give you easy answers and guidance, accompanied by step-by-step instructions for specific tasks.

I include sidebars that give you more information, but you don't need to read those sidebars if you're short on time. Technical Stuff icons also indicate helpful extras that you can come back to when you have more time.

Conventions Used in This Book

Keeping things consistent makes them easier to understand. In this book, those consistent elements are *conventions*. Notice how the word *conventions* is in italics? That's a convention I use frequently. I put new terms in italics and then define them so that you know what they mean.

URLs (web addresses) or e-mail addresses in text look like this: `www.bloggingfordummiesbook.com`. Sometimes, however, I use the full URL, like this: `http://traction.tractionsoftware.com/traction` because the URL is unusual or lacks the `www` prefix.

Most web browsers today don't require the introductory `http://` for web addresses, though, so you don't have to type it in.

Foolish Assumptions

Just because blogs have a funny name doesn't mean they have to be written by funny people — or even humorous ones! If you can write an e-mail, you can write a blog. Have confidence in yourself and realize that blogs are an informal medium that forgives mistakes unless you try to hide them. In keeping with the philosophy behind the *For Dummies* series, this book is an easy-to-use guide designed for readers with a wide range of experience. Being interested in blogs is all that I expect from you.

If you're new to blogs, this book gets you started and walks you step by step through all the skills and elements you need to create a successful web log. If you've been reading and using blogs for some time now, this book is an ideal reference that can help you ensure that you're doing the best job possible with any blog that you start or manage.

I do expect that you aren't tackling starting a blog without having some basic computer knowledge under your belt, not to mention a computer on your desk (or, uh, lap!). If you're still figuring out how to use your computer or don't have access to an Internet connection, keep this book for a time when you're more able to put your computer and the Internet to work for you.

That said, you don't need to know much more than how to use a web browser, open and create files on your computer, and get connected to the Internet, so you don't need to be a computer genius, either.

How This Book Is Organized

To ease you through the process of building a blog, I organized this book to be a handy reference. The following sections provide a breakdown of the parts of the book and what you can find in each one. Each chapter walks you through a different aspect of blogging, providing tips and helping you understand the vocabulary of web logs.

Part I: Getting Started with Blogs

This part introduces you to the general concepts of blogging, including actually starting a blog today. In Chapter 1, I show you some good blogs and give you background about this young industry. You can find out what's involved in creating a blog and take a quick tour of what works in a blog and what doesn't.

While reading Chapter 2, you find guidance on how your friends, family, and business colleagues might react to your new blog. If you're interested in blogging frankly, you might want to read this chapter before you start criticizing your boss or writing about your personal life online.

In Chapter 3, you make a big decision: what blogging software you want to use. I explain what your options are and how to find blog software that has the features and extras you need. Chapter 3 also helps you choose a domain name and a web host so that you can install your own blog software and control every aspect of the blogging experience.

Part II: Setting Up Your Blog

In Chapter 4, you can jump right into a real blog and start a hosted Blogger blog. Sign up in ten minutes and have fun putting up text, links, and images. It really is that easy.

Chapters 5 and 6 are devoted to helping you start blogging in two other formats. Chapter 5 covers setting up and blogging with WordPress, a software application that you install on your own server. And Chapter 6 is all about blogging with the popular Tumblr hosted blog software.

Together, these chapters give you step-by-step instructions for both starting up a new blog and adding blog posts, images, and other fun stuff to the blog you start. If you read no other chapters in this book, read these three!

Part III: Fitting In and Feeling Good

Part III is dedicated to making sure you know how to get the most out of your blog while meeting the needs of your audience. In Chapter 7, you can work on figuring out just what your topic is and how best to produce content around your subject. I even give you tips on dealing with writer's block.

In Chapter 8, you can define your audience and work on targeting your blog content to reach that group most effectively — and keep readers coming back for more.

Chapter 9 helps you avoid a common blog problem: spam. Discover the tricks every blogger must know to keep ads for enhancing intimate body organs from dominating their comment areas. More than that, however, Chapter 9 tells you how to cultivate a community of interaction and conversation on your blog.

Chapter 10 is a new addition to this edition of *Blogging For Dummies*. If you are wondering how to blog anonymously (and I won't ask why!), this chapter is a handy starting point for knowing how to assess the risks and make the technical adjustments necessary.

Part IV: Going Beyond Words

In Part IV, you find a series of chapters that help you dress up your blog with style and neat technological tools. In Chapter 11, you can find out how to make the most of photos and other graphics in your blog. Did you know that adding a photo to your blog post makes more people read it? It's true!

If you can't say it with a photo, say it with your mouth by creating a podcast as I explain in Chapter 12. Everyong, from the newest blogger to the seasoned professional, can use this exciting area of the blogosphere to make themselves heard.

In Chapter 13, I introduce you the idea of adding a forum, or bulletin board, to your blog. This conversational medium is a great adjunct to the dialogue that happens in your blog comments, but gives your visitors a little more freedom in directing that conversation.

Part V: Marketing and Promoting Your Blog

Make your blog and yourself known on the Internet and in the blogosphere by using the tools described in Part V. In Chapter 14, you can find out what the heck RSS is and how you can use it to direct traffic to your blog. Not only

that, but you can also use RSS yourself to read other blogs quickly and find out what others are saying about you.

Twitter is showing up everywhere, even in sitcoms. In Chapter 15, get familiar with this easy tool for keeping in touch with friends, family, and even your colleagues. You can dive in to the depths of social networking in Chapter 16. You may find more going on with Facebook than you think!

Chapter 17 helps you use statistics and traffic-tracking tools to discover more about your audience members and how they're using your blog.

Part VI: Getting Business-y with It

Part VI drills down to the business of . . . uh . . . business!

If you've ever thought that you ought to be able to make a little money with your blog, then Chapter 18 is for you. Find out how to put ads on your blog, form relationships with sponsors, and use affiliate programs to make a buck.

If you're a corporate CEO or small-business owner, then Chapter 19 is a must-read. In this chapter, I show you how businesses, nonprofit groups, and other organizations are making use of blogs to form relationships with clients and customers.

Part VII: The Part of Tens

In The Part of Tens, you can discover ten ways to increase the community interaction on your blog, ten indispensable tips for mobile bogging, and best of all, ten outstanding blogs that make the most of technology and the Internet.

Part VIII: Appendixes

Blogs, sidebars, blogrolls, RSS — this medium has more jargon than you can shake a stick at. I define new terms in each chapter so that you know what's going on when you start blogging, and you can always consult the glossary in Appendix A for definitions of all those weird blog terms that have sprung up in recent years. Don't let a few acronyms keep you from enjoying the blogosphere!

In Appendix B, you can get the goods on writing your own HTML code. Happily, you don't need to do much of that on a blog (unless you want to)!

Icons Used in This Book



Here's a rundown of the icons I use in this book:

The Remember icon reminds you of an important concept or procedure to store away in your memory bank for future use.



The Technical Stuff icon signals technical stuff that you might find informative and interesting, but that you don't need to know to develop the blogs described in this book. Feel free to skip over these sections if you don't like the techy stuff.



Tips indicate a trick or technique that can save you time and money — or possibly a headache.



The Warning icon warns you of any potential pitfalls — and gives you the all-important information about how to avoid them.

Where to Go from Here

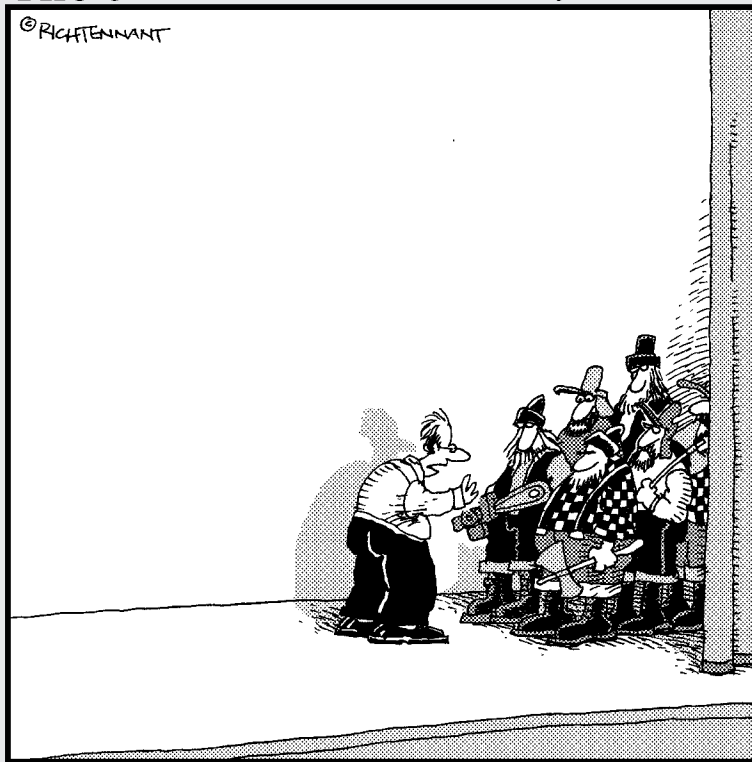
Turn to Chapter 1 to dive in and get started with an intro to blogs and an overview of why this medium is so exciting for so many people. If you just want to get started blogging today, read over Chapter 4. Otherwise, spend some time thinking about the best blog software solution for your situation — which you can read more about in Chapter 3. Already have a blog, but want to do more with it? I think Chapter 8's coverage of great content might be a great place to dive in. Don't forget to send me your efforts: I can't wait to see your blog! Drop me an e-mail at susie@bloggingfordummiesbook.com.

Part I

Getting Started with Blogs

The 5th Wave

By Rich Tennant



"No, we're here to introduce Google Bloggers.
Bloggers. Not loggers..."

In this part . . .

part I is your crash course in blogging, from finding out what the heck blogs are all about and why people are bothering with them at all, to understanding what a blogger considers ethical. It's an exciting part, and you won't want to miss a word! In Chapter 1, you find out why people are posting their most personal thoughts on the web and why even businesses are getting involved. In Chapter 2, it's all about how you can start a blog and keep your job at the same time. Chapter 3 shows you the ins and outs of several blogging software applications and guides you through picking the right solution.

Chapter 1

Discovering Blog Basics

In This Chapter

- ▶ Recognizing the hallmarks of a blog
 - ▶ Getting started with your own blog
 - ▶ Deciding what to blog about
 - ▶ Blogging successfully
-

By now, you've probably heard the word *blog* tossed around by all kinds of people, seen it show up in news stories or cited on TV news broadcasts, or you may even have a child, friend, or coworker who has a blog. Bloggers are showing up inside businesses, and businesses are even using blogs to reach out to their customers. But what exactly do all these people mean when they say they have a blog? And what does a blog written by a teenager have in common with one written by a CEO?

Don't be too hard on yourself if you aren't exactly sure what a blog is. The word *blog* is actually a mash-up of two other words — web and log — so if it sounds made up, that's because it is. At its most basic level, a *blog* is a chronologically ordered series of website updates, written and organized much like a traditional diary, right down to the informal style of writing that characterizes personal communication.

In this chapter, you find out just what makes a blog bloggy and why so many people are outfitting themselves with one like it's the latest celebrity fashion trend. (Hint: It's not just that we're all narcissists!) You can get some ideas that you can use to start your own blog and become part of the *blogosphere* (the community of blogs and bloggers around the world).

No matter what your teenager tells you, the blogosphere has absolutely no requirement that you must write your blog while wearing your pajamas. Also, you're allowed to use a spellchecker.

Making Yourself Comfortable with Blogs

I talk to a lot of people about blogs, many of whom know that you can find a blog on the World Wide Web, but who also have the impression that all blogs are written by navel-gazing cranks with an axe to grind or by 12-year-old girls. Some blogs really are diaries in which the blogger records the minutiae of day-to-day life — but blogs can be much more than that, and all kinds of people write them.

One of my favorite blogs (see Figure 1-1) falls into the personal diary category: Mimi Smartypants (<http://mimismartypants.com>). A woman living in Chicago writes this blog, which records her thoughts and activities with such hilarious prose that I often find myself laughing out loud when I read her posts.

Think of a blog this way: It's a kind of website. All blogs are websites (the opposite isn't true, though), and neither the content nor the creator makes a blog a blog — the presentation does. A blog can be many things: a diary, a news source, a photo gallery, or even a corporate marketing tool. Blog content can include text, photos, audio, and even video, and bloggers talk about nearly any subject that you can imagine.



Figure 1-1:
Mimi
Smartypants
blogs about
her life —
hilariously.



One of the reasons blogs have become such a popular way of publishing a website is because they're particularly good at generating high search-engine rankings. If you have a blog, it's more likely than a standard website to come up high in lists of search results for the topics you discuss. The reason? Your posts are fresh and recent. Search engines give an extra boost to web pages that have the most recently updated or created content related to the keywords that someone is searching for. And better search-engine listings mean more visitors, more readers, more comments, and a more vibrant community. Individuals and companies have taken advantage of the blog medium to reach out to web users.

How people use blogs

With millions of blogs in the world — the blog search engine Technorati (<http://technorati.com>) tracks more than 1 million blogs — it's obvious that blogging is a popular and successful format for publishing a website. But just what are people doing with blogs? They can't all be talking about their cats!

And they aren't. Bloggers are using the blog format to communicate effectively in all kinds of information spheres, from the personal to the professional. In fact, many blogs serve multiple purposes at the same time, mixing posts about activities at home with news pertaining to work. Your blog can serve many purposes in your life.

Documenting your life

A lot of folks use blogs for the same reason they might keep a diary — to chronicle their lives and activities. This urge to communicate appears in all kinds of mediums, from scrapbooking to taking digital photographs. If you're interested in sharing personal details with others, a blog gives you a fast, efficient way to do so.

If you send holiday newsletters every year or e-mail a group of friends and family to let them know about exciting events in your life, you can have a lot of fun with a blog. You can blog as often as you want, and your readers visit when they're ready to get more information. Best of all, each blog post gives your friends and family a quick way to respond to you; they only have to leave a comment on your blog post. You might find you're talking more with your family than ever before!



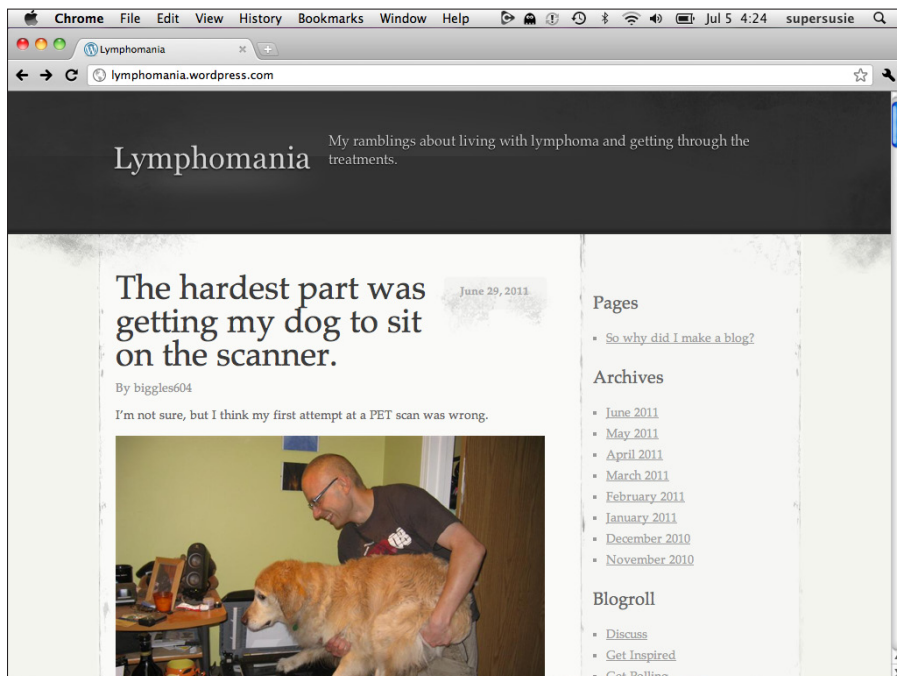
You don't have to buy or find the postage stamps either, so keeping in touch through your blog is inexpensive and less time-consuming than snail mail. And no more envelope glue to lick.

Of course, not all lives come up roses every day; they can't all be wedding and travel blogs. Personal blogs can be intense when they document rough times. Steve Sheldon (<http://lymphomania.wordpress.com>), a Vancouver-based blogger, uses his blog Lymphomania, shown in Figure 1-2, to document his experiences with lymphoma. He explains how the blog has been part of his journey:

“... I have lymphoma, and as scary as it's been, it's also been a great learning experience; learning how amazing the people around me are, how I can handle such a life-changing event, and learning about the disease and the treatment.

I want to use this blog as a way to vocalise everything that is going through my head as I am on this journey, it seems a little narcissistic, but by externalising to an audience, it's really helping me cope with the stress of it all, and who knows, maybe some of you will learn something about the disease, in which case; Mission accomplished!”

Figure 1-2:
Steve Sheldon uses his blog Lymphomania to connect with others and cope with his illness.



In your eagerness to let your friends know about what you're up to, don't forget that anyone in the world can access a blog (unlike a real diary or scrapbook), now and in the future. Don't publish anything that you might find

embarrassing in the future, and have the same consideration when you talk about others or use photographs.

Exploring a hobby or passion

If you have a passion or hobby that you just love to talk about, consider doing so in a blog. Anyone who shares your interest is a potential reader and is bound to be looking for more information wherever he or she can find it.

You can detail your own experiences, offer advice to others, drum up support for whatever you like to do, or just talk about what you love. Best of all, you might be able to make connections with others who share your infatuation, making friends and finding ways to get involved with your hobby more deeply.

Cybele May runs a blog about something she loves: candy. Candy Blog (www.candyblog.net) is her personal labor of love and a great excuse to buy a lot of candy! Cybele reviews candies, writing extensive descriptions of taste, texture, and ingredients for fellow sugar enthusiasts. And they respond! Nearly every review garners comments from fans and critics of the candies that Cybele samples. Check out Candy Blog in Figure 1-3.

Figure 1-3:
Candy Blog
is a sweet
labor of love
for Cybele
May.



Sharing information

Sometimes, a blog is all about sharing information. Journalists use blogs to report on local, national, and international news; critics and commentators use the medium to state their opinions and predictions. Educators keep parents and students abreast of classroom happenings and dates. Coworkers let colleagues in geographically distant offices know what's going on in relation to collaborative projects. The uses of the informational blog are really limitless.

The popular blog Boing Boing (www.boingboing.net) is a great example of an information-sharing blog. Self-described as a “directory of wonderful things,” Boing Boing’s several contributors are dedicated to keeping you up to date on all the weird and wonderful websites in the world. A selection of posts from August 2009 described the Nano Air Vehicle (it has wings, like insects do), a mouse who had made its home in an Oregon ATM, and a link to creating your own “Achingly Self-Referential Virtual Commodity Fetish Objects.” This site is truly a random collection of news and links, perfect for the eclectic consumer of trivia.

Another popular information blog is TechCrunch (www.techcrunch.com). This guide to everything Internet covers everything from new companies to the latest geek gadgets and, of course, offers a lot of information about software. You might not find every post useful, but if you're trying to keep up with the breakneck pace of technological innovation on the Internet, you may find TechCrunch (shown in Figure 1-4) and blogs like it invaluable resources.

Making money

You spend a lot of time producing your blog, and a lot of people read it. Why not turn those eyes into dollars? That's a question many a popular blogger has asked, and you can make it happen in several ways.

The most common technique involves including advertisements on your blog pages. For example, Google AdSense (www.google.com/adsense) provides in-page advertising that's designed to match the content of your blog and therefore be of interest to your readers. Each time a visitor to your blog clicks one of these advertising links, you earn money from Google. I talk more about making money from advertising programs, affiliate links, sponsorships, and more in Chapter 18.

Of course, companies haven't missed out on the fact that blogs can help them drum up interest in their products and services, or inform and connect with consumers. Many companies, small and large, have added blogs to their websites, and they use the blogs to start conversations with their customers and potential customers. In many cases, use of the informal voice of the blog medium has helped customers understand that real people work in these organizations. This personal connection gives the company better credibility and often adds to customers' recognition of that company and its values in the marketplace.

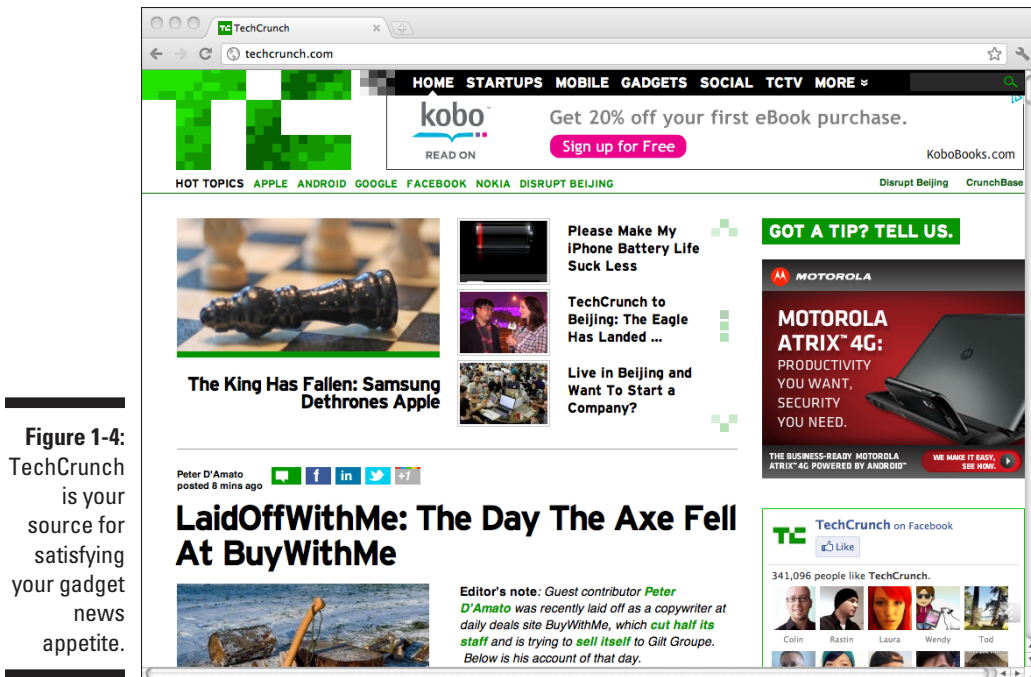


Figure 1-4:
TechCrunch
is your
source for
satisfying
your gadget
news
appetite.

General Motors, Google, and Sun Microsystems all have company blogs, giving readers a peek inside the corporate culture of what might otherwise be fairly faceless monoliths.

Southwest has taken this approach (www.blogsouthwest.com). On the blog's About page, Southwest says, "Our goal with the new Nuts About Southwest remains to give our readers the opportunity to take a look inside Southwest Airlines and to interact with us." Southwest tries to make sure that the blog represents a lot of voices inside the company, from managers to captains — even the president of the company. As with personal blogs, the tone is light and conversational, making the company seem friendly and accessible.

Recognizing a blog

You've probably seen a blog online already. Because the blogger isn't required to put a big This Is a Blog! sticker at the top of the page, you might not have realized that you were looking at a blog. With a little practice and familiarity with standard blog elements, though, you can identify any blog in a snap.

Regardless of what the blog is about or who writes it, every blog features

- ✓ **Frequent updates:** Most bloggers update their blogs a few times a week; some bloggers even update them a few times a day. Blogs don't have a schedule for publishing; the blogger simply updates the blog when it seems appropriate.
- ✓ **Posts or entries:** Each time a blogger updates the blog, he or she creates a blog *post*, or entry, that he or she then adds to the blog.
- ✓ **Permalinks:** Each time a blogger adds a post to his or her blog, that post appears on the blog's home page. At the same time, blog software creates a *permalink* page to contain only that blog post and its comments. (The word *permalink* is short for “permanent link.”) Permalink pages are a big part of why blogs do so well with search engines — every post adds a new page to your website and provides another opportunity for your blog to come up as a search result.
- ✓ **Chronological order:** When a blogger writes a new blog post, that post appears at the top of the blog's first page. The next time the blogger writes a post, it shows up at the top, and the older posts move down the page.
- ✓ **Comments:** Most (though not all) blogs allow readers to leave comments — short text messages — in response to blog posts. Comments really differentiate a blog from most websites by encouraging interaction and conversation.
- ✓ **Archives:** Because blogs are updated so frequently, bloggers often sort their blogs into a date-based archive so that readers can find older information easily.
- ✓ **Categories:** Bloggers can sort posts by subjects or categories, which allows a blogger to blog about a number of different topics and lets readers focus in on the topics that most interest them.

Blog anatomy: Dissecting a typical blog

In this section, I give you a tour of the usual blog elements by using baker Rose Levy Beranbaum's blog, Real Baking with Rose Levy Beranbaum (www.realbakingwithrose.com). Rose's blog has all the usual features that I discuss in this section, as shown in Figure 1-5 — and a few more bells and whistles as well.



Figure 1-5:
Real Baking
with Rose
Levy
Beranbaum
is written by
a baker and
cookbook
author.

Courtesy of Rose Levy Beranbaum, author of *The Cake Bible* (William Morrow).

Most blogs — no matter what topic they cover — look quite similar because the elements of one blog are common to all blogs. Rose's is no exception.

Blogging through the ages

The concept behind a blog isn't new; after all, people have been keeping diaries and journals since the invention of the written word. Even on the web, diary websites existed long before anyone used the word *blog*.

No one really knows when the first true blog was created, but estimates put the date around 1994. The term *weblog* came into existence in 1997, and it was quickly shortened to the more colloquial *blog*. If you want to read more about the history of blogging, read author Rebecca Blood's essay on the early days of blogging

at www.rebeccablood.net/essays/weblog_history.html.

No one can really measure the number of blogs in the world, for a number of technical reasons and because blogs can be short-lived (accidentally or deliberately). All studies of numbers, however, indicate that the number of blogs increases dramatically every month. For example, in May 2007, the blog search engine Technorati (www.technorati.com) was tracking 75 million blogs; by July 2007, that number was 94 million.

Those common elements are:

- ✓ **Branding/logo header:** A *header* at the top of the blog displays the name of the blog, often including a logo or other visual element. This header is visible on every page of the blog, identifying it, even to a visitor who visits one of the interior pages without first going to the home page. In Figure 1-5, the header contains the name of the blog, a photo of Rose, and the blog's *navigation* — the links to the different parts of her site.
- ✓ **Most recent posts:** At the top of the blog's home page, the most recent post appears. While you scroll down the home page, you see the next most recent post, and the next most recent post, and so on. New posts are always at the top, making it easy to find the latest, freshest information when you visit. Most blogs display around a dozen recent blog posts on the first page of the blog, and to read older posts, you can visit the archives.
- ✓ **Post information:** Along with each entry, blog software displays information *about* the post. This sort of post information typically appears — but a blogger doesn't have to include it. A blog might be missing an element or two that I list or have others that I don't mention:
 - The date and time the post was published.
 - The name of the post's author. On blogs that have multiple authors, the visitor may find this info especially valuable.
 - The number of comments on the post.

- A link to the permalink page, usually labeled Permalink. Sometimes, you can both read and write comments on the permalink page.
- The category in which the blogger has placed the post. In Figure 1-5, the category of the top post is Special Stories.
- Other links to bells and whistles unique to the blog, such as the links to Send to a Friend (which allows you to quickly e-mail the post to a friend) or Print.

✓ **Sidebar material:** Most blogs are laid out in two or three columns, with the most real estate given to the column that contains the blog posts themselves. The second and/or third columns display organizational material for the blog and peripheral information. Some blogs don't have sidebars at all, and on some blogs, you may see elements that I don't mention in the following list of typical sidebar components:

- *Date-based archives:* Nearly every blog archives a post when the blogger publishes that post, both by date and by category. In the sidebar of a blog, you can usually access both archive methods. Figure 1-6 shows the date-based archives of Rose's blog, broken down by month. Date-based archives can also show weeks and years.

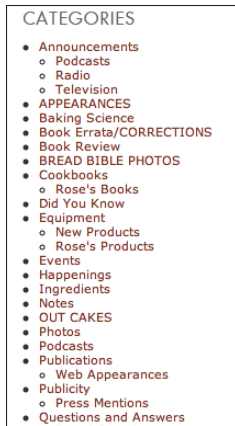
Figure 1-6:
A date-based archive.



*Courtesy of Rose Levy Beranbaum,
author of The Cake Bible
(William Morrow).*

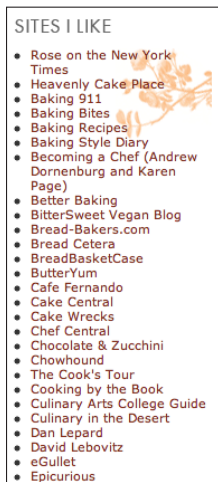
- *Categorized archives:* Figure 1-7 shows the category archives of Real Baking with Rose Levy Beranbaum. By sorting each post into a category at the time that she publishes it, Rose creates an archive organized by subject, making it easy for you to find the posts that most interest you. Clicking a category link displays only the posts in that subject area, organized in reverse chronological order.
- *Blogroll:* A *blogroll* is a list of other blogs that the blogger finds interesting or useful. By including the blogs and websites that Rose likes to read on her blog, she can direct her readers to other interesting websites (see Figure 1-8). And who knows, those sites may return the favor, sending their visitors to her site.

Figure 1-7:
A categorized
archive.



*Courtesy of Rose Levy Beranbaum,
author of The Cake Bible
(William Morrow).*

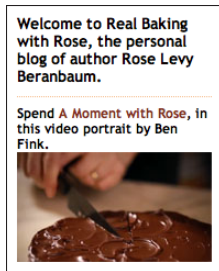
Figure 1-8:
A blogroll.



*Courtesy of Rose Levy Beranbaum,
author of The Cake Bible
(William Morrow).*

- **Information about the author:** Because blogs are so personal, sometimes you want to know more about who's writing them. Many bloggers know their readers are curious, and those bloggers put together short bios and other information for readers. Bloggers sometimes display this information in the sidebar or link to it, like in Figure 1-9.

Figure 1-9:
An About
the Author
section.



*Courtesy of Rose Levy Beranbaum,
author of The Cake Bible
(William Morrow).*

- **RSS feed link:** Readers can use RSS, or Really Simple Syndication, to subscribe to your blog by using a newsreader, such as Google Reader. After a reader subscribes via RSS, he or she can read the latest updates via the newsreader instead of visiting your blog. So, your readers don't have to visit your blog several times a day to see whether you've updated it. A blog often includes an RSS link (identified by a small orange icon, as shown in Figure 1-10) near the bottom of the sidebar. I talk more about RSS in Chapter 13.

Figure 1-10:
A link to an
RSS feed.



*Courtesy of Rose Levy Beranbaum,
author of The Cake Bible
(William Morrow).*

Starting a Blog

One reason that so many blogs exist is that you can set them up and publish them so easily. The early days of the Internet were full of heady talk about the democratization of publishing; people discussed how absolutely anyone would have the power to publish because of the prevalence of personal computers. In fact, that idea wasn't strictly true. Writers no longer needed a printing press and a distribution method to get their work to people, but they still needed specialized skills and technology.

Unless the wannabe publisher spent time figuring out how to write HTML, owned a computer that had an Internet connection, and understood how to put files onto a web server, he or she was still pretty much in the old can't-get-published boat. You could acquire those skills and the tools to publish, but you couldn't do so easily.

The answer, as it turns out, comes down to technology — specifically, software. I believe blogging goes a long way toward making that initial promise of the web come true. If you can write an e-mail, you can figure out how to use the simple interfaces of blogging software without any of the muss of dealing with HTML, FTP, or any of those other awful web acronyms everyone's supposed to understand these days.

Figure 1-11 shows the publishing interface of Blogger (www.blogger.com), a great blogging software tool. To write a new post, you simply log into Blogger, fill in the blanks for a new post, and click the Publish Post button to put the entry on your blog.

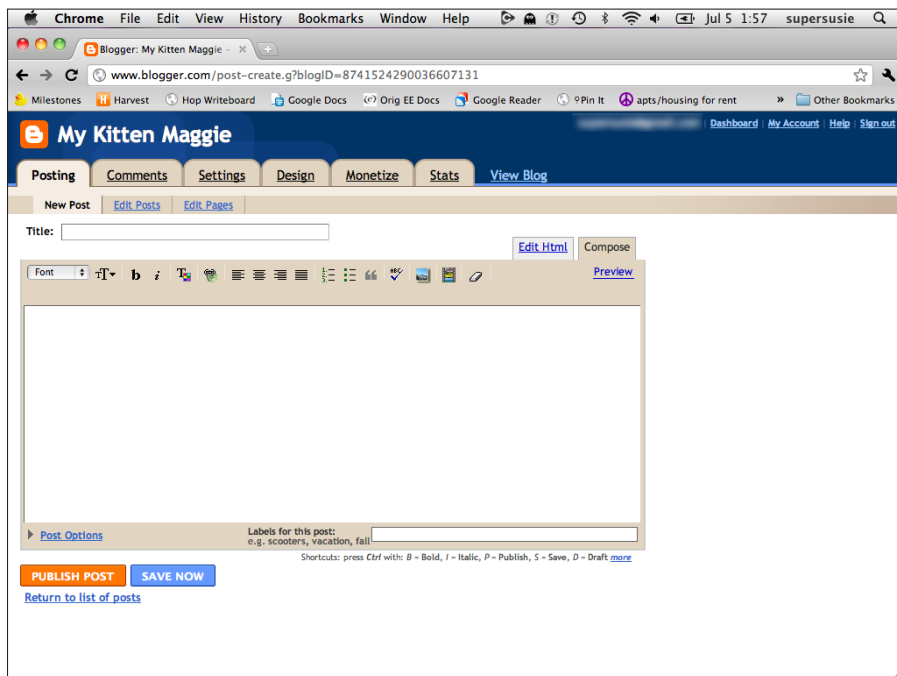


Figure 1-11:

You can publish a blog by simply filling in a few form fields and clicking Publish Post.

Different blog software offer different feature sets. Like with all software, the tricky part is finding the right one to use for your situation and needs. I can assure you, however, blogging software comes in all shapes, sizes, and price

ranges. In Chapter 3, I talk extensively about choosing the right software solution for your blog. Chapter 4 shows you how to start a blog in about ten minutes by using Blogger, and Chapter 5 walks you through the details of using WordPress. In Chapter 6 you can try out a microblog using Tumblr.

Choosing What to Blog About

You can find blog topics all over the map. If you haven't already read a blog, follow these simple steps to find one and read it, which is the best possible way to become familiar with the medium:

1. **Open your web browser and go to www.technorati.com.**
2. **Type any search term that you're interested in reading about into the search box at the top of the page.**

For example, you might enjoy reading a blog written by someone with whom you share a hobby, such as knitting or parasailing. Or try a search term that describes what you do for a living; if you're an accountant, for example, you might search for **tax regulations**. You can also search for something that can help you accomplish a task, such as buying a house or finding out how to paint.

3. **Click **Blog** or **Posts** to filter the search results as you desire. I find **Posts** gives me more interesting results.**
4. **Click **Search** (the magnifying glass button to the right of the search box).**

Technorati returns a list of recent blog posts that used your search term. When I searched for **knitting**, for example, Technorati showed me a blog post by someone who just bought some new yarn for making socks, one about a recipe for a knitting-themed birthday cake, and another post by someone who was frustrated with a pattern.

5. **Find a blog post that looks interesting and click the URL to visit the blog and read more.**
6. **Repeat Steps 1 through 5, as needed, until you find a blog that you enjoy!**

You can find blogs on so many topics that you can't help but find something interesting, whether it engages you professionally or personally. I read blogs on all kinds of topics that interest me, from (surprise) knitting to the arts to real estate.

The blog format is exceptionally well-suited to letting you explore an idea, a hobby, or a project — but don't let that stop you from using it for other things. People have created blogs to pass along marketing expertise, sell shoes, cover the latest celebrity gossip, raise funds for bike rides, and even write books. The topic or topics that you write about should excite you and hold your interest, and they can be about absolutely anything.

Having that much freedom can be a little scary and, if you're like me, can leave you with an absolute blank in your mind. No problem; you can start a blog today about one topic, and when you actually figure out what you want to write about, change directions and go down another road. It's a very flexible format!



Think about the following tips when you start a blog:

- ✓ **Choose a subject that genuinely interests you.** Don't choose a topic only because you think being interested in it makes you look good or you think that it'll attract a lot of readers. You're the one who has to do the writing for the blog, and you can do that writing a lot more easily if you're enthusiastic about your subject. Your passion shines through to your readers and keeps them coming back.
- ✓ **Decide whether any topics are off limits.** Bloggers who keep personal diaries for their friends and families might decide to keep certain subjects out of the public forum of the Internet. For example, do you really want your significant other reading a frank account of last night's dinner preparation argument? How about your mom or your boss?
- ✓ **Think about your potential readers.** Who are they? How can you appeal to them and get them to keep reading your blog? Do you even care about how many readers you have? If you do, what do you want to show, explain, or ask them?

Creating a Successful Blog

Blogs are so quick and easy to set up that you can start one without having much of a plan in place for what you want to blog about, why you're blogging, or what you're trying to accomplish. Some people thrive on this kind of wide-open playing field, but others quickly become bored (or boring!).

To get your blog started on the right foot, think seriously about why you're blogging, and then make a commitment to attaining your goals. Don't get me wrong — this isn't a job! But, just as you wouldn't expect good results from a dinner prepared without paying any attention to ingredients, you can't start your blog without having a recipe for success.

Here's my recipe for a good blog:

1. Preheat the oven by setting goals.
2. Measure out several cups of good writing.
3. Mix well with frequent updates.
4. Sprinkle in a lot of interaction with your readers.



Watching how someone else blogs is a great way of finding out how to be successful yourself! Keep track of how the blogs you enjoy are keeping you interested: Take note of how often the blogger updates his or her blog, the writing style, and which posts you find most engaging and get you to leave a comment.

Setting goals

Just like you have many different reasons to blog, you have many ways to create a successful blog. *Don't* forget that your goals and plans might not be the same as another blogger's. *Do* think about what your goals are and keep those goals in mind when you start your blog.

The following are ways that you might define a successful blog:

- ✓ **Numbers:** Many bloggers are eager to attract readers to their blogs, and they define success by the number of people who visit every day.
- ✓ **Comments:** Some bloggers find the interaction with readers in the comment area of the blog very gratifying. For these bloggers, getting a comment every day or on every post might mean they're successful.
- ✓ **Results:** Many bloggers start their blog in order to accomplish a task (such as raising money for a charity), to sell a product, or even to get a book contract (blogs have done all these things). When these bloggers meet their goal, they know they've succeeded!

When you start your blog, take time to think about how you define success. Do you want to help your entire family keep in touch? Do you want to let your friends back home know more about your college experience? Are you starting a company and trying to get attention in the media? Consider writing your goals into your very first blog post and then returning to that post every few months to see whether your goals have changed and to remind yourself of what you're trying to accomplish.

Writing well

Many people think that blogs are poorly written, misspelled, and full of grammatical no-no's such as incomplete sentences. Most criticism has at least some basis in reality, and this case is no different. Many bloggers *do* write their blogs very casually, paying only cursory attention to spelling and grammar.

For many, this informality is part of the charm of the format. Readers find the colloquial, conversational tone accessible and easy to read, and bloggers who write informally seem approachable and friendly.

I'm not making an excuse, however, for ignoring all the rules of writing. Well-written and correctly spelled blogs attract readers just as often (perhaps more often) as those that aren't. You can develop a friendly, personal way of writing without losing touch with the dictionary. I encourage the use of spell-checking, even for very informal blogs intended for friends and family.



For a professional blog, don't even consider writing without paying attention to spelling and grammar. Your readers will roll their eyes, and your competitors will get a good snicker out of it.



Most importantly, however, think through your writing and consider your readers. Take the time to practice and develop a voice that sounds personal and conversational while still qualifying as good, engaging writing. Don't let the chatty style of a blog fool you: The best bloggers spend just as much time writing a casual blog post as they would a work memo.

You can find tips on how to develop your voice in Chapter 7.

Posting frequently

Commit yourself to writing new posts on your blog frequently. Ah, *frequently* is such a deceptive little word — because really, what does it mean?

For some people, frequently means every day. For others, it means three times a day. If you want a blog that doesn't eat up every spare moment in your life but that you still update often enough to keep people interested, define the word *frequently* as at least two or three times a week. (If you want to blog more often than that, go to town.) This number of updates strikes a good balance for most blogs.



Many bloggers use a little trick to account for periods of writer's block or for when they go on vacation: They write posts ahead of time and then save them for later. Using your blog software, you can schedule a date and time for a post to go live, making it possible for you keep your readers entertained, even while you're having an appendectomy or basking on a beach in Hawaii.

You also need to pace yourself. In the first heady days of having a blog, the posts flow freely and easily, but after a few months, you might find it difficult to be creative.

Interacting with comments

Comments make blogs really different from a website; the opportunity to interact and converse with the creator of a website and with other readers is almost unique to blogs.



Forums, also called bulletin boards, offer one way to engage in online conversation on the web, but they aren't as directed by regular posts as blogs. Everyone in the forum community is free to chime in with a topic or question. In fact, some bloggers have chosen to add forums to their blogs as a place for free-flowing conversation. I talk more about how this can work in Chapter 13.

Visitors to a blog have the opportunity to leave a comment on each post. Sometimes, readers leave comments in reaction to what they read; other times, they might offer a suggestion or pose a question. Because any reader can leave a comment, readers may leave comments about other comments!

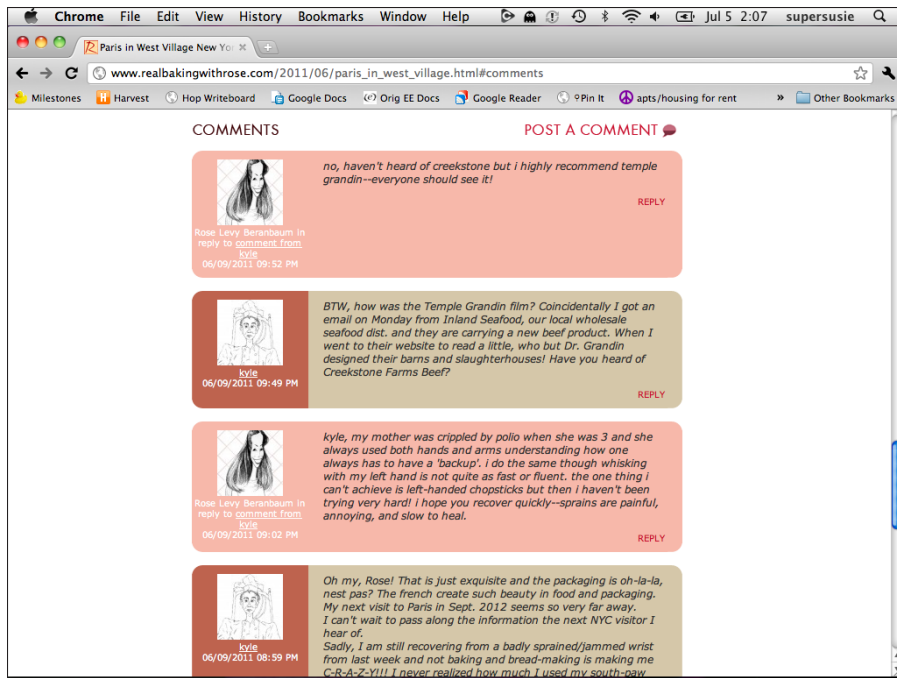
Blog posts often include a link directly below each post, indicating how many comments readers have left. Clicking this link takes you to a page that displays the post, any comments that readers have left about that post, and a form that you can use to leave your own comment.

After someone makes a comment, it appears in the Comments area of the blog, usually labeled with the comment writer's name, along with the date and time that he or she left the comment. On some popular blogs, readers compete to see who can leave the first comment on a new blog post.

In Rose Levy Beranbaum's blog *Real Baking with Rose Levy Beranbaum* (www.realbakingwithrose.com), Rose often responds to questions that readers ask by putting the answer in her blog post's comments area. Rose's comments have a shaded background that other comments don't have (see Figure 1-12) and feature her personal avatar image.

Figure 1-12:

The Real Baking with Rose Levy Beranbaum blog allows readers to leave comments and questions for the blog's author.



Courtesy of Rose Levy Beranbaum, author of *The Cake Bible* (William Morrow).

Not every blog allows comments. Many popular bloggers find that they're overwhelmed by the sheer volume of responses that they get and must turn off comments because they can't keep up with them. We should all be so lucky to have that problem. For most bloggers, comments are an important way to develop a dialogue with readers.



I recommend you keep comments turned on in your blog. They're an easy way to involve your audience in your topic and to get valuable feedback about what you're doing with your blog.

Unfortunately, spammers can take advantage of comments as easily as they can send you unwanted e-mail. If you keep comments turned on, you get unwanted comments that have commercial messages, unless you take preventive measures (which is becoming easier to do). You or your readers might even find some spam comments offensive, just like some kinds of spam e-mail. If you decide to allow comments on your blog, be sure to read them and delete inappropriate messages. Your readers will thank you. In Chapter 9, I talk at length about encouraging comments — and dealing with those comments that you don't want.

Designing for Success

Blog design is a very personal experience. The decisions you make about how your blog looks are just as important as the technology that you choose to run your blog and what you choose to put on it. Because the web is an ever-evolving medium, no solid rules exist that tell you what you should or shouldn't do with your blog. But you can follow guidelines to keep your best foot forward.

The blog that you're starting is a reflection of you and your professional life. Even if your blog is for personal expression, it represents who you are. So, make sure that you have a good handle on how you want to present yourself to the world. If pink bunnies say everything you need, you should have pink bunnies. And if you need to look more corporate, you should avoid the pink bunnies — unless you sell Easter baskets and egg dye.

If you're blogging for business reasons, either on behalf of a company or to promote yourself, make sure that both the writing and design demonstrate the proper tone. Seek advice from bloggers like you and find out from friends and family just how they think your blog should look. Check out other blogs, especially blogs that reflect the same goals or tone you want to create. What does the design of those blogs say about the blogger and the blog content?

Whether you hire a designer for your blog, use a blog template, or try to make the design yourself, seek ways to make your blog stand out from the rest. If you're a business, make sure that your logo appears on your blog. If you're creating a personal blog, add your own photos. Even if you use a default template, you can often add an identifying graphic or element on the site that differentiates your blog from others.



Don't be afraid to start small and plan to redesign later. You can grow into your big ideas when you're sure that you know what you want, so take the time to look at what other blogs are doing while you make your plans.

Let your readers be your guide: If your mom visits your site and says that she can't read it, find out why. If your friends start talking more about the annoying background color than your latest blog post, you have a problem. Just like you do with your content, keep the design focused on the readers to keep them coming back for more.

The average blog has four very distinct areas in which to place and customize content: logos, headers, sidebars, and footers. In a blog, each of these areas has a specific purpose. As more blogs have come into existence, these areas have developed in specific ways that can help you organize your content.

Here's some detail about each of these customizable areas:

- ✔ **Logos:** Getting a visitor's attention on the Internet is a science in itself, and clean, crisp logos can hold a visitor's interest long enough to get him or her to read some of your blog. Typically, a logo appears near the top of each blog page. Many logos include an illustrated element and a special font treatment of the blog name.
- ✔ **Headers:** The header of any blog contains a few elements. The first element should be, of course, the name of your blog. The title should explain what your blog talks about or who you are as the main writer. You can also throw into the header some form of navigation that can help your visitors find their way around and provide them with quick links to special areas that you want highlighted on your site. On many blogs, the logo also appears in the header. Like the name suggests, headers appear at the top of blog pages.
- ✔ **Sidebars:** Sidebars usually become a major focus for a blog site. *Sidebars* are columns to the right or left (or both) of the main content area, and they contain elements such as navigational links, special highlighting graphics that point to social networking sites, lists of blogs that you read (*blogrolls*), archive links, or anything that you want to share with your visitors outside the context of a blog post. Sidebars usually appear on every page of your blog and look consistent from page to page.
- ✔ **Footers:** Footers live at the bottom of each blog page, and sometimes they do nothing more than feature a copyright message. More advanced bloggers have expanded the use of footers to include a significant series of links to content within their sites. These links might lead to comments on the blog, recent posts, or posts that you particularly want to highlight. The footer can feature parts of your blog that you want visitors to find easily.

Chapter 2

Entering the Blogosphere

In This Chapter

- ▶ Knowing what you're getting into
 - ▶ Realizing what happens when you publish
 - ▶ Blogging with standards
 - ▶ Keeping your job while blogging
 - ▶ Staying out of hot water with Mom
 - ▶ Protecting your identity online
-

If you put something on your blog, *anyone* can read it. Blogs, like all websites, are accessible anywhere in the world at any time, and anyone who can access a computer and understand the language the blog is written in can read it. (Some blog software does allow privacy settings or password protection; if you use these options, you have more assurance of privacy.)

And, like with all websites, people can print, duplicate, and fax blog posts, tape them to lampposts, distribute them to a class, or post them on social networking websites such as Facebook. A reader of your blog can even copy and paste the text of your blog posts into a text editor or e-mail message, sending that text buzzing around the world in the blink of an eye.

You can't know who's reading your blog, why they're reading it, or what they might do with what you post. I often talk to bloggers who say, "Well, my only readers are my friends and family, so I don't worry too much about what I write." Your friends and family may very well be reading (in fact, I hope they are!), but they may not be the only readers. Don't make the mistake of assuming that you know who is and isn't reading your blog! I'm not saying that your readers *aren't* only your friends and family, but that you can't know that for sure.



Some blog-hosting sites require you to register in order to use them, and limit readership to those who have registered. It's not just anyone who has a computer and an Internet connection can read those blogs; anyone with a computer, an Internet connection, and an account on that service can read them. Those blogs might look like they offer you more privacy, but generally the barriers to registering for a service are very low: You just need an e-mail address. The blogs might as well be public.

In rare instances, an entire blog is password-protected and therefore readable only by visitors who know the login information for the site. As long as that login information stays private, the blog is private. All the points about people being able to copy and paste or print the post still apply, however. As well, if someone shares a password, you may have unwelcome guests.

In this chapter, I drive home the point that you shouldn't post anything to your blog that you don't want anyone in the world to read — and yes, that includes your best friend, your significant other, your mother, your coworkers, your boss, your landlord, your neighbor . . . you get the idea.

Assessing Your Involvement

Any productivity guru will tell you that individuals who are looking for advice think with their short-term brains. When you start a new project, you rarely think beyond the end of the calendar year — and even that can be a somewhat generous assumption. New bloggers aren't any different.

Think about where you want the blog to be in five years. Will you still actively blog, or will this blogging thing last a few days, weeks, or months? Recognizing your level of commitment helps establish a clear vision about the resources that you should put into the blog.



Making decisions about the future of a blog can be a tricky business, but here are a few questions to answer (maybe in your new blog!) about where your blog will take you:

- ✓ **What level of commitment are you willing make to blogging?** Take a moment to visualize your level of commitment. On a list of your priorities, where does blogging fall? If it's at the absolute bottom of the list, this may not work out well. On the other hand, if you're thinking about how many ways you can use your blog to enhance your business visibility or to keep your family up to date about what you're doing, you might want to try blogging.

The best starting point in determining your commitment is deciding how many posts you're planning to write per day or week. Many popular bloggers tend to post more than once per day, but at that stage, the blogs are usually making a little money, or the bloggers already have an established business (so the blog provides mainly a supplemental outlet for them). Posting once per week works for most personal blogs.

- ✓ **Do you like writing? How's your typing?** Being able to write is one skill, but being able to write interesting, fun prose that people actually want to read is entirely different. You can't pick up blogging overnight; you

must figure out how to do it by practicing. A good way to do this would be to create a test blog on a free blogging service like Blogger (www.blogger.com) and try posting for a period of time. If you have any fear of writing or don't know whether writing on a regular basis will work for you, you don't need to invest a lot of time and money until you know the answers to these questions.

Knowing how to type is an important skill that some new bloggers might not be very good at. If you don't like to write (or type!), consider a podcast or a videoblog. I talk about those formats in Chapter 12.

✔ **What will the blog be about? Is your blog personal or professional?**

If you think of your blog as a personal space, that suggests you should spend less time on it than you do on your paying work or occupation — and you should definitely keep your budget lower than your income! Choose a design solution and write content to suit your budget and time.

However, if you want the blog to serve a business purpose or promote your professional acumen, keep in mind that a company or consultancy needs to present a polished, professional image online with a professional-looking design — ideally, one that's integrated into any existing branding and identity. Also, rather than squeezing in time for writing the blog in the background, designate time for blogging just as you would for a meeting, project task, or other work-related responsibility.

✔ **Do you think that your new blog might grow into a new career, lead to new clients and business, or help build connections with peers and colleagues?**

Websites can really help you make connections (just like joining social networks and finding old classmates), and I presume that, in part, you're starting a blog to reach out to a community. If the community is a professional one or a group whose respect you must earn, your blog can send unspoken messages about who you are and what you stand for. But you don't need to get all corporate!

Most popular bloggers have developed careers based on their blogs unintentionally, all thanks to the quality of the blog. Bloggers have used blogs as starting points for book deals, television shows, and even direct sources of revenue. Think about the needs of your audience members and how to appeal to them, even when you consider what software to use. If you want to build an empire, choose the software that has the bells and whistles necessary to make that empire possible. Chapter 3 has more information about software.



✔ **How comfortable are you with sharing information about yourself or about your business or industry?**

The Internet is a public space. Don't forget that anyone, not just the people you're trying to reach, can read what you reveal about yourself on your blog. (See the next section for details.) Occasionally, bloggers find themselves the recipients of unwanted attention and discover that they need to blog more anonymously than they'd planned.

What Happens When You Publish?

Blogging is a very immediate medium: When you publish a post, it goes live on your blog right away. In fact, several things happen the moment you click the Publish button:

- ✓ The post appears at the top of your blog's home page.
- ✓ The blogging software adds the post to your blog's archive, usually by both date and subject, and to your RSS feed, which gets updated in newsreaders.
- ✓ Anyone who signed up for e-mail notifications receives an e-mail about your post.
- ✓ If your blog software pings blog search engines and services, those search engines and services receive a notice from your blog software that you've updated your blog and put that information into their catalogs. (A *ping* is simply an electronic notification.) Users of search engine websites can then get your blog post as a result of a search.
- ✓ A search-engine crawler indexes the post the next time it visits your blog.

All these changes happen whether or not you think about them. The fact that blog posts are quickly distributed with a minimum of effort on the part of the blogger is part of the beauty and effectiveness of this format. Blog software and services are designed to deliver your content quickly.



Of course, you can edit your blog posts after you post them, and many bloggers make changes when necessary (see the “Making mistakes” section, later in this chapter, for some suggestions about changing your blog posts appropriately). However, editing after you post is a pretty ineffective way to control your message, because visitors might read or e-mail the original post before you make your edits.

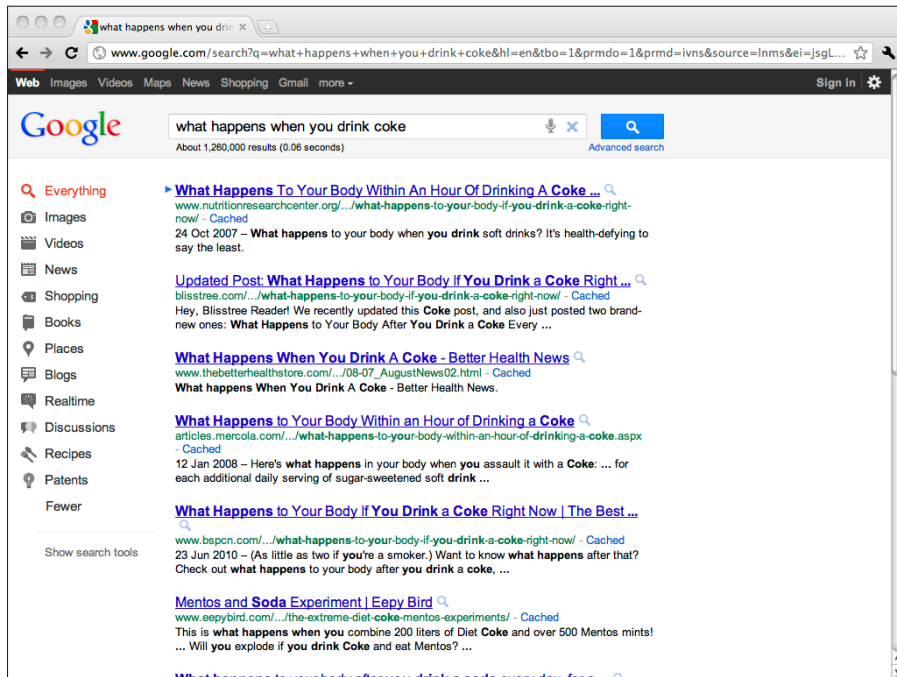
The content you publish on a blog or web page can live on in other unintended ways as well:

- ✓ Other bloggers might quote your post and expand on it on their blogs, creating partial copies of your deathless prose.
- ✓ Blog services might point to, and even partially excerpt, your blog post.
- ✓ Search engines might cache or otherwise archive the content temporarily or permanently.
- ✓ An Internet archive, such as the Wayback Machine (www.archive.org/web/web.php), might add your blog post to its permanent database.

You can see these effects demonstrated in Figure 2-1; a Google search (www.google.com) for the phrase **what happens when you drink coke** turned up not only a blog post, but also several references to that same post on other blogs and websites, and on the news-sharing site Digg (http://digg.com). Google linked to the original blog post and a cached version archived by Google.

I don't want to scare you. After all, publishing to your blog is a good thing! You want each of these processes to happen because they bring readers to your blog and present your content to potential readers. But be sure about what you're posting before you start the ball rolling.

Figure 2-1: Searching for the topic of a post turns up the post, references to it, and links to the search engine's cached version.



Blogging Ethically

The best defense, as they say, is a good offense. As a blogger, you should think about what you write *before* you publish it, as well as afterwards.

What I'm about to say might shock you, so prepare yourself: Bloggers have a code of ethics.

Okay, what I really mean is that *some* bloggers have a code of ethics. This loose set of ethics and standards, to which many serious bloggers adhere,

developed as blogs matured from a new medium into a more established one. For most old-school bloggers, the word to think about is *transparency*, which represents a whole range of ideas. I introduce transparency here and explain in more detail in the following sections:

- ✓ **Truth-telling and honesty:** In keeping with the diary format of a blog, being transparent on your blog has a lot to do with telling the truth about who you are, why you're blogging, and what you want to accomplish with your blog. You want to communicate openly and honestly on a blog, dealing straightforwardly with your topics and ideas, and with your readers.

This idea of honesty doesn't mean you need to reveal information that you're not comfortable disclosing online — quite the contrary. But it does mean you don't intentionally mislead your readers, as I explain in the upcoming section, "Telling the truth."

- ✓ **Admitting mistakes:** No one's perfect, and you'll eventually make a mistake. Whether you post something that you heard that turns out not to be true, or you blog while angry, the real test is how you respond to making a mistake. In the blogosphere, you need to own up to your words, apologizing if you need to, and making corrections when they're necessary.
- ✓ **Maintaining a dialogue:** A good blogger is aware of, and responsive to, his or her readers via the comments that those readers leave on blog posts. A blog isn't created in a vacuum. In fact, many bloggers feel that you can use a blog to build real relationships with people.



The idea that you can use a blog for meaningful interaction is the revolutionary element in blogging. At the core, blogging is about real people talking with each other and sharing real knowledge and experiences.

Of course, a blog isn't necessarily great literature — and that's fine. But transparency comprises worthy ideas, especially if you plan to blog about personal and sensitive topics. Read on for more details.

Telling the truth

Honesty in blogging is different from honesty in real-life relationships or even journalism or advertising, because knowing who someone is or what they represent online is complex. Consider the following:

- ✓ **Blogging anonymously:** Blogging under a pen name is okay. For many bloggers, telling the truth is first about emotional honesty and second — or perhaps not at all — about revealing who you are. For example, a personal blogger may connect with a community over a sensitive topic and thus want to use a pen name.



The blogosphere doesn't like poseurs. If you choose to blog about your life and do so anonymously, be prepared for readers to challenge whether you're even a real person. Know that your true identity may be revealed, either publicly or among people who know you in real life. Be prepared to defend your writing as your own, especially if your anonymous blog could create conflict in your offline life or career.

A famous incident from 2001 concerning the blog of Kaycee Nicole, a young teenager who had just died of leukemia, demonstrates the kind of thing I'm talking about. People all over the world followed her blog, chatted with her online, even spoke with her on the phone during her illness. In fact, the life and death of Kaycee was the product of imagination. After some suspicious anomalies surfaced, several savvy bloggers tracked down real-world evidence that she not only hadn't died, but didn't even exist.

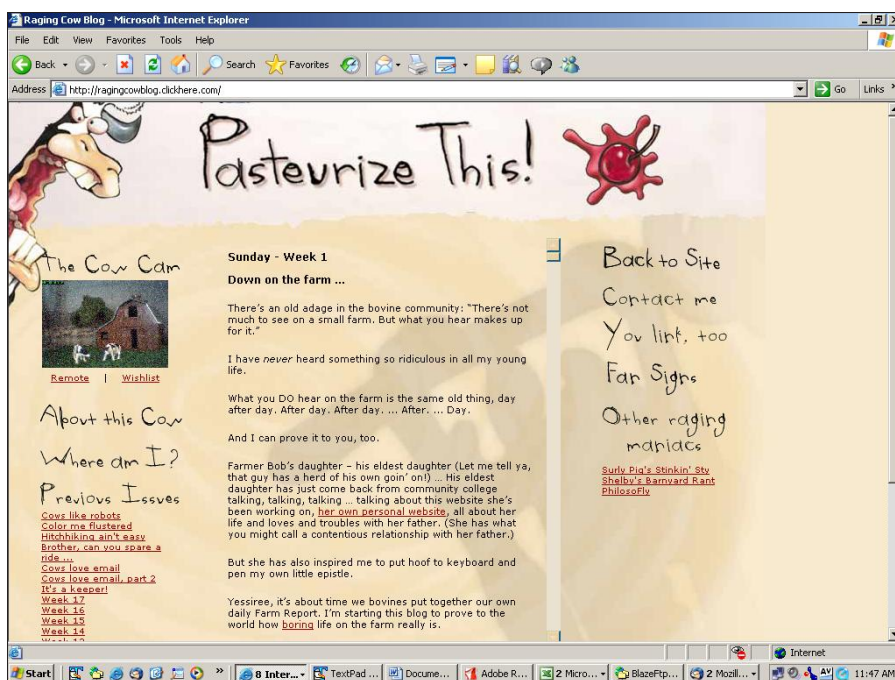
If you're set on blogging anonymously — and there are many reasons to choose this approach — be sure to check out Chapter 10 to learn what to watch out for.

- ✔ **Blogging about products and services at the behest of the product or service provider:** The online community has slammed bloggers for blogging about products and services for money without revealing that they were paid to do so. A blog scandal in 2003 put Dr Pepper into the public eye for soliciting blog posts from a group of teenagers about a new product called Raging Cow. The teens received trips, samples of the product, and gift certificates, and the company asked them to promote the drink on their personal blogs. Many of the teens did so without revealing that they basically received compensation for promoting the product, and when the arrangement became public, a blogosphere boycott of the company and a lot of anger against the bloggers ensued.

Since then, the FTC has ruled that these kinds of endorsement relationships *must* be disclosed, so this is no longer simply an ethical issue. You can review the FTC guidelines at www.ftc.gov/os/2009/10/091005revisedendorsementguides.pdf.

- ✔ **Blogging as a fictional character:** Interestingly, Dr Pepper also started a blog ostensibly written by the Raging Cow herself during her travels around the country, as shown in Figure 2-2. Bloggers roundly criticized this blog at the time (for being fake, of course). But the idea of creating fictional characters that write blogs has stuck around, and many bloggers have used it successfully since then. The format is still controversial, but it's also highly effective!

Figure 2-2:
The Raging
Cow blog
was an
early
example of
a fake blog
written by
a fictional
character.



In general, I recommend following these rules about honesty in your blogging:

- ✓ Explain who you are and why you're blogging.
- ✓ If you need to hide your identity or those of people you mention, indicate that you're doing so and why.
- ✓ If you start a fake blog, make sure that you disclose somewhere on the site that it is, in fact, fake. (You'd think that a blog written by a bovine is obviously fake, but it doesn't hurt to say so.)
- ✓ If you're making money from your blog posts, explain the arrangement and how you're allowing it to influence (or not influence) what you write. U.S.-based bloggers should review the FTC guidelines around endorsements and material considerations at www.ftc.gov/os/2009/10/091005revisedendorsementguides.pdf.

- ✓ If you mention a fact or story that you got from someone else, explain who. If you can link to the source, do. Observe copyrights at all times.
- ✓ Take responsibility for what's on your blog, no matter where else you might have heard or read about what you write.

Making mistakes

If you make a mistake on your blog, admit it. Apologize, if necessary. Above all, don't try to deny it or hide it.



Mistakes, big and little, are inevitable and upset people, but you can do a great deal to help yourself and your credibility by how you handle the mistake after you or your readers discover it.

In general, most bloggers try to avoid editing posts after they publish those posts, which is part of the transparency I discuss earlier in the section “Blogging Ethically.” Sometimes, however, you need to correct the original post when you make a factual or grammatical error. Fortunately, bloggers have evolved ways to indicate corrections in blog posts, such as using strikethrough text on the original error and following it with the correction, like this:

President Bill Clinton played his ~~trumpet~~ saxophone on *The Arsenio Hall Show*.

Blogger Darren Barefoot uses this technique on his blog (www.darrenbarefoot.com). In Figure 2-3, he corrects a grammatical error that changes the meaning of a sentence. Other bloggers use italics or bold, or make notes at the top or bottom of the blog post, to make these kinds of corrections. The strikethrough style, however, has the advantage of letting you indicate the original error clearly.



Making a correction while retaining the error is best (unless the error was libelous or is causing legal trouble). Try to avoid simply changing the text like the mistake never existed.

You can handle updates that you want to make to a blog post in two ways:

- ✓ **Expand on your original post:** If you change your mind about something, or simply need to expand on what you first said, you may want to do so in the original blog post, instead of starting a new post. Updating the original blog post ensures that readers see your original post at the same time as the update.

For very important updates that change the intention or meaning of a post, Darren Barefoot (www.darrenbarefoot.com) posts the update at the end of the original post labeled UPDATE, as shown in Figure 2-4. In this case, the update expands on the original post by pointing out new resources. Some bloggers preface the new content with the acronym ETA (which stands for Edited to Add).

- ✓ **Start a new post:** When you really mess up, you might also choose to add a new blog post that explains what went wrong and how you might be able to avoid similar mistakes in the future (assuming that's possible!) or that just clarifies the whole situation. You don't always need to go this far, but if it helps clear the air, why not? Plus, you can use the extra post to apologize if you need to.

If you start a new post to explain a mistake, link to the old post and also go into the old post to create a link to the new one, just so all your readers get a chance to see all the details.



Figure 2-3:
On his blog,
Darren
Barefoot
uses strike-
through text
to cross out
an error.

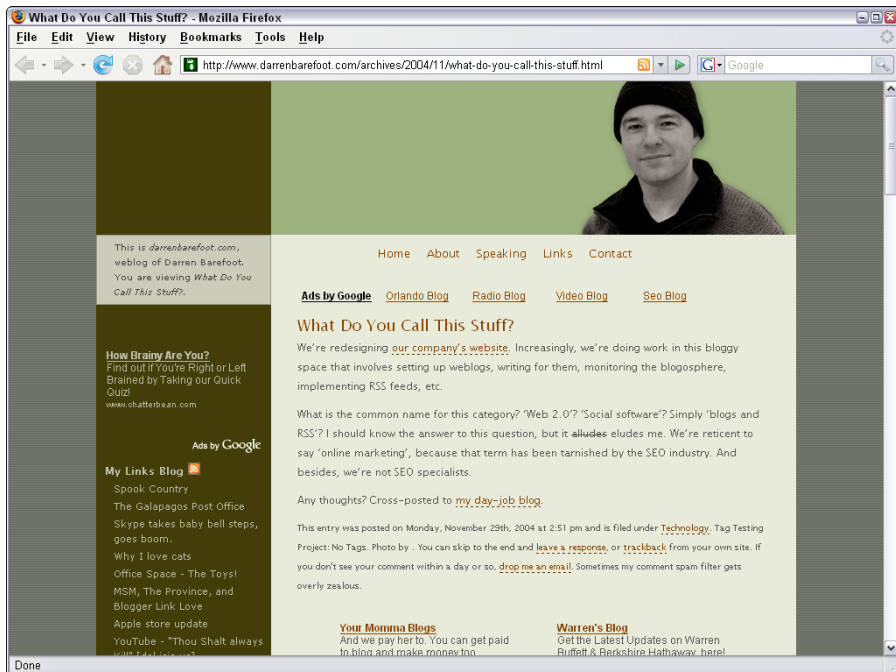
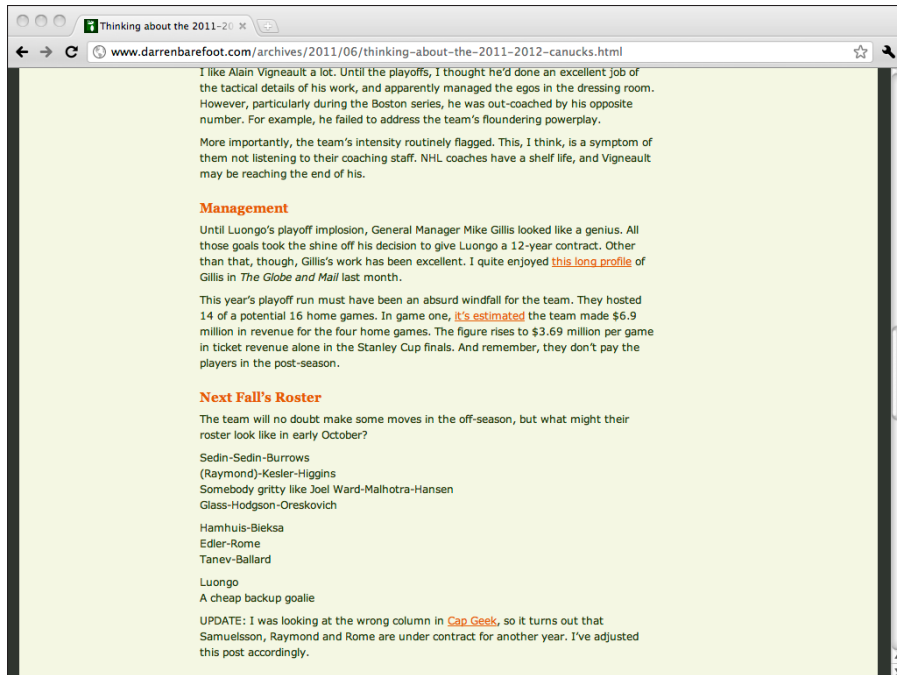


Figure 2-4:
When he
has new
information
to add to a
blog post,
Darren
Barefoot
adds an
update to
the bottom
of the origi-
nal post.



Handling dialogue

You write your blog in hopes that people read it and (usually) respond and interact with you, as well. The mechanism for interacting with your readers involves blog post comments. Comments are both a boon and a bane for bloggers: They provide a source of much interesting dialogue, but they can also likely provide an area for people to post spam and other unwanted material.

A blogger who neglects to read comments and respond to them quickly loses the community of people who write those comments because they can get frustrated and leave. On the flip side, reading and replying to those same folks generally earns a blogger a larger and more engaged audience.

You don't need to keep all the comments on a blog, however. Pay attention to the conversation others generate on your blog; when necessary, exercise your judgment about removing personal attacks, libel, obscenity, spam, or other undesirable content.

In Chapter 9, I cover building a strong community dialogue by using the comments on your blog.

Keeping Your Job While Blogging

You can blog about anything you want. And you spend a lot of time at work. So maybe you're blogging about work. Work can certainly provide you with a great source of stories and jokes. In fact, at my office the other day, my partner did the stupidest thing. . . .

Ahem.

Anyway, blogging about work can get you in trouble. Your colleagues and your boss might not appreciate that you repeat water-cooler gossip on your blog, complain about the most boring meeting ever, or talk about how you photocopied inappropriate body parts when you were "working" late on Thursday.



If you choose to discuss people you work with on your blog and someone may be able to identify them (even if you don't include your coworkers' names), you can get yourself in hot water with both your coworkers and your boss.

And all that trouble comes before you reveal trade secrets or stock information!

Some bloggers identify both themselves and their employers on their personal blogs. Doing so is certainly transparent — after all, work is a big part of your life — but it isn't necessarily wise. For one thing, if you blog about your work place and you name your employer, readers might think that you're blogging on *behalf* of your employer.

This perception isn't fair, but a lot of readers have it. After all, if you blog on your own time (and you do blog on your own time, right?) and don't use company blogging software, who can consider you a spokesperson for your company? Honestly, most people won't think you're a mouthpiece for your company, but they might associate your thoughts and opinions with your employer. Generally speaking, employers don't want people to associate the business with the political agendas, family relationships, or dating habits of their employees.

Employers today know that blogs exist, and they're fully capable of typing your name, their name, or the company name into a search engine and finding blogs that talk about them or their company. Blogging anonymously — although a good idea if you want to criticize your employer — doesn't really guarantee that you won't get caught, particularly if other people in your office know about your blog.

Employers who regard their employees as representatives of their businesses might even institute a company blogging policy that dictates whether

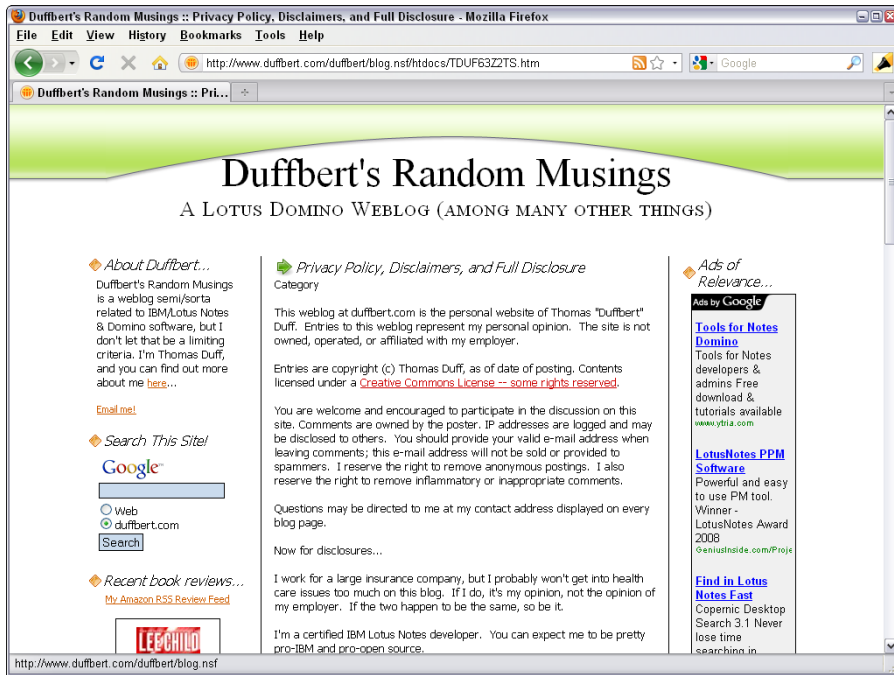
you can identify your employer on your personal blog. This policy might even request that you not blog at all, especially if you are the visible face of the organization or speak for the company in other circumstances.



I encourage you to blog about whatever floats your boat, but if you want to blog about work, you need to do so safely. Here are a few tips that you can use to stay on your employer's good side:

- ✓ **Regardless of what you blog about, don't blog while you are at work.** Using company time and resources to write a personal blog is a clear violation of most employment contracts and can get you disciplined or fired, even if all you do on your blog is sing your boss's praises.
- ✓ **Find out whether your workplace has a blogging policy.** If your boss doesn't know, consult with the HR department. In some cases, a policy might be in place that makes certain requests of your blogging behavior, and you can choose whether to comply with them. Comply with them or have good reasons if you choose not to.
- ✓ **Ask questions about your employer's blogging policy if it's unclear or incomplete.** Find out whether you can't discuss certain subjects and whether you can identify yourself as an employee.
- ✓ **Be smart about what you choose to say about your work and your colleagues.** If you wouldn't feel comfortable saying what you write in public, don't put it on your blog. (Go back to the beginning of this chapter if you're unclear on the idea that the web is a public place.)
- ✓ **Don't reveal trade secrets.** Trade secrets include confidential information about how your employer does business that can impact revenue or reputation. If you aren't sure whether you can blog about something, run it by your boss first.
- ✓ **Review other rules and regulations that might impact what you can blog about.** For example, some employers have policies about taking photographs of the workplace, or revealing addresses or buildings. Those policies seem unrelated to blogging — until you put those photos or that information on your blog.
- ✓ **Consider including a disclosure statement on your blog that says you're blogging for personal expression and not as a representative of your employer.** Thomas Duff makes his blogging position clear in his very thorough disclosure statement on Duffbert's Random Musings (www.duffbert.com/duffbert/blog.nsf/htdocs/TDUF63Z2TS.htm), which is shown in Figure 2-5.

Figure 2-5:
Disclosure
statements,
such as
Thomas
Duff's, help
make it
clear that
you blog for
yourself and
not for your
company.



Blogging without Embarrassing Your Mother or Losing Friends

You might think it goes without saying that if you can lose your job over opinions that you express on your blog, you can also damage your personal relationships with friends and family. I'm saying it anyway.

Many bloggers get caught up in the confessional mood and post content that they later regret — though perhaps not as much as a friend or relative regrets it.

Understanding what's at stake

Successful blogger Heather Armstrong alienated her family early in her blogging career when she posted her views on the religion in which she was raised. Her parents, who were still firm believers in that religion, read the post and were hurt, as was her extended family and the community in which

they lived. (I'm sure she also received plenty of e-mails from people outside of family who also felt strongly about their religion.) Heather calls herself a poster child for what not to do on a blog, though in fact, the process has resulted in Dooce (www.dooce.com), a blog that's both well-known and profitable today.

In an interview with Rebecca Blood (who studies blogs), Heather cautions that criticizing others might make great posts, but the chances are good that the person you criticize will read what you've written and feel hurt. You can read the full interview on Rebecca Blood's website at www.rebeccablood.net/bloggerson/heatherarmstrong.html. More recently, Heather was the subject of a *New York Times* story www.nytimes.com/2011/02/27/magazine/27armstrong-t.html describing the influence she has earned by chronicling stories from the life of her family and herself.

Even if you never criticize others, you might possibly reveal information about others — their conversations with you, the date you had last night, the disappointing sexual encounter — that your friends and family may find disturbing.

Protecting others in your life

Call it the Mom test: Can your blog post get you in trouble with your mom? Sure, you're an adult, and so is she — but she's the most likely person to call you on an inappropriate blog post. Your coworkers might be appalled when they read about your love life, but they probably won't ever tell you that your blog is a problem. If your mom is like my mom, she will.

In some ways, all this advice is common sense:

- ✓ Don't blog about topics that you think might hurt others.
- ✓ Don't blog about others without their permission, even about topics that you consider inconsequential. Don't identify friends and lovers by name without their permission.
- ✓ Remember that your blog software archives your blog posts, so someone might read what you say today at a later time. For instance, if you write a report on an unsuccessful relationship, the next person you want to date might read it.



Before you hit the Publish button, stop for a second and put yourself in the shoes of your reader: Are you writing for the reader, or are you writing for yourself? If your answer is the latter, you might be better off keeping a real diary in a format that the entire world can't publicly access.

Protecting Your Privacy and Reputation

Your blog might not reflect your employer's viewpoints or your family's, but it certainly reflects your own. Don't forget that what you put on your blog today might stick around for a long time to come and that the reader might not always have your best interests at heart.



Never put any personal identifying information online that exposes you to possible identity theft or physical confrontation: Don't post your Social Security number, home address, birthdate or place, mother's maiden name, passwords, bank account numbers, or any information that you use as password reminders or identifying information with financial institutions. Most bloggers prefer to keep phone numbers private, as well. Don't reveal this information about the people you blog about, either.

Many bloggers solve the issues discussed in this chapter by choosing to blog anonymously or by using a *handle* — a phrase or moniker that doesn't personally identify the writer.

Don't forget that many of your online identities are linked. For example, if you use a nickname when you leave comments on other blogs, and then use that same nickname on a bulletin board or when you sign up for a social-networking service, people can easily connect the dots. In fact, many of these services already work together.

For example, on one of my blogs, I display my Flickr photo stream and my latest Twitter messages. My Facebook profile pulls in my Amazon wish list, my music playlists, and my horoscope. Here's my point: If you identify yourself on any of these sites or tools, and then tie them together in some way, others can easily follow the trail to figure out who you are.

Anonymity gives you a great way to protect yourself on your own blog, but it doesn't keep you from showing up in other people's blogs or Flickr photo streams. If your friends and family have blogs, consider setting ground rules with them about situations and topics that you want excluded as subjects on their blogs. Be willing to accept the same kinds of requests about your own blog writing.



One of the best ways to take charge of your own online identity is to start a website or blog yourself. If other people are mentioning you online, having an official website that contains accurate information can help supplant or downplay less desirable material.

If you want to find out more about controlling your online identity or protecting your privacy, review some of these great online resources:

- ✓ Visit the Electronic Frontier Foundation's (EFF) guide "How to Blog Safely (About Work or Anything Else)" at www.eff.org/wp/blog-safely for advice on blogging anonymously, and be sure to read Chapter 10 of this book.
- ✓ The EFF's "Legal Guide for Bloggers" is a great resource on a number of issues, including defamation, privacy rights, and legal liability: www.eff.org/issues/bloggers/legal.
- ✓ Wikipedia's entry on Online Identity is informative and useful, and covers more than just blogging: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Online_identity.

