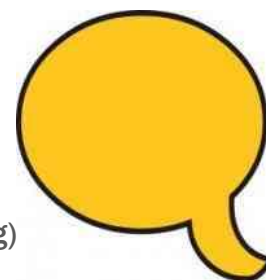


# Getting started with blogging: a guide for Liberal Democrats



Edited by Mark Pack, co-editor, Lib Dem Voice ([www.LibDemVoice.org](http://www.LibDemVoice.org))

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# Introduction

by Mark Pack

In the run-up to Christmas 2009, Liberal Democrat Voice ran a series of “how to” posts about political blogging written by a range of different Liberal Democrat bloggers. As befits a diverse range of liberals, not all of the authors agree fully on all the issues touched on in the series, but that diversity was a strength - because there isn't only one way to blog or only one way to blog 'correctly'.

We've now gathered slightly updated versions of the posts together in this e-book. Whether you are thinking of starting your own blog, a novice blogger or an old hand I hope you find this guide useful.

I am very grateful to all the authors of the pieces for providing them so promptly for the original publication and for helping with the creation of this compilation.

All of this of course assumes blogging might be a worthwhile way to spend some of your time. So what might the point of blogging be?

**Blogging can be fun:** I've recently started doing a post each Monday morning over on my own blog highlighting an odd quote from Hansard. There's only one reason for doing this: I like hunting out the quotes and I hope a few other people will find them amusing too. But even if no-one else reads them, I still get fun out of the quote hunting.

**Blogging gives you a voice:** Just because you have a blog that doesn't mean the world will immediately start reading it, though future posts in this series will help you on the way to an audience at least the size of Lichtenstein. But if you want other people to hear your views, making a success of a blog is one of the best routes to take.

Many people in the party - from the passive supporter who gives a donation once a year through to Nick Clegg himself - read blogs, as do journalists of both national and local variety, people in other parties and so on. Make a success of your blog and all of those and more could be reading your words.

Some of the more successful bloggers even often have their stories picked up by the national media. That may be a little way off when you write your first post - but remember many of those people have not been blogging for that long. It doesn't take years to join their ranks.

**Blogging can help you win elections:** If you decide to have a blog aimed primarily at the public (rather than at fellow Liberal Democrats), it can build up a local audience in your ward or constituency that is a major boost to our other campaigning in the area.

Blogging may not win elections on its own but when done well it does help - and Lynne Featherstone gives her blogging and other online campaigning a key role in explaining why she is now an MP.

**Blogging can be a good way of learning a skill:** One style of blogging is to take news from other places and then write up a story about that news. Being able to quickly but accurately grasp a story, find something interesting to say about it and write it up in a clear and compelling way is a skill that is useful in many other contexts, such as writing news releases, stories for political leaflets or even producing a staff newsletter at work. There are tips and tricks unique to each of these areas, but there is a common skill across them all.

The above list isn't comprehensive and with the other pieces in this book you will pick up a flavour of the diversity of motivations and methods there are. One factor is common amongst all the authors: for all its moments of frustration and writer's block, blogging is also a great source of knowledge, interest and above all fun.

# What's the best blogging platform for new bloggers?

by Mat Bowles ([matgb.dreamwidth.org](http://matgb.dreamwidth.org))

So, you're thinking of starting a blog of your own. You could do what most people seem to do at this stage, and go sign up directly to Google's Blogger service and just get writing. Personally, I don't think that's necessarily the best idea. I'm a Lib Dem, my membership card says on the back:

*No one shall be enslaved by poverty, ignorance or conformity*

Now, can't help you out much with the first, but when it comes to blogging, I can definitely help with the second and the third. There are many different services out there that will let you host a perfectly respectable blog, many of them for free and as good, if not better, than Blogger, offering unique features that Blogger either cannot, or will not, provide. All have their strengths, and most have weaknesses.

You may even be one of those that actually benefits from and is best suited to using Blogger. I won't hold that against you. Well, not much, anyway.

Some services are completely free, others place adverts on your blog to pay for the costs. If you're an elected politician, you might prefer not to have adverts display on your site over which you have little to no control, thus ruling out some platforms.

The purpose of this article is to help you choose between the popular free platforms, thus premium hosted services such as Dreamwidth or Typepad are not covered, and self-hosting is only touched on briefly.

## ***Free blog services***

The 'big three' of these are Blogger, WordPress.com and LiveJournal.com. In addition, popular social network sites such as MySpace.com, Facebook.com and Bebo.com have a built in, limited blogging functionality; you may find these suit you more if you already have an account there.

## ***Blogger***

Undoubtedly the most popular blogging platform, Google's Blogger platform is free, does not require you to display adverts, and offers a flexible, reliable service that fulfils the basic needs of anyone wanting a free blog.

**Strengths:** Large variety of templates, which can be personalised easily through a fairly straightforward menu. Advanced users can edit the template directly with their own CSS or bespoke code. Automatically optimised to have a strong search engine presence. Straightforward comments system that allows for easy subscription for logged in users, and non account holders to state their own site address, with optional restrictions on who can comment and on publication facility. Allows for easy insertion of Google adverts, which can provide a small income for regular bloggers.

