

The Creation of a Personal Blog: Genre Bike Riding

Mary Cullen

In this article, Mary Cullen uncovers a correlation between learning how to ride a bike and learning how to write a successful blog. She takes the reader on a journey through the multiple stages she encountered when learning to compose in this way: piquing interest, choosing a style, finding teachers, training, making first attempts, practicing, experiencing the mishaps along the way, and finally reaching the overall goal. The article explores how learning the process of writing a blog is not as easy as it appears, much like riding a bike.

A common childhood pastime is riding a bike. Although not everyone may agree, I always find it to be one of my favorite outdoor activities. Knowing how to ride a bike seems like such a common thing. One might even say that everyone knows how! Well that may be true, unless you're my sister who learned when she was twenty-five; strangely enough, that's when her husband learned too. The truth is, not everyone can or even wants to ride a bike. There are some people who cannot ride bikes easily or at all. They may have different physical abilities or needs that require them to have special accommodations during the learning process. Riding a bike is not for everyone, and neither is writing a blog. One thing about learning how to ride a bike is that there are a lot of steps involved. These steps are both daunting and complex. You cannot simply get on a bike for the first time and ride it perfectly; you have to be taught over a period of time. There is a process. Much like learning how to ride a bike, learning how to write in a new genre also has a process that can be daunting and complex. As I learned more about blogs and the act of blogging, I noticed the unique qualities of this process are similar to the experiences I had when I was a child first learning how to ride a bike. Everyone takes his or her own journey to learn any new skill,

but this is the story of my journey towards blogging, and how I relate it to common bike riding experiences.

Inspiration

As a kid, I first wanted to learn how to ride a bike when I saw others doing it. Children, sometimes being of a “monkey see monkey do” nature, often have jealous tendencies. They frequently want what others have and want to do what others can do. For me, it was riding a bike. So what did many of us do as kids? We told our parents that we wanted to learn how to ride a bike, too. Maybe your friends were learning or maybe you saw some neighborhood kid ride by. No matter what it was, some outside force often inspires people to want to learn a new skill too.

When my professor gave our class the option of choosing our own genre for our final project, my mind jumped immediately to writing a blog. Why? Well, I have always wanted to start one. I keep a journal on my computer, and it contains all of the crazy thoughts that come to my mind. Also, I was inspired by watching the TV show *Awkward* in which the main character Jenna has a blog where she writes about current events in her life. Still having that jealous child within me somewhere, I wanted what she had. I wanted a blog! I always thought it was interesting and might be a great way to get my creative energy out; I just never got around to actually creating one because I knew close to nothing about them. But I did find a simple definition of blogs while reading through an article titled “Why We Blog”: “Blogs combine the immediacy of up-to-the-minute posts, latest first, with a strong sense of the author’s personality, passions, and point-of-view” (Nardi 42). This definition is what I wanted to achieve.

Choosing a Bike

If you were like me as a child, intrigued by the bikers around you, you may have already made up your mind about learning how to ride a bike after seeing a few neighborhood kids ride by. If so, it was time to get some wheels, and in my case, I could not have been more thrilled! It was a very exciting trip to the store where I got to pick out which bike I wanted from a wall full of different colors and styles. On my trip, I could even take the bike down and look at it up close before deciding that it was the one I wanted.

Choosing a theme for a blog is just as exciting. There are no rules as to what you can write about, but it is a good idea to stick to one general theme

for your blog . . . at least, that's what I noticed when I started researching blogs. The themes of a blog are a lot like the colors of a bike. They come in all different kinds of shades that can be formatted to your personality. With your blog you are free to choose from many different themes, but they tend to be somewhat consistent. Not every child's favorite color can be found on a bike. It is usually just the most popular colors that you see. With bikes, the popular color when I was learning was blue. In blogging, personal-themed blogs are the blue bikes. I decided to write my blog in a journal entry theme (also called a personal blog) because I knew I wanted my first post to be about a personal story of mine. It is also one of the only themes that I actually knew something about prior to researching, and drawing on your previous knowledge can be really helpful in learning any new skill, whether writing a blog or riding a bike.

Teachers

Almost everyone needs help learning how to ride a bike, especially me. It is not something that we have programmed inside of us, so usually someone has to teach us how to do it. In my case, this was a parent or some other family member who was willing to take part in the day's lesson. For me, just about everyone in the family had to pitch in. They had to slowly go over how to pedal, brake, balance, and steer. It would not have been possible to ride without first learning these initial elements.