Chapter 3

Choosing and Hosting Blog Software

In This Chapter

- ▶ Choosing a domain name for your blog
 - ▶ Identifying a good web host
 - ▶ Deciding between hosted and non-hosted software
 - ▶ Getting your blog software in place
-

If you're serious about turning your blog into a visual masterpiece, you're likely to choose a blog software package that you install on your own web server. Hosted solutions are great, but you run up against the limits of customization quite quickly.

In this chapter, you can find information about choosing the right software for your situation. If you pick blog software that you need to install, you also need to get yourself a domain name and web hosting where you can install your software.

Prepare yourself for strange new technology jargon while you explore what makes blogging exciting, frustrating, confusing, and rewarding — blogging software.

Having Your Own Domain Name

Of course, you want a blog — that's why you're reading this book, right? But before you get too much further, you need to deal with the single most important decision of your blogging career: the name of your blog!

That name should tie closely into the *domain name*, or web address, that your visitors use to access your blog. And if you have a domain name, you obviously need web hosting so that your blog software has a place to live on the Internet. In the following sections, I walk you through domain names and web hosting.

A *domain* is the address (or main URL) that people type in their web browsers to get to your website. Think of a domain like an address to your house. Each house on a street has an individual address. When someone looks for you in the phone book, he or she can find your address. If you search for a website by using your favorite search engine, you can find the website address.

Picking a domain name

You can use any word or phrase as your domain name (assuming no one else is using that domain name). You can make your domain name a company name, a nickname, or your favorite food group. For years, professional web designers and developers have been saying that all the good domains are gone, which is far from the truth. After all, new websites and blogs are launched all the time, and many of them have great, memorable domains!

For an example of a great domain name, check out Darren Barefoot's blog One Year, One Canadian (www.oneyearonecanadian.ca), which documents his effort to live a year buying only Canadian products, eating only Canadian food, and consuming Canadian media (see Figure 3-1).

Think up a phrase or sentence that says something about you and your blog as a starting place. Write your topic keywords on sticky notes, and then move them around. That trick may lead to something great.

What exactly does a domain do for you? It has several plusses:

- ✔ Your readers can easily remember your site. Your mom can brag about you and send visitors to your blog.
- ✔ Having a domain of your own looks professional; it's a nice marketing benefit at a small cost.
- ✔ You can change web hosts or hosted blog solutions with impunity because your address is actually a separate service. If — or when — you move your blog, your web host can help you use the same domain to get to your new server on the web.

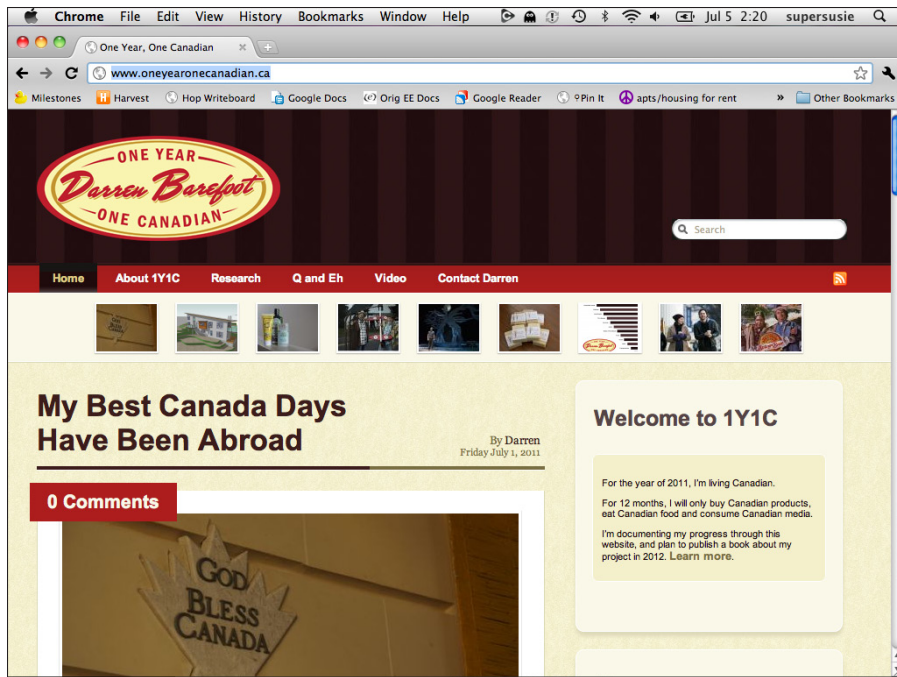


Figure 3-1: Think creatively to find a blog name and domain, like One Year, One Canadian.

Your domain should represent your blog's name and purpose, although at the end of the day, there are no hard and fast rules. Here are a few quick guidelines that you might want to follow. Try to choose a domain that

- ✓ Matches your blog name
- ✓ Is based on your topic keywords
- ✓ Is a play on words or slang based around your topic
- ✓ Is humorous or otherwise memorable



If you're having trouble coming up with a name idea, consider using your name. In fact, even if you ultimately want to use another domain for your blog address, owning the domain for your own name is a good idea. You can use several domain names to reach the same website or blog, too, so using your own name as a domain might help people find you in search engines.



Many online tools can help you choose a domain name if you're having trouble. Domain-name-choosing websites help by suggesting word combinations and coming up with randomly generated choices. One good site to use for this purpose is Bust a Name (www.bustaname.com), which is shown in Figure 3-2.

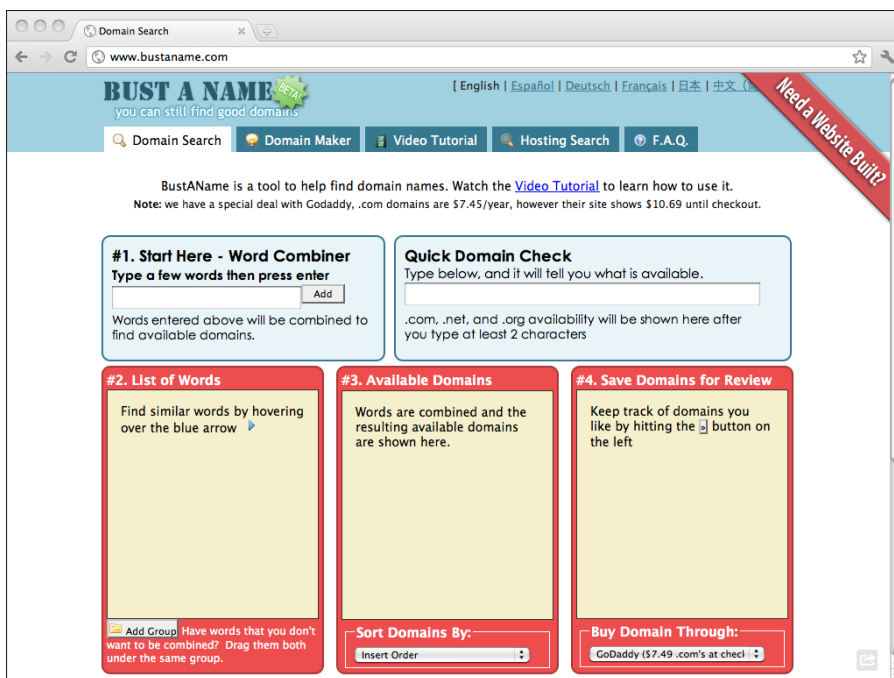


Figure 3-2:
Bust a
Name can
help you
brainstorm
name pos-
sibilities
for your
domain.



Even if you end up using a hosted blog solution and therefore don't need to get web hosting, you can buy a domain and forward the address to your blog. This is handy to do because it makes your blog's address easier to remember. After you register your domain, check the Help text of the registrar to find out how to forward the domain to your blog's web address (URL). Instructions vary by registrar.

Registering a domain

Registering a domain is a straightforward process. First, use a domain registrar to buy your name. After you own the name, you just need to point your new domain at your web host. This process basically involves telling your domain registrar which web server your website is on; your web hosting company or domain registrar gives you the information and tools to make it all work.

You can use many domain registration services. The choice really comes down to the domain management interface — the tools that you get in order to manage your domain. Some management screens are incredibly difficult to work with. Finding a host that has a clean and easy-to-use interface makes a world of difference when you're updating or making changes to your web domain. Be sure to shop around, as well. The annual fee for domain registration varies widely, and for the most part, the price differences don't equal a difference in what you get.

You can choose to register for your domain for a single year or for multiple years at a time. Typically, registering for multiple years earns you a small discount. If you choose to register for only a year, you need to renew the domain in a year (assuming that you want to keep your website going). Many domain registration companies also offer web-hosting and e-mail packages.



Make sure that you keep your domain registration up to date. If you have any changes to your domain or contact information, including your e-mail address, update your domain information immediately. If your information isn't current, you can lose access to your domain or miss e-mail reminders to renew your domain. Print a copy of the login information and store it safely.

Visit any of the domain registrars in the following sections to check whether your domain is available, and then register it.

Go Daddy

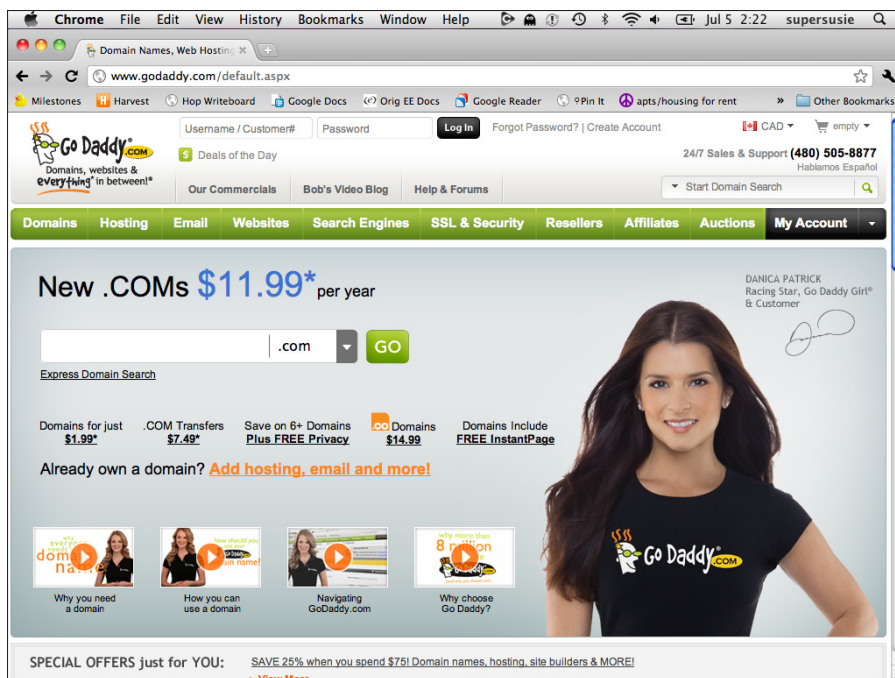
`www.godaddy.com`

Go Daddy is a popular web host and domain registrar that provides a long list of web services, including domain hosting, web hosting, and e-mail address hosting. It has a good reputation and is easy to contact if you require assistance. A .com domain is priced at \$11.99 for a year's registration.

To register a domain with Go Daddy, follow these steps:

1. **Point your web browser to** `www.godaddy.com`.
2. **Type the domain you're interested in into the Start a Domain Name Search text box.**
3. **Select the suffix that you want to use from the drop-down menu, as shown in Figure 3-3.**

Figure 3-3:
Choose a
suffix to use
with your
desired
domain
name.



Copyright © GoDaddy.com Inc. All rights reserved.

4. Click the Go button.

GoDaddy returns a page indicating whether your domain is available.

5. If your domain is available and you want to complete your purchase, click the Add button to add it to your shopping cart.

If your domain is unavailable, scroll down the page to the Search for Another Domain text box and try a new name.

6. Continue shopping for other domains on GoDaddy or follow the instructions for completing the credit card purchase of the domain you select.

Network Solutions

www.networksolutions.com

Network Solutions is one of the granddaddies of all registrars. At one time, it was one of the few places you could register a domain. Services are varied and flexible, but domains are a little pricey. A .com domain is priced at \$34.99 for one year of registration.

Domainsatcost.ca

```
www.domainsatcost.ca
```

This domain registrar, located in Canada, provides registrations for all major domains, including .com and .ca domains. It has a support number (long distance applies), and someone answers the telephone — a rarity among domain hosts. Domainsatcost.ca is reasonably priced at \$12.95 CDN (that's Canadian dollars!) a year for .ca domains, and \$14.95 year for .com domains.

Finding Web Hosting

With a domain in hand, you can turn your attention to web hosting.

If the domain is your address, *web hosting* is your actual house on the web. Web hosting provides the web server where your software, graphics, and other files live online. When people use your address — the domain — the web server gives them the pages that they want.

Doing your research

Your primary concern is to find a web host that has everything your blog software needs to run. Because you want to use a blog software package, you might have more specific needs than are on offer for a typical website.

Most blog software uses a LAMP (Linux/Apache/MySQL/PHP) web server, a mix of several kinds of web server technology that is ideal for running dynamic websites such as blogs:

- ✓ **Linux:** A very common web server operating system. It's very stable and considered a standard for web servers. As a blogger, you probably don't need to make too many changes to the operating system, as long as it's in place for you.
- ✓ **Apache:** Apache is *web-page-serving software*, which means it looks at what web page is requested and then feeds the browser the appropriate file. It does most of the hard work of serving web pages to visitors coming to your website.
- ✓ **MySQL:** MySQL is the most popular database software for blogs. For any blogging package, you need some kind of database system to store all your blog posts and run the other functionality of the blog software. MySQL is the standard database tool for most blog software.

- ✓ **PHP:** PHP is the programming language that a lot of blogging and content management systems use. It sits between the blogging software and the database, making sure all the parts work together.

The preceding four technologies are considered the bare minimum that most blogging packages need to function. But you should consider these requirements, as well:



- ✓ **Disk space:** For blogging, disk space is important if you decide to store a lot of images on your blog or upload audio and video files. Uploading images is relatively easy to do, but you need the space to store those images. For the average blog that has a few photos, you most likely want about 500 megabytes (MB). Blogs that have a lot of photos require several gigabytes (GB) of disk space. Video blogs need a whole lot more disk space (unless you use an online video-sharing service) than text or photo blogs, so you want more than 10GB. Those files do take up a lot of space!

Running out of disk space is an easily solved problem: Most web hosts allow you to add disk space when you need it for an additional cost. Check with your web host to find out what it charges for additional storage.

- ✓ **E-mail management:** You probably want an e-mail address with your new domain. If you want to use your blog for business purposes, having an e-mail address that matches your domain looks more professional.
- ✓ **Backups:** Consider how you plan to back up your data (including your database content) and whether the web host will also back up the files on your web-hosting account. Knowing this information can save you from disaster and data loss in the future. Daily backups aren't a bad idea!
- ✓ **Bandwidth and CPU resources:** Computers and networks can take only so many visitors and downloads, and hosts usually set a quota on how much bandwidth you can use for the particular web-hosting package that you buy. Ask about what happens if you exceed your monthly allowance of bandwidth. (Usually, you have to pay for the extra resources.) For most bloggers, this won't be an issue, but if you develop a very popular blog with lots of visitors, or are serving very large files like videos, bandwidth can become an additional cost.

Buying web hosting

After you purchase your domain, you *should* be able to pick a web host just as easily. But the reality is that web host offerings are all over the map, so you need to do your research, ask for recommendations from friends and colleagues who have websites, and compare the details of what different hosts offer.



When comparing web hosts, always confirm the numbers provided in sales materials. Here are the top questions to ask a prospective web host about its web-hosting packages:

- ✓ What's your reliability and uptime guarantee? Most web hosts will tell you the amount of time in a given month that they guarantee your website to be available given normal traffic loads. None of them, however, can absolutely guarantee 100 percent uptime.
- ✓ What's your data transfer limit, and how much do you charge for additional bandwidth? Bandwidth/data transfer is used as visitors visit your website and download pages from your site in order to view them. If you have a lot of files being transferred, or a single file that thousands of visitors download, you may hit your limit and need to buy more.
- ✓ How much disk space does the package include, and what do you charge for additional space?
- ✓ What kind of technical support do you offer? What are your telephone hours? How do you handle e-mail support?

When you find a web host that interests you, check out the packages on offer. Many web hosts provide a handy comparison chart that you can use to quickly compare pricing and features, as Nexcess.net (www.nexcess.net) does in Figure 3-4.

The following sections help you get started with your web-hosting search by discussing three top web-hosting services.

Go Daddy

www.godaddy.com

Go Daddy is a popular web host — and domain registrar — that provides a long list of web services. Its smallest web-hosting packages start at around \$4.99 a month.

For a new blogger just starting out, I recommend the Economy Plan. It includes 10GB of disk space and unlimited bandwidth, in addition to daily backups and 24-hour phone and e-mail technical support. You can receive discounts if you sign up for a year or more at a time.

Figure 3-4:
Check the
web host
for package
comparison
charts to
help make
your
decision.

Shared Hosting Plans				
FEATURES	SH-100	SH-200	SH-300	SH-400
ORDER	[Sign Up]	[Sign Up]	[Sign Up]	[Sign Up]
SETUP FEE	Included	Included	Included	Included
MONTHLY [?]	\$9.95 (USD)	\$14.95 (USD)	\$19.95 (USD)	\$24.95 (USD)
OPERATING SYSTEM	CentOS 5.x 64-bit	CentOS 5.x 64-bit	CentOS 5.x 64-bit	CentOS 5.x 64-bit
STORAGE	5 GB	10 GB	15 GB	20 GB
BANDWIDTH	50 GB	75 GB	100 GB	150 GB
DOMAINS	5	10	15	20
SUBDOMAINS	25	35	50	75
FTP ACCOUNTS	1	5	5	10
MAILBOXES	50	75	100	200
DATABASES	25	35	50	75
DEDICATED IP	✗	✗	✗	✓
R1SOFT BACKUPS & ACCESS	✓	✓	✓	✓
ORDER	[Sign Up]	[Sign Up]	[Sign Up]	[Sign Up]

AVAILABLE ADD-ONS	
DEDICATED IP ADDRESS	\$2.50/mo

A dedicated IP address can be added to any shared plan during the ordering process, or can be added later by opening a ticket. Shared plans are limited to only one (1) IP each.

Security

- Secure POP, IMAP, SMTP support
- Secure FTP/SSL (Auth)
- R1Soft backups, with client access

Multimedia

- Real Media streaming
- Windows media HTTP streaming
- mp3 streaming

Developer

- SSH access available
- CGI, Perl, PHP 5, MySQL 5
- Ruby on Rails
- C/C++
- Server side includes (SSI)
- PhpMyAdmin
- GD Library
- ImageMagick
- ffmpeg
- Python 2.6 with mod_wsgi
- .htaccess support
- APC, eAccelerator
- Subversion, Git, Mercurial, Bazaar

Doteasy

www.doteasy.com

Doteasy offers a wide range of web-hosting solutions for bloggers, including hosting. Doteasy offers 24-hour e-mail technical support. Blog-friendly web-hosting options start at \$6.95 a month — the cost of the Ultra Hosting package, which includes 1,000MB of disk space and 20GB of bandwidth per month. Spring for the \$7.95 plan and get unlimited disk space and bandwidth.

Nexcess.net

www.nexcess.net

Nexcess.net is a popular web-hosting company located in Ann Arbor, Michigan. It has quite a few packages and displays them in an easy-to-compare format. Its e-mail support is extremely fast and effective. Web packages start at \$9.95 a month.

The SH-200 package sets you up with 10GB of disk space and 75GB of bandwidth, and includes daily backups for \$14.95 a month.

Deciding on the Right Blogging Software

No matter where you take your blog, it all starts with one crucial decision: what blog software you want to use. Choose wisely, grasshopper, and watch your blog software grow while you add more bells and whistles. Pick poorly, and be faced with the ultimate chore: migrating your blog from one blog software package to a better one. You can do this transfer, but you can't do it easily. Spend the time to find out about the available blogging tools and the functionality they provide now so that you can save yourself a lot of headaches later.

First, you need to recognize that all blogging platforms aren't created equal. Of course, blogging software packages, whether they're managed by you or by paid web-hosting technical staff, all share the same or similar functionality that you need for a typical blog. But each software package was designed with very different goals in mind.

Unlike software that you install on a desktop or laptop computer, blogging software requires a server environment to function. What a challenge, for a non-technical blogger who just wants to start posting, to make a good decision about web servers!

Bloggers can use either of two kinds of blogging platforms:

✓ **Hosted blogs:** *Hosted* blog services provide a unique situation in which you don't need to worry about the software technology at all. You can concentrate on worrying about what your next blog post will be about, rather than how to configure a web server. To use hosted blogging software, you log into the editing tool, write a post, click the Publish button, and log out.

You don't need to think about *how* the software is managed, just as long as it's there the next time you want to post something. Many bloggers consider this setup the deal of the century. One popular hosted solution is Blogger (www.blogger.com), which I discuss in detail in Chapter 4.

Extra bonus: If you choose hosted software, you don't have to worry about web hosting — the software company is providing that service for you! See the section “Understanding Hosted Blog Software,” later in this chapter, for a more in-depth discussion of this option.

Social networks allow you to connect with current friends and make new ones while sharing photos, videos, and text. They've exploded in popularity in the last few years, and many of them have added a blogging tool. I cover how blogging fits into social networking in Chapter 16.



- ✓ **Non-hosted blogs:** You might want to run your own blogging system right from the beginning. This type of setup is known as *non-hosted* or *installable* blogging software. By installing blog software on your own web server, you take on all responsibilities related to maintaining the blogging software and the data created when you blog. Strictly from a technical point of view, this type of setup for a new blog might be a little on the difficult side and cause more stress — especially for the nontechnical folks who are figuring things out while they go — but you ultimately get more flexibility when you use a non-hosted setup. For example, Serious Eats (www.serious-eats.com), a blog that covers food news from all over the blogosphere, uses Movable Type, a blogging solution that you install on your own server.

Okay, I lied. Hosting your own blog is a *lot* more difficult than the point-and-click solution of hosted software. If you love a challenge or want all the bells and whistles, however, consider hosting your blog yourself. Later in this chapter, the section “Understanding Blog Software That You Install on Your Own Server” explains the details of how non-hosted blog software works.

Budgeting for software

Many of the hosted services available to new bloggers usually don’t charge the user — at least, at the basic level of service. A great number of the non-hosted blogging software packages are also free, but the web server that you need to install them on most definitely isn’t. How much money you can commit to your new blog can help you figure out what platform you should acquire.



Consider how much financial commitment you want to dedicate to your new blogging life. Costs can be associated with

- ✓ **Blogging software:** Some packages are free; others aren’t. In some cases, the blogging software might be free for personal use but can cost money if you use it for commercial purposes.
- ✓ **Upgrades:** When you choose a software package that has a price tag, be sure to note the costs for upgrading that software down the line. Blog software is in flux, and you’ll need updates!
- ✓ **A domain name:** Regardless of whether you choose a hosted or non-hosted solution, you can buy a domain name (also called a *web address*) and point it at your blog.
- ✓ **Web hosting:** If you choose a blogging software package that needs to be installed on a web server, you need to find web hosting.

- ✓ **Support costs:** If you have questions about your blog software or web hosting, getting answers might cost you. Find out what the support policies are for both software and hosting before you buy.
- ✓ **Web designers:** If you need to hire a web designer or developer to produce a design, install the software, and get your blog started, you have to pay those folks.
- ✓ **Special bells and whistles:** You might find that you can purchase and use extra add-ons with your blog, from cool functionality to exciting designs.

Making sure you get the basics

Each blogging package has a great number of options to choose from. Some options are designed to trick out your ride, making your blog into a thing of beauty and delight. Some options you absolutely need to have. Good blogging software *must* have the following five features:

- ✓ **A usable publishing interface or control panel:** Check out how the control panel looks before you commit yourself. A good user interface is important, and if you can't make sense of what you see, chances are good that you won't enjoy using the software.
- ✓ **Comments:** A blog isn't a blog unless your readers can leave comments on your posts. You don't have to use the comments, but blogging software without comments takes away a vital element of blogging — allowing your readers to cultivate discussions.
- ✓ **Spam deterrents:** Spam comments are a part of every blog, but that doesn't mean you have to live with them. Like e-mail spam, comment spam tends to be an automated process that posts on your blog useless information and includes links to all kinds of other sites. Look for blogging software that has functionalities in place to help you moderate and block spam.
- ✓ **Pinging:** A blog software package that uses pinging services is a great idea. *Pinging* is an automated notification system for search engines and newsreaders, letting those services know that you've updated your blog. Because search engines tend to rank “fresh” content highly, letting them know when you have new content means that your blog may be more likely to appear, and appear higher, in search results.
- ✓ **RSS feeds:** If your blog software doesn't have an RSS feed, move on to different blog software. If you're at all interested in building traffic to your blog, an RSS feed is the single best built-in software feature that you can use to meet that goal. An *RSS feed* is a computer-readable version of your blog, standardized so that it can appear in newsreaders and on websites and blogs. For more information about RSS, read Chapter 14.

I highly recommend two other features, although not all bloggers use them:

- ✓ **Categories:** Blogs often jump from topic to topic. Categorizing your posts gives your readers a quick and easy way to sort through your content, focusing on what most interests them. A List Apart (www.alistapart.com) uses categories, called topics here, to sort blog posts; Figure 3-5 shows the categories in the sidebar on the right side of the blog post.

Categories are high-level organizational tools. For example, a food blog might have posts sorted into categories like Vegetarian, Dessert, Main Dish, and so on.

- ✓ **Tags:** A *tag* is a term associated with a blog post. (For example, when I write a blog post about my new cat Maggie, I tag that entry “kitten.”) Tagging is a relatively new technology, but it has proven to be one of the best ways to sort through blog data quickly. The Cool Hunting blog (www.coolhunting.com) uses tags in the right column, shown in Figure 3-6.

Tags are like keywords you might use when doing a search on a search engine website, and they tend to be more specific than categories. A blog post on a food blog might use categories as I describe in the preceding bullet, and then tag individual posts with more specific terms, like *chocolate*, *hazelnut*, and *brownie*. To differentiate between categories and tags, think of categories as describing a group of blog posts, and tags as describing individual posts.

Figure 3-5:
A List Apart
organizes
blog posts
by category,
or topic.

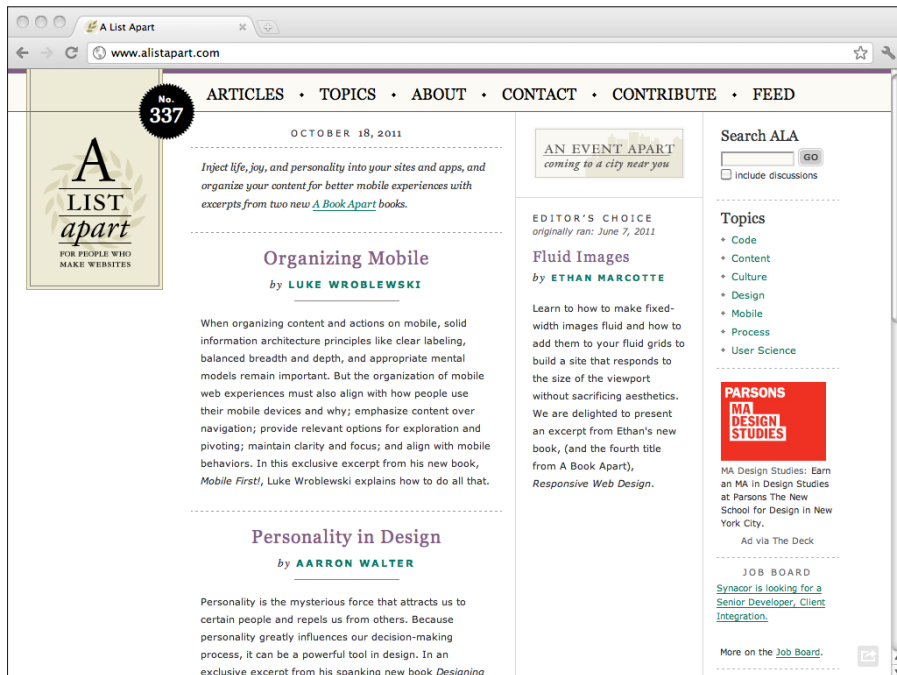
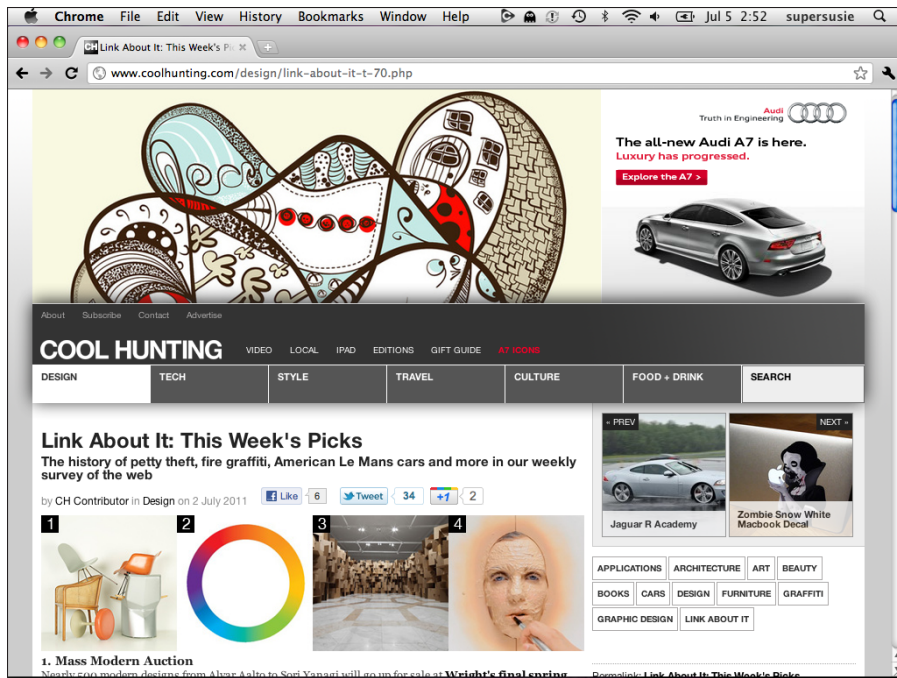


Figure 3-6:
The Cool
Hunting
blog uses
tags to label
content;
they appear
in the right
column.



Courtesy of Captain Lucas, Inc.

Upgrading with bells and whistles

You can implement a number of cool toys on your blog:

- ✓ **Trackbacks:** *Trackbacks* are a useful technology that allows bloggers to link to blog posts on related topics. If your blog software is trackback-enabled, you can link to another blog simply by using the URL of the original posting. In this automatic process, your blog software lets another blogger's software know that your blog has referenced a post so that the software can create a link on the original post.

Trackbacks can also be a source of spam, and as a result, they're not as important in the blogosphere as they used to be. So, although they're nice to have, if the blog software package that you want to use doesn't offer trackbacks, don't automatically eliminate that software from consideration.

- ✓ **News aggregation:** One of the handiest features of blogging software is the capability to aggregate news by using RSS feeds. Having a news aggregator included with your blog package allows your site to pull in information from other blogs. You can then provide this information to your readers, offering them content from other sources.



- ✓ **Spam blacklist:** Most blogging packages have some kind of blacklist protection against spam comments. These blacklists are often centralized lists of e-mail addresses, URLs, and IP addresses that spammers use, which the blog software prevents from commenting in any blog post on your blog. With an up-to-date blacklist, you can stop a lot of spam before it becomes a comment.
- ✓ **Spam whitelist:** Some blogging software includes the capability to use a whitelist, in which you preselect the users who can comment. Spam-filtering systems and blog user accounts are quickly replacing this type of system, however.
- ✓ **CAPTCHAs:** *CAPTCHAs* are images that display letters and/or numbers that a person can read but a machine can't. When someone wants to leave a comment on a post, he or she must correctly type these letter/number combinations into a text box, which proves to the blog software that the commenter is indeed a human and not a computer spam system. This process blocks out the comment spam and lets through the valuable feedback. Variations on CAPTCHAs include simple math problems that a user needs to solve in order to post a comment. Clotilde Dusoulie's Chocolate & Zucchini blog (<http://chocolateandzucchini.com>) uses one form of a CAPTCHA, as shown in Figure 3-7.

Figure 3-7:
You must correctly fill out a CAPTCHA field to leave a comment on Chocolate & Zucchini.

The screenshot shows a web browser window with the address bar displaying `chocolateandzucchini.com/archives/2011/07/eggplant_recipe_ideas.php#comments`. The page content includes a comment form with the following elements:

- A heading "Post a comment" with a small speech bubble icon.
- Input fields for "Name", "Email Address", and "URL".
- A checkbox labeled "Remember personal info?".
- A text area for the "Comment (You may use HTML tags for style)".
- A CAPTCHA section with the text: "As an anti-spam measure, please type the word 'olive' (without quotes) below **(required)**:" followed by a single-line text input field.
- "Preview" and "Submit" buttons at the bottom of the form.
- A footer line of text: "All writing and photography on Chocolate & Zucchini is Copyright Clotilde Dusoulie © 2003-2011 unless indicated otherwise. All rights reserved."



You can tie together more and more web services these days, from your photos on Flickr, to your Twitter updates, to your . . . well, you have a lot of possibilities. Some blog software allows you to automate those kinds of connections, so if that interests you, keep an eye out for software with these features. I walk you through some possibilities in Chapter 16.

Understanding Hosted Blog Software

Hosted services take a whole lot of responsibility off the blogger. The blog software company manages the data, software, and web hosting; the blogger manages the content. Some services, such as Blogger, do it all for free, whereas other services, such as TypePad, charge a monthly fee to run your blog. Yet other services, such as WordPress, offer a level of free service with the option to upgrade when your blogging requires a little more power. Hosted blog software allows you to make someone responsible for the entire gauntlet of technical tasks that don't excite you.



Seasoned blogging veterans recommend that new bloggers start by using a hosted service that's free. The reason is simple: If you find the idea of having a blog appealing, but you have never tried blogging or played with blogging software, you might not like it all that much in reality. So, an expert — say, the one writing this book — tells newbie bloggers to take a free blogging service for a test drive before committing a lot of time or money.

After all, actually sitting down and running a full- or part-time blog is a whole lot of work. If writing turns out not to be your cup of tea, using a free service for a while means that you haven't poured any money down the drain to find that out.

Reaping the benefits

An upfront cost of zero is very attractive to new bloggers. If you want access to blog technology and have a limited budget (not to mention all those other annoying budget commitments, such as food and rent), free looks just about perfect. Not all hosted software is free, but they generally have quite reasonable costs. A hosted blog that charges a monthly fee is still cheaper than most monthly cell phone plans, about on par with a newspaper subscription.

But free or inexpensive isn't the only upside to hosted blog services. They really take the complication out of starting a blog. For the technophobe, a

hosted solution is ideal because you have very few technical issues to worry about. Hosted services take care of

- ✓ Web domains
- ✓ Software maintenance and updates
- ✓ Data storage and backup
- ✓ Template design and management

Hosted solutions are also generally quicker to set up than software you have to install on your own server, so you can start blogging sooner when you choose one of these solutions.

Updates are generally free, and the software is available to the end user 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Sounds like a really good deal, huh?

Living with the limitations

Before you sign yourself up, be sure you understand the tradeoffs that come with using a hosted blog service. Ultimately, you don't control your own blog. If the company goes out of business, takes servers down for maintenance, or decides to change its offerings, you're pretty much stuck with the results.

A free hosted solution, for example, might suddenly decide it should start charging; one that already charges can always raise its rates.

Most hosted solutions let users make some modifications and tweaks, but you can't install your own plug-ins and extras; in many cases, the level of customization is quite limited. With hosted blog software, that ubiquitous WYSIWYG (what you see is what you get) acronym is a double-edged sword: You can't actually do more with less.



If you blog on behalf of a company or business, you might want to cross a hosted solution off your list for a couple of reasons:

- ✓ You probably need to make your blog part of an existing website, integrated into the look and feel of the company brand; hosted blogs don't allow this customization or integration.
- ✓ With a business blog, you need control of the data. Putting the blog on your own server removes any doubts about security or data ownership.



When you think about whether to use a hosted solution, be sure you understand the terms of service of that host. Some hosts reserve the right to cancel or remove your blog or blog posts.

Make sure to read all the fine print for the host that you want to use! You don't want to run into legal restrictions that mean you can't actually use your blog the way you want to, and you definitely don't want to suddenly find your blog missing if the hosted software company decides you're in violation of its rules.

Choosing hosted software

In the following sections, you can take a look at some of the most popular hosted platforms to see which might be the best fit for you and your new blog. These blogging software packages have been around for quite a while and are regarded as some of the best that the blogging community has to offer.

Blogger

www.blogger.com

Blogger is the quintessential hosted blogging platform. Started in 1999 at Pyra Labs, Blogger weathered the rough Internet waters at the turn of the century to become the most well-known hosted blogging platform. The Blogger service became incredibly popular, and eventually, Google purchased it. Since then, Blogger has introduced many new features and remained one of the premier blogging platforms. Blogger has many features that allow bloggers to publish multiple blogs:

- ✓ All blogs are free and hosted for you, with no hassles and no mess.
- ✓ Blogger offers a wide variety of free templates to get you going, which you can customize in a number of ways.
- ✓ The publishing tool now has Google AdSense (a blog advertising program) and other neat elements, such as polls and lists, integrated into it, allowing you to add functionality to your blog.
- ✓ If you don't want Blogger to host your files, you can save all your blogging files to another server.



I show you how to get Blogger set up in Chapter 4. Because you can use it so easily and set it up quickly (and because it's free), I encourage all new bloggers to use Blogger as a learning tool, even if you plan to use other blog software for your real blog.

WordPress.com

`www.wordpress.com`

In 2005, the popular WordPress blogging platform launched a hosted service, in addition to software that you can install on your own server. WordPress.com, as shown in Figure 3-8, offers a clean, easy-to-use interface, and bloggers tend to see it as more flexible than anything else on the market. Now that WordPress.com has added new functionality and additional themes, you can set it up very quickly.

In short, WordPress.com

- ✓ Is free to use (although there are some premium levels available with additional functionality)
- ✓ Has many options for design templates, letting you choose a look that suits your content
- ✓ Includes features such as tags and categories, permitting easy organization of your posts
- ✓ Offers spellchecking, rich-text editing, and photo uploading
- ✓ Lets you measure your site traffic and statistics to help gauge your popularity
- ✓ Integrates an excellent spam-fighting tool, Akismet



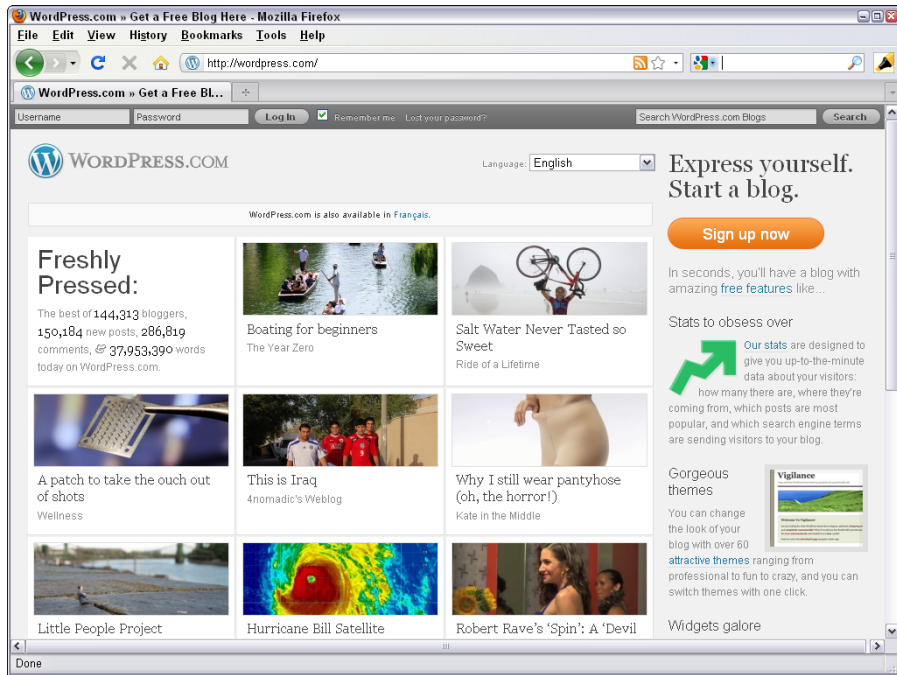
On WordPress.org, you can get software to install WordPress on your own website. I talk more about WordPress.org later in this chapter, and in Chapter 5, you can find out more about both versions in detail.

TypePad

`www.typepad.com`

TypePad was launched in 2003 to great fanfare. It allows you to do more than just blog; it was one of the first blogging platforms to offer the capability to create static content pages. TypePad pricing starts at \$8.95 a month and ranges upward, depending on the services that you include.

Figure 3-8:
Use
WordPress.
com to get
a free but
powerful
blog.



TypePad offers

- ✓ WYSIWYG (what you see is what you get) posting and editing environment, which means you don't need to know HTML
- ✓ Tools that allow you to insert photos into your posts quickly, automatically resizing them and adding thumbnails to blog posts
- ✓ Tools that allow you to quickly place videos and podcasts into your blog posts

Tumblr

`www.tumblr.com`

Tumblr is a fun, and really easy-to-use hosted blogging service — and it's free. Tumblr blogs are a little different, in that it is really easy to re-post material from another Tumblr blog to your own blog, so sharing is a big part of the Tumblr experience.

Tumblr offers:

- ✓ The ability to run several blogs from a single dashboard interface
- ✓ The ability to quickly pose text, photos, quotes, links, music, and videos from your browser, phone, desktop, or e-mail
- ✓ Many different themes that let you customize the way your blog looks so that it's personal to you



Discover more about using Tumblr in Chapter 6, where I cover everything from signing up to posting content on a Tumblr blog.

Understanding Blog Software That You Install on Your Own Server

If technology freaks you out, you can make life easier by using hosted solutions, but bloggers who require more flexibility than hosted solutions offer may choose non-hosted blogging packages. Configuring software to your own tastes and requirements can really improve the overall quality of your blog, making it more attractive to readers and ultimately more successful.



Flexibility can make or break your blog. If you have the money and the skills to install your own blog software, doing so can give you better tools and control over your blog, enabling you to do things like customize the design, add third-party widgets for serving ads, or dabble in customizing the publishing interface.

Choosing a non-hosted blog isn't a plug-and-play solution. Unfortunately, choosing to install blog software, rather than to use a hosted service, means that you need a whole bunch of other technical services to make it all work.

Reaping the benefits

If you use non-hosted blog software, you're in full control. You can do just about anything to the software after you install it:

- ✓ **Design personalization:** For those who have web design skills, stand-alone blogs generally are very adaptable. Some blogs have incredibly diverse and clever designs, many created by the author of the blog to match the style and topic of the blog. Installing the software on your web server gives you access to every part of the blog software's innards, from templates to graphics, so you can make your blog as pretty as a picture. Or tough. Very tough.

- ✔ **Customization:** A lot of the blogging software available is *open source* (meaning the code for the software package is available to developers so that they can manipulate it). Programmers can add, remove, update, and improve functionality for each package. Some packages offer many different options, and independent programmers might also offer additional functionality either for free or a low cost.
- ✔ **Looking smart:** The blogging world has social divisions, just like any other, and at the top of the blogging heap, you find geeks. If you want to play with the cool nerds, you need to install your own blog software. Technical bloggers will recognize your prowess and give you props.

Living with the limitations

The first stumbling block you discover when installing your own blogging software is . . . installing your own blogging software. Somehow, you have to get the software files onto your server, run the scripts, modify the code, and generally muck about in the ugly innards of the software. This process can either be simple or a complete nightmare, depending on your technical savvy and the complexity of the blog software package that you choose.



You can shortcut this issue by choosing a web-hosting company that offers blogging software. Most blogging software companies provide a list of web hosts who have in-house expertise in handling their software; just browse around on the software company's website to find that list. You can also have the blogging software company install the software for you. For a fairly reasonable fee, you can put that job into the hands of an expert. This solution makes sense for one big reason: You need to install the software only once. If you don't already know how to do it yourself, you don't have to spend hours beating your head against a wall to obtain knowledge you'll probably never need again.

Of course, all software requires some level of maintenance, and most web hosts don't handle software upgrades and tweaks; be prepared to handle those requirements when they come up by doing them yourself or finding an expert who can handle them for you.

Using non-hosted software has some other downsides, as well:

- ✔ **Design personalization and code customization:** Making your blog look pretty sounds great, but you need a cornucopia of associated skills to make that happen — everything from graphic design to HTML coding. If you don't have these skills yourself or access to someone who does, you don't actually have the ability to customize your blog, despite your software.

- ✔ **Domain registration and Web hosting:** Unlike the hosted systems, you can't avoid spending money to host your own blog software. Several costs automatically kick in, such as domain name registration and web hosting (explained in the sections "Registering a domain" and "Finding Web Hosting," earlier in this chapter).
- ✔ **Technical support:** Even if you pay to get the blog software installed for you or sign up with a web host that does it automatically, if the software breaks (and doesn't all software break at some point?), many web hosts can't or won't fix it.
- ✔ **Backing up:** If you install your own software, you're responsible for making sure that the software and data get backed up or for finding a web host that includes backups as part of the hosting package.

Choosing non-hosted blogging software

If you're ready to make the leap into the deep end of the blogging pool, the following sections give you recommendations for a range of well-respected non-hosted blogging tools.

WordPress

www.wordpress.org

Since 2003, WordPress has provided a solid platform for new and experienced bloggers who want the control of installing blog software on their own computers. Many bloggers say that WordPress is the easiest blogging platform (aside from hosted blogging software) to set up and configure. I cover installing and using WordPress in Chapter 5.



The interface acts exactly the way the hosted WordPress.com system works. That said, if you're considering using WordPress, sign up for a test blog on WordPress.com to get a good preview of how WordPress works.

Here are some of the highlights:

- ✔ WordPress is free!
- ✔ It offers many, many user-submitted and user-prepared designs, ready for use.
- ✔ It includes tags and categories, allowing you to organize your posts easily.
- ✔ It has editing tools (such as spellchecking), offers common text styles, and gives you easy ways to include photos, videos, and other media.

- ✔ It displays statistics about your visitors to help you understand the traffic to your blog.
- ✔ It fights spam with a range of anti-spam tools.

Movable Type

www.movabletype.com

Movable Type is the grandfather of all installable blogging platforms. Released in 2001, it quickly became one of the most popular blogging software packages, for geeks and pundits alike. Movable Type was the first blogging software that permitted contributions by multiple authors, and bloggers highly regard it for the many ways that you can leverage it to create easily updateable websites and blogs.

If you're serious about looking at hosting your own installation, Movable Type is a strong contender. Movable Type offers

- ✔ A WYSIWYG (what you see is what you get) editing environment that saves you time and effort
- ✔ Easy tools for categorizing your posts, inserting photos and multimedia, and spellchecking
- ✔ Automatic generation of RSS feeds to give your blog longevity
- ✔ Searchable content, tags, and other cool tools
- ✔ A range of licensing options for personal, commercial, and educational use

Pricing varies, but the basic commercial installation is \$395.95, and you may qualify to use the free Blogger license if you are an individual blogger and not setting up a blog for an organization or business.

ExpressionEngine

www.expressionengine.com

Back in 2001, a company called pMachine released a blogging software package called pMachine Pro. pMachine Pro quietly hatched a following based on clean interface, solid performance, and flexibility in both design and layout. From that success, pMachine built the content management system and blogging software ExpressionEngine, an exceptionally powerful platform.

Today, pMachine (now known as EllisLab) supports all kinds of sites by using ExpressionEngine, which it offers in both commercial and personal flavors. Like Movable Type, ExpressionEngine is highly regarded by web developers because it offers great blogging tools, but it's flexible enough to be used to develop all kinds of websites — not just blogs.

ExpressionEngine users have

- ✓ The capability to run multiple blogs that have many contributors
- ✓ A powerful templating engine
- ✓ Additional modules and community plug-ins, including mailing lists, forums, and photo galleries
- ✓ Strong comment moderation and prevention tools
- ✓ Different levels of user access, allowing administrators to control what blogs and templates users can edit

ExpressionEngine's commercial license runs you \$299.95, the non-profit/personal version is \$149.95, and there is a Freelancer license for smaller-presence websites for \$99.95.

Installing blog software

After you purchase your domain and web hosting, you can get into the nitty-gritty technical tasks: installing your blog software. To get started, look for installation instructions on your blog software company's website. Each blogging package has a set of instructions for doing the job yourself and details about hiring company technical support to do the job for you.



Keep in mind that installing blog software is a one-time task! When you finish, you never need to do it again, and you probably don't need the skills necessary to install the software in order to use your blog.

Unfortunately, the steps that you need to take to install a particular blog application vary dramatically from software to software, so I can't give you detailed step-by-step directions. Each blog software package has its own particular requirements for installation, but the general process follows these steps:

1. Download the latest version of your blogging software.
2. Uncompress the package and upload it to your new web host by using FTP (file transfer protocol).
3. Execute the installation application associated with your software.

To make your installation experience as trouble-free as possible, watch out for the following common problems:

- ✔ **File location:** When you upload your blog package, make sure that you upload it to the correct location. All web hosts tell you where to place your web files and software so that visitors can find your blog. If you put your files in the wrong place, no one can access your blog.
- ✔ **Database requirements:** Sometimes, you need to create a database prior to installing your blog software. Each web host has a different procedure for creating a database, so if your installation instructions mention this requirement, consult the web host documentation or support materials to find out how to set things up properly.

Sound like gibberish? The truth is that almost anyone can use blogging software, but only quite technically advanced computer users can install it themselves. If you're a web designer or developer, you may be able to install the software yourself. If you aren't technical but want to be, this project gives you the chance to really get your hands dirty.

However, if tech stuff makes you cringe, you can investigate having someone else install the software. My main advice is to find a professional:

- ✔ **Web designers:** Many people who build websites for a living can help would-be bloggers get blogging software installed and running. Of course, you need to pay these folks for their time, so shop around for several quotes to get the best deal.
- ✔ **Blogging software companies:** The best blogging software companies offer inexpensive solutions to this problem: They install the software for you on your own website. Check with the blogging software company to see whether it offers this service.
- ✔ **Web-hosting companies:** Some web hosts install software for you if you ask (and pay them), and some even offer a one-click installation. These one-click installations can save bloggers from headaches, pain, and mid-night crying sessions. You just click a button to install the desired blogging software on your web server. If this option sounds appealing, check with the web host you're eyeing before you sign up to see whether it offers one-click blog software installations.



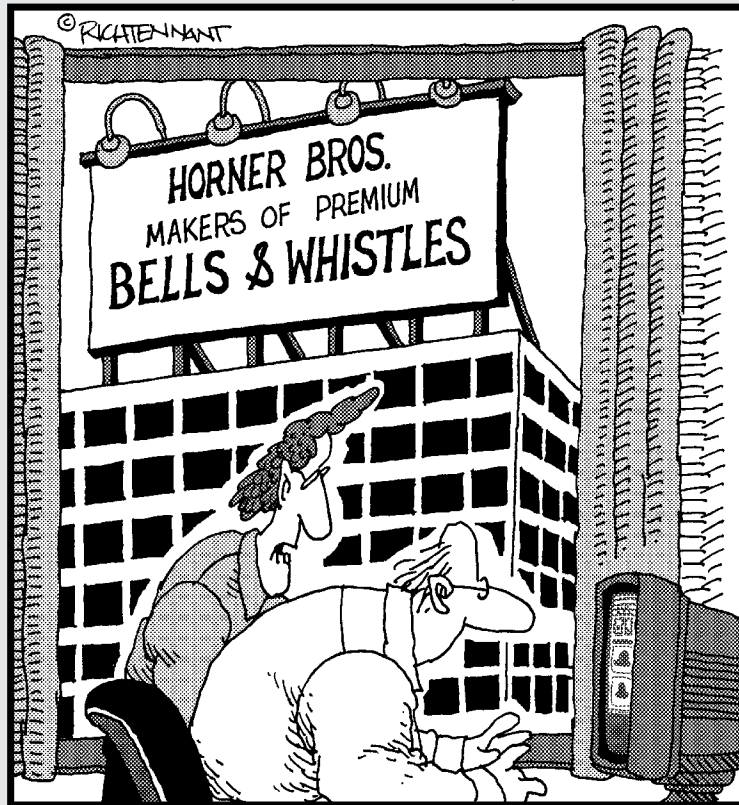
Many blogging software companies have figured out that installing blog software creates a real barrier to the nontechnical customer. As a result, you can often go to a blogging software company's website and find a list of web-hosting companies that offer one-click installation for a particular blogging platform.

Part II

Setting Up Your Blog

The 5th Wave

By Rich Tennant



"As a blog designer I never thought I'd say this, but I don't think your blog has enough bells and whistles."

In this part . . .

Enough chitchat? Ready to get going right now? I'm with you. Part II is all about getting your hands dirty, starting with Chapter 4, where I get you started with a tool called Blogger. I kid you not; you can set up a blog and start posting within about ten minutes. Blogger isn't the only tool around, of course. Chapter 5 introduces you to a great piece of blog software you install on your own web server or use as a hosted service: WordPress. And in Chapter 6, you have fun with Tumblr. If you really, really don't have much time to spend on a blog, micro blogging with Tumblr might be just the ticket.

Chapter 4

Starting a Blogger Blog

In This Chapter

- ▶ Signing up with Blogger to get started
 - ▶ Writing, publishing, and viewing your first blog post
 - ▶ Managing your blog settings
 - ▶ Customizing your blog template to match your style
-

Part of the beauty of a blog is how quickly and easily you can get going. You can go from zero to blog in about ten minutes by using good blog software, especially if you go with hosted blog software. One such is Blogger, which is the focus of this chapter. I show you how to set up a blog with Blogger, write and publish blog posts by using its interface, manage your settings, and customize your template to make your space on the web unique.

If you're unfamiliar with hosted blog software versus server-based software, flip to Chapter 3 for an introduction to blog software. In Chapter 5, you can find an introduction to WordPress, which offers both hosted and server-based blogging software. And in Chapter 6, you discover Tumblr, a short form of blogging called micro blogging.

Starting a Blog with Blogger

You can't find a better place to get introduced to blogging than Blogger (www.blogger.com). It's free, fast, and easy to use. Because you can get started so easily, you can use Blogger to play with code and discover how blogging works without having to invest a lot of time and energy in web servers and complicated installation processes.

Blogger promises to get you blogging in three steps: Create an account, name your blog, and choose a template.

Each hosted blog software platform has a different process for getting started, but each one requires the same kind of information: your contact information and a name for your blog.



Creating an account

Before signing up with Blogger, you need login information (a username and password), which you can get in a couple of ways:

- ✓ **Through a Google account:** If you have an account with one of Google's services, such as Gmail, you can log in to Blogger by using that account information. (Blogger was acquired by the popular search engine company in 2002.)
- ✓ **Through Blogger:** If you don't have a Google account, you get one when you sign up with Blogger.

To sign up for Blogger when you don't have a Google account, follow these steps:

1. **Click the Get Started button on the Blogger home page** (www.blogger.com).
2. **Type your e-mail address in the Email Address text box. Re-type your e-mail into the second e-mail text box.**
3. **Choose a password and type it in the Enter a Password text box.**



When you type your password, Blogger indicates whether you need to increase the password *strength* — meaning how difficult it would be for someone to guess your password. Click the Password Strength link for more information about creating a more secure password.

4. **Retype the password in the Retype Password text box.**
5. **Type the name that you want to associate with your blog in the Display Name text box.**
6. **Select the Email Notifications check box if you want to receive informational e-mails from Blogger.**
7. **Type your numeric birth date into the Birthday text box.**
8. **In the Word Verification text box, enter the word shown as an image.**
9. **Select the Acceptance of Terms check box.**

You can read the Terms of Service to see what you're agreeing to by clicking the Terms of Service link.

10. **Click Continue to start a new blog, and then move on to the following section in this chapter.**

To sign up for Blogger by using an existing Google account, follow these steps:

1. **Type your Google account username and password into the appropriate text boxes on the Blogger home page** (www.blogger.com).

2. Click Sign In.

The Blogger Dashboard appears.

3. Click the New Blog link in the Dashboard, and then check out the following section in this chapter.

Naming your blog

When you have a Blogger account set up, you can choose a name for your blog. If you're creating a blog that you plan to actually use (rather than just test, a topic that I discuss in Chapter 3), give a lot of thought to the name that you choose. Your blog name needs to accurately portray your blog's tone and content. If you plan to use this blog as a test space, don't worry too much about choosing a name that has a lot of meaning, but be sure you choose something that you can remember!

To name your Blogger blog, follow these steps:

1. Type the name of the blog in the Blog Title text box.**2. Decide what phrase you want to use in your URL and type it in the Blog Address text box.**

A *URL* (uniform resource locator) is better known as a web address. To open your blog, visitors type this address into the address bar of their web browsers. You can use any word or phrase that you want as a URL, as long as someone else isn't using it, but you probably want to keep it short, sweet, and memorable so that others can get to your blog quickly and easily. You can't use spaces or punctuation, except dashes, in your URL.

You can type about 35 characters in this text box.

As you type, Google will check to see whether your URL is available and display the status of that check below the text box.

3. Click the Check Availability link to see whether the web address you want to use is available. If it isn't, type a new phrase into the Blog Address text box and try again.

You might have to make several tries to find an available blog address — Blogger is popular!

4. Select one of the Template styles shown by clicking on the image.

You can change this selection later.

5. Click the Create Blog button.

Blogger sets up your new blog and takes you to the Dashboard.



After you complete this setup process, you don't need to repeat it when you want to add a post to your blog. The next time you come to Blogger, simply use the login boxes on the home page to log in and get started posting to your blog.

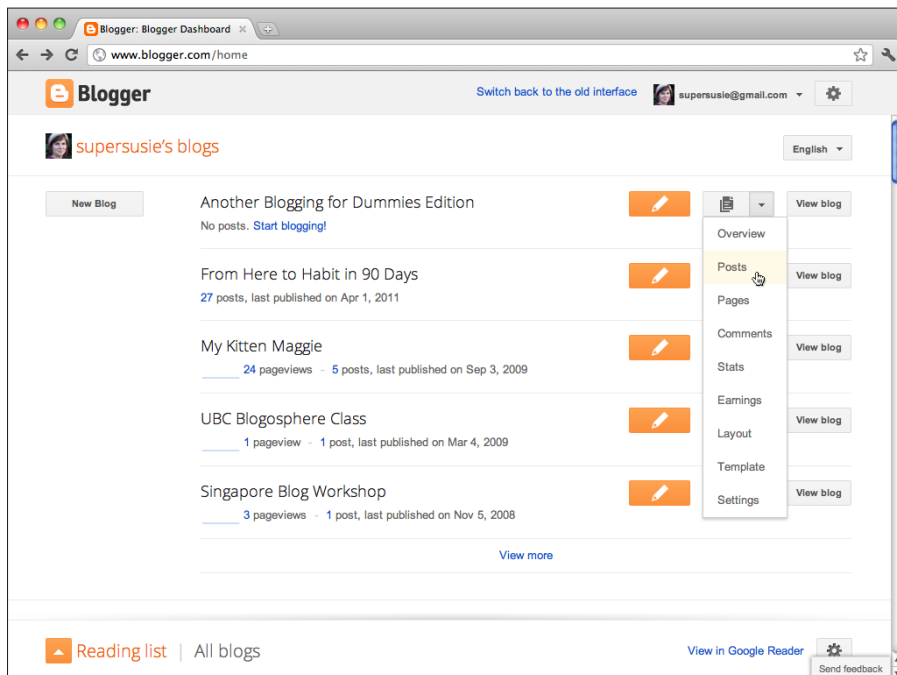
Using the Dashboard

When Blogger sets up your blog, it adds it to a Dashboard (see Figure 4-1) that displays your new blog and any others you may have. You can use the Dashboard to get quickly to common tasks, like writing a new post, checking your stats, and viewing your blog.

To write a blog post, click the orange Pencil button next to the name of your blog. The View Blog button opens your blog, allowing you to view it the same way your visitors will see it.

The Posts drop-down list gives you access to all your past posts, pages, comments, stats, earnings information, layout, template, and blog settings. Simply click the arrow in the Posts drop-down list to view all the options, as shown in Figure 4-1.

Figure 4-1:
Use the Blogger Dashboard to get started writing blog posts for any blog you maintain using Google.



Writing a Post

You officially join the blogosphere by writing your very first blog post, an *entry*, for your new blog. (The *blogosphere*, by the way, is the semi-ironic way that bloggers refer to themselves, their blogs, and the phenomena that is blogging today. You're a member of the blogosphere when you have a blog, regardless of whether you think it's the dumbest word you've heard this year.)

The mechanics of writing a blog post aren't much different from writing an e-mail. Bloggers usually make most posts quite short, and they write those posts directly and conversationally. Of course, you might decide to use your blog to write the next Great American Novel, in which case, your posts might be quite a bit longer than what's standard! That's fine, too. Every blog takes on a personality and life of its own. If you want to find your own narrative voice for your blog, go to Chapter 7.



If you've used a web-based e-mail service such as Gmail, Hotmail, or Yahoo!, the Blogger software feels very familiar. To create the post, you simply have to fill in the appropriate text boxes in a form, format the text, and then send it off to its destination — in this case, to your blog, rather than a friend's e-mail inbox.

Follow these steps to write a blog post on Blogger:

1. **From the Blogger home screen, click the orange Pencil button next to your blog's name.**

Blogger opens the Publish entry screen, as shown in Figure 4-2.

2. **Enter a title for your post in the Title text box.**

Titles are a lot like newspaper headlines: They should be catchy and informative, and they should encourage visitors to your blog to continue reading the rest of the post.

3. **Write your post in the large text box.**



Consider writing your blog posts in a standard word-processing program, such as Notepad or Microsoft Word — and then saving that post. Too many bloggers have spent hours composing right in the entry box of their blog software, only to find that their Internet connection has failed or another technical problem has occurred — which results in a lost post. You don't want to lose all your carefully considered prose just because your cat pulled the cable modem out of the wall! It's safer to compose offline, and then simply copy and paste the text into the blog software.

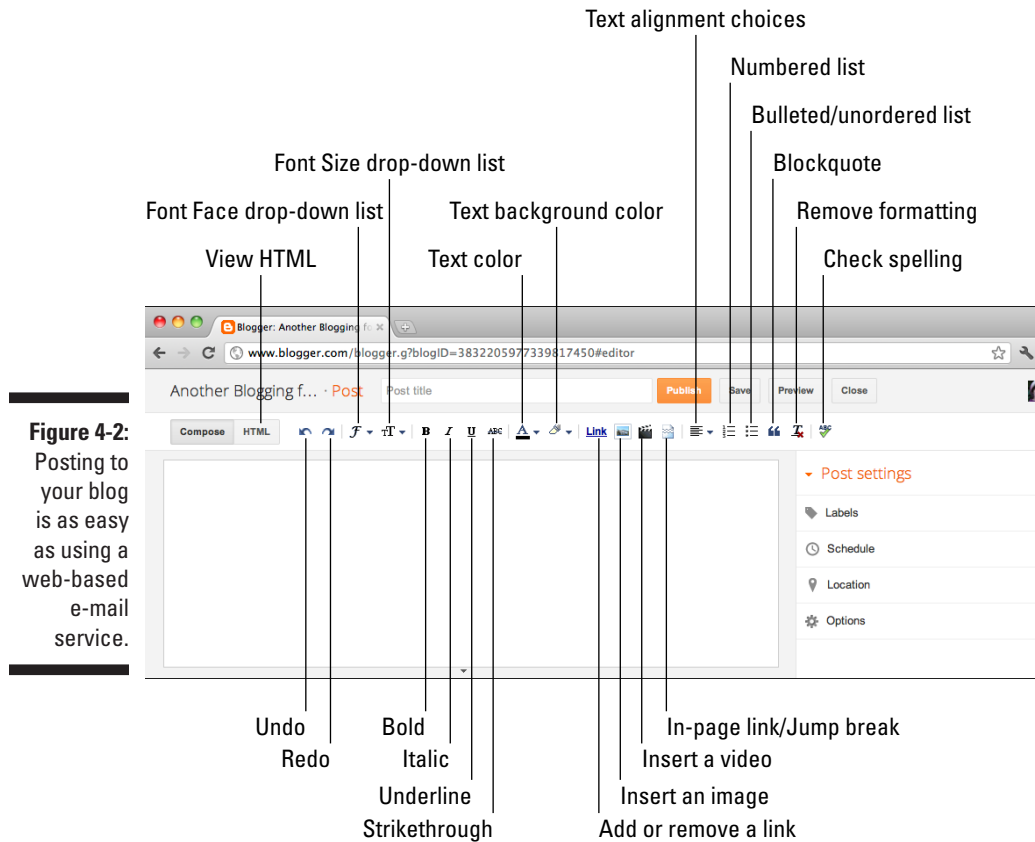


Figure 4-2:
Posting to
your blog
is as easy
as using a
web-based
e-mail
service.

4. Format your post.

Blogger's entry box includes icons across the top that let you change the font style and font size, apply bold and italic to text, and create common formatting styles such as lists. To use these features, select the text that you want to modify by clicking and dragging over the text; then click the appropriate icon or select an option from the desired drop-down list.



If you know how to write HTML code, you can also try composing your post in the HTML mode. Click the HTML button and include HTML tags in your text, as needed. If you want to find out more about coding HTML, I discuss common tags in Appendix B.

Adding a link

The Link icon deserves special attention. You use this icon whenever you want to link to another blog, a news story, that embarrassing website that your best friend just created, or any other page on the web.

When you want to create a clickable link in your blog post, follow these steps:

1. **Highlight the text that you want to make clickable by clicking and dragging.**
2. **Click the Link icon.**
3. **Enter the URL of the website to which you want to link and click OK.**

Include the full URL of the web page in this text box. Don't delete the `http://` that's prefilled in the form for you. The URL you use should look like this:

`http://www.flickr.com/photos/supersusie/6166429107`

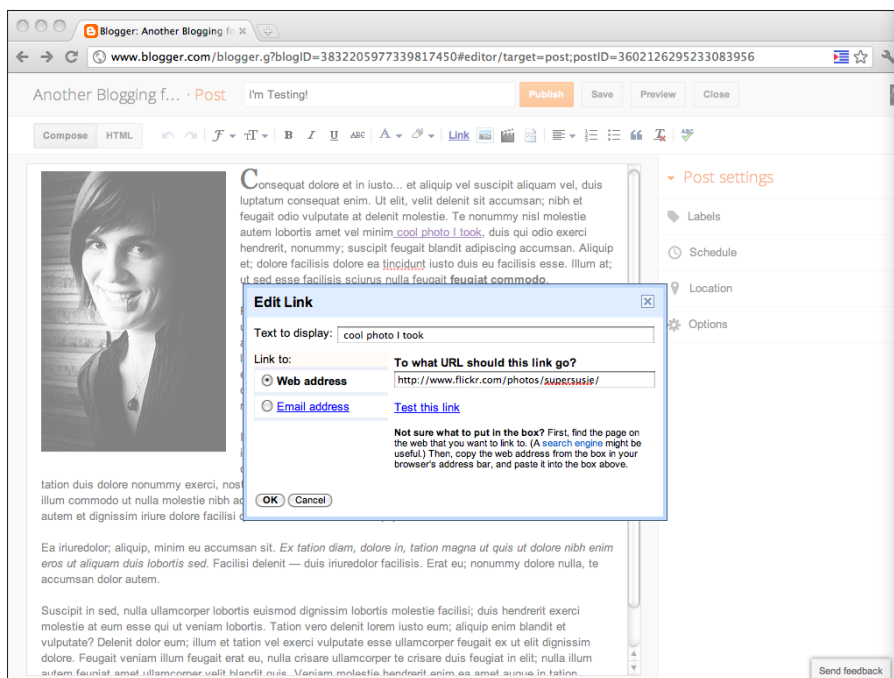


Figure 4-3:
Use the
Link icon to
create click-
able text in
your blog
post.

And not this:

```
www.flickr.com/photos/supersusie/6166429107
```

You can most easily make sure that you have the right link by going to the web page to which you want to link, copy the URL from the address bar (press Ctrl+C to copy and then Ctrl+V to paste; on a Mac, use ⌘ rather than Ctrl). To make sure the link is going to the right page, you can click the Test This Link link in the Edit Link window to preview the page.

After you click OK, the linked text appears as underlined blue text in your post. It doesn't become clickable until you publish it.



Don't forget that if you know HTML and would prefer to create the link manually by using HTML code, you can do so on the HTML tab.

Spellchecking your text

Blogger provides a handy tool for anyone who needs help with spelling (and who doesn't?). After you finish writing your post, click the Check Spelling icon. It's the icon that shows the letters ABC with a checkmark below them (refer to Figure 4-2).

Blogger highlights incorrectly spelled words in yellow. Click any misspelled word to see a list of suggested alternatives. Select any suggestion from the list or simply type your own correction.

Including an image

You can make your blog post more appealing by including an image. Longtime bloggers can tell you that adding a photo or artwork encourages visitors to read more of the surrounding text. And, of course, everyone knows how many words that photo is worth!

Blogger has some good built-in tools that allow you to upload an image that's already the right size and format for displaying on the web. If you need help formatting photographs from a digital camera or another source, Chapter 11 shows you how.

Follow these steps to upload an image from your computer and add it to your blog post:

1. Click the Add Image icon.

It looks like a photograph (refer to Figure 4-2).

The Upload window opens.

2. Click the Choose Files button to upload an image on your computer.

A File Upload dialog box opens, as shown in Figure 4-4.

3. Locate the image that you want to upload from your computer and select it.

4. Click Open.

The image is uploaded to Blogger.

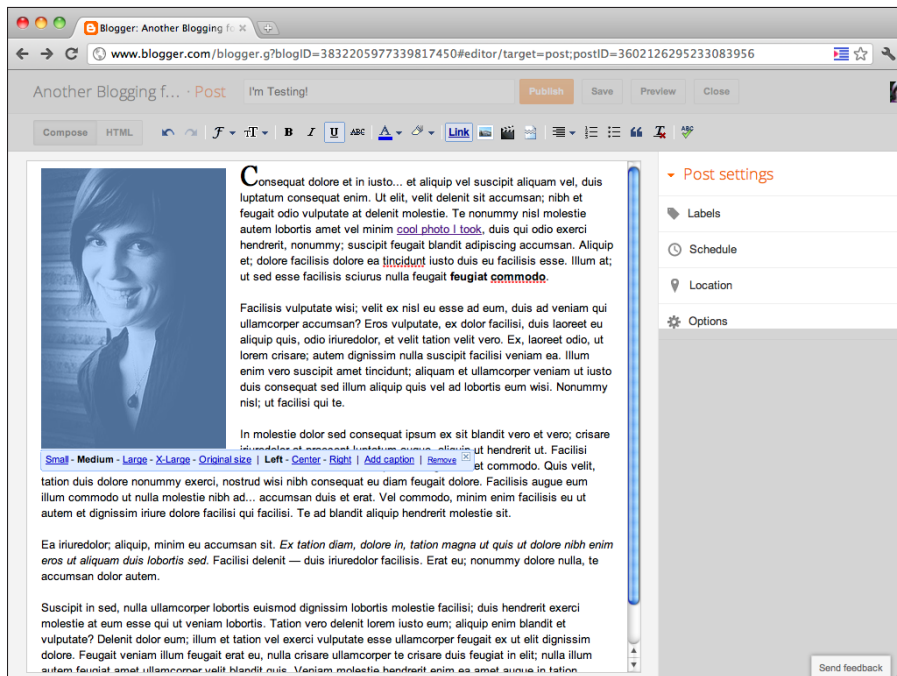
5. Click Add Selected from the lower-right corner of the Upload screen.

The image is placed in your blog post.

6. Select the image and then choose your image formatting options (see Figure 4-4):

- *Image Size*: Determines how large the display of the image is in your blog post, regardless of the dimensions of the source image. You can choose Small, Medium, or Large.
- *Alignment*: Determines how text wraps around the image. You can choose None, Left, Center, or Right.
- *Caption*: Places text directly under the image.

Figure 4-4:
Selecting
an image
you have
uploaded
allows you
to size and
align it, as
well as add
a caption.





You can also add an image to your post from another website, as long as you have permission to use the image or it's in the public domain. (Read more about copyright in Chapter 8.) You can add an image from a site easily by using Blogger. Just follow these steps:

1. Find an image or photo on the web that you want to use.

Make sure that you're allowed to use it by checking copyright permission or asking the creator.

2. Right-click the image and select Copy Image Location from the menu that opens.

Phrasing of this option may differ in different browsers. If you don't see anything that looks right, choose Properties from the menu. A window opens that shows you the URL address, which you can then click and drag to highlight. Press Ctrl+C to copy the address (⌘+C on a Mac).

3. Head back to Blogger and start a new post, or open one that you've already created.

4. Click the Add Image icon.

It looks like a photograph (refer to Figure 4-2).

The Upload window opens.

5. Choose the From a URL link and press Ctrl+V (⌘+V on the Mac) to paste the image address into the image URL text box on the right of the window.

Blogger loads a preview of your image.

6. Click the Add Selected button to insert the photo in your post.

7. Click to select the image to choose from image formatting options (refer to Figure 4-4):

- *Image Size*: Determines how large the display of the image is in your blog post, regardless of the dimensions of the source image. You can choose Small, Medium, or Large.
- *Alignment*: Determines how text wraps around the image. You can choose None, Left, Center, or Right.
- *Caption*: Places text directly under the image.

Publishing Your Post

When you're satisfied with your blog post, you can publish it so that the world can admire your erudition. Publishing a post isn't hard: Click the orange Publish button at the top of the page. Your post appears on your blog, making it available for others to read.

Before you publish, you can take advantage of three areas of the Blogger Publish page that I find very helpful: previewing, saving as a draft, and selecting post options.

Previewing your post

Before you publish, you can preview what you've created by clicking the Preview button (found at the top-right of the browser window). This preview is WYSIWYG (what you see is what you get), which means that it shows you the post exactly as you formatted it, including links, text colors, embedded images, and so on. The Preview is shown in a new browser window.



I like to preview my post before I publish because I can more easily read for meaning and content at this point. Think of the preview as a last chance to catch grammar problems or even to think twice about what you're posting if it's controversial. Of course, you can also see how the text and content flow around any images that you've added.

If you see changes that you want to make, simply switch back to the editing screen, make your changes, and click the Preview button again.

Configuring post settings

To the right of your blog post, you see the post settings links. These let you decide on a number of important ways your post is handled by Blogger, from when the post is published, to whether you allow comments.

Scheduling your post

Many bloggers like to create posts in advance of when they plan to publish them. For example, if you're planning a vacation, you can write several posts before you leave. When you put them into Blogger, click the Schedule link to the right of the post box before you publish your post. Set the date and time you want your post to go live, click Done, and when you click Publish, Blogger will hold your post until that point.

By default, Blogger sets the publication date and time of the entry to the date and time that you began writing that entry. You might choose to change the date or time for a number of reasons:

✓ **Social or professional reasons:**

- Create a blog post for a friend's birthday and make the date match the time your friend was born.
- If you're blogging at work, you might want to set your date and time to a period when you weren't supposed to also be at your

desk (ahem) *working*. Chapter 2 discusses blogging and workplace issues in detail (and recommends that you don't blog at work, unless that's part of your job responsibility).

✓ **To work around your schedule:**

- If you take a long time to write a post, by the time you're ready to publish it, you might need to put a more realistic time on the entry.
- If you save your post as a draft and publish it later, you can update the date and time to accurately reflect the real publication date.

Allowing comments

You can choose whether you want readers to be able to comment on your blog post by selecting the Options link under Post settings. There are three options: Allow; Don't Allow, Show Existing; and Don't Allow, Hide Existing. Don't Allow, Show Existing keeps already-posted comments visible, even though no one can add new comments.



You can make the decision to turn off comments at any time, so if you decide later that you don't want to receive further comments, you can always edit the entry and turn off this option then.

Most of the time, you want to allow comments; after all, part of what makes a blog exciting to read is the opportunity to interact with the blogger. Sometimes, though, you might write an entry that you don't want to read discussion about, perhaps because you don't want to start a long argument or because the entry has become a target of spammers. You can find more about interacting with your reading community and preventing spam in Chapter 9.

Launching your post

Once you have the text and photos laid out nicely and you've chosen your settings, it's time to publish! This is pretty hard, so get ready:

1. Click the **Publish** button at the top of your blog post.
2. Ha ha, just kidding, there is no Step 2! Your post is on your blog. Go take a look.

Viewing Your Blog Post

After you publish, you can see how your post looks on the blog. You may find this step rewarding — and you definitely don't want to skip it. Even if you preview your post before publishing, you haven't seen your post in the way

that your readers see it. You can do that only by actually going to your blog as it appears to everyone on the web and taking a look.

Computers can still make errors or fail between the moment you click Publish and when the entry shows up on the blog. I like to look at my blog every time I post a new entry to make sure that it actually looks right on the page and that the blog software successfully processed it.

When you click Blogger's Publish button, the system provides you with a handy link to view your blog. Click View Blog to head over to your blog and see your handiwork.

Of course, if you prefer taking the long way, you can always type the web address (the one that you chose when you set up your blog) into the web browser to see your blog without going through the Blogger Dashboard.



While you look at your blog, make sure the formatting, images, and text look the way that you want them to and click any links that you created. If anything doesn't work quite properly, go back into Blogger and make changes to your entry.

Selecting the Dashboard Settings

Blog software, as a rule, is quite customizable. As the owner of the blog, you can decide a number of things about the way your blog looks and works, and you can control those elements from the control panel — called the Dashboard in Blogger — of your blog software.

Most blog software packages work quite similarly, and if you know how Blogger works, you can make the most of any other software.

Blogger divides its settings into several areas: Basic, Posts and Comments, Mobile and Email, Language and Formatting, and Other. I cover important highlights from the settings in the following sections.

You access all the Blogger settings via the Blogger Dashboard. (In other blog software packages, this area is called the control panel, the admin panel, and so on.) To reach the Dashboard, just log in to the Blogger website. If you're already logged in, look for a link to the Dashboard in the upper-left corner of any page and click it. My Dashboard is shown in Figure 4-1.

The Dashboard shows all the blogs that you've started with Blogger. For each blog, you can quickly start a new post, view your blog, or jump into other areas. A single click takes you into the blog settings, or to the template or layout that you're using.



You can access all the Blogger settings for your blog from the Dashboard. Look for the Posts drop-down list (it looks like two pieces of paper) next to the blog you want to configure, and click the arrow to open the menu. Selecting the Settings option (refer to Figure 4-1) takes you into the right area to do everything discussed in this section.

Making basic changes

From the Basic Settings area, you can change the name of your blog (Blogger refers to this name as the blog title) and also give it a short description. Most of the Blogger templates display the description near the top of the page. Even if you change the title on your blog page, the URL that readers type into a browser to visit your blog stays the same, but you can also change the URL.

You can also add authors to your blog — people who can also contribute blog posts, creating a group blog. To add someone as an author, you simply need that person's e-mail address. If the person you're adding has a Blogger or Google account, I recommend using that address so that all his or her Blogger and Google account services are tied together.

If you aren't happy with the web address for your blog, you can edit the address by changing the Blog*Spot Address setting. For instance, if you start a blog called My New Kitten Maggie and your cat grows up (they do that, I hear), you might want to edit both the name and the location of your blog. (You have to make the name change on the Basic Settings tab, which I describe in the preceding section.) Use the Publishing tab to change the URL. For example, you can change

```
http://mynewkittenmaggie.blogspot.com
```

into

```
http://mygrownupcatmaggie.blogspot.com
```



You can change your address only to one that another Blogger member isn't already using, so you may have to make several tries before you find one that's available. Although you can make changes to the URL of your blog, remember that doing so means that no one can access your blog from the previous address, so anyone who has bookmarked your blog or memorized the address can't reach you after you make the change.

Follow these steps to change your blog's name, add a description, edit the URL, give authors access, or limit readership:

1. From the Dashboard, click the Pages menu and select Settings.

The Basic Settings page opens, shown in Figure 4-5.

2. Edit the Title and/or Description.**3. Edit the Blog Address/URL.****4. Give others permission to post to your blog:**

- a. Click the Add Authors link in the Permissions area of the Basic Settings page.

A pop-up window appears with a text box for addresses.

- b. Type or paste the e-mail address of the author you want to add, and click OK, as shown in Figure 4-5.

Blogger sends an e-mail invitation to the address(es) you provided.

5. Choose who should be able to read your blog from the Blog Readers area:

- *Anybody*: Anyone with Internet access and the blog address can read your blog.
- *Only These Readers*: Restrict access to selected people; you need the e-mail addresses of those you want to give reading access.
- *Only Blog Authors*: Only people you have added as authors on the blog can read the blog.