**Weaknesses:** Limited privacy function, entire blog must be either public or private. Comments cannot be threaded and individual comments cannot be replied to directly. Comment subscription only possible for Google account users, although OpenID and anonymous commenting is supported. Frequently has comment pages display separately in a Blogger hosted page, further reducing the appearance of professionalism. Cannot import directly from other blog platforms. Advanced customisations require learning a Blogger specific mark-up language.

**Best used by:** Amateur pundits who aren't too bothered about a professional appearance and new bloggers wanting to dip their toes into the water without a major commitment.

Some other platforms do allow you to import to them from Blogger, so is a good starting point if you're not sure whether blogging is for you.

## ***Livejournal.com***

Livejournal was created before the word 'blogging' was invented, and has always existed in a semi-detached little bubble. It offers incredibly strong privacy functions, and has a built in aggregator ("Friends Page"), creating a strong community feel. Livejournal is popular with female bloggers with 65% of users who have stated a gender being female.

**Strengths:** Strong privacy functions, you can choose exactly who has access to each individual post. Options to limit the search engine presence of publicly posted content. Built in aggregation and feedreading feature that is easy to use and follow.

Account holders can comment easily, subscribe to entire threads and receive notifications if a comment they have made is responded to directly. Accounts can be upgraded to a premium service, removing adverts from view and allowing extra options. Account holders and OpenID users can upload a variety of icons which can be selected when posting or commenting, creating an extra visual aid for readers. Large variety of open access 'community' blogs allow for quick propagation of content and an easy way to find like-minded users.

**Weaknesses:** For technical reasons has reduced visibility within blog and web search engines. Free accounts automatically display adverts to all readers except paid LJ subscribers. For non-account holders, the OpenID functionality is very limited and unintuitive, and the ability to comment without an account or an OpenID is deliberately limited. Due to its history, Livejournal powered blogs are frequently ignored by 'serious' bloggers, although this attitude is changing. Poorly implemented domain mapping feature is available to paid users.

**Best used by:** Personal bloggers aiming at friends and family, 'fan' blogs about specific TV shows, people who want a personal journal locked away from the public gaze. While it can be an effective 'broadcast' style blog (it is the most popular blog platform in Russia, where the word for 'blog' is "LJ" and the President has an account, and is now used by all journalists on "The Independent"), due to its limited search visibility it is not the best option for a pundit-style blogging or for election candidates.

Due to the Friends page, Livejournal subscribers to your blog are very likely to continue reading, and will be more inclined to comment. It provides a limited direct audience, but that audience is much more likely to comment and come back repeatedly, as long as you're being interesting.

## **WordPress.com**

WordPress is free, Open Source software that anyone can download and install on a server to run their own blog. To cover their costs, the company creating the software also run this service, which displays a small amount of adverts to logged out readers and, while free, charges users for some extras, including appearance personalisations and use of personal URLs.

**Strengths:** Easy comment system, allowing for subscription and the option of threading discussions. Allows for easy import of content from most other platforms (including both Blogger and LJ). Allows for creation of 'static' pages easily, so you can have an 'about me' page, a contact page and other content linked directly from the front page and not hidden in your blog archive. If you buy your own web domain, this can be 'mapped' to WP for a fee, and then all URLs will redirect there. Good choice of appearance templates. Individual posts can be password protected so that only the title appears publicly.

**Weaknesses:** Colour schemes are limited to those within approved templates unless you both pay extra and know how to code css. Displays adverts to readers that you have no control over unless you pay a premium. After setup, needs several options changed from the default to get the best search engine visibility.

**Best used by:** New bloggers hoping to continue and expand, writers wanting the option of privacy in a predominantly open blog, users wanting contact pages and other easy to find static content.

## **Overall**

In my opinion, the best all round free platform for new bloggers is WordPress.com. I personally prefer Livejournal over Blogger, but I'll admit to a bias - I had an LJ account before I knew what a 'blog' was, and met my fiancée through a conversation in a comments box there. Blogger is not a terrible platform, and for all around purposes is more than adequate, but if you don't mind either paying or having a small number of adverts displayed, each of the other two platforms discussed is more powerful and flexible for most purposes.

One caveat: If you're a Lib Dem Councillor and a member of ALDC, then you should strongly consider using their MyCouncillor service, which is free to members. It is powered using the WordPress software and is thus just as flexible, while also displaying syndicated news from the party ensuring there is always new content for you to discuss. Even if you don't plan to blog regularly, ensuring your free page is up to date with contact information and links to your local party's site is pretty much essential.

If you are planning on blogging regularly, and even if all you do is comment, an account with each of the platforms listed will make it easier for you to navigate and comment.

Above all else, don't be daunted, and if you need any help, feel free to ask. Approximately 7% of the population has a blog of some sort so the odds are very good you know a few bloggers already, even if they've never mentioned it.