Just like riding a bike, you cannot simply write a blog. There is a lot of learning that must go into the process first. And usually, it is a good idea to find some teachers to help you get started. Being a horrible student in bike riding, I was prepared to take on as many teachers to help mold my blog as possible. In order to write my blog, I looked at multiple blogs just to see what other bloggers wrote about and how they wrote. I did not learn as much as I had hoped about blogs from just looking at other personal blogs. I mostly found information about what people typically wrote about, which always related back to the overall theme of their blog (their personality-paired bike color).

I began researching blogs by searching "blog posts" on Google. Since my prior knowledge was lacking, I knew that I had to learn more about what a blog post really was. From this search, I began seeing the characteristics of a good blog. According to Debbie Hemley, who wrote an article entitled "26 Tips for Writing Great Blog Posts," these characteristics include having an eye-catching title, a post that is relevant to everyone, and a purpose to your post. If your post has some deeper meaning that the reader could take away, it is usually a more successful post.

From there, I realized I had no idea where one would even post a blog. What kinds of blogging websites are out there? What is the most popular blogging website? When it came to bike riding, even when I was learning I knew that you could bike almost anywhere with solid ground. But the “where” was a whole new idea in the blogging world. I began Googling things like “popular blogging websites.” From this, I learned that the popular social network Tumblr is a blog. This blog includes mostly picture posts rather than paragraphs of text. I find it to be very similar to Instagram, which is a constant stream of photos with captions and comments. Tumblr is like the sidewalk of bike riding. It is well known, and it is where most bloggers get their footing before starting a blog on a more exclusive website.

This is also when I learned about all the different themes or topics of blogs such as fashion, business, technology, news, journal, food, and even travel (“Technorati Top 100”). I had no idea that there were so many different themes of blogs out there! It really is just like the many colors of bikes I looked at as a child. You truly can blog about anything. Along with this, I learned that specific blogging sites were for specific types of blogs. Like “Men with Pens” is a blog for businesses. I relate that concept to the bikes I saw as a child that were suited for adults. They had thicker wheels and funny looking gadgets on the handlebars. I now know them to be bikes for serious bike riders, just like certain blogs are for people with certain goals and levels of expertise.

I soon realized that I did not have a lot of information about what makes a blog popular. I figured this was important to know due to the fact that popular blogs have a lot of views and a lot of followers. In my research, I noticed a correlation between the number of followers and the strength of a blogger. The more followers, the better the blogger. If I wanted to write a blog that was successful and followed the characteristics of a good blog, this would be a good place to start. I decided to Google “popular blogs” to get an idea of how these bloggers wrote and what they wrote about that caught the eye of so many readers. I found facts about how to run a popular blog by reading an actual blog post titled “The 7 Secrets of Running a Wildly Popular Blog.” The title sounded like it would be helpful, so I went with it. Still, I received a majority of my research from blogs about blogs. I wanted to learn from the experts so that I could obtain the best blogging education I could find. I knew I could trust what these writers said because they were successful bloggers themselves. On “7 Secrets,” I learned a lot about how to actually write in the genre of a blog. I read tips about what to say and how to say it. I learned that it is important not to be too egotistical and to make sure that you cater to your readers’ needs. This includes responding to comments on your blog posts and commenting on others’ blog posts (Rieck). Commenting on other bloggers’ posts gives readers a reason to go look at your page, thus,

bringing you more followers. It makes sense that it is very important to keep a good relationship with your readers so that you can get more of them and obtain a truly successful and popular blog.

As I mentioned previously, the number of followers appears to be an overall sign of a good blogger. Unfortunately, I was not entirely sure what being a follower meant, so I compared what I learned to other genres I am more familiar with. Similar to social networks like Instagram and Twitter, the people reading your blog can also be referred to as your followers. They receive notifications via email every time you post something new. Their relationship to your blog can also be compared to “liking” a page on Facebook and receiving notifications from their updates and events.

It was after reading these tips that I decided it was about time for me to actually get a blog and see what the layout is all about. I signed up with the blogging website Blogger because it was on the top of the list of the most popular blogging websites (“Top 10 Blog Websites to Create Free Blogs”). Unlike the Tumblr sidewalk, Blogger is more like a bike path. It’s more risky and exciting than the sidewalk, but not as reckless as you can get. Making my account was pretty easy, but I soon realized that I had way too little information to start blogging. I needed to learn more. My first trip on the bike path did not last long either. I remember my training wheels got stuck in the gravel, and my mom had to walk me back home, bike in tow. Back to the drawing board. Similarly, I had to get more information about how to blog, not just what blogging is. I looked back at “The 7 Secrets of Running a Wildly Popular Blog” and found other blog posts that could be helpful to my research. From this, I found two more posts that could help to teach me how to blog.