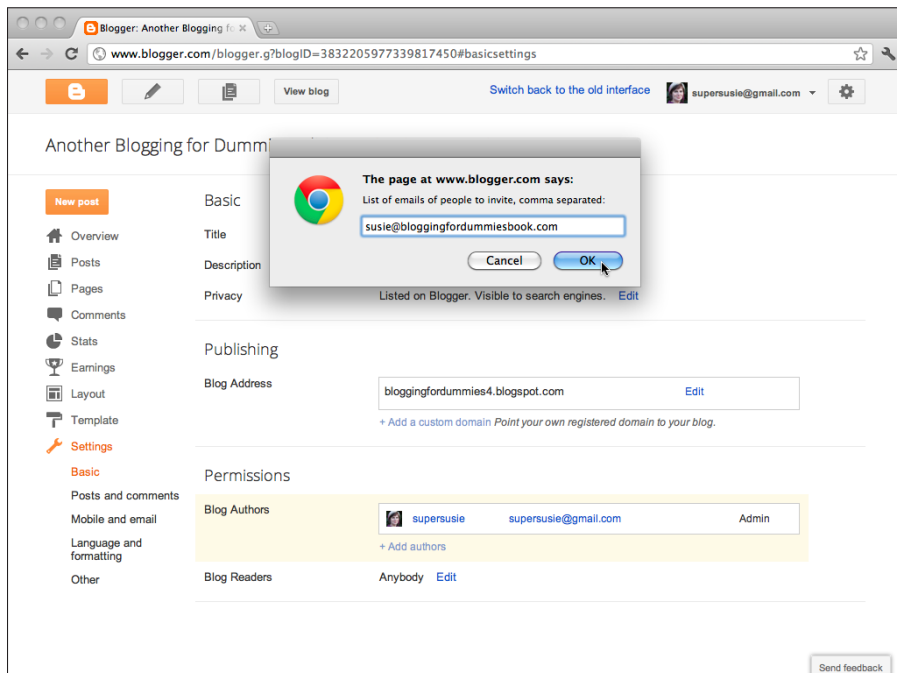


Figure 4-5:
It's easy to
give others
access to
post to your
blog.

Making comment changes

Comments are both strengths and weaknesses of the blog medium. Both readers and bloggers find the capability to leave a comment, which lets you interact or converse with a blogger, very attractive.



Commenting has a downside: Spammers have discovered the comment technology, as well. Just as with e-mail, you can expect some commenters to tell you about fabulous mortgage opportunities, Mexican pharmaceuticals, and other less-than-savory possibilities — information neither you nor your readers want.

The Posts and Comments settings help you reduce spam on your blog. One of the best ways to reduce spam is to specify who can comment on your blog. From the Posts and Comments screen, select an option from the Who Can Comment options:

- ✓ **Anyone:** This option allows the widest possible audience, with no limitations on who can comment. It provides no spam prevention, but it also imposes no barriers to leaving a comment to genuine commenters.
- ✓ **Registered Users:** Sets your blog to accept comments only from registered members of Blogger so that you can cut down on some spam. Don't forget that not everyone has a Blogger account — or wants one — so you might lose some real comments.
- ✓ **Users with Google Accounts:** Because Google validates the accounts it creates, letting users who have Google accounts leave comments can help ensure that you get comments from humans, rather than spammers.
- ✓ **Only Members of the Blog:** Prevents anyone who isn't a member of your blog from leaving a comment. No one you haven't personally authorized as a member can leave a comment. This option creates a lot of work for you because you have to maintain the list of authorized members, but you don't get any spam.



You can add members to your blog from the Basic Settings page.

Also on the Posts and Comments page, you can specify your comment moderation options. Change the Enable Comment Moderation setting to Always. Turning on comment moderation prevents anyone from posting a comment that you haven't approved. When someone leaves a comment, you get an e-mail that lets you know about the comment. From the Dashboard, you can authorize or reject the publication of the comment. You can also moderate comments via e-mail.



Moderating comments is a lot of work for you, but it improves the quality and readability of comments on your blog for your readers, and it discourages spammers in the future.

Making e-mail changes

On the Mobile and Email settings page, you can turn on a cool feature that allows you to post to your blog by sending an e-mail message. When it's configured, you can simply send an e-mail to the address from any device capable of sending e-mail (such as your smartphone!). The subject of the e-mail becomes the title of the blog post, and the text of the e-mail is the entry body. It's a very quick, easy way to publish to your blog, which makes it great for when you're traveling.

To set up a Mail2Blogger address, click on the Email & Mobile Settings tab and fill out the Email Posting Address text box. Be sure to save the settings and test to make sure that it works!



In the Mobile and Email page, you can enter an e-mail address in the Comment Notification text box at which you want to receive notification when someone leaves a comment on your blog. This setting helps you keep track of comments left on your blog, especially when you have a lot of old posts on which you might not see comments when you view your blog.

You can also set up your phone with Blogger so that you can post using SMS/MMS. This is especially cool for photo bloggers who use their phones to capture images.

Customizing Your Blog

The look that you picked when you started your blog might be just fine, but many bloggers want to tweak and customize the look and feel of their blogs — I know I did when I started working on my blog. I was using personal words and pictures, and I wanted to make the rest of the site look more like my own website, rather than a Blogger design.

Blogger differentiates between the *template* and *layout* of your blog. The template dictates the look of the blog; the layout is the placement of the elements of the blog.



Editing templates old-skool: Using code

If you're a web designer or coder, and you want to sink your teeth into the Blogger template itself, you can do so. To get to the code from the Blogger Dashboard, select Template from the blog's Posts and click Edit HTML for the template you're using.

From here, you can edit the HTML and save as you go. Blogger recommends only advanced

users use this tool. You should be proficient with HTML and CSS, and know a certain amount of Blogger's own coding language, to successfully edit these files.

Blogger suggests that using the Template Designer gives you good options without as much risk of breaking your blog.

When you start your Blogger blog, you choose a template and that template determines the look and feel of your blog, as well as the placement of the elements and what those elements are. However, you should think of the template and the layout it comes with as a starting point; it's not set in stone.

You can change the look of a Blogger blog in four ways:

- ✓ Change the template you are using completely.
- ✓ Customize an existing template using the Template Designer.
- ✓ Create your own template in HTML (see the "Editing templates old-skool: Using code" sidebar).
- ✓ Edit the layout of your template to move, add, and remove elements.

Choosing a new template

One of the fun features of Blogger allows you to choose from a number of templates for your blog. The template determines both the look and feel of your blog, and also how the blog elements appear on the page. Blogger has many templates to choose from, and don't forget that you can customize or change the template later if your first choice no longer looks as fresh in six months. (For more info, see the "Using the Template Designer" section, later in this chapter.)

To choose a template, follow these steps:

1. From the Dashboard, select Template from the Posts drop-down list.
2. Use the scrollbar to browse through the available templates in the Choose a Template screen.

The previews on this page give you an idea of how your blog would look if you used the various templates.

3. When you find something intriguing, click the thumbnail image.

A larger image of the template opens in the window so that you can take a closer look, as shown in Figure 4-6.

You can preview as many or as few templates as you wish. To close a preview without implementing the template, click the X in the upper-right corner of the preview window.

4. After you decide on a template, click the Apply to Blog button on the preview window, or click the Apply to Blog link under the template thumbnail.

Blogger displays a confirmation message that the template has been implemented on your blog.

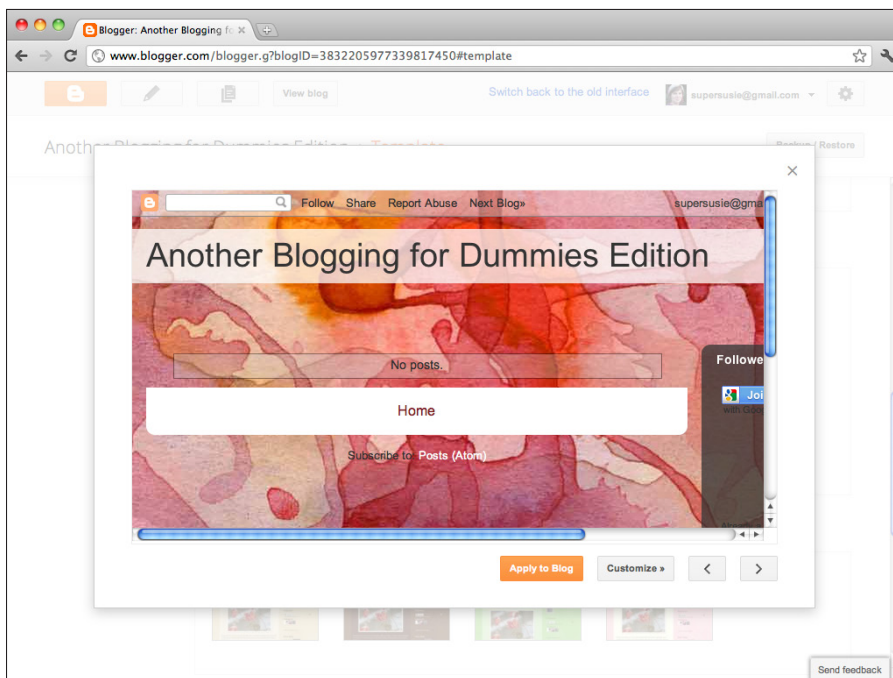


Figure 4-6:

You can preview the Blogger templates when you start a new blog.

Using the Template Designer

Don't know any HTML, but still want to tweak certain elements of your blog's design just a little? You're in luck — the Blogger Template Designer gives you some excellent tools to do just that. In fact, I think you'll be pleasantly surprised to discover just how many things you can change easily.

The Template Designer gives you the capability to change:

- ✓ The font face, size, and color of text, links, navigation elements, and sidebar elements.
- ✓ The background color and/or image.
- ✓ Widths of the columns on your blog
- ✓ Layouts of your blog to use one, two, three, four, or even five columns.



In fact, you can even use the Template Designer to insert some of your own custom styles, if you're up-to-date with HTML and CSS.

To use the Blogger Template Designer, follow these steps:

- 1. From the Dashboard, select Template from the Posts drop-down list.**
- 2. Click the Customize button under the Template you're currently using.**

The Template Designer opens.

- 3. Click the Background link in the left column and click the thumbnail in the Background Image box.**

The Select Background Image window opens.

- 4. Browse the available backgrounds and select one in order to preview it, as shown in Figure 4-7.**

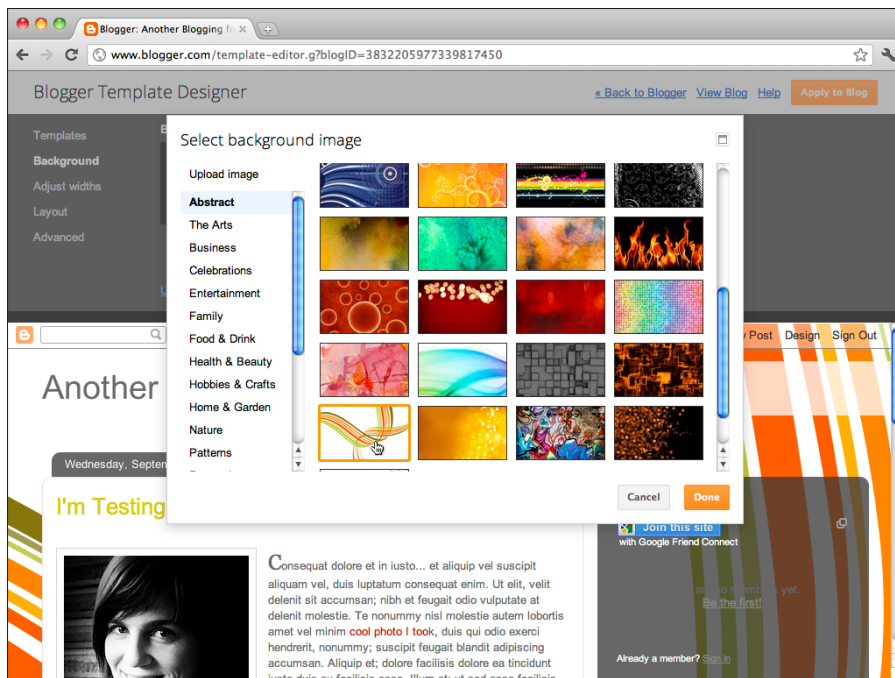
Looking for something specific? Choose one of the image categories in the left side of the window to see topically selected images, like Shopping, Technology, or Nature.

You can upload an image from your computer to use as a background by selecting Upload image.

- 5. Click Done.**
- 6. If desired, choose a new color theme from the options in the Background page of the Template Designer.**

The themes set background, link, text, and other element colors.

Figure 4-7:
Select a
new back-
ground
image
within the
Blogger
Template
Designer.



7. Click the Layout link from the left side of the Template Designer.

This opens the layout page.

8. Select the thumbnail that uses the number of columns you want your blog to have.

You can also select the layout to use in the footer — that's the bottom area of your blog.

Selecting a thumbnail implements that layout on your blog.

9. Click the Advanced link on the left side of the Template Designer.

10. Select an element to customize from the available list.

In Figure 4-8, I customize the Blog Title.

You may customize each element in the following ways:

Font Face: Choose from the standard web fonts, like Arial, Times New Roman, and many fancier web fonts.

Font Style and Size: Bold, italicize, and make text larger or smaller than the template's initial settings.

Color: Select a color for the element, using the following selection suggestions:

- **Hexadecimal Code:** If you know the hexadecimal code for the color that you want to use, you can type it into this text box. *Hexadecimal code* is a code that contains letters and numbers that equate to a color. Primarily, graphic and web designers use hexadecimal codes, so don't worry if this seems like gibberish to you.
- **Color Picker:** Click the drop-down list on the color picker to really fine-tune an exact color choice (see Figure 4-8).
- **Colors from This Template:** These colors are already in use in your template.
- **Suggested Colors:** This palette shows colors that Blogger thinks fit well with the colors already in use.
- **Background Color:** Choose a color for the background of the element you are customizing. The ways you can select a color are the same as for the font color choices.

When you click a color, Blogger shows a preview of how it looks on your blog in the lower half of the screen.

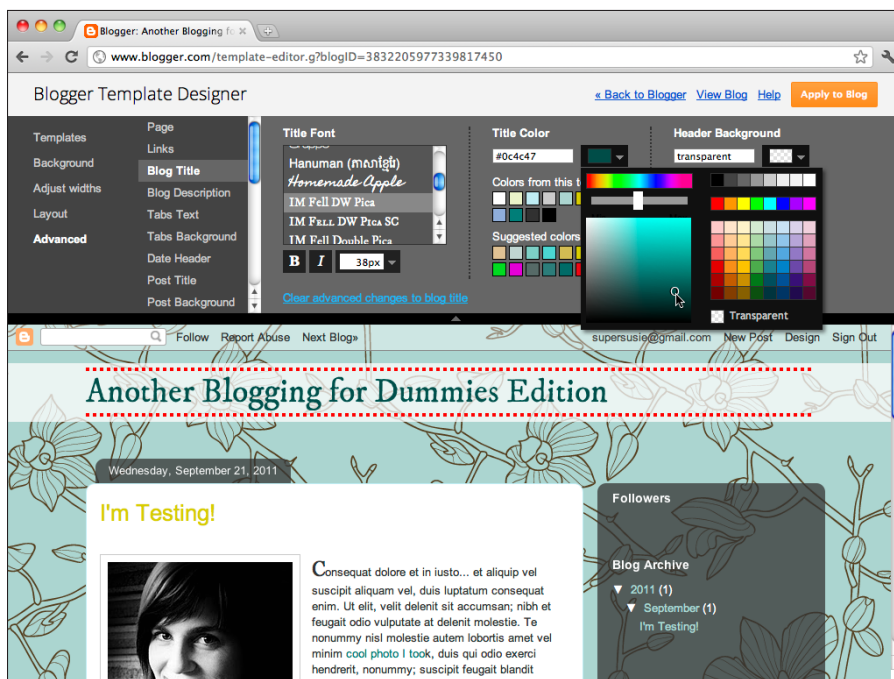


Figure 4-8: Select new colors for many elements with the Blogger Template Designer.

11. After you make your edits, click **Apply to Blog**.

A Blogger page opens, displaying a confirmation that it has saved your edits. You can return to the Blogger home page or continue making changes in the Template Designer.

Editing page elements

The Layout area of Blogger (see Figure 4-9) gives you, the blogger, a groundbreaking tool that allows you to have detailed control over the layout and look of your blog without requiring you to become an HTML guru and stay up late figuring out the intricacies of web publishing. This kind of editing control reflects the growing do-it-yourself attitude found in the blogosphere: Bloggers want sites that reflect their own sensibilities, but not everyone has the time to become an expert or the budget to hire one.

This access also reflects the growing expertise of many computer users who can edit photographs and create graphics, and it gives them the capability to make the most of those skills.

In the Layout screen (see Figure 4-9), a wireframe of your blog template appears. A *wireframe* is a visual representation of the template layout that uses only outlines, or boxes, of the elements.

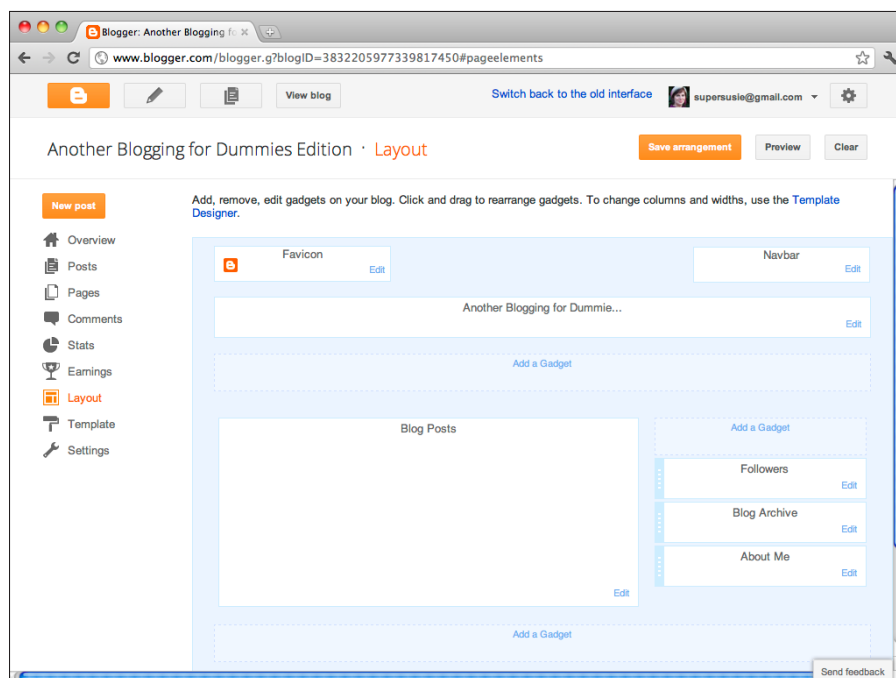


Figure 4-9:
Use the
Layout page
in Blogger
to customize
your blog
layout.

The following list explains how you can use the wireframe features to customize your page:

- ✓ **Edit page elements.** Click the Edit link for any page element that is already being used to change its formatting. What you can change depends on what kind of element it is, and the features Blogger has given you access to. For example, clicking Edit on the Blog Posts area lets you edit:
 - The number of posts on the page
 - The date style
 - Wording of the byline, labels, and comments areas
 - Social networking sharing tools like Twitter, Facebook, and Google+
 - Ad placement in your page
 - The order of elements in a blog post
- ✓ **Add a gadget.** Click the Add a Gadget link to place in your sidebar polls, images, lists, advertising, and more from a library of Blogger-provided elements. You have many to choose from, but here's a quick list to give you a feel for the options:
 - Poll
 - List
 - Link List
 - Picture
 - Google AdSense (see Chapter 18)
 - Text
 - HTML/third-party functionality
 - RSS or Atom feed (more about RSS in Chapter 14)
 - Video clips
 - Logos
 - Your profile
 - Headlines

- ✓ **Move page elements.** Click and drag them to a new position.
- ✓ **Preview edits that you've made.** See how your changes look before you save them to your blog by clicking the Preview button.
- ✓ **Revert to the original version of your template.** Click the Clear Edits button.



Many elements on the page can also be removed. Click Edit and look for a Remove button for anything you don't want to include on your blog. Don't worry if you change your mind later — you can always add them back in.

Chapter 5

Starting a WordPress Blog

In This Chapter

- ▶ Examining the different versions of WordPress
 - ▶ Doing your WordPress install
 - ▶ Kicking the Dashboard tires
 - ▶ Writing your first post
 - ▶ Customizing your blog
 - ▶ Searching for all things WordPress
-

If you spend much time looking at blogs or talking to bloggers, you can't miss references to WordPress, one of the best-known and well-liked blogging software options available today. WordPress comes in two flavors — hosted and installable. In this chapter, I focus on working with the installable version that you place on your own web server.

This chapter runs through an overview of how to install WordPress on your server, use the administration panel, play with themes and widgets, and find out where to connect with other WordPress users in your local community and online.



I can cover only so much detail in a single chapter, so if you want to dive into greater detail about WordPress and find out how you can keep your software installation healthy for a long time to come, invest in a copy of *WordPress For Dummies*, 4th Edition, by Lisa Sabin-Wilson (John Wiley & Sons, Inc.).

Choosing between WordPress.com and WordPress.org

Some blog software is available as both a hosted service and a version that you can download and install. WordPress is one of those packages. (For a refresher on hosted versus server-based blogging software, see Chapter 3.)

Open source software

WordPress is open source software, which means that its *source code*—the programming that runs the application—is freely accessible to developers who want to customize it or create new software from or for it.

Also, you can freely distribute open source software, and no one places restrictions on how you (or anyone else) can use it. In fact, one of the few terms of using open source software is that you can't place restrictions on the use or distribution of what you create from it.

References to WordPress (Figure 5-1) are uniformly about the version of the software that you download and install on your own server. You can check it out online at www.wordpress.org. However, the option at WordPress.com is a hosted version. Fortunately, you can use both types of WordPress for free.

When WordPress.com was launched, many bloggers rejoiced because WordPress had reached the blogging mainstream. Bloggers could now create blogs with ease and use the tools that they had come to love without having to tinker in the background or stress over how to maintain those blogs.

Figure 5-1: WordPress.org is the open source release of the WordPress platform.

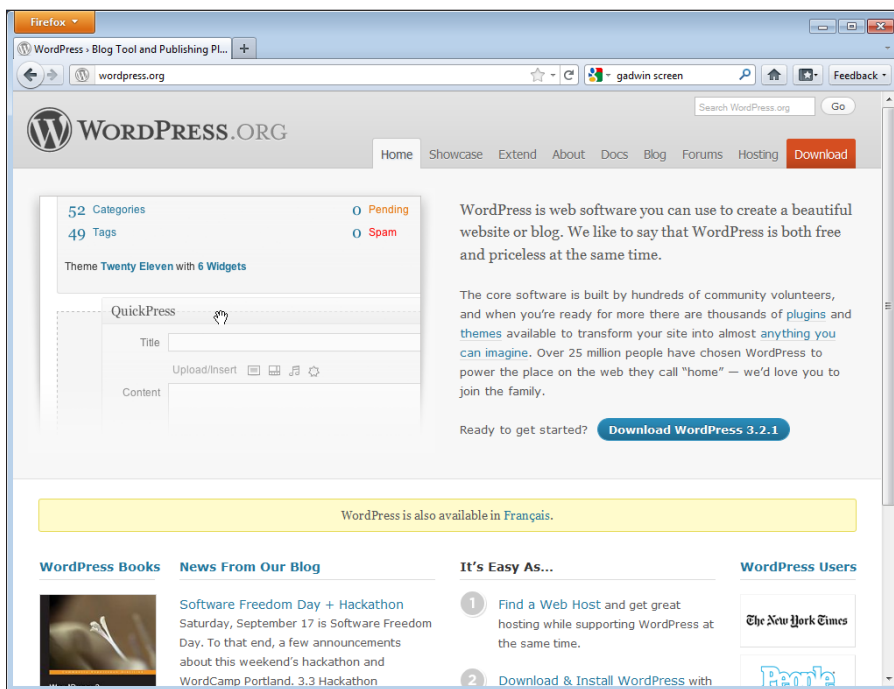


Table 5-1 breaks down the pros and cons of each version of WordPress.

Table 5-1 WordPress.com versus WordPress		
<i>Flavor</i>	<i>Pros</i>	<i>Cons</i>
WordPress.com	A free and hosted service. The WordPress.com service deals with daily maintenance, such as backups and software updates.	You can't implement custom themes (you have to choose from about 70 themes).
	Security is a little better than some hosting services: Your blogs are replicated in three different locations, thus keeping your blog posts safe.	You can't upload any custom widgets.
	You gain the benefits of the WordPress.com community's featured blog postings and shared content.	You can't customize the WordPress software.
WordPress	It's free.	You must install and maintain the software yourself.
	You can fully customize the WordPress software; you can also use any theme you like or create your own.	Needing your own domain and web hosting adds to your costs.

Choosing a version of WordPress looks daunting, doesn't it? It really isn't. You just need to ask yourself these questions: How nerdy are you? Do you like fiddling with the dials? Jiggling the handle? If your answers are positive, then you should continue reading this chapter! If not, WordPress.com may be the WordPress for you.



Still stuck? You can find additional information about the two options at <http://support.wordpress.com/com-vs-org>.

Installing WordPress

In this chapter, I focus on installing and using WordPress on your own web server. (If you think the hosted version is what you need, just point your web browser to www.wordpress.com and follow the simple sign-up instructions to get started.)

You can get your WordPress installation up and running without a huge amount of difficulty, but in order to get your site going, you need to follow some very important steps.



Although this chapter walks you through the process, you can also follow along with WordPress's instructions, located at http://codex.wordpress.org/Installing_WordPress.

Registering a domain

Do you know what you want to call your blog yet? Do you have a domain already? When you're itching to get your blog online and want to control every aspect, the domain is the first thing that you need.

A domain is the name and brand of your blog, and the web address (or URL). It gives visitors an idea of what your blog is about and who you are. You can have some fun getting creative with your blog name! Before committing to a blog name, why not see what others have done? The following list gives you five examples of some of the world's top blogs and their domains:

- ✓ **Engadget** (www.engadget.com): A technology blog that talks about gadgets
- ✓ **Tech Crunch** (www.techcrunch.com): A technology-industry blog
- ✓ **Boing Boing** (www.boingboing.net): A blog that talks about almost anything
- ✓ **Lifehacker** (www.lifehacker.com): A site that suggests ways that you can make your life better and more efficient
- ✓ **ReadWriteWeb** (www.readwriteweb.com): A site featuring several blogs that talk about web technology

The domains in the preceding list make quite an impression, even if, at first glance, they don't necessarily tell the visitor what they write about. If you find and bookmark a blog that you like, you keep going back for the great content, not the domain name. In Chapter 3, I talk about acquiring domains in detail, if you need a refresher about them.

Selecting web hosting

After you choose an appropriate domain for your blog, you need somewhere for your WordPress install to live. In Chapter 3, I tell you what to look for in web hosting and make some recommendations. Don't forget that you can also ask other bloggers what host they use and what their experience has been.

If you've read Chapter 3 of this book, you already know that web software such as WordPress has certain technical requirements. The requirements for WordPress are

- ✓ PHP 4.3 or greater
- ✓ MySQL 4.0 or greater
- ✓ The mod_rewrite Apache module

Most web hosts have similar configurations and should be able to handle what you need, but you can review the official WordPress requirements page at <http://wordpress.org/about/requirements>. They also have a handy bit of text that you can copy and send to potential web hosts to see whether their services can handle WordPress. How cool is that?



The WordPress community has already taken the question of web hosting into its multitude of hands and come up with a list of recommended hosting companies. The community and WordPress developers voted these companies their top picks for providing everything that you need for WordPress:

- ✓ BlueHost (www.bluehost.com)
- ✓ DreamHost (www.dreamhost.com)
- ✓ Media Temple (www.mediatemple.com)
- ✓ Blogs About (www.blogs-about.com)
- ✓ Laughing Squid (www.laughingsquid.com)

Each of these companies offers well-known quality web hosting, but if you want to continue looking, compare notes with other bloggers and refer back to Chapter 3 for good advice about choosing a web host.

Getting the software

After you sort out your web host and site domain, you next need to download and extract the WordPress files from WordPress.org and put them on your computer. Choose a place you'll remember, such as a Documents or Download directory. Follow these steps:

1. **Point your web browser to `www.wordpress.org`.**

The main WordPress page appears.

2. **Click the red Download tab in the top-right corner.**

The site takes you to a short instructional page that has download information on it.

3. **Click the Download WordPress button.**

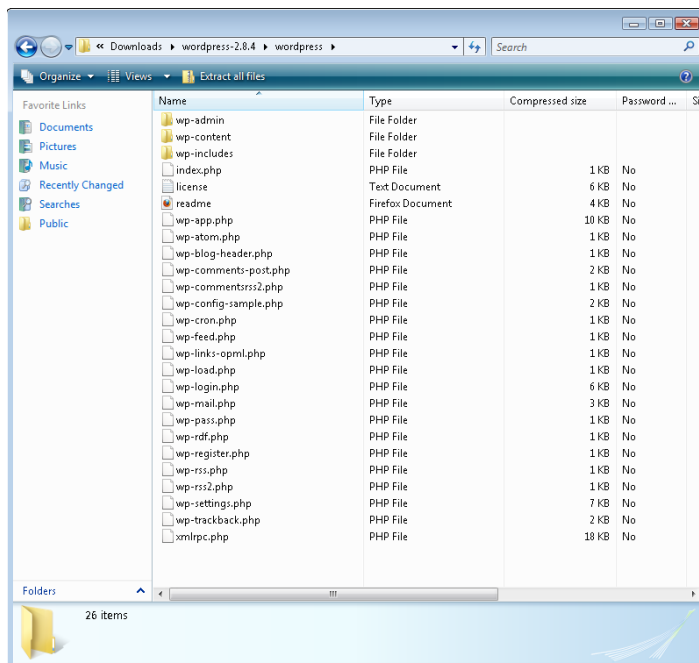
Your web browser may ask you to select a location to place the files that are downloading. If it does, choose a place on your computer that you will remember. Your Desktop or Documents folder are decent choices.

4. **After the compressed file downloads, double-click it to expand (or *unzip*) the files it contains on your computer.**

The files are saved on your computer, as shown in Figure 5-2.

Figure 5-2:

After you extract the WordPress files to your hard drive, you should see a folder structure similar to this.



What is FTP?

FTP is a technology used to copy files from one computer to another by using the file transfer protocol. Simply put, FTP allows computers that are running different operating systems (such

as Windows or Mac) to move files across the Internet without experiencing format difficulties. It's an old technology that people still use every day to move website files.



WordPress.org provides the downloadable file in two compressed formats: GZip (.tar.gz) and ZIP (.zip) format. These days, most computer systems recognize the ZIP format, and you should be able to open it without installing any additional software. After you expand the .zip file, you can delete it from your computer.

Uploading the WordPress files

Do you have your files unzipped? Great! Now, the installation process gets a little more technical. You need to upload these unzipped files to your web hosting space by using an FTP (file transfer protocol) client. If you don't have an FTP client installed on your computer, you have plenty of free options that you can download and install.

The following are my two favorite FTP clients:

- ✓ **FileZilla** (www.filezilla-project.org): Available for all computer platforms (see Figure 5-3)
- ✓ **Cyberduck** (www.cyberduck.ch): Available only for Macintosh computers

Both of these programs have the capability to connect and transfer files to your new web host. To place the WordPress files on your web host, follow these steps:

- 1. Download and install the FTP client of your choice.**

Look for installation instructions on the FTP software website.

- 2. Start your FTP client.**

3. Connect to your web server by using the details that your web host provided you for FTP access.

These details usually include a URL, username, and password.

The directory in which you store the WordPress files is normally the main directory that you see when you connect via FTP. Check with your web host if you're confused.

4. Using the FTP software, upload the WordPress files from your computer to the server.

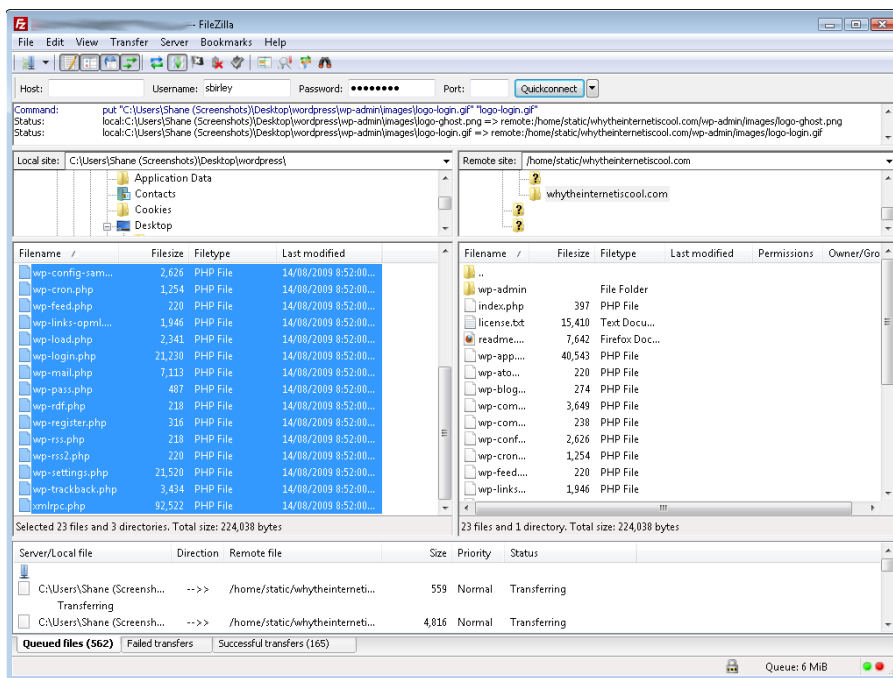
In some FTP clients, you can drag and drop the WordPress files to the location on the web host. Others use arrow interfaces.

5. When the files finish uploading, close your FTP client.



At some point in the future, you may need to upload additional files (although WordPress is fairly good at doing most of its updates directly through the interface). That said, make sure to retain the information that you used to connect to your web host.

Figure 5-3: This FileZilla interface, which has the hard drive on the left and the web server on the right, is similar to most other FTP client interfaces.



Setting up the database

You're doing great! But don't rest on your laurels; this next step is probably the most technical. Take a deep breath and prepare to set up a database for your WordPress blog.

Arguably, setting up a database isn't actually terribly difficult. However, each web host handles databases in different ways, so I can't give you straightforward instructions for accomplishing this task.



Your web host is in the business of handling technical issues, and of course, it sets up the environment in the first place. Don't hesitate to request assistance with your database setup.



The database system that you need to use is called MySQL. (Without MySQL, you can't use WordPress.) *MySQL* is a relational database management system. It can store all kinds of data for WordPress — from your blog posts to blogroll links, as well as all your WordPress settings. So, MySQL stores the blog posts that you write inside a database that's fast, efficient, and flexible.

If you want to know more about MySQL, pick up a copy of *PHP & MySQL For Dummies*, 4th Edition, by Janet Valade (John Wiley & Sons, Inc.). But take my word that after you set up your database, you won't need to know anymore about it for the purposes of using WordPress.

After you know how to access your database setup tool, follow these steps:

1. **Log into your web host.**
2. **Create the database.**

You need to name your database something that makes sense. If you have a blog called Joe Smith's Wondrous Adventures, you can name the database joesmith. The length of database names and database usernames are normally limited, and you can't include special characters in the names.

3. **Create a database user.**

You can make the username anything, except the name that you used for your database. The same length and special character restrictions apply, though.



4. Assign a password to that user.

Don't forget to write this information down so that you can use it when you run the WordPress install script.

Because web hosting companies can choose for themselves which MySQL database system to include in their hosting packages, I don't know which of the following applies to your situation. But web hosts commonly use one of the following management systems:

- ✓ **phpMyAdmin:** A database management tool (shown in Figure 5-4) that a lot of web hosts provide to their clients. You can create and delete databases, manage database users, and (depending on what permissions the web host gives you) manipulate the data itself.

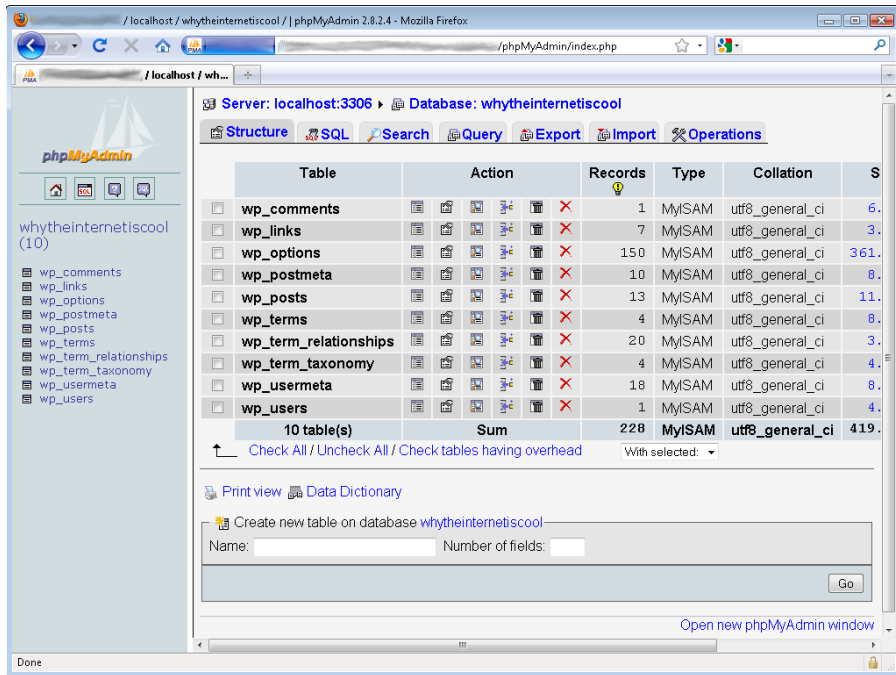


Figure 5-4: phpMyAdmin is a tool that you can use to manage and create databases.

- ✓ **cPanel:** A common web host interface that generally enables users to create and delete databases. You normally do any additional manipulation by using phpMyAdmin.
- ✓ **Plesk:** Yet another web host interface that allows users to create and delete databases and manage database users. You do any data manipulation by using phpMyAdmin.

The web host that you choose probably uses one of the interfaces in the preceding list. You can figure them out and use them fairly easily. If you're running only one blog, you need only a single database. If you're thinking of running more than one, you need to find out how to keep your databases healthy and separate by using tools that your web host provides.



Some web hosts have automated WordPress installation and allow you to bypass all the installation instructions in this chapter — the web host takes care of it all. Ask your web host whether it offers packages that include WordPress installation as part of the setup.

Running the install script

After you put the WordPress files in the directory your web host recommends and write down the database information, you only have to run the WordPress installer. The installer is super simple. Things can go wrong, of course, but if the installer gets stuck, it does a very good job of letting you know exactly what you need to do.

Follow these steps to install WordPress:

1. To run the installer, point your Internet browser to

```
www.yourwebdomain.com/wp-admin/install.php
```

Remember to replace `www.yourwebdomain.com` with your domain name!

The installer checks to see whether you've created or edited the configuration file. If it doesn't find one, it will create it for you.

2. Click Create a Configuration File.

This creates your WordPress configuration file. Now all you need to do is enter the information the configuration file needs.

3. **Make sure you have the database name, username, password, and hostname. If you do, click Let's Go!**
4. **Enter the database information (see Figure 5-5).**

You can usually leave the database host as `localhost` because most web hosting environments use that host without complaint. You don't have to change the table prefix, either.
5. **Click Submit.**
6. **Click Run the Install.**
7. **Enter a blog title and your e-mail address in the text boxes provided.**
8. **Click Install WordPress.**

Figure 5-5:
Provide the
database
informa-
tion to the
WordPress
installer.

WordPress Setup Configuration File - Mozilla Firefox

File Edit View History Bookmarks Tools Help

http://www.whytheinternetiscool.com/wp-admin/setup-config.php?step=1

WordPress Setup Configuration File

WORDPRESS

Below you should enter your database connection details. If you're not sure about these, contact your host.

Database Name	<input type="text" value="wordpress"/>	The name of the database you want to run WP in.
User Name	<input type="text" value="username"/>	Your MySQL username
Password	<input type="text" value="password"/>	...and MySQL password.
Database Host	<input type="text" value="localhost"/>	99% chance you won't need to change this value.
Table Prefix	<input type="text" value="wp_"/>	If you want to run multiple WordPress installations in a single database, change this.

Done

If everything goes well, the installer displays the word `Success` on the screen. The username and password of the administration user also appear on the screen. Keep a record of this information in a safe location because if your blog experiences any problems or you need to conduct any WordPress configuration or management, you will need to log in using the admin account.

9. Click Log In.

The log-in page appears, where you can log into your new installation.

That's it! You've done it! You can now log into your new WordPress installation and get busy publishing.



The configuration file is named `wp-config.php`. If your installer can't create the configuration file automatically, follow the instructions that WordPress provides at (http://codex.wordpress.org/Installing_WordPress#Setup_configuration_file) to create the file by hand.

Getting Familiar with Settings

After you have your new blog software installed and running, you can log into your WordPress admin account and take a look around. The WordPress software does a lot right out of the box to make your blogging life as simple as possible. You have the ability to create blog posts; create static pages; add images and multimedia files; connect to social networking sites, such as Flickr and Facebook; and chat with blog visitors by using the commenting system.

Either these functions come with the WordPress install, or you can add them by using a plug-in that you download and install. Each of these plug-ins typically has an administration page.

In the following sections, I introduce you to the administration section of the blog itself.

Logging in

Before you can start posting, you need to head on over to the Log In page and enter the username and password that were provided to you during the installation process.

In order to log into your new website, you may want to bookmark the following link:

```
www.yourdomain.com/wp-admin/wp-login.php
```

Remember to replace `www.yourwebdomain.com` with your domain name!

Setting up an Editor account

WordPress allows you to set up and maintain several levels of user accounts in addition to the administrative account created during the setup process. These account types are called *roles*. They are:

- ✓ **Administrator:** Administrators have access to all features and areas of the blog software, from technical configuration to user accounts to content tools. This is the most powerful level of access on your blog; handle with care!
- ✓ **Editor:** This is a user who can publish posts, manage posts, and manage other account posts.
- ✓ **Author:** This is a user who can publish and manage his or her own posts.
- ✓ **Contributor:** This is a user role that allows someone to write and manage posts but not publish them live to the blog.
- ✓ **Subscriber:** This is a user who can read comments, post comments, and receive other private information.



If you are the only person blogging on your website, you should still go ahead and set up an Editor user account for creating blog posts. I recommend that you don't use the administrative account created during installation as the account you use when you author blog posts. It's a bit like driving a car by opening the hood and manipulating the engine directly; use the perfectly good steering wheel that comes with WordPress by setting up an Editor account. Reserve the administrative account for administrative tasks like installing new themes, plug-ins, and any other general maintenance.

Set up your Editor account by following these steps:

1. Log into your WordPress installation.

2. From the Dashboard, click Users.

You see the full list of users and their roles.

3. Click Add New.

WordPress loads the Add New User screen.

4. Fill out the user fields.

You will see a listing of text boxes: username, first name, last name, e-mail, website, and password. Only three are required: username, password, and e-mail address. I also recommend filling in the first and last names.

5. Select the Editor role.

6. Click Add User.

The user is created.



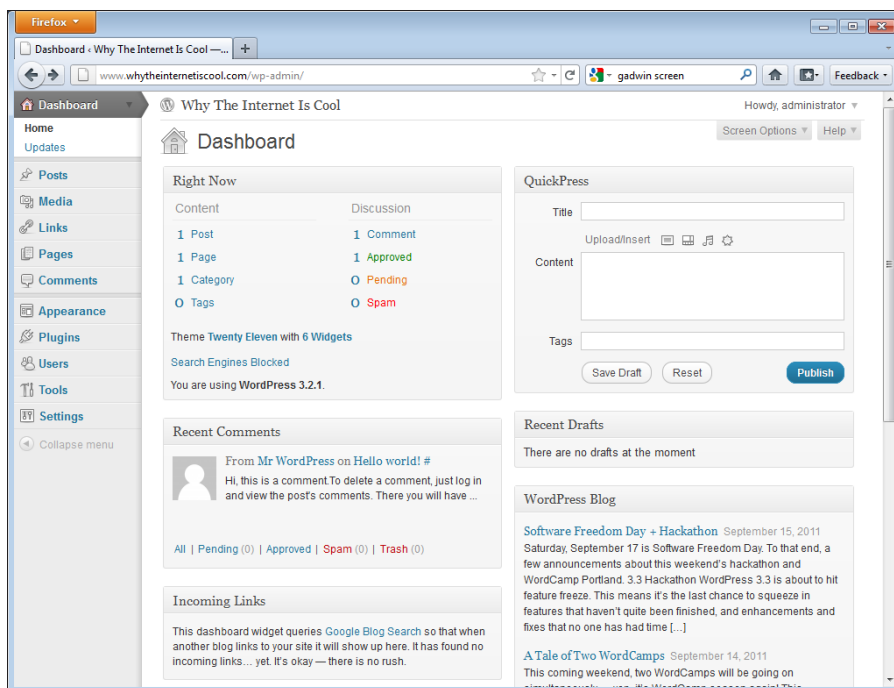
When you set up a new user, you can choose to send the account information to the new user's e-mail address. In this case, the account is for yourself, so you don't need to select this check box. If you wish to have additional writers on your blog, consider setting them up as Authors — instead of Editors — and notifying them as you set up their accounts.

After you create your new Editor account, don't forget to log out of the administrative account, and then log in again as an Editor!

Using the Dashboard

Each time you log into your WordPress blog, you end up on the Dashboard page. Get to know this page well because you spend most of your blogging time here. You can configure the front Dashboard to your liking by moving panels around and turning panels on or off. You can see the Dashboard in Figure 5-6.

Figure 5-6:
Prepare
to spend a
lot of time
with the
WordPress
Dashboard.



On the left side of the Dashboard, a series of menus point you to the various sections of the administration panel. You likely visit some of these menus on a daily basis and some only once in a while:

- ✓ **Posts:** Includes links that allow you to edit posts, add new posts, and manage categories and tags.
- ✓ **Media:** Provides you with a link to upload new media files to your media library or manage previously uploaded media.
- ✓ **Links:** Manage lists of links on your website. For example, group links together into categories and post them in sidebars as blogrolls or other link lists.
- ✓ **Pages:** Clicking Pages takes you to the Page Administration section. Pages in WordPress are considered *static* pieces of content (pages that change only once in a while) and aren't blog posts. Use them for pretty much any section of your website, like a bio page or contact page. You can then link to these pages from a sidebar menu or via another blog post. Some themes may also provide you with menus that you can use to link to different sections of your blog.

- ✓ **Comments:** Post, delete, and respond to comments that readers have added to blog posts on your website.
- ✓ **Appearance:** View installed themes, activate new themes, edit existing themes, and search for additional themes from the online WordPress theme catalog.
- ✓ **Plugins:** View installed plug-ins, activate and deactivate plug-ins, search for new plug-ins from WordPress.org, and edit plug-in files right in the interface.
- ✓ **Users:** Manage the users for your blog, including readers and additional authors.
- ✓ **Tools:** Manage additional tools for improved speed by using Google Gears, import and export blog posts and comments, and conduct WordPress upgrades. Google Gears is an optional plug-in for browsers like Firefox and Internet Explorer and adds functionality to your browser.
- ✓ **Settings:** Make all the general changes to the blog, such as the name of the site, your e-mail address, and the date and time-zone settings.
 - *Writing:* Contains settings for the editor interface, as well as default settings for categories, RSS, and tags. You can also access settings to set up remote e-mail.
 - *Reading:* Choose the number of blog posts that appear on the front page of your blog and the number of postings available in your RSS feed.
 - *Discussion Settings:* Control what kinds of communication your blog sends out. For example, you can get the blog to notify you by e-mail when someone adds a new comment.
 - *Media:* Upload and manage any of your media files. You can add titles and descriptions, organize images and audio, add captions to images, and make minor changes to image sizes.
 - *Privacy:* Set your blog so that search engines ignore it. Use this option only if you have a private blog that you want to share with a small number of people.
 - *Permalinks:* *Permalinks* are the permanent links to your individual posts. You can configure the format of the post URLs so that they contain both date information and keywords, or keywords only. You can also set default categories for posts and tags.
 - *Miscellaneous:* Settings for uploads, URL paths to files, settings for folder organization, and link update tracking.

Checking out the panels

On the right side of the Dashboard, you see a series of panels. Each panel gives you access to parts of the administrative interface for WordPress. The default panels are

- ✓ **Right Now:** Contains a quick overview of what's happening on your blog. The panel displays
 - The number of posts on the blog
 - The number of comments
 - The spam count
 - The number of categories and tags currently in use on the site
- ✓ **Recent Comments:** Lists the most recent comment activity on your blog and provides links that allow you to moderate and respond to comments without leaving the Dashboard.
- ✓ **Incoming Links:** Uses Google searches to show the sites that are sending visitors to your blog.
- ✓ **Plugins:** Gives you a quick list of the newest, the most popular, and the most recently updated plug-ins. A *plug-in* is a small piece of programming that you can attach to existing software to extend that software's functionality.
- ✓ **QuickPress:** Allows you to post a quick note on your blog right from the administration panel.
- ✓ **Recent Drafts:** Contains a listing of posts that you saved as drafts but haven't yet published.
- ✓ **WordPress Development Blog:** The latest postings from the WordPress development blog, which announces security patches and any other important updates.
- ✓ **Other WordPress News:** Contains a listing of blog posts from other WordPress blogs that talk about WordPress.

Creating a Post

I'm sure you're bursting at the seams to get your first blog post online. The process is quite simple in terms of using WordPress. The real challenge is coming up with good stuff to blog about! Jump to Chapter 8 for a lot of tips and ideas on writing for your blog.

To start a new blog post, follow these steps:

1. Click the Posts menu in the Dashboard and select Add New.

WordPress opens the Add New Post page, shown in Figure 5-7.

2. Give your post a title by entering it in the text box below Add New Post.

3. Add some text in the body text box.

Use the formatting buttons if you want to change the style of your text, create a list, or otherwise add elements.

4. Use any of the other options that you want for this post.

WordPress gives you the following options:

- *Excerpt:* If you want, you can write a short summary of your post for the Excerpt field.

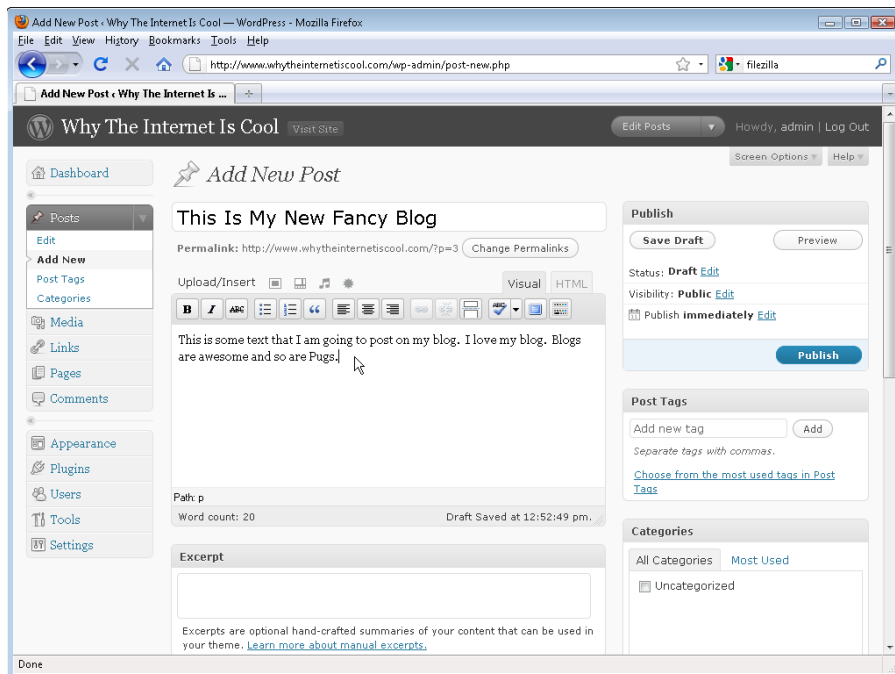


Figure 5-7:
Adding a
new post
by using
WordPress.

- *Post Tags:* *Tags* are keywords that describe the topic of your post. Tagging your posts lets search engines easily identify the subject material you discuss and means your post is likely to rank higher in search engine listings.
- *Categories:* Use the Add New Category link in the Categories box if you need to create a new category for your post. Categories are general groups that you can sort your blog posts into so that readers can easily locate the content most interesting to them.
- *Discussion:* You can choose whether you want to allow readers to post comments on this posting and whether you want to permit trackbacks. I explain trackbacks in Chapter 3.
- *Custom Fields:* You can add custom fields to your posts, which you fully control. *Custom fields* are simply fields that appear in each blog post that you can display by altering the template for your blog. For example, if your blog is a restaurant-review blog, you might choose to add custom fields for the location or rating of each restaurant that you review.

5. Click Publish to save your blog post and check out your blog to see how it looks!

If you're not ready to post your blog entry to the public, you can save your posting as a draft or preview it before you post it. Also, you can set a particular date if you want to schedule your post for publication in the future.

Look for a Visit Site link at the top of the Dashboard; the link takes you right to your blog.

Customizing Your Design

After you play around with a few of the WordPress features, I know you're thinking, "How do I make this new blog pretty?" The answer is as simple as a menu click. Just follow these steps:

1. From the menus on the left side of the Dashboard, click Appearance.

The Manage Themes page opens, displaying a list of themes that you can install.

2. Search for themes based on color or keyword.

WordPress returns a list of themes based on your search query.

3. Click Preview to see how a particular theme looks in a pop-up window. Close the pop-up to look at the list again.

4. After you find a theme that you like, click **Install** to load the theme onto your server.
5. Click **Active** to apply the theme to your blog.

You can install several themes all at the same time, and then take time to test which theme best suits your blog.

Now, do you want to get into the code even more? If so, get ready to dive into HTML. Only the brave venture into this territory because it does require knowledge of HTML, CSS, PHP, and WordPress's own markup language. The code editing for WordPress includes a little more than just plain old HTML.

Some bloggers love playing with HTML code, and some run away as fast as they can. If you have the chops, however, the developers of WordPress have made accessing and modifying the theme files a fairly easy task.

Select **Editor** from the **Appearance** menu to get at the editing interface for the currently installed theme. The editor is simply a text editor in which you can manipulate the files in your theme without using any other technology (such as FTP) to access the files. It's simple to use and doesn't have too many frills.

The drawback to using the editor is that you really need to know your stuff when it comes to HTML code, CSS, and a little PHP thrown in for good measure. If you don't know what these technologies do, I don't recommend touching your theme without a little practice beforehand. Make backups!

Finding Out More about WordPress

You could spend a lot of time figuring out WordPress, and I just can't fit it all into a single chapter. (I tried!) But you're far from alone in your search for a better understanding of your new WordPress blog. A great many websites and blogs can help you further your WordPress education. Here are a few handy resources:

- ✔ **WordPress For Dummies, 4th Edition, by Lisa Sabin-Wilson (John Wiley & Sons, Inc.):** You knew that *For Dummies* had a book on this topic, right? Of course you did! Why not pick up a copy? You can dig deeper into the ins and outs of WordPress code, themes, and widgets. This book can be your one-stop resource. Tell Lisa Sabin-Wilson that *Blogging For Dummies* sent you!

<http://justagirlintheworld.com/wordpressfordummies>

- ✔ **WordPress Community:** The official WordPress documentation is available online and updated regularly. You can find out about the latest functionality and also see what's coming up in the future. The community offers a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) section, and you can get involved in this large and active web community.

http://codex.wordpress.org/Installing_WordPress

http://codex.WordPress.org/New_To_WordPress_-_Where_to_Start

- ✔ **WordCamp:** Over the last couple of years, camps have been popping up everywhere. *Camps* (also known as *unconferences*) are informal gatherings of people who love to get together and talk about their interests. If you love WordPress, then you need to go to a WordCamp in your area soon because you can find out a lot of things not covered anywhere else. What could be better than a bunch of people getting together to talk about everything WordPress? Maybe a bunch of people getting together to talk about everything WordPress who also have cupcakes? Visit the website to see whether a WordCamp is coming to your community. If not, you can start one!

<http://central.wordcamp.org>

Chapter 6

Starting a Tumblr Blog

In This Chapter

- ▶ Getting familiar with micro blogs
 - ▶ Creating a Tumblr micro blog
 - ▶ Posting to your micro blog on Tumblr
 - ▶ Customizing the look and functionality of a Tumblr blog
 - ▶ Taking a look at your micro blog
-

Do you think blogging might just be too much work? Before you dismiss my question as sarcastic, consider this: A 2010 study by Technorati indicated that 40 percent of the surveyed bloggers spend more than 3 hours a week on their blogs, and 13 percent spend more than 10. That's not an insignificant amount of time, and not everyone has that kind of time to devote to blogging. (Interestingly, only half of the bloggers Technorati surveyed for this study indicated that they make money from their blogging. Check out the full study online at <http://technorati.com/blogging/article/who-bloggers-brands-and-consumers-day>.)

So, if you're interested in blogging but worried about time, a micro blog might be an alternative you should consider. *Micro blogging* is pretty much what it sounds like — creating very short blog posts. But the micro blog may have all the other usual trappings of a blog, such as comments, RSS feeds, and so on.

In this chapter, I introduce you to micro blogging options and walk you through starting a micro blog using Tumblr.

Introducing Micro Blogging

Micro blogging is characterized by very short blog posts, done quickly and frequently, and often from some nontraditional publishing tools, such as mobile phones, e-mail, instant messages, and text messages. However, you can still use a web interface to produce a micro blog!

Some micro bloggers use their blogs as mechanisms to collect and archive interesting tidbits of information that they come across while they surf the web. Many micro blogs contain very little personal content in the form of writing, but a lot of photos, video snippets, and links. In fact, many micro bloggers don't explain why they choose to include something in their blogs at all, and in this way, micro blogs can be much more idiosyncratic to the individual blogger than a regular blog.

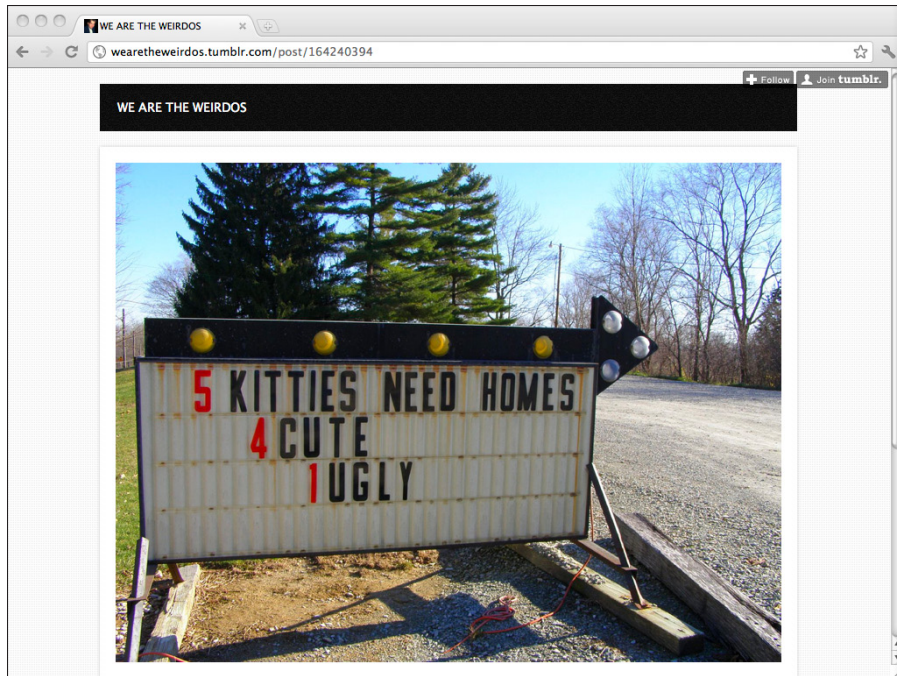
We Are the Weirdos (<http://wearetheweirdos.tumblr.com>) is a micro blog produced with Tumblr (you can read more about Tumblr in the following sections). Created by Spencer, the blog (see Figure 6-1) is a motley collection of funny photos, screenshots, videos, audio files, and quotes.

Other micro blogging tools act a little differently. Facebook, LinkedIn, Google+, and MySpace — or any social network that allows you to post status updates — are technically micro blogging tools, as well. *Status updates* are very short text posts that are generally used to let others know what you're thinking or doing.

Twitter (www.twitter.com) is a micro blogging tool that broadcasts status updates. Blogger Darren Barefoot writes a blog called One Year, One Canadian (www.oneyearonecanadian.ca) and uses the micro blogging tool Twitter in combination with his regular blog posts to provide quick updates to his readers about his efforts to live a life consuming only Canadian food and media for an entire year. His Twitter micro blog (www.twitter.com/1y1c) is shown in Figure 6-2.

I spend more time covering the Twitter phenomenon in Chapter 15.

Figure 6-1:
Spencer's
We Are the
Weirdos
is a good
example
of a micro
blog.

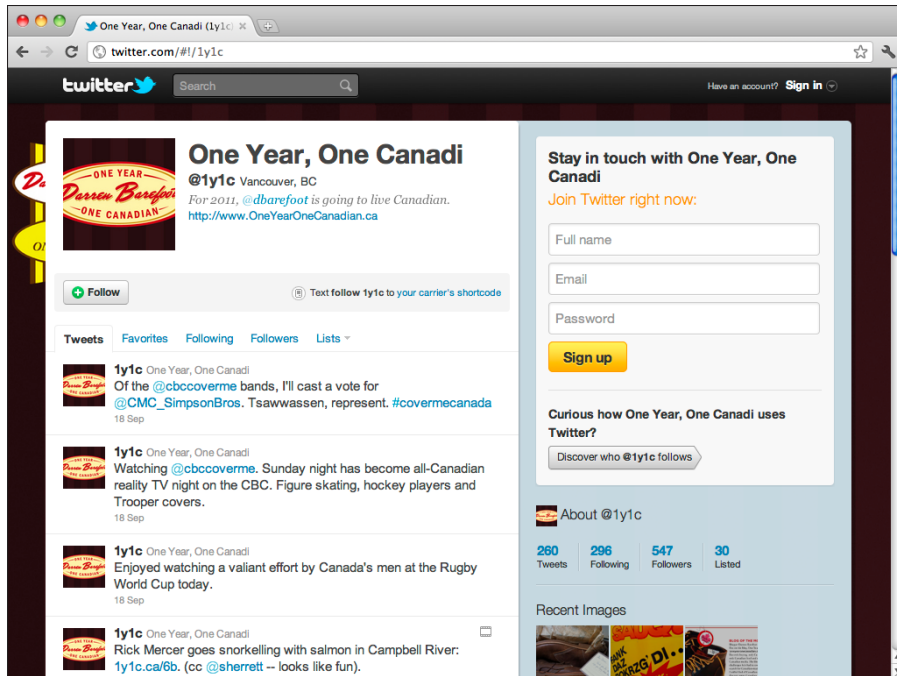


Some popular tools for micro blogging include

- ✓ Tumblr (www.tumblr.com)
- ✓ Posterous (www.posterous.com)
- ✓ Twitter (www.twitter.com)
- ✓ Plurk (www.plurk.com)
- ✓ Jaiku (www.jaiku.com)
- ✓ Identi.ca (www.identi.ca)

Figure 6-2:

Darren Barefoot's One Year, One Canadian Twitter feed keeps blog readers abreast of his challenge progress.



Starting a Micro Blog with Tumblr

In this section, I walk you through starting a micro blog by using Tumblr, one of the most popular micro blogging services out there.

Tumblr (www.tumblr.com) is hosted blog software, which means that you don't need to have web hosting, a domain name, or anything more than the capability to access the website in order to get started.



I cover the differences between hosted and installable blog software in Chapter 3.

Signing up and getting started are simple processes. Just follow these steps:

1. **Point your web browser to** www.tumblr.com.
The main Tumblr page opens.
2. **Type your e-mail address into the Email Address text box.**

3. Type a password of your choice into the Password text box.
4. Type a URL (usually the name of the blog you're creating) into the URL text box.
5. Click the Start Posting button, as shown in Figure 6-3.

Tumblr loads a visual test called a CAPTCHA to make sure you are a human and not a spam script.
6. Retype the CAPTCHA words shown and click I'm Human.



Figure 6-3:
You can
sign up for
a Tumblr
micro blog
quickly and
easily.

Creating a Text Post

Tumblr allows you to create blog posts by using text, photos, quotes, links, chat excerpts, audio files, and video. I show you how to post entries that include these different elements in the following sections. For more on including audio and video in your blog posts, jump to Chapters 11 and 12.

Create a quick text post in your Tumblr blog by following these steps:

1. **Click the Text Post icon (a capital T) on your Tumblr dashboard.**

Tumblr displays the Add a Text Post page.

2. **(Optional) Give your blog post a title in the Title field.**

3. **Type the text of your blog post in the Post field.**

Use as much or as little text as you want.

If you're ready, you can post to your blog right now by clicking Create Post, or you can spend a little time making your post fancy. In the following section, you can find out about the options.

Formatting your blog post

Tumblr, like most blog software, gives you the ability to format your blog post while you create it. The icons just above the Post field, shown in Figure 6-4, enable you to format what you've written.

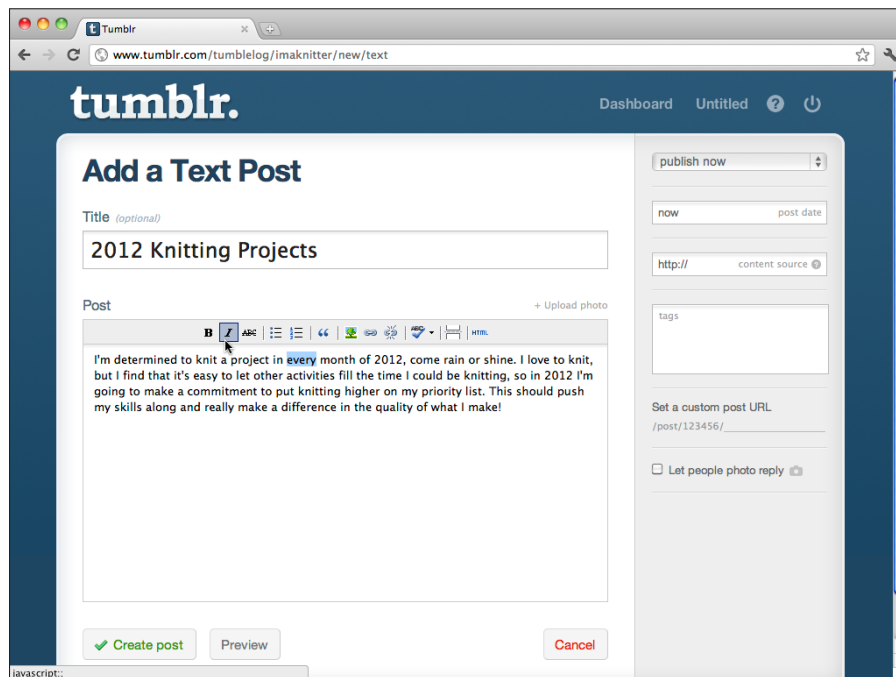


Figure 6-4:

Use the formatting tools in Tumblr to format your blog posts.

Tumblr uses a WYSIWG (what you see is what you get) interface, which shows you the effect of a tool in your blog post right when you apply it. This list describes each of the available tools:

- ✔ **Bold:** Make any text in your blog post bold by clicking and dragging over the text that you want to affect, and then clicking the Bold icon. The selected text is made **bold**.
- ✔ **Italic:** Italicize any text in your blog post by clicking and dragging over the text that you want to affect, and then clicking the Italic icon. The selected text is then shown in *italics*.
- ✔ **Strikethrough:** This style is commonly applied to text that you need to correct. Click and drag over the text that you want to affect, and then click the Strikethrough icon. The selected text is then made strikethrough.
- ✔ **Unordered List:** In web browsers, unordered lists are usually displayed as bulleted lists (like this list you're reading right now). You can most easily use this tool by typing each list item into your blog post on a separate line. Click and drag to select all the items, and then click the Unordered List icon.
- ✔ **Ordered List:** In web browsers, ordered lists usually appear as numbered lists. You can most easily use this tool by typing each list item into your blog post on a separate line. Click and drag to select all the items, and then click the Ordered List icon.
- ✔ **Blockquote:** Indent a paragraph clicking anywhere in the line or paragraph of text that you want to affect, and then selecting the Blockquote icon. Your text moves to the right.
- ✔ **Insert/Edit Photo:** Add photos to your blog posts by linking to them on other websites. I give you step-by-step instructions for adding photos to your posts in the following section.
- ✔ **Insert/Edit Link:** Make any text or image in your blog a clickable link to any website. I give you step-by-step instructions for adding a link in the section "Adding links to your post," later in this chapter.
- ✔ **Unlink:** You can remove a link that you added by clicking the linked text or photo, and then clicking the Unlink icon.
- ✔ **Toggle Spellchecks:** Not a great speller? (You aren't alone.) Click the Spellcheck icon to run a spellchecker on your text. If you click the small arrow to the right of the icon, you can choose another language for the spellcheck default.

- ✓ **Insert “read more” break:** Break up your post so that only part of it appears on your blog’s home page, and the rest is visible when the visitor clicks through to the *permalink* — the page that shows only the post — page.
- ✓ **Edit HTML Source:** Are you an HTML guru? If you want to edit the source code of your blog post directly, click the Edit HTML Source icon and go to town.



Appendix B, at the end of this book, gives you some basic HTML editing code, if you’re starting to explore this area.

Use the tools described in the preceding list to format your text, and when you’re ready, move to the following section to add an image to your text blog post.

Adding an image to your post

Blog posts are more fun with photos! If you want to add an image to a text blog post on your Tumblr blog, you first need a photo on the web. A lot of bloggers set up accounts with the photo-sharing site Flickr (www.flickr.com), post their photos there, and then include the ones they want to share via their blog by using Tumblr. On Flickr, you can also republish many photos by others, but be sure to check the licensing restrictions so that you don’t inadvertently violate someone’s copyright.

To find out more about copyright and photos, jump to Chapter 11. For now, feel free to experiment with a photo that I took, which you can view at www.flickr.com/photos/supersusie/3815946553.

Follow these steps to place an image from Flickr into your Tumblr text blog post:

1. **Use a web browser to go to a photo on Flickr, such as** www.flickr.com/photos/supersusie/3815946553.
2. **Click the Share button directly above the image.**
Flickr opens a Share options window.
3. **Click the Grab the HTML/BBCode link.**
This opens a view that provides code for your use.
4. **Select whichever size you want to use from the size drop-down list.**
In my example, I selected Small.

5. Click in the area labeled **Copy and Paste the Code Below** and press **Ctrl+C** (⌘+C on the Mac), or select **Copy** from the browser **Edit** menu to copy the image code, as shown in Figure 6-5.
6. In your Tumblr text blog post, click where you want to put your photo.
7. Click the **HTML** icon.

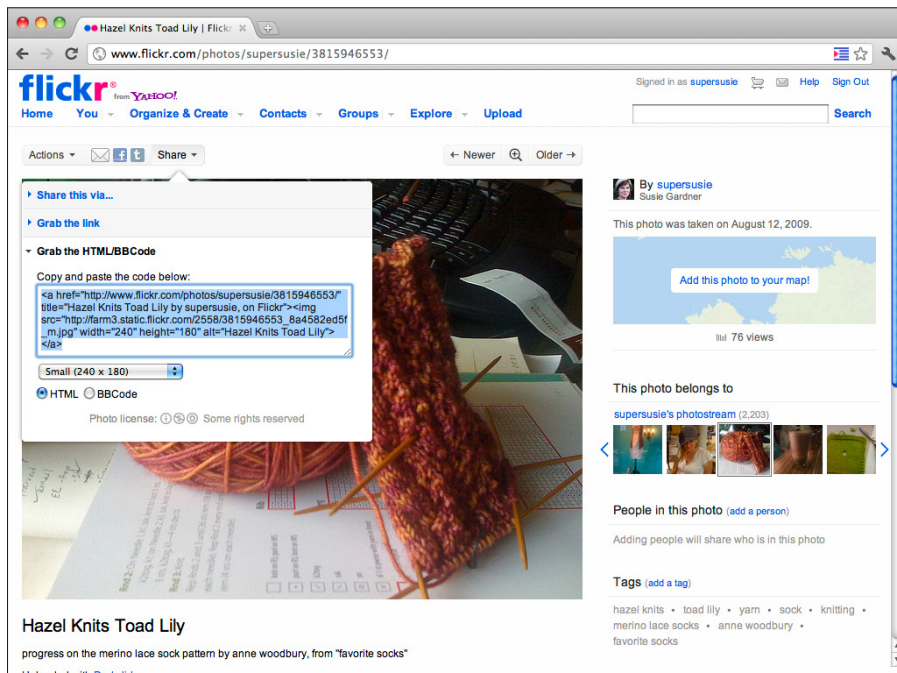
Tumblr opens the HTML Source Editor window, shown in Figure 6-6. This window shows any content you have already placed in your post, with the HTML code that formats it.

8. Click in the window where you want your image to appear and press **Ctrl+V** (⌘+V on the Mac) to paste the code into the field.
 9. Click the **Update** button.
- Tumblr closes the window and shows the image in your post.
10. To wrap the text around the image, click on the image to select it and then click the **Image** icon (it looks like a tree).
 11. Select an option from the **Alignment** drop-down list.

The Insert/Edit Image window opens.

I chose Left because I want to put the image on the left side of the text.

Figure 6-5:
Flickr provides code that allows you to display an image on your blog.



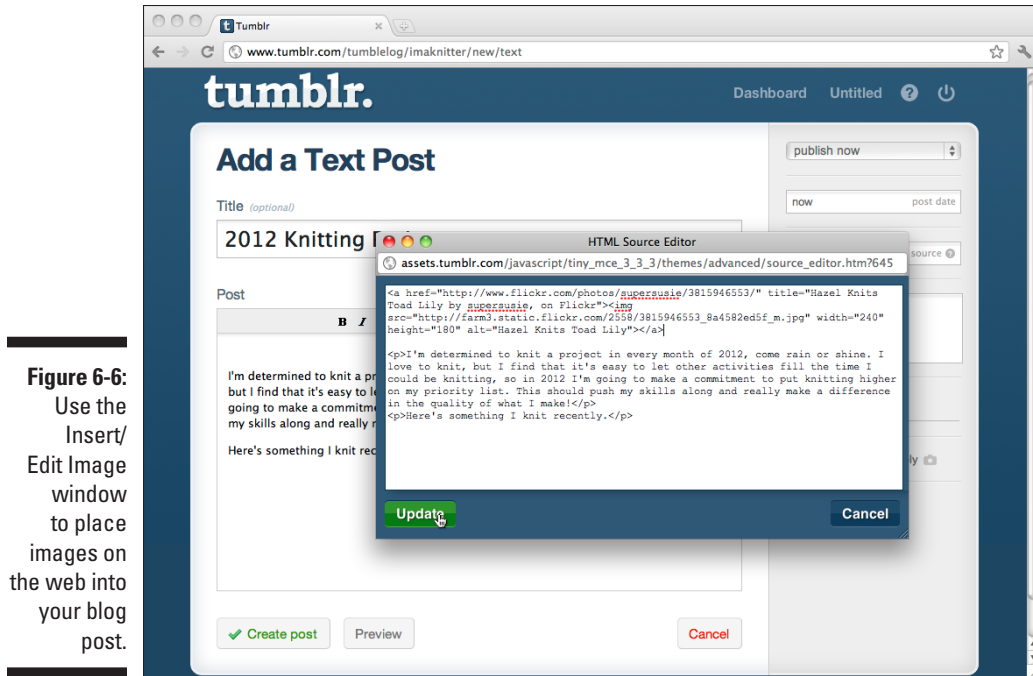


Figure 6-6:
Use the
Insert/
Edit Image
window to place
images on
the web into
your blog
post.

12. Change the values in the Dimensions fields if you want to resize the image.

13. Click the Insert button to close the window and place the image in your blog post.

Tumblr displays the image in your blog post.

Adding links to your post

Links add a lot of value to a blog post by giving your readers the resources to explore a topic further or find more information about your discussion or idea. As long as you link to useful information, don't hesitate to add links to your posts.

You can add links to both text and images. Follow these steps:

1. Select text or click on an image in your blog post.
2. Click the Insert/Edit Link tool (it's a small piece of chain).

Tumblr opens the Insert/Edit Link window.

3. Type or paste a URL into the Link URL text box.

In this example, I'm linking to the image featured in the preceding section, so I create a link back to Flickr by typing the following into the Link URL field: **www.flickr.com/photos/supersusie/3815946553**.

- (Optional) You can give a descriptive title to your link in the Title text box if desired.
- (Optional) If you want to open the link in a new web browser window, select Open Link in a New Window from the Target drop-down list. If you don't select an option, the default behavior opens the link in the same window.

4. Click the Insert button to add the link to the text or photo in your blog post (see Figure 6-7).

The link isn't clickable in the editing screen because you'd have trouble formatting or removing the link later if it was.

If you want to remove a link that you've created, you can easily do it. Simply click the text or photo on which you placed a link, and then click the Unlink tool.

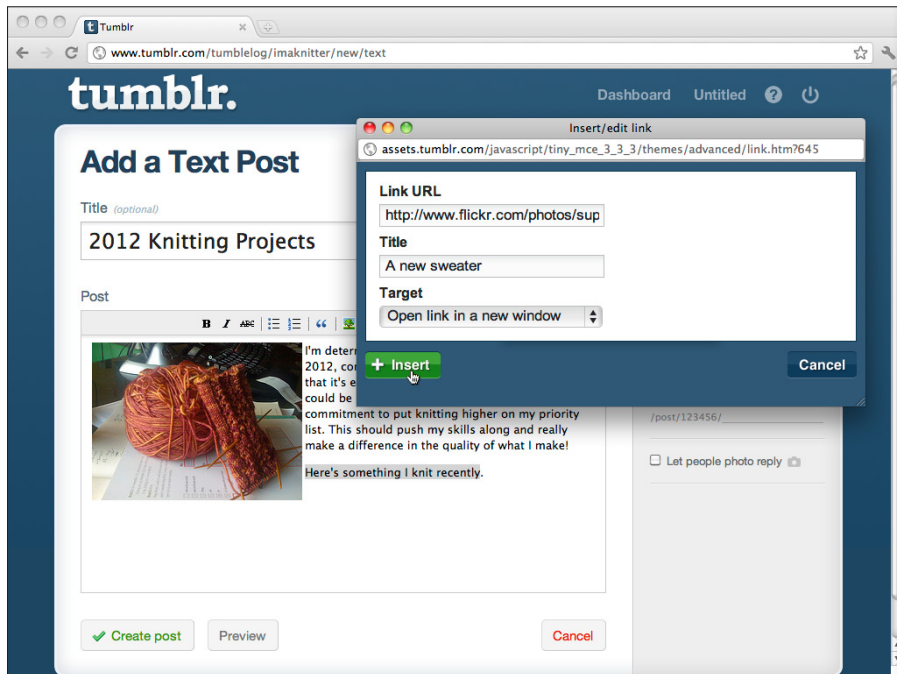
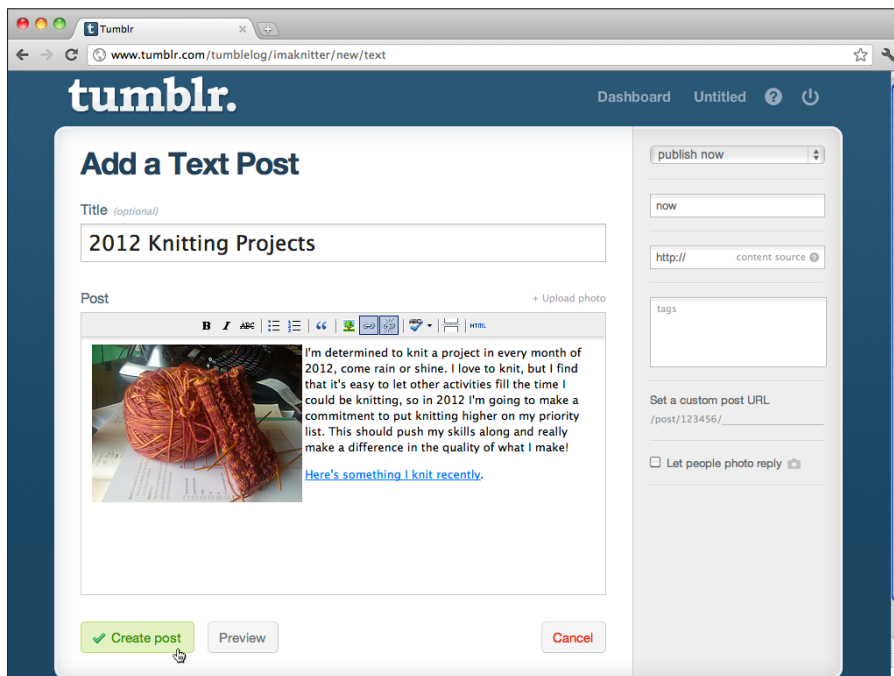


Figure 6-7:
Quickly
create a
link in your
blog post
by using
Tumblr.

Publishing your post

When you finish everything that you want to do to your blog post, it's time to publish! Simply click the Create Post button, shown in Figure 6-8, and your post appears on your blog for others to view.

Figure 6-8:
Make your
blog post
available to
the public
by clicking
Create Post.



Click on the Publish now drop-down list (it's in the upper-right of the Add a Text Post screen) to save your post without publishing it, or to set a date in the future to launch it.

Customizing How Your Blog Looks

This section introduces you to the customization options for your Tumblr blog. You can change the look and feel of the blog, as well as some of the functionality. Adding your own touches really personalizes a blog and makes it feel more like home.

Get to the customization options by clicking the Customize appearance link in the right column of your Tumblr Dashboard. A page that displays a preview of your blog opens, and the menu across the top enables you to adjust the following:

- ✓ **Info:** Update the following areas by using this option:
 - *Title:* Give your Tumblr blog a name.
 - *Description:* Some of the themes (discussed later in this list) display a short description text area. You can describe yourself, your blog, or whatever you think people might want to know about you and what you're doing.
- ✓ **Theme:** Change the appearance of your blog by choosing one of the design themes that Tumblr automatically provides. Tumblr offers nearly 200 options. If you're good with HTML, you can also use this tab to create your own custom theme.
- ✓ **Appearance:** Even if you select a theme that you like, the Appearance tab allows you to further customize the colors. Clicking any color option displays a color picker, and from there, you can go crazy (or not). You can see this in Figure 6-9.