# Where to get ideas for posts

by Mark Thompson (markreckons.blogspot.com)

Until I was asked to contribute to this series on blogging with a focus on where to get ideas for posts I must admit that it was not something I had thought about very much. But having spent some time mulling it over and looking back through my blog archive I have been able to boil it down to a number of broad categories which I will elaborate on:

## ***Blogging in response to a current news story***

This is one of the most common categories that my posts tend to fall into. I have always been a voracious reader and viewer of news and comment and now that I am a blogger I find this often feeds into the topics that I blog about. I usually come at the story from a certain angle though generally aligned with my political views. One thing that I do try and do is get behind the story as much as I can perhaps by pulling in background and related articles as well as referencing things that the protagonist(s) have said and done previously, especially if they seem to be contradicting themselves! It's also a good idea to link to other bloggers who may have commented on the same story. One final point is that the quicker you can get your blog post out there, the more readers it is likely to get and the more inbound links. This is especially true with a fast breaking story.

## ***Blogging in response to another blog post***

This is again a fairly common way that I get ideas for blog posts. Sometimes I will reference another blog post because I agree with it, sometimes I may disagree and want to reference it in order to put my counter-argument into context. I would suggest though that in the case of agreeing with another blogger, if you can, try and have a bit more to say on the issue rather than just "I agree"!

## ***Fisking***

This is a particular type of blog post which I have done on occasion whereby you take an article or blog-post (or section of it) by someone else (usually one you quite strongly disagree with) and then reproduce it along with your own commentary about the points they have made and why you think they have got it wrong. A recent example of this from my own blog is <http://bit.ly/64ST9P>, which I wrote in response to one on LabourList from someone who seemed to think it was a selfish luxury to vote against Labour.

Fisking can be a good way to respond to others articles but I would suggest it is used sparingly as it can otherwise get a bit tedious.



## ***Blogging in response to a local issue***

There are not many of my blog posts that fall into this category. I generally blog about politics from a national perspective. However there have been a few that have related to local issues where I live in the Bracknell constituency. These have been related to our MP Andrew MacKay who held a public meeting and was forced to step down following the expenses scandal and the Conservative open contest to replace him. This category is very important for more locally based blogs (e.g. Bracknell Blog in my local area) though and there have also been examples of bloggers who often blog on national issues but who have seized the opportunity of a local political event to blog extensively on it.

Nich Starling's excellent coverage of the Norwich North by-election a couple of months back on his Norfolk Blogger blog is a textbook display of this where he pretty much kept a daily diary of events on the ground and published a copy of every single political leaflet that came through his door.

## ***Blogging about things that have long been bugging you!***

This is something that I found happening a fair bit when I first started blogging. I had had 15 or so years as an adult following politics closely and shouting at the TV but without a proper forum in which to express my views. Once I started blogging it was like the floodgates had opened! An example would be this post about Prime Ministerial prerogative which I wrote back in January as it was topical but that I had been thinking about for years. I still find now after nearly a year of blogging as a Lib-Dem that issues and ideas that I had years ago pop out. Aside from anything else, it can be quite cathartic to be able to do this.

There are a few other categories which some of my posts seem to fall into and I will list here more briefly:

**Live chats:** Can be a good way to get bloggers together to "chat" in real time about something, e.g. I do one every Thursday during BBC Question Time.

**Round ups:** They can be round-ups of your own posts or of others. Can be a good way to show your readers what you are reading and other bloggers certainly appreciate the linky-love!

**Interviews:** With fellow bloggers or anyone else interesting who is willing to spare a bit of their time for you. They can be written, audio or video. As I am learning though it is best to keep them reasonably short and to the point if you want to maintain interest!

**Campaigning:** It may be to highlight an existing campaign and try to get others involved or even to start your own.

One bit of advice I would give is to maintain a list of non-topical things that you want to blog about at some point. If you are anything like me, ideas will pop into your head at times when it is not convenient to blog. I tend to make a note of them ASAP so as not to forget and it gives me a list to draw from at times when I am struggling for inspiration or there are no topical issues I want to blog about.

So I think that just about covers it. I can only write from my own personal experience but blogging for me has been a very positive thing in many ways and it can be a release valve for when the throbbing vein in my temple gets too big!

# Blogging style and etiquette

by Jonathan Calder ([liberalengland.blogspot.com](http://liberalengland.blogspot.com))

Blogging is a very personal thing that we do in public. And there is nothing more personal than an individual's style of writing.

For that reason, whenever someone offers a list of rules on how to blog it will be possible to point to popular blogs that break some or all of them Still, here goes.

In the early days of writing for the web people used to tell you to put your most important point in the first sentence and to make sure that the they readers did not have to scroll down to read the whole of the article. (The thinking, presumably, was that they would be unwilling or even unable to do so.)

These days readers are a lot more web savvy and there is no need for rigid rules like that, but it remains true that reading from a screen is different from reading a printed page.

So it is a good idea to use shorter sentence and, particularly, shorter paragraphs than you would when writing for print. The occasional use of bullet points, bold text and colour (one thing you cannot easily do in print) help to make a page easy to read too.

If you quote more than a couple of lines from someone else, make it a separate paragraph and indent it.