The first, titled “How To Blog Like Bond. James Bond” offered me valuable information about letting your readers know exactly who you are and what you are about right away by creating an identity. This identity will allow your readers to relate to you more easily because they know more about you. In this blog about blogs, it mentioned that it’s okay to be witty because sometimes it helps you get your point across to your readers. It is just important not to be too witty to annoy your readers with your constant use of sarcasm (Kamb). The most important aspect that I took away from this blog was that words are like bullets—don’t waste them. This means being concise with your posts and not to drag on. Dragging on will cause your readers to lose interest, which of course I did not want.

The second blog I encountered was “11 Common Blogging Mistakes That Are Wasting Your Audience’s Time.” The title sounded intimidating enough that I realized I had to make sure I did not foolishly commit any of these blogging crimes. But luckily, being able to read about them from experts would

help me avoid the potholes. Two of the most important things I learned from this blog were to make sure you were not writing too complexly and to create your own blogging voice (Duistermaat). To avoid writing in a complex way, these experts suggest bloggers use standard proper English the majority of the time. When readers reach too many words that they do not understand, they will frequently lose interest and stop reading your blog altogether. In regard to creating a blogging voice, I found that this relates very closely to having your own identity. Your blogging voice is your own style of writing, and it helps the reader understand what kind of person you are. It plays through in your writing. For example, there are bloggers who make a lot of jokes and interact with their audience while writing, and then there are bloggers who write strictly about the topic. No questions and no jokes. It is totally up to bloggers what they want their writing voice to be like, but it depends a lot on their purpose and goals. It was then that I made the conscious decision that I would type my story just like I would say it in-person to a friend. I wanted my blogging voice to be as close to my actual way of speaking as possible. By doing this, I could also hope to accomplish a good relationship with my followers.

Even after receiving all of this information, I still did not think I knew enough, and I wanted to learn more. I decided to Google “introduction to blogging.” This took me to another blogging website called WordPress. Here, I learned about blog content. Typically, blogs would focus on one particular topic per post, which would then relate to the blogger’s overall theme (“Introduction to Blogging”). For example, if a blogger’s theme has to do with food, his or her posts would all have a food aspect.

For one of our class reading assignments in the *Grassroots Writing Research Journal*, we read “Bust a Rhyme: A New Poetics of Food Journaling,” which included an image of a blog post on the WordPress blogging website (Browne). It was at this time that I decided to check out WordPress for the website I would use for my blog in case I did not like Blogger. I ended up making an account, and I found that the website was very difficult and hard to understand for beginners. This was due to the fact that there were a lot of writing choices included in the website, such as the layout of your blog as well as different ways of posting your writing. WordPress seemed as risky as it gets. It felt like the middle of the street compared to the sidewalk and the bike path. It was dangerous and open, but still filled with cars that could potentially hurt you. It was then that I decided I was not sure about using WordPress free blogging because it looked like it would take more time learning how to write than it would actually take to create my blog post. I was definitely not ready to attempt street bike riding yet.

This is where my research of blogging and how to blog stopped (temporarily). I thought that I had plenty of information to write a blog successfully, so now I just had to plan out what to say.

Training

Now, back to working with that shiny new bike. When I first started riding a bike, I did not just get on a regular bike and go. I had to start with training wheels. These wheels helped me get the feel of riding a regular bike, but were also there for me in case I messed up.

I wore a sort of training wheels while I was drafting for my first blog post. I had to go through a lot of planning before I started writing. I decided that it would be a good idea to journal or at least look at some of my previous journals because those are the closest things to blog posts that I have ever created. In the ISU writing program, something like this is called antecedent genres. These journals were a lot like the three-wheeler I used to ride around my driveway before I got green eyes for bike riding.

I began looking back on my journaling days when I was a little girl in elementary school. Most of the entries consisted of, “River is so cute, I hope he knows who I am!” I started realizing that these prior experiences with my diary would not be of much help because, frankly, I was a horrible journal keeper. Three-wheelers don’t have the same feel as a bike. You don’t have to balance at all. You just sit there and pedal. I needed something more similar to what I was trying to learn. It was then that I decided it would be a good idea to look at my journals that I have done more recently on my Mac.

Once there, I started seeing how I wrote while journaling, what tone I used, and the layouts of my writing. After looking through these, I came up with the idea of having an outline of my blog just like I would outline any of the papers I have ever written. I would refer to these rough outlines right before creating my blog post.

First Solo Mission

Your first bike ride alone was probably a little rocky. Maybe you ran into a bush, maybe you fell off, maybe you forgot how to stop. Maybe you stopped right there and quit bike riding altogether. Everyone had his or her own experience. No matter what, almost no one’s first bike ride was perfect.