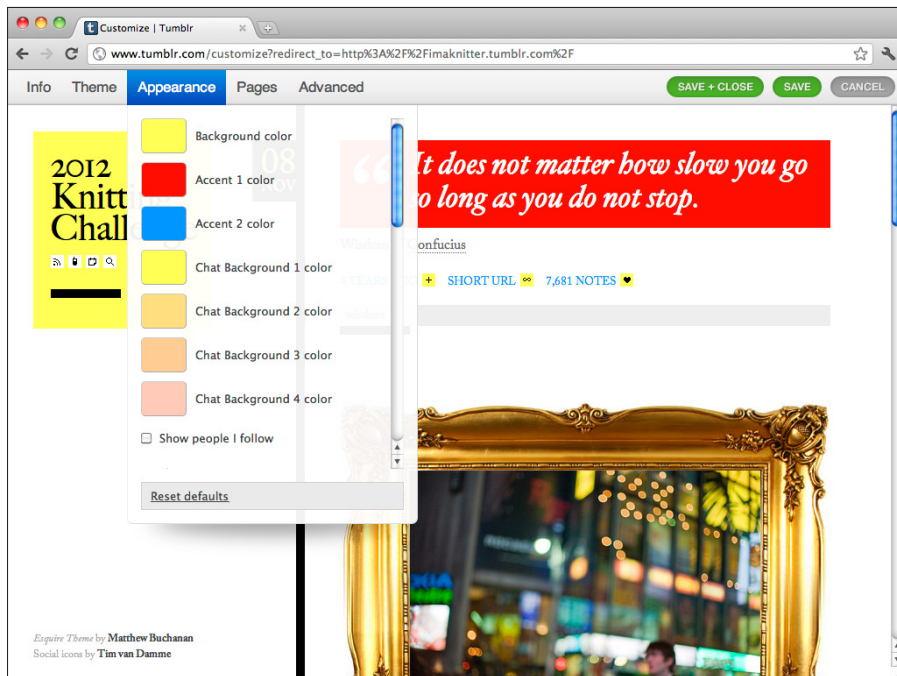


Figure 6-9: Select colors and add pages in the Tumblr blog customization area.

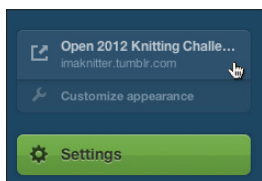
- ✓ **Pages:** Want to include some content on your blog but don't think it should be a blog post? In this area, you can create a standalone page. This might be used to create a bio page, or one where you let people contact you.
- ✓ **Advanced:** Anything you can customize that didn't fit in the other categories seems to be available in the Advanced tab:
 - *Add Custom CSS:* Some themes available on the Theme tab include custom Cascading Style Sheets (CSS) styles. If you're not familiar with CSS, don't worry about it. Custom CSS is part of creating advanced layouts.
 - *Post Count:* Change the number of blog posts that appear on your blog's home page.
 - *Options:* Extend the functionality of your blog by adding some neat features, including enabling high-resolution photos, opening links in new windows, optimizing your layout for mobile delivery, and adding descriptive words to your URLs.

After you make updates in any of the customization tabs, be sure to click the Save Changes button at the top-right of the page. And then take a look at your blog so that you can be sure the changes were implemented correctly.



You can view your Tumblr blog at any time by pointing your web browser to the URL that you chose when you signed up or by clicking the Open link in the menu on the right side of the Dashboard, which you can see in Figure 6-10.

Figure 6-10:
View your
blog URL by
clicking the
Open link.



Configuring Your Settings

There are some macro-level settings for your Tumblr blog that you might want to consider customizing, as well. You can access these settings by clicking the Settings link in your Tumblr Dashboard (you can see the Settings button in Figure 6-10).

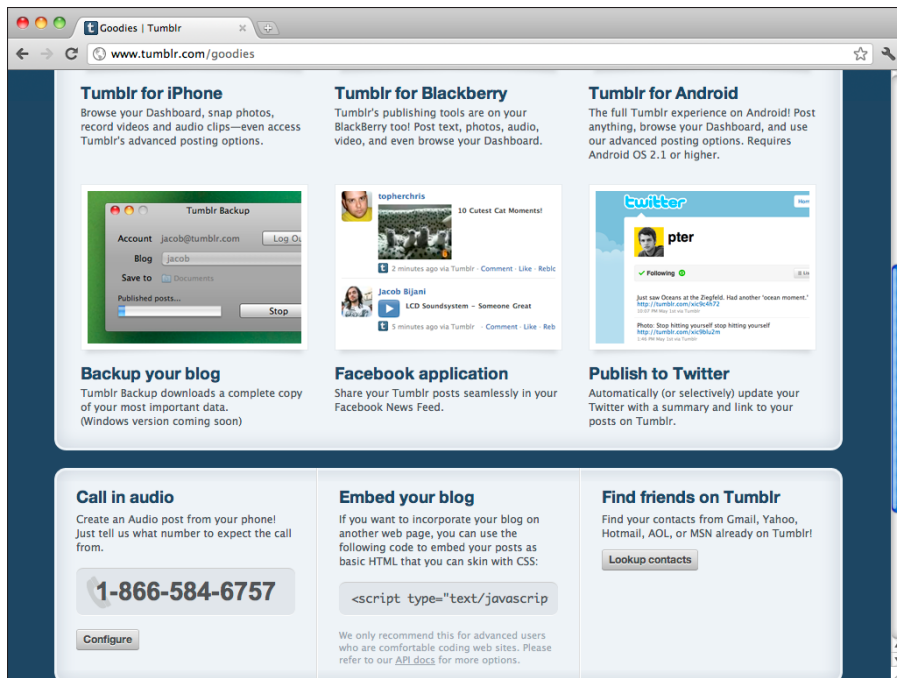
The settings you can tweak are:

- ✓ **Portrait Photo:** Make your blog more your own by uploading a photo of yourself. Some themes display these images; some don't.
- ✓ **URL:** If you want to change the URL of your blog at any point, you can take care of that here. Remember, you probably don't want to change the URL of a blog that already has visitors because then they can't find you easily anymore.
- ✓ **Replies:** Let your visitors reply to your posts if they "follow" your blog using the Tumblr Follow feature.
- ✓ **Ask:** Your visitors can submit questions to you on your blog if you opt to allow them.
- ✓ **Submissions:** If you'd like to let others submit blog posts, you can set up a page to allow this, complete with guidelines.
- ✓ **Facebook:** Promote your Tumblr posts using your Facebook Wall.
- ✓ **Twitter:** Promote your Tumblr posts by publishing them in your Twitter feed.
- ✓ **Posts by Email:** Obtain an e-mail address that lets you submit your posts by e-mail.
- ✓ **RSS Feeds:** Choose to include some or all of your posts in your RSS feed, or redirect your feed URL. (For more about RSS, see Chapter 14.)
- ✓ **Language:** Choose the language for your blog.
- ✓ **Timezone:** Set your time zone to match your geographic location.
- ✓ **Directory:** You can allow search engines to show your blog in search results — a really good idea if you're trying to build an audience!
- ✓ **Not Safe for Work (NSFW):** If you're blogging about sex-related or other workplace-sensitive topics, marking your blog NSFW alerts the directory and warns others.

Exploring Tumblr Goodies

Tumblr offers fun extras for your blog on the Goodies page (see Figure 6-11), accessible from the Tumblr home page, or in the navigation on the bottom of Tumblr pages.

Figure 6-11:
Select
Goodies
from the
bottom of
the Tumblr
pages to
play with
a lot of fun
posting
extras.



On the Goodies page, you can find information about posting to your blog by using your phone, instant messages, e-mail, or third-party applications.



My favorite addition available in the Goodies area is Call in Audio. It's a really nice (and free) tool that you can use to call in and record audio posts by using a phone. You can create quick recordings on the go, and best of all, you don't need to buy any extra equipment or software!

Part III


Fitting In and Feeling Good

Kathryn B. Lord - Find A Sweetheart: Blog Editing Policy #1 - Mozilla Firefox

File Edit View History Bookmarks Tools Help

http://www.find-a-sweetheart.com/blog/item/blog_editing_policy_1/

blog comment policy

**Kathryn Lord**
♥ Coaching for CyberRomance

- ♥ your sweetheart store
- ♥ kathryn's new, fun, free
- ♥ about kathryn and coaching
- ♥ just for you
- ♥ kathryn's blog
- ♥ contact kathryn

Do you have a secret?

Kathryn's eReport: "How to Tell Your WORST" FREE!

Name:

Email:

[go>](#)

Or get more info before you sign up.

Kathryn's Blog

Blog Editing Policy #1

I've been running this blog since February and have loved every minute of it. I particularly enjoy it when something I have written spurs readers to write back in "Comments" at the end of each posting. Keep it up, readers! The dialogue is great!

Since I wrote about ABC's "Hooking Up" a week ago, the comment traffic has hit an all time high. However, my relatively few words about the Lisa character on "Hooking Up" has evolved into defenses and attacks of Lisa that are not in the tone that I would like to see perpetuated in this blog. See the comments attached to entries "[Hooking Up's Lisa Gets Rooted from the Army???](#)" and "[Kathryn Weighs in on "Hooking Up"](#)".

I will leave up what is already posted in the comments sections so that you can get a flavor of what I am talking about, but if more postings come on that I judge are too vituperative, I will edit the comment out completely.

I don't mind controversy. But I do want the tone of this blog and website to be informative, constructive, and of service to singles trying to find a mate. Attacks or defenses on either side that deteriorate to mud-slinging do not seem in line with my objectives.

As always, I welcome comments to this posting as well, keeping in mind what I wrote above.

From Your Romance Coach, Kathryn Lord

posted by Kathryn Lord on 07.22.05 at 8:15 am
[permalink](#) | Categories: • [Blog Policy](#) • [0 Comments](#)

Done

In this part . . .

Blog in hand, you're ready to join the ranks of the top bloggers in the world. This part helps you get there in style. Get to know your readers in detail, focusing on their likes and dislikes, and find out how to cultivate a following you can be proud of in Chapter 7. Even great bloggers have off days or need the occasional inspiration, so Chapter 8 walks you through developing great content and breaking through writer's block. Also, discover how to build community, keep your blog spam-free, and generate interaction in Chapter 9. Chapter 10 is for those of you who want to remain nameless; maybe you have something to say that you don't want attributed to you? I can help.

Chapter 7

Finding Your Niche

In This Chapter

- ▶ Discovering blog genres
 - ▶ Finding out what makes appealing blog posts
 - ▶ Making connections with other bloggers
-

If you're blogging only for your friends and family, you probably have a captive audience that stays interested, no matter what you choose to blog about on any given day. (Although, even your mom might get a little tired of hearing about what time you got up and what you had for lunch!)

Most bloggers, however, define blogging success as attracting, keeping, and growing an audience of interested readers who can't wait for the next pearl of wisdom to leave their fingertips . . . preferably an audience that leaves comments and interacts with the blogger and with other readers.

Creating this kind of blog is no small challenge: You're in competition with every other source of news, information, and entertainment in your audience members' lives (not to mention your own, if you have trouble finding time for blogging).

So, find a niche and exploit it fully. I have no way of knowing exactly what your niche is — that's something for you to figure out — but I can give you ideas and suggestions to help you start turning your mental gears. This chapter can help you find others blogging in your subject area, what they're doing right, and how you can make the most of your subject.

Deciding What Belongs on Your Blog

You may find picking a niche and sticking with it tough to do. Fortunately, blogging gives you a lot of leeway in how you handle a subject, in evolving your own style, and in what you blog about. The medium allows for a lot of experimentation, and your readers likely welcome new approaches and ideas while you go.

For your own peace of mind, however, you probably want to pick a broad theme and then explore within that theme. Do you like books? Why not blog about what you're reading and make recommendations? You can then take a natural leap to movies based on books, and to authors . . . even a simple idea can give you a lot of room to grow.

Some subject areas have worked as popular and successful blog topics already. You can take on the competition and start a blog about

- ✔ **Your kids:** Baby books might have gone out of style, but that doesn't mean you can't document your child's growth in detail on a blog. *Mommyblogging*, as it's called, is on the rise in a big way. Talk about a topic that has an infinite variety of discussions, products, problems, and cute photos!
- ✔ **Your hobby or interest:** Blogs are beautifully suited to help you make connections, so feel free to use yours to become part of a community of folks who share your passion for knitting, sport fishing, geocaching, carpentry, or whatever your interest is.
- ✔ **Technology:** Many of the original bloggers chose technology as their focus — a great decision. People have a huge interest in technology and technology issues today. After all, more and more people have cell phones, personal computers, and MP3 players, and everyone has problems using them!
- ✔ **Politics:** Do I really need to point out that political commentary and criticism can make a good blog? A number of popular political bloggers have turned their online punditry into thriving careers in traditional media.
- ✔ **News of the weird:** Some very popular blogs make the most of the many strange websites by posting links and quick summaries of the sites on their blogs. These blogs cater to the lazy man's approach to surfing, and if you're interested in sharing the quirky oddities that you find, you can definitely get an audience for them.
- ✔ **Specialized news:** Offer a service for your busy readers by aggregating all the news on a particular topic, including quick tidbits and links to sources. You can create this kind of blog for both serious and comic topics — cranial surgery techniques to coverage of the latest teen sensation.
- ✔ **A personal diary:** If your life is full of crazy adventures, colorful figures, drama, passion, and ludicrous jokes, you can stick with the tried and true blog subject: You. With a unique voice and great writing, you can attract readers who can become friends.

The following sections look at each of these topics in a little more detail.

Mommyblogging

Generally speaking, *mommyblogging* is memoir-style blogging, detailing the trials, tribulations, and general hysteria of raising children.



Quite a few mommyblogs start before much mommying is going on — before or during pregnancy — and then proceed through infancy and upward. Don't let the fact that you're not quite a mommy yet deter you from starting a mommyblog.

They're often hilarious, often heartbreaking, and so easy to identify with. If you don't have children, you certainly were one once. Frankly, kids are *funny*.

You can find many great examples of mommyblogs out there; I had trouble picking just one to tell you about, but you can start exploring at the blog Woulda Coulda Shoulda (www.wouldashoulda.com). Mir, a mother of two, writes Woulda Coulda Shoulda, shown in Figure 7-1. Her blog has earned her coverage in *Parents Magazine*, *Redbook*, and *The Today Show*; inclusion in an anthology; and gigs speaking about mommyblogging at the BlogHer Conference (www.blogger.com).

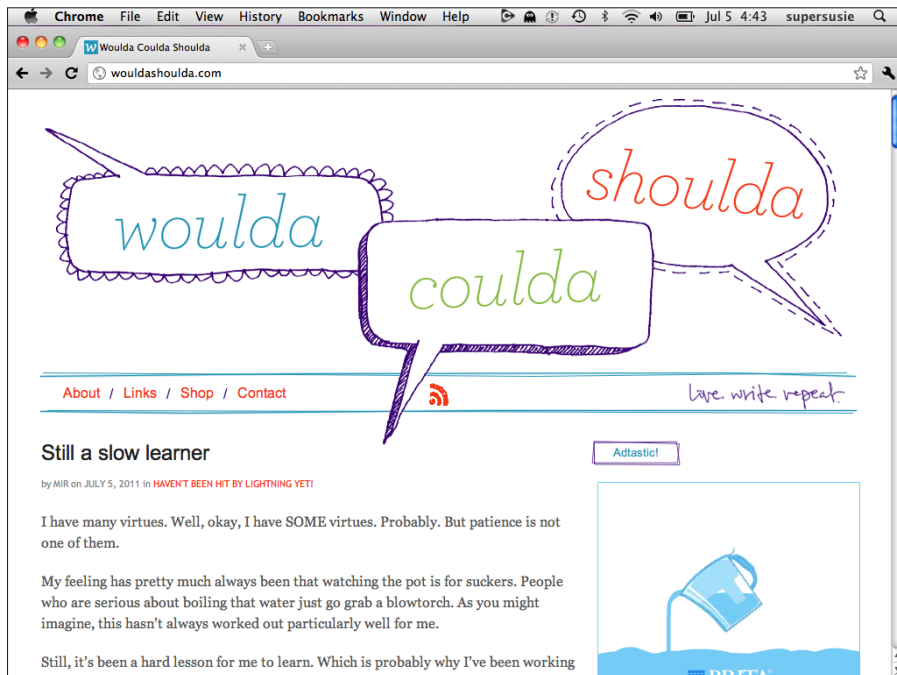


Figure 7-1:

Mir's Woulda Coulda Shoulda is a memoir of a mother raising two children.

Turning your offline hobby into a blog

You probably already have offline hobbies that consume time and energy, and about which you have great passion. You also probably have plenty to say on the topic, but too few people are genuinely interested in hearing you expound about your hobby.

Find your compatriots online by starting a blog about your hobby and hooking into a community of people who share both your passion for the activity and also your passion for news and discussion about your hobby.

You can find many terrific hobby blogs out there: great blogs about everything from scrapbooking to jewelry-making to collecting airline safety cards.

One of my hobbies is knitting, and let me tell you, the knitters have caught onto blogging in a huge way! Bloggers who knit share stories about frustrating patterns, exciting yarns, sales, and more. I read knitting blogs because I can identify with what the blogger is describing, but also because I often find out something new.

One fun knitting blog is Yarn Harlot (www.yarnharlot.ca), written by a knitter living in Toronto named Stephanie Pearl-McPhee. Yarn Harlot (shown in Figure 7-2) is the online diary of a devoted knitter and author; Stephanie has also written six books of knitting humor. Her hilarious blog covers everything from knitting techniques to home renovations, and it never fails to entertain.

Figure 7-2:
Yarn Harlot
offers
knitting
techniques
and
engagingly
self-
deprecating
personal
stories.

The screenshot shows the Yarn Harlot blog interface. The header includes the blog name 'yarnharlot' and a tagline 'Stephanie Pearl-McPhee goes on (and on) about knitting.' The main content area displays a post from July 5, 2011, titled 'A Little Time'. The post describes a weekend trip to North Bay, mentioning internet access, power, and a laptop in the car. The right sidebar contains a calendar for July 2011, a list of recent entries, a search bar, and a donation section for MSF (Médecins Sans Frontières) with a goal of \$1,000,000.

Talking technology

Can anyone ever know enough about technology to make everything he or she owns function? At least for me, the answer is no. Just when I start to feel reasonably competent with computers, a hard drive fails. And how often have I brought home a new cell phone, ripped open the box with great excitement, and then failed utterly to figure out how to get my contacts imported? It's true — even I need technology help.

And I'm betting you do, too. Technology bloggers have figured this out, writing blogs that explain how to resolve common problems as well as blogs that whet your appetite for new gadgets. Don't you always think that a new and better device can solve your problems with the one you have now?

You can find a number of highly successful technology blogs around the web, including some that have been in existence for years and years. Some of these blogs are specialized to a particular kind of tool or software; some are just about conveying the latest and greatest across the field.

If you work in technology or just have a passion for it, you can start a blog around your enthusiasm. That's what Dennis Lloyd did when he founded iLounge (www.ilounge.com).

iLounge, shown in Figure 7-3, covers anything and everything about Apple's iPod and iPhone devices. Started in 2001, shortly after Dennis Lloyd first laid eyes on an iPod, it has grown from being a blog into a true community site, including forums and photo galleries, in addition to the news blogs.

Getting political with it

No matter where you sit on the political spectrum, you live in interesting political times. You'll never be short of topics, from the latest political scandal to the next national election.

Some of the most popular political bloggers have turned their online musings into full-fledged careers in the media, from talk shows to newspaper columns. And some traditional journalists have bowed out of newspapers and television to move to a blog.

This niche has room for many kinds of blogs, from those criticizing national policy to those covering local school board and city elections. If you have a craving to get involved in politics but don't want to run for office, a blog might be a great way to develop an effective voice. And if you're a politician, you can follow the example of Barack Obama, who used a blog as part of his campaign strategy while running for the presidency of the United States. (He won, by the way.)

Figure 7-3:
iLounge is
the essen-
tial source
for all news
and issues
for the
Apple iPod
and iPhone.



For some, the urge to sound off on politics has produced entirely new publications. Take, for example, Truthdig (www.truthdig.com), which won four Webby Awards. (The Webbys are the web's equivalent of the Oscars.) Shown in Figure 7-4, Truthdig was started by journalist Robert Scheer and publisher Zuade Kaufman to be a source for political commentary and news that challenges the "wisdom of the day."

Pointing out the strange

If it's bizarre, you can probably find a website about it. Many bloggers make a blogging career out of pointing blog readers to the strangest of the strange websites. These blogs are often called *link blogs*, which consist primarily of short descriptions and links off into the wild world of the web. Today's blogger, in an attempt to cultivate the perverse, hilarious, and just weird, often adds more commentary, but the effect is the same: The reader gets a daily dose of random tidbits to enjoy.

A good example of a blog in this area is The Obscure Store & Reading Room (www.obscurestore.typepad.com), which focuses on news stories that seem just too bizarre to be true — but actually *are* true. Postings on the day this chapter was written ranged from stories about a boy who reported his own mother to 911 from the car for her bad driving and a social networking community called Enemybook (see Figure 7-5).

Figure 7-4:
Truthdig,
winner of
four Webby
Awards,
challenges
conven-
tional
political
thinking.



Figure 7-5:
Get your
daily dose
of differ-
ent at The
Obscure
Store.



Reporting news

The offline world is full of general news sources — the 200-page newspaper that struggles to appeal to all its readers or the broadcast news show that does local car chases and the weather well — and not much else. Specialized news sources are hard to come by.

Online, the situation is a little different. Quite a few news outlets have opted to offer news personalization features, letting you customize the news that you consume by topics. But many folks who have specialized interests still have to look through a lot of news sources to find truly pertinent stories.

If you're doing that kind of research for yourself, you can start a blog that shares your findings with others interested in the same topic. Are you an economist collecting stories about garbage production in North America? Or a marketing expert who keeps track of the latest guerilla marketing tactics in order to keep on your toes professionally? You can turn this research into a valuable blog for others who share your interest.

You can produce this format quite easily, as well, because posts are frequently just pointers to a news story or article on another website. The value for readers in a blog of this kind is that someone else (the blogger) has already done the work of finding the news, so sending them to another site is actually an important part of the service you're providing.

Quite a few bloggers have opted to develop blogs in a specialized news area and parlayed that success into a new revenue stream or sponsorship, so creating your own news blog might even prove to be a wise business move.



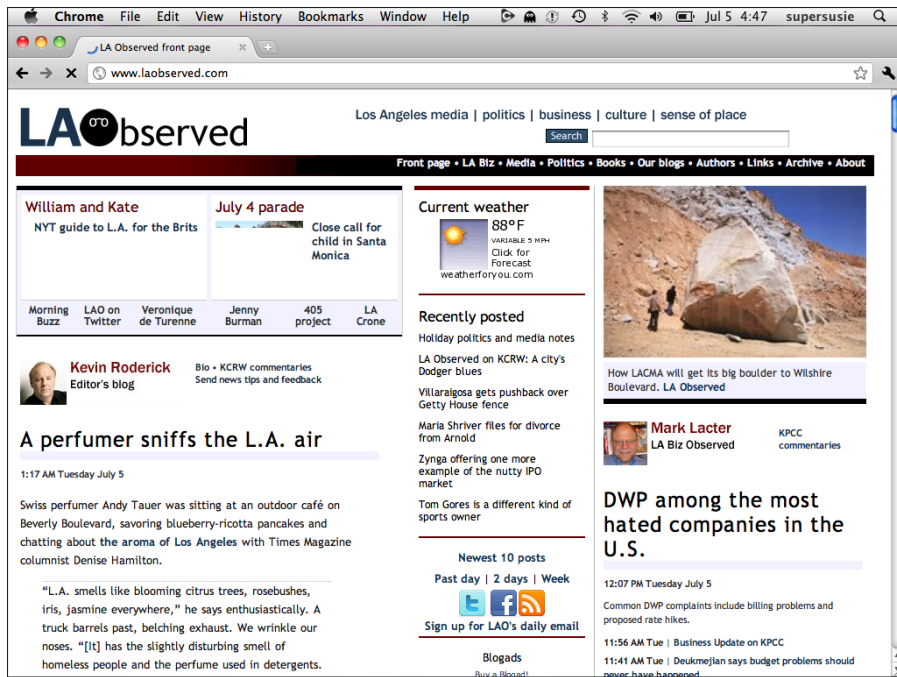
Even if you don't put advertising on your specialized news blog, keeping a blog of this kind demonstrates that you're on top of your field.

One journalist who left traditional media behind in order to serve as a clearinghouse of news about the media in Los Angeles is Kevin Roderick. His blog, LA Observed (www.laobserved.com), shown in Figure 7-6, is a must-read for journalists in Southern California and across the United States. His blog is becoming quite a little empire while he expands into city hall and business coverage.

Revealing it all

If nothing in this chapter appeals to you so far, perhaps you're looking for the blog classic: a personal diary. Part memoir and part confessional, personal diaries on the web cover every topic that life can serve up.

Figure 7-6:
LA
Observed
covers the
Los Angeles
media
space for
journalists
who don't
have time
to do it
themselves.



Personal diaries can be real snooze-fests or tearjerkers nonpareil. Much depends, of course, on the quality of the writing. But much also depends on what happens in the life being documented. *Life bloggers*, as they're sometimes called, must deal with whatever comes up next for them, from weddings to being fired or hired to being diagnosed with cancer.

These blogs are usually easy to relate to and easy to read; they're also often humorous or heart-wrenching, and sometimes both. They take courage to write, whether read by millions or only five.

For a heart-wrenching example of a personal diary blog, visit Penmachine (www.penmachine.com) for a journal written about a Vancouver-based writer's life, including his struggles with colorectal cancer (see Figure 7-7). Derek Miller's writing is full of emotional and gritty detail, and also the mundane circumstances of a full life lived despite health problems. Derek passed away on May 4, 2011; his final post was written in anticipation of his death and is a final good-bye to friends and family.

Figure 7-7:
Derek Miller
shared
openly
on Pen-
machine,
a personal
blog about
his life.



Learning from the Pros

After you choose a topic, you can work on producing a readable blog that you can be proud of. In the following sections, you get ideas for setting up a blog successfully by cultivating your own talents and observing what others are doing right.

When you blog, much depends on the quality of your writing and your ability to make a connection with your readers. Work on developing a dialogue with your readers. Life bloggers often create this connection by revealing common experiences that many people can identify with. Businesses can choose to start a blog that gives typically silent members of a company (such as high-level executives or behind-the-scenes mechanics) a connection to customers.



Many blogs are maintained by more than one person; sometimes, contributions by several different people can enliven and enrich the conversation, as well as decrease the workload for any single blogger.

I cover creating great content in Chapter 8, and in that chapter, you can find out how to keep track of what's working for other bloggers.

Lurking on other blogs

You can best figure out what will work on your blog by seeing what's working on other blogs. If you aren't a regular blog reader, find some blogs and start reading!

The old, old Internet term *lurking* describes web users who look at blogs, mailing lists, online discussions, and forums, but don't choose to participate in them. Lurking online doesn't have any negative connotations, though the word does sound kind of sinister.

In truth, lurking can help you find out about what kinds of communication and interaction are appropriate when you're new to a web community or when you're planning to start one yourself. The vast majority of web users are actually lurkers; most people don't do more than read or look at blogs.

Start your lurking career by finding a few blogs that you like, that you regard as competition, or that you find interesting for some reason. If you want to see a blog that has a very active, vocal audience, find one that has a lot of comments and make sure that you read them all. Many of the blogs mentioned in this chapter fall smack into this category, so why not start with them?

If you want to see how a blog evolves, find one that has been around awhile and look back through the site's archives to see how it got started. Most of all, pay attention to what you find interesting about the blog.



Here are some issues that you can figure out from lurking on a blog:

- ✓ **Posts:** Watch what the blogger (or bloggers) posts about, how often they post, and what days and times attract readers. See whether you can understand what prompts a blogger to post.
- ✓ **Interaction:** Pay attention to the posts that get a lot of comments and responses, and try to understand what gets people talking.
- ✓ **Resource use:** Look for instances when the blogger chooses to include a link, a quote, or other resource, and what it adds to the conversation.
- ✓ **Design:** Keep an eye out for blog designs and styles that you might want to imitate on your own blog.
- ✓ **Sidebar use:** Look at the blog sidebars for cool technologies and tools that the blogger uses (and that you might be able use on your own blog).



You want interaction with your blog readers, but some comments can cause problems because they're off-topic or offensive, so you can use this opportunity to see how other bloggers handle bad comments. Pay attention to whether a blog comment policy is in place and how the blogger enforces that policy. When does the blogger choose to remove or edit comments? Do you agree with his or her choices? How do you want to handle problem comments on your own blog? I talk more about handling spam and bad comments in Chapter 8.

While you lurk, keep a list of notes and ideas for later reference, especially for items that you think are good ideas but that you aren't ready to implement quite yet. You can easily lose those first good ideas if you don't keep track of them somehow.



What works for someone else might not work for you, and it doesn't have to. The blogosphere is still young, and you have plenty of room and time to try new ideas. Rules and standards that others have adopted give you a good starting point, but you don't have to use them if they don't work for you.

Participating by commenting

When you're comfortable, you can start participating in your favorite blogs. Leaving comments can start your interactions on a blog. You don't have to take a long time to write comments, they help the blogger, and you might even further the conversation with your comment.

Leaving comments gives you experience with participating in a blog audience, and when you have a blog of your own, you can comment on someone else's blog to let others know about your own blog.

Many blog comment forms give you the chance to leave a URL when you post a comment, and the software often links your name to the URL. So, when you have a blog, leaving a comment that includes such a link is a bit like leaving a tiny, unobtrusive ad. When the blogger and other blog visitors read your comment, they might just choose to click the link and visit your blog, especially if they like what you had to say.



You might also get visitors who *didn't* like what you say! You invite disagreement any time you put your opinion out into the world, but don't let that stop you from doing it.

Some bloggers have made the mistake of abusing this little privilege, leaving comments that don't add to the topic or say much, simply to get the links to their blogs on the other bloggers' pages. Don't make this mistake. Be a genuine member of the blogosphere and leave comments only when you truly have something to say. "Nice site" is neither interesting to read nor particularly helpful to anyone.



Leave comments that distinguish you as a thoughtful contributor to the topic. If you can answer a question posed by the blog post or provide information that seems to be missing, you really contribute value with your comment. But you can also just leave your own opinion, even if you completely disagree with what the blogger is saying.

Reaching Out to Other Bloggers

Don't forget that other bloggers are your primary audience. These folks are online and already familiar with blogs, and you're likely to find other bloggers with whom you have things in common — maybe even the subject of your blog.

Meeting with bloggers in person and communicating with them online are terrific ways to network and market your blog. A lot of bloggers list the blogs that they read right beside their blog posts in the sidebar called a *blogroll*, so you might be able to generate some additional readership if you create relationships with bloggers.

Meeting in person

This is going to sound really old school, but you can turn online acquaintances into offline friends. In fact, it can be pretty fun.

For example, on a visit to Boston, I posted on the Rockin' Sock Club blog, asking for yarn store recommendations. I also offered to meet with any knitters in town who wanted to get together. (The Rockin' Sock Club is a sock-knitting club put together by Blue Moon Fiber Arts. Only members of the sock club can post comments and blog posts.) As a result, I had a great afternoon with people I never would have met otherwise.

You don't have to knit socks to get together with bloggers, though. Most cities have an active community of bloggers that you can cultivate:

- ✓ Be sure to include your e-mail address and let people know that you want to make new friends. Look for similar information on the blogs that you read if you're interested in getting in touch with a blogger.
- ✓ Look for bloggers who identify their locations and get to know them on their blogs by posting comments.
- ✓ Visit Upcoming (<http://upcoming.yahoo.com>) or Meetup (www.meetup.com), and search for blogger get-togethers in your area. Many bloggers network with other nearby bloggers on a regular basis. You can even look up get-togethers when you're visiting a new place.
- ✓ Organize your own get-together and publicize it on your blog, Twitter, or on Upcoming or Meetup.

Using social networks

Social networking sites are designed to connect you with your current group of friends, and then extend those connections out to their friends. Each site that I mention in this section has a different mechanism for making that happen, and different types of community interaction occur. LinkedIn (www.linkedin.com), for example, is a professional networking site designed to showcase your work background and interests so that you can make connections to others in your field.

You can make friends in social-networking online communities, such as Twitter, LinkedIn, Google+, and Facebook. Social networking sites usually give bloggers a way to link to blogs, or even to notify others about new blog posts via profile pages. If you're looking for online connections in the blogging community, these communities are a great place to start.



In fact, a lot of bloggers regard their blogs as a form of networking, and they're already looking to make these kinds of connections via social networking websites.

Facebook (www.facebook.com) is more about cementing your social friendships, even for tracking down old friends from high school with whom you might have lost touch. It has great additional applications and games that you can use to break the ice with a new friend.

Regardless of whether the folks in your social network have blogs, you can use the site to let them know about your blog, building up your audience and hopefully the participation on it by leveraging the goodwill of people you know and the people they know!

Chapter 8

Creating Great Content

In This Chapter

- ▶ Discovering who your audience is
 - ▶ Getting words onto your blog
 - ▶ Adding value by including links
 - ▶ Planning for blogging dry spells
-

A lot of elements work together to make a blog successful, from a well-designed layout to fancy technical widgets, but none of those things are a substitute for good content aimed at the right audience. In fact, if you write (or podcast or take photos) well and you're reaching readers who are engaged by your style and content, you can actually be successful without spending any time at all on your blog's appearance. Good content can even make your readers forgive an awkward interface or missing bells and whistles, such as RSS feeds or categories.

So, if you do nothing else to make your blog succeed, focus on producing great writing, photos, audio, or videos. Know what your audience wants and deliver it. In fact, try slightly *under-delivering* it — keep your audience wanting more.

Most blogs include a written component, or are predominantly word-based, so this chapter offers pointers on writing well for the web and understanding what your audience expects from your blog.



In this chapter, I refer to competitors when I am describing other bloggers who are covering the same subject area as your blog, or trying to reach the same audience you want to attract. Remember that in the blogosphere the atmosphere is very collaborative, which means competitors can also be friends, contacts, occasional contributors to your blog, participants in your comments area, and good resources for information. So when I talk about competitors, I do so in the friendliest sense of the word!

Knowing Your Audience

First things first: How well do you know your audience? Are you hitting the right notes to attract the readers you want in the quantity you want them?



Not all bloggers care about the number of readers they get, but they do care about getting the right eyes on their words. Regardless of whether you're number-obsessed or just focused on your niche, you need to understand your audience and what your readers are looking for.

You can get an idea about your audience by

- ✓ Using statistics software to track the number of visitors to your blog and what links those visitors click
- ✓ Noting the content that elicits the biggest and best response from your readers (or the response that you want, even if it isn't the biggest)
- ✓ Looking at the blogs of others in your subject area to see what you can find out from their comment activity, search engine rankings, and other data

You might have to wait awhile for statistics and comments, but you can easily look at others' blogs, even if you're still developing your own blog. I talk in detail about measuring site traffic and statistics in Chapter 17, so jump there if you want to find out more about the readers you already have.

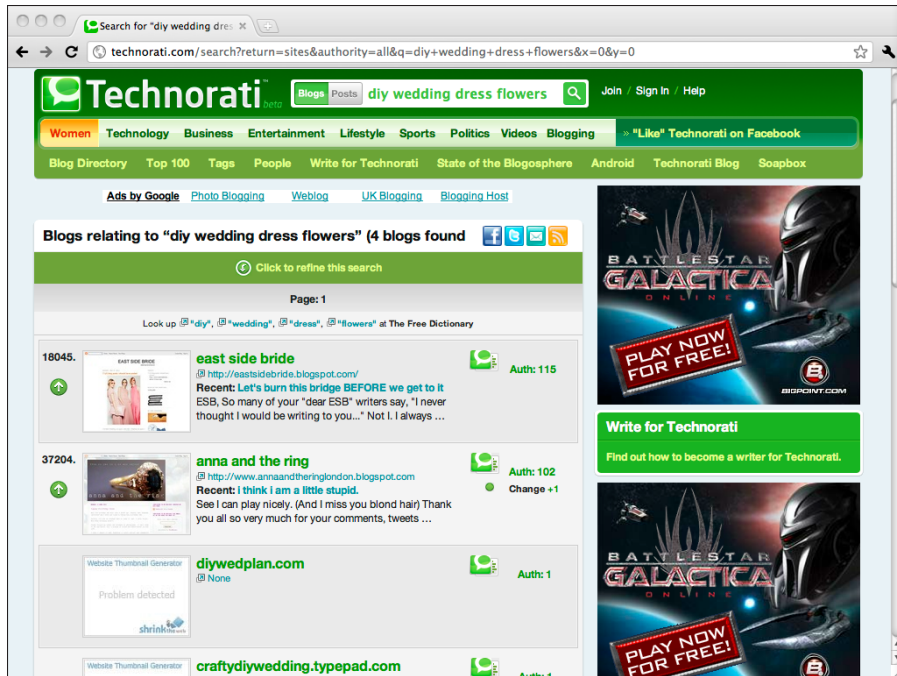
Finding your competitors

To find your competitors, you must first define your own niche. Your niche consists of what you're blogging about, the topics you cover, and what words you use most frequently in your posts. You use these keywords to describe yourself, and visitors use them to find you when they conduct a search on Google, Yahoo!, Bing, or another search engine.

Use these descriptive words (plus the word *blog*) to search for yourself on Google or another search engine. Investigate the results that come up and look for blogs that have content (never mind the look and feel of the blog for now) similar to the content you're creating or want to create.

You can also use one of the blog search engines, such as Technorati (www.technorati.com), Google Blogs search page (<http://blogsearch.google.com>), or Icerocket (www.icerocket.com). Figure 8-1 shows the results of a search on Technorati that used the terms *diy*, *wedding*, *dress*, and *flowers*. These results show posts from blogs that talk about these topics.

Figure 8-1:
Use
Technorati
to find your
competitors'
blogs.



You want to find other blogs that inhabit your niche, and then spend a week or two investigating these blogs. Your mission: Find the secret of their success, which I discuss in the following section. You want to know how those blogs get readers and how they keep those readers coming back for more.

Discovering the secrets of success

While you watch your competitors' blogs, you have a chance to figure out what topics they blog about, of course, but also how they reach out to their audience.



Your competitors might not be blogging in the most effective way. While you look at these blogs, decide whether your competitors are actually reaching their audiences successfully or whether they're falling short. You can learn as much from a failing blog as you can from a successful one.

While you visit these blogs, keep a journal of your impressions. Watch the following to investigate how these bloggers handle publishing and outreach:



- ✔ **How frequently the blogger puts new posts on the blog:** Frequency of blog posts is a big deal. Any blogger can tell you to post “frequently,” but almost none can tell you what that really means. I talk more about how often you should post in the section “Writing Well and Frequently,” later in this chapter, but you can explore this idea by noting how often your competitors choose to post to their blogs. Do they create new posts daily, or even multiple times a day? Or do they post a few times a week, or even once a week? When you become a reader of that blog, do you find yourself wanting more content or less?
- ✔ **When the blogger publishes blog posts:** Time of day can have a surprising impact on how readers receive a blog post. You need to reach your audience members when they’re likely to be sitting at their computers. If your audience consists of stockbrokers, time your posts so that new content becomes available just before business hours start on the East Coast, not during dinnertime on the West Coast. If you’re targeting teens, try to publish before or after school hours, not while they’re sitting in homeroom. (Theoretically, they are doing schoolwork at that point and not surfing the Internet!)

Sure, your readers can visit your blog anytime and pick up content that you posted in the middle of the night, but you can impress them with a blog that always seems to have fresh content just when they want it.
- ✔ **The length of posts on the blog:** You might be surprised to know that the ideal length of a blog post is a hotly debated topic among experienced bloggers. Some bloggers swear by the short-and-sweet recipe that guides most web writing: Blog posts should get to the point quickly and allow readers to get back to their busy days with the information that they need. Others find that longer posts — even essays — do the job, keeping readers on the site longer and providing more thoughtful commentary. The topic of your blog and your audience’s appetite and available time, combine to dictate the natural length of your blog posts. Looking at your competitors’ blogs can tell you the number of words that they find optimal in a blog post, which you can use as a starting point for your blog.
- ✔ **When the blogger links to outside websites:** Linking to other blogs and websites is a great way to serve the reader. By pointing out other sources of information or even other blogs, you help them become more knowledgeable about your topic and keep them engaged with it. So, when do your competitors choose to link to other sites, and what sites do they link to? Are the links designed to entertain, educate, or inform? Are links included in the text of the post or broken out at the end? What makes you click a link yourself?

I talk a lot more about linking other sites as a strategy for reaching your audience in the section “Linking to Serve the Reader,” later in this chapter.

✔ **When the blogger addresses his or her audience directly:** A lot of bloggers use a very personal writing style that directly acknowledges the reader, kind of like this book. You might enjoy being addressed directly by a blogger because the conversation feels more personal. Or, depending on the topic of the blog, perhaps a more formal, almost academic approach is more appropriate. Either way, check out how your competition is handling this issue. When do they ask readers for input or feedback, and how do they phrase those requests? Do readers actually respond, and if so, to what kinds of approaches?

✔ **Use of multimedia, such as photos, audio, and videos:** Although the majority of blogs are made up of a whole lot of words, you can still throw in the occasional (or even frequent) picture or video. In fact, bloggers do it all the time to dress things up visually and keep readers interested. Take a look at how your competitors include multimedia in their blogs. Do they use photos to illustrate the ideas in the posts or just to attract the eye? What about animation or video? Do posts that have these extras get more comments or fewer? Do you like getting information in these other formats, or do you find them distracting?

✔ **Posts that get a lot of comments and posts that get very few:** A blog that gets a lot of comments signals that the blogger is resonating with his or her audience — even if just to make audience members mad. A blog that has no or few comments probably just leaves people flat (or maybe isn't even read). Not all bloggers get hundreds of comments every time they post. Some blog posts just get better responses than others, and part of what makes a blogger successful is being able to know what makes those posts really work so that they can repeat the success. Watch your competitors' blogs to see when a post gets a big response and look at what kind of response it gets.

Also, watch for the posts that don't get any responses. Figure out why those posts didn't work so that you don't make the same mistake!

✔ **The writing style of the blogger:** Bloggers need to have good content, and for most bloggers, that comes down to having an accessible and readable writing style. For those blogs in your niche that attract participation and good press, what style does the blogger use? Personal? Professional? Humorous? What tone appeals to readers and makes them come back to the blog again and again? What approach do you find more readable and engaging?



Use these same points of analysis on your own blog. After you have your blog up and running for awhile, take a look at your content with the same critical eye that you use on your competitors. What are you doing right? What are you doing incorrectly?

You may find this exercise hard to do. I'm sure you think everything on your blog is great; after all, no one sets out to write a bad blog post! Still, some of your posts are likely more popular with readers than others, and if you can figure out why certain posts work better than others, you can repeat that success again and again. In fact, developing a critical eye for your own content can really help you make your blog succeed: This medium doesn't hold still, and you need to adapt your style and content while your audience grows and changes. Consider conducting this kind of survey of your content a couple times a year to make sure that you stay on track and topical to the folks you want to attract, even if you're aiming for just your immediate family.

If you find it tough to view your own content through that kind of lens, but you have a friend or two who get what you are doing and can look at it critically, ask them to do a site review. Just remember, they are giving you opinions and advice, but it's your call whether you implement any of that!

Profiling your audience

When you finish your competitive analysis (which I explain how to do in the preceding section) and after you review your own content successes and failures, picture your audience in your mind's eye.

Create a clear vision of just who's in your audience. If you don't have the audience you're targeting at this point, develop a picture of who you want in your audience.

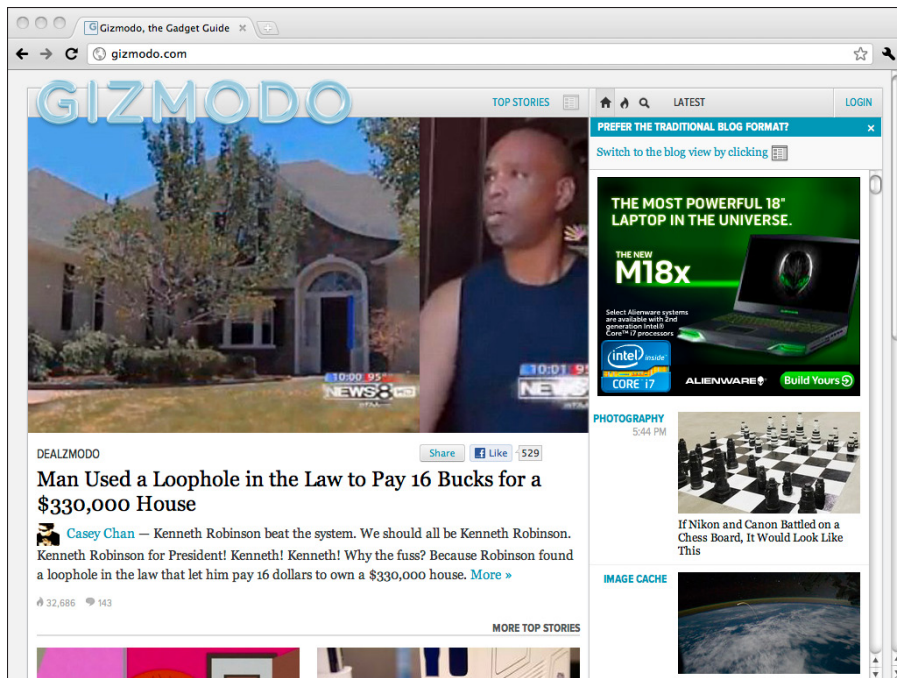
You don't actually have to draw a picture, though. You can create this profile in words that describe the characteristics of your ideal audience member. You can include anything that you want in this profile, from shoe size to personal hang-ups — any detail that helps you really know this person better and create content for this person on your blog.



Don't just say, "My ideal audience is anybody who is interested in [*insert your blog topic here*]." You already know that. Otherwise, this person wouldn't be on your blog in the first place. You want to capture all the details that make this person different, unique, and interesting.

Take Gizmodo, as shown in Figure 8-2. Gizmodo (www.gizmodo.com) is a techie blog featuring information on gadgets and other nifty technical devices. The blog's tagline is "Gizmodo, the gadget guide. So much in love with shiny new toys, it's unnatural." Right away, you know that the audience for Gizmodo is more than just those *interested* in gadgets. Gizmodo readers adore gadgets, see them as playthings meant to entertain and amuse, and are perhaps unhealthily engaged by them (maybe at the expense of other hobbies and pursuits). And those audience members want their gadget news piping hot, fresh off the presses. Doesn't that tell you more about what kinds of posts will work best to attract and keep these kinds of readers?

Figure 8-2:
Gizmodo
focuses on
the fanatical
gadget
enthusiast.



Some concepts and facts to explore for your audience profile include

- ✓ Age
- ✓ Gender
- ✓ The nature of their interest in your topic (for example, familial, personal, emotional, or professional)
- ✓ Geographic location and proximity to you or to the topic of your blog
- ✓ Lifestyle (for example, workaholic, homebody, retired, world traveler, and so on)
- ✓ Occupation
- ✓ Education level
- ✓ Marital status
- ✓ Interests and hobbies
- ✓ Income range
- ✓ Political leanings



Heck, you might even think about what your ideal audience member reads, eats, or wears; his or her sleeping habits and style of personal hygiene; and so on. If a specific detail seems like it might impact your writing style and content, throw it into the mix.

When you have a reader profile in hand, you can be more targeted about what you choose to write about and how you address that audience.

Writing Well and Frequently

I've said it before and I'll say it again: The primary ingredients for a successful blog are

- ✓ Good content
- ✓ Frequently updated content

But what do I really mean by *good* and *frequently*?

Good content compels, satisfying the readers' immediate interests but leaving them hungry for more. Think of a blog post like an appetizer: It should whet the appetite, pique the palette, and sustain the diner until the next course arrives. You don't want to give your readers "annual Thanksgiving dinner" — you want them to come back, come back soon, and come back often.

Respecting copyright

As a general rule, anything and everything you see on the Internet is protected by copyright. Copyright is just what it sounds like: It focuses on "the right to copy" an original creation. Copyright law protects an author by giving that right solely to him or her.

Unless the creator of an image or photo specifically licenses his or her copyright to you, you can't reuse it, *even if you give the author credit or link back to the original story*. (This rule applies to text, photos, and videos, too.) But this rule has a few exceptions: You can quote a news story or a blog post on your blog if you use only part of it, and as long as you don't take

credit for the work. Commentary and critique also allow you to excerpt a piece of text or other work. But don't think that just because you're the subject of a story or blog post that you have the right to repost the entire article on your blog or website. You don't. When in doubt, ask and get permission.

At www.copyright.gov, get the goods on what you can use on your blog without running afoul of the law that protects other authors' content. You might particularly want to read the areas around fair use, especially if you plan to write reviews.

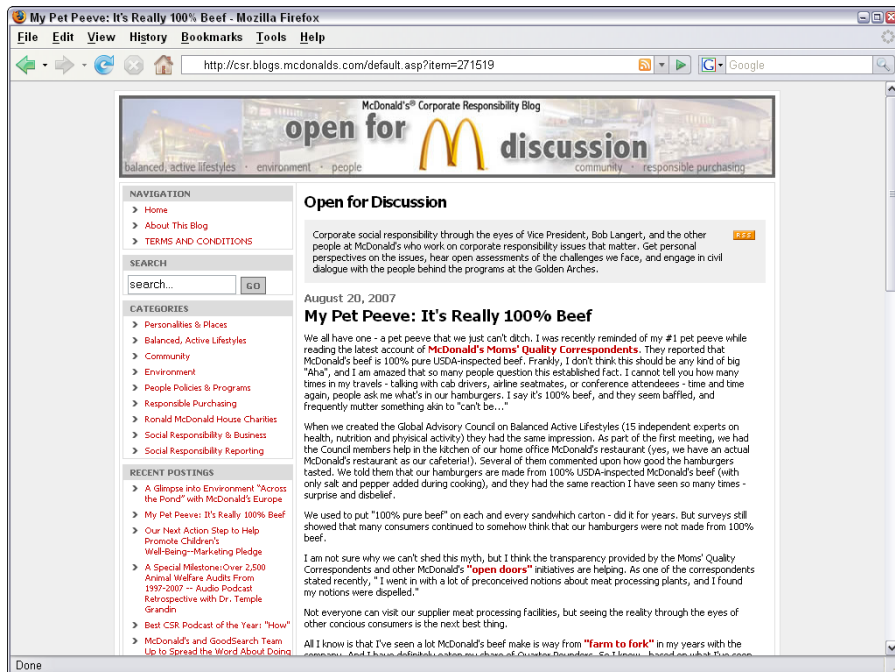
As a general rule, blogging has evolved into quite a personal, conversational medium, and textual blogs have a strong feel of the author and his or her personality. The first blogs were actually online diaries, and even today, most bloggers choose to use words such as *I* or *my* in their blog posts, creating an intimate and open feel — even on corporate blogs. This *first-person* writing differs dramatically from most corporate communication, which at best refers to the company as *our* and at worst only refers to the company by its full and official name.

Take, for example, one of the McDonald's blogs, Open for Discussion, which was written by McDonald's Vice President Bob Langert. In a post on August 20, 2007, Bob wrote:

“We all have one — a pet peeve that we just can’t ditch. I was recently reminded of my #1 pet peeve while reading the latest account of McDonald’s Moms’ Quality Correspondents. They reported that McDonald’s beef is 100% pure USDA-inspected beef. Frankly, I don’t think this should be any kind of big ‘Aha’, and I am amazed that so many people question this established fact.”

Figure 8-3 shows this post.

Figure 8-3:
Even vice presidents are informal on blogs, as McDonald’s V.P. Bob Langert was on Open for Discussion.



Writing in the first person isn't as easy as it looks (or reads); after all, most people spend years training to write more formally and commonly produce all kinds of documents in which first-person writing is emphatically *not* suitable: memos, reports, news stories, invoices, and so on. You may have trouble finding an authentic, genuine voice that really feels comfortable. My best advice is to just practice, practice, practice.

Think of your blog posts like letters or e-mails. Speak directly and simply, like you would in a personal note or letter. Try not to over-think your words, but don't go right into stream of consciousness (fun to write, hard to read).



One of my favorite techniques for making my blog posts readable is to close the door of my office and read my post out loud. If it sounds close to something I might actually say in conversation, it hits the right tone for a blog post — at least, on my blog.

When it seems appropriate, use humor and jokes, especially if you can be self-deprecating. People just love self-deprecating bloggers. Here's an example from Stephanie Pearl-McPhee's Yarn Harlot blog (www.yarnharlot.ca):

"I think that I can't be the only one who finds LA a little hard on the ol' self esteem. There is an alarmingly high ratio of tall, beautiful people compared to us ordinary souls, and it usually doesn't take long for me, the shabby and usually bra-less to feel out of place."

Sometimes I find it difficult to write to some anonymous audience member and get a conversational tone, so I imagine that I'm writing to a good friend. If I can be interesting enough to hold her attention, it ought to do the trick for my readers, too!



If you make your blog informal and conversational, you still can't completely ignore spelling, grammar, and sentence structure. Some bloggers do opt for a completely unedited approach, right down to not using capital letters, but keep in mind that people have more trouble, not less, reading poorly formulated writing. If you have a business or professional blog, you definitely need to pay attention to spelling and grammar because these little details influence your credibility. Do your readers a favor — use the grammar and spellcheck functions of your word processor.

On the other hand, many blogs have made a reputation based on using incorrect spelling or grammar! An example is the funny blog I Can Has Cheezburger? (www.icanhascheezburger.com), which has built its popularity largely on bad spelling in hilariously captioned photos of cats.



Many bloggers like to quote news articles and blog posts, and then expand on them. If you take this approach, make sure that you understand the rules of copyright law when you use someone else's words — it's always best to ask permission! For more, read the sidebar "Respecting copyright."

Linking to Serve the Reader

Links — you need 'em. You may worry that by providing a link to a news story or online article, you're sending your readers away from your site into the black hole of the Internet, never to return. Your readers might, in fact, click the link and go read the article. But they probably won't forget where they found the link.

On a blog, links are just as much a resource as any other information that you provide. In fact, many blogs actually consist of collections of links around a topic or theme, pulled together to inform or entertain the blog's readers.



If you're providing good content and expanding on that content by using links, you're doing your readers a service that they won't forget — one they likely come back to you for.

Joey deVilla doesn't shy away from adding links to his blog posts on *The Adventures of Accordion Guy in the 21st Century* (www.joeydevilla.com), as shown in Figure 8-4.

Figure 8-4: Joey deVilla adds a lot of links to his blog posts, helping his readers get more information.

This could make trade with the U.S., our largest trading partner (as we are theirs) a little more difficult, but on the personal scale, it's good — I've got a handful of trips down south scheduled in the next couple of months. Why, oh why wasn't it this way from 1999 through 2002, when I was flying to the U.S. at least once a month and my bank account was getting beaten up on the exchange?

The last time our currencies were at par was back during the Ford and Trudeau administrations, back when I was a still a landed immigrant and [Wings' Silly Love Songs](#) was the #1 song on the [Billboard Top 100 for that year](#).

Related Reading

- *Chicago Tribune*: [CANADA DOLLAR HEADING FOR PARITY WITH U.S. FOR FIRST TIME SINCE 1976](#)
- *Forbes*: [FOREX - CANADIAN DOLLAR ON THE VERGE OF PARITY VS US DOLLAR](#)
- *The Globe and Mail*: [LOONIE TOPS 99 CENTS](#)
- *AFP*: [CANADIAN DOLLAR HITS 1997 HIGH](#)

This was written by Joey deVilla. Posted on Thursday, September 20, 2007, at 2:52 pm. Filed under [Uncategorized](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#). Follow comments here with the [RSS feed](#). [Post a comment](#) or [leave a trackback](#).

In a September 20, 2007, post about the Canadian dollar's parity with the U.S. dollar, he included links to bios of the U.S. president and Canadian prime minister in office during the last time the currencies were equal, and he provided links to pop culture references current at that time. Also, he collected a list of news stories that covered the event.

Speaking of dollars, links are the currency of the blogosphere. A lot of bloggers point their readers to blog posts that they find especially interesting, even going so far as to quote the other blogger. In the sidebars of their blogs, bloggers regularly build lists of links to blogs that they read. These lists are called *blogrolls*.

In general, bloggers are generous about linking to other blogs and websites because the favor is frequently returned. As the saying goes, “You have to spend a little to make a little.”



Adding links to your posts is a good thing . . . unless you're irresponsible about what you link to. Take your responsibility as a publisher seriously and don't send people to suspect resources or throw them into an adult-oriented site without warning.



When you link to a blog post, be sure you link to the permalink URL, not the blog's home page. A *permalink* is the unique Web address for an individual blog post — the permanent link to that page. You should use the permalink because the blogger might update the blog any time after you create the link, pushing the post that you mention down or even off the blog's home page.

The Web Style Guide (www.webstyleguide.com) covers everything from good web design standards to graphics production, but you can probably benefit most from Chapter 9 of the guide, which covers links, titles, and common online styles.

Breaking Through a Blank Screen

At times, even outstanding bloggers hit dry spells and can't think of a word to write. You can safely anticipate a day sometime in the lifespan of your blog when you literally have nothing to say to your readers, no matter how much enthusiasm you have for your topic.

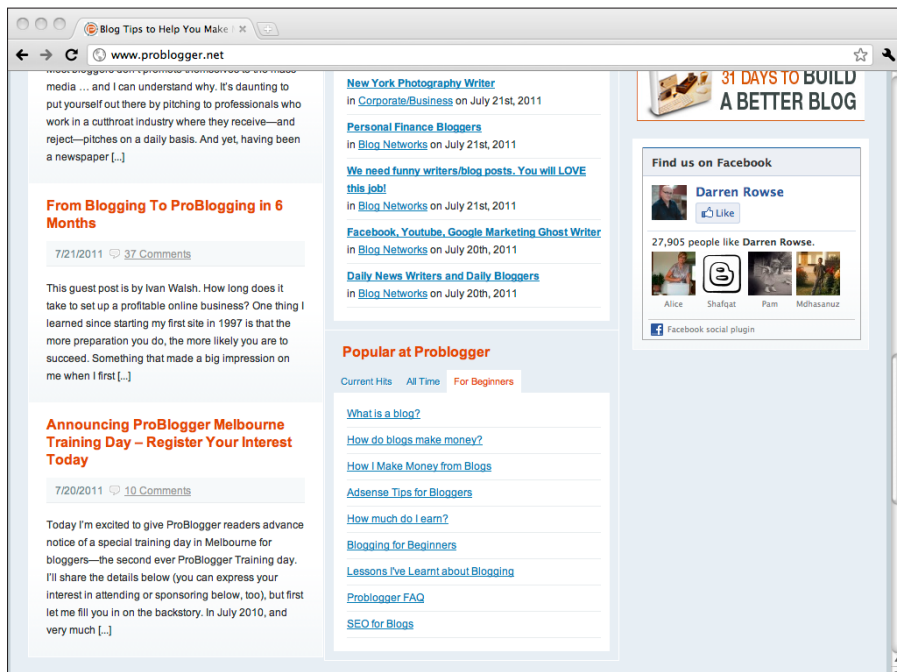
This phase will pass, but sometimes, you need a little help pushing back to a productive spot. Here are a few tips for making it through your dry spell:

- ✓ **Stockpile a few evergreen posts.** In newsrooms around the world, journalists regularly create *evergreen stories* (stories that can be printed or televised at any time and still be interesting). You can also put together a few evergreen blog posts that you can keep on hand against a day when your creative juices temporarily dry up. You can also use these kinds of posts for days when you're sick or on vacation, but still want to have something publish on your blog. A lot of blog software allows you to schedule a publication date for a blog post in the future, so you can even set these posts to go up automatically and take a well-deserved break.
- ✓ **Ask a friend to guest blog for a few days.** Bring some new perspective to your blog when you have none left yourself by asking a friend, colleague, fellow blogger, or even a critic to write some blog posts for you. Your readers might enjoy the change of style and tone (and if they don't, you make them that much happier when you come back!). Be

sure to return the favor when your guest blogger has a dry spell of his or her own.

- ✓ **Recycle an oldie but goodie.** When you can't think of exciting new content, bring out a great post from your archives. New readers appreciate seeing something they missed, and old readers might find new information in a second read. Professional blogger Darren Rowse points his readers to a list of best-of posts on ProBlogger (www.problogger.net). In fact, Darren pulls out the best posts of all time, for the month, for new readers, and just some of his favorites (see Figure 8-5).
- ✓ **Hold a contest.** When the well has run dry, you can hold a contest. Ask your readers to submit funny photos or write a caption for one of your funny photos. Show them a bottle of jellybeans and ask for guesses about how many pieces of candy are in the bottle. You get the idea: Distract them with shiny, happy prizes! But make sure you're fair and impartial in how you award prizes. If you say you plan to hold a raffle, be sure to actually do so!
- ✓ **Post a photo.** Rather than 1,000 words, put up a single photo. Take a picture of where you usually blog, show off your new laptop, or just take a walk in your neighborhood. You can dig out a photo of yourself as a kid or show that embarrassing haircut you had in the '80s.

Figure 8-5:
Darren
Rowse
points
people to
favorite
posts from
the past.



- ✔ **Post about the books, movies, or television that you're consuming.** Tell folks about the other media you're enjoying. You can even hook up an Amazon Associates account and earn a little money from your recommendations. (You can find out how to set up this kind of account in Chapter 18.)
- ✔ **Give out your favorite recipe.** Dig out the cookbook and find your grandmother's fudge recipe or your mom's apple pie recipe, and share it with your readers. Better yet, take a break from the computer and make the recipe yourself so that you can put up a photo with your post.
- ✔ **Blog from a new location.** Sometimes, breaking the routine can shake loose those recalcitrant brain cells. Try blogging from another room in your house, or head to the local Internet cafe or coffee shop.
- ✔ **Record an audio podcast.** If you can't write, talk! Give the gift of your voice to your readers — listeners — by trying something new and different. You might be pleasantly surprised and make podcasting a regular feature of your blog. Chapter 12 covers podcasting extensively.
- ✔ **Do an interview.** Ask a friend, colleague, neighbor, child, parent, boss, or public figure whether you can interview him or her for your blog. Type up a few questions, e-mail them off, and when the answers arrive in your inbox, a little copying and pasting should do the trick.
- ✔ **Take a quiz.** Let your readers know what superhero you are or what color your personality is by playing with some of the fun quizzes and polls online. The Superhero Quiz is at www.thesuperheroquiz.com (I'm Spider-Man), and you can find loads of others on blogthings.com and Quiz Meme (www.quizmeme.com).
- ✔ **Ask for suggestions from your readers.** Appeal to your readers for help finding new topics to post about. Also, look through your old posts and see whether you can expand on a post that worked well; check out comments and e-mails from readers, too!

Chapter 9

Building Community with Comments

In This Chapter

- ▶ Discovering what comments are and how to use them
 - ▶ Maintaining and managing your blogging community
 - ▶ Dealing with spammy comments on your blog
 - ▶ Handling negative comments on other blogs
-

Every blog should have comments. Love them or hate them, they're an integral part of blogging. Comments provide the main source of interaction between you and your readers. Visitors to your blog can ask you questions, correct your writing, suggest your next blog topic, or leave a note to say hello.

Unfortunately, as interesting and thought-provoking as comment conversations can be, they're not without their challenges. Comment spam and negative commentary can take the joy out of blogging and make managing comments on your blog feel like a full-time job.

How you handle your blog community determines your level of stress and success. In this chapter, I talk about how you can set your own comment rules and monitor your community. I also give you tips about how to make your blog a positive place for conversation, as well as provide strategies for dealing with spammers and negativity.

Getting Interaction Going with Comments

Comments are an important part of a blog. When a blogger opts, through choice or necessity, to turn off commenting, the blogger loses some of what makes blogging such a dynamic, exciting medium: the interaction between blogger and readers. Not only the blogger loses out when he or she removes comments — most blog readers enjoy the comments left by others and often form a strong community feeling for fellow visitors.

Blogs that have active comment communities

While you experiment with comments, see how sites that have vibrant, active communities handle the onslaught of opinion and discussion. The following popular blogs have developed an involved and vocal audience that you can explore:

Boing Boing (www.boingboing.net): This grandfather of blogs brings together the weird and wonderful from all over the web for the entertainment and bemusement of its readers. Readers are healthily active in the comments, and the blog features a navigation item labeled Suggest a Link that encourages readers to send their suggestions for future posts.

Gizmodo (www.gizmodo.com): This gadget guide keeps you abreast of all the latest in shiny tech toys, from car stereos to mobile phones — and does so in multiple languages, to boot. Comments on this blog range from the rabid fan to the disgruntled critic and add as much value as the blog posts.

Nuts About Southwest (www.blogsouthwest.com): Folks from all levels of the Southwest Airlines organization post to this blog, which covers topics such as new boarding procedures, dress codes, and food offerings.

Judging from the hundreds of comments on some posts, Southwest is getting plenty of feedback from its customers on experiences with the airline.

Yarn Harlot (www.yarnharlot.ca): Stephanie Pearl-McPhee is an avid knitter turned knitting book author. You simply won't believe how popular her blog is or how many of her readers comment on her humorous posts about knitting projects and her family life.

The Pioneer Woman Cooks! (www.thepioneerwoman.com/cooking): Warning! Reading this blog can make you very hungry. Ree, wife to a cattle rancher, posts mouthwatering recipes amply illustrated with photographs. If you're looking for ideas about what to cook for dinner, Ree has ideas. Judging by the comments that her blog receives, you can trust her cooking advice.

Truthdig (www.truthdig.com): This news website has won multiple Webby Awards for Best Political Blog in both the Juried and People's Choice categories. The site combines commentary on current political issues with book reviews, podcasts, and interviews, and it gets loads of feedback from fans and critics.

A blogger may turn off comments when he or she simply doesn't have the time or desire to read and respond to them, or when the tenor of the comments becomes a problem. Popular blogger Heather Armstrong only selectively allows comments on her blog Dooce (www.dooce.com) because her religious views and style of blogging generate a lot of negative interaction with readers in the comments. Political bloggers often have similar problems.

Other bloggers' main issue with comments is often related to time. A popular blogger can get hundreds of comments on a single blog post, and it takes time to read and respond to those comments, much less remove any inappropriate comments. Spam can also lead a blogger to restrict comments. Just as with e-mail, spammers have discovered that they can throw their unwanted

commercial messages (anyone need a refinance?) into blogs. Even with the best blog software, some spam messages end up on the blog.

Still, the vast majority of blogs allow comments, and those blogs benefit hugely from the interaction and fun that comments can generate. On a blog such as Grey Matter (www.greyswriters.com), from the writers of the TV show *Grey's Anatomy*, readers really get involved with the show's writers. In the comments, readers share their thoughts on the show, offering feedback and suggestions.



Getting involved

If you want to have a dialogue with your readers, you need to allow comments on your blog, whether you're reaching out to your parents or to your customers.

Just because your blog posts have a comment form, though, people don't necessarily just jump in and start commenting. You need to tailor your posts to elicit dialogue and feedback, perhaps even by going so far as to ask specifically for responses.



If the comment areas of your blog look a little bare, ask some friends to help by reading and commenting for a few weeks. Comments tend to generate more comments, if you can get the ball rolling.

Of course, the problem might lie with your content or approach, so don't be afraid to experiment with your topic or style to try to get better results from your comment forms.

You want to be involved in your blogging community, right? If you don't, then turn that comment function off. Here's a quick checklist of tips for cultivating comments on your blog:

- ✓ **Make it easy for your readers to comment.** Sometimes, readers can have problems finding that Comment Now button or link. Keep your comment links visible to encourage people to comment.
- ✓ **Ask questions of your readers.** Get your readers to start participating by requesting advice, seeking out information, or asking for a recipe. The simple act of asking can do wonders for comments. Ask your visitors to tell you stories, answer questions, or give advice. For instance, if you're blogging about a frustrating travel experience, you might ask your readers for tips for the future. Or, if you're looking for a new laptop bag, ask your readers to recommend bags that they like.

Specific, rather than general, questions work best to start a conversation.

- ✓ **Request topics or ideas.** Requesting ideas about your blog topics can generate an amazing response. You may also invite readers to send in



blog posts they write that could benefit the community of your site. (If you make this invitation, make sure that you're clear about who owns the copyright! As the publisher of the content, you probably want to have the guest bloggers assign copyright to you.)

- ✓ **Communicate with your readers.** Make sure you're actively talking to your readers by responding to the comments that they leave on your blog.
- ✓ **Host comment-related contests.** Think of ways that you can turn comments into a contest. One common contest strategy involves asking people to leave a comment in order to enter a contest, and then drawing a winner randomly from those who participate. Ree Drummond, author of the Pioneer Woman Cooks blog, does this; in a July 2011 contest, more than 40,000 comments were left on a giveaway blog post.

Also, get involved with your blogging community. Visit other blogs and use their comment systems to get involved with their readers. In return, if you're active enough with your comments, those readers visit you, as well.

Enabling comments

Most modern blog software, regardless of whether it's hosted or installed on your own web server (see Chapter 3), has tools that allow your visitors to comment and tools that allow you to handle the comments you receive. Check your documentation to figure out what functionality the software you're using offers — and don't forget that you may be able to customize the way in which your comment tools are configured to better suit your preferences and audience.

If you find yourself in a situation in which you use software that doesn't have that capability, and you can't change software, you can find third-party solutions. In fact, many bloggers who use top-of-the-line blog software opt to use another tool for comments because they want specific functionality.

One such tool is DISQUS (www.disqus.com), which offers a truly impressive range of functionality options — plus, it's free! You can use it to

- ✓ Allow visitors to track comments via e-mail or RSS.
- ✓ Allow visitors to rank comments on the site or reply to a comment directly.
- ✓ Allow visitors to flag comments as inappropriate or spam.
- ✓ Sort how the comments appear, either by date or popularity.
- ✓ Moderate comments to remove, edit, and screen out unwanted content.

Managing Comments

Like all good things, comments require care and feeding. Although I believe the resulting community dialogue makes that effort worthwhile, I can't deny that managing comments involves real work and time. In the following sections, I talk about ways you can set up your blog for comments, prevent possible problems, and deal with problems if they do crop up.

Establishing community guidelines

You want comments, but you want the *right* comments. Ideally, your visitors provide on-topic, interesting, and never ever profane feedback. Of course, we don't live in an ideal world, so setting some community guidelines for participation on your site can help clarify your expectations to your readers. Make those guidelines straightforward and clear. Your rules may exclude anything you want. Common blog rules outlaw comments that include

- ✓ Racist or bigoted speech
- ✓ Sexually explicit content
- ✓ Discussions or descriptions of violent or criminal acts
- ✓ Unlicensed copyrighted material
- ✓ Threats, harassment, or personal privacy violations

You have to enforce these rules, but simply having them in place can deter troublemakers from posting at all, particularly if you're scrupulous in enforcing your guidelines quickly.

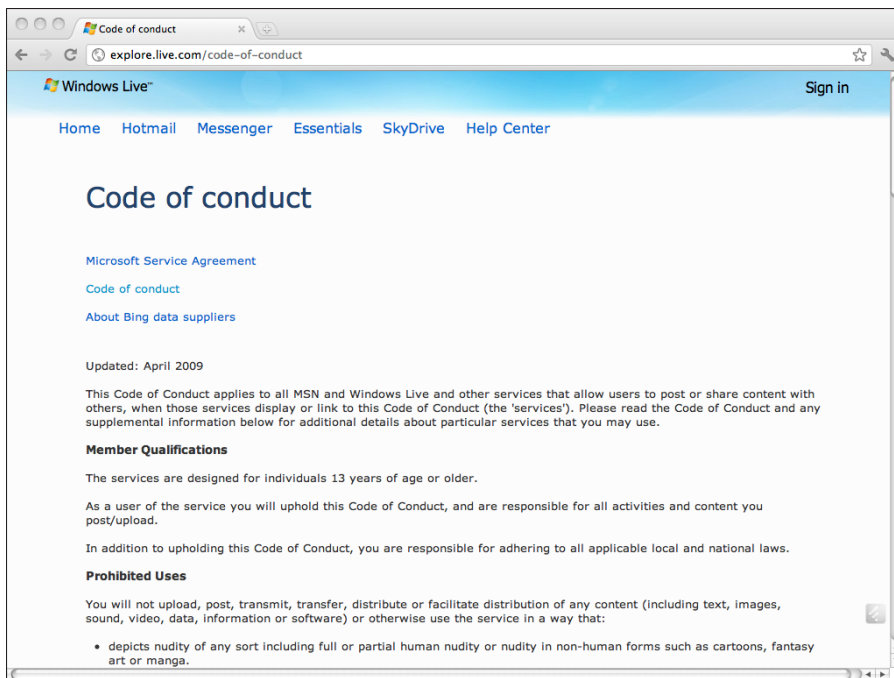
The blogging software solution that you use might also have a set of standards in place with which both you and your visitors must comply. For example, Microsoft Windows Live Spaces (<http://home.spaces.live.com>), a hosted blogging solution, has a community code of conduct that you must enforce on your blog (shown in Figure 9-1). Every hosted blogging service has its own set of rules that you should be aware of. Don't get caught breaking the rules!



You may need to adapt any guidelines that you create over time, especially while your blog grows in popularity or changes its focus. Be sure to set a time every so often to review your own guidelines and make changes. You might include your visitors in the development of the community guidelines, checking with your readers about what you do to protect them. They'll love you for it.

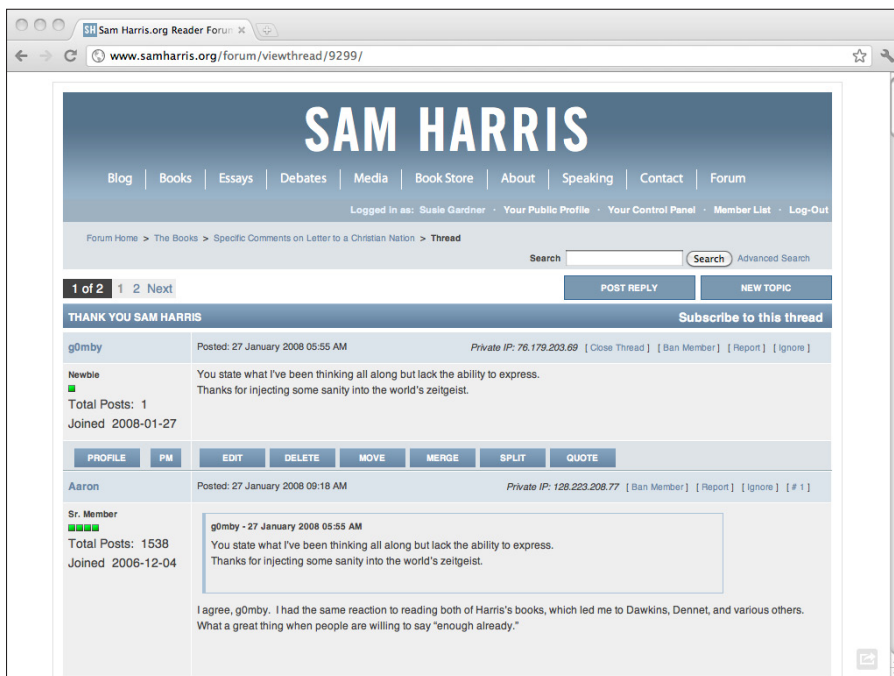
Figure 9-2 shows the blog comment policy written by Kathryn Lord, who blogs about online dating and relationships on her website (www.find-a-sweetheart.com). For Kathryn, it all comes down to having common courtesy for her and for other readers — mud-slinging comments are history.

Figure 9-1:
Microsoft
Windows
Live Spaces
has a com-
munity code
of conduct
for its
system.



Microsoft product screen shot reprinted with permission from Microsoft Corporation.

Figure 9-2:
Kathryn
Lord makes
it clear in
her blog pol-
icy that she
maintains
the appro-
priate level
of courtesy.



On Greg Mankiw's blog for economics students, he asked his readers to simply treat each other with respect: "Please approach this blog with the civility you would bring to a college seminar. Don't post anything here that you wouldn't say to a fellow seminar participant face to face." You can read Greg's full blog comment policy at <http://gregmankiw.blogspot.com/2006/09/comments-policy.html>. Unfortunately, Greg Mankiw couldn't enforce his comments policy and decided to close comments entirely.



If you're thinking about writing a blog comment policy, take a look at what other bloggers have done. A quick search on Google for **blog comment policy** turns up some well-done policies that might give you ideas. And remember, you can add a blog comment policy at any time and amend your policy as needed.

Editing comments

Sometimes, a reader posts a legitimate comment that you need to alter in some way. For example, you might prefer to remove profanity from otherwise legitimate comments or edit a long web link that's breaking a page layout. Whatever the situation, edit a reader's comments delicately.

Some of your readers might react poorly to having their words edited, and of course, the last thing you intend is to insult a reader by pointing out spelling or grammar issues. Use a sensitive hand, but remember that a comment on your blog is as much a part of the conversational give-and-take as your original blog posts. Not only that, but you're also responsible for the words on your blog and may feel that you have a duty to remove hateful or offensive language, especially if young audiences read your blog.



Your blog is your domain, your kingdom, and your place in the world, so your word is final.

Of course, when you choose to edit a comment, you might want to alert readers that you have done so and why, as I've done in comment #7 on my own blog, shown in Figure 9-3. You may also want to lay out in your blog comment policy circumstances in which you'll edit comments. Both these techniques can head off accusations of censorship.

Deleting comments

Unfortunately, not all the comments on your blog are fun to read, or are even remarks that should stay on your blog. When it comes right down to it, you control which comments appear on your blog, whether you moderate them ahead of time or afterward. You need to moderate comments because quite a few of your blog's comments probably come from spammers and add nothing to the conversation. But sometimes, you may need to delete comments from real people that are even on topic. Every blogger has to make a choice about what kinds of comments to delete.

An edited comment

Figure 9-3:
If you need
to edit
comments,
let people
know that
you've done
so and why.



Bloggers choose to delete comments for several reasons:

- ✓ Comments are off-topic for the post to which they're attached (a common issue with spam comments).
- ✓ Comments make personal attacks on the blogger or other readers. For example, many bloggers draw the line at comments that contain racial slurs, name-calling, hate language, or speculation about things such as sexual orientation. People who leave these types of comments are often called *trolls*.
- ✓ Comments left anonymously or by using a fake name and e-mail address.
- ✓ Comments feature a URL apparently included for marketing purposes.
- ✓ Comments are libelous.
- ✓ Comments are obscene.

- ✓ Comments contain private information (which you don't want to make public).
- ✓ Comments contain plagiarized material.



TIP

In blogging terms, a *troll* is an individual who posts irrelevant and often inflammatory things in blog comments. Trolls try to get an emotional response out of people and can be quite disruptive. Most blogs won't see any troll activity, but if you become popular, they will make an appearance from time to time.



REMEMBER

Deleting comments is quite a personal decision, one that any good blogger runs into. After all, you want to get people talking, so you need to have opinions that can start dialogue. A milquetoast approach doesn't make an interesting blog, even if it does prevent offensive comments.

Most blog readers can accept that you get to make the decisions about which comments stay and which get the heave-ho on your own blog. Nobody likes to have their comments deleted, however, and readers often criticize bloggers when those bloggers delete comments, especially when the readers don't know why the bloggers deleted those comments. If you find yourself being questioned about deleted comments, you can always write a blog post about how you deal with comments and remind your readers about your blog's comment policy, or refer them to your comment policy if you have one.

Moderating comments

The single best solution for keeping spam off your blog is to read each and every comment left on your blog individually, removing the comments that are spam or inappropriate. Sifting through your blog's comments is called *moderating*. Moderating your blog comments can add overhead to your blogging time, but if you're dedicated to making your blog successful and useful to your readers, it's time well spent.

You have several options for how you manage the time that you spend looking through comment lists, but the method you choose as your primary line of defense depends on how your community grows.

You, your community, your software, or a combination of all three can moderate your blog. Table 9-1 covers the pros and cons of three approaches that you can try. Some bloggers have strong preferences at the outset, but you can experiment with the best setup for your blog and readers.

Table 9-1 Comment Moderation Options		
<i>Approach</i>	<i>Pro</i>	<i>Con</i>
Review all comments <i>before</i> they're posted on your blog.	No spam ever appears on your blog unless you choose to allow it.	Comments are delayed before they're posted, making your blog not very spontaneous and rather slow-paced.
Review all comments <i>after</i> they're posted on your blog.	Comments appear on your blog more quickly, making conversation quick-paced.	You must review and remove unwanted comments frequently, probably daily.
Ask your readers to notify you of inappropriate comments.	Cuts down on your comment moderation hours by pointing you to problem comments quickly.	Turns your readers into police, a role that they might enjoy too much or not at all, changing the conversational tenor.
Let software weed out the bad stuff.	Using a combination of blacklists and whitelists (see more on these technologies in the section "Blacklists and whitelists," later in this chapter) means that you don't have to read through a lot of spam yourself.	You need to keep the software up to date because spammers always work out new ways to cheat the system, so budget time for behind-the-scenes technical work; software is ineffective against personal attacks or flames.

You can most easily maintain your sanity by using a combination of the methods in Table 9-1 to control spam. If your site becomes a popular location for online discussion, experiment with these methods to find one that suits you and your readers, while letting you keep enough time in your schedule for actually writing new blog posts!



Some blogs have communities that build quickly, whereas others take more time. You might need to change your spam prevention methods from time to time in order to take advantage of the community desire to help.