A good rule of thumb is to aim for the style - if not the politics - of a tabloid columnist.

You don't have to turn each post into an essay or the definitive statement on the subject. Many of the most widely read bloggers prefer to use shorter posts. If you do favour longer posts, do not forget that it is possible to use subheadings.

If inspiration is flagging there is nothing wrong with sending your readers to a post on another blog or an article on a website, particularly if it is one they are unlikely to come across themselves. Remember that a blog was originally a "web log" - an annotated log of the sites you have visited.

As with any writing, it is a good idea to use a spellchecker and read over what you have written before you press Publish. One consolation of blogging is that if you see a mistake afterwards you can easily correct it. If something is wrong in a printed publication it is wrong for ever.

## *Linking*

If there are no rules for writing, there is at least an accepted etiquette for linking.

If you get an idea or a story from another blogger, you should acknowledge the fact by giving a link to that post.

It is perfectly acceptable to quote from a post by another blogger, but give some thought to how much you quote. If you are quoting from a long post, then it might be acceptable to quote two or three paragraphs. If the post is shorter, then you should quote less of it. What is not acceptable, even if you give a link, is to quote a whole post.

The rule here is that you should quote enough to show your readers why they should go and read the whole thing but not so much that they need not bother.

Keeping a blogroll is one of the pleasures of blogging. In the early days, when you are unlikely to have a lot of readers, it is a way of stating who you admire and what you want your blog to be like.

You don't have to link to everyone who links to you. And not everyone you link to will link back to you in return. It is best not to get too bitter and twisted about this, though there is pleasure to be found in deleting the occasional person from your blogroll. It is a little like cutting them out of your will.

# How to handle comments

by Paul Walter ([liberalburlblings.co.uk](http://liberalburlblings.co.uk))

There are a number of approaches on handling comments. It's a question of finding a method which you are comfortable with.

It's probably best, at first, to moderate comments (i.e get them sent to your email account first before you approve or reject them). That way, you can get a feel for the sort of comments you will attract.

99 times out of 100, most blogs will get totally OK comments with which most bloggers will be comfortable. So it's probably best to aim to allow unmoderated comments as soon as you feel comfortable with that. When you do, make sure you have a disclaimer somewhere on your blog saying that "comments are unmoderated and do not represent the opinion of the blog owner".

Unless you are a legal expert, it is best to play very safe with libel. If you feel any comment is making unsubstantiated and defamatory remarks about an individual then it is best to delete them. It hardly ever happens on most blogs. But if it does, it is best to play safe. Don't worry if you allow unmoderated comments and it takes you, say 24 hours, to get to a comment which might be libellous. As long as you act within a reasonable time period then you're in the clear. It is remarks about a named individual that are dangerous.

Comments about a group of people - e.g. "The Tories are bar stewards" tend to be OK, because they are rather nebulous in terms of who is implicated. (Would that be the Conservative party or anybody who votes Tory?) If you are under 18 then bear in mind there is such a thing as "vicarious liability" which means that your parents might be implicated if you publish something libellous. But, as I say, it hardly ever happens but it is best to be aware of what libel is. There are plenty of websites which explain it in layman's terms.

You really can decide your own policy on abusive comments or swearing. It's your blog. Again, it hardly ever happens. But if someone, for example, writes that a very genteel politician is an "organ thieving Nazi whore", then you are within your rights to delete that comment. Not only is it abusive, but if the individual is named it is probably legally "actionable". You might like to leave a comment on the same post saying that you have deleted a comment due to its abusive nature.

In general, don't worry about comments. Most of the time, they won't bite you. It's only blogs like *Iain Dale* or *Lib Dem Voice* who get heavy duty abuse or libellous comments.

Enjoy your comments. If you are getting people who take the trouble to make comments on your posts, then remember it's a cause for congratulations! - your blog is working!

It's a very good idea to engage with your commenters and occasionally thank them for very good comments. Often commenters are the first people to point out errors, so their feedback is very valuable. If someone takes the trouble to comment on your blog, you should value them and respond to their points. It's a tremendous compliment to you that they can be bothered to comment.

# Context is king – link for victory

by Alex Foster ([www.alexfooster.me.uk](http://www.alexfooster.me.uk))

When writing for a blog, perhaps the default view I have of my reader is someone who is familiar with my entire body of work, someone who started at the first thing I wrote, and read it through in order. That person would have a pretty good understanding of what I meant whenever I made a reference to something I have previously written.

Life's not like that, however. Most of my readers have no clue what I was thinking this time last year. Most of your readers too will come to your blog posts from a variety of sources, and may not regularly read your work. If you're on Lib Dem Blogs, a particularly eye-catching title may draw in readers that haven't seen your output before. And the more you write, the longer you are around, and the better you work with search engines, the more people will find your blog from bizarre search terms that have nothing whatsoever to do with what you are actually writing about.

(Fully three quarters of my traffic is from search engine referrals, and of those, the majority have landed on me from a search about "number one when I was born" which links to a post I wrote three years ago. Either that or pear crumble.)