My first experience with blogging wasn’t perfect either. Before getting to my actual post that had to do with all of my outlining, I wanted to take a test drive by writing an About Me page. I got this idea from the sections I read in “How to Blog Like Bond. James Bond.” So I went on my blog on WordPress, and I clicked to create my first post. I ended up using WordPress after all because I did not feel that Blogger would let my personality show as much as WordPress would, which just goes to show how complicated decisions about medium can

be. Due to the personal adjustments that are possible to be made on WordPress, it is easier for readers to understand who I am. Blogger did not have any options to customize. Everyone who did not want to pay money had the same white background. It was a complete snooze fest. So even though it was a hassle trying to learn all of the tricks to creating my layout, I still think I made the right choice. I left that boring old bike route for the dangerous and freeing street.

I wrote a tiny paragraph about why I started my blog and who I was, then hit “submit post.” It probably sounded a little cut off and short, because I was trying so hard not to have it drag on. How could I be successful in my blogging if I lost the interest of my readers when they only read my “About Me” page? Oh well, what’s done is done. All finished with my first official blog page. Maybe it wasn’t a perfect first post, but just like riding a bike, sometimes you have to give it a try and make adjustments later.

Practice

Finally, after days, weeks, months of practice, most people begin to get the hang of bike riding. After lots of practice, I contemplated removing my training wheels because I had become a good enough rider with them on. Maybe you kept them on for longer, or maybe you still have them on now! But for me, the time came quickly that my parents and I planned to take them off.

Once I exited out of my “About Me” page, I saw an option that said to write a “post.” This was my first problem. Through all my previous research, I had not encountered what a “post” or a “page” was and what the differences were. I had to do more research. On WordPress they had a handy dandy section entitled *Post vs Page* that told me the differences between the two. There, I learned the following:

Post:	Page:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most common form of blogging • Text, music, image, video, or link • Entered in reverse chronological order on the blog home page • Sticky Posts: appear before any other posts • Associated with a date • Can be published by email 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Static • Not listed by date • Can be displayed in the sidebar using the Pages widget • No tags or categories • Ability of creating a hierarchy of pages (also called subpages), where the pages build off of one another (Example: about me page, then adding contact me page underneath it)

It was while reading these differences that I realized I also had no idea what tags were. I had even more research to do! I began Googling the word “tags” and landed back on the WordPress website, where they had yet another informative page. I learned that tags were unique to posts, and that they worked in the same way that hashtags do on Twitter and Instagram. This means that they group blog posts together that have similar topics. The inclusion of tags is completely optional (“Tags”).

Bumps and Bruises

Every new bike rider has his or her fair share of falling down. There is often blood spilled, swollen bruises, and maybe even the occasional broken bone. I never broke any bones, but I broke my spirit plenty of times. At the time it was always painful, but after multiple times of flying over your handlebars because you hit the brake too hard too quickly, you begin to learn your lesson. In the end, all those bumps and bruises usually turn out helping you become a better bike rider.

In regard to blogging, bumps and bruises should be part of the description. There are always going to be readers out there who do not believe in what you are trying to say. They are going to try and tear you to pieces in a few carefully thought out words. Maybe you sound too bubbly on your posts. How dare you? Maybe you use excessive exclamation points when you’re writing an upbeat post. Someone throw this writer in jail! They have committed a horrible crime! These are just a few real comments I have received on the blog I created while researching this genre.

In reality, these critics may believe you have done something wrong, but it is always going to be your blog. It is important to be true to yourself in your writing. If you like to end your blogs with a smiley face, go for it. Just know that these criticisms may not stop. It is all in how you choose to handle them.

When you get a scratch from falling off your bike, you have two choices: ignore it or patch it up. If you ignore it, the scratch could get infected and spread to other parts of your body. If you chose to patch it up, you will heal more quickly.

The same goes for blogging. By ignoring negative comments on your blog, you run the risk of losing followers or even getting more comments on more of your posts. It is best if you patch it up by respectfully responding to the post to clear up the bad air. By doing this you take the time to consider what they are trying to tell you, which in turn can help you become a better blogger by catering to your followers’ needs.

Adequate Biker/Seasoned Professional

Finally, with the training wheels off and all of that practice behind you, biking often begins to come somewhat naturally. Your parents might finally let you go on rides by yourself because they trust that you would not fall and hurt yourself, at least not too badly. Maybe there were a few bumps and bruises along the way, but overall you were doing just fine. You learned to pick yourself up and dust yourself off after falling down, and became a better bike rider because of it.