Recognizing Spam Comments

Spam! It's everywhere, lurking in your e-mail inbox, waiting to pounce on an unsuspecting click. It also hangs out on your blog, hiding in the comments —

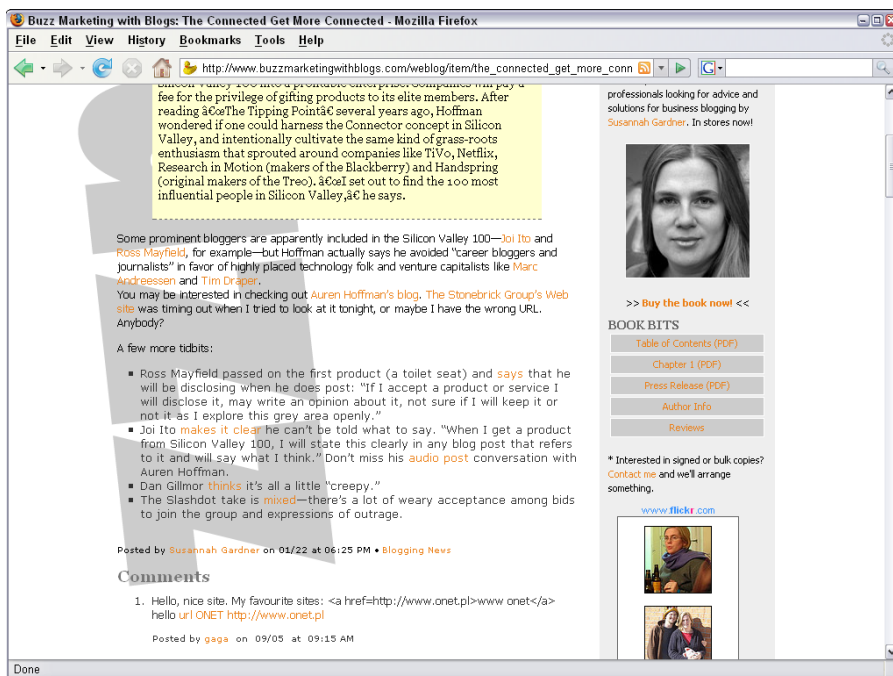
you might never escape it! Fortunately, you can slow the stream of spam messages, and even block most of them from appearing on your blog.

I don't recommend disabling comments just to keep out the spam. Blog comments are crucial for the life and health of your blog; if you want to make your blog more than just another website by having real conversations with your readers, you can't forego comments. You have to take the good with the bad. And I won't lie about the bad: Fighting spam can consume valuable time and energy. If you're serious about blogging, you have to do it, no matter how unrewarding it feels. It's like taking out the trash: no fun, but if you don't do it, your house fills with garbage.

Any unwanted message that someone posts in the comment area of your blog is spam, especially those messages that include links to fabulous drug cocktails, unbelievable mortgage opportunities, and solutions to certain . . . ahem . . . anatomical size problems (which, naturally, you don't have).

The first time you see a spam comment on your blog, you might not recognize it. Long ago, you could easily pick out the spam posts on blogs: They consisted of incomprehensible text, inappropriate images, and links to pornographic websites. But, while the blogs evolved, so did the spammers, and today's spam comments might look like anything from a sincere compliment to a request for more information. Figure 9-4 shows a spam comment that was left on one of my blogs.

Figure 9-4:
A spam
comment,
disguised as
a real
comment.





You — your brain and eyes — protect your blog from the outside world. If something looks suspicious to you, check it out so that you can protect yourself, your readers, and your search engine ranking.

Because you're the first line of defense, you need to get a feel for the comments that are legitimately posted on your site. Take some time to see what your community is like. If your blog community needs time to grow, venture out onto other blogs and see what people are saying:

- ✓ Look at real comments and see how they're written.
- ✓ Get involved and add your own commentary to other blogs. The more experience you have at posting comments, the better you can identify the spam on your site.

When you take the time to read real comments, you can more easily spot the spam.

Spam has certain styles. Spammers attempt to weasel into your site by looking like they have personal or generally harmless content. Sometimes, you can't tell a legitimate comment that has poor grammar and spelling from a spam comment that has similar attributes. Spammers count on this confusion. You may find sorting the wheat from the chaff a tricky bit of business, but by following a few tips, you can get through the spam onslaught with as little frustration as possible. Examine the following types of comments with skepticism:

- ✓ **Personalized and customized messages:** A real human being creates this type of spam, as opposed to an automated bit of programming. Usually a human being, paid by a spam company, visits your blog, reads a few posts and a few comments, and then customizes messages that fit in with the tone and style of the site. Often, the spammers even direct these messages to you by name. You can easily miss these messages when you're watching for spam comments.

If the link that's included with a comment isn't related to the subject of the comment or the topics on your blog, the comment is suspect, no matter how on-topic it might seem.
- ✓ **Generic commentary or questions:** The generic message spam either requests that you do something or makes a very nonspecific remark. You often see comments such as, You've got the same name as I do, Have you seen the new video?, Check out my blog?, Need you to do something for me, or Your blog is broken you need to see this.
- ✓ **Flattery:** Finally, spammers use flattery. Spammers may send comments such as Your blog is awesome or I like your blog, click to read mine. As a general rule, regard these kinds of brief praise with suspicion (well, unless your blog really is awesome, of course!). Real fans usually elaborate more about what they like about your writing.

Understanding why spam exists

Junk snail mail, e-mail spam, and blog spam all exist for the same reason: because someone, somewhere, makes money on them. You may find this fact hard to believe if you just look at spam comments — a lot of them don't really make much sense, much less look like something you might click.

But spam comments aren't necessarily designed to make you or your readers click them. Blog spammers usually just want to raise the search engine profile of a site that they link to in their comments. Search engines use secret formulas to determine the result listings that you see when you do a search. The formula works to determine and display the most relevant results — the ones that best match your search terms — at the top of the list. One of the ingredients in this secret formula is the number of websites that link to a site, and another ingredient is the words used for that link.

So, when you write a blog post about a company that has a product you love and link to the company, you're really doing it two favors: You've praised it publicly, and you've given

it a little boost in the search engine rankings, which helps it come up a little higher the next time someone searches for the product you reviewed. Aren't you nice? Now imagine that ten more customers do the same thing on their blogs. The company gets a lot of search engine love for all those different links.

Spammers are trying to scam this process by creating dozens, even hundreds, of links from many different web pages to the website that they're attempting to boost in the search engine rankings. When a site appears high in the search engine rankings, you know what happens: More people visit it more often.

Ultimately, comment spam might simply want to get people to visit a particular website, but it takes a fairly indirect path to that result. After someone opens the website, the unfortunate visitor might get a chance to buy a product, click a link, provide information that he or she shouldn't about bank accounts, or view a page that has ads on it. And that's where the spammers make profit.



In general, a spam comment includes a link, usually to an advertising website or a site designed to look like a blog. The spammers hope that you or your blog visitors click the link, giving those spammers a traffic boost and potentially allowing them to collect a fee based on the number of times users visit the site or click a link. Look closely at comments that include links.

Many comment spammers are annoyingly ingenious about finding ways to disguise their messages. (Some aren't — you can easily recognize as spam the comments about Viagra or the ones that contain gibberish.) But the generic nature of comments gives them away. Keep your wits about you so that you can identify new trends and formats in comment spam techniques when they appear. The techniques described in this chapter can help you prevent or remove spam, but the human brain is endlessly inventive, which keeps the spammers a step ahead of any software solution to the problem.



Don't just leave comment spam on your blog and let your readers sort through the mess. Spam attracts spam: If you don't remove these kinds of comments, you actually end up with more spam on your site. And, when your readers click the spam links, spammers realize that you're not tending your blog, so they flock to it. Delete your spam. Your readers will thank you.

Unfortunately, spam isn't the only unwanted comment material you might deal with. Some of your legitimate commenters may use language that you don't want on your blog or post personal, offensive *flames* (or attacks) aimed at you or other readers. You're just as entitled to remove this kind of comment as you are to remove spam. In most cases, you can use the techniques described in the following section to handle flames and spam comments alike.



Don't avoid blogging just because of the amount of spam you're bound to get. After all, junk messages aren't anything new. You see spam in your e-mail all the time; heck, you even see it in your snail mail box, and you probably aren't about to stop getting mail delivered, right?

Fighting Spam with Software

Spam is a pain. But consider how much spam you really have to deal with: Do you get three spam messages every few weeks, or are you getting 500 an hour? If you're receiving only a few every month, you might not need to install any software because you can moderate the few problem comments yourself pretty easily. If your blog gets dozens of comments every day, however, spam fighting can take up a lot of your time. The following sections explore some of the many blog software solutions available to make this task a little faster and easier.

Protecting your comment form

The tools described in the following sections are designed to give spammers trouble filling out the comment form on your blog. These tools try to prevent the spam from ever reaching your blog so that you don't need to deal with reading and deleting it.



These tools do that job fairly well, but they also present something of a barrier to people who want to leave a legitimate comment; remember, you want to cut down on spam, not real comments! Keep your audience's needs and abilities in mind when you implement any spam-fighting tools.

CAPTCHAs

A *CAPTCHA* (an acronym for something really long and boring) is a challenge-response test, meaning it's a question that your reader must answer correctly in order to post a comment. On a blog, CAPTCHAs are most commonly implemented in such a way that humans can complete them but computers can't. A CAPTCHA on the World Hum travel site (www.worldhum.com) requires the would-be commenter to duplicate the letters and numbers shown in an image in order to submit a comment, as shown in Figure 9-5.

CAPTCHAs were created to stop spammers from adding comments to blogs by using automated scripts that try to fill out any web form that they find, especially blog comment forms. But spammers are inventive: Some blog comment scripts can now recognize letters and numbers in an image, so many sites that use CAPTCHAs distort the text by stretching it, or layering it with graphic random graphic elements.

Other sites use CAPTCHA questions that are simple for humans to answer, such as trivia or mathematical questions. For example, "What color is a red balloon?" These kinds of CAPTCHAs are new and have yet to prove their effectiveness, but you might want to check into them and see for yourself how they work.

The screenshot shows a web browser window titled "Turn Up the Tunes, Break Out Your Phrasebooks - Features - World Hum - Mozilla Firefox". The address bar shows the URL <http://www.worldhum.com/features/speakers-comes/turn-up-the-tunes-break-out-you>. The page content includes a comment form with the following elements:

- A message: "NO COMMENTS FOR Turn Up the Tunes, Break Out Your Phrasebooks."
- A section titled "ADD A COMMENT" with a note: "NOTE: We reserve the right to remove comments with profanity, personal attacks, spam, overt advertisements or other inappropriate material." and a link "View our Privacy Policy »".
- Form fields for "Name:", "Email:", and "Website:" (with a pre-filled value "http://").
- A large text area for the comment.
- A CAPTCHA challenge box with the text "pawpaws such" and a prompt "Type the two words:". Below the prompt is a small image of the CAPTCHA text.
- Checkboxes for "Remember me" (checked) and "Notify me of follow-up comments".
- A "Submit" button.
- Footer text: "Photos Courtesy: REUTERS | iStockPhoto | flickr", "©2009 World Hum, All Rights Reserved", and links for "About Us", "Submissions", "For Advertisers", "Visitor Agreement", and "Privacy Policy".

Figure 9-5: On World Hum, the visual CAPTCHA is designed to let humans leave comments and block spam scripts.

Your blog software may have CAPTCHA technology built in, or you might be able to add one by using a plug-in. Check your blog software's documentation and support tools for suggestions on installing and configuring a CAPTCHA system.

User registration

Registration is a popular option with larger communities, especially online forums. The community requests or even requires that users who want to leave comments sign up for a user account. These accounts are typically free, but to complete the registration process, you must provide a name and valid e-mail address, thereby cutting down on the number of spam scripts that can create an account and therefore post comments. Sites that require registration actually prevent anyone who isn't registered from leaving a comment; sites that simply request registration reward registering by recognizing members or by marking a registered user's comments in some highlighted way.

This setup lets you keep a record of everything that a particular poster adds to the system, easily identifying your most frequent contributors and visitors. Also, if a poster gets out of hand, or an automated spam system acquires an account and posts by using that username, you can simply close the account and stop the poster from posting again by using that account.

Blog software is increasingly offering registration, so be sure to check your documentation. If your software doesn't offer registration, look for a plug-in that does.

Screening for spam

Software that filters the incoming comments in various ways can provide a defense against spammers by identifying and removing comments that look like spam. These filters give a blogger great tools: They run all hours of the day and they don't require any effort on your part. But an automated process is never as smart as a human, so you might occasionally lose a valid comment if you use a filtering system.

A third-party software solution called Automattic Akismet (see the sidebar "Akismet," later in this chapter) is the clear leader when it comes to spam filtering, though many blogging software applications have added their own internal tools, as well. Check to see whether your blog software has any of these technologies in place for you to use; you can probably find some of them available. If you don't, check <http://akismet.com/development> to see whether you can add Akismet to your blog.

Keyword filtering

Keyword filters can help you identify incoming comment spam. This kind of filtering is probably the oldest type of protection for blog comments. It might

not work all the time because spammers have become much smarter since this technology was first used. Spam filtering usually works by comparing incoming comments against lists of words and/or phrases associated with spam. Matches indicate spam, and the filter yanks those comments.

Keyword filters are typically updated frequently to keep up with the ploys that spammers use. Some of these lists contain web addresses and other computer identification information, as well as keywords. Users also can submit and maintain their own lists in case custom spelling or other methods of tricking the anti-spam system come into use (for example, using *Vlagra*, rather than *Viagra*).

Several services over the years have allowed different blog tools and platforms to take advantage of a central keyword listing. These lists are maintained and updated by a third-party company. Today's most popular anti-spam system, Akismet (see the sidebar "Akismet," later in this chapter), falls into this category.



One problem with this kind of filter system is that some spammers leave nice messages that include bad links. These messages get past the filter because they aren't offensive and don't violate any rule that you have.

Blacklists and whitelists

A blog *blacklist* is a method of keeping spam off your website by preventing certain known spam systems from accessing your comment system or your website as a whole. By specifically identifying spammers from certain addresses, countries, or computers, or by using certain URLs, you can block those individual spammers, keeping your blog much safer.

Most blogging software comes with a blacklist system built in or a system that you can easily add by using a plug-in or third-party solution. Consult your blog software documentation to be sure that you understand how to keep your blacklist up to date and how you can contribute to the blacklist.

Whitelists perform the opposite action of a blacklist by specifically permitting certain visitors or types of visitors. A *whitelist* is a preselected list of visitors whom you know won't post spam on your blog. Bloggers use a whitelist in conjunction with a blacklist. Whitelists can allow you to accept comments from visitors who have been misidentified as spammers in the past. Essentially, you're making your blog accessible to certain people or computer networks. If you want to guarantee that your mother, for instance, can always post to your blog — or even if you want to set it up so that she doesn't have to comply with a CAPTCHA or other anti-spam techniques — add her to the whitelist so that she can post with impunity. Whitelists are uncommon, so if your blogging software doesn't offer this functionality, you probably can't find a good third-party solution.

IP banning

Similar to blacklists, IP banning prevents certain IP addresses or a range of IP networks from accessing your website. IP banning is probably the oldest method of protecting blogs.



An IP (Internet Protocol) address is a series of numbers that identifies a network, a computer, or any networked electronic device within a computer network. Devices such as printers, fax machines, desktop and laptop computers, and some telephones can have their own IP addresses.

Many blog software solutions offer lists of banned IP addresses that they collect from other users of the same software who have identified spammers, and you can automatically update your own list to prevent those spammers from posting to your site.

A potential problem with banning networks or certain IP addresses is that the offending poster may connect via a different IP address the next time that he or she posts something. Banning by IP address can work for known spam companies, but it's highly fallible because so many computers regularly obtain new IP addresses through their Internet Service Providers (ISPs). IP banning can also affect people whom you don't actually want to block. For instance, if you block a computer on a particular network, others who use the same network but are blameless might end up using the offending IP address at some point and be blocked. Many bloggers discount IP banning, saying that it has no real usefulness in today's mobile world.

Akismet

One anti-spam service is worth a special mention: Automattic Akismet (www.akismet.com). The Akismet service has been around since the latter half of 2005, and it's one of the best spam-filtering systems in the world. Plus, it's very easy to use. While you moderate your comments, a simple series of links and buttons helps you make quick choices about good and bad comments.

Akismet works by running your comments through a central data center. The Akismet system runs a number of tests each time a user submits a comment, and if the comment passes

all the tests, Akismet automatically posts the comment to your site. It holds comments that fail the tests in a queue for your review so that you can identify any valid comments and post them. (Or you can just delete them all without going through them.)

The software updates itself and maintains the blacklist that it uses, so after you install it on your blog, you don't have to do anything to keep it up and running. Akismet is free for personal use but requires a monthly fee for commercial use. Also, some deals are available for non-profit organizations.

Dealing with Coverage on Other Blogs

You can't do much about negative blog posts or comments about you on other blogs, although many a blogger has stayed awake all night worrying. (It doesn't seem to help.) You can easily post a comment that responds, but you may not want to respond when you're feeling angry and emotional because you may post something you would regret.



You're taking part in a public conversation, and free speech means that people can openly express their opinions about you, your blog, your opinions, your business — you name it. You can find negative criticism hard to take, especially when you feel it's unjustified. Before you send off an angry e-mail or post a vicious comment, sit back and take a little time to consider your options. If you can be objective, try to understand exactly what the other person is criticizing and whether the critic has a point.

Here are four ways that you can handle a case in which another blogger posts a negative statement about you or your blog:

- ✓ Point to the negative coverage on your own blog and get some other opinions on the issue without taking a position yourself.
- ✓ Ignore the post and comment about it only when someone specifically requests your opinion.
- ✓ Post respectful comments on the blog in question and constructively add to the conversation there.
- ✓ Counter the criticism, in a respectful manner, on your own blog.

Whichever path you choose, make sure that you deal with the comment in a respectful manner. You can easily escalate a conflict online because you don't have to deal with people face to face. The anonymous feeling people get when they're on the Internet can lead them to behave in ways that they wouldn't in person. Try to take the high road as much as possible, if only because an uninvolved reader is more likely to see you as right if you handle things more courteously than your critic.

In some cases, criticism of an individual or business on a blog has led to legal ramifications, from copyright violation to libel. If you feel that the negative comments about you online might fall into the legal realm, consult with a lawyer about the best course of action.



You might not be the only target of criticism: Some bloggers use their blogs as a way to publish attacks on everyone, from public figures to private individuals. Some other bloggers might even attack your readers and ignore you. Deal with these kinds of situations quickly and with as much care as you can provide. Think of yourself as the referee in a situation that involves personal attacks from one member of your audience to another, and look for ways to defuse the situation and prevent future occurrences.

Chapter 10

Blogging Anonymously

In This Chapter

- ▶ Deciding how anonymous you need to be
- ▶ Understanding the basics of being anonymous
- ▶ Getting into the technical details
- ▶ Digging into resources on anonymous blogging

Ever been on a blog and had difficulty figuring out who is writing it? That might be intentional, especially if the topic of the blog is sensitive. Many bloggers who want to be heard in a public forum prefer to do so without using their real names.

Perhaps you are thinking about blogging about politics but hold a position where your political views shouldn't be common knowledge. Maybe you're a survivor of childhood abuse who wants to contribute to current discussion and help other adults, but without having your identity become common knowledge. You might work for an employer that you believe is engaging in unsafe business practices and feel ethically obligated to share that information; getting fired would mean you don't have access to office information any longer. Or perhaps you have a personal journal that details your essentially mundane life, but would just prefer for others not to know who you are.

Many bloggers rely on (perceived) anonymity to keep one aspect of their lives from becoming attached to the others. However, the nature of the Internet and digital identity means that it can be surprisingly easy to connect the dots from one Internet service to another. As potential employers, family members, potential relationship partners, and others research you, they may find information you want them to have, mixed right in with information that isn't appropriate. An Internet search on your name might return your risqué Flickr photos in the same list of results as your professional resume. Anonymity seems like the answer.



Before you start down the path of anonymous blogging, it's worth really asking yourself the question of whether it's worthwhile to put something online if it would cause a problem if it was linked to you. The single best way to prevent others from finding out information you want kept private, or information you don't want your name on, is to keep it out of the public eye. And let's be clear: The Internet is as public as it gets.



Please regard this chapter as a resource, guideline, and starting point, and not a recipe for guaranteed anonymity. Technology and laws change, and although what I say here may help protect your identity, it should not take the place of you doing your own research, and of making your own decisions about what to publish. This is especially true if you are using this book some time after its publication, or are outside of North America. Basically, I make no guarantees that following this advice means your identity will remain unknown.

Also, this is not meant to protect you from being caught for doing anything illegal. Don't break any laws, and if you do, don't post anything about it on the Internet. Seriously.

Deciding How Much Anonymity You Need

The reasons for a decision to blog anonymously may be widely varied, and so are the potential consequences of being found out. What this means is that not every blogger needs the same level of identity protection. A teenager dishing on his friends might not want to get caught, but if he is, he's unlikely to face the risk of criminal prosecution (or worse) as would, say, a political activist in a country where free speech is not protected.

Give some thought to the level of protection you need, and to what might happen if your identity is exposed. If speaking your mind on your blog puts you at risk for jail time, physical harm, or prosecution, you clearly need to take the utmost levels of precautions as you go about setting up and publishing to your blog.

Those who choose to blog about topics their employers might object to, or even to blog about their employers, clearly also need to be very careful, although the consequences of being identified here are likely to involve finances rather than physical safety.

The next question is whether anyone is going to pursue discovering your identity. There are also those who might simply prefer to keep some facets of their lives separate from others. A soccer mom might prefer that her kids don't stumble across her personal musings on sexuality, for example — but in reality her kids aren't going to go looking for a blog like that, much less have access to technology or legal resources to connect the dots.

Having said that, keep in mind that anytime you reveal yourself as the author of an anonymous blog, even to a trusted friend, you crack the door open a little wider for that information to become public. Many anonymous bloggers have been exposed not through complicated technical detective work, but because someone chose to leak a secret.

While you're thinking about risks, consequences, and who might put two and two together, pause and give some thought to others who might be harmed if your identity was revealed. If you can be identified, and you've blogged about friends, family, former relationships, employers, and others in unflattering ways, or revealed sensitive information about them, you're putting possible consequences into their lives, too. Risks that might be acceptable for you may not be so for others, particularly if they are put in harm's way unknowingly.



I recommend you read through this whole chapter before taking any of these steps, because I move from low- to high-level precautions; if you decide you need to set yourself up at the highest level, some steps described later need to be done first.

Going Anonymous

Clearly, you shouldn't use your own name or photo on your anonymous blog. Beyond that, there are still other basic precautions you should take while setting up protections for your identity. Most of them are based on good common sense.

Establishing a pseudonym

It's obvious, but I'll say it anyway: No matter who you are, what your blog is about, or what might happen, every single anonymous blogger needs a *pseudonym*. A *pseudonym* is a fake name, preferably one that doesn't cleverly suggest your real name, or provide any clues to who you really are. For example, "CEOsecretary" isn't a good pseudonym for that blog you write about how much your employer irritates you, but "Fed Up Worker" will do just fine.



If you have created an account on a social networking service, or really any sort of membership website, you may have been asked to create a username to use on that site. It might be tempting to use that nickname on your anonymous blog, but don't do so.

For example, you may have noticed in some of the screenshots in this book, that my Gmail address is displayed as `supersusie@gmail.com`. I use the nickname `supersusie` on many websites, and that means it would be a poor choice if I wanted to start an anonymous blog. For one thing, it contains part of my actual name! For another, I use this username across many websites in association with my real name and e-mail address. All it would take is a couple of Internet searches to know that `supersusie` and Susannah Gardner are one and the same person, even if I never used the name Susannah on my personal blog.

So, choose a new pseudonym, one you've never used before.

Setting up a new e-mail address

The next step in anonymity is to set up a new e-mail address using your pseudonym. Whatever blogging service you decide to use, they all require you to have an e-mail address in order to get started, and you can't use an e-mail address that is associated with any of your real identifying information.

Create an entirely new e-mail account (don't use any identifying information in the account settings). As well, don't import your contacts.

There are many free webmail services out there. Ideally, you want to choose a service that offers a secure connection, like Gmail (www.gmail.com) or RiseUp (www.riseup.net). A secure connection means your visit to the e-mail website can't be listened-in on by technical snoopers. You have a secure connection if you can get to the e-mail website prefaced by `https://` instead of `http://`.

Choosing passwords

How many times have you used the same password when signing up for a new web service? If you're like me, it's a bunch! Most people I talk to admit that they have one or two passwords they use in rotation, one that might be a little more secure than the other, or one that they use whenever there is a credit card involved.

Let me tell you a little story: I'm a member of the popular knitting social network Ravelry (www.ravelry.com). Now, Ravelry is a great site for knitters — hardly a high-value target. They also don't ask for much personal information and they don't store financial data or other important records. But in June 2011, the site was targeted by hackers who managed to break into a server and capture many of the Ravelry community usernames and passwords. While the passwords were encrypted, Ravelry was concerned that the hackers might be able to crack them. They recommended all Ravelry members change their passwords on the site and stepped up their security precautions.

But there are larger implications for any Ravelry community member who might have used the same username and password on another site. If a hacker tried those usernames and passwords on another, more sensitive site, like a bank site or a photo sharing site, some of those usernames and passwords would probably work. Long story short, choose unique usernames and passwords for any service that you really want to protect — like an anonymous blog.



Ideally, you should choose passwords that contain a variety of lower- and uppercase characters, as well as numbers. You can even use some punctuation characters. Don't choose a password that spells out a word, even if you

replace some of the letters with characters or numbers, and definitely don't use a password that is the name or birth date of a family member or pet.

It's a good idea to change your passwords frequently. It's also a good idea not to write down your passwords or record them anywhere (especially on your computer). Of course, none of this does you any good if you can't remember your passwords as a result, so experiment with some set of good password practices that still lets you log into your services.

I'm a fan of the PC Tools Secure Password Generator (www.pctools.com/guides/password), which lets you generate a random set of characters to create a truly strong password.

Starting your anonymous blog

Your safest bet to maintain your anonymity is to choose hosted blogging software (I talk more about this in Chapter 3) that doesn't require you to have a domain, web hosting, or to buy a license.

Two options are:

- ✓ WordPress.com (www.wordpress.com)
- ✓ Blogger (www.blogger.com)

Be sure to sign up using your anonymous e-mail address, and to leave out any identifying information in the account information, name of the blog, and so on.



Be cautious about what sites you include in a blogroll or link to; putting any of your friends in your blogroll, or linking to your own non-anonymous blog, is a quick trip to outing yourself.

Being time and location aware

One way you might inadvertently give clues about who you are is to suggest what time zone you are in based on when you post to your blog. Consider changing the times and dates of your posts so that they go live at times when you might be asleep or otherwise occupied, but don't go so far as to never post at a time that would be appropriate for your time zone.

Changing the time and date also divorces when you're online and posting from when the post is published, which makes it a little harder to correlate Internet access to a specific person. This can help if someone is trying to track down your identity by accessing log files of when your computer is on the Internet, or when your blog software was accessed.

Approaching Content Cautiously

You are far more likely to be identified because of *what you are writing or posting* than anything else. Be extremely careful about details that provide clues to who you are, where you are, what you do, and so on.

Be very cautious about giving specifics. Here are six examples:

- ✓ The number of employees in your workplace
- ✓ Your geographic location
- ✓ Your profession
- ✓ The stores you commonly shop at
- ✓ The names, numbers, breeds, and descriptions of your pets
- ✓ The names of friends and colleagues

Any single detail likely won't be enough to identify you, but cumulatively they may paint the picture for a savvy reader. This becomes a bigger issue over time: The longer you blog, the more information about yourself you have provided.

Remember that photos are records of a particular time and location, so if you put one on your blog that you took, you're telling the world you were at that location at that time. It's a good idea to remove that photo from your computer, your camera card, and certainly you shouldn't post it anywhere else on the Internet. You also want to scrub any meta information out of the image itself.



When it comes to your subject material, you should be especially careful to understand whether you are violating any laws in what you say. For bloggers, the main concern is libel. *Libel* is any seemingly factual statement that is both false and damaging to a person's reputation.

Publishing harmful information about another individual is a good way to get them interested in figuring out who you are, so that they can stop you or pursue legal action.

Stepping Up Security

Now I talk about the big guns. You have a blog and you *really* need to make sure you aren't identified as the author. For starters, don't do anything that

involves making a credit card payment, like register a domain name, buy a blog software license, or sign up for web hosting. Your credit card information isn't on your blog, but a financial transaction that ties you to the domain of your anonymous blog is a quick route to identification.



Many of the other precautions involve a fair amount of technical know-how. Remember that I am giving you the basics, and use this as a jumping-off point to do more research!

Understanding IP addresses

The primary technical consideration for maintaining anonymity online has to do with your *IP address*. An *IP address*, or Internet Protocol address, is a numeric identifying number assigned to every single device that connects to the Internet, from your computer to your smartphone. An IP address identifies the device uniquely, and works like a mailing address to tell other computers how to find that device.

Every time you go online, you leave a history that includes this IP address, whether all you do is send an e-mail, or post a comment on a blog. This means that if you set up an anonymous blog and the IP address of the device you use to post to the blog can be traced to you, the blog can be attributed to you as well. In fact, some webmail services even include the IP address as part of the header in e-mail messages you send.

An IP address can be permanent — a web server is typically always located at the same IP address — or it can be dynamic, which is the case for most home computers on the Internet. If you access the Internet via an Internet Service Provider, sometimes the IP address is assigned at the time you actually connect to the service. That means your IP address changes, but it can still be traced to the ISP and the right legal pressure can force an ISP to give up the records of which customers used what IP addresses when.



Curious to know what your IP address is? Visit www.whatismyip.com and you see the number at the top of the page.

Clearly, hiding your IP address is necessary for the highest level of identify protection. This is not a simple process, but there are ways to do this. The resources at the end of this chapter can help, and you can also look into:

- ✓ Anonymizer (www.anonymizer.com)
- ✓ Tor (www.torproject.org)
- ✓ Psiphon (www.psiphon.ca)

Using software safely

Even after you implement a good IP address strategy, there are some other important technical ways of protecting yourself. You may not need to do all of these, but remember that every additional precaution lessens your chances of being identified. Here are eight recommendations:

- ✔ Use a web browser that is up-to-date and known to be conscientious about security holes. Mozilla Firefox is a good choice; Internet Explorer is not.
- ✔ Run your browser in Privacy Mode (Private Browsing in Safari).
- ✔ Install and regularly run antivirus software on your computer.
- ✔ Consider encrypting your hard drive. TrueCrypt (www.truecrypt.org) is a good open source tool for Windows and Mac.
- ✔ If you write your posts on your computer, delete them from your computer and use software intended to permanently remove files from your computer. The Mac makes this easy — simply choose Secure Empty Trash from the Finder menu. On the PC, look into installing software like Eraser (<http://security.tacticaltech.org/glossary#Eraser>) or Ccleaner (www.piriform.com/CCLEANER).
- ✔ After you go online to post to your blog, make sure to clear your cookies, passwords, and browser history. The technique for doing this will vary depending on which browser you are using, so be sure to read through the documentation provided to make sure you know how to accomplish these tasks. Clearing your history means that your computer is clean if others use it or it is lost. You should also do this if you use a public computer.
- ✔ Be cautious in how you participate in commenting on blogs, using forums, or signing up for services using your anonymous identity. Many of these services collect IP addresses when you post to them, or when you sign up.
- ✔ Blogging in public is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, using a publicly available computer — in a library or Internet cafe — means muddying the waters in terms of who posted to a blog from that computer. On the other hand, if you're in public, others can likely view your screen, you yourself can be seen, and you don't know what software might be on the computer you are using.

Keeping up

Keep up to date on the technical issues involved. Don't assume you've set things up that will protect you permanently. The Internet is a very fluid place: Technology and tools change constantly, and having all your bases covered today is no guarantee that you will be safe tomorrow. For instance, simply upgrading your browser to the latest version has implications for security!

This goes for legal issues around anonymity as well. Know the laws in your country, or those that apply to you, so that you can be deliberate about what laws you violate (if any), or what the consequences might be if you are identified.

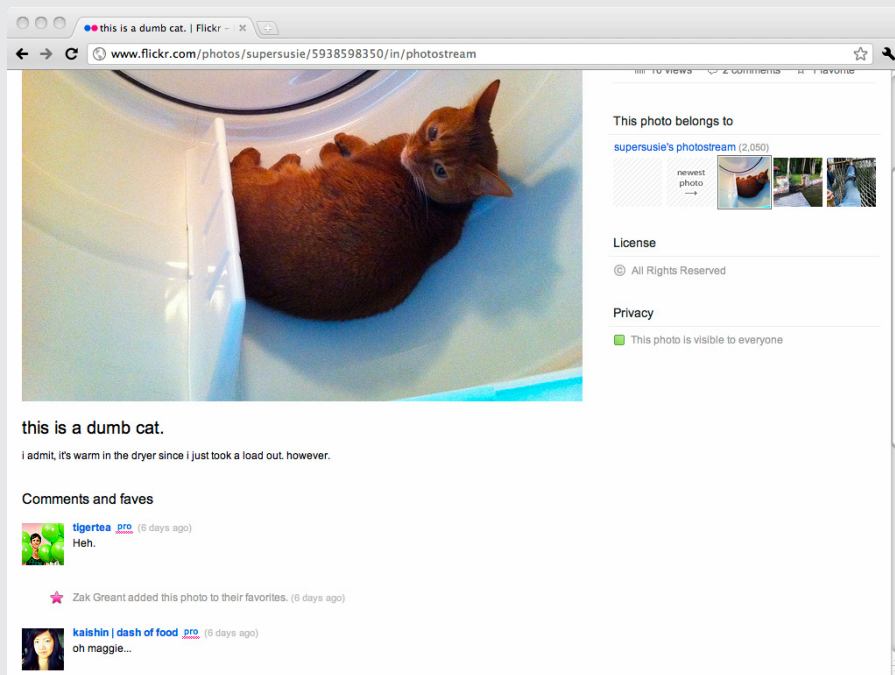
Resources

Above all, don't take my word for any of this! You should do your own research so that you can blog anonymously with confidence. Here are five of the resources I used to research this topic:

- ✓ A Technical Guide to Anonymous Blogging, TechSoup (www.techsoup.org/learningcenter/internet/page6042.cfm)
- ✓ How to Blog Safely (About Work or Anything Else), Electronic Freedom Foundation (www.eff.org/wp/blog-safely)
- ✓ Anonymous Blogging with WordPress & Tor, Global Voices Advocacy (<http://advocacy.globalvoicesonline.org/projects/guide>)
- ✓ How to Communicate Securely in Repressive Environments, iRevolution (<http://irevolution.net/2009/06/15/digital-security>)
- ✓ Hints and Tips for Whistleblowers (<http://ht4w.co.uk>)

Part IV

Going Beyond Words



In this part . . .

If you've mastered the basics, you can have some fun! In this part, you can try some of the truly cutting-edge tricks being used by successful bloggers. They say a picture is worth a thousand words, so photo blogs are going to repay your efforts in a big way. In Chapter 11, you find out how to make the most of photos and other graphics in your blog. Or, say it by simply speaking. I know you, though. You're not satisfied with words and pictures — unless they are moving! Chapter 12 takes you on a tour of the world of podcasting and videoblogging. Chapter 13 tackles the interesting possibilities of opening up the conversation on your blog even further by adding a forum.

Chapter 11

Working with Photos

In This Chapter

- ▶ Getting set up with a digital camera and editing software
 - ▶ Making or collecting images to use on your blog
 - ▶ Using Picasa to edit your photos
 - ▶ Putting Flickr photos into your blog posts
-

It's a fact: People love photos! You can increase your readership and decrease your writing time by including photos in your blog posts or putting photo badges (code you can place on your blog that shows off your photos) into your sidebar. Many bloggers have discovered that including a photo in a blog post, even if the photo is only tangentially related to the post, ensures that more people read the post than read entries without photos.

If you already have a digital camera and photo-editing software, you have the tools at hand to start putting photos into your blog quickly. But if you're new to photography, this chapter also includes information about choosing a digital camera or software.

Putting graphics on the web isn't incredibly hard to do, and today's wonderful photo-sharing websites make posting photos online quick and easy. In fact, if you already have a Flickr account that you use to share your digital photos, you can jump right to the section "Inserting Photos into Blog Posts with Flickr," later in this chapter. You'll be pleased as punch to find out how easily you can do it.

Getting Equipped

Today, digital cameras are quite inexpensive, and using one can expedite the process of putting your photos online. Most digital cameras can take photographs in file formats that you can use on the web with no further processing, but you can also pick up software that helps you convert your photos to the right format quite quickly. Some cameras shoot photos in particular formats, some of which are not web-compatible, so you have to convert them into web-friendly formats like JPG and GIF. (I cover the more nitty-gritty details

of web-compatible file formats and photo editing in the section “Editing Photos,” later in this chapter; if you’re in the market for a camera, make sure that you know in what format or formats the camera captures pictures.)

The ingredients to getting photos onto your website are

- ✓ A camera, preferably a digital camera
- ✓ A way to get your photos from your camera onto your computer, such as a USB cable or scanner
- ✓ Image-editing software that can help you crop, resize, and touch up your photos
- ✓ A photo-sharing service or blog software that has file-upload tools

The following sections cover these items in detail.

Picking a digital camera

Digital cameras come in all kinds of price ranges and with tons of different features. When you take a photograph, the image is saved on a storage card or small hard drive, and many cameras have a nice preview screen that lets you see the results of your photography right away.

When you need your photos, you can remove the storage card from your camera, and then insert it into the card reader hooked to your computer, or even into a printer. You may want to have a removable storage card if you plan to take a lot of pictures because you can easily carry several cards with you, switching them out when you fill one. Some cameras can also connect directly to your computer.



Digital cameras usually come with several quality settings that determine the resolution of your image and the sizes that look good when you print your photograph. If you choose higher-quality settings, the resolution is higher, and the file sizes are also larger. This means fewer images fit on your storage card, but the resulting photos look better, print more sharply, and can be resized more easily than lower-quality images. Web images are usually compressed so that the file sizes are reasonable for visitors to download, but taking images at higher-quality settings (which usually means that the resolution is also higher than is needed for the web) gives you more options down the line and better looking photos even after compression.

Today, even relatively inexpensive digital cameras can take high-quality images suitable for use in almost any medium, so the real challenge is to pick a camera that suits your picture-taking style.

Be realistic about how you plan to use the camera and how comfortable you are with it when you look at the options:

- ✓ **Digital SLRs:** If you're a professional photographer or a dedicated amateur, you likely want a high-end dSLR camera. But these cameras are quite large, which makes them awkward to carry and use unobtrusively on a day-to-day basis. They can be expensive, too.
- ✓ **Low-end point-and-shoots:** If you're a photography amateur, super light-weight cameras can get a lot of admiring glances. But they might lack important features, and their tiny size might also make them hard to use and hold steady.
- ✓ **Midrange:** If you're not a professional photographer but want more than just the basics that low-end cameras provide, look for a camera in the midprice range. These cameras come in a range of styles and sizes, and with a wide range of features designed for use by completely inexperienced to professional photographers.
- ✓ **Mobile cameras (phone cameras):** These days, most phones come with cameras built-in — convenient, but the photos may not look as wonderful as those taken with higher-end cameras.

Start your search by visiting CNET (www.cnet.com) and looking at the product reviews written by CNET editors and readers. Reading through the reviews can help you understand the options and features, and it can give you a feel for the price ranges that include the features you want.

With some CNET recommendations in mind, head for a camera or good electronics store to test-drive some cameras. You need to feel physically comfortable handling and using any camera that you purchase, regardless of how well it was reviewed online.

Another website worth using for camera research is Digital Photography Review (www.dpreview.com). It highlights a collection of digital cameras with lots of detail about different brands and models. This site shows example photos from most of the cameras along with reviews from readers.

Choosing photo-editing software

You need to find a program to help you edit and organize your photos. You have loads of options, at all pricing levels. In fact, your computer might have come packaged with image-editing software, or the digital camera that you purchase might include software.

When you're looking for image-editing software with the ultimate goal of getting your images online, consider these criteria:

- ✓ **File formats:** You need to be able to create images in the right format for display on the web. These formats are JPG, GIF, and PNG. These formats also allow you compress the file size of your images for the web.

- ✓ **Standard editing tools:** At a minimum, you need image-editing software that allows you to resize, crop, rotate, and adjust brightness and contrast in your photos. These tools should be quick and easy to use.
- ✓ **Organizing tools:** Look for software that helps you keep track of your images by using thumbnail previews, naming schemes, and search, especially if you take a lot of photos.
- ✓ **Photo sharing:** You don't need a program that integrates with the blogging tool that you use or with a photo-sharing service such as Flickr, but it can speed up the time it takes to post a photo online. I discuss inserting photos with Flickr in the section "Inserting Photos into Blog Posts with Flickr," later in this chapter.



With these ideas in mind, don't forget to think about whether you want an image editor that can do more than just get photos into shape for online publication. If you plan to print photographs, be sure you look for photo-editing software that has good tools for printing.

I cover two software programs (Picasa and iPhoto) in the following sections. Other image-editing programs also work well for touching up and formatting photographs:

- ✓ **Adobe Photoshop Elements:** Under \$100; version 9 and higher support Windows and Mac (previous versions support only Windows); www.adobe.com/products/photoshop-elements.html. This program is suitable for users who have the patience to figure out how to use a full-featured program but don't need professional features, such as the capability to produce color separations for high-end professional printers. Photoshop Elements is a great compromise between basic and high-end software.
- ✓ **Adobe Photoshop Lightroom:** \$299; Mac and Windows; www.adobe.com/products/photoshoplightroom. This software is intended specifically for photography. Serious amateur photographers and professionals find this program valuable for managing large collections of photographs.
- ✓ **Adobe Photoshop:** \$699; Mac and Windows; www.adobe.com/products/photoshop. For anyone who isn't a designer or very serious photographer, Adobe Photoshop can be overkill. But this program can make your photos look especially great if you are willing to pay the premium price. Advanced editing tools and more control over the quality of the images you are using for your blog put this package heads and shoulders above Adobe Elements' more basic toolset.
- ✓ **Adobe Fireworks:** \$299; Mac and Windows; www.adobe.com/products/fireworks. Although you can use Fireworks to process photos, it's really intended to be a web graphics production tool. If you have it already, use it, but if you're looking over your options, I recommend some of the other products in this list for photo editing.

Picasa

<http://picasa.google.com>

Picasa, from Google, is priced competitively (it's free) and works especially well for photographers who want to put photos online. It has highly developed organizational tools, allowing you to do everything from automatically importing and naming photos from your camera when you hook it up to your computer, to quickly labeling and tagging your photos, to rating good photos, to creating photo albums.

Picasa has good editing tools, but they sacrifice some fine control in favor of being easy to use. You can crop, straighten horizons, fix red-eye issues, adjust color and contrast, and make other edits to your photos easily.

However, the photo-sharing tools set Picasa apart. You can use tools to e-mail photos, get them onto the web, create online slideshows, and put photo collections onto other devices. You can also print photos quite easily, and create slideshows with music and captions.

Picasa (shown in Figure 11-1) is available for Windows, Mac OS X, and Linux.

In the section “Editing Photos,” later in this chapter, I walk you through using Picasa’s simple editing tools.

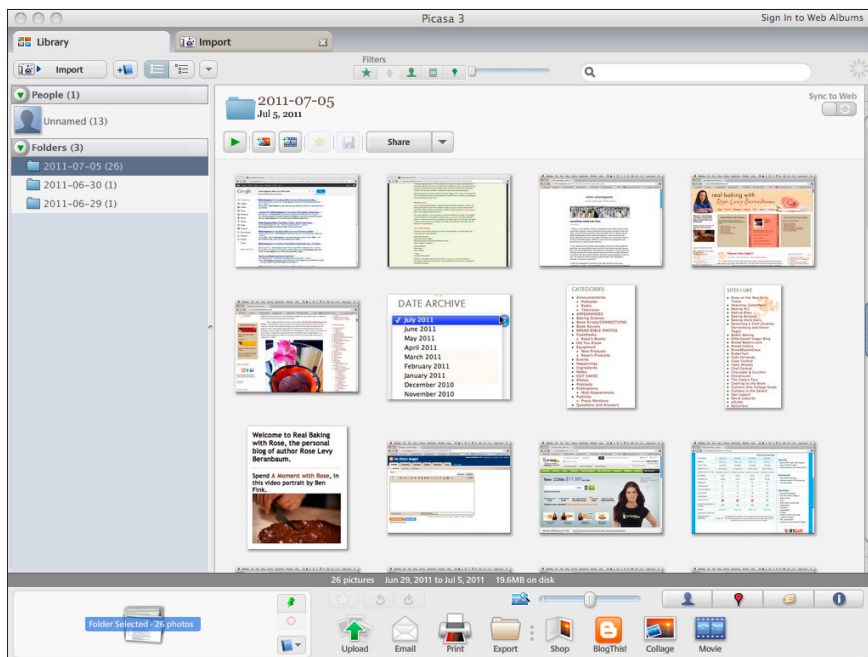


Figure 11-1:
Use Picasa
to quickly
import, edit,
and share
photos.

iPhoto

www.apple.com/ilife/iphoto

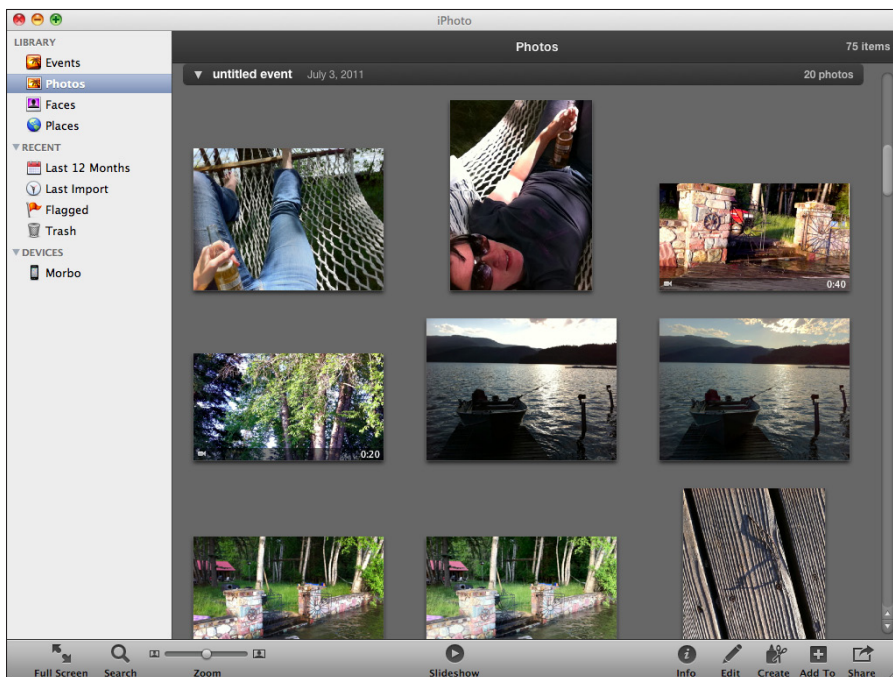
If you're a Mac user, you have a great image-editing program in Apple's iPhoto (see Figure 11-2). It gives you all the basic tools for cropping, straightening, adjusting color and brightness, and resizing. Plus, you can dabble with fun effects, and increase or decrease highlights and shadows in your photos.

iPhoto also comes with excellent organizing tools: You can categorize, tag, caption, and title your photos quickly and easily, and the simple search interface helps you find old photos.

You can use iPhoto for more than publishing your photos on your own blog. Use iPhoto to publish to the MobileMe web service, put up slideshows and albums, and share your photos with groups of friends and family.

You can also use iPhoto to print a real photo album, calendar, cards, and individual prints. iPhoto frequently comes packaged on new Macintosh computers, but if you don't have it, head to the Apple Store (<http://store.apple.com>) and buy a copy of iLife. It includes iPhoto and other digital applications.

Figure 11-2:
iPhoto is
Apple's
solution
to image-
editing and
organization
tools.



Choosing a photo-sharing tool

When you're ready to put your photos online, regardless of whether you ultimately want to include images on your blog, you have plenty of options. Photo-sharing websites have become full-fledged members of the Web 2.0 movement, offering friends lists, tagging, and other sophisticated tools.

The media darling of photo-sharing sites is definitely Flickr (www.flickr.com). For avid photographers, Flickr has nearly replaced the need to have a blog at all because many of the best blogging tools are integrated into the Flickr service.

On Flickr, you can

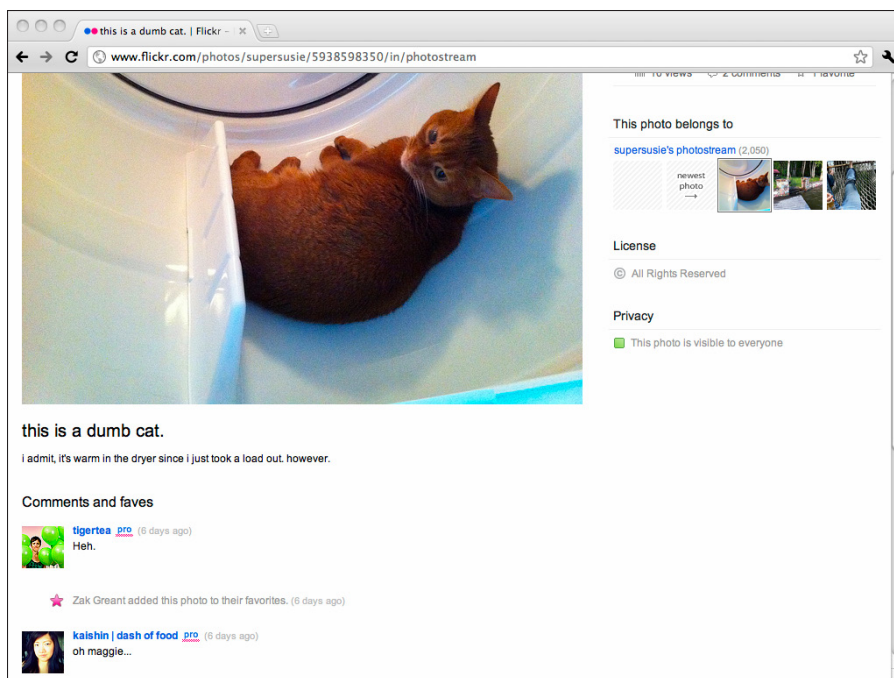
- ✓ Create a list of friends whose photos you want to follow.
- ✓ Upload and organize photos by using *tags* (keywords), sets, and collections.
- ✓ Start groups around a visual theme and add your photos to other groups.
- ✓ Set privacy controls to dictate who can see your photos.
- ✓ Use your photos to create books, prints, calendars, business cards, DVDs, and stamps.
- ✓ Post photos in your account and receive comments (see Figure 11-3).
- ✓ Create slideshows of your photos.
- ✓ Upload, tag, and share video.
- ✓ Browse other members' photos and leave comments.

Basic Flickr accounts are free for 300MB worth of photos and two videos each month. You can display only your most recent 200 photos, though. Pro accounts cost \$24.95 a year and receive unlimited uploading and image display.

In the section “Inserting Photos into Blog Posts with Flickr,” later in this chapter, I show you how to put Flickr to work for you when you want to add images to blog posts.

Flickr isn't alone in offering photo sharing online; it just happens to be my favorite. You can also upload your photos to Photobucket (www.photobucket.com), Shutterfly (www.shutterfly.com), SmugMug (www.smugmug.com), Snapfish (www.snapfish.com), and Webshots (www.webshots.com), among others.

Figure 11-3:
When you
post photos
on Flickr,
your friends
and other
Flickr mem-
bers can
leave
comments
for you.



Whatever service you choose, look for tools that can make your life easier when it comes to putting your photos on your blog. For example, look for services that

- ✓ Integrate well with the camera you own, and/or with your mobile phone if you use it for photography.
- ✓ Let you post a photo to your blog or give you code to put the photo in your blog post.

Choosing Visuals for Your Blog

Far be it from me to tell you how to take photographs — I'm a rank amateur when it comes to photography. But I can give you tips on taking photos that you can use for a new blog post, which I do in the following sections.

Taking photos

Readers respond well to photos: Visitors are more likely to read posts that have photos than those that don't. And, most of the time, your photos and

other images don't have to have a strong relationship to what you're blogging about. In fact, they can go off on a tangential topic or idea.

You can't always throw unrelated images onto your blog, though. After all, if you're blogging about your new mobile phone, go with a picture of that phone. And if you're talking about your recent trip to Peru — well, you need some pictures from your trip. But if you're just pontificating or talking about a favorite book, think about adding a photograph as more of an accessory.

Bloggers often add pictures to posts that just need a little zing, as on the Foodists blog (www.foodists.ca) in the post shown in Figure 11-4. Blog posts about cooking and restaurants are seriously enlivened by the addition of beautiful food photos. Who doesn't salivate at the sight of a beautifully prepared dessert?

If you want to take photographs to put on your blog, keep your eyes open all the time for visuals that inspire or interest you. You don't have to be a rocket scientist to find good picture subjects, but you do need to be thinking about your blog and your camera more often than you might normally. In fact, some bloggers find that carrying a camera with them actually helps them find things to blog about and illustrate regular blog posts.

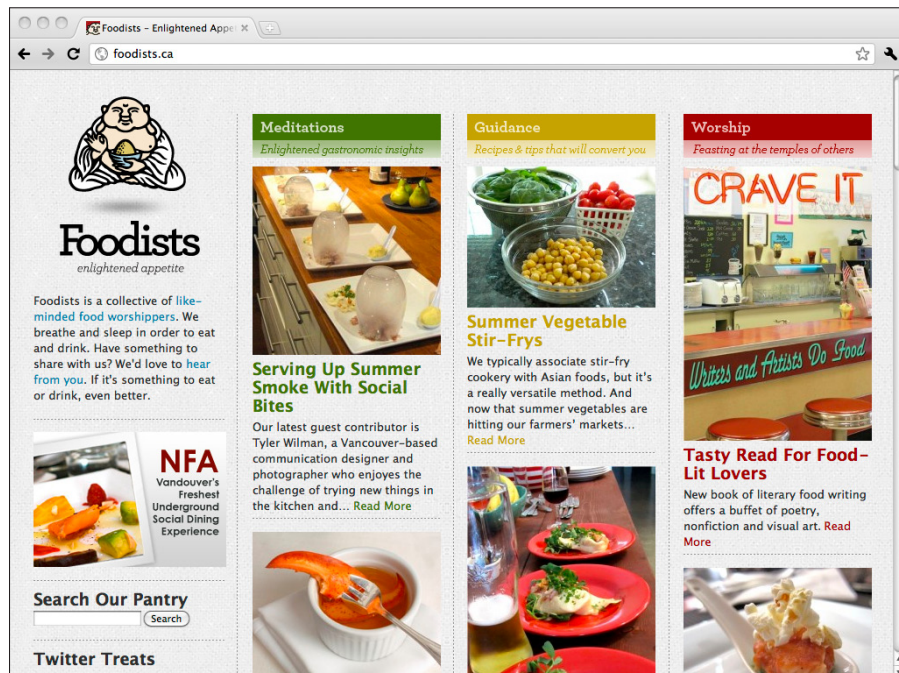


Figure 11-4:
Photos
are an
invaluable
addition to a
food blog.



Here are four tips for taking photos for your blog:

- ✓ Carry your camera with you when you leave the house, even if you're just running down to the grocery store.
- ✓ Keep fresh batteries in your camera so that when you need to use it, it isn't dead. If possible, keep a second set of batteries in your camera pouch. (By the way, digital cameras quickly suck up battery juice, so you really should buy rechargeable batteries, reducing the impact on both your pocketbook and the environment.)
- ✓ Don't worry too much about taking the perfect picture. Just take the picture! Photo editing and good cropping can salvage many a bad shot, but they can't help you if you never even pushed the shutter button.
- ✓ Take photos of the people you meet and talk to, and your friends. Be sure to ask them whether you can use their photos on your blog. Then, when you blog about going to a movie with Bill, you have a photo of Bill to include.

Using art from other sources

One nice thing about the web: You can find tons and tons of photos and other images, graphics, and visuals out there to inspire you. Some bloggers have taken advantage of this vast offering by including some of those great visuals in their blog posts. Photos attract readers' attention better than a few paragraphs of text. You may decide to use photos on your blog, as long as you have the rights to republish those images.

Here are three tips when you need images other than your own:

- ✓ **Check the public domain:** Some materials are designated *public domain* works, which means anyone can use them for any purpose, although you must still give the author credit. If you're interested in featuring public-domain and licensed images on your blog, do a search for **public domain photos** on your favorite search engine. You can investigate a number of good resources.

In the United States, anything published before 1923 is considered public domain, but other countries don't necessarily have the same policy.

- ✓ **Search through Creative Commons:** By using the Creative Commons licensing tool, you can look for works that authors have licensed for republication. To find additional works that you can use, visit <http://search.creativecommons.org> and search by using keywords that describe the material you're looking for. (Creative Commons licenses allow blog authors to make known their copyright wishes for the copying to their blog content.)

- ✓ **Ask for permission:** If you see something that you like and want to use, but it's protected by full copyright, consider simply asking whether you can use it. Many photographers, especially those who don't make a living selling their work, willingly let you use their work, especially if you give them credit!



Many of the photos on the Flickr photo-sharing site (www.flickr.com) have been licensed for use on other websites and blogs. When you're looking at a photo on Flickr, check the copyright information on the right side of the page.

Editing Photos

As long as you have the rights to do so, you can edit any photo. In general, you can do what you like to photos that you acquire from a public domain website or a picture that you take yourself. Photos that you obtain permission to use, or use under a special license, may have restrictions when it comes to making edits. Be sure you understand what you're allowed to do. In the following sections, I show you how to do some of the most common photo-editing tasks using Picasa.

The most common photo-editing tasks are resizing, cropping, adjusting lighting and contrast, and adjusting the color of a photo. For each of the following tasks, you should have Picasa running and have a photo available to edit.

Getting photos into Picasa

Before you can edit a photo, you need to get it into Picasa. Follow these steps:

1. **With Picasa installed on your computer and running, connect your camera to your computer.**

You can also put your camera's storage card into a card reader or printer, if that's how you usually move photos from your camera to your computer.

2. **Click the Import button in Picasa.**

Picasa loads the Import screen.

3. **Use the Import From menu to select the device containing your photos, or identify a folder already on your computer.**

Picasa connects to the device, and displays the available photos.

4. **Select the photo or photos you want to import, and click Import Selected. Or, click Import All to bring the photos into Picasa.**

Picasa imports the image(s) and displays them in the Library.

Cropping a photo

Cropping a photo allows you to remove unneeded or unattractive parts of an image. For example, if you take a picture of a group of friends and then want to include a photo of just one of the individuals in your blog post, you can crop out the other people in the image.

To crop a photo that you've imported into Picasa, follow these steps:

1. **Open Picasa and, in the Picasa Library, double-click the photo that you want to edit.**

The Editing screen opens.

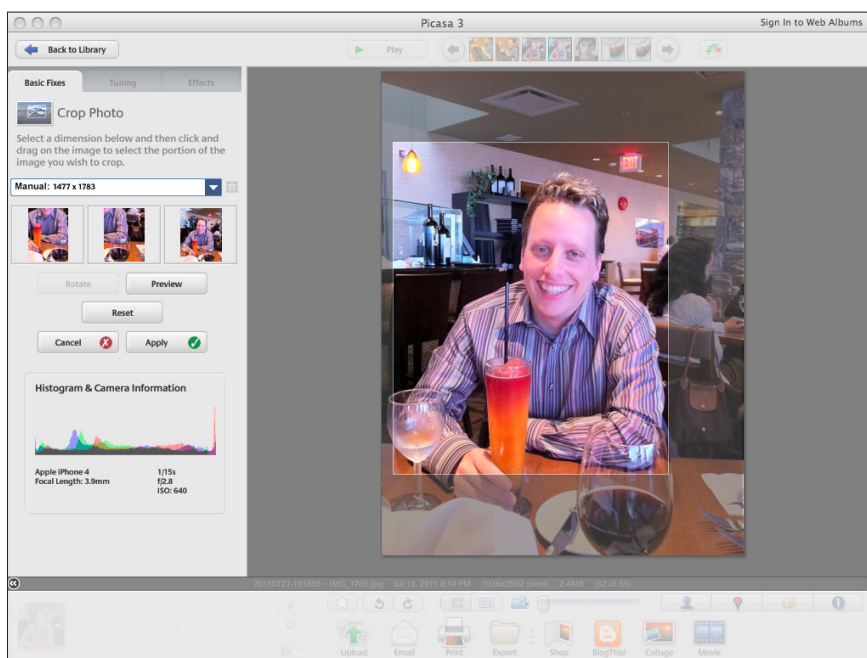
2. **Click the Crop button at the top of the Basic Fixes tab.**
3. **Select whether you want to crop to a preset size or crop manually.**

If you're cropping to a preset size, simply select the size that you want to use from the menu.

4. **Use your mouse to click and drag over the area that you want to retain in your photo, as shown in Figure 11-5.**

While you click and drag, the area that will be cropped out of your photo appears slightly grayed out, leaving the portion that will be retained at the original brightness.

Figure 11-5: Cropping manually lets you choose a specific area that you want to keep in your photo.



If you want to start over, click Reset to remove the cropping box that you created. If you don't want to crop after all, click the Cancel button to exit the Crop tool.

5. **Click the Preview button and check out how the cropped photo will look.**

6. **Click the Apply button to crop your photo.**

Picasa displays the cropped photo.

Adjusting brightness and contrast

Sometimes, despite your best efforts, photos end up looking too dark or too light. By using photo-editing software such as Picasa, you get a second chance because you can adjust brightness and contrast.

To adjust the brightness and contrast, follow these steps:

1. **Open Picasa and, in the Library, double-click the photo that you want to edit.**

The Editing screen opens.

2. **Click the Tuning tab on the left side of the application.**

3. **On the Tuning tab, drag the slider bar below Highlights to adjust the brightness of the image.**

Picasa adjusts the image being displayed while you move the bar.

If you're lightening the photo, watch the brightest parts of your photo to make sure that they don't get too bright, losing information you want in the photo. If you're bringing down lightness, watch the darker areas of your photo so that you don't end up with too much black in your photo. Let your eyes be the judge of a well-adjusted image.



You can have Picasa make an educated guess about the brightness settings that you need by clicking the Auto Contrast button in the Basic Fixes tab. Click the Undo Auto Contrast button if you don't like the results.

Adjusting color

Color in photos frequently needs a little adjusting. I've taken too many greenish photos in fluorescent lights! With a little help from photo-editing software such as Picasa, I can turn my friends' skin back to normal colors.

To adjust the color of a photo, follow these steps:

1. **Open Picasa and, in the Library, double-click the photo that you want to edit.**

The Editing screen opens.

2. **Click the Tuning tab on the left side of the application.**
3. **On the Tuning tab, drag the slider bar below Color Temperature to adjust the color tone of the picture.**

Color can be tricky to adjust. As a good rule, look for an element in the photograph that you know should be a particular color, and then adjust the overall color to make that element look right. Then, look at the overall picture and adjust, if necessary. Elements that you can use for the purpose include eye color, skin color, sky, and other consistent elements.



You can have Picasa make an educated guess about the color settings that you need by clicking the Auto Color button in the Basic Fixes tab. Click the Undo Auto Color button if you don't like the results.

Optimizing a photo for the web

Digital cameras commonly store photos as high-resolution files suitable for print, but that high-resolution is more than you need for display on a blog or website. And you probably don't want to make your blog visitors download a great big image when they don't need to. Usually, you compress the file size of your image when you plan to put it on your blog.



If you plan to upload your image to Flickr, don't worry about compressing the image when you export. Flickr can handle large files and can resize the photo for you.

You may also need to change the image's dimensions in order to fit it into your blog layout, or even create a thumbnail version.



In Picasa, compressing — also called setting the image quality — and resizing a photo actually occur when you export the image. You don't need to deal with these issues until after you do all your other edits. When you export, you create a file that you can upload to your blog, so don't skip this step!

To resize and export an image, select the photo in Picasa that you want to export and follow these steps:

1. **Click the Export button at the bottom of the Picasa window.**

The Export to Folder dialog box opens, as shown in Figure 11-6.

2. **Click the Browse button and select the location on your computer where you want to save the file that you're exporting.**

3. To resize your image, click the **Resize To** radio button below **Image Size Options** and enter a pixel width that you want to use for your new image in the text box below **Resize To**.

You may need to experiment to find the right pixel width for your particular blog design, but a good rule is to choose a pixel width of 400 pixels because many blog templates tend to hover around this width.

You can also use the slider bar to the right of the pixel text box to change the width.

4. Select an **Image Quality** setting from the **Image Quality** drop-down list.

For web graphics, Normal is a good setting to choose because it has a good balance between image size and file size.

5. Click **Export**.

Picasa exports your image to the folder you chose in Step 2.

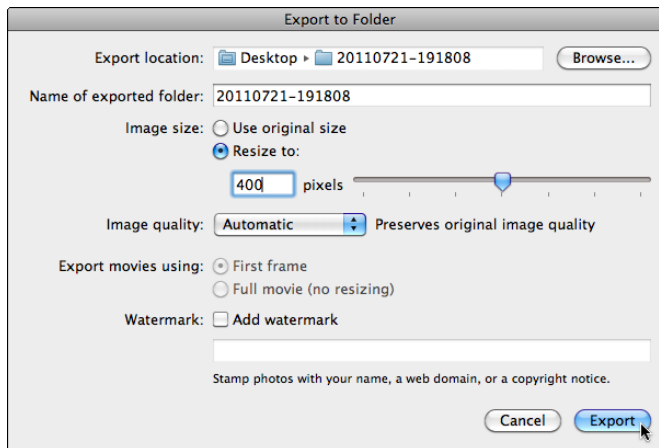


Figure 11-6:
Export and
resize an
image easily
with Picasa.

Inserting Photos into Blog Posts with Flickr

If you have a photo prepared for use on your blog, you're ready to upload it to the web. You can take two approaches to get your image online:

- ✓ **Uploading directly to your blog:** If your blog software supports it, you might be able to upload your image directly into your blog post. In Blogger, for instance, you can use the Image Upload button in the New Post interface to upload an image. You can read more about this process in Blogger in Chapter 4.

- ✓ **Other online sharing sites:** If your blog software doesn't include an image-uploading tool, you can upload your photos to an online sharing site, such as Flickr. You can then add your photo to your post from that site.

Follow these steps to add photos to Flickr:

1. **Log into your Flickr account and select Upload Photos & Video on the home page.**

Alternatively, click the arrow next to the You navigation button and select Upload Photos and Videos from the menu that appears.

The Upload to Flickr page appears.

2. **Click the Choose Photos and Videos link.**

A Select File dialog box opens, showing files on your computer.

3. **Navigate to the location of the photo that you want to upload, select the photo, and click Open.**

Your photo goes into an upload queue on the Flickr page.

If you want to upload more photos, click the Add More link and add those photos to the queue, as well.

4. **Make sure that your Privacy setting is Public so that readers can view your photo when you put it on your blog.**

5. **Click the Upload Photos and Videos button.**

Flickr displays a progress bar and notifies you when it has fully uploaded your photo.

6. **Click the Add a Description link.**

The images you've just uploaded will appear and you can now add tags, descriptions, and titles.

7. **Give your photo a title, description, and tags that describe it in the text boxes provided.**

8. **Click the Save button.**

Flickr adds your new photo(s) to your photo page. After you've completed your upload, you are sent back to your main photostream.

9. **On your photo page, click the photo that you just uploaded.**

10. **Select the right-hand sharing menu above the photo, as shown in Figure 11-7.**

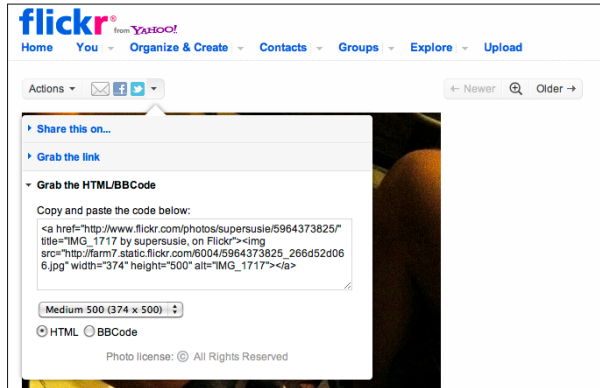
To post your photos directly from Flickr onto Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, or Blogger, select the appropriate icon and skip the remaining steps. Flickr shows you the starting point for configuring the connection between Flickr and your blog. Have the web address for your blog's publishing interface, your username, and password ready.



11. Click the Grab the HTML/BBCode link.

Flickr opens the code screen, as shown in Figure 11-7.

Figure 11-7: Clicking the Grab the HTML link in the Sharing menu gives you access to the HTML code for your photo.

**12. Click in the code box, and copy that code into your Clipboard by pressing Ctrl+C (⌘+C on a Mac) or choosing Edit⇧Copy.****13. Go to your blogging software and start a new post.****14. Paste the code from Flickr into your post entry field.**

After the Flickr code, type your post like you normally would.

15. Publish your post.

Be sure to check how it looks on the blog.

Flickr uploading tools

There are four ways to upload your photos to Flickr: You can use the method described in this chapter, download the Flickr Uploadr tool and install it on your computer, use a plug-in for iPhoto, or upload via e-mail. If you upload via e-mail, don't forget that you can use your

mobile phone to e-mail pictures directly onto your Flickr photostream.

To find out more about the Flickr uploading tools, go to www.flickr.com/tools.

Chapter 12

Starting a Podcast

In This Chapter

- ▶ Figuring out whether you want to create podcasts
 - ▶ Evaluating the equipment and tools needed for podcasting
 - ▶ Finding fun audio files to include in your podcast
 - ▶ Getting your podcast onto the web and promoting it
-

By adding *podcasts* — either audio or video files that you publish on the Internet for people to download and listen to or view — to your blog, you reach a wider audience and reach your audience in different locations: People might listen to you while they drive or commute, or they might watch your videos on their televisions or their iPods.

The production process for a podcast is (in theory) simple: You go out into the world, record a video or some audio, edit it on your computer, and then upload the files to your blog for release onto the Internet. Your blog's readers then download the files, and they can still leave comments and interact with your blog in the usual way.

Intrigued? Podcasts are attracting a whole new audience to the blogosphere. With the creation of improved software and mobile devices that can consume these kinds of media, you might want to seriously consider adding podcasting to your blog.



If you want to become the coolest podcaster in your neck of the woods, check out *Podcasting For Dummies*, 2nd Edition, by Tee Morris, Chuck Tomasi, Evo Terra, and Kreg Steppe (John Wiley & Sons, Inc.).

Deciding to Podcast

Podcasts come in all flavors. You can find personal podcasts, technical podcasts, sports reports, music samples, recorded social gatherings, previously recorded radio broadcasts, book reviews, and audio books. If you can think of a topic, you can probably find a podcast for it.

Knit Picks (www.knitpicks.com) is a knitting yarn and supplies company that offers a regular podcast about knitting activities, techniques, books, and guest interviews in an informative and entertaining mix. The Knit Picks podcast page (<http://knitpicks.com/cfBlog/author.cfm/Knit%20Picks%20Podcast>) is shown in Figure 12-1.

Blogs and podcasts can look very similar; the main difference is that a podcast entry contains a media file that the consumer can download, either by directly accessing the website or by subscribing to a syndicated *blog feed* (also known as the RSS feed). See the section “Delivering your podcasts,” later in this chapter, for more information about your options.

Many bloggers who want to podcast don’t because of the learning curve to build and maintain a podcast. As wonderful as podcasts can be, writing, recording, uploading, hosting, and promoting one requires a higher level of technical proficiency than written blog posts do. However, you may find figuring out how to work podcasts worth it if you think they can help grow your audience, enhance your blog content, or improve and expand your blogging skills. In the following sections, you can take a closer look at the advantages of podcasting and figure out how to choose between audio and video podcasts.

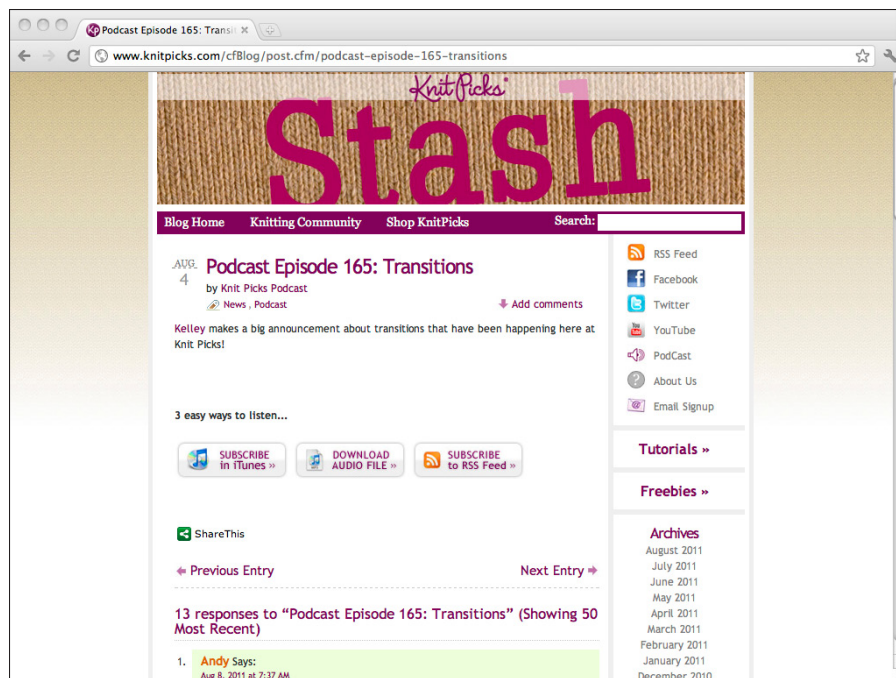


Figure 12-1:
Get knitting
tips and
tricks from
the Knit
Picks
podcast.

Podcasting in ancient times

In 2003, a number of bloggers thought it would be interesting to record their thoughts out loud and then publish the audio, usually as MP3 files, through their blogs. Some of those bloggers started releasing audio blog entries on a regular basis. What happened next was a bit of a surprise. Because of the rising popularity of MP3 players, such as Apple's iPod, the audience for these podcasts grew extremely quickly. And thanks to RSS feeds, listeners could easily retrieve and download the latest recordings. People from all over the world started listening, recording, and publishing their own audio blogs. Several audio blogs became popular enough to gain some notice within the mainstream media. A hidden audience had been discovered.

In fact, most people believe the word *podcast* comes from the Apple iPod device, a popular MP3 player that can store and play podcasts and music. This belief comes close, but it isn't the whole truth. Podcasts arose at the same

time that Apple's device came on the scene, and bloggers conceived the name *podcast* to echo the idea that people could listen to these audio files on the go by using a hand-held device. But many devices could play the files, and in fact, people listen to most podcasts on a computer, not an MP3 player. Some say the word comes from a combination of the acronym *pod* (*pod* standing for portable-on-demand) and the word *broadcast*, but this meaning evolved after the word itself, probably in response to Apple's attempts in 2005 to try to restrict the commercial use of the word *pod*.

Although some bloggers were also experimenting with video in 2003, it took until 2005 for video-casting to really start to gain traction. Two technological shifts helped make this happen. iTunes, the program most people used to subscribe to podcasts, started supporting video; YouTube, the video-sharing site, made uploading and sharing video a much more common online activity.

Reaching a wider audience

Podcasting can help you reach a different audience. Many people like to read and enjoy taking in a well-written blog post. However, some blog readers enjoy listening to what you have to say as an audio recording. Other blog followers like to watch, rather than read, your blog post — especially if you have a compelling voice or are more photogenic than average. (I've been told I have a face for radio.)

Also, some of the things that you want to talk about on your blog might work better as an audio recording, rather than as a text post, such as interviews, soundscapes, or special events. And video is even more powerful: You can show off much more of your personality than you can by using just a text blog, and you can demonstrate things that you might find difficult or impossible to convey with just words.



Think about when and where people might play your podcast and use that knowledge to help focus your entries.

Choosing between audio and video

If you're ready to take the plunge into the production of a podcast, you need to decide what format you want to use. Both audio and video require specialized skills to produce.



Your level of technical competence and comfort can determine what medium you choose. You need to consider what type of podcast fits with your blog's audience — don't use videocasting, for example, if your blog targets those who use low-bandwidth connections.

Here are a few tips that can help you decide what type of podcast to use:

✓ **Audio:**

- Easier to produce than video because of a larger availability of open source software. Most software for professional video editing is expensive.
- Easier and generally quicker to edit than video.
- More portable than video. Fewer portable devices are designed to deal with video than with audio.
- Less of a space hog than video, making audio files less expensive to store on a web host than video files.

✓ **Video:**

- More compelling. The visual and auditory components combined are more likely to keep a viewer from becoming distracted.
- You can make video shorter than audio. Audiences likely feel satisfied with a 2–4-minute video podcast, whereas they might want a much longer audio podcast.
- Gives you more visual elements to work with — both when you're designing your blog and in individual entries.
- Has more related sites online where you can upload and share files.
- Requires the viewer's attention, whereas people can listen to audio podcasts while completing other tasks. You can listen to an audio podcast while driving to work, for example.



Video and audio files can get very large. When you upload them to your web server, you fill up your available disk space more quickly than you do if you upload only text and photos. Also, distributing audio and video requires more bandwidth. Keep an eye on your disk space and bandwidth usage so that you

aren't hit with unexpected overage charges. Ask your web host how to keep tabs on those elements, any fees that you may accrue, and whether you need more space and bandwidth.

If video is the medium of your choice, be sure to read Chapter 13 for tips and tools specific to video production.

Planning Your Podcast

To create a podcast, you first need the desire to make it the best experience for the listeners that you can. If you aren't having fun, it shows in the final result. Remember, even if you find your very first podcast a little frustrating, it gets easier.

Here are a few key ingredients that you need for a good podcast:

- ✓ **Planning what you'll say:** You can make a single podcast, like a blog entry, about anything, so have a clearly defined topic before you start. Some podcasters write a script for every podcast that they record. Although you may find a script is overkill for you, jotting down a few notes or creating an outline to follow can help you streamline the creation process. You can find a list to help you brainstorm topics and the flow of your podcast later in this section.
- ✓ **Finding your voice:** You need to establish the tone of the piece before you go forward. How will the format of your overall podcast determine how you shoot or record it? Do you want to use some kind of traditional show format, or do you want to improvise the entire program each time? Taking these kinds of questions into account when you're planning your first podcast can help you make your program a success.
- ✓ **Timing:** Technically speaking, you can use as much or as little time as you want in your podcast. You may find, however, that you get a better end product when you give yourself limits, rather than chattering on about your favorite color or a funny thing your cat did when you really should be getting to the point of your recording session. Think about how much time you can reasonably expect your audience to give you, and target that length for your podcasts. In general, podcasts range from a few minutes to an hour. Also, make sure that you have enough time to record the entire podcast in the same location so that you don't have awkward changes in the background noise, which can distract your listener or viewer.
- ✓ **Recording conditions:** When you want to record anything, you need to take into account environmental considerations before you hit the Record button. Is the environment you're in quiet enough? Background noise from fans or computers may annoy the listeners! For video, do you have sufficient lighting to produce watchable video? Try to

eliminate distractions, such as phones ringing or people walking by. And if you can, do some test recording that you can listen to or watch so that you know what the quality of the final product will be before you record your entire podcast.



Blogging in writing is relatively easy in comparison to recording a podcast, and you can also more easily hide your inexperience in a text blog because you can rewrite and edit before posting. Although you can edit audio and video, removing stuttered speech or inappropriate facial expressions is harder than revising text in a blog post. The good news is that practice can help eliminate awkward moments.



If you get stuck thinking about a podcast topic or format, ask your readers for suggestions. Even if only five or ten readers respond, you can get some good ideas and direction.

Here's a short list of podcast ideas that have been successful for other podcasters. Use this list to spark your creativity to find other topics that interest you:

- ✓ **One-on-one interviews:** Fascinating people in your neighborhood are just waiting to get on your podcast — especially people involved in a cause, an organization, or a business. Discover more about your family's background or the adventures of your friends. See who in your acquaintance might fit the theme and direction of your podcast.
- ✓ **Show your expertise:** Show off what you know and share your knowledge with others — maybe even show your audience how to do something.
- ✓ **Soundscapes:** You can find fascinating sounds all around you that you can document. Record yourself walking through a forest or park. Make some observations about your surroundings, describe each sound, and explain why it's important to you. Remember, what's ordinary for you (waves at the beach, a passing train, construction noise, or a barn owl) might fascinate someone living on the other side of the country or the world.
- ✓ **Events:** A performance at your local coffeehouse, a city hall meeting, or a surprise party all might make for an interesting podcast. Make sure to get permission before recording or publishing a podcast of an event.
- ✓ **Discussions:** General discussions in social settings can reveal some great conversations. Take your recorder along to your next BBQ or evening social, and direct the conversation along a theme or idea.

If you take the time to plan out what things you want to share with your subscribers, you can make your podcast happen. With a recording device, a plan, and maybe someone else to talk to (although, not entirely necessary!), you can have a complete podcast episode in no time.