So given that most of your readers come to your site without much of a clue what you write about, it's really important to give them a clue often. You can't ever say things, "as I said yesterday" because your casual visitors won't know what you said yesterday. Even if yesterday's post was the last thing you wrote, if your visitor has followed a link to the blog post in full and not to your blog as a whole, they won't easily be able to find the post.

What you need to do is to refer them to what they're looking for using a hyperlink. What I wrote the month before last, with a handy link to what it is you referred to, means that anyone who's landed on your blog and is interested in your topic can follow your train of thought.

Referring back to your old stock of writing is also excellent for keeping your best pieces fresh in people's minds; and the more links you use, the better search engines will be able to see how your thoughts are structured. That context is all the more important if what you are referring to was written on someone else's blog or a newspaper article.

Finally, if you notice from your logs, or a third party tool like Google Analytics or MyBlogLog, that people are frequently landing on the same posts from years back, it's worth going back and editing them a little to help direct your new readers at your new material. I've made sure I have Google ads on the pages that are most often read, and have sometimes gone back to add in bulleted lists at the end of

pieces to signpost people at other posts. Even if you have tags or category lists, adding in to a post an explicit invitation to read other related content will often push more traffic through your site.



# How to increase your blog's readership

by Mark Pack ([www.MarkPack.org.uk](http://www.MarkPack.org.uk))

There are many reasons for blogging and, depending on your own motivation, getting a bigger audience is not necessarily important. My occasional blog post about paper clips are aimed at around 7 people and judging their success or not by readership beyond them misses the point of why I write them. However, for many blogging objectives - such as a councillor wanting to reach residents or a party member wanting to get their views heard - bigger relevant audiences are better.

But how do you go about that? Many people make a full time profession out of building up online audiences, so here is a brief introduction to some of the simplest and most effective steps you can take.

## ***Be clear about your niche***

To get an audience, you have to be writing something that is of interest to them. So try to picture your ideal reader(s) and ask yourself, "What information can my blog provide that they don't get from elsewhere?" For example, you may have two ideal readers - a ward residents and a local party member. The answers may be, "The local news which they don't get from the local newspaper because it has a very low readership" and "Information about what the party is up to which they don't get from our limited media coverage".

## ***Be easy to find in the obvious places***

For Liberal Democrat blogs, visiting and asking to be listed on the Liberal Democrat Blogs ([www.LibDemBlogs.co.uk](http://www.LibDemBlogs.co.uk)) aggregator is an obvious starting point. Other potentially useful and free places to get a listing include the Total Politics blog directory ([www.TotalPolitics.com](http://www.TotalPolitics.com)) and Wikio ([www.Wikio.co.uk/addsource](http://www.Wikio.co.uk/addsource)). Make sure you also cover the other relevant Liberal Democrat sites (e.g. your local party's site) and any local non-Lib Dem sites.

## ***Tell people about your blog***

Telling people that your blog exists is a much better bet than relying on telepathy. In particular, personally telling your friends and colleagues is a good way to get people to take an initial look. One tip - do this just after you've done a few blog posts that you think worked particularly well. You want to make a good impression when these people come looking.

But more than that, if you blog about what someone else has said or done, then letting them know is often both polite and a way to help nudge your audience up. For example, if you blog giving extra details about a story run in a local

newspaper, let the journalist know. Or if you blog about a great speech you heard at an event, let the speaker know.

### ***Make your blog like a newspaper, not a book***

A daily newspaper doesn't need to advertise to let you know when the next edition is out. You know that without having to be told specifically each time. Book publishers however have to put great efforts into letting people know that a new book is out from an established author.

You want your blog to be more like a newspaper, where people come back for future updates of their own volition and without you have to work hard to attract them afresh each time.

Two major ways of doing this are to blog reasonably regularly and also to provide a clear RSS feed. The former means people expect there to be new content and so come to look at it whilst the latter allows people to sign up to automatically get new content pushed out at them.

### ***Write good headlines***

As in print, so online - the headline you give a story has a big effect on the number of people who decide to then go on and read the story. Short, clear and interesting is what you need. Much easier said than done, I'm afraid but it is a really useful skill to acquire and refine.

### ***Look at some evidence***

There are many free services available to provide details about the level of traffic on your blog. Google Analytics is one of the most popular and lets you see how many visits your blog gets, how people find your blog and what content on it is most popular. This all adds up to a very rich set of suggestions about what is working well on your blog, what isn't and what you can do in future.

### ***Blog at the best times***

Relatively few people have the time or inclination to systematically and regularly check back through stories they may have missed. If they use a feed reader, there's often a backlog of stories that either don't get read or get only the merest skim. If they visit sites, they often will not click through to pages of older posts every time in order to see everything since their last visit. Some people do, but many don't. If you don't time your post well, that means you'll miss out on their readership.

The ability to schedule posts to appear at some point in the future is a standard part of blogging packages, so when you write a post doesn't have to determine when it appears.

But when is the best time to post? The post I wrote at <http://bit.ly/BlogTiming> may help you answer that.

***And finally...***

Learn from the other advice in this book of course!