In my blogging experiment, I also got to the point where the time to give it a try arrived. No more beating around the bush looking for more research to help me write my first blog post. It was time that my teacher, aka the Internet, let me spread my blogging wings and fly solo.

I began looking at the outlines that I noted back while I was still in the training stage. From this I recalled the main topics of what I wanted to talk about, and then I was ready to write. The most exciting part was realizing that I could write about whatever I wanted. Blogging has no rules concerning what you want to write about; it is completely up to the writer.

I wrote my blog post about my hometown and my childhood home. Funny, that is the place where I learned to ride a bike. It was easy for me to write within the characteristics and conventions of a personal blog due to the fact that my story was very personal, and I had also spent a lot of time reading other similar blogs in my research. I wrote just like I would be having a conversation with a person and telling them the story. The most difficult part for me was keeping it as short as possible. I had to go a little longer than the average blog post, but I knew that this was okay because my research told me to keep it short enough to get my point across.

After actually writing my post, I wanted to make it more personal by adding photos. I added pictures of both my hometown and my actual childhood home. You could even see the bushes at the edge of the driveway where I spent a lot of time crashing my bike and getting scratches from the falls. Through these pictures, I accomplished the personal point of view that allowed my readers to get to know a little more about me than just the story.

I also decided it was a good idea to add the tag “Wheaton,” which is the name of my hometown. That way, others who also wrote about my hometown could see my post and relate to it.

There it was, Your Everyday College Girl’s very first blog post. It may not have been perfect, but it was definitely a great success in my book.

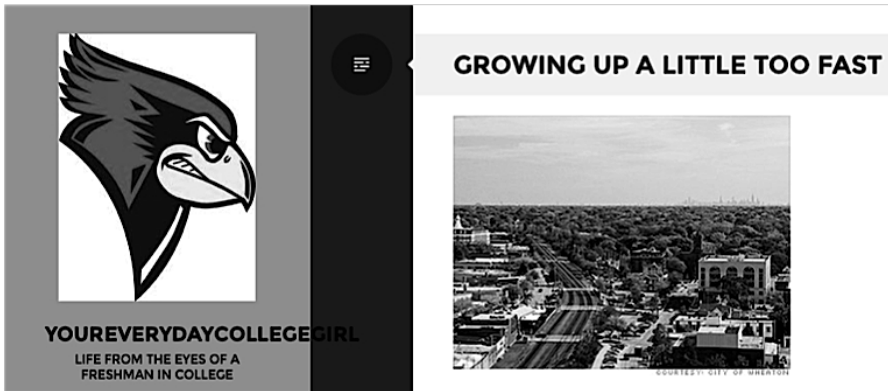


Figure 1: Blog Post Heading

Accessories

No bike is complete without some fancy add-ons. For many kids, to show that you were a skilled biker, you had to jazz up your bike. The attitude seemed to be that the more accessories you had, the better the biker you must have been. Every addition was like a little gold medal, proving to everyone that you were truly a great bike rider. Girls often want those streamers that hang from the handlebars, and boys frequently want pegs on their wheels so that they can ride their friends around the block with them. Some kids even got bells to annoy all of the neighborhood parents with. I have to admit, I was one of those kids.

In regard to blogging, my bells and streamers come in the form of widgets. Widgets are completely optional. They are used to add content to the sidebars of your blog (“WordPress Widgets”). They show things like previous posts as well as all of the tags you have used. As you can see in the picture of the widgets on my sidebar after my first official blog post, a widget also allows my readers to see what blogs I follow. This can also help them figure out what kind of person I am by seeing what other things I am interested in. Since I have not been on the website for long, I do not follow very many blogs yet. As I continue my journey to being the best blogger I can be, my list will expand.



Figure 2: Widgets Column

Conclusion

Riding a bike is not something that is commonly forgotten; it typically sticks with a person for the entirety of his or her life. I hope the same goes

for blogging. It is an art form that many have not yet recognized. Bloggers are open to the opinions of others in regard to some of their most personal thoughts. It allows people to get whatever is on their minds out in the open. Although my experience with learning how to blog correlated with my experiences with bike riding, yours may be entirely different. In my case, I could have stopped at any time and given up, but I did not. I conquered the blogging world just like I conquered bike riding. I plan to continue writing in the genre of blogging and try to further perfect my creation of a personal blog: Genre Bike Riding.

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Mary Cullen is currently a sophomore at ISU. She is an aspiring journalist who loves writing with every fiber in her being. She came into writing this article in her first-semester freshman English 101 class, and since that experience, her love for writing has grown so much she started her own blog! As for her personal life, she enjoys reading, being outside, spending time with friends and family. She has high expectations for her future and hopes you do as well!