Assessing the Tools

Making your podcast requires a bit more than your fingers and a computer keyboard. Podcasts require recording equipment for audio and video. Here's what you're looking at:

- ✓ **Computer:** You need a computer of some kind. You can use a desktop or a laptop, although laptops are more flexible and allow you to edit on-the-go. The computer must be able to handle editing audio files and, more importantly, video files. Video is a computer-intensive medium and requires a computer with a lot of power and a lot of disk space in order to process the large files that you record. Audio files can also be fairly large.
- ✓ **Microphone:** Microphones these days are built into almost every laptop, and you can easily buy external microphones. Consider purchasing a good microphone from a professional audio store because the microphones that you get from the average computer store or on the typical laptop are poor quality. Ask a podcaster or the staff of a good audio store for advice about the best microphone for the kind of recording situation that you expect to be in. Expect to spend at least \$40 for your microphone: It isn't the item to economize on.
- ✓ **Sound-recording and sound-editing software:** Unless you're the sort of person who never deviates from a script or says "um," you need software to edit your audio or video. Solutions range from free to the price of a small automobile. Let your budget be your guide. You may want to start small and upgrade when you know more about podcasting and your own needs. A good starting point for audio software is the free program Audacity (<http://audacity.sourceforge.net>). Audacity (as shown in Figure 12-2) is available for Windows, Mac OS X, and Linux/Unix. It's the program of choice for many podcasters, largely because it's free and open source. Audacity is a *multi-track recording* program, which means you can have two pieces of audio, such as a voice and a piece of music, and you can mix the two at different volumes or even fade from one to the other.

A high-end solution is Sony's Sound Forge (www.sonycreative.com/products/soundforgefamily.asp).

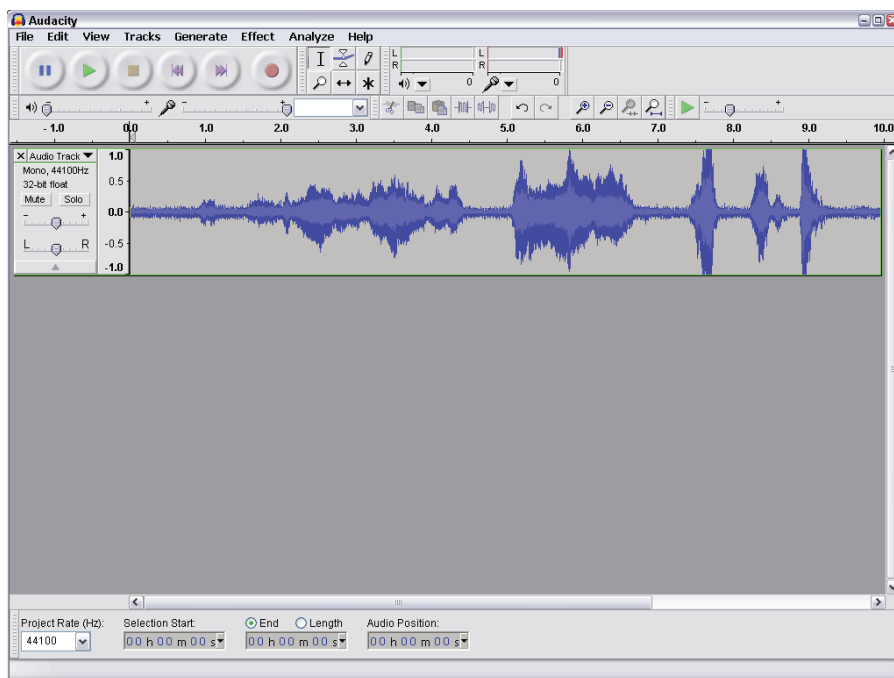


Figure 12-2:
Audacity is
a popular
audio-
editing
software
program.

Dressing Up Your Podcast with Music and Sound Effects

Nothing spices up a podcast like a little intro or background music. But podcasts — even if they’re produced and released at no cost to the listener — aren’t exempt from copyright restrictions. You need to find music and/or images that are in the public domain or licensed for republication.



Let me be clear: Even if you use only a little bit of a copyrighted song or give the performer credit, you’re still violating copyright if you don’t have a license or other permission to use the music. The same goes for using copyrighted images and video clips in videocasts.

But plenty of this material is available for you to use. The term *podsafe* has appeared to describe music, sounds, and other clips that are available for free unlimited use in podcasting, but no specific license exists to identify that a clip is podsafe. Read the terms and conditions before you integrate sound or audio into your productions.

Creative Commons Search

<http://search.creativecommons.org>

Creative Commons is an organization that has evolved a set of licenses that you can use on your own content to permit or disallow use by others. If a publisher applies a Creative Commons license that allows republication, you can search for and find that content in the Creative Commons search area, specifically requesting content that you can use for commercial purposes or modify (see Figure 12-3).

Some of the types of licenses are

- ✓ **Commercial Use:** Permits use of the content for business and revenue-generating purposes.
- ✓ **Noncommercial Use:** You may use this media only for noncommercial podcasts.
- ✓ **Attribution:** You can use the work only when you give credit to the creator.
- ✓ **Derivatives Allowed:** You can cut, chop, and excerpt this media to create new works.
- ✓ **No Derivatives Allowed:** You must leave the media intact and unchanged.

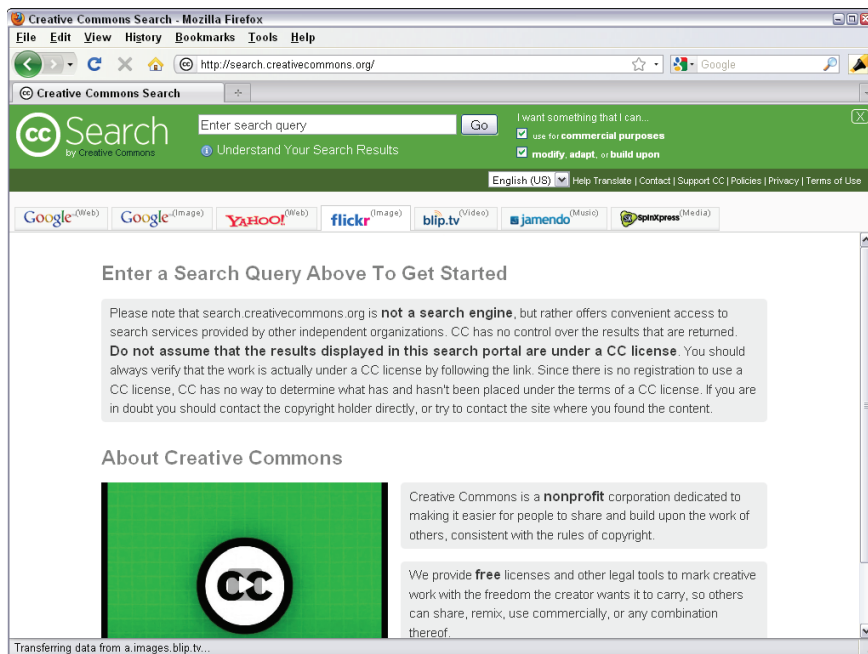


Figure 12-3:
Search for
licensed
content to
use in your
podcast on
Creative
Commons.

Magnatune

www.magnatune.com

Magnatune is a record label that helps artists promote and share their music, and make money doing it. The label and the artists sell their albums on CD and via download, and they split the money evenly. The music on Magnatune (shown in Figure 12-4) is available for download and purchase, as well as to noncommercial podcasters. To help promote artists, podcasters are granted a waiver to use Magnatune music without paying a royalty fee.

Music Alley

www.musicalley.com

Music Alley is a place where artists provide tracks from their albums for sharing and use in podcasts. Everything is released by using a Creative Commons license, and registered users can create playlists and download tracks to share on their podcasts.

Figure 12-4: Magnatune is the only record label that specifically allows noncommercial podcasters to use music for free.



The Freesound Project

www.freesound.org

Music is great, but what about sound effects? What podcast wouldn't be improved by a few barking dogs and fart noises? I'm kidding, of course. But sound effects can really add value to your production, from realistic sounds of dialing a phone to a spring breeze. The Freesound Project can help you dress up your podcast.

Use its simple search box to find Creative Commons–licensed sound. You can also contribute your own sound effects to the project by creating an account and uploading to its website.

Publishing Your Podcast

You can put your podcast into the blogosphere fairly simply: Write a blog post about your podcast, upload your podcast media file, and then publish it by using your blog software.

But before you do that, you have a couple of tasks: You need to add metadata to and choose a file format for your podcast.

Assigning metadata

Metadata, simply put, is data about data. In the case of podcasts, metadata is data that describes your video or audio podcast. When you publish a podcast, whether audio or video, you need to provide descriptive metadata that podcast systems such as Apple's iTunes and the RSS feed can read. After all, the computer can't listen to or watch your podcast and figure out what it contains!

Common metadata types include

- ✓ Title
- ✓ Author name
- ✓ Publication information
- ✓ Topics covered
- ✓ Type of file
- ✓ Descriptions
- ✓ Keywords

Your editing software (both video and audio software packages) asks you to enter metadata when you create your audio or video files, and software such as iTunes, which is designed to support podcasts, also offers you a chance to provide metadata.

Choosing a format

Creating video and audio for general release means that you need to choose a file format that your audience can consume.

Most audio bloggers release audio files in the MP3 format. MP3 files are easy to create and play on a variety of devices. Most computer users are familiar with the format, and both browsers and preinstalled audio players have good built-in support for MP3s.

Other options are available, such as OOG, an open format, and AAC, a format popular on Apple computers. Windows users can play AAC files, too, if they install QuickTime. The Apple iPod can't play OOG files, which is a significant issue for most audiences. AAC has some nice features, such as audio bookmarks.

Storing your podcasts

When you have a podcast ready for primetime, you need to figure out where to put it online. Posting your podcast poses two problems:

- ✓ **Storage:** You need a place to put the actual file. Audio and video files are larger than text files, so you may run into an issue with disk space when you store them.
- ✓ **Bandwidth (the amount of data your audiences downloads):** You have to account for the additional bandwidth required for your audience to download those files. It takes more bandwidth to deliver audio or video to your audience than it does text or images.

You have two options for getting the storage and bandwidth you need: your web-hosting server (the one that hosts your blog) or a free storage website.

Putting your files on your own web-hosting server

Check with your web host to find out how much disk space you have available and what it costs to increase your allotment. Be aware that if you keep podcasting, you'll eventually run out of disk space, even if you start off with quite a bit. If you're a video podcaster, you want a hosting package that has

several gigabytes of storage space. If you stick with only audio, you need a few gigabytes to start. When your podcasts grow in number, you'll require more and more space, so keep that in mind. I talk about choosing a web host in Chapter 3.

You also need to consider bandwidth when you choose your hosting service. Most web-hosting packages offer a standard amount of bandwidth, and you're charged if you and your audience use more than that. Most web hosts have pretty reasonable fees, unless your podcast becomes the hottest thing on the web and your traffic becomes astronomical.

To give you a better idea about how file sizes can affect your web-hosting costs, I show you some reasonable working numbers. You can compare these to your hosting package bandwidth:

- ✓ **1MB (megabyte) audio file:** If you have 100 subscribers and you post one audio file a week, your estimated bandwidth for that file is about 100MB.
- ✓ **10MB (megabyte) video file:** If you have 100 subscribers and you post one video file a week, your estimated bandwidth for that file is 1000MB or 1GB.

From these numbers, you can see how your bandwidth needs may skyrocket. Thinking about these almost hidden costs is important because you can get stuck with a hosting bill you weren't expecting.



Bandwidth can be a confusing concept, especially when dealing with a podcast. Websites like Podtopia (<http://podtopia.net>) have tools that let you generate estimates on how much it can cost you to host your own files.



Most hosting packages come with a finite amount of disk space and bandwidth. You most likely can post only a certain number of podcasts before your hosting package runs out of space. Unless you have the dollars to spend, you probably need to find an alternative for storing your files.

Using a free storage and sharing website

Luckily for podcasters, a great service called Archive.org (www.archive.org) is the home of the Internet Archive, a nonprofit organization founded in 1996 to build an Internet library in which researchers, historians, and the general public can store and access text, audio, moving images, software, and a vast collection of archived web pages.



You can upload your podcasts to the Internet Archive for free, as long as you comply with its guidelines and describe your content. The system also provides and converts your video or audio format into other formats for increased accessibility.

You can find other podcast storage options, too. If you haven't seen a YouTube video on a blog or website lately, you must be living under a rock. YouTube (www.youtube.com) has soared in popularity. When you upload a video to YouTube, your video is listed on the site, where visitors can view and comment on it. But you can also grab the code for the file and embed it directly into your website or blog post. Files that you upload to YouTube are reformatted into Flash video. They must be shorter than 15 minutes and less than 2GB in size.

If you think 15 minutes isn't long enough for your blog, YouTube offers a YouTube Partner Program (www.youtube.com/partners). Members of the program are granted permission to upload larger video files, have videos longer than 15 minutes, and share advertisement revenue. If you think video blogging is for you, check it out!

Delivering your podcasts

After you have your audio and video online and your blog post created, you need to make sure that your blog has an RSS web feed. Podcasts are typically delivered to playback software (such as Apple iTunes) through a subscription to your blog's RSS feed. I talk extensively about setting up and using RSS in Chapter 14.

Suffice it to say that you need an RSS feed so that your viewers and listeners can subscribe to it themselves, but also so that you can promote your podcast by using some of the handy podcast promotional directories and software out there. (See the following section for the promotion details.)

If you already subscribe to a number of blogs, you know that a syndicated blog feed contains information such as the title of the post, the main content, and maybe some author information. A podcast feed, in addition to the typical entry information, contains a link to a media file. If a consumer subscribes to a podcast feed by using an RSS reader, most modern readers automatically download the files so that the user can listen or watch at his or her convenience.

Promoting Your Podcast

Publishing your podcast on your website can help you promote it, but you can get the word out in more effective ways. If you already have a good promotional system built into your site and a decent-sized audience, you can get users to subscribe to your podcast without too much additional marketing. If you need a little more promotion, however, you also can use a number of other strategies.

Adding your podcast to FeedBurner

FeedBurner (<http://feedburner.google.com>) provides custom tracking and customization of podcast feeds. If you submit your podcast to FeedBurner's service, you can implement good promotion tools to help your podcast get more play.

Now a Google company, FeedBurner has a lot to offer bloggers and podcasters. You can use FeedBurner to do the following:

- ✓ Add metadata to your files.
- ✓ Make your feeds compatible with every RSS reader available.
- ✓ Add your podcast to the major podcast directories, making sure that people can find your podcast.
- ✓ Track the number of subscribers to your feed.
- ✓ Keep track of which podcasts visitors actually download.

To use FeedBurner, you must already have an RSS feed. If you're using blog software, it probably offers you a feed. Check your documentation for more information and jump to Chapter 14 for more about RSS feeds.

Follow these steps to create a feed with FeedBurner:

1. **Go to** <http://feedburner.com>.
2. **Create an account on FeedBurner if you don't already have one.**
3. **On the FeedBurner main page (shown in Figure 12-5), paste the web address (URL) of your RSS feed into the Burn a Feed Right This Instant field.**
4. **Select the I Am a Podcaster check box.**
5. **Click the Next button.**

FeedBurner verifies that the feed is working and loads the Welcome screen.

6. **Give your feed a title, if it doesn't already have one, by entering it in the Field Title text box.**

You can also customize the feed address in the Feed Address text box, if desired.

7. **Click the Activate Feed button.**

FeedBurner creates your new feed and loads a screen that displays the web address of your feed.

8. **Click the Next button.**

FeedBurner loads the podcast configuration screen.

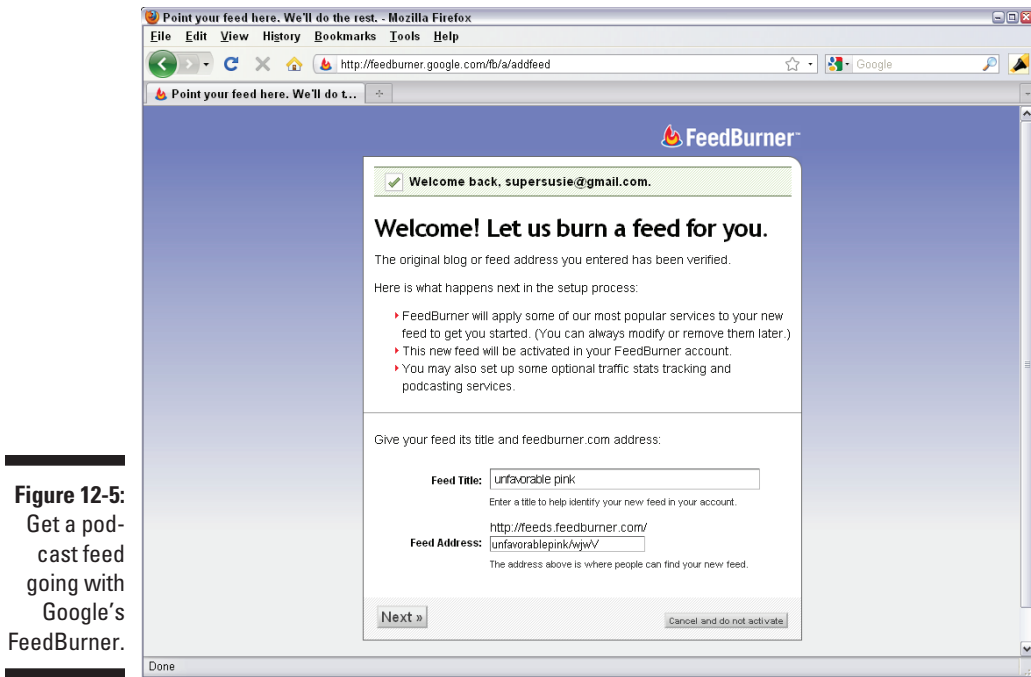


Figure 12-5:
Get a pod-
cast feed
going with
Google's
FeedBurner.

9. Fill out the configuration screen.

FeedBurner offers these configuration options:

- *Create Podcast Enclosures from Links To:* Select the kinds of files that you want to include in your podcast — any, audio, video, or images.
- *Include iTunes Podcasting Elements:* Deselect this check box if you don't want your podcast listed in Apple's iTunes Store.
- *Category:* Select a category from the drop-down list. You can also select a subcategory in the text field that appears.
- *Podcast Image Location:* If you created a graphic for your audio or video podcast, paste the web address of the graphic into this field. This graphic is like an album cover for your podcast. iTunes uses it to fill in the album artwork.
- *Podcast Subtitle:* Expand on your title in this field.
- *Podcast Summary:* Provide a short description of your podcast.
- *Podcast Search Keywords:* Provide descriptive keywords for your podcast.
- *Podcast Author E-Mail Address:* Enter your e-mail address.

- *Include “Media RSS” Information and Add Podcast to Yahoo! Search:* Deselect this check box if you don’t want to be included in Yahoo! Search.
- *Contains Explicit Content:* Select the Yes, No, or Yes (Cleaned) option button. Click the Information icon if you want help understanding how FeedBurner defines explicit content.
- *Copyright Message:* Provide a short copyright message.
- *Podcast Author:* Fill in your name.

10. Click the Next button.

FeedBurner loads the traffic statistics screen.

11. Fill out the Feed Traffic Statistics screen.

These options appear on this screen:

- *Click-throughs:* Select this check box if you want to know when subscribers use your feed to come to your website.
- *Item Enclosure Downloads:* Select this check box if you want to know which podcast entries your subscribers actually download.

12. Click the Next button.

FeedBurner finishes burning your feed. You can begin monitoring subscriptions and activity on your feed by using FeedBurner.

After you create a feed by using FeedBurner, head to your site, put the link to your new feed on your blog, and urge your blog visitors to subscribe.

By using FeedBurner, you can actually keep track of how many subscribers your feed has and how they’re using your podcast, which is useful information if you plan to pursue funding or sponsorship. Once you have set up a podcast with FeedBurner, log in and select it in order to view traffic information in the Analyze section of the site.

Adding your podcast to iTunes

Because of the overwhelming popularity of Apple’s iTunes software as the main podcast viewer, you absolutely must submit your podcast to its service — unless, for some reason, you don’t want people to find your podcast.

Before you submit your podcast to iTunes, you need to do the following:



- ✓ **Sign up for an Apple ID.** Each submission is associated with a user account. If you have iTunes installed on your computer and have purchased songs or other media from the iTunes store, you already have an Apple ID. To get an ID, download iTunes, which you find at www.itunes.com; after you install the software, select the iTunes Store option on the left of the main screen to begin setting up your ID.
- ✓ **Set up an RSS feed.** If you're using blog software, you likely already have a feed. Check your documentation for more information, and jump to Chapter 14 for more about RSS feeds.
- ✓ **Have a few entries in your feed and make sure that the feed is working.** You can test your feed by making sure your own feed reader (like Google Reader) can subscribe to your feed. If you see your posts in your reader, the feed should be working fine. Refer to Chapter 14 for information on subscribing to feeds in Google Reader.

If you have a FeedBurner feed set up, you've already taken care of some of the optimization to make your feed work well in iTunes. Be sure to use the FeedBurner feed address when you sign up in iTunes.

Before iTunes adds podcasts to the Store, Apple iTunes staff reviews podcast submissions. The staff can refuse podcasts for even very small reasons. You may have problems getting a podcast added if you've been turned down before.

If you have the iTunes software installed on your computer, you can submit your podcast by using the iTunes interface. In order to get your podcast into the iTunes Store, follow these steps:

1. **Start your iTunes software.**
2. **Click the iTunes Store navigation item in the left column.**
This will open the iTunes store interface.
3. **Select the Podcasts link from the iTunes Store menu on the top of the screen.**
The Podcasts page appears.
4. **Click the Submit a Podcast menu item located in the top-right of the page.**
iTunes loads the Submit Podcasts page.
5. **Enter the RSS feed of your podcast in the Podcast Feed URL field and click the Continue button.**

If you're not logged in to the iTunes Store, you're prompted to log in at this point.

iTunes submits your feed for review by Apple staff.

After you submit your podcast, it might take several days or even weeks until your feed shows up in the iTunes library of podcasts. If your podcast is rejected for any reason, you receive an e-mail from Apple. (Unfortunately, it doesn't provide reasons for rejections.)

Getting listed in podcast directories

Podcast directories help would-be listeners and viewers find known podcasts. Getting listed in these directories is an easy way to let people know about your podcast. Most directories are organized by topic, and many of them offer subscription features that allow people to quickly sign up for your podcast. Listing your podcast in these directories can most certainly provide you with new traffic to your blog and podcast.

Here's where you should get your podcast listed:

- ✓ **Podcast Alley** (www.podcastalley.com): This site contains a podcast directory, as well as news and information about podcasting.
- ✓ **Podcast.com** (www.podcast.com): Podcasts are organized by category (for example, entertainment or sports), and the home page displays a list of recently updated podcasts.
- ✓ **Castroller** (www.castroller.com): One of the newer websites for subscribing, organizing, and listening to podcasts. You can sort podcasts you listen to into "channels," and it is easy to recommend podcasts (including your own!) to others. It is easy to use and has a lot of social media functionality built in. This makes it easy for your listeners to promote you.
- ✓ **Podcast Pickle** (www.podcastpickle.com): One of the older podcast directories, Podcast Pickle offers visitors organization tools for the podcasts to which they subscribe.
- ✓ **PodNova** (www.podnova.com): More than just a directory. You can subscribe, listen, view, read, and maintain your feeds online by using PodNova.
- ✓ **PodBean** (www.podbean.com): Another directory where you can publish and host your podcast. You and your audience can listen and view your podcasts and share them on other websites like Facebook.

And if you don't want to put your podcast on any of the sites in the preceding list, check out Robin Good's extensive list of podcast directories at www.masternewmedia.org/podcast_directory.

Chapter 13

Leveraging Community with Forums

In This Chapter

- ▶ Differentiating between comments and forums
 - ▶ Deciding whether to use free or paid forum software
 - ▶ Finding the features you want
 - ▶ Installing forum software
 - ▶ Establishing community guidelines
-

Imagine your blogging career five years in the future. Your blog has thousands of visitors every single day. Comments are being left on your blog posts by the hundreds every hour. A blogging career couldn't get any better, could it? You've reached the big time! People love you!

But wait! You also have a problem: You can't keep up with the conversation, and now that you think about it, a lot of your contributors are talking to each other. Although you love reading what they have to say, these conversations aren't really directed at you anymore. One possible solution to this awesome dilemma is to add a *forum* to your blog. On the Internet, a forum — which might also be called a message board or bulletin board — is software that permits date-sorted conversations between members, generally organized around topics. Members can reply to messages posted by others, or start their own topics. Unlike blog posts, forums are typically not maintained by an author. Members are all on an equal playing field when it comes to the conversation.

Sounds good, right? But, should you do it? Is it a good idea? What if members talk about things unrelated to the topics you normally discuss on your blog?

In this chapter, I discuss the benefits of setting up a forum, what types of forum software are available, and how forums differ from your blog's comment system. I also tell you about common features of a typical forum package and how you can add a forum to your blog without disturbing the natural flow of the blog itself.

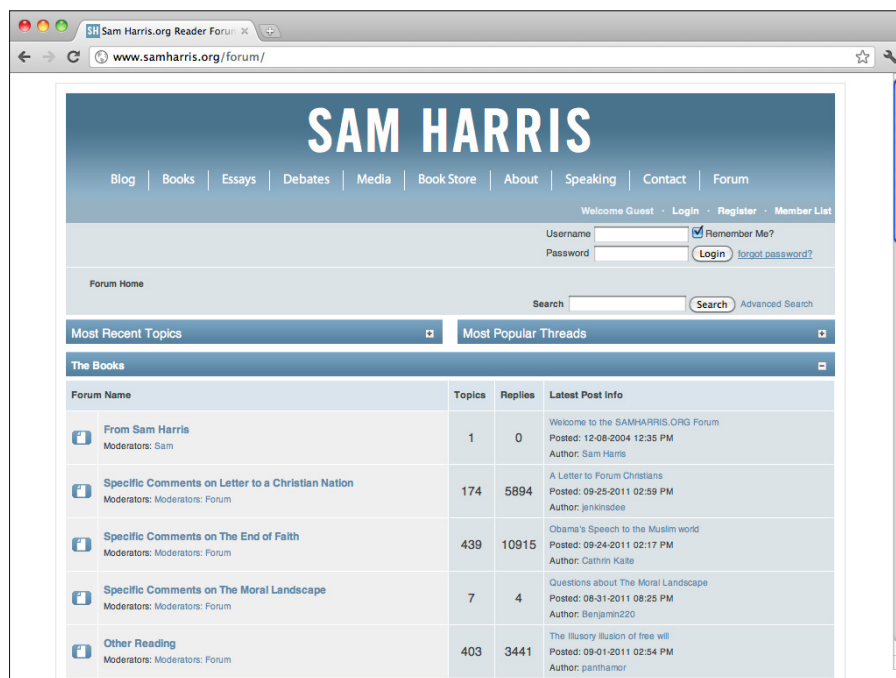
Deciding Whether Forums Will Work for You

The neuroscientist and author Sam Harris has a blog combined with a forum on his website at www.samharris.org. Sam is sometimes known as “America’s leading atheist,” and his writings cover the intersection of religion and science. As you can imagine, this is a set of topics that generates a huge amount of discussion, and Sam has responded by housing some of this conversation on the forums of his website (www.samharris.org/forum/), shown in Figure 13-1. This neatly solves one of Sam’s biggest problems — as a single individual, he simply can’t respond to the sheer volume of conversation his chosen field generates, but discussion of which he encourages.

There are many reasons to add a forum to your blog. The first and most common reason is that your frequent visitors may ask you to add one, but you may also see the need for it yourself.

The second most common reason is that discussions have simply outgrown the blog commenting system. This isn’t a bad thing; it just means your blog is incredibly popular. You should be pleased that visitors enjoy what you are doing so much!

Figure 13-1:
Sam Harris’s website offers visitors both a blog and a forum.



Some bloggers find that comments are great ways for dialogue to start, and that forums allow that discussion to expand. But how does a forum benefit your blog itself? How can you use a forum to grow your community? Here are a few examples of what a forum can do besides giving your readers a way to chat:

- ✔ **Increase traffic to your blog:** By offering a place where people can exchange ideas and chat directly with one another, you can reap the rewards of additional content. Each posting on your blog is an individual page that people can find by searching the Internet. The same thing applies to forum posts. The more discussions you facilitate, the more pages and locations search engines can index. This means you can use your forum as a place for friendly conversation and generate more traffic.
- ✔ **Find a new type of audience:** A forum may attract a whole new type of readership. Those individuals who like to leave comments on blog posts may not be invested enough to carry on longer chats with other commenting visitors. But providing them a platform where they can expand on their comments and offer additional opinions can help build a new audience. There is an audience out there that enjoys participating in wider discussions that are not specific to individual blog posts. People may be attracted to your forum and then start participating in the comments.
- ✔ **Keep tabs on your audience's interests:** Even though you write your blog to put your ideas out into the blogosphere, you may run dry from time to time. You can look through the comments on your blog to find new ideas or expand on existing posts, but a forum can generate a whole new set of ideas. This is a great tool for taking the pulse of what your community is finding compelling or interesting, where they have questions, and that can feed directly back into what you choose to discuss on your blog.
- ✔ **Build additional credibility:** If you are already blogging and attracting readers, you are likely developing some visible expertise with your community. Forums can help build that reputation with a larger audience, and on a broader set of topics. (You may even learn a thing or two from your community members while you're at it!)
- ✔ **Have more "you" time:** Comments on blogs tend to be directed toward you, the blogger. This means that people who leave comments want to hear your reaction to their thoughts. You need to spend a lot of your time not just writing your blog but also responding to comments. Adding a forum gives your community members the chance to help each other out, and takes a bit of the pressure off you to be the only source of information.

Does it sound like it is worth adding a forum to your blog? Don't worry if the answer is "No," "I'm not sure," or "Not right now." Forums aren't for every blog, or every blogger, but they can be a natural evolution of online discussions and commentary. There isn't a stock answer — the final call is up to you! If you're on the fence, you might want to write a blog post and see what your readers think.

If your answer is “Yes, let’s go!” jump to the next section for answers to what I’m sure your question is now — what kind of forum software is available?

Researching Software Options

A set of “out of the box” features come with most forum software packages, but it’s worth reviewing the basics to make sure you’re meeting your audience’s needs when making your selection.



A great online source where you can “kick the tires” on a bunch of different forum software can be found at <http://php.opensourcecms.com/scripts/show.php?catid=5&category=Forums>.

The website is dedicated to providing demonstrations of blog software, forum software, and general content management systems. It’s a great place to try out forum packages without installing them yourself.

Another option to consider before you start installing software is to find some online forums (whether or not they are on a blog) and spend some time using them. You can often find out what software is being used by looking near the bottom of the home page of the forum. You can then make your choice based on the user experience.

Choosing between Free and Commercial Forum Software

One of the first decisions you must make is between free forum software and commercial software. Both categories offer great options.

Budget is of course one of the biggest differences. There’s free . . . and *not* free. If you have zero budget, well, the choice is pretty simple! But if you do have some money to spend, commercial forum software generally offers some level of customer service and technical support that free software lacks. If something goes wrong or the forum does not perform correctly, answers can be a little easier to come by. If you aren’t terribly technical yourself, having reliable technical support may be cheap, whatever the cost.

Selecting the software that will benefit both you and your audience is paramount to the success of your forum, so be sure to thoroughly kick the tires before you make your final choice.

In addition to forum software you install on a web server, you can also use hosted software that runs elsewhere. See the “Hosted forum solutions” sidebar, later in this chapter, for information about these lighter-weight options.

Browsing commercial forum software

Here are three of the most popular packages with commercial support:

- ✓ **vBulletin** (www.vbulletin.com): This feature-rich forum software offers commercial support and a variety of licensing models. Cost starts at \$195 and increases based on additional features and support levels.
- ✓ **UBB.Threads** (www.ubbcentral.com): Available since 1997, UBB pricing starts at \$139, and you can pay to have the software installed.
- ✓ **IP.Board** (www.invisionpower.com): Part of a suite of website tools, this forum software can be purchased on its own from \$149.

Perusing open source forum software

Here are a few open source alternatives:

- ✓ **phpBB** (www.phpbb.com): This very popular open source package has been available since 2000, and there are good user-created resources.
- ✓ **Vanilla Forums** (www.vanillaforums.org): This tool promises a high degree of flexibility and integration with existing websites and blogs.
- ✓ **miniBB** (www.minibb.com): miniBB is a lightweight forum package that prides itself on being small and fast.

Hosted forum solutions

For those who would prefer to make implementing forums as simple as possible, hosted forum software is the easiest way to go. Hosted forum software works much like hosted blog software: You sign up for a service and they handle all the hosting, technical maintenance, and users on their own servers, so there's no need for you to install anything, or even have web hosting.

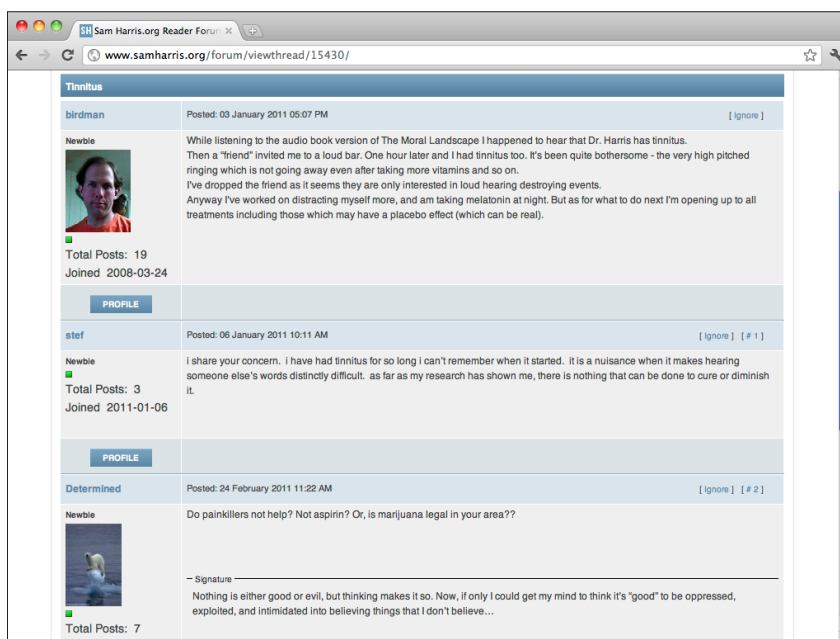
The downside is that hosted solutions may not be as flexible and may not allow full integration with your blog software. And, as with hosted blog software, you typically must abide by the company's use requirements, and won't have any control over downtime or features.

Getting Finicky about Features

Of course, it isn't all about the cost! Features matter when it comes to forums, particularly those that need to host a high volume of messages and/or users. It's worth noting that although you can migrate from one forum software package to another, the process is notoriously complicated, so you can save yourself time if you think through the options up front.

- ✓ **Availability:** Some blog software actually offers forum software, or integrates easily with a particular package. Check your blog documentation. If you are lucky and the blog platform you selected has forum features built in, all you have to do is turn them on. If it doesn't, it's worth checking to see if there is a package commonly used by others using the blog software you are using, or if there are compatibility recommendations. bbPress, for example, was created by the makers of WordPress, and can be easily implemented on WordPress blogs (www.bbpress.org).
- ✓ **Threading:** One of the most important forum features is whether or not conversations on the forum are *flat* or *threaded*. *Threading* groups sets messages together, relating them. For example, if you post something on a forum and someone replies to you, a threaded conversation displays a visual cue that indicates that the forum postings are part of the same conversation. You can track which conversations are which and who is replying to what postings. You can see an example of a threaded forum in Figure 13-2.

Figure 13-2:
Threaded
comments
display con-
versations
so that they
appear to
be visually
related.



- ✓ **Look and feel:** Forum software is incredibly visual, and typically a software package comes with several default themes, or design packages. Many offer additional themes, for free or for a fee. You may also be interested in creating a custom theme that matches the design of the blog you're adding the forum to.
- ✓ **Ignore lists:** Not everyone on the same forum is the best of friends. Unlike the comment system where users always know who is writing the comment (unless they post anonymously, but those types of people don't really want to have real discussions), you want to give a little bit of control to your users to make sure their time on your forum is a good one. *Ignore lists* allow a forum member to hide other users and their posts. This is somewhat like blocking someone on a social network, and a handy feature that lets your community members aggressively dislike another member and still have a positive experience.
- ✓ **Signatures (sigs):** Forum users are addicted to *signatures*. A signature is a lot like it sounds — a way for users to append identifying information to the posts they make on the forum. Signatures generally allow for imagery, links to external websites, famous quotes, and even some good old-fashioned silliness. As you might expect, forum members are quite attached to them.
- ✓ **Emoticons:** Who doesn't love emoticons? Don't answer that :). Emoticons are whimsical text or visual icons intended to convey emotion. Many forum users use them to indicate the tone of their message and prevent misinterpretation. Emoticon options differ from software package to software package, but are usually appreciated by the forum members.
- ✓ **Polls:** Polls are a nice feature that allows visitors to vote on questions that other users create. Questions can be asked, and answers can be preselected by the user asking the question. The answers are then calculated, and a graph is produced.
- ✓ **Membership tools:** Most forum software offers a set of membership tools, like registration, profiles, avatars, and so on. Membership allows the software to understand that posts come from the same user and keep track of the user's activity across the lifespan of the forum. Membership requirements decrease the amount of spam on a forum, and also allow moderators to remove or block problematic users.



If your blog already has registration turned on for comment posting, you may want to look for forum software that can be tied into your existing membership database, so that visitors don't have to create and remember two different accounts.

- ✓ **Spam controls:** If you thought that spammers would leave a forum alone, think again. I'm sorry to say that spam is as big a problem on a forum as it is on a blog. Membership (see the preceding bullet) can help, but a good forum software package should offer you some options for identifying, preventing, and removing spam posts and users.

- ✓ **Images and rich media:** Some forum software allows users the capability to post images, upload files, and embed rich media from other locations on the web. This can make postings and discussions more vibrant.

At the end of the day, the features you choose help your users communicate better — more quickly, easily, and effectively. So do your homework!

Installing Forum Software

After you decide to press ahead with installing a forum for your readers, it's time to think about what you need to run it. If you already have web hosting for your blog, this process may be quite simple. In fact, check with your web host; they may have a forum software package available as an add-in, or may even be able to take care of the installation for you.

If you don't have web hosting, it's time to find some. I talk about web hosting in Chapter 3.



As well as establishing web hosting, you must think about the URL for your forum. Your blog, for example, may have a URL like `www.example.com`. When you install your forum software, you can't use the same URL because your blog already lives at that location. The forums need their own addresses. A couple of options are:

- ✓ `www.example.com/forum`
- ✓ `www.forum.example.com`

Consult with your web host to see what the best options are, or if they have any guidelines for where and how software of this kind should be installed.

The installation process for your forum software will vary from package to package, but they all come with installation instructions. Refer to those in order to complete the installation of the package you've chosen.

A typical installation process, however, looks a lot like this:

1. Download the forum software from the web.
2. Decompress the file on your computer.
3. Upload the forum software files to your web hosting account.
4. When the files are in the correct location, go to the installation script page in your browser and click the Install button to be walked through the installation procedure.

5. When the forums are installed, visit them and test all the common tasks your users need to accomplish, such as registering, logging in, resetting a password, formatting a member profile, and of course, posting!



If you have any problems with the installation procedure, make notes about any error messages you see, and where the failure occurred in the installation process so that you can ask good questions using whatever support tools are available to you. And if you've opted not to spring for support, a search engine query on the error may help you track down the problem.

Cultivating Community Standards

As Chapter 9 mentions, building community standards is important. Establishing a good set of rules will encourage readers to get involved and add their own ideas to the conversations. Ideally, the dialogue on your forum stays civil, respectful, and on-topic. However, sometimes your community may need a little push in the right direction. Making your expectations regarding behavior clear upfront can help set the tone for the kinds of conversations that occur on the forum — and give you a way to remove members who don't follow the rules without being accused of censorship.

Typically, forum guidelines should direct members to conform to some basic standards:

- ✓ **Be polite:** Being rude on a forum is tempting for some people. You probably want to make sure politeness is one of your first and foremost rules.
- ✓ **“No flaming, no trolls.”** Many forum owners explicitly indicate that flaming and trolls aren't allowed. *Flaming* someone is the act of posting hostile messages. Flames are often posted by *trolls*, people who participate in a forum with the purpose of sowing havoc with off-topic or offensive content.
- ✓ **User accounts:** You may want to make it clear that the user accounts you provide to all of those who chat in your forums exist on your terms, and that people who violate terms lose their accounts.
- ✓ **Links:** Some communities restrict their users and do not allow linking to other websites. Others allow users to post links, but only after members have been active for some time. Because some links can take people to unwanted material, spam, and malware websites, links can become problematic.
- ✓ **Pictures:** If your software allows users to post photos, either as part of their member profile, or within the body of posts, you need to specify whether particular types of imagery are acceptable. Nudity, for example, is typically excluded.

✔ **Legal stuff:** A mention about copyright is worth including. Forum software lets users post images, audio, and text, but the users must be held to a standard that means they are not posting the work of others.

Some of this stuff sounds a little daunting, I know. But most people appreciate the additional resource of a forum and aren't actually out to post troublesome content. If you're thinking about guidelines, visit some existing forums and review their terms of use for additional ideas and considerations. Forums that have been around for some time may be especially useful for this purpose, because their guidelines have probably evolved as the community ran into particular kinds of problems.

When it comes to community guidelines of any sort, they are entirely up to you. Like comments, you may consider it your duty to protect everyone who posts on your blog and your forums, or you may feel that the community should police itself. It can be a very structured conversation that you encourage or you can let it be a written "wild west."

Part V

Marketing and Promoting Your Blog

The 5th Wave

By Rich Tennant



“We have no problem funding your blog, Frank. Of all the chicken farmers operating blogs, yours has the most impressive cluck-through rates.”

In this part . . .

Undecipherable acronyms become your friend in Chapter 14 when you find out how to handle all the flavors of RSS feeds, syndicating your content across the web and on other blogs. Your friends are doing it, your kids are doing it; it's time to find out what this Twitter thing is all about. Chapter 15 walks you through starting an account and the etiquette of *tweeting*. And if that isn't enough, you can really enter the realm of hipness by reading through Chapter 16, which is all about the world of social networking. Chapter 17 makes it real, with tips on installing and understanding web statistics tools for tracking your traffic.

Chapter 14

Reaching Out with RSS

In This Chapter

- ▶ Figuring out what RSS really is
 - ▶ Signing up for an RSS feed
 - ▶ Putting RSS to work for your blog
-

No fashionable blog would be caught dead without a web feed. It's essential for both accessibility and promotion of your blog. RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feeds, or web feeds, give you an easy way to distribute your content, such as blog posts and podcasts, to your web audience.

But what is RSS, really? In this chapter, I explain what an RSS feed is, how to create your blog feed (it's easy), how to subscribe to feeds, and more.

Getting the Goods on Web Feeds

RSS is one of the hottest technologies on the Internet today. Since 2003 — which is when blogs truly reached mainstream awareness — blogs and other technologies have adopted RSS at an exponential rate. Companies such as Mozilla, Microsoft, IBM, and many others have created really interesting ways to use RSS feeds to share information, both through their websites and through internal communication processes.

Put simply, when you syndicate your blog by using a web feed, feed software reads your blog posts, which it formats by using XML (eXtensible Markup Language). XML is an Internet standard and marks your prose so that software applications can understand and display it properly for readers who subscribe to your blog.

Why is RSS a good thing? Well, it means that code can be used to easily display your blog's feed on other websites, from blogs to search engines. Sites that pull in news from multiple sources use RSS feeds to do so, and being syndicated in this way can earn you traffic from those sites back to your blog.

But more importantly, newsreader software that any visitor to your site might use can read RSS feeds, and visitors can then access your blog quickly and easily. By subscribing to a blog via an RSS feed, visitors don't have to bookmark hundreds of blogs and check them every 20 minutes to see whether the bloggers have updated them. Instead, a user can simply log into his or her newsreader software to see in one window all the feeds to which he or she subscribes.



On the web, several different terms describe the subject of this chapter: *RSS*, *Atom*, *web feed*, and *news feed* are a few. Website developers use all these terms interchangeably, but the most accurate one is *web feed*. RSS is simply a type of web feed. Even though web feed is the most accurate name, I usually refer to RSS feeds because that's how most blogs and bloggers refer to them.



If you want to find out more about RSS than I can provide in this chapter, either to give your blog visibility in the world or to pull other blog content into your own blog or site, consider reading *Syndicating Web Sites with RSS Feeds For Dummies*, by Ellen Finkelstein (John Wiley & Sons, Inc.).

Breaking it down further

Essentially, RSS gives your blog the capability to break down its content into a basic text file. Software creates this text file in a special XML format that makes up the feed. Blog software then distributes this plain-text version of your blog content to other websites, search engines, and blogosphere tracking services. Figure 14-1 shows the code behind an RSS feed.

A few acronyms for RSS are floating around out on the Internet. Here are the acronyms you're most likely to see, and if you want to talk about RSS with your blog readers, you can use any of them (but the first one tends to be the most popular):

- ✓ Really Simple Syndication
- ✓ RDF Site Summary
- ✓ Real Simple Syndication
- ✓ Rich Site Summary



You can use RSS to syndicate content on your blog, but most mainstream news agencies also use RSS to make their news information more accessible. News services such as Reuters, CBC, CNN, and the *Washington Post* use RSS technology to spread their articles beyond their own websites.

Many web browsers use XML to handle displaying RSS feeds in a more attractive format. If you click an RSS feed link and find that the content that loads looks rather user friendly, you're probably using a browser that understands and formats XML nicely.

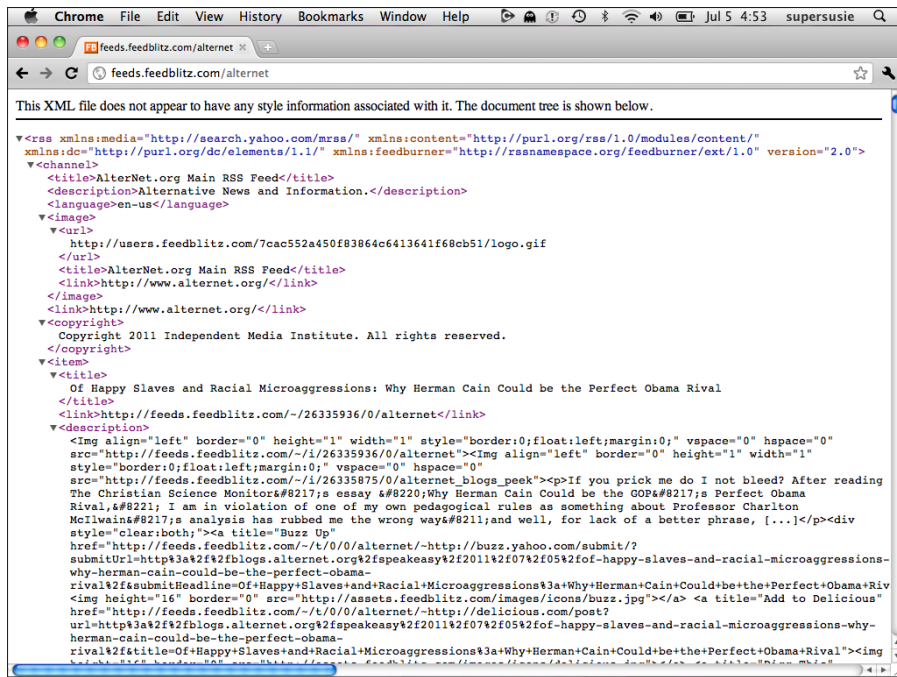


Figure 14-1:
Web feeds
aren't very
pretty to
look at.



For a really excellent short video that describes just what RSS is and how it works, visit the Common Craft blog at www.commoncraft.com/video/rss. This video uses simple graphics and words to get across the concepts that make RSS so groundbreaking.

Confused? Well, don't worry, because nearly all blog software automatically builds your RSS feed and helps you advertise it to your blog visitors. So, you're most likely covered, in any case — but if you know a little bit about RSS and why it's important to your blog, you can ensure your blog content reaches a wider audience.

Generating web traffic

Some bloggers have a tendency to limit the distribution of their content and keep it off other sites. The reasoning goes that you worked hard to create that content, so why should other sites and software get to display it for free?



Actually, because of its ease of use, RSS can help you gain more users. Your website can travel further than ever because you can distribute RSS feeds with little to no effort on your part. Because syndication of your content includes links back to your blog, people who are exposed to your RSS feed probably click those links and come to your blog.

So, because the RSS feed is only text, it doesn't have to stay in one place. Any number of websites and blogs can pick it up and display it.

Creating a feed for your blog

Unless you really want to mess around in the code of your own RSS files, you shouldn't need to do anything special to get started with RSS. Most blog software already includes an RSS feed that pulls together and syndicates your blog. At most, you might have to turn on the option to have an RSS feed.

Then, just blog normally and ignore the feed. Your users can find it and subscribe, and your blog content flows automatically into the feed.



Chances are that your blog software already has RSS capability. Check your administrative settings and documentation. If it doesn't, you might also be able to add the functionality by using a plug-in.

If you don't have software that creates an RSS feed, you have a couple of options. If you're a programmer or coder, you can probably pick up enough XML to hand-code an RSS feed yourself. But an even better option is to use some of the third-party feed creation tools available today:

- ✓ **FeedYes** (www.feedyes.com): Use this simple tool to create an RSS feed from any website or blog. You can create multiple feeds and, with an account, edit and manage them. FeedYes is free.
- ✓ **IceRocket RSS Builder** (<http://rss.icerocket.com>): With this tool you can build RSS feeds or "channels" from practically any content on the web. You can create as many feeds as you want. IceRocket RSS Builder is a free service.
- ✓ **Feed43** (www.feed43.com): Set up a feed for your blog quickly and for free. Increase the frequency with which your feed is updated by buying a higher level of feed, starting at \$29 a year.
- ✓ **FeedForAll** (www.feedforall.com): Use this tool to create and edit RSS feeds for your blog or podcast. You must be able to install software on your web host to use this tool. Pricing starts at \$39.95.

When a feed exists, you don't need to do anything else. Search engines and software tools automatically find it when they index your blog, and your readers can subscribe to your feed when and if they choose to do so.

Subscribing to an RSS Feed

I'm sure you read at least a few favorite blogs regularly. Do you visit them every day or maybe even several times a day? Are you ever frustrated because the site hasn't been updated yet? Do you ever miss a post by a few

minutes, and then read it hours or days later, and miss out on the conversation? The solution to this problem is RSS.

Follow these basic steps to get set up with your favorite blog's RSS feed:

- 1. Choose a newsreader and sign up to begin using it.**

You can find tons out there, and I tell you about a few of my favorites in the sections “Finding a web-based newsreader” and “Choosing a desktop-based reader,” both later in this chapter.

- 2. Subscribe to an RSS feed.**

Don't worry: You can subscribe to an RSS feed even more easily (and cheaply) than you can subscribe to a newspaper or magazine, although the idea is similar. The newsreader software you chose and signed up to use provides specific instructions on subscribing.

- 3. Check your newsreader.**

When you subscribe to an RSS feed, new blog posts appear in your newsreader every time the blogger posts a new entry to his or her blog. When the blogger publishes a new post, the RSS feed is updated a few minutes later, and the newsreader checks the feed and alerts you to the new posts.

- 4. Click, read, and *voilà!***

No more boring bookmarking and refreshing a blog over and over. You go to the blog only when it has new content, so you never miss anything.

You can subscribe to as many (or as few) feeds as you want, potentially keeping track of hundreds of sites, all in one place.

Browser newsreaders

Some browsers have built-in newsreaders that you can use to subscribe to feeds and then read them. On a PC, Internet Explorer 7 and higher allows you to read, subscribe to, and manage feed subscriptions right inside the browser. Mac and PC users of the Firefox web browser can install a plug-in called Sage (<https://addons.mozilla.org/en-US/firefox/addon/sage>) to add news-reading capabilities to the browser.

On the Mac, you can use the built-in newsreader in the Safari browser to subscribe to and read feeds.

Finding a web-based newsreader

Web-based newsreaders are online services that allow you to aggregate your favorite feeds into a simple interface where you can read your subscriptions. These online services are usually free.

The big advantage to using a web-based newsreader is that you can log into the service from any computer, even if you're traveling, at the library, or using your son's laptop. In most cases, however, you need to have Internet access in order to read the blog posts because you have to be online. Google Reader, Bloglines, and Feedly, introduced in the following sections, are three popular web-based newsreaders.

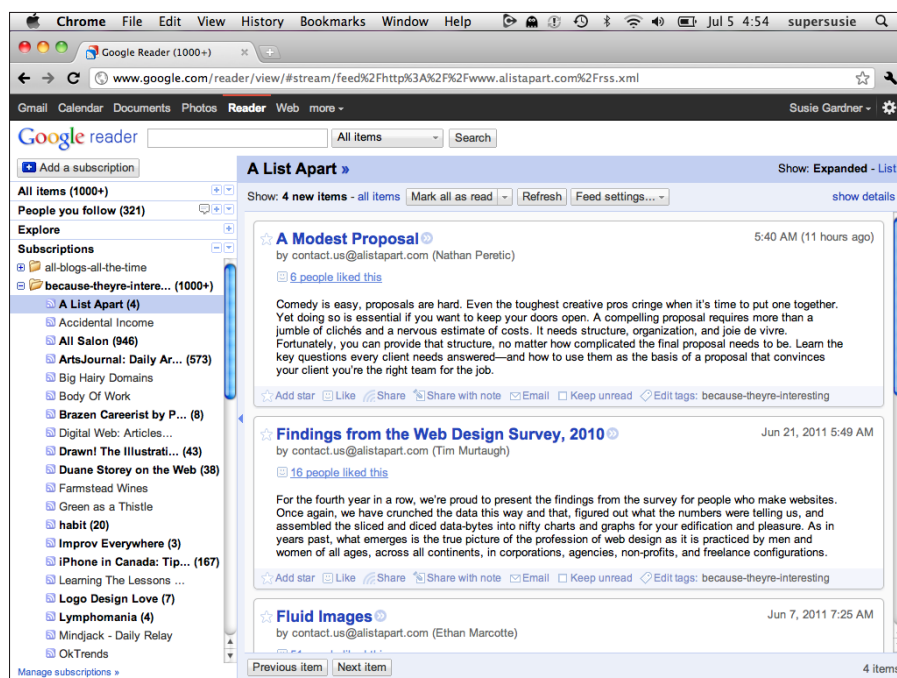
Google Reader

`www.google.com/reader`

Google Reader is a great web-based feed aggregator. If you already registered with Gmail or other Google services, getting started with Reader is as simple as signing in at `www.google.com/reader`. If you don't have a Google account already, click the Create an Account Now link.

Google Reader's interface is similar to the other Google web products, and it features feed searching, RSS feed sharing, mobile access, and offline reading. Google Reader is shown in Figure 14-2.

Figure 14-2:
Google Reader is an excellent online newsreader.



Bloglines

www.bloglines.com

The web-based application Bloglines is super-simple to use, with quick tools for adding a subscription and sorting your subscriptions into categories. One fun feature of Bloglines is that you can produce a blogroll — a list of links to blogs — to put in your blog’s sidebar, sharing the blogs to which you’re subscribed with your readers. Bloglines even carries over the categorization when it displays your blog subscriptions. You can mark some feeds as private if you prefer not to share them with the world.

Feedly

www.feedly.com

Feedly is a unique browser-based application designed to make your feed reading enjoyable by providing you with an easy-to-read, newspaper-like layout. The main feature is called “the cover,” where your feeds are displayed in a thumbnail format that looks great to the eye and makes sorting through many feeds enjoyable. Integration with social networks like Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr is seamless and makes sharing posts with others a snap.

Feedly is available as a browser-based application but also has free iPhone, iPad, and Android mobile applications. Feedly requires you to have a Google account and Google Reader.

Choosing a desktop-based reader

Desktop readers are a little different than online newsreaders. You install desktop readers directly on your computer (so they don’t use any web-based tools), which gives you a bit more control over when the reader checks and updates your feeds. Best of all, a desktop reader actually downloads the feeds to your machine, so you can read blogs even when you don’t have Internet access — perhaps while making a commute or on an airplane.



Some people believe that a major drawback of desktop readers is that they cause your computer to run slower than it normally would, especially when it has to check a large number of feeds. Because computers have so many differences, I can’t predict whether a desktop reader may slow down your computer, but definitely watch out for this problem.

FeedDemon (Windows)

www.newsgator.com/rss-readers.aspx

FeedDemon is a free RSS reader client that you can install locally on your computer. It downloads updates from your feeds on a regular basis (which you can configure), and it features many great organizational tools that keep your feeds updated and easy to peruse.

FeedDemon, available from the folks at NewsGator, also downloads and stores any podcasts to which you subscribe; it transfers those podcasts to your portable audio player. As if that isn't enough, you can also set up custom news watches to keep track of topics or events that you want to know more about.

FeedDemon is available only for Windows.

NetNewsWire (Mac)

```
www.newsgator.com/rss-readers.aspx
```

NewsGator's Mac newsreader solution is NetNewsWire, a free program that takes advantage of preinstalled Apple software on the Mac. As with FeedDemon, you can use NetNewsWire to read and organize feeds, as well as save them for later reference or send them via e-mail or instant messenger to a friend.

NetNewsWire automatically downloads podcasts and transfers them to Apple's iTunes software, and you can even use NetNewsWire with iCal and Address Book.



NewsGator also makes a newsreader for the Apple iPhone and iPad, which you can download via the iPhone App Store. The premium iPhone version, at \$4.99, or the premium iPad version, at \$9.99, ensures that your reading experience is ad-free.

Signing up for a feed

After you select a newsreader, you can subscribe to a feed and start reading! This task has two steps: visiting a blog that you enjoy reading and then subscribing.

Somewhere on the blog page, you might see a small orange icon, sometimes with the acronym RSS or XML in it. Or you might just see a small text link to the feed.



Look closely: RSS feeds can be hard to find on the page. Because you need to use the link only once, bloggers tend to downplay them in the design.

Alternet (www.alternet.org) offers several different RSS feeds, so you can choose between getting front-page news stories, video stories, columns, and so on. Check out all the flavors at www.alternet.org/webfeeds.

When you find the RSS link or icon, click it. If you're using a web-based newsreader, you might be subscribed automatically, or you might see an icon for subscribing using one of the most common newsreaders.

If you don't see a link or an icon to an RSS feed, copy the URL from the address bar of the browser. Return to your newsreader and follow your newsreader's instructions for adding a new subscription.

Follow these steps to subscribe to an RSS feed in Google Reader:

1. **Visit a blog or website to which you want to subscribe and locate the feed link or icon.**
2. **Click the link.**

The browser displays the feed.



3. **Copy the URL from the address bar.**

You can also simply right-click the feed link or icon and select Copy Link Location or Copy Shortcut from the pop-up menu that appears.

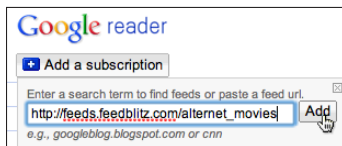
4. **In Google Reader, click the Add Subscription link in the left column.**

A small dialog box opens, as shown in Figure 14-3.

If Google Reader finds the feed, that feed appears in the right column. If it doesn't find the feed, Google Reader notifies you.

5. **Repeat as desired!**

Figure 14-3:
Subscribing
to a feed
is quick
and easy
in Google
Reader.



Making the Most of RSS

You can use RSS in all sorts of ways. Industries as diverse as financial sectors and breaking news organizations have adopted RSS because it's so flexible and generates website traffic, attracting new readers from search engines and news aggregators. But that's not all you can use RSS for:

- ✓ **Syndicating content:** In the blogosphere, *syndication* means that you publish your information on the web so that newsreaders and other websites can display it.
- ✓ **Aggregating news:** Do you like other blogs that deal with similar topics as your own? You can use their RSS feeds to include their content on your website. You can link directly to it or, if your blog software has such functionality, display other blog content on your own blog.
- ✓ **Replacing e-mail newsletters:** Some RSS advocates make astounding claims that RSS will be the death of e-mail. Although this dire prediction hasn't yet come to pass, RSS definitely has many advantages over e-mail newsletters. The most important is that you can avoid spam. How? You can simply choose to read an RSS feed, rather than receive more e-mail; by not giving away your e-mail address, you don't put it at risk for being sold to a spammer.
- ✓ **Keeping communities updated:** RSS feeds are terrific for keeping people updated. Some feeds merely post information, such as sports scores — as fast as a goal is scored, an RSS feed can be updated. Here are five kinds of things you can share that people might want to know as soon as possible:
 - Security bulletins
 - Classified listings for apartments
 - Emergency weather changes
 - Changes to bids on eBay or Amazon
 - Product availability at retail stores

Because of the simplicity of using RSS technology (yes, the actual building of RSS feeds might still be too geeky for most bloggers), you can use it in many ways to augment the communication channels of your blog or within your community that you haven't quite figured out yet. Get creative!

Chapter 15

Joining the Twitterverse

In This Chapter

- ▶ Taking the measure of Twitter
 - ▶ Using Twitter
 - ▶ Customizing your account
 - ▶ Using your phone to tweet
 - ▶ Bringing Twitter and your blog together
-

While I was watching a well-known sitcom on TV the other day, a character mentioned Twitter. If that's not mainstream, I don't know what is! But just because Hollywood knows about Twitter doesn't mean that you don't have questions, so this chapter gets down to brass tacks.

Twitter (www.twitter.com) is a free social network used for *micro blogging*, which is essentially blogging, but in very short form. How short? Well, on Twitter, your posts are limited to 140 characters — barely enough for a couple of sentences. If you use Facebook, you may be surprised to know that you're already familiar with micro blogging.

Although you can post only up to 140 characters of text at a time on Twitter, you can use it to share photographs and links, even videos. Many businesses have jumped onto the Twitter bandwagon and use the tool to tell their customers about sales, specials, and other news.



If this chapter whets your appetite for even more Twitter tidbits, be sure to check out *Twitter For Dummies*, by Laura Fitton, Michael Gruen, and Leslie Poston (John Wiley & Sons, Inc.).

Understanding Twitter

Twitter started in 2006 and grew slowly into the phenomenon it is today. It's fundamentally difficult to explain both its popularity and its purpose; as with blogs themselves, some very logical and common-sense questions jump to mind for most people:

- ✓ Who's going to read this stuff, anyway?
- ✓ What am I supposed to talk about on Twitter?
- ✓ Why do people use Twitter?
- ✓ Isn't Twitter a huge waste of time?
- ✓ How do the creators of Twitter make money?

And in the case of people who already have a blog, the big question is, “Do I really need Twitter, as well?”

I hope you can forgive my answer to these questions: It's up to you! People use Twitter for all kinds of reasons. I've seen Twitter accounts devoted to spiritual guidance, sports, sex, marketing, web development, and diaries. You name it, and someone is using Twitter to talk about it. So, explaining why you should use Twitter, and what you might get out of it, is pretty hard to do!

For example, the blog Foodists (www.foodists.ca) has a Twitter account that is regularly used to alert readers to restaurant openings, food markets, tastings, and of course to attract readers to the blog when there are new posts available. In Figure 15-1, you can see the Foodists Twitter profile page (www.twitter.com/foodists).

Figure 15-1:
Foodists
blog con-
tributors
use Twitter
for updates
too minor to
deserve a
whole blog
post.



The Foodists Twitter updates are also displayed on the blog, ensuring that the audiences for both the main blog and Twitter micro blog know what's going on in each place. The goal of having both a blog and a Twitter account is pretty simple: Get more readers by producing different kinds of content in different web formats.

For most Twitter users, the first goal is communication, quickly followed by reaching out to more people in a format that they can use easily (and for free), which reaches people very quickly.

Here are just a few ways in which individuals and businesses are putting Twitter to work:

- ✓ **Restaurants:** Advertise specials, let customers know about available tables, and offer coupons.
- ✓ **Pundits:** Post links and resources to support their viewpoints.
- ✓ **Friends:** Coordinate get-togethers and even arrange dates.
- ✓ **Conference organizers:** Remind potential attendees of sign-up deadlines and early-bird pricing specials.
- ✓ **Conference attendees:** Let other attendees know about good speakers (and snacks) and keep those who aren't attending up to date.
- ✓ **Celebrities:** Extend their personal brand and identity by talking about their projects.
- ✓ **Characters from popular television shows:** Carry on dialogue with viewers between episodes — written by the show's writers, actors, or marketing folks.
- ✓ **Political candidates:** Update voters about their policies and appearances.
- ✓ **Emergency services:** Update followers about operations. In 2009, the Australian County Fire Authority used Twitter to send out alerts and updates about the Black Saturday bushfires that killed 173 people and injured more than 400.

Twitter updates have a lot of potential to inform and entertain. To get a sense of the mechanics of using Twitter, follow these basic steps:

1. **Sign up for a Twitter account and choose a nickname.**

When you set up your account, you can choose to share your updates — called *tweets* — with anyone (meaning the public) or to restrict access to only the people you choose to follow.

2. **Customize your icon and profile page to make them reflect your personality or brand.**

3. Run your contact list through Twitter to see if any of your friends, family, and colleagues are on Twitter.

If any of them are on Twitter, decide whether you want to follow their updates.

4. Post updates.

You can tweet about anything, from news about your plans, your thoughts, or activities.

People who follow you on Twitter see your updates. On the web, updates appear right when you post them to Twitter. Followers who have their phones configured to do so get your updates as text messages and can respond to them by sending a text message to a number provided by Twitter. If you have an iPhone, iPad, Blackberry, Windows 7, or Android phone, you can install the Twitter application to use the network that way.

Following people on Twitter is equivalent to making them into a friend or contact on other social networks; Twitter simply calls those folks who read your updates *followers*. Like with other social networks, the number of followers you have indicates your popularity, and a lot of people focus on getting those numbers high.

The really neat thing about Twitter is that you can participate without ever visiting the Twitter website. Twitter's designed so that you can handle the whole thing by mobile phone text messaging and apps, keeping you updated with a device that you probably already have close to hand.

Getting Started

I'm a big fan of learning by doing, so in the following sections, I walk you through signing up for Twitter and getting started. I get the easy job — getting you started with Twitter. You have the hard job of figuring out what to tweet about!

Signing up for an account

Follow these steps to set up a Twitter account:

1. Point your web browser to www.twitter.com.

The Twitter home page opens.

2. Enter your first and last name in the Full Name field.

You're limited to 20 characters in this field.

3. **Provide an e-mail address to use with your Twitter account in the Email field.**
4. **Create a password in the Password field.**
5. **Click Sign Up.**

Twitter loads the Create an Account page, which confirms the information you already provided.

6. **Choose a Twitter username and type it in the Username field.**

Unlike some social networks, you can change your username later.

Your username is limited to 15 characters, and while you type in your desired username, Twitter checks to see whether it's available. If you don't get a green OK message (see Figure 15-2), try again until you find an available username.

7. **Click Create My Account.**

Twitter creates your new account and loads the Who to Follow page. You also receive an e-mail that contains your new account information at the address you used to sign up.

Twitter / Create an Account

Twitter, Inc. [US] https://twitter.com/signup

Have an account? [Sign in](#)

It's your turn.
Join Twitter.

susannah gardner ✓ Name looks great.

bloggingfordummies@bloggingfordummies! ✓ We will email you a confirmation.

..... ✓ Password is okay.

addicted_input ✓ Username is available.

Suggestions: [GardnerInput](#) [InputGardner](#) [AddictedInput](#)

☒ Keep me logged-in on this computer.

By clicking the button, you agree to the terms below:

These Terms of Service ("Terms") govern your access to and use of the services and Twitter's websites (the "Services"), and any information, text, graphics, photos or other materials

[Printable versions:](#)
[Terms of Service](#) · [Privacy Policy](#)

Create my account

Note: Others will be able to find you by name, username or email. Your email will not be shown publicly. You can change your privacy settings at any time.

About · Help · Blog · Status · Jobs · Terms · Privacy · Advertisers · Businesses · Media · Developers · Resources · © 2011 Twitter

Figure 15-2:
You can
sign up
for Twitter
quickly (and
for free).

Finding friends to follow

After you set up your account, you can let Twitter help you find friends, family, and colleagues who are also Twitter users by giving the service access to your contact lists in Gmail, Yahoo!, or AOL. If you don't have contact lists with any of these tools, click the Skip This Step link at the bottom of this screen.

To let Twitter access your contact list in an online e-mail tool and find people to follow, follow these steps:

1. **On the Find Friends page, click Search Contacts beside the name of the service that you use to keep track of your contacts, such as Gmail.**

Twitter loads a login information screen.

2. **Provide your login information for the service to which you want to give Twitter access, such as your e-mail address and password.**

Twitter doesn't keep this information; you're granting the company only one-time access to your contact list.

If you are already logged into the service you use for contacts, Twitter gives you a screen requesting access to the service.

3. **Review the provided list of contacts who have Twitter accounts, and follow the provided instructions to select those you wish to follow.**

Twitter connects to the service and loads your contact information, matching the e-mail addresses from your list against the e-mail addresses of other Twitter users.

You can always add more people later.

4. **Select anyone from the Look Who Else Is Here page whom you want to follow and click Finish.**

If you prefer not to follow any of these popular Twitter users, simply click Finish without selecting any of them.

Twitter loads your personal home page, which displays messages from all the people you're following.



If you'd prefer not to run your contact list through Twitter, you can easily search for individual users by clicking the Find People link that appears in the navigation area at the top of all Twitter pages and then using the search tools provided.

Twittering

After you sign up for a Twitter account, it's time for the fun part — your first tweet! You can send a tweet pretty darn easily from the website. Follow these steps:

1. **Point your browser to `www.twitter.com` and log into Twitter if you aren't already logged in.**

Twitter loads your personal home page, which displays messages from all the people you're following.

2. **Type your tweet into the What's Happening? field at the top of the page.**

While you type, watch the number at the bottom of the field; it tells you the number of characters still available.

3. **Click Tweet (see Figure 15-3).**

Twitter posts your tweet into your message stream, where your followers can read and respond to it. If any of them subscribe to your updates with their phones, they receive a text message that contains your tweet.

Posting a tweet is just the beginning. Other kinds of messages include the following:

- ✦ **@ messages:** When you want to direct a message to a specific person, but still include it in your main message stream (which means all your followers, and possibly the public, can see it), start your message with the @ symbol followed by the username of the person. For example

```
@b4dbook i'm reading your chapter on Twitter right now!
```

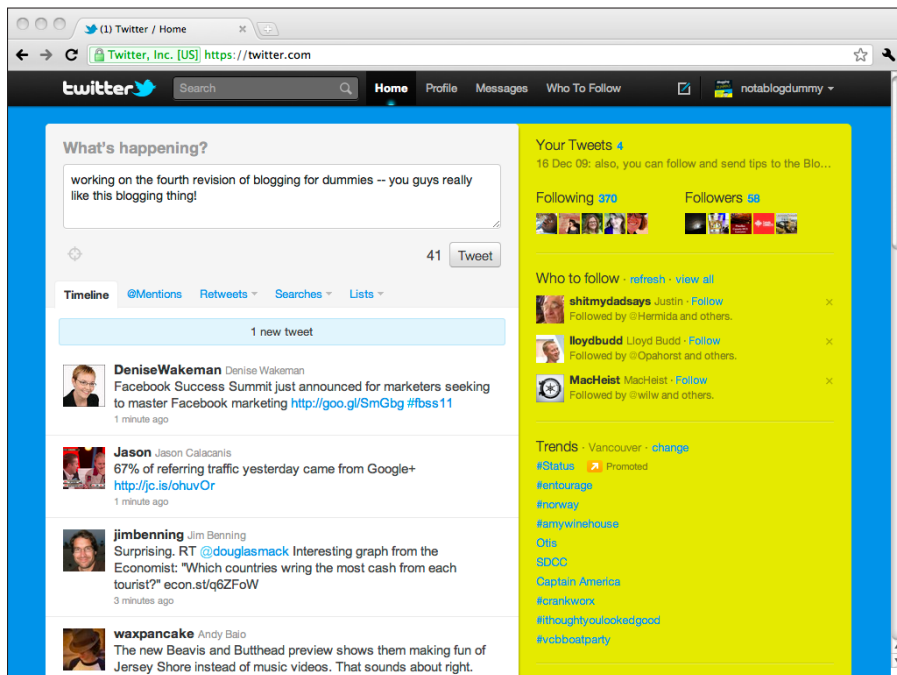


Figure 15-3:
You can
post a tweet
on Twitter
very quickly.



To view these messages quickly, click the @Mentions tab in the main column of your Twitter page, as shown in Figure 15-4.



- ✓ **Direct messages:** You send direct messages to only a specific Twitter user, and they don't appear in the general message stream. To send a direct message, visit the user's profile page and click the Message icon in from the right navigation; it looks like a small envelope. Or preface your message in the What's Happening? field with a d and the username. For example

d hopstudios thanks!

Be careful sending direct messages — you can too easily post things publicly that you meant to be private!

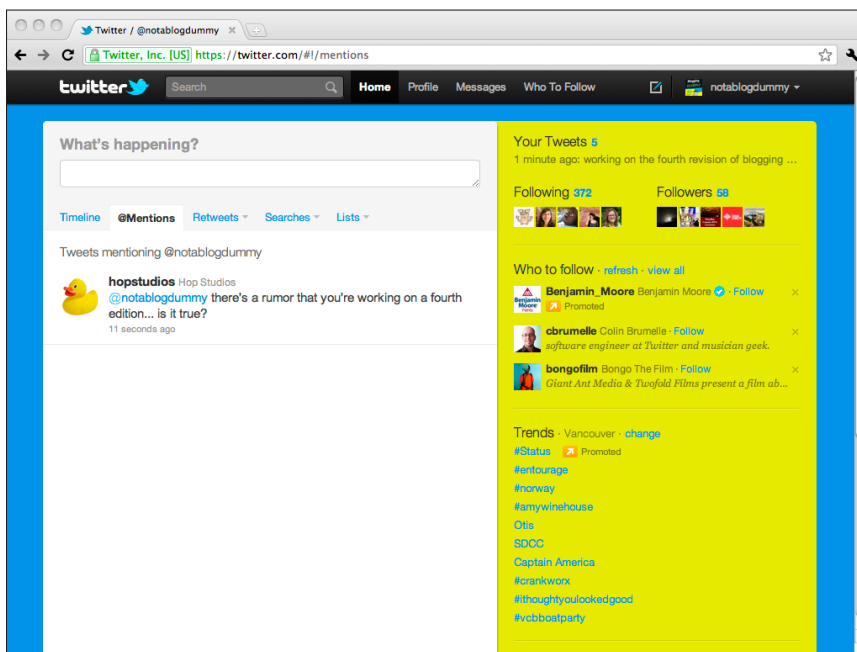
- ✓ **Retweets:** Do you see a tweet in your stream that you want to rebroadcast to all your followers? That's called retweeting. To retweet, simply put your mouse over the tweet, and the Retweet link will become visible. Click the link, and the tweet is automatically sent to your followers. Alternatively, you can copy and paste the text of the tweet into the What's Happening? field, preface it with RT, and even add your own remark, as below:

that makes so much sense! RT @dbarefoot On a similar bent, there's a great quote about creativity being something plus frequent iteration.

It's considered good form to include the username of the person you're retweeting.



Figure 15-4:
View public
messages
directed at
you by click-
ing on the
@Mentions
tab.



Exploring the Settings

You can personalize your Twitter home and profile pages in a lot of ways, and of course, you can also update your account information, change your username and password, and so on. You can make all these changes on the Settings page, which you access by clicking the drop-down menu at the top right of any Twitter page. The Settings page includes the following areas:

- ✓ **Account settings:** Change the e-mail address at which Twitter contacts you and your username. You can also customize the following:
 - *Language:* Select the language you tweet in.
 - *Time Zone:* Make sure Twitter knows your time zone.
 - *Tweet Location:* This geo-location service tells your followers exactly where you are in the world.
 - *Tweet Media:* Opt to see photos and videos from any tweet in your Timeline, instead of only those from people you follow directly.
 - *Tweet Privacy:* Control who can see your tweets by requiring authorization for each new follower request.
 - *Always use HTTPS:* Encrypt your account information for better security.
- ✓ **Password:** Change your password. You need to know your current password in order to change it.
- ✓ **Mobile:** Set up your phone to receive tweets from Twitter. I cover this setup fully in the following section.
- ✓ **Notifications:** Decide whether you want to receive e-mail messages when you get a new follower, receive a direct message, are retweeted or mentioned, or subscribe to the Twitter e-mail newsletter.
- ✓ **Profile:** Customize your Twitter icon by uploading a photo or other graphic. Businesses often choose to display a logo as their icon. You can also provide your:
 - *Location:* Let people know where you are on the globe.
 - *Web:* Your profile displays this URL, so you can send people to your home page quickly.
 - *Bio:* Give people a little bit of background about who you are.
- ✓ **Design:** Select a new theme for the look and feel of your Twitter pages, upload your own custom background image, or even change the background, text, and link colors.

Twittering with Your Mobile Phone

Twitter is intended for use with your mobile phone, either by receiving and sending tweets as text messages or by using one of the device-specific pieces of software that interface with Twitter.

Tweeting from your phone

When you want to use your mobile phone to tweet, you first need to let Twitter know about your phone by setting it up on the Mobile Settings page. Follow these steps:

1. **Point your web browser to www.twitter.com, sign in if you need to, and choose Settings from the menu at the top-right of the page.**
The Settings page loads.
2. **Click the Mobile tab from the Settings menu at the top of the page.**
3. **Choose your country/region.**
4. **Fill in your mobile phone number and, if desired, select the check box labeled Let Others Find Me by My Phone Number.**
5. **Choose your text messaging language.**
6. **Click Start.**



Remember, depending on your mobile phone plan, it may cost money for you to receive and/or send text messages on your phone. Check with your service provider to see what is and isn't included in your plan! If you don't have an unlimited text message plan, be sparing with the number of Twitter feeds sent to your phone.

7. **From your phone, send a text message as directed to the number provided on the Twitter site.**
If you send this text correctly, you receive a text message from Twitter, confirming that you've signed up.
8. **Refresh the Mobile page on the Twitter website and customize what kinds of text messages you want and the hours you want to receive them.**

From this point on, you can post tweets from your phone. Simply text the same number to which you sent your confirmation code. In the United States, the number is 40404; in Canada it is 21212. When you send a text message to that number, the text message is posted as a tweet on your account, and your followers can read it.

Receiving selected tweets on your phone

You can request to receive the tweets of people you're following as text messages. I recommend you be selective about this option! For example, I follow several hundred people by using Twitter, but I want to hear from only a handful of friends and family at the moment they tweet and as a text message.

To get someone's tweets on your phone, follow these steps:

1. **Point your web browser to `www.twitter.com` and sign in, if you need to.**

Twitter loads your personal home page.

2. **Click the Following link in the right navigation area.**

Twitter displays a list of all the users you're following on Twitter.

3. **Find a user whose tweets you want to receive as text messages and click that user.**

Twitter loads a basic profile on the right side of the page.

4. **Click the tiny phone icon next to the Following button.**

The icon turns green — you've just turned on text message updates from that user.

To turn off text message updates, repeat these steps, but click the green icons.

Tying Your Blog into Twitter

Some bloggers have set up a system that automatically tweets about their blog posts. If you want to use this system, explore Twitterfeed (www.twitterfeed.com).

Setting up such a system is pretty simple, really. If your blog has an RSS feed (see Chapter 14), you simply point Twitterfeed at both the feed and your Twitter account. Whenever you post a new blog update, a tweet containing the blog post title and URL is added to your Twitter feed.



Tweeting about your blog posts can really help to drive traffic to your blog, but some users find the impersonality of this kind of message irritating. Be aware of what your audience is looking for if you decide to go this route.

You can also put a widget on your blog itself that shares your Twitter posts with your blog visitors (and invites them to follow you!). To do this, follow these steps:

1. **Sign in or create an account on Twitter** (www.twitter.com) and click the **Resources** navigation link at the right-hand column of any Twitter page.

Twitter loads the Resources page.

2. **Click the Widgets item.**

The Select Your Widget screen appears.

3. **Click My Website in the left navigation panel, and then Profile Widget from the center of the page.**

The Customize Your Profile Widget screen opens.

4. **Customize the Preferences, Appearance, or Dimensions to suit your blog from the navigation menu on the left.**

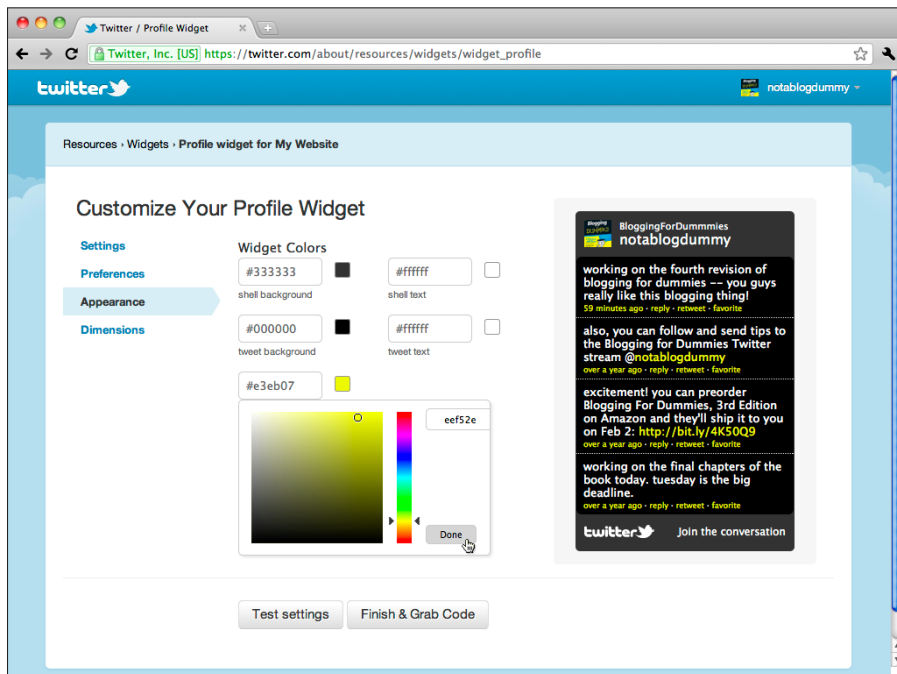
A preview of your badge appears on the right side of the page, as shown in Figure 15-5.