# How to blog successfully as a councillor

by Mary Reid ([www.maryreid.org.uk](http://www.maryreid.org.uk))

You probably already know that 7% of Liberal Democrat councillors have a website/blog, compared with 2% of Tory councillors and only 1% of Labour councillors. So there is plenty of experience around and many good blogs to emulate.

I have been blogging, only taking breaks for holidays, for nearly five years. One thing that I have learnt is that you will only persist with your blog if the act of writing meets your own needs as well as those of your electors. In my case, I like being able to process my thoughts on issues and enjoy creating a permanent record of my work as a councillor.

So here are my hints and tips ...

**Your name is your brand**, so don't hide behind a clever title.

**Don't forget to include your imprint and contact details.**

**Never write anything that you could not say in a public meeting.** A blog feels like an intimate space but it isn't, so think twice about what you write, especially if you are angry - or drunk.

But, **don't sound as though you are at a public meeting.** A chatty style is best.

**Don't think of blogging as an alternative to delivering Focus** - it supplements and extends your printed literature, but it does not replace it.

**Use photos.** I always ask permission and explain I'm taking photos for my blog. You absolutely must check that there is parental permission before you use photos of children.

It is tempting to do nothing but campaign on a blog, but it is also a space where you can **praise work done by the voluntary sector and council officers.** If you are invited to some kind of celebration, or even just an AGM, take photos of the key people, and use your blog to tell the world about the good things they are doing. Then send them an email, thanking them for the invitation and explaining that you have written about them on your blog. This amplifies the praise, and neatly grows your audience.

You will mainly be writing about local issues, but also **try to find the local angle to national stories.**

**Make sure that the local press knows about your blog.** I find whole chunks of my blog are lifted and used directly in the local papers. From time to time drop an email to the local reporter with a link to something that might interest them on your blog. It's much simpler than writing press releases.

**Encourage comments on the site, but use the option to pre-moderate them.** Although this restricts the immediacy of responses, it does protect you from the nutters. From time to time explain the criteria you are using when moderating comments. Mine are: no offensive comments about individuals and no spam (those irritating comments that are simply placed to increase the Google rating of a business). I also try to discourage anonymous comments.

**Respond to comments, but don't forget that you are still in a public space.** Beware of the kneejerk reaction to a political challenge and continue to present yourself as reasonable and thoughtful, which you undoubtedly are.

**Don't forget that the opposition will be reading it.**

**Don't forget that council officers will be reading it.**

**Make sure your council website provides a link to your blog, and that its web address is printed on business cards and stationary.** If the council refuses to do this, then refer them the Guidance on this issue produced by the National Project for Local e-Democracy (copies available from me).

# Why bloggers should tweet

by Charlotte Gore ([www.charlottegore.com](http://www.charlottegore.com))

So you've picked your blogging platform, created your blog-roll, found your niche and worked out your style - you're blogging! But is it enough to rely on [libdemblogs.co.uk](http://libdemblogs.co.uk) to bring you new readers and win you new friends?

Sadly not. At least, not since the rise of Twitter. Oh no, you're thinking. Not Twitter! Oh yes, Twitter. If you want to make the most of your blog, you're going to want to join the "Twitterati" too.

So what is it? At its heart it's a really simple, accessible and easy way for people to communicate with each other. That's it! You follow other people on Twitter, and they follow you back, and you 'Tweet' at each other, sharing ideas, opinions and links to interesting things on the internet.

You're limited to 140 characters per 'Tweet', so reading and writing a 'Tweet' rarely takes up much of your precious time. There's other bonuses too: If you want to learn how to write in a punchy and to the point way, Twitter is a sort of extreme boot camp for turning the linguistically flabby into lean, mean terse machines.

But you're a blogger, right? You want to write thoughtful, considered articles and stimulate debate, not spend your time announcing to the world that you've run out of toilet roll, right? Why do you need to worry about Twitter at all?

For bloggers, the real power - and value - of Twitter is that it helps you get noticed and build a readership.

So what do you do? Start by signing up for Twitter, of course. If you're a Lib Dem, get yourself added to the Lib Dem Twitterers list (<http://www.libdemblogs.co.uk/tweets>), which also gives you a handy way to find some interesting people to follow to get you going.

Next you'll want to put a Twitter widget into your blog. This tells the world that you're on Twitter and makes it easy for them to follow you.

If you're using a WordPress.com blog, you can add a Twitter widget to your sidebar by going into your dashboard, selecting 'Appearance' and going into 'Widgets'. If you're using Blogger, you can add a Twitter gadget by selecting 'Layout' then, "Add a Gadget" and searching for Twitter.

So you've signed up to Twitter, put your widget onto your blog and people have started following you. What next?

Building a readership with Twitter is easy: Whenever you write a blog post, simply write a 'tweet' that contains a link to your post and a few words hinting at the content. It might feel strange or awkward to be advertising yourself at first, but people on Twitter are used to bloggers doing this - in fact, they're probably following you because they *want* to know when you've written something new! By letting them know, you'll keep them coming back, and that's exactly how you build a readership - that an giving your audience something compelling to read when they arrive!