5. **Click Finish & Grab Code when your badge looks the way that you want it to.**

Twitter displays the code for your badge.

6. **Copy the code and go to your blog so that you can paste that code into your sidebar.**

Figure 15-5: Share your thoughts and activities using Twitter on your blog with the Profile Widget.



Chapter 16

Diving Into Social Networking

In This Chapter

- ▶ Generating traffic by letting visitors tell others about you
 - ▶ Finding other bloggers and blogs with social networks
 - ▶ Getting to know popular social-networking websites
-

Ever been “liked” on Facebook? Done any tweeting lately? What about endorsing someone on LinkedIn? Is this all gibberish to you? Welcome to the world of social networking, the hottest topic online in the last few years.

At first glance, social networking can look overwhelming and difficult to understand because it uses a lot of jargon, and so many players are in the field. Never fear, however. Social networking is a simple concept: You can meet others online by using a website or online service. At the very heart of it, social networking is the simple process of finding people you want to hang out with, or connecting online with people you already hang out with.

The web has opened the door to meeting people who share your interests, but whose geography or professional careers — to name just a couple of possibilities — made it unlikely you would ever meet in “real” life. Social-networking websites are designed to bring together people who share hobbies, careers, friends, geographic regions, and other interests, and then encourage communication and sharing. And believe me, social-networking sites exist for everything under the sun!

In this chapter, I introduce you to some of today’s most popular social-networking tools and show you how they can tie into your blogging efforts.

Thinking Strategically

Social networks allow you to connect with current friends and make new ones while sharing photos, videos, text, and more. They’ve exploded in popularity in the last few years, and many social networks have even added blogging tools. From Twitter to Facebook, these tools are proliferating, and their quality is improving. Social networking can build:

- ✓ **Friendships:** You can form long-lasting bonds with people you meet online. By building your social network, you inevitably find others who share your interests.
- ✓ **Communities:** Connecting with other people is one of the greatest ways to improve your blogging experience. Other bloggers are using social networks to connect with those who share their interests and passions.
- ✓ **Audience:** Bring more eyeballs to your blog. The fact that these eyeballs belong to folks you already have things in common with — well, that's a bonus!



In general, social networks that have blogging tools are good for, well, social networking. If you're starting a business or professional blog, these blogging tools were once considered "amateurish" or unprofessional. Over the last couple of years, that attitude has changed dramatically. It is now a requirement that professional bloggers use social media tools to promote themselves. If you aren't, you are considered outdated and lacking in knowledge. These days it is hip to be square, and it can pay off with more blog traffic.

Many blogs include a feature on each post that allows you to share the post and a link to it on many social networks. You can add this feature to your own blog if your blog software has these tools built in, or by implementing the ShareThis service (www.sharethis.com). I cover ShareThis in detail later in this chapter.

Because this book talks about blogging, I focus mainly on how social networks can benefit your blog. You may forget that, sometimes, you also need to select social networks that work for you, overall. The following sections give you some tips on choosing a network or networks.

Connecting with your audience

The key is to know your audience and to choose what information to share. The more information you share among the social networks you use, the more attention you can bring to your blog. You must take the time to identify your audience and choose networks where that audience is active. Be sure that the social networks where you spend time are those that likely can repay that effort.

You can tie your blog and your social networks together, letting blog readers know about your actions on social networks and vice versa. The payoff? More readers and, hopefully, more readers from the audience that you're trying to attract.

Essentially, if you participate in a social-networking site that has something to do with the topic of your blog, the friends you make on that network naturally fit into your target audience. And the readers of your blog are also likely to want to join your social network, bringing along with them their groups of friends, family, and colleagues, who may in turn be interested in what you blog about. That's the idea, anyway!

These sites can attract huge audiences, and you greatly increase your ability to filter content through to groups who are most interested in what you have to say on your blog. The friends and contacts you make through social networks may very well be hungry for good blogs to read.

Selecting networks

Integrating social networks into your online activities and your blog does require some planning. With so many options, how do you determine which networks to spend time in? You could just dive in and sign up for a bunch of social networks, then see where the chips fall, but if you want your time spent using social networks to pay off, consider the following questions:



- ✓ What do you want to accomplish with your online efforts?
- ✓ What networks does your current readership use? What about your friends and family?

If you're unsure what networks you have to choose from, the section "Getting Familiar with Social Networks," later in this chapter, introduces you to a variety of popular networks.
- ✓ Which networks have the coolest designs and best functionalities?
- ✓ How active is your audience on social networks? What do they seem to be getting out of that interaction?
- ✓ Is your blog content subject-appropriate for any particular social networks? On the flip side, is your blog inappropriate for any of them?
- ✓ Does your audience want to know about you in ways that a social-networking tool might fulfill?
- ✓ How much time do you want to spend playing around with social networks?

You need to consider these types of questions when you're looking to fit a social network into your blogging life. Take a look at where your readers are coming from and, using the analytics information that you should be collecting for your blog (see Chapter 17), find out what attracts visitors to your site.

Post a question on your blog about a social-networking website, and solicit responses and advice.

The social-networking online realm is a bit of a Wild West scenario: Everyone's experimenting to find out what works and what doesn't. So, jump in the saddle, pardner!

Protecting your privacy online

You may worry about the security of your identity online if you're jumping headlong into the social-networking world.



Be smart. Don't post information on any social-networking website that you feel is inappropriate. You want to keep certain bits of information private. If a social-networking website asks you to provide information that you aren't comfortable sharing, don't share it. If the website insists you share that information, don't use that service. It's as simple as that.

If you're at all concerned about your security online, make sure you check regularly with your bank and any credit card company you deal with. Some financial institutions are taking new and additional precautions to make sure that your security and identity remain private.



Social networks often feel safer than the Internet at large because they require membership and logins, and of course, profiles of your new friends often include photos and other elements that look convincingly real. However, remember that these sites offer very little barrier to creating an account — the accounts are free, the services don't require identity verification, and the social networks can't prevent people from including misleading information or outright lying about who they are.

So, remain vigilant. If you're aware of what information you place online, you should be able to protect yourself without much of a concern. Just like writing on your blog, consider using this guideline: If you wouldn't blog it, don't social network it.

Getting Familiar with Social Networks

Almost any interest group and almost any method of sharing has a social network. Deciding which ones to try out depends on what you want to get out of the social networking. If you're a photographer, social websites such as Flickr

(which allows you to share photos) may be your cup of tea. If you like to read books and talk about them, LibraryThing and Goodreads may be the places to hang out.

In the following sections, I show you some of the most popular (and some of my favorites) so that you can get familiar with social-networking sites and decide where to get started.



You can find many more sites that I don't have the space to cover in this book, so make this chapter a starting point while you explore social networks.

Friend-based networks

Social networks are never really all that general, but the most popular social networks allow their users to share almost anything, from photos to friends to games. Social networks such as Facebook simply try to throw everything and the kitchen sink into the mix; others, such as Twitter, go with a more minimal approach.

Here are two all-purpose social networks:

✓ **Facebook** (www.facebook.com): Facebook is one of the most popular social-networking platforms. It boasts a user base of more than 300 million — and that number gets bigger every day. Started in 2004 by Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook was initially intended to be a communication tool for university students but quickly grew beyond that audience.

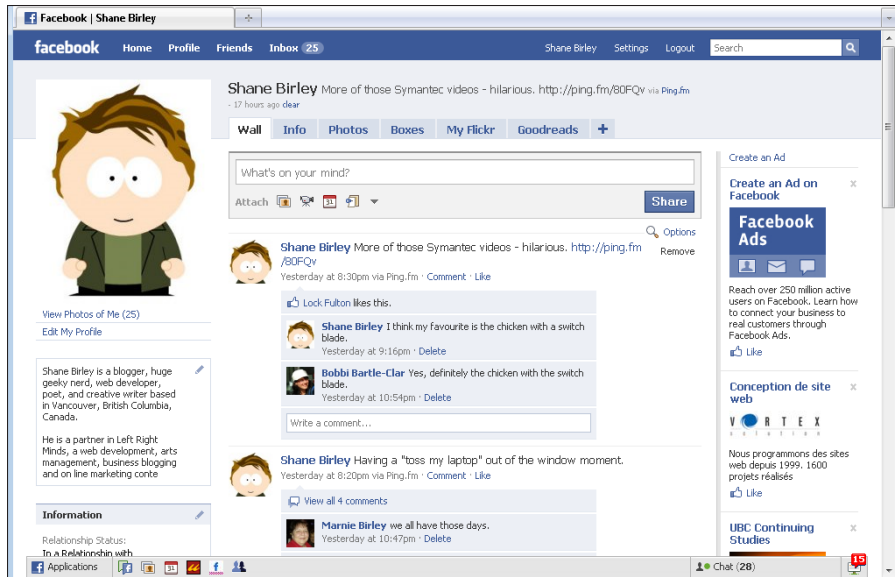
The service allows users to share photos, audio, and video; install apps, such as games and horoscopes; and friend others. *Friending* is the method of identifying people you want in your network. On most social networks, Facebook included, friends are entitled to see more of your shared information than other members of the network.

For more information about Facebook security settings, check out *Facebook For Dummies*, written by Carolyn Abram and Leah Pearlman (John Wiley & Sons, Inc.).

Not surprisingly, you can also post messages and short status updates, and you can set up your profile to let others know when you post to your blog. You can install widgets on your blog that automatically post a Facebook update when you create a new post (see Figure 16-1).



Figure 16-1:
Facebook
allows you
to commu-
nicate with
millions of
potential
friends.



✓ **Twitter** (www.twitter.com): Micro blogging is all the rage on today's World Wide Web, particularly as mobile-phone technology has really taken off in North America. Twitter is a micro-blogging tool that allows you to post small bursts of text, called *tweets*, about your plans, thoughts, and activities. Following other people's Twitter feeds means that you can stay abreast of their activities, as well. You can handle the whole Twitter experience by mobile phone text messaging, keeping you updated by using a device that you probably already have close at hand.

Though you can post up to only 140 characters of text at a time, you can use Twitter to share photographs, links, and even videos. Many businesses have jumped onto the Twitter bandwagon and use the tool to let their customers know about sales, specials, and other news. I cover Twitter in detail in Chapter 15.

Hobby-based networks

If you're a bookworm like me, hold on to your hat. A number of social-networking sites are designed specifically to let you catalog your bookshelves, find cool books to read, and chat with other book lovers.

The same is true of music lovers; you can share your musical tastes with others online and get suggestions for new music that you may like. Some services even allow you to listen to full tracks of music, or you can listen to bite-sized chunks.

The fun doesn't stop there, either. If you have a hobby that you share with a large enough group, you can probably find a social network out there designed just for you. Here are a few of my favorites:

- ✓ **LibraryThing** (www.librarything.com): A great website that allows you to share books that you're reading. You can catalog your collection and find information about your books by using a variety of libraries, such as Amazon.com or the Library of Congress.

The tie-in with your blog? Widgets let you share what you're reading and have read with your blog visitors.

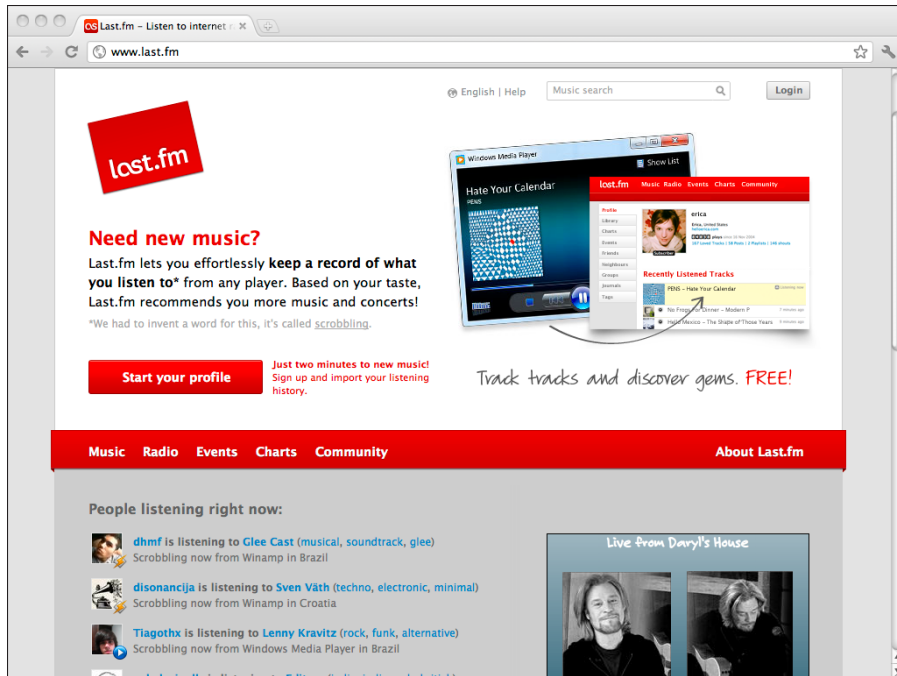
- ✓ **Goodreads** (www.goodreads.com): Goodreads is another social book-cataloging website that allows you to build virtual bookshelves of books that you've read or want to read. You can recommend books to others, compare what you're reading with others in the forums, and even run a book club.

Some of my friends who share my taste in books find the site useful for choosing what to read next, by keeping track of the ratings others post for books they've read. I really like using it to keep track of the books I want to read next, so that I don't have to keep all that information in my head. And, of course, there are widgets for your blog (not to mention for Facebook and MySpace).

- ✓ **Last.fm** (www.last.fm): Founded in 2002, Last.fm (shown in Figure 16-2) is a social-networking site that allows you to share your musical tastes. You can track the music you're listening to and share what types of music you enjoy with others. If you install Last.fm's *audioscrobbler* widget, it records automatically whatever music you play on your computer, phone, or MP3 player. It then posts this information on your profile on the website.

Over time, you can see what music you listen to most often, and then the website and the community can make suggestions about what other music you may want to check out. You can tie Last.fm widgets to your blog so that your readers can subscribe to your music playlist and also be your listeners.

Figure 16-2:
Last.fm
shares what
music you
play and recom-
mends
music that
you may
like.



- ✓ **Blip.fm** (www.blip.fm): Blip.fm is another, and more recent, addition to the music social-networking realm. This tool is tied closely to Twitter, so users of the one social network get the benefit of the other.

Blip.fm allows you to sign up, identify your friends, search the web for music that you want to recommend (or just listen to), and then build a playlist based on the results. Do you have a friend who has impeccable musical taste? Get him or her signed up for Blip.fm, and then listen to his or her playlist. This site also allows you to give *props* (as in praise) to users who *blip* (post) a song you like, giving feedback about what you want more of.

You can even link your Last.fm account to Blip.fm and let your computer do all the work of blipping songs for you.

- ✓ **Ravelry** (www.ravelry.com): This chapter wouldn't be complete without a mention of my favorite social network of all time, Ravelry. I admit, it may not be your favorite! Ravelry is a social network designed for knitters to share information about what they're making or thinking of making, how they did it, and other such conversation. You can add friends and send messages, and of course, if you have a knitting blog, you can pull your blog posts into Ravelry and get your friends from Ravelry over to your blog.

Professional networks

The business world has latched onto social networking, as well. Many businesses are using social-networking tools to find new clients, build more creative advertising, and create a conversation with the public. Many of them use the existing popular social networks, from Facebook to Twitter, but the big player in business-related social networking is LinkedIn.

LinkedIn (www.linkedin.com) claims to have more than 45 million users, and it targets its service to your professional life. Looking to find a new employee or a new job? LinkedIn can put you in touch with others in your industry, recommend partners, help you locate contractors, and generally get the lowdown on those you work with.

One of the most useful features of LinkedIn is that your profile looks much like a résumé, so you can refer people you want to work with to your LinkedIn profile. You can also connect with past and present colleagues, and make use of their networks so that you can make connections with people they interact with. The business world can become a surprisingly small place, thanks to these connections. In fact, I used LinkedIn to make contact with many of the businesses that I discuss in this book by putting my own network to use.

Media-sharing networks

The web has allowed all of us to share more than just text — you can easily display video, audio, and photos online, and a number of social-networking sites let you do just that, regardless of whether you have a website or blog. Here are the big hitters:

✓ **Flickr** (www.flickr.com): Flickr is one of the most successful social networks going. Flickr allows you to post and store your photographs and even videos online. You can share these photos and videos with the community at large, as well as your friends and family. Viewers can mark each photo as a favorite, and they can also leave comments and feedback for you.

You can use Flickr to build albums and galleries of your photos, and even slideshows. Best of all, you can place your photos online with Flickr, and then quickly and easily embed those photos into your blog posts (see Chapter 11).

- ✓ **YouTube** (www.youtube.com): For those video bloggers out there, YouTube is probably the most popular social-networking video platform online today. People from all over the world record, edit, and post videos, and then share them with the YouTube community. You can post these videos and also embed them into your website or blog.

Informational networks

Initially, social bookmarking was just an online service that allowed you to save all your bookmarks without worrying about whether you'd lose them. As social networking became more popular, social-bookmarking websites got into the act and began to offer all kinds of ways in which you can share your bookmarks with others or discover new and interesting websites to visit. Use these sites to organize your bookmarks, recommend websites, and web surf:

- ✓ **Delicious** (www.delicious.com): Early on in the life of the web, someone realized that we all spent a lot of time e-mailing each other links ("You *have* to see this; it's hilarious!") and that a more efficient way to share that kind of information probably existed. Enter Delicious.

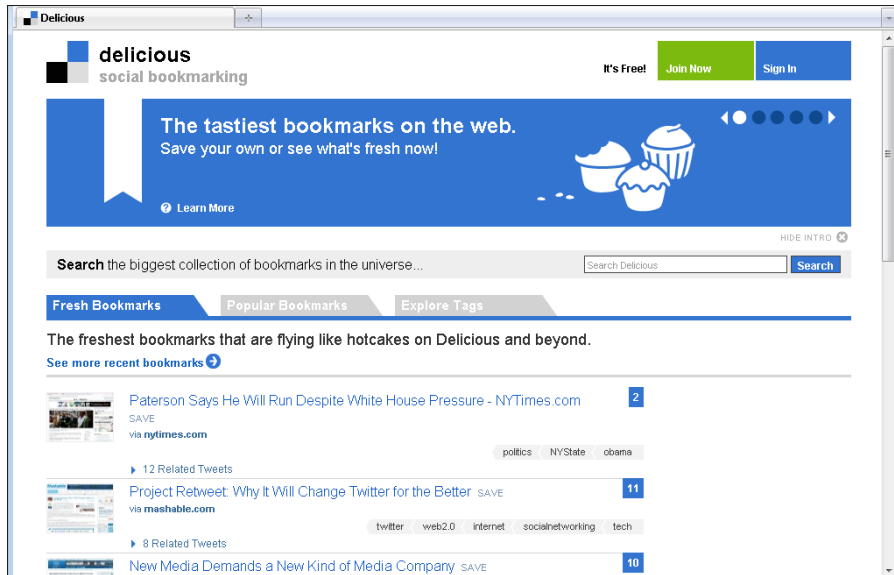
Delicious (see Figure 16-3) enables you to record and tag links for later retrieval. You no longer have to be at the same computer to remember what websites you've visited or bookmarked. You can make your bookmarks private or share them with the public. This incredibly easy-to-use social-bookmarking service is also incredibly powerful. You can share your bookmarks by using the built-in RSS feeds and by sharing your bookmarks with your personal network of other users.

Social bookmarking is a little different than creating bookmarks of sites that you go to often, which you probably already do with your browser. I use Delicious to keep track of research around a particular topic — for example, looking up activities to do on my next trip to Asia.

- ✓ **StumbleUpon** (www.stumbleupon.com): Many people have called StumbleUpon one of the biggest time wasters online today. But that isn't actually a bad thing. Web surfing is a time-honored way of negotiating the World Wide Web; and StumbleUpon simply acknowledges that fact, and then gives you some outstanding tools for more efficiently and intelligently surfing.

With StumbleUpon, users post and recommend interesting things that they find on the web, and others view those recommendations and add their own endorsements, effectively creating a snapshot of the most interesting and compelling links on the web. You can imagine how useful sharing becomes when you create a community on StumbleUpon of your friends and colleagues; if you combine their recommendations with the personalization options that StumbleUpon provides, it's like reading a personalized (albeit somewhat eccentric) newspaper.

Figure 16-3:
Sharing
your book-
marks with
Delicious
lets you
share links
with others.



Location-based networks

A bunch of networks allow you to post your location on a map or track your (and your friends') geographic whereabouts. Typically, these kind of social-networking applications need a little forethought before you use them. Do you really want your colleagues to know where you are at all times? I didn't think so. But these kinds of programs can help you create impromptu coffee meetings or figure out whether someone you want to see is "checked in" nearby. Many location-based networks also give you information based your current location for nearby great places to eat, shop, or visit.



These services are really designed for mobile phone users who have signed up for data plans.

Try these networks on for size:

- ✓ **foursquare** (www.foursquare.com): foursquare allows you to use your phone as a GPS device. It tracks your location, checks you in at the places you visit, and awards points for everywhere you go. If you're the most frequent visitor to a location in a 30-day period, foursquare declares you the mayor of that location, and you can also earn badges. Foursquare has some handy apps for different types of phones as well as a mobile phone website version.

Some businesses are rewarding users with freebies and recognition. You can link your foursquare account with your Twitter and Facebook updates.

- ✓ **Gowalla** (www.gowalla.com): Gowalla is a popular location-based social-networking website. It offers applications for iPhone/iPad, BlackBerry, Palm, and Android mobile devices. You can share pictures of your location, and people may leave comments on your “check-in.”
- ✓ **Google Latitude** (www.google.com/latitude): Google Latitude (see Figure 16-4) is another location-aware mobile application that allows you to share your current location and keeps track of places you’ve been. You can have this application automatically update with your whereabouts, or you can manually add your check-in points. The application plots your updates on a Google Map for your friends to view. The application is available for many mobile platforms, including iPhone and BlackBerry.

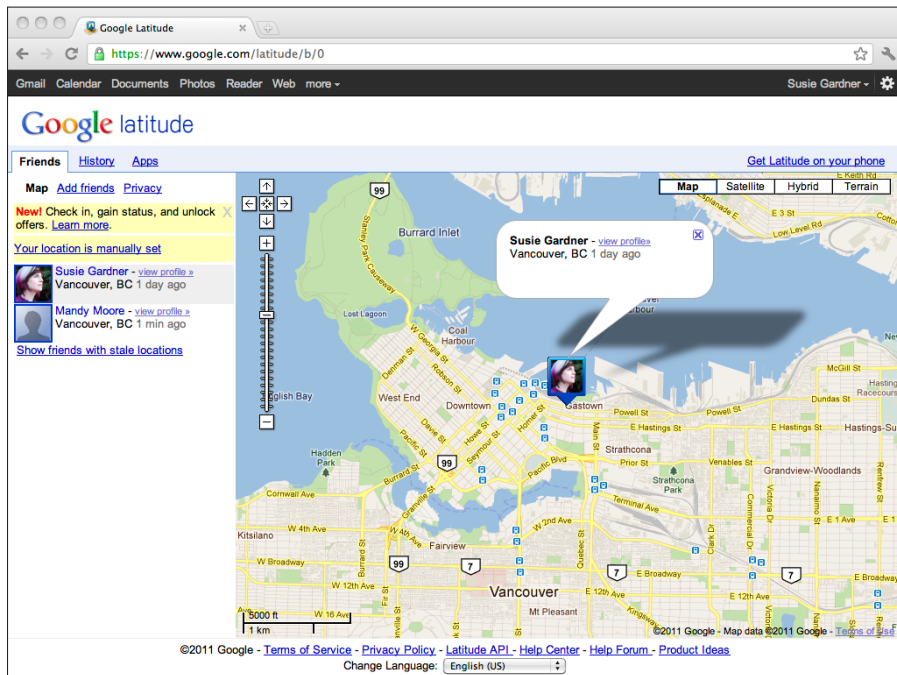


Figure 16-4:
Google
Latitude
shows you
where you
are and
where oth-
ers are, too.

Sharing It All

Clearly, there are many social networks, widgets, and bits of code you can choose to include on your blog. You can spend a lot of time customizing, but I have good news. If you would like to make the pages of your blog easy for your visitors to share with others via social networks, there is an easy way to get the job done.



ShareThis (www.sharethis.com) has the solution. Sign up with this free service and add the code to your site so that you can quickly and easily add all those tools to your site in a single step.

You can see the ShareThis widget implemented on the blog for this book in Figure 16-5. Clicking the ShareThis link opens a small window in the page that visitors can use to select where they would like to share your content.

Figure 16-5:
Use
ShareThis
as a short-
cut to
getting more
traffic to
your blog.



You can customize the ShareThis widget to control which sharing tools show up in the window. The neatest feature, however, is that ShareThis tracks the data of those who use the ShareThis tool on your site, so you can find out more about the ways in which people share content, as well as which stories or blog posts attract the most attention!

Chapter 17

Measuring Blog Presence

In This Chapter

- ▶ Figuring out what web statistics tell you
 - ▶ Checking out good statistics-tracking tools
 - ▶ Tracking the blogosphere for keywords and topics
-

For a moment, picture your new blog running just the way you want it. The graphics are pretty, you're blogging every day, and comments are rolling in. Everything looks perfect, and you seem to be well on your way to a successful blogging career. But wait! For no real reason, over a few weeks, the number of comments left on your blog each day starts to decrease. Your visitor numbers are down. You don't find an obvious explanation, and you can't imagine why your readership is disappearing so quickly!

If you ever find yourself in this type of situation, you may start to ask yourself questions such as, "How many visitors do I have every day, anyway?" or "How many of my visitors have been here before?"

It's time to understand your web traffic statistics. You, as a blogger, may find web stats especially important because your audience numbers are affected each time you post, versus the kind of traffic a static website generates.

You must pay attention to how your blog is performing on the Internet, but it can be confusing and boring. Spending an afternoon peering at web stats, especially if you don't know what you're looking for, can be a tedious experience. It's like . . . well, it's like watching paint dry. But it doesn't have to be as painful as it sounds. Web statistics are very geeky, but these days, you can choose from services available to bloggers (and webmasters, in general) that allow you to track your blog's success in interesting and informative ways by using a friendly interface.

Exploring the Power of Statistics

Even if you like the way your blog is performing, you should take a look at your blog stats once in a while. Some bloggers look at them daily to see what kinds of visitors appeared on their blogging radar overnight; some bloggers check their stats once a week or once a month. Whichever pattern you choose, keep a good handle on your statistics. Knowing how many visitors you have can help you improve your blog in the future, making it even more popular.

For an example of what a typical web-stats tool looks like, check out StatCounter's measurement of the Find-A-Sweetheart website (www.find-a-sweetheart.com) in Figure 17-1. (You have to be logged in if you want to view stats on StatCounter.)

Using web statistics, you can track

- ✓ What countries your web visitors are surfing from
- ✓ How long visitors stay
- ✓ How many visitors check out your site for the first time
- ✓ How many visitors have been to your blog before

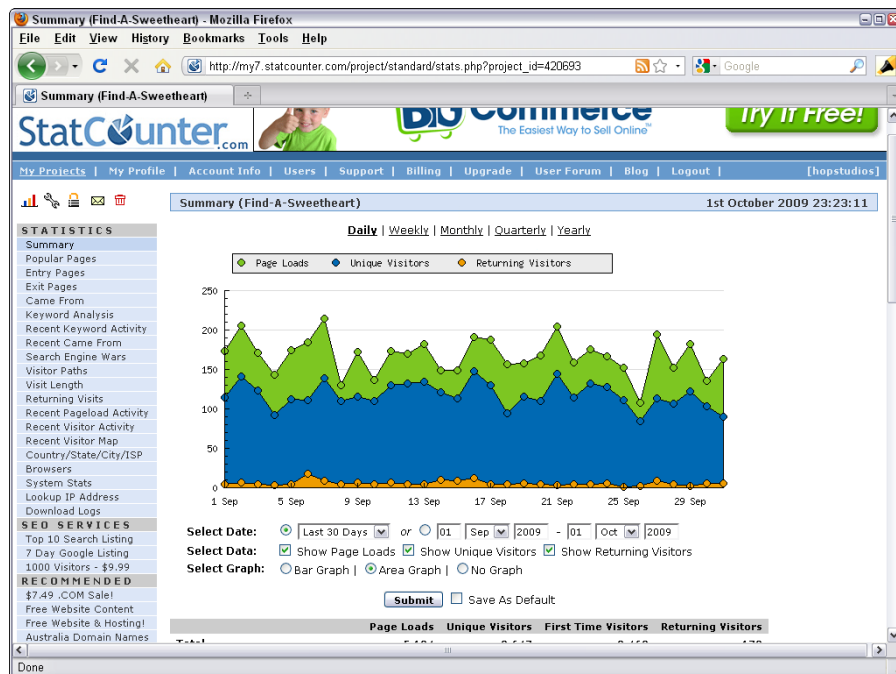


Figure 17-1:
Blogger
Kathryn
Lord uses
StatCounter
to track her
site's web
stats.

- ✓ What pages your visitors start their visit on
- ✓ What pages visitors end their visit on
- ✓ What sites send visitors to you
- ✓ What search words visitors use to find your site
- ✓ What browsers your visitors use
- ✓ What kind of computers your visitors use to surf the web
- ✓ What screen resolutions your visitors set their monitors to

With some of the more advanced web analytics software, you can see what pages are the least popular, find out how search engines handle your blog, and even see what errors or missing pages your visitors get when they try to access parts of your site. (If you have removed an old blog post or renamed a posting, your statistics will tell you which pages are missing.) A lot of bloggers particularly want to know what websites are sending visitors to their blogs so that they can figure out where to invest time and energy in comments and discussion forums.



Knowing even a little bit about your traffic can help you make all kinds of strategic decisions about your blog, from what kind of design to use to the subject of a post.

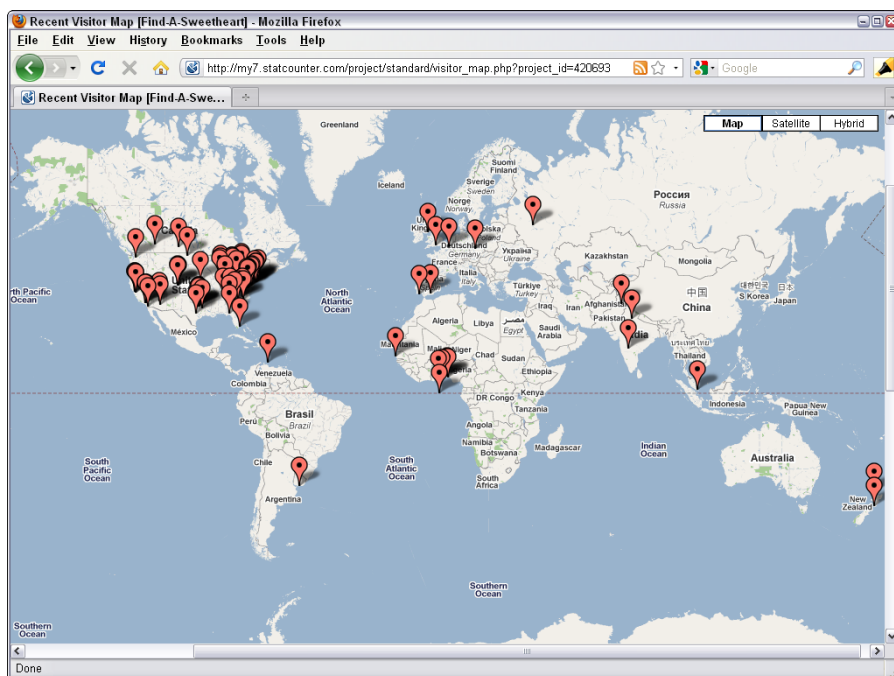
Blog stats become even more useful when you begin analyzing them. *Web analytics* are the trends that your statistical or log software shows you. Some traffic software helps break down these trends for you, but the most basic software simply displays the raw data about how visitors use your site and lets you draw the conclusions. When people talk about web analytics, they're referring to the process that you undertake when you're looking through those stats and logs to figure out what visitors are doing on your website. Commonly, you look for trends about what content the visitors view, how often they visit, and what other sites direct traffic your way.



Pay close attention to your website logs so that you can chart what your users are doing over time. You can see what your site visitors are reading and what keeps them coming back for more. You can then use this information for a variety of purposes (such as deciding what to blog about). The following examples illustrate how gathering your blog's statistics and interpreting them can be useful:

- ✓ **You notice that a large bunch of readers are coming from a particular country (see Figure 17-2), and you don't live in that country.** In this case, you should see what pages those visitors are viewing — and determine why they're coming to your site. You can then write more to attract additional visitors who have similar tastes. In fact, noticing a trend such as this one might help you focus on a core audience that you didn't even know about. You can even redefine what you do with your blog in the future.

Figure 17-2:
Track where
your visi-
tors live by
using a stat
program
such as
StatCounter.



✔ **You have ads on your blog (see Chapter 18), and more people are clicking a certain type of advertisement.** If you take the time, you can see what kinds of visitors are clicking advertisements on your site (if you have any ads, of course). You can use information about what ads your visitors click to sell ad space to certain advertisers.



You may have trouble staying away from your blog's web stats, and you might want to check them daily. But don't forget that you have a blog to run, which requires that you focus on the quality of the content you produce for your community. Try to avoid an obsession over your web statistics because no amount of tinkering with web analytics can make your blog popular. Your content is the only thing that can accomplish that feat.

Knowing What the Statistics Mean

To understand what you're looking at when you scan your web statistics or server logs, you need to know a series of terms. Most web analytics software uses these terms, but you should always check to see how the software's creators define measurements. Web analytics software tends to use these terms in the same way, but not always. I cover the most vital terms in the following sections.



You'll run into more terms than the ones I cover in this chapter, but the most important ones for bloggers are *page views*, *unique visitors*, and *repeat visitors*. Together, these three statistics give you the most accurate picture of how many visitors your blog receives and what they do while they visit.

I also introduce you to what the term *hits* means, which new bloggers often find misleading, and how statistics can help you resolve errors on your blog.

Hits

A *hit* is an official request from a web browser for a file from the web server. The file can be an HTML file or a movie file. Essentially, accessing any file available on a web server to the surfing public counts as a hit.



Any given web page causes *multiple* hits on the server when it loads, even though it's only one page. Multiple files are actually called to display the page: the HTML file, any associated style documents, and all the image files. If an HTML file has five images, it counts as six hits — one for the HTML file and five for each individual image.

A lot of people think that hits indicate the number of website visitors or even the number of pages viewed, but hits don't even come close to measuring those kinds of figures. Hits are pretty meaningless if you're trying to understand how many visitors you have, but they can help you get a feel for the traffic load that your site puts on the web server.

Page views

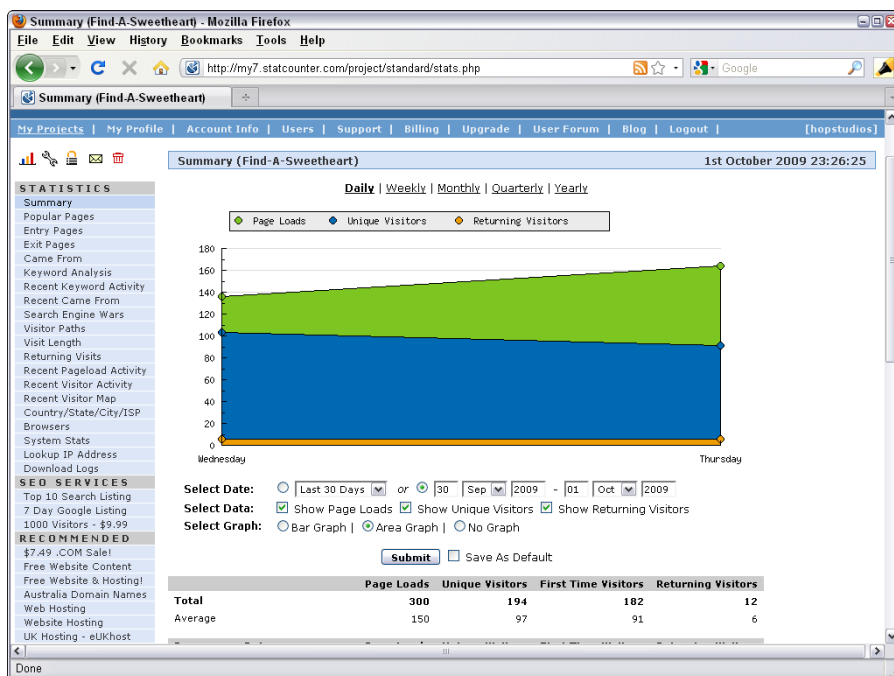
A *page view* is normally defined as a page within a web server log; if the web browser requests an HTML file, the log records that as a single request, even if the server needs several files to display the page. Each time the web browser loads a page of your site, it counts as a page view. Page views are a valuable measurement because you can get a better understanding of how people actually use your site.

In Figure 17-3, you can see the page views for September 30, 2009.



Advertisers are often very interested in the number of page views on a website (more is better), and most bloggers consider a high page-view number something to brag about.

Figure 17-3:
StatCounter
breaks
down page
loads for a
given day.



Unique visitors

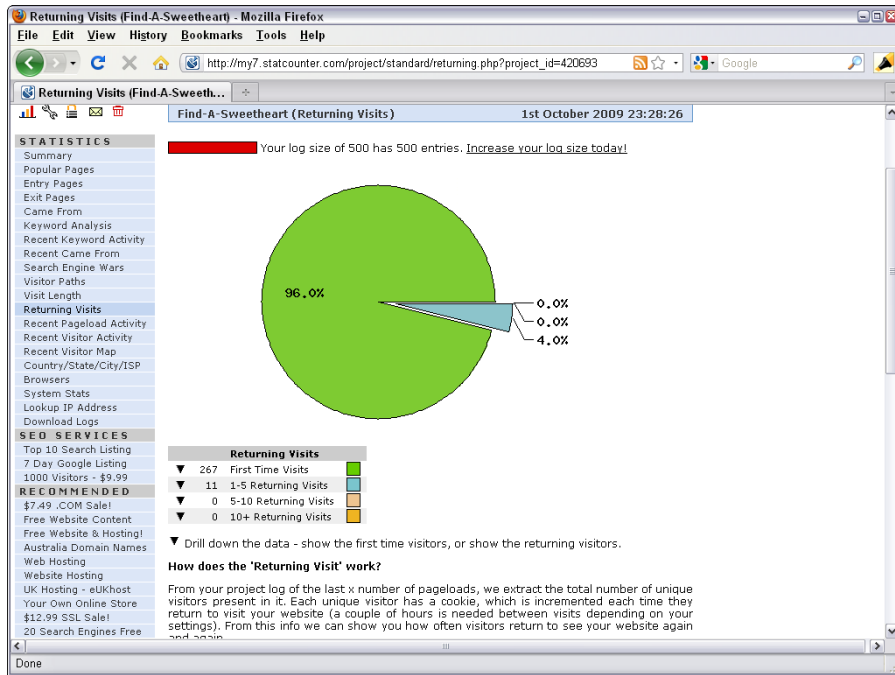
Unique visitors are just what they sound like — individual visitors who come to your website. The analytics software counts them only once, no matter how many pages they view or how many times they visit. When you're looking at the number of unique visitors your blog gets, take a look at what time period the analytics software refers to. Fifty unique visitors in one day, for example, is a much bigger deal than 50 unique visitors in a month.

Repeat visitors

Repeat visitors are blog readers who visit your site on more than one occasion and, usually, visit multiple pages. Pay attention, just as with unique visitors, to the time period this repeat-visitor number covers.

In Figure 17-4, you can see a graph that breaks down the percentages of first-time visitors to repeat visitors on the web statistics tool StatCounter.

Figure 17-4:
Keep tabs
on how
much of
your traffic
is new and
how much
is repeat
visits.



Errors

Most stat software tracks *errors*, instances when your visitors get an actual error message when they try to do something on your site or when they try to view a page that doesn't exist anymore (or never did).



Track your error logs to find out where visitors are having problems — and be sure to fix the errors.

Getting Web Stats

You can find many statistics software applications that track web traffic available for installation on your blog. But before you get too carried away, check to see whether your blog host offers web traffic-tracking software or gives you access to your server logs.

A lack of standards

Currently, no official standards govern the world of server logs and web statistics. No large corporations tell anyone how to capture their traffic numbers, what terminology to use, or how to analyze the statistics. The world of web stats has, more or less, grown organically, and a set of rules around the analysis of server logs has emerged from the community.

The various software tools have a lot of inconsistency in what and how they measure statistics. As a result, I commonly use two different programs to measure unique visitors on my own blog, and the two software programs rarely agree about what that number is. It's a frustrating fact of life. (Between you and me, I tend to use the bigger number.)

Knowing about this inconsistency, you might want to consider using at least a couple of web statistics tools (I talk about the options in the section "Getting Web Stats," later in this chapter) and comparing the results that you get. Different web analytics software treat server logs differently, and some software is certainly better than others. Most often, users prefer packages that create charts and graphs, which represent their data visually, making the numbers easier to understand quickly. Because no hard and fast rules exist, you're free to do research into what packages can work best for you.

**TIP**

If your web host offers stats software, review the offering carefully. You might not need any additional tools, or you might want to supplement the preinstalled tool with one of those discussed in the following sections, if only to check the accuracy of the numbers you're seeing. Keep in mind that different applications can measure statistics differently, so the numbers may not be exactly the same.

**TECHNICAL STUFF**

Some bloggers like to look at the server logs for their sites. *Server logs* are simple text files that web servers generate in order to keep track of information about who visits a web server, when, using what kind of browser, when errors occur, and so on.

Most web hosts provide access to stat software and server logs through an administrative control panel.

In the following sections, I cover the different services and software available. You should be able to find a service that fits your web-stats needs.

Choosing hosted statistics software

Like hosted blog software, the company that creates the hosted web statistics software package also manages that software. Typically, you install the software by adding a chunk of HTML code to your pages, which communicates with the hosted software.

Because you must be able to place some HTML code into your blog software templates so that it appears on every page that you want to track, blog software that doesn't give you the ability to add code will rule out using a hosted statistics solution.

Google Analytics

www.google.com/analytics

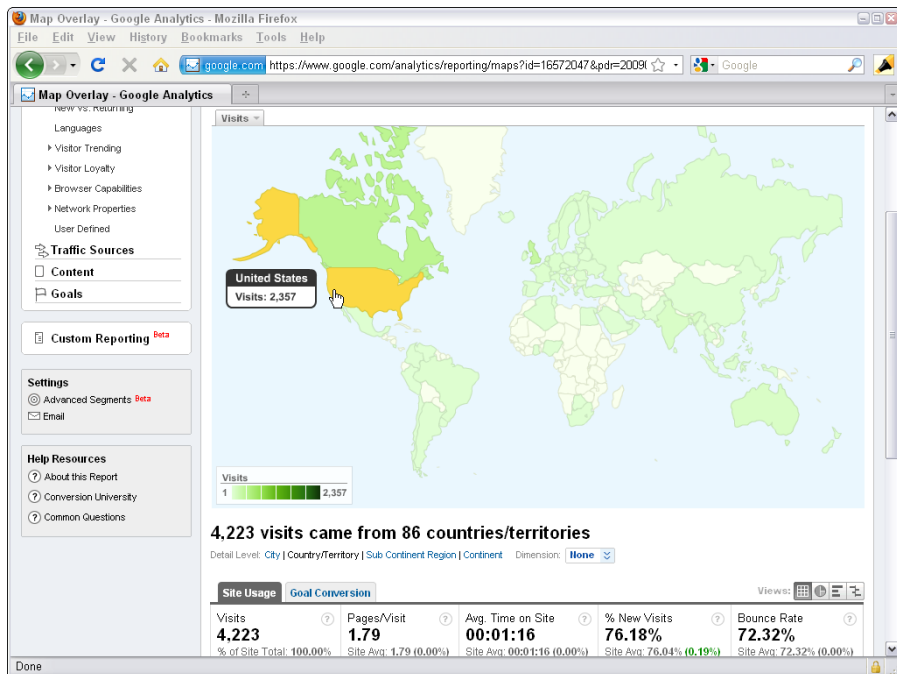
Google Analytics has a great interface with many options that you can customize and use to analyze stats to your heart's content. Google Analytics can calculate how many page views and number of visits your blog or site has received. The Google Analytics system (shown in Figure 17-5) is free, but it requires a registered Google Account (which is free, as well).

StatCounter

www.statcounter.com

StatCounter is a free, hosted statistics tracker, and new users can figure it out easily, thanks to good organization and explanation in the control panel.

Figure 17-5:
Use Google
Analytics
to check
out where
your web-
site's traffic
comes from.



After setting up your site in StatCounter, you must insert StatCounter HTML code into your blog templates so that it can track every page. StatCounter measures page views and hits, of course, but also what terms your readers use in search engines to a Google Maps interface of where your traffic originates.

Site Meter

www.sitemeter.com

Site Meter has been around since the beginning of stat tracking on the web. This tool provides you with basic details about each visitor who comes to your blog and shows you what the visitor does while he or she is there, even down to what page he or she is on before leaving.

Site Meter (see Figure 17-6) has two levels of service: the free Basic edition and the Premium edition. The Premium edition provides more information than the Basic setup and grants access to a longer history of your statistics, but the free edition is a good starting point for new bloggers. The professional edition starts at \$6.95 a month.

The screenshot shows the Site Meter website in a Mozilla Firefox browser window. The address bar displays <http://www.sitemeter.com/>. The page features a navigation menu at the top with links: File, Edit, View, History, Bookmarks, Tools, and Help. Below the navigation bar is a banner for "THE 2010 FORD MUSTANG GT" with a "Visit Ford.ca" button. The main content area is divided into two columns. The left column promotes "Site Meter Basic" as a "FREE" service, highlighting its ease of use for tracking visitors. The right column promotes "Site Meter Premium" as a service starting at "\$6.95" per month, offering more advanced features like ranked reports and moving averages. Both columns include a "TAKE A TOUR" button and a "SIGN UP!" button. A central login section with fields for "Codename" and "Password" is also visible. At the bottom, a sidebar lists links for "home", "learn more", "How Does Site Meter Work?", "Site Meter Basic", "Tour", "Demo Stats", "Meter Options", "Sign Up", and "Site Meter Premium". A large counter displays the number "139,694,392".

Figure 17-6: Site Meter offers two levels of statistics tracking.

Choosing installable statistics software

Web analytics software that you can install on your web server and manage on your own is called *installable* software. If you want to use a specific analytics package that your web host doesn't normally provide, look into whether you can install software on your server. Some hosts can give you suggestions and may even assist you when you install analytics software.

Installed software usually measures the same metrics as hosted statistics software, but it does so by analyzing log files stored on your website, rather than gathering information when a visitor hits your site. Some web developers feel that installed software therefore provides more accurate numbers than hosted software, but many other web developers and bloggers hotly debate that opinion.

When you sign up for a web-hosting package, the web host probably has some kind of web statistics available to you. These packages can range from open source software to custom, home-grown solutions.



Check the technical requirements for the package that you want to install to be sure that your server works with it.

The Webalizer

```
www.mrunix.net/webalizer
```

The Webalizer is an open source application that you install on your server. Because it's free to use, many web hosts offer it as part of their standard web hosting packages. Originally created in 1997, the Webalizer lets you track hits, page views, geographical origin of your traffic, and other data.

The Webalizer generates easy-to-read pages that show traffic to your site broken down by month, but you can also see traffic figures by day and even by hour. It offers all the usual suspects, from page views to unique visitors to the top referring sites.

AWStats

```
http://awstats.sourceforge.net
```

AWStats is a popular web statistics analyzer that you can install on your web server. Its features enable you to track not only visitors, but also streaming media, e-mail, and FTP transactions on your server. AWStats requires that you have the Perl programming language installed on your web server to operate. (Most web servers support this requirement.)

AWStats generates graphs and other visual indicators about the activity of your visitors month by month, letting you see the region and cities where traffic originates, as well as the operating systems and browsers that your visitors use, among many other measurements.

Mint

`www.haveamint.com`

Mint, which began in 2004 as a basic website tracking tool, has matured into a great service. Mint's installable software offers the usual suspects: new and returning visitors, the sites from which they get to your site, search terms that they use to find you, and so on. Mint also looks really cool: It produces fun graphs and charts.

A Mint license costs \$30 per site.

Finding Out What Others Are Saying

With web analytics software, you can watch the behavior of your site's visitors but you can also find out a lot by monitoring mentions of you, your blog, and your topic on the web (especially on your competitors' blogs!) on other websites. Watching what's going on within the blogosphere is a huge task. You can spend hundreds of dollars to have others do it for you, or you can check out some of the simple tools available on the web.

Among the simple blogosphere tools available to you are the following:

- ✓ **E-mail notifications:** Receive updates via e-mail about content or topics that you want to keep up with.
- ✓ **RSS watch lists:** Keep current on topics by using your favorite news-reader software. (Read more about RSS in Chapter 14.)

You can use these tools in a variety of ways by doing random manual searches and installing software designed to display web information on your desktop.



The power of RSS and the syndication of news and blog feeds become apparent when you start trying to monitor certain phrases and keywords. RSS is one of the best ways to track what people are saying about your blog and about topics that you're interested in.

Google Alerts

www.google.com/alerts

Google Alerts (see Figure 17-7) provides you with e-mail notifications that it sends to you based on keyword searches of Google's search system. Sign up for an account, and then create an alert by entering keywords about which you want Google Alerts to notify you.

In order to receive any e-mail from the Google Alerts system, you need to enter some keywords. Follow these steps:

1. **Go to** www.google.com/alerts.
2. **Enter the keywords that you want to be notified about in the Search Terms text box.**
3. **Select the type of web content that you want included in your search from the Type drop-down list.**

Your options are News, Blogs, Web, Video, and Discussions.

4. **Select how often you want to be notified from the How Often drop-down list.**

You can select As-It-Happens, Once a Day, or Once a Week.

5. **Choose the quantity of results you want from the Volume drop-down list.**

Your options are Only the Best Results and Everything.

6. **Type your e-mail address into the Your Email field, or select Feed.**

If you are already signed into your Google account, your Gmail address is pre-filled.

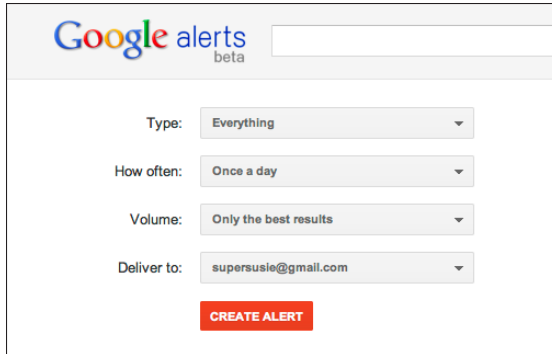
If you select Feed, you can subscribe to these custom search results using a RSS reader. See Chapter 14 for more on RSS.

7. **Click Create Alert.**

Google begins to track your search and sends you the e-mails that you requested at the rate you want them.

When a keyword gets a hit, you get an e-mail that includes a link to the web page. Google Alerts can do automatic keyword searches for all kinds of web-sites, including blogs.

Figure 17-7:
Google Alerts sends you e-mail if it hits your keywords in searches.



These alerts work best when you create a specific and detailed search. Think about how you can refine your search to keep your results to a manageable number. For instance, if you want to track a particular news topic, use several keywords, rather than just one. For example, use *knitting sock yarn hand-dyed*, not just *socks*.



Set Google Alerts to search for your name, your blog name, and any keywords that you want to be aware of. Use these alerts to find out when people are talking about you, your blog, or the topics you're covering.

Twitter

www.twitter.com

Twitter is a social-networking service that allows you to post online messages known as *tweets*. People can then watch your tweets, and you can watch theirs. Your tweets can be anything from short messages, links to websites, or conversations with others. You can also use Twitter to track what people are talking about by searching for keywords and *hashtags* (Twitter users sometimes mark keywords in their tweets with a # to set them off and make it easier to search for them). You can search using the Twitter search engine

(<http://search.twitter.com>). For instance, after Michael Jackson's death, Twitter users posting about the pop star used the hashtag #mj. You can read more about Twitter in Chapter 15.

Technorati

www.technorati.com

Technorati is a search engine that focuses its energy on blogs — and does it very well. Technorati publishes information periodically that gives people who use its service a status of the blogosphere. Technorati can update you on the following:

- ✓ The number of blogs that are tracked
- ✓ Ongoing trends in conversations throughout a given time period
- ✓ The growth rate of blog technology adoptions
- ✓ Up-to-the-minute search results from blog posts

IceRocket

www.icerocket.com

Track mentions of specific keywords on blogs, Twitter, Facebook, and more using IceRocket. This easy-to-use service delivers results on currently trending topics, as well, making it a good resource if you're trying to decide what to blog about on a slow day. IceRocket offers:

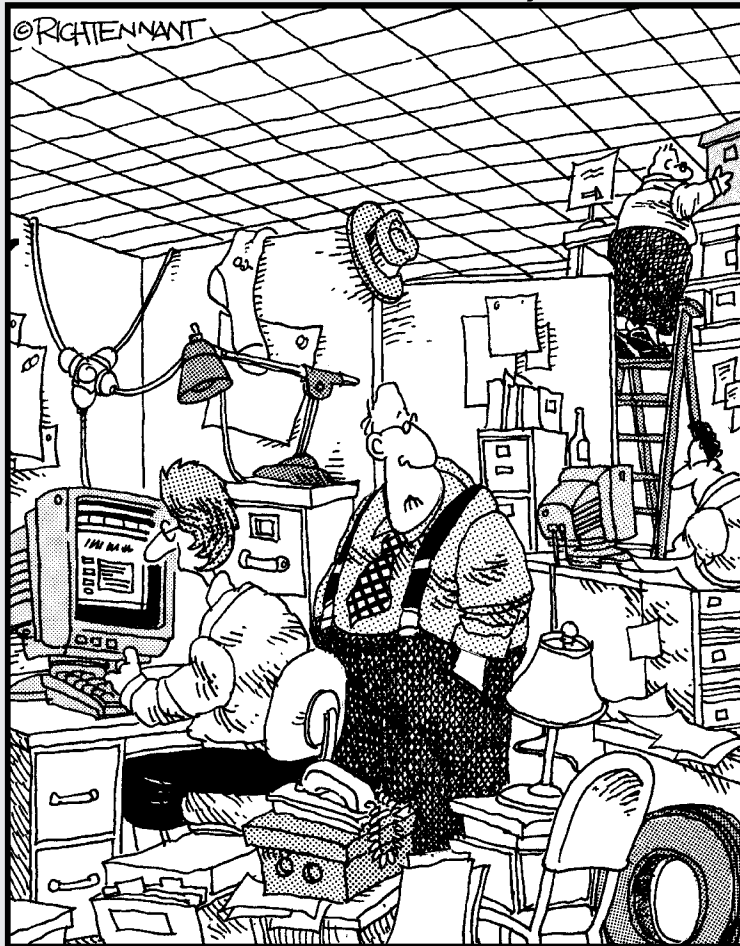
- ✓ A web statistics tool called IceRocket Blog Tracker
- ✓ Topic results based on IceRocket search terms
- ✓ Trends over time — the percentage of blog posts in the last month, two months, or three months mentioning any term

Part VI

Getting Business-y with It

The 5th Wave

By Rich Tennant



"Just how accurately should my blog
reflect my place of business?"

In this part . . .

Blogs aren't just for the hobbyist, as you discover in this business-oriented part of the book. If you have a business idea up your sleeve or want to put ads on your blog, get the lowdown on using blog advertising programs and tools in Chapter 18. Some bloggers make a little money, and some make a whole lot! Businesses and non-profit organizations aren't left out, either. Chapter 19 describes how today's companies are making use of blogs to reach customers and critics alike, and even using the technology internally to foster communication.

Chapter 18

Making Mad Mad Money

In This Chapter

- ▶ Checking out the advertising options
 - ▶ Blogging for money
 - ▶ Putting products on your blog with affiliate programs and gifts
 - ▶ Looking for a blog sponsor
-

Advertising on your blog has never been easier. Many different advertising systems offer bloggers a free way to place ads on their blogs, and businesses have picked up on the fact that blog advertising can really work. Putting an ad or two on your blog can help you easily earn a little money doing something you enjoy. Many bloggers turn a pretty penny, and some even earn a living, from advertising.

Ever since websites came into existence, you could find online advertisements. From the first web banners of the early Internet to today's contextual advertising systems, ads have run the gamut from wildly successful to a waste of precious bandwidth.

In some cases, the effectiveness of ads has more to do with the readers than anything else. On the blog for some topics, blog readers willingly look at ads and even click them, but audiences on other blogs just don't have the patience to wade through advertisements that clutter their reading pleasure. So, you need to know what your audience will tolerate before you make a big play with ads!

Turning your blog into a retirement savings plan won't happen overnight, and don't take the addition of advertisements to the average blog lightly. It all requires planning, patience, and faith and trust in your readership. Depending on your audience, you might even need to request input from them about the advertisements that you choose to deploy on your blog.

Finding Out How Advertising Works

Banner ads (rectangular ads usually placed along the top of a site) used to dominate ad slots on the web but have become less important because people often just tune them out. Then, pop-up, animated, and blinking advertisements generated a few clicks and ultimately managed to generate a massive backlash. Many of these moving, beeping, and blinking ads just irritated users, instead of successfully advertising.

Today's contextual advertising tools are actually intelligent; ads are matched by subject to the words and phrases that you use on your blog. Generally, this approach gives you ads that better suit your readers' interests, making those readers more likely to click the ads.

First, decide whether your blog is meant for an advertising campaign. Many blogs can benefit greatly from advertisements. However, you should think about a few things before diving in:

- ✓ Does your blog have a design that's ready for ads?
- ✓ Does your blog software support the advertising system you choose?
- ✓ Will advertising earn you any money?
- ✓ Will your audience put up with ads?

Answering these questions isn't easy; in fact, you might find it impossible unless you jump in. Try using some advertising and observe the results.

Planning for advertising

You can use several kinds of advertising methods to turn a blog into a place where you can make a tidy profit. The last few years have seen an explosion of companies that want a piece of the action in the blogosphere, and these companies have come up with creative ways to make ads easy to use, simple to implement, and appealing to your readers.

If you're a new blogger or just new to advertising programs, you can easily latch onto the first advertising system that you find and commit to using it. Although this system may serve your needs well, you might want to take a look at some of the different ad systems available and find out about how advertising tends to work in the blogosphere before you start using ads.

While you do your research, keep in mind that if you decide to make that leap into monetizing your blog, you should choose software that allows you to control your advertising so that it doesn't overwhelm the blog audience that you worked so hard to build.



A multitude of advertising companies offer bloggers simple solutions to monetize websites. Most of these programs work in similar ways but have unique delivery methods. Advertising programs range from text-only ads to flashy animations, and even full-page advertisements that really get your readers' attention! As a blogger, choosing an advertising program that works for your audience can make the difference between an increase in readers and turning off your existing traffic.

Looking at the formats

You can deliver ads to a blog audience in four different ways. Additional methods are available, but most don't work very well in a blog. The most popular advertisement formats for blogs are

- ✓ **Text-based ads:** These ads are text-only and feature a link or links to the advertiser's website or service. Each ad is very plain, and most advertising systems limit your ability to customize their look and feel.
- ✓ **Graphical banner and button ads:** Banner and button ads can be static or animated images. These ads usually have preset sizes, but you can customize them to fit your blog design.
- ✓ **RSS ads:** Ads are a new addition to RSS feeds; while the format has taken off with the public, advertisers have jumped on the bandwagon. Such ads can include text or images, and they're linked to the advertiser's website straight from your RSS feed. See how this kind of advertising looks when someone views the RSS feed in a newsreader, shown in Figure 18-1. If you want to find out more about RSS, see Chapter 14.
- ✓ **Pop-up ads:** Pop-ups tend to be everyone's least favorite type of ad, but oddly enough, pop-up ads that open in a new window are still quite successful at getting people to click an advertiser's website. The readers might be fairly irritated by the time they get to the site, but they do click.

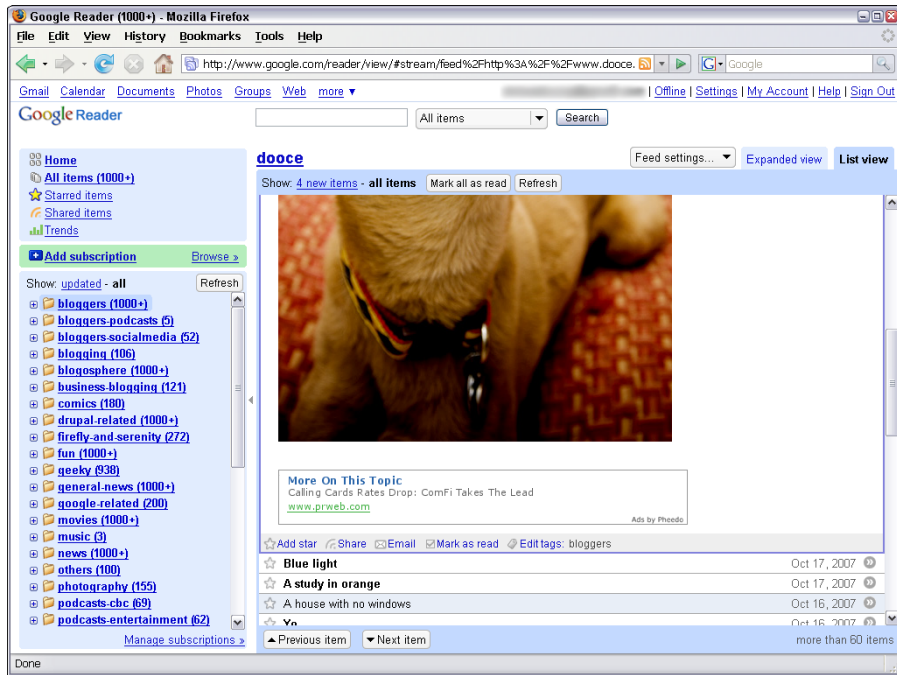


The Interactive Advertising Bureau makes recommendations each year about ad sizes and standards. You might find the recommendations useful in planning for ads. Visit www.iab.net/standards/adunits.asp to see the options.

Most ad programs today — with the exception of sponsorships — use *contextual advertising*, which coordinates ad display with related editorial content. So, a blog post about skiing might include ads for ski shops and resorts. A blogger who posts about blogging, for example, ends up with ads for blog software and tools. (I speak from experience here.)

Contextual ad systems search your blog for keywords that match products the advertisers have in their inventory. These ads then appear beside the topic keywords and, in theory, apply in the context of the web page on which they appear.

Figure 18-1:
Place ads
directly into
your RSS
feed.



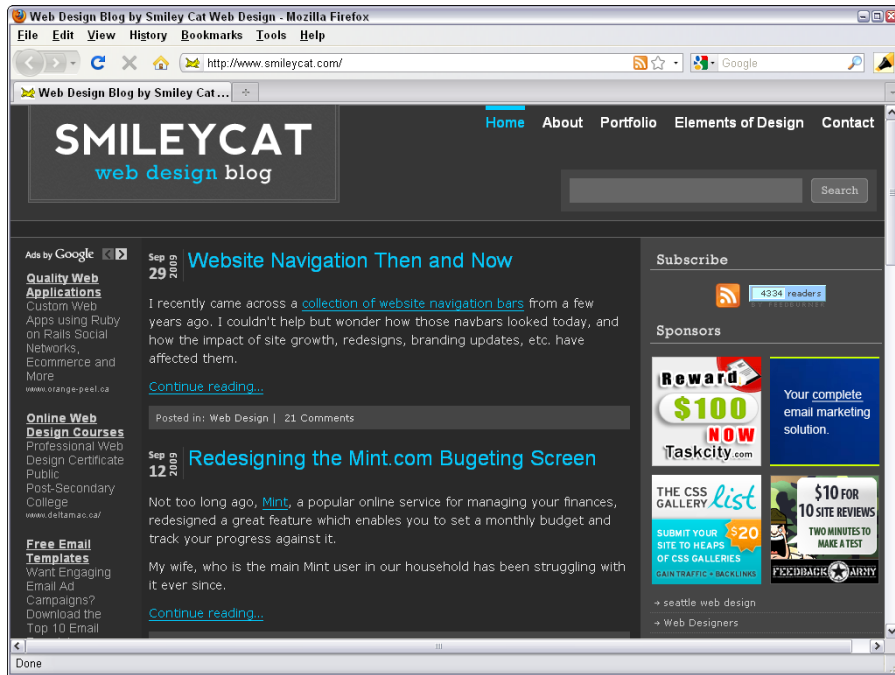
Contextual ads about blog polling tools appear on the left side of the Smiley Cat Web Design blog, as shown in Figure 18-2.

Assessing business models

Money can flow from the advertiser to the blogger in different ways. Always read the terms of service for an ad program because each advertising company has a different idea about how to compensate bloggers. The usual business models for online ads are

- ✓ **Cost per impression:** In this model, advertisers pay for the number of times a computer loads a page that displays the ad. The advertiser might prefer that a reader click its ad, but it recognizes that simply appearing on a blog that users access also has value.
- ✓ **Cost per click or pay per click:** The blogger makes money only when a reader clicks an ad and goes to the advertiser's website. This type of ad is very common in contextual ad programs, as well as on search engines in the sponsored results section.

Figure 18-2: Contextual advertising puts blogging tool ads next to a post on the same subject.



Courtesy of Christian Watson www.smileycat.com

- ✓ **Cost per action:** The advertiser pays only when the reader actually takes action after he or she views and clicks the ad on the blog. This required action can include anything from signing up to receive more information to actually purchasing a product.
- ✓ **Sponsorships:** When an advertiser wants to be actively associated with the content of your blog, it might offer to sponsor the blog or some part of the blog. A sponsorship usually includes premium advertisements and exclusive ad placement, and the blogger sometimes even thanks the sponsor in the editorial content of the site. See “Seeking Sponsorships” later in this chapter.



A lot of bloggers have had the same great idea about the ads on their blogs: “I’ll just click these myself and send my cost-per-click rates through the roof! I’ll make millions!” Unfortunately, the advertising companies have figured out this little scheme, and they refer to it as *click fraud*. Advertisers spend good money to have their ads displayed, and companies that run advertisement programs go out of their way to make sure that clicks on those ads are legitimate clicks. Make sure that you understand what happens if you click ads on your own blog before you do it: Some programs penalize or even ban bloggers who engage in click fraud.

Getting Advertising Going

Most bloggers choose to incorporate advertising programs by signing up with a company that serves as a middleman between the blogger and the advertiser. This company typically negotiates rates with the advertiser, tracks ad performance, and pays the blogger for advertising placement.

Although you can cut out the middleman and sell your own ad space, many bloggers find that they don't really want to spend their time dealing with the negotiation, tracking, and technical overhead.

But even the most time-pressed blogger can likely find the strength to listen when an advertiser contacts that blogger directly and offers to sponsor the blog. These arrangements are typically more lucrative for the blogger (and the advertiser, presumably), and the two parties negotiate this relationship on a case-by-case basis, depending on the audience, product, blog traffic, and other factors.

After you decide on formats, placement, and business models, it's time to put ads on your blog. The good — and bad — news is that you have dozens of options to choose from. In the following sections, I show you a few well-regarded advertising programs to consider.

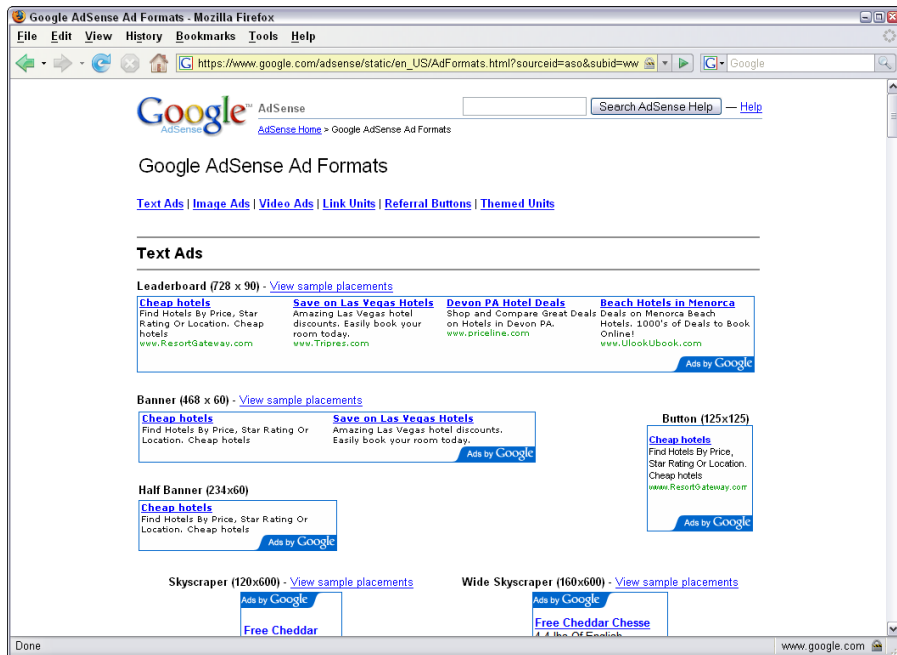
Google AdSense

www.google.com/adsense

AdSense is Google's contextual advertising program, and it's really the biggest player in the contextual advertising arena. When you sign up for Google AdSense, you choose what kinds of ads you want on your blog, from text to images to videos. You can see examples of the Google AdSense formats in Figure 18-3.

Advertisers pay Google money when your blog visitors click the advertisements displayed beside your content, and you receive a portion of those payments. Successful bloggers who have a lot of traffic can earn a living from Google AdSense, but income varies greatly, depending on the size of your audience and how well your blog topics match the advertisers who contract with Google.

Figure 18-3:
Google
AdSense
puts adver-
tisers on
your blog
and money
in your
pocket.



Text Link Ads

www.text-link-ads.com

Based in New York, Text Link Ads is one of the most popular and recognizable advertising systems used by bloggers. Designed with blogs in mind, these ads are a slightly different option than contextual advertising programs that try to relate ads specifically to your content. Instead, you get only simple links that you preapprove, which are related but much lower-key in look and feel than contextual ads.

You can display Text Link Ads on the same page with Google AdSense, Yahoo! Publisher Network, and other contextually served ads.

AdBrite

www.adbrite.com

AdBrite is an advertising marketplace similar to the others mentioned in the preceding sections. Bloggers can choose between text, banner ads, full-page *interstitials* (splash pages containing a full-page advertisement), inline ads, and image ads. Interstitials are high-paying ads that take over the entire browser window when a user clicks to move from one page of your website to another; they usually feature a Skip This Ad link or button.

Putting Ads on Your Blog

To get these ads onto your website, most often, the programs you sign up for provide you with a bit of code that you insert into your website templates. Some programs have step-by-step instructions for popular blog software packages, but be aware that you might also need to consult your blog software documentation for help with putting your ads where you want them.

First, decide just where you want the ads on your page. The best thing to do when you're thinking about introducing ads into your blog design is to make sure the ads aren't overpowering.



Don't damage your reputation or credibility by overloading the site with ads or by associating ads too closely with your blog posts and content. Aside from pop-up ads, nothing is more annoying than having a blog design that's created around ads rather than a blog that's designed to include ads.

At the same time, you need to place ads in spots where readers can see them. Bloggers have discovered a few truths about ads, although your results might differ:

- ✔ **Ads at the top and bottom of each page do poorly.** Readers often ignore and rarely view advertisements along the top or the bottom of a blog because the site content usually appears in the middle of the screen. While users scroll their windows to view site content, they may never see these top and bottom advertisements at all.
- ✔ **Ads in the sidebars perform well but might interfere with navigation.** The left side of the website is a traditional place for ads. However, it's also a prime place for navigation tools, and your website design might require that you locate such tools higher than the ads you want people to view. As for the right side, not only are navigation tools sometimes placed here, but the bulk of blog content tends to be aligned to the left side of the screen. Some users might cover the right side with other windows and therefore miss these right-side advertisements entirely.
- ✔ **Ads within the content itself get clicked.** Some blogs have their ads placed within their content, and therefore visitors don't miss the ads. But you need to be careful when you use advertising within your content. Remember that you want to make the content king, not the ad.



Try out ads in different places on your blog and see how your audience reacts, as well as how your earnings do. You might need to try several different locations before you find one that balances your readers' needs with your advertisers'.

Putting Ads in Your RSS Feeds

Active bloggers debate about whether RSS feeds should contain ads. Traditionally, bloggers have used RSS as a way to share information, and only later did it become a place to put advertisements. You might want to consider using RSS ads because many of your blog readers might use RSS readers to consume the content of your blog.

RSS ads are simply banner or text advertisements that appear below or above the content displayed in your RSS reading program. The ads are usually smaller than typical banner ads on the average website because they're meant to fit within the RSS feed.

Pheedo

www.pheedo.com

Pheedo is the pioneering company that began the feed advertising industry. In 2003, Pheedo's creators thought of an idea to place advertisements in RSS feeds and started Pheedo. Their business has grown into one of the largest advertising networks for RSS.

Google FeedBurner Ad Network

<http://feedburner.google.com>

FeedBurner, a Google-owned company, is chock-full of feed experts. It has a program called the FeedBurner Ad Network that allows you to monetize your feed with ads via a revenue-sharing program. It has established a significant ad network. You can also connect an existing Google AdSense account to your RSS ads.

Getting Paid to Post

Being paid to post can mean a couple of different things. For many bloggers, it means receiving money or products to post a review or mention a company on a personal blog. But blogging for money can also lead you down the path of the professional blogger, where you write posts for other blogs.

Placing products on your blog

Some bloggers believe that getting paid to post about products or companies is a bad thing. However, blogging is hard work. Would it be so terrible to get paid to talk about a product every once in a while?

Some bloggers fear that the influence of advertisers might take over the traditionally independent voice of the blogosphere. When advertisers offer money to bloggers to praise their products and services in a blog, it might not result in an honest review of the business. So, if you're paid to post information about someone else, make sure that you retain your right to post your own honest opinion. You might even want to consider starting an additional blog to showcase content that you're being paid to produce, as opposed to the content contained in your original blog.



Above all, let your readers know what products companies have paid you to mention or review, or sent you for free in hopes that you review them. You can head off accusations of deception by disclosing the terms of how you came to talk about a product or a post that some company has paid you for.

You can either set up your own system or find a service that allows you to connect with companies that want to have their products or services advertised on blogs.

SponsoredReviews.com

www.sponsoredreviews.com

SponsoredReviews.com is a company that connects advertisers with bloggers who are willing to write reviews about the advertisers' products and services. This company is forthright with the expectation that you, as a blogger, will offer an honest opinion and even give constructive criticism about the products that its advertisers create.

PayPerPost

www.payperpost.com

PayPerPost is a company that helps bloggers get paid for creating and publishing advertiser-sponsored content. The theory behind the company is that if you're a blogger, you'll inevitably write about some products that you've used in the past or are currently using. PayPerPost believes you should be paid for those kinds of posts.

PayPerPost works somewhat like a job board, where you accept bids to write about a certain product or service. The advertiser and the amount of traffic you report determine the amount of money you receive.

Blogging professionally

You can offer your blogging services to those who might want them by making a small business for yourself as a professional blogger. Believe me, companies are often looking for competent writers they can hire to contribute content to their blogs. This decision might take time away from your personal blog, but hopefully, additional practice can help you to become a better blogger!

To offer up your service, check the blogger-wanted ads on job boards and see whether you're interested in writing about any topic. Also, be sure to post about your availability on your own blog's sidebar and in your blog itself.

A site where you can start your search for blogging jobs is Jobs.Progblogger (<http://jobs.progblogger.net>). This popular website provides help to bloggers so that they can monetize their websites. The job board is highly active, and blogger jobs often appear here.



When you begin blogging professionally, you need to keep track of any progress you make. Typically, this tracking includes either the number of posts that you create or the number of site visitors over a period of time. You can organize this information in various ways, but the tracking needs to prove that some interaction occurred between you and your readers.

Tying in Affiliate Marketing

If you ever blogged about a product that you really like and just knew that you were helping the company that makes the product make a sale, you can now make some money from that sale with affiliate marketing.

Popular retailers have set up affiliate marketing programs, most notably Amazon.com. You sign up with an affiliate program, and when you blog about one of its products, you include a piece of identifying information that the company gives you. You earn cash when readers of your blog click the product and buy it.

If you find yourself blogging about items that others might buy as a result of your recommendation, check to see whether the company that makes the product has an affiliate program and sign yourself up.

In short order, your blog can contain links to books, DVDs, or other products that provide you with a commission on each product bought through a link from your website.

Amazon Associates Program

www.amazon.com/associates

Amazon is the most recognized affiliate program available, and it's arguably one that you likely benefit from using because many bloggers mention books and DVDs that they've enjoyed.

Amazon Associates works by letting you create specially formatted links that you can use on your blog to drive traffic to the Amazon website. Anything that a visitor who clicks your link purchases earns you a percentage of the sale as a referral fee.

LinkShare

www.linkshare.com/publishers

LinkShare is another affiliate program that calls itself a pay-per-action marketing network. You can place both text and graphical ads on your blog and make money from any sales that come from readers' purchases.

Google Affiliate Network

www.google.com/ads/affiliatenetwork

If you regularly blog about consumer products, the Google Affiliate Network can help you turn those blog posts into money. Sign up to review the advertisers participating in the network, and learn how to track conversions of your recommendations into purchases. Many well-known brands participate in the Google Affiliate Network, from Target to Verizon.

Seeking Sponsorships

Sponsorships are advertisements by companies that have either requested to be an advertiser or whom you seek out to advertise on your site. Such sponsorship can mean one of two things:

- ✓ Sponsors might pay you to put their ads on your website.
- ✓ Sponsors might simply provide you with free goods or services in return for advertising on your website.



You need to think carefully about whether to take on a sponsor because not all sponsorships are equal:

- ✓ **Prominent placement or exclusivity:** A sponsor is different from the usual ad on your website because sponsors like a prominent placement on your blog — possibly including the exclusive right to advertise on your blog.
- ✓ **Acknowledgment:** A sponsor might ask you to use the phrase “This blog sponsored by . . .” or some variation of it to let your readers know that a specific company is funding your blog. You may also want to thank your sponsor occasionally to generate extra goodwill.
- ✓ **Time commitment:** Sponsorships often run for a set length of time, usually much longer than a standard ad runs. Sponsorships of several months to a year aren’t unheard of.

Getting sponsors interested in your blog is probably the hardest advertising strategy, though it’s also the most lucrative. To find a sponsor, you need to “sell” your blog, from the design to the content. Make the sponsor want to post its advertisements on your site — not someone else’s. When you’re seeking sponsors, keep your blog dynamic, on topic, and well written.

One of the best things sponsors do for your blog is legitimize your work. Many bloggers might be viewed by the public as “just another blogger” within the static of the Internet. But, if you have sponsors that believe in what you’re doing, you can attract other professional relationships, such as speaking engagements or press interviews. If you’re regarded as an authority, you can build a stronger brand.

Negotiating a sponsorship experience

Sponsors can be demanding advertisers. Unlike developing your own monetization plan, sponsorships can change the way you advertise on your site. Some sponsors demand *exclusivity* — which means they’re the only business of that type that advertises on your site, and you might have to turn away other potential sponsors. Others might demand that you always write about

their products or services in a positive way. Dealing with sponsors can be a true balancing act. But the rewards can be worth the work.

Here's my recipe for a successful sponsor/blogger relationship:

- ✔ **Be clear on your topic.** Know who you are and what you're writing about. If you have a blog that isn't clear about its subject, when you're seeking sponsorship, potential sponsors may be unable to understand why they are a good match for your blog. Sponsors want a very clear idea about the content you're creating and about what you can do for them.

Keeping your blog on topic is especially important when sponsors are actively using their brand identities on your site. Make sure that they're aware of everything you might write about so that they don't have any surprises or objections to editorial content.
- ✔ **Be clear about what you're promising.** Be sure both you and your sponsor understand exactly what influence and control — if any — the partnership offers the advertiser. Thoroughly outline how you'll handle both content and advertising placement of the sponsor; the advertiser should be upfront about its expectations of you.
- ✔ **Know your audience.** Educate yourself on your audience if you're seeking paying sponsors for your blog. With increased sponsorship, you absolutely must address the question of who your audience is. You need to document the activity in your community, track your comments, and analyze the information from your web statistics. (Check Chapter 16 for information on web statistics and traffic software.)



Create a report of your statistics to prove to any sponsors that you have the numbers that you claim you do. Don't use any guesswork when creating this report. Your sponsors want to see solid numbers and data to back up your claims. Sponsorship arrangements often require you to create statistics reports; the simple fact is that if you want to make money, you have to gather data.

You can collect data from your audience in the form of contests, polls, and other interactive experiences. Ask your audience members who they are — and if you approach it in a professional manner, they might be happy to reveal a little bit about themselves.

- ✔ **Banner placement and visual cues.** If you've been placing advertising on your blog for awhile, you already have a good idea where ads appear to good effect on your site, and you probably also know what types of ads work best. So, you can demonstrate the benefits of placement and ad types to any potential sponsors.

However, if you've never had ads on your site when you first seek a sponsor, be prepared to offer ideas and suggestions for adequately highlighting the sponsor's ads and branding. You can even provide a design mock-up or some kind of visual representation. Or you might even

consider creating a demo website that actually shows the ads in the positions and formats that you think can work.

- ✓ **Limit other monetization methods.** Some bloggers find that if they use other advertising systems at the same time as a sponsor, it dilutes the effectiveness of the sponsorships. Many sponsors ask to be the exclusive advertiser on your site or that you limit what other kinds of advertising and advertisers you use while they sponsor you. This request isn't unreasonable, especially if you have a lucrative sponsorship agreement that compensates you for the loss of those ad spots.