Getting *noticed* on Twitter is a little harder and requires a bit more imagination, but it's still possible for almost anyone to become a Twitter star thanks to 'retweeting'. Retweeting is where another person on Twitter copies your Tweet and sends it onto their followers. If you're very, very lucky (or just especially witty, funny or saying something people passionately agree with) you'll be 'retweeted' a lot, winning you new followers, friends and readers for your blog.

But Twitter isn't just for promoting your blog. It's a way of discovering what people are thinking, what they're concerned with and finding out what's going on - often as things are happening. You can ask questions and provide answers. It can also be a source of inspiration for subjects to write about and a superb way of finding new and interesting blogs to read.

The only danger is having rather too much fun on Twitter and forgetting to write blog posts!

# If a gobby barmaid from Yorkshire can do it, anyone can

by Jennie Rigg ([miss-s-b.dreamwidth.org](http://miss-s-b.dreamwidth.org))

Perhaps you've read all the foregoing articles, and you're still doubtful as to whether this blogging thing is for you? This is where I come in. I am by no means a typical Lib Dem Blogger, as you can see from my blog, and I'm going to try to convince everyone who reads this post that if they have the slightest inclination to blog, they can and should do so.

The single most important thing to remember about blogging is that it is an extremely Liberal medium. You can do whatever you want with it. To be successful, I would suggest that it's *imperative* to do what you want with it. Not what the party wants, or what you think your friends and family might want, or what you think people want to read. Say what *you* want to say.

To that end, in this post I aim to cover and counter what I consider to be myths about blogging which prevent more people from picking up mouse and keyboard and getting their views out there.

***Myth: Bloggers are all white geeky boys and nobody will pay attention to me if I don't fit this demographic***

While the white geeky boy blogosphere (which I affectionately term the blokosphere) is excessively insular and self-promoting, that doesn't mean that it's the whole, or even the majority of the blogosphere. More women blog than men - in fact, I maintain a list of recommended female bloggers at <http://miss-s-b.dreamwidth.org/981734.html>. Lots of people who are not white write hugely successful blogs too (although I am less expert on BME bloggers, I fully recommend the Angry Black Woman among others).

The same can be said for any minority you might fit into. Maybe you're disabled, or a goth, or bi or gay or a cat owner. None of these things means that your views are not valuable. Don't be put off by a perception that you won't fit in.

***Myth: Blogs have to focus on one subject***

I flatter myself that several of you will already have seen my blog, but even for those of you I count as friends, it might surprise you to know that less than a third of my readership is people who read for the politics content. This is the important point: *You don't need to blog about politics to be a successful politics blogger.*



So if you're reading this and thinking, "Well, yes, I'm a Lib Dem, but I don't think there's much to be achieved by blogging about Focus Deliveries and Land Value Tax", don't for one moment think that means you can't blog.

Blog about sport, or cookery, or sci-fi, or science, or mechanics, or even Strictly Come Dancing. Some of my favourite blogs are on a hugely eclectic combination of subjects. Blog about whatever you have views on; if your views are sincerely held and passionately put forward, and you go and interact with other bloggers, people will read them, value them, and link to them. Remember what Skunk Anansie said: everything is political.

Also, don't forget that Ryan will not look at your content before adding you to the Lib Dem Blogs aggregator. The aggregator is for bloggers who are Lib Dems, not people who blog about Lib Demmery.

***Myth: Blogs have to be formatted like print media***

People read online content differently from the way they read print media. Don't think you have to be inclined to write like Unity ([www.MinistryOfTruth.me.uk](http://www.MinistryOfTruth.me.uk)) to blog. Short, snappy posts are often of greater value than enormous essays in terms of getting a point across. If that were not the case, twitter - essentially microblogging - would not have taken off the way it has.

***Myth: Blogs need the patronage of famous bloggers to be successful***

You don't need to be linked to by Mrs Dale (or even to read his pap - I don't) to find an audience. I'm not going to say it doesn't help to have the spotlight shone on you by someone more successful, but the best way to build an audience is far simpler than that. Say something interesting, and then let people know you've said it. Find other bloggers who are posting on related subjects and comment on their posts. Talk to other bloggers, interact with them, and they will interact with you.

***Myth: You need to post several times a day to be successful***

Don't worry if you don't have the time or inclination to post incessantly. Posting incessantly can actually be a detriment. Some of the best bloggers post once a week - or even less. Look at our own beloved Orwell-prize-nominated Mortimer.

***Myth: You need to find a niche and fill it***

Many of the foregoing posts have talked about finding your niche. With respect to the writers of those posts, I don't think it's necessary to do market research and identify a niche before you start: this idea comes from a particular view of blogging-as-opinion column to which I, personally, don't subscribe.

Blogs don't have to be opinion columns, they can be a way of keeping in touch with friends and family, or of sharing art or photos, or of sharing expertise on a particular subject, or of starting a campaign, or any and all of the foregoing at once. Blogs can be a content-rich social network - in fact, I would argue that Lib Dem Voice itself fulfils this function. The point is that everyone has things they want to share, and everyone has their own particular way of communicating. Niches don't just exist; you can carve out your own.

***Myth: You need to have thousands of readers and to be paid attention to by the Mainstream Media for your blog to have value***

If your blog only counts its readers in the tens, and you've never been featured by the BBC, this does not mean that your blog does not have value. One, just one, dedicated reader who then becomes a friend is more valuable than thousands of anonymous eyeballs skipping past your blog. One of my readers is in bed beside me as I type. I wouldn't have met him were it not for the fact that we both blog.

***Fact: Blogging is about changing the world***

Blogging *is* about changing the world, but that doesn't mean you have to change the world totally, and it doesn't mean you have to do it all in one go. Blogging changes the world by getting more of us communicating. This is a valuable thing in and of itself, adding richness and democracy to the world just by sitting behind a keyboard and tapping out your thoughts. It doesn't matter if your thoughts are not deep and philosophical; it just matters that you have them and want to share them.

Blogging has changed my life. Through my blog, I met my fiancé. I joined the party. I made friends with one of my favourite Doctor Who writers. I influenced party policy. I have made lots and lots of true and valuable friends, and met people like Vince Cable, Ros Scott, Our Glorious Leader and even the great Millennium Elephant. Although it is possible to do all of those things *without* blogging, I don't think I would have done them myself if it were not for my blog.

Blogging changed my life, and by doing so, I have had more of an impact on the world than I would otherwise have done. And you can do the same. Really. If a gobby barmaid from Yorkshire can do it, *anyone* can.

So what are you waiting for? Whoever you are, whatever you are thinking, get out there, and get blogging.

# Why blog?

by Alix Mortimer ([fabulousblueporcupine.wordpress.com](http://fabulousblueporcupine.wordpress.com))

The whys and wherefores of political blogging generate a lot of heat. Amble around the internet a little, and you'll find denunciations of blogging as a self-indulgent waste of time, and see it lauded as the answer to every problem from lack of accountability to the rise of the far right. Personally, I have sympathy with the self-indulgent camp. It's why I do it, after all. But there are, luckily, almost as many different reasons to blog as there are bloggers. Here are just a few:

## ***Blog as an accountability tool***

If you're a councillor or MP and you don't have a Vince-like profile, blogging makes your activities visible to constituents and press, in an informal way that obviates the need for fanfare. Not every single thing you do will result in a law changed or a hospital saved, but that doesn't mean your daily grind isn't worthwhile and worth reporting. MPs should be particularly tempted because it's an opportunity to demonstrate that the recess periods aren't just one long strawberry daiquiri.

## ***Blog to campaign***

To be honest, I've had my doubts about this. Of course, blogging can be one tool within a wider campaign. But the old campaign rules still apply - what exactly are you hoping to achieve and how will you know when you've done it? I know groups of bloggers periodically decide that this-or-that opponent should be targeted by co-ordinated blogging, or such-and-such an issue be pushed to the press, but I've rarely seen it succeed.

More scope, I reckon, lies in the supporting role. Telling your readers to sign a petition to outlaw Dan Hannan will result in more signatures, and then that petition becomes a useful campaigning tool. Repeatedly blogging that Dan Hannan should be outlawed is unlikely to result in a newspaper calling for this to happen, or a question being asked in the House. (Or at least, it hasn't yet and some chaps have been slogging away at it for long enough.)

## ***Become number 55***

This is a sort of a fuzzy-edged version of the previous. Blogging may not get things done by itself, but it can contribute to the online "noise" in support of a political position. Quantity of blogging drives up quality and increases the chances that interested punters will find your corner of the blogosphere. Political blogging is still, just about, news in itself, and political activists still vie with one another to show that their party, or cause, has the most-read, the best-written or the highest-profile blogs. If you care about that party or cause, then you might want to add your voice to the chorus. Jo Christie-Smith put this rather well once - she said

that, assuming it would take, say, 100 women bloggers to achieve gender parity in the Lib Dem blogosphere, she wanted to do her bit by becoming number 55.

### ***Become the go-to blog for the latest on Giant Newts***

Actually, Giant Newts is a bit of an over-subscribed niche. What I'm getting at is that you might want to take ownership of a particular individual or angle. Politicalbetting.com is the example par excellence, Boriswatch is another. This is, at the moment, the only scenario in which I can see the blog-as-campaign thing working. If your remit is specific enough (and, obviously, your material good enough), people will get into the habit of reading you for your special subject, and that may well include journalists who want to write about it.

### ***Join in the conversation***

Blogging needn't be a glorified timesheet or a sifting pan for the newspapers. The internet is full of interesting people saying interesting things (obviously not quite full, because there has to be room for the nutters). If you're into the same stuff as they are (we're back on the interesting people now) why not talk to them? Of course, you might already be in the conversation, as a commenter. I can think of plenty of people I would consider part of the Lib Dem blogging "community" who don't have blogs of their own. Blogging is just the logical next step, a place, as it were, to keep your stall so that you don't have to set it out anew every time you join in a thread. Not everyone will have time or inclination to make that next step. But you might.