Setting boundaries

Jumping to the professional level in the blogging world poses a few potential pitfalls and requires ongoing reinvention on your part. Set up and keep to a few simple rules about what your professional limits and intentions are, and don't be afraid to write those rules down in a document that you share with sponsors and your readers.

Also, be ready to say no. Some sponsors might want more than you're willing to give. Yes, you may be able to earn some money from your blog, but don't forget the reason you're blogging in the first place. Your blog is your territory, not your sponsor's. You're renting the sponsor space on your site, giving it access to your audience. You aren't signing up for someone to tell you what to do. You already have parents for that!



Don't jump at every offer that comes in the door. You may find this advice difficult to follow when you're seeking your first sponsor, but you need to maintain a high level of professionalism — not just for yourself, but also for your audience. In the same way that you protect your audience from nasty comments and spam, you need to be sure that you give them an appropriate experience with your sponsors and advertisers. Protect the integrity of your blog and avoid sponsors that demand more time, editorial control, or space on your blog than you're willing to give.

Accepting Gifts, Not Obligations

Many companies offer news media access to products and services in order to generate press attention, and increasingly, bloggers are being offered the same goodies. After all, some blog topics are so specific that companies absolutely know that the blog's readers will be interested in their products. For example, a blogger who writes about cell phones might be targeted by a mobile phone company, and offered a free product or money in exchange for some kind of online review or feedback.

This kind of exchange can be a tricky situation because some bloggers regard the gift as some kind of bribe or obligation to write something positive about the product in question.

In fact, that perception isn't correct. I know bloggers who accept products for review on the condition that they say what they really think about it, and most companies are perfectly satisfied with this kind of arrangement. In addition, most bloggers who do these kinds of reviews are very upfront with their readers about how they obtained the product in question and what agreement they have with the company that provided it.

If you're getting these offers, you can probably benefit from establishing such a policy. Most bloggers don't want to be seen as taking bribes or favors from companies that just want the bloggers to say nice things about them. Your policy needs to lay out how you plan to deal with such situations.

Here are three things to consider when you start to get product-review offers:

- ✔ **Be clear about what you'll do with the product.** Tell the product maker that you won't write a positive review if the product doesn't deserve it. Make sure that you're very specific about what you'll provide in return for the gift (if anything).
- ✔ **Be prepared to return gifts.** A lot of bloggers, especially the incredibly geeky ones, would love to receive a gift from a company that has the latest and hottest product. However, if the company has unreasonable demands or demands that don't match the blogger's vision, the blogger might choose to simply return the gift.
- ✔ **Donate what you receive.** You can avoid an ugly scene with your audience or any sponsors of your blog by taking the gifts you receive, writing your review, and then giving the items away. You can send them to your favorite charity or hold a contest for your audience. Donating your freebies generates all kinds of goodwill from your community while avoiding any accusations of bias.

Keep to the core of what makes your blog great. If you get an offer for a free product, think about it first — don't accept it right away. You can even go to your community members and see what they think if you require advice. Whether you accept ads or sponsorships, and how you implement them, really depends on you.

Chapter 19

Blogging for Companies

In This Chapter

- ▶ Making blogs work for your business or organization
- ▶ Establishing a plan for blogging success
- ▶ Exploring the technological bells and whistles
- ▶ Advertising on blogs

As a business owner or entrepreneur, you're probably wondering whether blogging can help you be more financially successful or allow you to promote your company in some way. Many of today's technically savvy businesses have started blogs and found them to be terrific tools for reaching out to customers, generating buzz about a service or product, building goodwill, or just informing customers about what they're up to.

If you're thinking about adding a blog to your outreach efforts but aren't entirely confident that it'll be worth the time and effort, you aren't alone. Many companies have difficulty seeing the value in blogging. Some professionals worry about diverting time away from more crucial workplace tasks, whereas others worry about opening themselves up for public criticism.

And the truth is that even though blogging can provide a business with a really incredible tool, it isn't right for *every* business. Nonetheless, in this chapter, I do my best to persuade you that blogging can work for you and your company, whether you're a lone-wolf entrepreneur just starting out or a Fortune 500 executive with more marketing staff than you know what to do with.



If this chapter piques your interest, check out my book *Buzz Marketing with Blogs For Dummies* (John Wiley & Sons, Inc.), which covers in depth what I can only touch on in this chapter.

Putting Blogs to Work for Your Business

A stigma still lingers around blogs. Many people still think of a blogger as a pimple-faced teenager who sits in his pajamas all day writing excruciatingly boring diary posts about what he had for breakfast. Blogs, for a lot of folks, equate with the worst kind of narcissistic navel-gazing. Those kinds of blogs do exist, of course, but in reality, the blogosphere contains so much more than that. Hundreds of nonprofit organizations, small-business owners, consultants, newspapers, and schools have moved into the blogosphere.

Why? Blogs are simple to set up, easy to publish, and have a proven track record for increasing search engine traffic to a website. For a company in which time is of the essence and accessibility is a necessity — show me a company where these things aren't a priority, and I'll eat my hat — blogs are a low-investment way to accomplish a lot. Don't believe me? Then perhaps you'll believe General Motors, McDonald's, Microsoft, Amazon.com, *The New York Times*, and Southwest Airlines; all these companies have added blogs to their business practices.

Considering the benefits of a business blog

For a business or organization, you can use blog software to release company public-relations documents to the public, or you can go further and introduce blogs as part of your external communications to your customers and potential customers. Some companies use blogs internally to coordinate work teams or communicate across distances. Here are a few of the ways businesses are using blogs:

- ✓ Generating conversation and buzz about the company, its products, or services in the online space
- ✓ Reaching out with information and support to current customers, even resolving issues traditionally handled by phone-based customer service
- ✓ Creating new pathways to interact with the public about an industry or issue, including gathering feedback and input to guide future product development
- ✓ Defusing negative criticism or press by publicly addressing problems
- ✓ Demonstrating expertise and experience to potential customers
- ✓ Directly driving sales or action
- ✓ Collaborating across teams, branches, regions, or staggered shifts

When it comes to business, the main thing that a business blogger should consider is that blog software, implemented properly, can allow companies to improve their communications and organization with very little overhead.

In some cases, blogs have even saved businesses money by delivering documents and data online that were previously delivered via snail mail.

Businesses haven't been the only beneficiaries, either. Customers have benefited from increased access to news, information, support, and dialogue with companies that have blogs.

Making blogs work for you can be simple if you have a communication strategy that's flexible and can evolve when your blog takes off. Blogs can generate sales and establish strong communication directly with customers, and marketing experts believe blogs are a friendly method of making customers happy.

Checking out businesses that blog

You know blogging is important. You already know that it gives you a very good way to generate talk about your company. Do you need a little more convincing? Well, the following sections discuss how some other companies are blogging.

Hewlett-Packard

www.hp.com/hpinfo/blogs

You've probably owned a Hewlett-Packard product at some point in your computing life. Hewlett-Packard has built computers, printers, cameras, and high-end computer servers for years, building up incredible expertise across a range of consumer products. You can see that knowledge in the HP blogs, which claim to convey the "unvarnished thoughts of HP employees." Topics range from computers to the Cannes Film Festival to gaming, and the bloggers come from all areas of the company's structure.

Wells Fargo

<http://blog.wellsfargo.com>

What could a bank possibly blog about, you ask? Apparently, banks can discuss a whole lot with their customers. Student loans, small business, and stock markets are all topics discussed on the Wells Fargo Blogs site. Wells Fargo Blogs gives multiple contributors a public voice in a variety of blogs, from The Student LoanDown to Guided by History.

Microsoft Community

www.microsoft.com/communities/blogs

The Microsoft Community Blogs (shown in Figure 19-1) are one way that Microsoft reaches out to customers and potential customers. These blogs, written by software and hardware developers, give interested readers a behind-the-scenes peek at their favorite products and a way to interact with the developers.

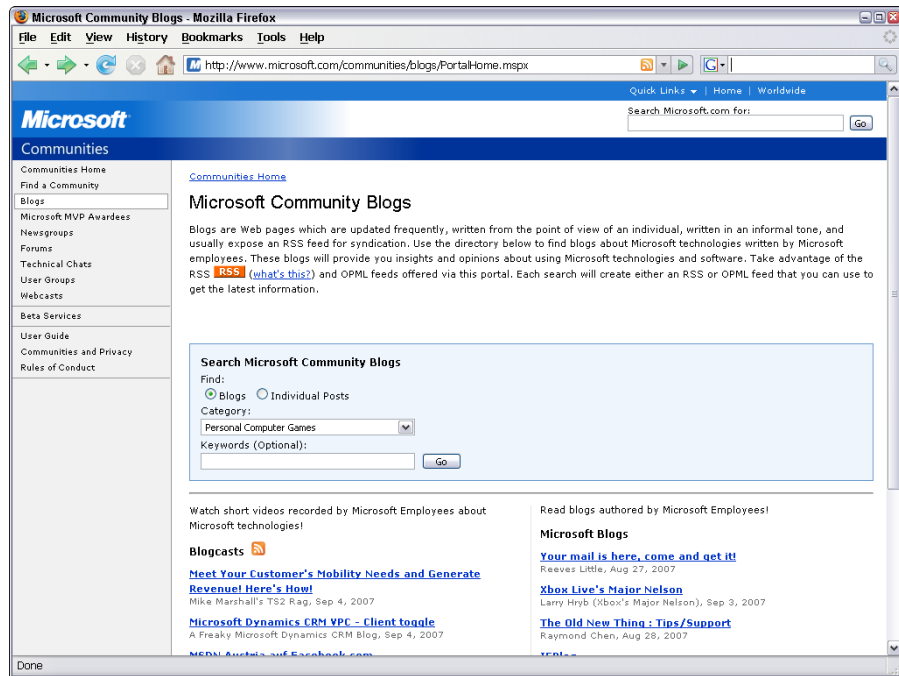
Oracle

`http://blogs.oracle.com`

Oracle also reaches out to customers by using developer blogs. On the blogs, customers can seek out and talk directly to the people involved in the making of a product, giving customers a feeling of involvement and direct access not available from traditional marketing efforts.

It's pretty ingenious, when you think about it — put your engineers and programmers to work helping you promote your products and services, rather than just creating them!

Figure 19-1: Microsoft's software coders talk about their work to customers and other employees.



Deciding whether to blog

Blogging for business reasons is a sensitive topic both in and out of the blogosphere. Old-school bloggers don't like seeing blogging turned from a personal outlet into a professional one, and many businesses worry that the informality of a blog looks unprofessional. And that isn't all: Some businesses also have concerns about employees who have personal blogs on which they might talk about their work or appear to be representing the company.

Blogging isn't for every corporate culture. If your company has traditionally had an open hand with communication and outreach, blogging is going to be a great tool for you. But if you have a reserved corporate culture, blogging might be too much of a stretch beyond business as usual. Still, many companies that might seem an odd fit for blogs for marketing or outreach have been happily surprised at the results they've obtained.

Businesses that need to keep information or trade practices confidential, or that stand to lose by having an open-door policy, probably shouldn't blog. For instance, some government agencies and law firms are limited by the very nature of their businesses in what they can communicate. You know best whether your corporate culture or industry can benefit from the use of a blog.



At the very least, however, track your company and what's said about it in the blogosphere. Just because you ignore blogs, that doesn't mean they ignore you! Chapter 17 explains how you can keep tabs on what others say about your business online.



If you're still on the fence about starting a blog, try one with a set endpoint, for an event or a product launch. After the event occurs, you can end the blog's lifespan gracefully and have some real data to use in assessing whether blogging was a worthwhile endeavor for you. Also, take a look at your competitors — are any of them blogging? If so, does the blog appear to be reaching visitors effectively? Are readers leaving comments? Watch how these competitors are making use of a blog and give some thought to whether you might be able to do something similar (but more effectively).

Planning for Business Blog Success

Blogging for a business comes down to planning. Don't let the ease of getting started with the technical side of blogging seduce you into jumping in without preparing. You need to decide what your goals are, figure out who you want to actually write the blog, map out the topics that you plan to discuss, and plan how you might integrate direct action or sales.

Top five reasons why blogs work for businesses

Here are the most important reasons that blogs work so well as a business and marketing tool in today's Internet-enabled world:

- ✓ **Cost:** A lot of blogging software packages are open source and available at no cost, but even those that have licensing fees are very reasonably priced. Hosted services can also provide you with an inexpensive platform to begin business blogging.
- ✓ **Communication:** A blog allows you to communicate with potential and current clients in a direct and informal way. You can chat and communicate about your product or service without pressuring your client. You use a business blog to make sure that your potential or existing clients get the facts about your product without a heavy-handed sales pitch.
- ✓ **Research:** Many companies want to break into new markets and new demographics. Blogging allows for collaborative discussion

that can help you gather valuable information about how to position products and services.

- ✓ **Feedback:** Find out what you're doing right and wrong in your business or with your products by just asking outright on your blog. Discover how to improve what you're currently doing or how you can deal with existing problems — and get points for effort while you do.
- ✓ **Reputation:** Do away with that corporate-giant personality most companies can't help but convey. Blogs can put a human, personal face on what has usually been a monolithic surface. If you let the public see how you respect and regard them, you reap the benefits of being honest and open. Smaller businesses and consultancies benefit from the publicity around their names and opinions.

Setting goals

Before you jump into blogging for your business, you need to set goals that define how you can know whether your blog is successful after you launch it. Decide what you want the blog to help you accomplish. Do you want to replace some of your existing customer service efforts with the blog? Are you launching a new product that needs publicity? Whatever your direction, plan your purpose prior to launching the blog.



So many things could go into a blog, but you also have a business to run. Decide how much time you want to devote to writing and maintaining your blog. Blogging is part of your business, but it can't take away from time you need to devote to other tasks.

You might choose to define success by

- ✓ Increasing traffic to your website
- ✓ Reaching a certain number of blog comments on a daily basis

- ✔ Seeing more conversation about your company/products/services in the media or on other blogs
- ✔ Earning money from product sales or blog advertising

You might want to define success for your blog in other ways, so don't think you have to use any of these suggestions. A blog is such a flexible medium that yours might accomplish a goal I can't even imagine!

Choosing a blogger

Businesses have developed two approaches to company blogs: blogs written by one person and those written by multiple people from all over the organization. Either approach is valid, as long as everyone posting to the blog has a clear idea of the goals, ideas, and style of the blog.



If you create a blog that has multiple contributors, put a single individual in charge of content on a regular basis and encourage others from the organization to chime in when they have something to say. The responsibility for the blog is in one person's hands, but the door is open for wide participation.

Occasional writers are welcome, but don't suddenly give employees brand-new job duties that they can't meet. Having multiple voices in a blog can also help you to convey the culture of your company overall, giving readers a taste of what people at all levels of the organization think about and do.

If you spread the writing around, you might be able to create a blog that has a huge amount of content and satisfies a very large readership. The multiple-voice perspective might also awaken ideas in the other writers and generate internal conversations.



No matter who blogs, you must decide internally whether someone needs to vet posts before actually posting them, and who should do the vetting. It's a good idea to have someone who isn't blogging keep an eye on things, just to get a second opinion.

When you're considering just who should blog on behalf of the company, give some thought to

- ✔ **Writing ability:** You need a blogger who's an effective writer and who also *likes* to write.
- ✔ **Position within the company:** Who's the right person to reach out to the public? CEOs offer one perspective, and so do those on the factory floor. Try to match the goals and style of your blog with the right people within your company, and don't be afraid to give unexpected staffers a try. You might be surprised at how interesting readers find a behind-the-curtain approach.

- ✓ **Knowledge and expertise:** Be sure to choose a person who has sufficient knowledge and expertise to be interesting and engaging on the subjects the blog discusses. Preferably, you want people who really know what they're talking about and have information to share.
- ✓ **Time commitments:** Choose a blogger who has the time to put into the site. Don't overload already busy staff with this new job requirement.

After you choose a blogger, you have a few more folks to identify. Don't forget to plan who you want to review comments, deal with spam, and fix technical issues.

Deciding what to write

While you think about topics for the blog, consider how informal or personal you want to make your blog style. Although the occasional personal post can help to humanize your blog, don't be tempted down the journaling path: You're creating a business blog, so look for creative ways of covering your industry.

The goal of many business blogs is to establish (or maybe reestablish) the business as a leader in its industry. Think about how to demonstrate expertise while staying interesting and readable: You need to show that you know your stuff without becoming a stuffed shirt! Use the blog to persuade people that they should trust you without coming right out and telling people, "I'm trustworthy!"

Whoever blogs for your business needs to have a keen understanding of the goals and culture of the company, as well as know how much information to put on the blog without going too far. Many companies set up rules about topics that are appropriate for the blog, as well as define what information they want to keep confidential.

Here are some general guidelines to keep in mind for your blog content:

- ✓ **Keep it true.** Double-check blog posts for accuracy before making them live. Like a newspaper or any other publisher, follow a process to make sure you're publishing facts and not fiction. You can include opinions on your business's blog as long as you label them as just that.
- ✓ **Keep it relevant and real.** Be as open and honest as you can in your blog. This approach to transparency can make some in your company nervous (hi, corporate lawyer!), but the more successful business blogs provide insight or communication from real people. Some even give the public access to the viewpoints and words of high-level staff the readers would normally never meet or talk to. Furthermore, whoever blogs should stay on topic and keep posts related to the subject of the blog, no matter how interesting that TV show was last night.



✔ **Keep it informative and educational.** One problem that many companies encounter when they start to blog is the fact that their blogs are (ahem) boring. You might have great information, but if people don't also find it interesting to read about, you can't get readers to stick around long. Try to write posts that educate with a light-hearted manner and that focus on information and news that are useful to those reading it.

✔ **Keep it positive.** Steer away from discussing your competition in your blog. If you can say something nice about another company, don't hesitate, but you probably don't want to point out just what other companies are doing wrong. That kind of approach can turn your blog into a giant argument, scaring off less-opinionated customers who might otherwise be interested in your products and services.

✔ **Keep using keywords.** Part of the plan of a business-related blog is to make sure the blog is useful to readers, but for that plan to work, you have to get readers from the search engine to your blog. Use your knowledge of your industry and topical news to use keywords that people are likely to use in search engines when they look for the subject of your blog or your business.

Pay special attention to the words that you use in the titles of your blog posts: Search engines often weight these words most heavily, so hit the highpoints in your titles. Informative is better than cutesy!

✔ **Keep linking.** Business blogs should also link to related articles and websites. You can link to resources on your business's own website, but don't hesitate to point folks to good information that isn't on your website. If you're a source for information that they need or can get them to the information they need effectively, you don't lose them for long.

Also, look for chances to link the blog to itself! A lot of bloggers are clever about linking to old posts on their own blogs so that new readers know where to go deep within the blog archives. This kind of linking can increase traffic and also inform and educate your readers.

✔ **Keep posting.** Post on a regular basis and don't stop. Don't worry about an absolutely right number of posts per week, but most experts agree that two to three posts a week is enough to keep your blog active and useful without overwhelming your readers. Other bloggers post less frequently, and others post multiple times a day. Do what works for you and for your readers, but be consistent so that your readers know what to expect from you. If your blog has long silences followed by short bursts of posting, you create a recipe for low readership numbers.

Generating sales or action

Asking potential customers to check out your services after they read something on your blog can turn those readers into actual customers. If you see a logical link to a product or service that you offer, it only makes sense to let

people know. But you need to do more than simply push sales. You tread a fine line between a blog that points out possible purchases, along with providing content, and one that isn't anything more than a big ad.



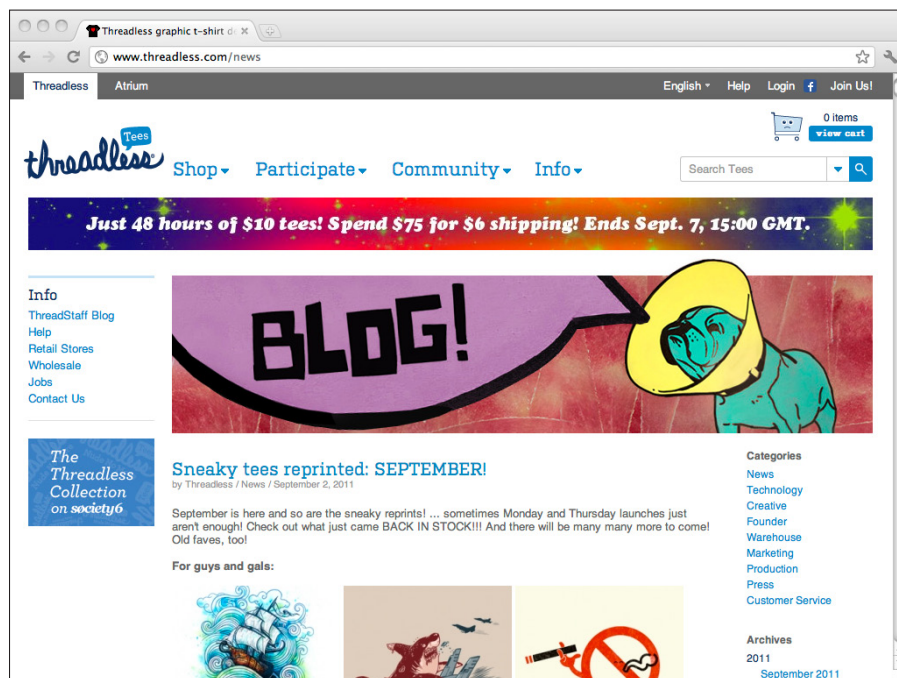
Keep one idea in mind: Meet the needs of your readers. If you can put yourself in the shoes of a blog visitor, you might be able to successfully discriminate between a reasonable link to a product sale and one that's too blatant.

Some blogs don't try hard to get people to pull out their wallets. Instead, the blog's purpose might be to gather feedback and get people to participate in an event or contest. Again, try to be genuine and inviting, rather than pushy. Get readers involved and invested in your goal.

The ThreadStaff blog (www.threadless.com/news) successfully negotiates between information and sales. Threadless is a company that solicits t-shirt designs, allows visitors to vote on their favorites, and then prints and sells the winning designs. Its blog, shown in Figure 19-2, keeps readers up to date on other products Threadless sells, lets artists know when to submit designs, explains new directions the company is taking, and even promotes charitable causes the company espouses.

Figure 19-2:

Keep up with the Threadless ethos and opportunities on the ThreadStaff blog.



Delivering with Technology

You might be thinking about how you, as a blogger, can make connections with potential customers by using your blog. Words are a great start, but technology can also be your friend! A lot of the standard blog bells and whistles are designed to get people involved or to make it easy for them to consume your blog.

Use the tools in the following sections to get readers to return to your blog again and again.

Enabling comments

Comments are a double-edged sword for companies that start blogs. On the one hand, they do a great job of starting conversation and interaction. On the other hand, they can be a source of a lot of work because you have to keep them free of spam or inappropriate conversation. Many businesses are tempted to start a blog and keep comments turned off, but that cuts out a huge part of the benefit of a blog: hearing from your readers and interacting directly with them.

My advice? Turn on the comments! But take precautions by setting up a good policy about what kinds of comments are acceptable and implement some of the very good spam-fighting tools discussed in Chapter 9.

Creating RSS/web feeds

Before the advent of web feeds, blog readers had to remember to visit the blog periodically to see whether the blogger had posted a new entry. This dangerous method made it easy for people to forget to visit. Web feeds, or RSS feeds, give you a way to let people know quickly, easily, and automatically that you have new content available on your blog. Blog visitors simply subscribe to the feed by using a newsreader, which tracks the feed and updates it every time you update the blog, giving instant notification to the reader.

Users can set up web feeds, usually formatted as RSS (Really Simple Syndication), quickly and easily. In fact, most blog software packages automatically include an RSS tool, so you can set it up once and never think about it again.

I talk more about web feeds in Chapter 14.

Podcasting

Podcasting is a relative newcomer to the blogosphere, but it's proving to be a powerful blog ally. *Podcasting*, the recording and distribution of audio and video files to subscribers, has a tremendous potential to give your business blog a boost by providing multimedia presentations to your readers. You can add personality and a face to your blog. Posting interviews, discoveries, tutorials, and other adventures that your company has had can boost your visibility higher than a text-only blog can.

HBO produces podcasts to accompany many of its top shows (<http://itunes.apple.com/us/artist/hbo/id118405710>). A quick run through the selection reveals interviews with directors, stars, on-set interviews, episode clips, and more.

You can read more about creating a podcast in Chapter 12.

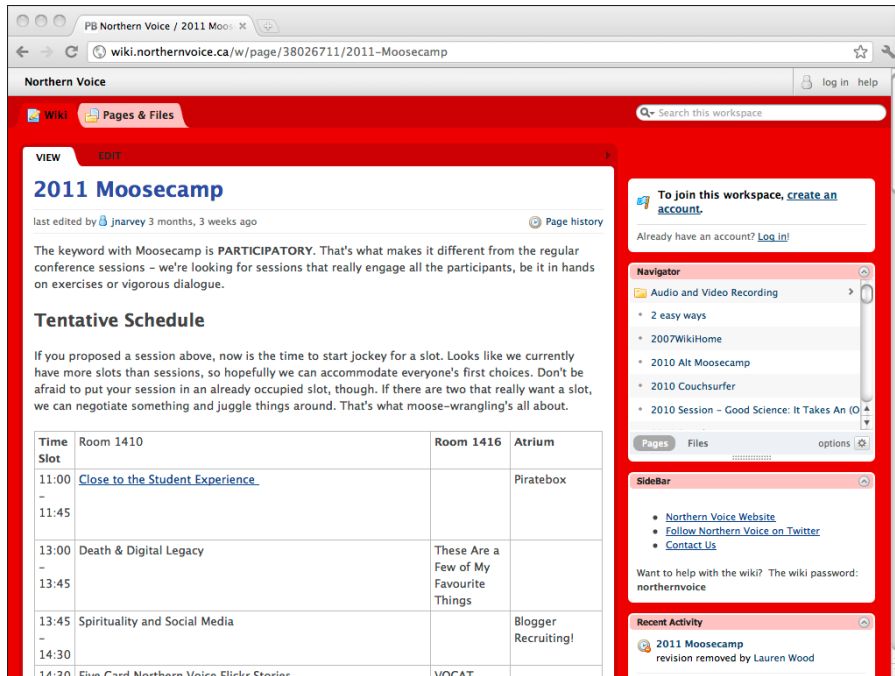
Starting a wiki

Wikis are collaboratively built websites, which any visitor can edit. Businesses and organizations have found that wikis can complement blog sites nicely. Blogs allow for comments, but a wiki can provide a little more flexibility because visitors can both post pages and leave updates in a wiki, contributing to everything from documentation to news coverage.

Wikis are terrific collaborative tools, and if you've been trying to figure out a good way to share knowledge within an organization, you might want to use this approach. Many companies have found wikis useful for group learning purposes, such as building documentation or setting up procedural tasks. One of the most well-known examples of a successful wiki is Wikipedia (www.wikipedia.org), an online encyclopedia to which anyone can contribute content or edit existing content. You can even find it available in multiple languages.

The Northern Voice blogging conference (www.northernvoice.ca) used a wiki to allow attendees of a self-organized event called Moosecamp to create its own event schedule. Figure 19-3 shows the wiki.

Figure 19-3:
The attendees of the Northern Voice Conference organized sessions by using a wiki.



Joining a social network

Adding your company to a variety of social networks can also help to boost your visibility in the blogosphere. Businesses tend to shy away from social networking as a valid form of online advertising, but using these mediums properly can add a viral component to your communication strategy. (*Viral marketing is advertising that consumers actually spread themselves. For example, when you forward a funny video created by a company, you've spread the "virus."*)

A lot of social networks exist, so be sure to choose those that are most pertinent for your industry and approach, not those frequented by 14-year-old girls (unless that suits your business!). LinkedIn (www.linkedin.com) and XING (www.xing.com) are good places to get started.

To get started with LinkedIn, follow these steps:

1. Use your web browser to go to www.linkedin.com.
2. Fill out the registration form and click the Join Now button.

LinkedIn loads the sign-up continuation screen.

3. Fill out the required fields, including your name, business information, and where you went to school.

4. Click Join LinkedIn.

LinkedIn creates an account for you.

After you're a LinkedIn member, be sure to click the Expand Your Network button at the top-right of any page in order to invite colleagues or see who in your e-mail address book already uses LinkedIn.

I introduce social networks and what they're all about in Chapter 16.

Advertising on Blogs

Traditional marketing strategies include advertising, and blogs are no exception. But these aren't your father's ads: Blog advertising runs the gamut of everything from text links to full sponsorships.

In the past, taking out a typical advertisement meant that you'd go to the local newspaper, select an ad size, and choose a section in which you wanted your ad to appear. Maybe people saw the ad, maybe they didn't, but you got charged by how many newspapers were printed, not how many sales you made.

Online advertising offers more accountability to the advertiser: Because of the way websites work, you can track how many times readers' computers load an ad, when a reader clicks it, and what the person does after he or she clicks that ad. Because advertisers like this kind of measure of effectiveness, printed material has seen a significant decline in the purchase of ad space, whereas online advertising has grown hugely. You can use several methods to get your name or even your blog URL seen on other websites and blogs.

Going contextual

Contextual advertising is the practice in which an ad-serving tool matches the advertisements based on the content that appears in the blog. For example, a blog about candy would have ads for candy, and a blog about movies would show ads for upcoming films. If the website visitors are interested in the content of the website, they're likely also interested in goods and services related to the topic of the website, and thus they're more likely to click the ads.

The first major player in the contextual advertising game was Google AdSense. The program was popular from the start, and after a few rocky periods of users abusing the system, it has proven to be quite a moneymaker

for successful bloggers. Many professional bloggers make their living almost entirely on the income received from Google AdSense revenue. Search-engine marketer Alexandre Brabant uses Google AdSense on his company website, eMarketing 101 (www.emarketing101.net). The Google AdSense program ads appear below the navigation bar of his site, as shown in Figure 19-4.

Here are two ways that you can get involved with Google's contextual advertising tools:

- ✓ **Sign up to put ads on your blog or website.** Use the Google AdSense program (www.google.com/adsense). Chapter 18 introduces this program.
- ✓ **Submit your blog or website for display.** The Google AdWords program (<http://adwords.google.com>) lets you present your blog or website in the ads displayed on other websites.



If you want to find out more about leveraging Google AdSense for your blog or business, check out *Building Your Business with Google For Dummies*, by Brad Hill; *Pay Per Click Search Engine Marketing For Dummies*, by Peter Kent; or *Google AdWords For Dummies*, by Howie Jacobson. All are published by John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Figure 19-4:
Put ads on
your site
quickly
by using
Google
AdSense,
like on this
site.



Yahoo! and several other companies also have contextual advertising programs. Do a web search for *contextual advertising programs* to see what's on offer.

You can add contextual advertising to your web (RSS) feed or put yourself into other web feeds by using the FeedBurner Ad Network (<http://feedburner.google.com>).

Advertising via ad networks

A number of advertising middlemen can help successful bloggers put ads on their blogs. In most cases, you can choose between text and graphic ads in a set of standard web-advertising sizes. You create the ad, the ad network serves it up, the blogger posts new content, and his or her visitors see your ad.

If you want to advertise on some of the most successful blogs around, check out one or more of these ad networks:

- ✓ **b5media** (www.b5media.com): Offers ad placement on more than 290 blogs reaching more than 10 million readers; bloggers can sign up to be paid for blogging on the b5media blog network.
- ✓ **Blogads** (www.blogads.com): Offers ad placement on 1,500 blogs and allows you to choose an audience to target (for example, parents or news junkies).
- ✓ **ClickZ** (www.clickz.com): Offers ad placement on the ClickZ family of news, opinion, and entertainment sites.
- ✓ **Crisp Ads** (www.crispads.com): Offers advertising across blog categories (such as autos and food) or on specific blogs. More than 3,800 blogs are enrolled.
- ✓ **FeedBurner** (<http://feedburner.google.com>): Offers placement on blogs and in RSS feeds; choose from categories of blogs and/or target specific times of day or geographic regions.

Each of these services offers you an array of popular blogs and ad formats to choose from, organizes the deal, and handles the transaction. Rates are negotiated based on the level of advertising, the blogs that you're placed on, and how many times your ads are viewed or clicked.

Sponsoring a blog

For a splashy way to be seen on a blog or website, consider sponsoring the site. Sponsorships for popular blogs have gained a lot of notoriety in the blogosphere. Some bloggers call accepting sponsorships “selling out,” but others regard it as a great way to get paid to do what they love. Sponsorships tend to get you coverage on other blogs, even if it’s just speculation about the amount you paid to sponsor a blog, but as they say, “Any publicity is good publicity.”

Sponsorships usually entitle you to occupy any and perhaps all advertising slots on a blog, and they often earn you mentions in the text of the blog, as well. Few blogs actually advertise that they accept sponsorships, largely because sponsored blogs are still fairly rare. If you want to sponsor a blog, contact the blogger directly with an inquiry. He or she can let you know whether the blog is open to a sponsorship, and you can go from there.

Sponsorships can be expensive to do. Be prepared to negotiate with the blogger about the length of your sponsorship and the amount of money you’re willing to pay, but think bigger than you would for advertisement. In some cases, sponsors assume the operating costs of a blog, in addition to paying the blogger for his or her time and audience exposure.

As a sponsor, you’re entitled to more than just a prominent ad placement (though you should get that, too!). You can consider requesting *exclusivity* — that you’re the only advertiser in your industry on the blog, the only sponsor, or the only advertiser. You can request mentions in the copy of the blog, or any other arrangement you think is good for both you and the blogger. For many sponsors, having a prominent logo placement and label at the top of every blog page, and no other advertising on the blog, fills the bill.

Topics to discuss with any blogger you’re considering sponsoring include the following:

- ✓ **What topics the blog covers:** Know what kinds of content the blog you’re sponsoring typically has, and what kind of language it uses. Because readers associate your brand with the blog, you need to be comfortable with the way the blogger expresses him- or herself, as well as what subjects the blogger may raise.

You might also want to discuss how you plan to handle situations in which the blogger has blogged about a topic with which you have a problem. Understand that the blogger is likely to resist giving you editorial control, and be clear about what, if any, say you want to have in the content of the site.



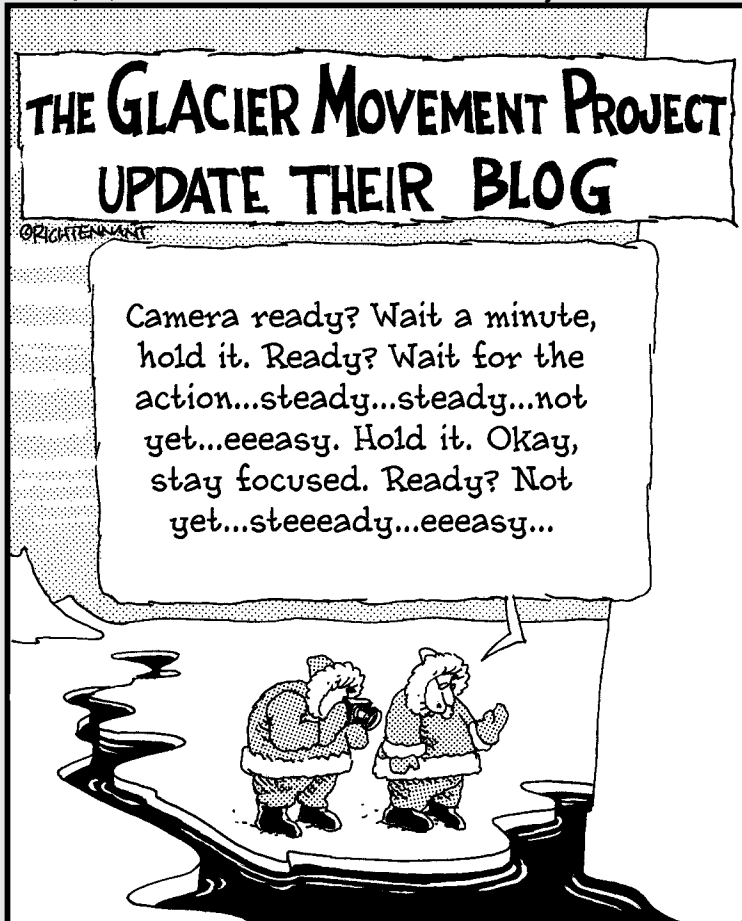
- ✔ **How you want the blog to acknowledge your sponsorship:** Be sure to establish how the blogger will place your brand on the page, and when and where he or she will mention your business and link to your business's website.
- ✔ **How other ads or monetization occur on the blog:** Talk with the blogger about other ways that he or she earns revenue and decide what, if any, of those systems can remain in place during the term of your sponsorship. Be prepared to compensate the blogger for any revenue that he or she usually earns that you request he or she remove from the site. For example, if the blogger commonly uses Google AdSense advertising that you don't want to appear on the blog when you sponsor it, ask for accounting statements showing the value of those ads to the blogger.

Part VII

The Part of Tens

The 5th Wave

By Rich Tennant



In this part . . .

Bring it all together in The Part of Tens by touring some top blogs and blog technologies. Chapter 20 covers some excellent ways to grow your audience into a true community, encouraging feedback and discussion and handling dissension in the ranks. In Chapter 21, get a cool list of what you need to make the most of mobile blogging, from software to production tips. For good measure, I leave you with ten outstanding and successful blogs you must check out in Chapter 22.

Chapter 20

Ten Ways of Growing Community

Every online community needs leaders or facilitators to keep the discussions lively, upbeat, and on topic. Playing “mom” or “dad” can be the hardest job in any community, and sometimes, the rewards come slowly. Don’t let this fact discourage you, though. Encouraging growth in any community requires a certain level of patience, persistence, and attention — but when it works, it really works.

This chapter offers ten simple tricks for developing your blog from your soapbox into a real community, with true interaction between you and your readers, and among the readers themselves.

If you’re lucky, in the process of getting people to read and comment on your posts and on each other’s comments, you even discover how to convert readers into community evangelists who can make the community larger, more fun, and more active.

Write

Get writing (or podcasting, or posting photos, or whatever it is you’re doing on your blog)!

Establish a regular schedule for maintaining your blog; a schedule really helps readers know what to expect and when. A regular schedule can even build anticipation and excitement. Be open to ideas, provide a welcoming environment, and keep yourself on topic so that interested, engaged readers get what they’re looking for when they visit.

Write on other websites, as well. See whether other blogs might need a little help with a few additional posts. Also, help keep the conversations going on other blogs that you enjoy. Each time you comment on another blog, you get exposure to a few more potential readers for your own blog and build links back to your blog.

Reply

If someone asks you a question, either in the comments or through e-mail, make sure to reply. Acknowledge what the person says in your reply and take the time to answer properly, even if only to thank him or her for the comment. Thoughtful responses to questions and comments about your blog can do as much to build your community as original blog posts can.

Some bloggers take the attitude that reader comments aren't important or don't count as much as the blog posts. If you actually want to build a readership that interacts with you, this attitude is dead wrong. Readers want your attention and encouragement.

Keep on top of what people are saying within your blog domain and don't be a stranger to those who like what you do. Embrace their enthusiasm for your blog. Give them a reason to keep coming back. Interaction can make those who might shy away feel that they're really part of the community that you're developing.

If you reply to comments and criticism on both your blog and in other online communities, you can really attract others to your own site. Get involved as much as you would in any offline community group.

Visit and Participate

Join other communities. It's that simple. If you want to build a community around your blog, you need to participate in others. Find blogs that are related to the topic areas of your blog. Jump in to the conversation by offering a different perspective, or some feedback to the blogger or to the folks who leave comments. Mentioning your site on other blogs is fine, as long as you make sure that your comments relate to the subject at hand and add to the conversation.

Also, don't just write and leave. Keep active in the communities in which you're a member and use that time to connect with others. Take what you can from the community, but also give back what you think can benefit everyone as a whole. Remember that participating in these communities might even give you ideas for your own blog, so you're likely to benefit in several ways from the time you spend on these blogs.

You can also share links between your blog community and related blogs that you want to support. Offer to set up a type of network where you can share content between sites. Anything is possible; you only need to ask.

Add Guest Bloggers

If your blog readership is up and running, and you're attracting a significant number of daily readers, you can request that members of your community help you out by guest-blogging on your site. Depending on the software you're using, you can either set up secondary blogs or allow guest bloggers to post to the main blog of your site. Getting other perspectives and comments from your community "experts" is incredibly cool, and you might be able to build a series of posts from other bloggers into your site.

This kind of blogging trade-off can let you have multiple voices fill out the content on your site and provide a richer experience for your readers.



These relationships are great to have when you get sick or want to take a vacation. Tap your guest-blogging community for help covering your blog when you aren't around to do it.

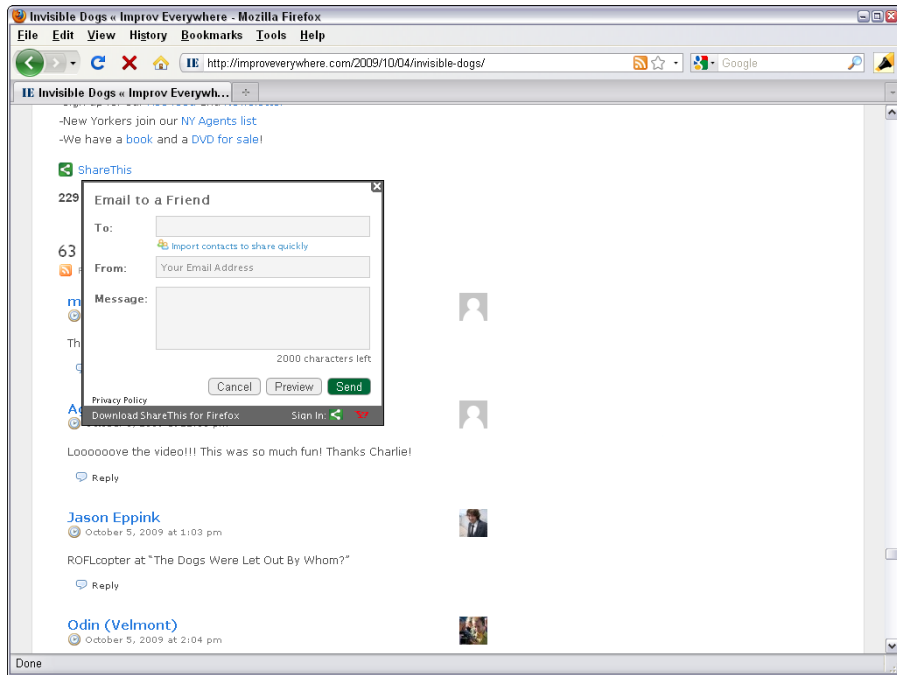
Try E-Mail and Newsletters

As spam-ridden as electronic mail can be, you can still use it to stay in contact with your community. Offering e-mail delivery of some or all of your blog content to your readers can attract users who aren't comfortable with some of the fancier technologies, such as RSS. Try these three tactics:

- ✓ Let your readers send a blog post to a friend who might also be interested.
- ✓ Let your users sign up for e-mail notifications when you post something new to your blog.
- ✓ Let your readers sign up for an e-mail newsletter that supplements your blog or recaps recent blog posts of interest.

Many blog software programs have built-in Tell a Friend or Email a Friend functionality. If you turn this feature on, every blog post includes a small icon or link that, when clicked, lets your reader fill out the name and e-mail address of a friend and send an e-mail notification about your blog post to that friend. It's like free marketing. Figure 20-1 shows an Email to a Friend form on the Improv Everywhere blog (www.improveverywhere.com).

Figure 20-1:
The Email
to a Friend
feature lets
you clue
in friends
about a
great blog
post.



You can easily reach users who have mastered e-mail, but aren't up on news-readers and RSS, by setting up your blog to allow users to sign up for e-mail notifications when you post a new blog entry. Allowing them to sign up and also remove themselves from your e-mail system puts them in control of the situation, which means that you don't contribute to the spam problem. The FeedBurner site (<http://feedburner.google.com>) lets you set up an e-mail notification/subscription tool.

Taking the time to create some kind of additional e-mail newsletter can also get people interested in your website. You can take a little time at the end of each calendar month to pick out your best or most popular blog posts. You can include the links to your blog posting, or you can copy and paste the blog post into an e-mail and send it off.

You can create this kind of newsletter in several ways, but it's most effective if you sign up for an e-mail service provider such as Constant Contact

(www.constantcontact.com), Topica (www.topica.com), Emma (www.myemma.com), MailChimp (www.mailchimp.com) or Lyris HQ (www.lyris.com/solutions/lyris-hq/email-marketing), to name a few. These services can handle subscription requests, unsubscribe requests, and changes of e-mail addresses, all without needing you to do anything. In addition, most of them offer you the capability to track click-throughs on links in your newsletters and track whom you e-mail and when.



You can find a few free mailing-list options out there, but most of them involve a monthly fee. Shop around to find one that fits your price range.

Track and Customize

What does your community like to read? Do the members like your posts about your personal life, or are they more interested in what you're doing in your daily job? Or is it your opinion about some other topic that you've discussed?

Watch to see what element of your content is most popular and what gets the most comments and responses. Don't confuse posts that get responses with posts that people like — you want to know what people are interested in and willing to comment on, not what they like. Controversial blog posts are most likely to generate conversation and feedback.

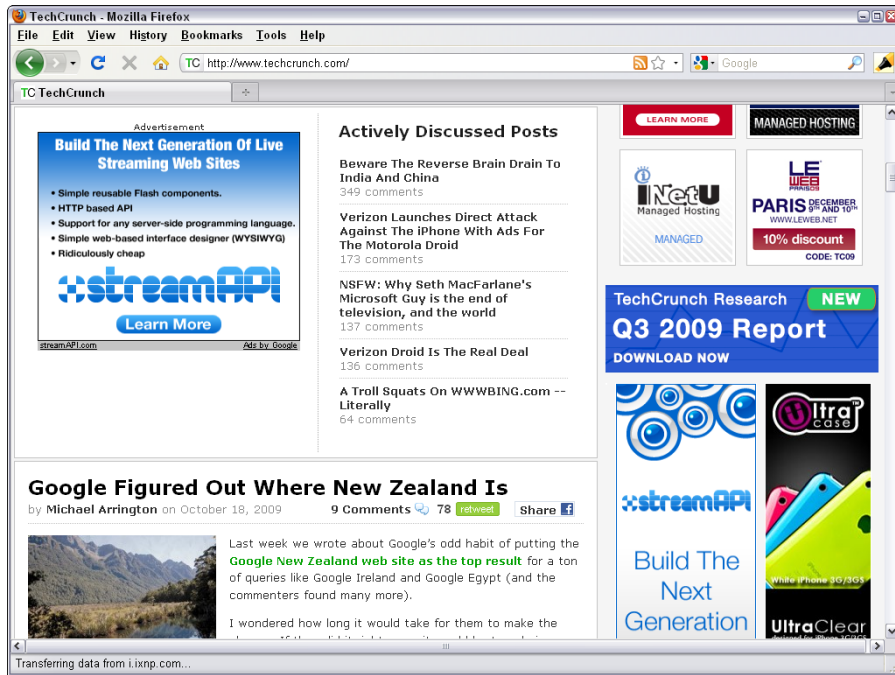
Knowing what's popular in your blog can help you when you write later on because you can draw on this knowledge to create more posts that get responses. Keep an eye on those posts that get lots of comment and understand their appeal to your audience as you make decisions about what to post about in the future. You can find out more about understanding your audience in Chapter 9, and get some help with content in Chapter 8.



Also, pay attention to what posts are unpopular and try to refrain from covering that content again.

You can also turn this information into additional resources for your readers. TechCrunch (www.techcrunch.com), for instance, tracks the posts that get the most comments and displays them in an Actively Discussed Posts box, which is shown in Figure 20-2. If you assume that the blog posts with the most comments are the most interesting, readers can use this box as a shortcut to find the best content on the blog.

Figure 20-2:
TechCrunch
highlights
the posts
that get
a lot of
comments.



Develop Solutions

Pay attention to what's going on in your community so that you can find solutions to problems when they arise. Communities grow and change, but they don't thrive unless you resolve issues such as spam or technical problems.

I can't describe this suggestion very well because each community's problems are unique. Just know that you need to keep on top of any problems that do come up.

For instance, if your blog readers start complaining about seeing too many spam comments on your blog, you need to find and implement some spam prevention tools and techniques. If you fail to do so, you risk losing your readers who get frustrated with having to skip every other comment on your blog.

Other possible problem areas might include flame wars between overheated readers, slow web servers, or too long a turnaround between when a reader submits a comment and when it actually appears on the site. (For the full scoop on comments and spam, see Chapter 9.)

Check Your Code and Software

Make your blog accessible to all web users. Your HTML code needs to be flexible enough to display in the many web browsers out there, and it must accommodate browsers used by people who are blind. Whether you're keeping the website design code clean or offering RSS feeds, you're ultimately responsible for making your site work for your readers.

It's a hard fact to accept, but it's true: Your blog doesn't look the same on your monitor and in your browser as it does on other computers and in other browsers.

Test your designs and test your RSS feeds in as many places as possible. Keep checking back to see whether anything changes over time. For instance, when Microsoft upgraded Internet Explorer from version 6 to 7, many websites experienced display problems that the site owners had to resolve. And of course, a blog grows, which means that the load your site puts on your web server changes over time.

Here are some important questions to ask yourself:

- ✓ How does your site behave with 500 blog posts, versus the 10 or 20 you started with?
- ✓ Can Google's newsreader display your RSS feed? What about Bloglines? How about . . . you get the picture. Chapter 14 is dedicated to all things RSS-related.
- ✓ Does the podcast that you listed with iTunes still appear in its directory? Can someone subscribe to it? Does iTunes deliver it?
- ✓ Are the images in old blog posts still available and viewable on the site?
- ✓ Do you regularly exceed the bandwidth allowances provided by your web host? Does your site run slowly at certain times of the day?

Changes, no matter how small, in design code or blog software programming can have unintended results. Be sure to look at your own blog on several computers every few weeks. Try leaving comments, using the search feature, clicking links, and generally kicking the tires on a regular basis.

Have Contests

Everyone loves to get free stuff! If traffic is lagging and needs a boost, try holding a giveaway or contest to spur more interaction. You could have a candy giveaway or offer up that rusting Chevy in your backyard. You need to

make your community members do something in order to get this free stuff that you see fit to give away.

By having contests on your blog, you can build your site traffic. You can make the contests almost anything: writing contests, reward points for different levels of activity, writing and submitting blog posts, and so on. Hold a seasonal contest, such as best costume during Halloween or most romantic date idea on Valentine's Day.

The possibilities are practically endless. Get hokey and create memorable contests. Sometimes, the sillier you get, the better the response from your readers.



If you're running a business blog, be sure that you understand the legal issues surrounding contests; legal requirements can vary state by state, and you might have to deal with national laws, as well.

Ask Your Readers

One of the best things that you can do for the community is to make sure that everyone's having the best time they can. How do you know whether your readers enjoy their time on your blog? Why not just ask?

Give people a way to let you know whether the community aspects of your site work for them by including a Contact Me page. But if you really want to hear about how things are going, try just posting a blog entry asking people for their thoughts and constructive criticism about what you're doing.

You likely will get great new ideas, as well as help identify real problems. In fact, your readers will probably give you bonus points for asking for their input!

Chapter 21

Ten Tools for Mobile Blogging

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When you're committed to the blogging lifestyle, the daily grind might feel overwhelming at times — writing, tinkering with blog software, preparing images, and repeating the process over and over. Luckily for you, a slew of websites and software can spice things up and banish any boredom you're experiencing, all while attracting new readers to your blog.

Making It Mobile with Mobify

Do you have a blog already but aren't happy with how it looks when you view it on a smartphone or on an Apple iPad? Mobify is a great solution. Sign up for free at www.mobify.com and use the Mobify GUI Picker to tell mobile browsers what parts of your blog to display, and even make modifications to how those elements display. You need to know HTML and CSS to really make the most of this tool, but when that work is done, you can simply continue to publish your blog as you normally do and the mobile version is created automatically. Mobify even helps you with media files that might be problematic to display on mobile devices by optimizing the content for different devices.

Mobify works by detecting Internet visits from mobile devices and routing them to the mobile version, so there's virtually nothing for you to do to maintain your mobile site after you've set things up.

Going Mobile with Blogger

Many blog software packages include options that allow you to blog from the road using your phone (not while you're driving, natch!). If you can text or send e-mail from your phone, you can post to your blog.

Blogger, which I cover extensively in Chapter 4, is one such tool. The easiest way to get started with Blogger is to set up your Mail2Blogger address in the settings of a blog you have already set up. From that point, anything you send to that address is automatically added as a blog post, so a phone with e-mail capability can be used for blogging while you're on the road or away

from your computer. You can tell Blogger to hold those posts as drafts, or publish them immediately.

Blogger can also create a mobile version of your blog, and you can get started at www.blogger.com/mobile-start.g. Sending a text from a U.S.-based mobile phone to BLOGGR (256447) or e-mail to go@blogger.com starts the ball rolling.



If you're sending e-mail or texts from your phone to your blog, you might have to pay for these services from your mobile phone provider, although Blogger's services are free.

Posting to WordPress on Your iPad

The popular blogging software and service WordPress has made an app specific for blogging on your iPad or iPhone. Both are available through the Apple iTunes App Store and are free.

After you install the app, you can log in to your WordPress account, whether it's one you have installed on your own web host or run through the hosted WordPress.com website. Writing posts works very similarly to using the web interface, and you can also edit existing posts, add images, and so on.

You can also moderate comments, a task that never sleeps, whether or not you happen to have a computer in front of you. All this from a free app!



You need to be running WordPress 2.9.2 or higher to use the app with a self-hosted blog.

Tying Into Tumblr

Tumblr (www.tumblr.com), a fun and popular microblogging service, also offers a custom app for the iPhone. You can post photos, videos, audio, quotes, links, and text. And, if you keep multiple Tumblr blogs (they can be addictive!), you can manage all of them through the app.

Additional features allow you to use your iPhone address book, post to Twitter, and reply to Tumblr messages. Frankly, it's a lot like using the website itself!

I take that back. In some ways, it's actually easier! If you want to post a photo, for example, starting a photo post actually brings up the camera interface of the iPhone, allowing you to take the photo on the spot. Talk about instantaneous blogging! This is a free app in the iTunes App Store.

Blogsy

Blogsy (www.blogsyapp.com) is an app that really knocks my socks off. This iPad application ties so many of the online services I use together that it makes blogging a snap. First of all, it's just a great method for creating a blog post, with easy-to-use text formatting and linking tools.

But its real magic comes into play when you want to integrate a piece of media you created and uploaded to the Internet using another web service. With a few quick steps to log in to your accounts, you can:

- ✓ Insert an image from your Flickr or Picasa accounts, even resizing and aligning it within your blog post.
- ✓ Stream a video from your YouTube account.
- ✓ Find images to use in Google Image Search.
- ✓ Upload images that are already on your iPad.

You can use Blogsy to create posts for WordPress (either a blog on your own server or the hosted version), Blogger, or Posterous, and there are plans in the works to add support for other platforms as well.

Get Blogsy for \$4.99 in the Apple iTunes Store.

Analyzing on the Road

Are you one of those bloggers who's hooked on knowing stats? Do you check to see how many unique visitors you have on a daily basis? If so, you probably use Google Analytics, and I have good news: Now you can feed your obsession from your iPhone or iPad.

A number of programs can give you access to a Google Analytics account; Analytics Pro is a great one. You can use Google Analytics to track stats on multiple websites, and Analytics Pro lets you do the same using many of the same tools — you see graphs, reports, thumbnails, and maps galore.

If you need to keep track of hourly visitor statistics, this app lets you do so while you're traveling, at a conference, or in a meeting. But don't blame me if you get hooked!

Get Analytics Pro for \$5.99 in the Apple iTunes Store.

Feeding Your Habit with Feedly

It goes hand in hand that bloggers read other blogs. In fact, if you're like me, you spend far more time consuming blog posts than you do creating them. One mobile application that I have come to rely on heavily is Feedly (www.feedly.com), a newsreader that syncs up with your Google Reader account.

Feedly's minimalistic design and interface elements put the highlight on the content of the blogs you read, and make it simple to jump through a series of posts from a single blog.

You can install Feedly on the iPhone, iPad, Android devices, and even in the Safari, Firefox, and Chrome browsers. Feedly has put a lot of emphasis on the common sharing tools, so you can also share posts you find interesting with Twitter, Facebook, Google+, and e-mail.

One of the Feedly features I particularly like is the suggestions it makes for other blogs you might enjoy based on those you already read. This feature makes it easy for me to find new and interesting blogs in my limited time.

Get Feedly for free in the Apple iTunes Store.

Sharing Photos with Instagram

If you have a yen to share your photos and get instant feedback on them, I recommend you check out Instagram, a very lightweight photo blogging tool for the iPhone that also is a social network.

Take photos with your phone, and share them in Instagram, complete with captions, geolocation information, and tie-ins to Flickr, Twitter, Tumblr, Foursquare, and Posterous. Your followers see your photos in a feed, and can "like" and comment on them, and of course, you have your own feed to view the photos of others.

Sound simple? It really is. It's also fun. When you share your photo, you can choose from a selection of very cool filters (sepia tone, anyone?) and focus effects. Your prosaic photo can feel like a work of art in mere seconds.

Get Instagram for free in the Apple iTunes Store.

Journaling Your Life with 280daily

280daily is an exercise in dedication. Every day at 4:00 p.m., this service sends you a message, asking you to sum up your day in 280 characters — about 50 words. This is a blogging tool, but it isn't a public one! You're the only person who will ever see your 280daily posts. It truly is an online diary.

280daily doesn't have a mobile app as of this writing (although they say they are working on one), but it does have a beautifully simple mobile version of the website (www.280daily.com). When you're on the road, a phone or other handheld device with a browser will let you keep your journal updated.

280daily suggests you might use its service for a diary, tracking your progress toward a goal, training for a marathon, losing weight, recording your restaurant visits, or even as a to-do list. It's simple and so easy to use. Also? It's free. Sign up online or via your phone.

Sharing with Friends Using Posterous Spaces

Finally, we have Posterous Spaces, a service intended to let you create buckets of content that share with different groups. It's blogging, but with an emphasis on letting you be precise about your audience — photos of last night's dinner for Mom and the relatives, and last weekend's raging party with your best friends.

iPhone and Android mobile blogging applications are available for posting to Posterous Spaces, with super easy integrations for finding your friends using your Facebook and Twitter contact lists.

Posterous Spaces lets you post text, photos, and video (yes, from your phone), add geolocation information, and automatically broadcast your posts to Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and Flickr. This makes it a pretty handy tool for folks who are already heavy users of other forms of social media.

Get started with Posterous Spaces online at www.posterous.com.

Chapter 22

Ten Blogs You Should Know

Because so many blogs are floating about in the blogosphere, you can't possibly read them all. In the beginning, only a handful of blogs were known well enough to attract solid audiences. A few short years later, well over 100 million different blogs exist, and each one attracts its own audience. This book makes reference to a number of blogs, but there's always room for more. This chapter includes a short list of some of the blogs that I find most interesting and useful.

Take the time to visit each of these blogs. Not only do they feature great content, but you also can discover what these bloggers do to achieve blogging success.

Engadget

www.engadget.com

In March 2004, Peter Rojas, cofounder of the blog Gizmodo, launched Engadget. Engadget is a contributor-supported blog that has posts written by several writers; it features articles about consumer technology and boasts lively discussions in the comments section.

Engadget is one of those blogs that you can't live without. It has won a number of awards and been translated into several different languages. If you have any interest in gadgets (I know you do!) and want to find out more about them, you can't go wrong in subscribing to Engadget. And if you want to explore the podcast milieu, don't miss the weekly Engadget podcast.

Hyperbole and a Half

<http://hyperboleandahalf.blogspot.com>

If you like reading funny blogs, you'll love *Hyperbole and a Half*, written by Allie Brosh, whose prose will make you laugh, and whose laughably terrible (yet evocative) illustrations will make you laugh until you cry. *Hyperbole and a Half* is a classic personal blog — the personal diary of an amusing writer who blogs when she feels like it about whatever she wants to. Brosh started the blog after getting positive feedback on funny Facebook updates, and covers everything from depression to her childhood experiences with a fishy best friend. (Hint: Things go terribly wrong.)

Young House Love

www.younghouselove.com

Sherry and John Petersik could be cuter, but I'm not sure how. These ambitious young marrieds blog about their adventures refurbishing and renovating old homes (they are on their second). Neither has a background in construction, so their renovations are total DIY efforts, from tiling, bathroom remodeling, and cabinet refinishing.

The two have parleyed their skills into a regular column in *Better Homes & Gardens Do It Yourself Magazine* and also blog for BabyCenter. All this means that besides renovating their home, the two are making their living as full-time bloggers.

One look at their blog tells you why. Sherry and John write well and entertainingly, and the photos that accompany each post are a fantastic addition.

Lifehacker

www.lifehacker.com

Lifehacker is a daily blog that features tips, tricks, and software downloads that can help you get things done more quickly and more efficiently. Several core writers helm the blog, devising new ways to do your day-to-day activities. They do write blog-specific tips, and many of their other posts have ideas that you can adapt for blogging.

Started in 2005, Lifehacker has produced a lot of content that's useful and may give you ideas about how you can increase your blogging success. They've also turned their blog into a couple of books!

ProBlogger

www.problogger.net

ProBlogger was founded by Darren Rowse in 2004, and it's one of the main landing spots for bloggers who want to know how to improve their blogs. The site includes tips on making money, writing solid content, and other simple tricks of the trade.

Since 2003, Darren has started many different blogs and more recently has cofounded the blog network b5media. He's the manager of many other blogs and writes daily on his ProBlogger website, helping bloggers find new ways of monetizing their blogs.

If you want to find out more about blog design, blogging tools and services, social media, blogging for dollars, podcasting, RSS, writing content, business blogging, advertising, blog promotion, video posts, affiliate programs, and other miscellaneous blog tips, this site is for you.

ProBlogger, shown in Figure 22-1, is a great resource — don't miss it!



Figure 22-1:
ProBlogger
helps you
to become
a better
blogger and
make money
doing it.

TreeHugger

www.treehugger.com

TreeHugger is a blog about how you can make the world a better place. Many different writers submit for this blog, all with the simple goal of helping readers find ways to establish a more sustainable world. It has a great collection of green buying guides that cover consumer products from clothing to laptops. You can submit your own tips on green living to TreeHugger. Check out its blogroll first if you need inspiration!

This comprehensive lifestyle blog features a main blog, a user-generated blog, videos, and a weekly podcast. And if you're not quite into RSS feeds yet, you can even sign up for a weekly or daily e-mail newsletter.

Damn You AutoCorrect

www.damnyouautocorrect.com

Damn You Autocorrect was begun in late 2010 by Jillian Madison. This blog is pretty much what it sounds like — outtakes from the world of mobile phones and texting. Ever made a typo when sending a text? Ever had your phone “correct” it for you and make it worse?

I regularly tell people I “lobe” them instead of “love” them myself. But that’s nothing compared to some of the hilarious and awful screenshots of phone screens you’ll find on this blog.

Word to the wise: Many of the posts include language you might not want to view on your work computer.



A List Apart

www.alistapart.com

A List Apart is a blog and website that talks about nothing but how to make websites. This blog features articles, tutorials, and community conversation about how web designers make websites, how designers feel they should create them, and tricks for readers to improve their web development skills.

If you're a blogger who likes to get into the muck of your blog software, this site provides many techniques for making your blog accessible and friendly to both computers and humans.

A List Apart started as a simple mailing list in 1997 and has grown into a hugely popular website that has spawned a conference called An Event Apart. The main topics that this blog covers include code, content, culture, design, process, and user science. When you become a blogging expert and want to contribute, you can even submit your own articles for publication on this popular blog.

Copyblogger

www.copyblogger.com

Copyblogger is the brainchild of Brian Clark, an Internet marketing specialist who develops content; helps people write posts that build traffic, generate comments, and attract new readers; designs online communication strategies; and is a "recovering attorney."

Brian founded Copyblogger in January 2006 and has written hundreds of blog posts that offer concise coverage of topics ranging from copyright discussions to how you can "pimp" your blog. He blogs in a no-nonsense style and isn't afraid to tell people about the real state of writing on the web.

This personal blog shows one person's thoughts and creativity. Brian stands out and gets noticed in the blogosphere for his forthright opinions. Read his blog to find out more about how to make yours great. Figure 22-2 shows the Copyblogger home page.



Figure 22-2:
Copyblogger
helps you
write better
copy.

Improv Everywhere

www.improveeverywhere.com

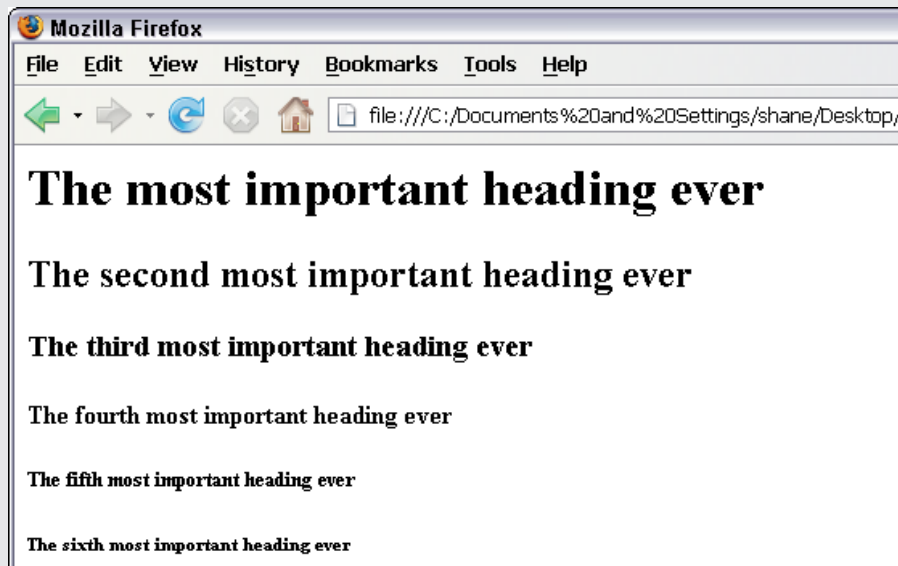
Improv Everywhere is a blog that documents “scenes of chaos and joy” organized in New York City public spaces by Charlie Todd. Todd brings together volunteers for lighthearted “missions” that take them into public spaces to do unexpected activities.

In October 2009, Todd organized a group dog walk. More than 2,000 people made the most of the day by taking their furry friends into the streets of Brooklyn for about an hour. The catch was — the dogs were all invisible. The dog walkers carried leashes and never let on to spectators that there was anything peculiar about what was going on. Some onlookers were frustrated not to know what was happening, but others played along by asking politely about the dog’s breed and petting them. Good fun!

Todd organizes these events irregularly, but they all make great, entertaining reading.

Part VIII

Appendixes



In this part . . .

This part of the book wraps up with Appendix A, where all the technical mumbo-jumbo gets defined clearly, and Appendix B, my quick guide to the basics of HTML code.

aggregator: A collector of information about a topic or idea. An aggregator can be a person, blog, or website. Technologically speaking, RSS is an aggregation format for individual blogs. Google News is an example of a website that aggregates news for many sources.

audio blog: See *podcast*.

blog: A chronological log of information kept by an individual, a group, or a business. The term *blog* is a merging of the words *web* and *log*. On a typical blog, the most recent post appears at the top of the page, usually time-stamped. Scrolling down the page takes the reader to older posts. Each post usually offers an opportunity for readers to interact by adding their comments and may also display Trackback information about other blogs that have linked to this post. Blog content is determined entirely by the author(s) of the blog; therefore, many are personal journals, but others are focused aggregations of news or commentary.

blogger: The author of a blog.

blogging: Producing blog posts. A blogger blogs on his or her blog.

blogosphere: The community of blogs and bloggers around the world.

blogroll: A collection of links used or recommended by an individual blogger. A blogroll is usually shown in a column on a blog.

buzz marketing: A no-cost or low-cost method of marketing associated with people telling other people about a company's products or services. Buzz marketing is based on peoples' direct experiences with specific products or on the experiences others have related to them.

comment: A piece of feedback left by a reader on a blog post.

CSS: This acronym stands for *Cascading Style Sheets*, an advanced HTML technique that permits fine control and layout of a website and quick changes in formats across the site.

entry: See *post*.

feed: See *RSS*.

feedreader: See *newsreader*.

follow: On Twitter, the act of subscribing to read the updates posted by another member. Unsubscribing is *unfollowing*.

friend: On Facebook and other social networks, the act of identifying another member as a part of your network; usually tied with access to information posted by that member for friends only, as well as allowing others to see who's in your group of friends.

FTP: *File Transfer Protocol* is the mechanism that allows transfer of files and data from one computer to another.

hit: A request to a web server for a file. When the web page (which often consists of multiple files) is downloaded from a server, the number of hits is equal to the number of files requested. Thus, one page view can often equal more than one hit, which means that counting the hits is typically an inaccurate measure of web traffic.

HTML: HyperText Markup Language is the computer coding used by web designers to create web pages.

hyperlink: See *links*.

keyword: The content and/or type of meta tag included in a web page's HTML code to help index the page. The term *keyword* also refers to terms or phrases that a user submits to a search engine when looking for content on the Internet.

links: A link, or *hyperlink*, is a navigation tool that allows a user to go from one web location to another by clicking. Links are typically underlined.

meme: Ideas that evolve virally. While bloggers post, comment on other blogs, post about posts on other blogs, and add their own thoughts, a meme spreads across the Internet, changing while it goes. Some groups spread memes consciously by participating in answering a set of questions or posting on a topic, but most memes are a natural byproduct of interesting topics.

meta tag: HTML tags used in a web page to describe the document to search engines. Common tags are title, keyword, and description. Title and description are frequently displayed in search results; keywords are used to determine when a site should be returned as a search result.

micro blog: A blog composed of extremely brief text or multimedia posts.

moderation: The regulation of an online community; specifically, the contributions made by users to discussion forums or blog comment threads. Moderation may include removal of content if that content is deemed inappropriate.

moderator: A person granted special privileges to enforce the rules of an online community by removing or changing content from individual posts.

newsreader: Software used to subscribe to and then read blog and website RSS feeds.

page view: A request to load a single page of a website. Counting page views can help determine whether any change made to the page results in more or fewer visits.

permalink: Short for *permanent link*. A page of a blog that contains a single blog post and usually any comments on that post. Permalinks allow users to link directly to a single post for more accurate reference.

photoblog: A blog composed entirely of images, sometimes with caption information.

ping: A ping occurs when one computer asks another whether it's there; the second computer confirms its presence/location/status. In the blogosphere, many bloggers alert blog aggregation websites with a ping when posting a new entry.

podcast: A digital media file that's distributed over the Internet by using feeds with the intention for viewers to download it and play it back on portable media players and personal computers. This can be an audio file or a video file.

post: A publication to a blog, possibly containing text, images, and other media. A post can also be called an *entry*.

RSS: Stands for *Really Simple Syndication*. An XML-based feed of a blog's postings that blog aggregation sites or software pick up.

sidebar: A column to the right or left of the main content of your blog. Usually, blog software comes with some content already in the sidebar, such as links to your categories, archives, and RSS feed. Bloggers can customize sidebars with additional common and uncommon elements.

spam: Unsolicited electronic messages sent in bulk that may be commercial, nonsensical, or malicious. In addition to creating e-mail spam, spammers can target blog comments and blog forums.

syndication: See *RSS*.

tag: A relevant keyword that's associated with or assigned to a piece of information, such as an image, a blog entry, or a video clip. The content creator or online community usually chooses tags informally. Tags help give context to nontext media and organize information for easy searching.

tagging: The act of adding tags to a photo, video, audio file, or blog post.

trackback: A mechanism that tracks references to a blog posting that occurs on other blogs. Trackbacks are designed to help readers find other blogs that discuss the same topic. They also let bloggers know what another blogger has blogged about and linked to a post.

troll: A blog reader who posts offensive, personal attacks that interfere with the conversation between blogger and readers.

tweet: A post or update on the micro-blogging website Twitter.

unique visits: A statistic used to count the visitors to a website, counting each visitor only once in the timeframe of the report. The number of unique visits measures a website's true audience size.

video blog: A blog consisting of video files or the practice of placing a video file in a blog post.

video podcast: A digital video clip shared on the Internet that viewers can download and watch on a mobile device or personal computer.

web content: Anything that a user can read, see, or hear as part of the experience on websites. Web content can include text, images, sounds, videos, and animations.

web log: See *blog*.

WYSIWYG: An acronym for *What You See Is What You Get*, this term refers to a system in which the content during editing appears very similar to the end result.

XML: XML stands for *eXtensible Markup Language*, and it allows publishers to build their own structures into markup languages. You can use XML for any kind of structured information, and it's intended to allow information to pass to any computer system, regardless of the platform that the computer uses.

Appendix B

Very Basic HTML Code

On a blog, *code* can mean many things. It can refer to the complicated programming that makes up the software that runs your blog, or it can mean simple styles that make written words look cool when displayed on your blog. In this appendix, you can find out how to make the text in your blog posts look like a million bucks. (Leave the blogging software code to the experts.)

The code that you're working with affects only a given blog post; the blog software itself builds the blog pages. So, you don't have to know very many pieces of code — just the code commonly used to format text and photos, or to insert video files.



Most of the code that you need to format your blog posts is HTML (HyperText Markup Language).

Documents formatted by using HTML really consist of nothing but text, which your Internet browser can read and then display. HTML code tells your browser all kinds of things, such as how the text on the screen should be aligned and what text links to what web page. You can easily use HTML. With a few exceptions, each bit of code, or *tag*, includes opening and closing elements, which surround the content that you want to affect. A few tags are standalone elements that you insert in only one spot. With HTML, you basically use code to mark up text, photos, and other elements.

Adding Headings, Paragraphs, and Line Breaks

You generally want to break up long blocks of text in your blog posts, maybe even throw in labels here and there. Styling headers, adding line breaks, and making sure that you divide the text of your blog into paragraphs can really improve the flow of your posts.

Headings

HTML has six levels of headings. H1 is the most important and largest, H2 is slightly less important and smaller, and so on. The final heading is H6, but people rarely use that heading level because it produces very small text. For most cases, first- and second-level headers do the job, giving you text larger than the main body text (and these headings usually are in bold). You can implement header tags by inserting code like this:

```
<h1>The most important heading ever</h1>
```

Like a light switch, the tag turns on before the first letter of your header and turns off after the last character.

You use all headers in the same way — just substitute in place of the number 1 a 2, 3, 4, 5, or 6. For example

```
<h2>The second most important heading ever</h2>
```

Figure B-1 shows each of the header tags as the browser interprets and displays them.

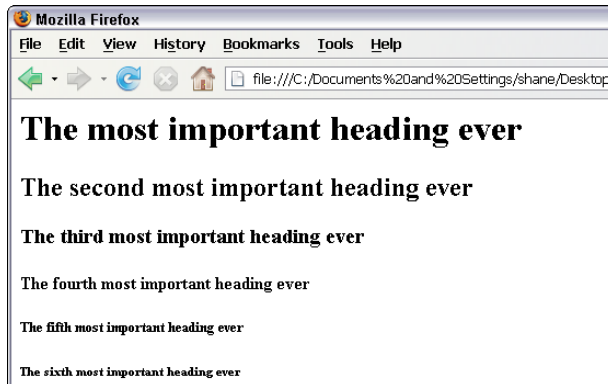


Figure B-1:
Headers
from the
largest to
the smallest.



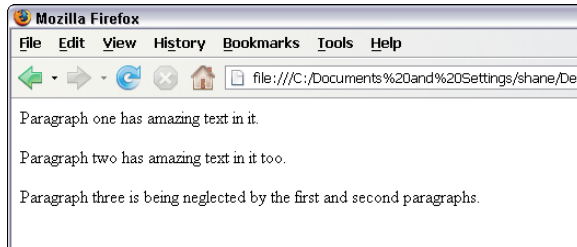
Headers have more than just an effect on how your text looks: Search engines understand that text defined by a header tag is important, so words and phrases that you enclose in a header are marked as especially relevant to your site, and search engine results lists will place your website higher when search terms match words in your headers.

Paragraphs

To create paragraph breaks, you need to start the new paragraph with a `<p>` tag. The closing `</p>` is placed at the end of the paragraph after the text, like this (see Figure B-2 for how the browser displays this code):

```
<p>Paragraph one has amazing text in it.</p>
<p>Paragraph two has amazing text in it too.</p>
<p>Paragraph three is being neglected by the first and
second paragraphs.</p>
```

Figure B-2:
Text paragraphs,
displayed
by a web
browser.



Most blogging software makes provision for paragraph breaks automatically, but if you ever end up looking at the code, you can recognize these fundamentally important tags. On most websites, paragraph breaks actually produce the effect of two line breaks, so paragraphs are spaced out from each other in the same way that they are in this book.

You can end a line of text and start the next word on a new line by using a `
` tag. You need to insert these standalone tags only once: There is no closing `
` tag. To create a line break, here's what you do:

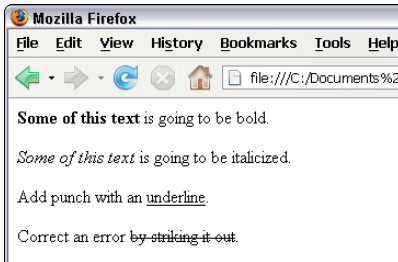
```
Break your line of text<br>
and start again on the next line.
```

Emphasizing Text

Dress up your text by using italics, underlining, bold, or even strikethrough code. You can add these text features by using HTML on/off tags, so you place the first tag at the start of the text that you want to affect and follow the text with the closing tag. Figure B-3 shows how each of the following code examples appears in a web browser.

Figure B-3:

Use bold, italics, underlining, and strikethrough in your HTML to make your text pop.



Here are the codes for each kind of text:

✓ **Bold:** `` or ``

```
<b>Some of this text</b> is bold.
```

✓ **Italics:** `<i>` or ``

```
<i>Some of this text</i> is italicized.
```

✓ **Underline:** `<u>`

```
Add punch with an <u>underline</u>.
```

✓ **Strikethrough:** `<strike>`

```
Correct an error <strike>by striking it out</strike>.
```



Even though the preceding list shows you how to underline text in your blog posts, I don't actually recommend that you use this style. As you know, underlining commonly indicates links online, so your readers may be very confused to see underlined text that isn't also a link.

Linking Up

In HTML, links are defined with the `<a>` tag (the *a* stands for anchor). But that isn't all! This special tag also gets what's called an attribute and a value, to go along with the basic tag. The *attribute*, `href`, indicates to the browser that what comes next is a hypertext reference — in this case, a web page. The *value* is the actual web page that the code links to, enclosed in quotation marks. Here's how all that looks in action:

```
This link goes to <a href="http://www.google.com">Google</a>.
```

If you post the preceding line in a blog, the word *Google* appears as a clickable link that leads to the Google website.



Make sure that you use the full URL when you create a link — including the `http://`! Unless you include that prefix, the browser doesn't understand that it needs to find another website. Instead, it looks for a document on your website called `http://www.google.com`.

Also, when you turn off the tag, you need to turn off only the main tag, not the attribute or value. Those extras are turned off automatically when you use the closing `` tag.

You can also use this tag around an image to make the image clickable to a web page. Simply place the tag around your image code, like so:

```
<a href="http://www.google.com"></a>
```

Making Lists

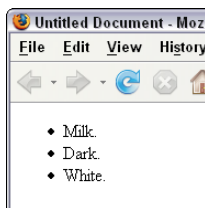
Lists can let people know about your favorite kinds of candy, music, or whatever. With a little help from your friendly HTML, you can create unordered lists or ordered lists. You create all lists, no matter the flavor, by using a series of HTML tags. These tags make lists a bit tricky to implement, so pay close attention to those closing tags — they're easy to forget.

An *unordered list* is a series of bulleted items. You can use this kind of list for items that don't require numbering. For example, if you want to create a list of cat breeds, you don't need to list them in any particular order. Unordered lists use the `` and `` tags. Set up the code as I do in this list of kinds of chocolate:

```
<ul>
<li>Milk.</li>
<li>Dark.</li>
<li>White.</li>
</ul>
```

The `` tag stands for *unordered list*, and it turns on at the beginning of the list and turns off following the last item in the list. The `` tag stands for *list item*; it turns on at the beginning of each new item and turns off at the end of that item. Figure B-4 shows an unordered list.

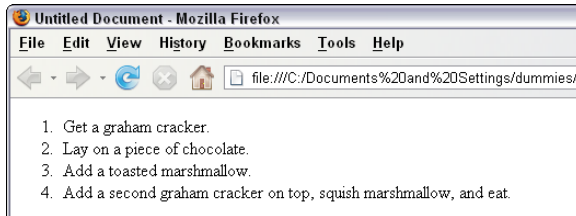
Figure B-4:
Use unordered lists
to create
bullet items.



An ordered list contains items that use numbers instead of bullet points and are perfect for steps lists or creating lists with content that needs to be ranked. Format an ordered list the same way you format an unordered list (as discussed in the preceding section), but substitute the `` tag for the `` tag (see Figure B-5):

```
<ol>
<li>Get a graham cracker.</li>
<li>Lay on a piece of chocolate.</li>
<li>Add a toasted marshmallow.</li>
<li>Add a second graham cracker on top, squish
marshmallow, and eat.</li>
</ol>
```

Figure B-5:
Ordered
lists work
well for
instructions.



You can embed a list inside another list. In fact, you can even embed a different kind of list into a list. Each time you embed a new list, the web browser creates additional indenting, giving you a nice stair-stepped look in your final page. Here's how you format the code that places an unordered sub-list inside an ordered list in a s'mores recipe:

```
<ol>
<li>Get a graham cracker.</li>
<li>Lay on a piece of chocolate. It can be:
  <ul>
    <li> Milk</li>
    <li> Dark</li>
    <li> White</li>
  </ul>
</li>
<li>Add a toasted marshmallow.</li>
<li>Add a second graham cracker on top, squish
marshmallow, and eat.</li>
</ol>
```

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