Style Guide: Blog Writing

When you're an expert on something, writing a blog article is a great way to share your expertise with audiences who are eager to learn more. And, I promise you, even if it's a niche topic, there are people out there looking for information! They're scanning Google right now, typing in questions to which you hold answers! You can help them! What are you waiting for?!

Here at *Michigan Virtual,* our blog serves as a platform for delivering statewide thought leadership in the realm of online and blended learning. As one of our resident experts, we'd love for you to share your knowledge and help us grow our readership.

Maybe you've always had an interest in blog writing. Maybe you want to stretch out some new muscles. Maybe you have something you *really* want more people to know. Maybe your supervisor has asked you to write a blog, and you don't know where to start!

The following style guide is designed to help you think through the process of writing a blog from scratch, including:

- Setting goals for your blog
- Picking a topic
- Structuring your blog
- Determining your word count
- Establishing your tone
- Writing an introduction
- Formatting your post
- Coming up with a title
- Additional resources

Setting Goals for Your Blog

Before we dive into the details, let me share a little bit about the goal of the *Michigan Virtual* blog and how the articles you can contribute will fit into this larger picture.

When it comes to our blog, the goal is to provide thought leadership on online and blended learning. That's a big goal, certainly, but there are a few different ways we can break it down:

Talk about your industry, not your organization.
It may seem counterintuitive, but when it comes to our blog, the goal is to provide thought leadership, not simply to promote our products. When you start thinking about blog posts you could write for *Michigan Virtual,* think about our *industry,* not our *organization*.

For example, rather than writing a blog post on our Essentials courses specifically, you might choose to write about best practices for success with online credit recovery. When writing this blog post, you'd want to be careful to keep it *provider agnostic,* which means the advice you provide would be helpful for someone *even if they do not currently use Michigan Virtual products*.

Again, while this may seem counterintuitive, we want to build *Michigan Virtual* up as a thought leader in this space and help ALL online learners in the state use digital learning to reach their full potential. This path builds trust and is a better long-term game for converting customers who believe in our brand's integrity, credibility, and expertise.

Of course, there is a time and place for promoting our products. However, this goal is best accomplished *outside* of the main body text of the blog post. It's not something you have to worry about!

Provide value-added, educational content.
Your goal with writing a blog post should be to educate someone in our main audiences on how to solve a problem.

When this is your starting point, it's almost impossible not to write a value-added, educational blog post! Start by thinking of our customers (or potential customers!) and what problems they have: How can you educate them and help them solve these problems?

Answer commonly asked questions.
One way you might be able to provide educational content is by answering a commonly asked question in your area of expertise. What are the questions you commonly hear from others when you explain to them what you do? What questions do you hear from our customers? Could you provide an answer to one of these questions?

Debunk myths and misconceptions.
When it comes to online and blended learning, there are plenty of myths and misconceptions abound! What myths and misconceptions do you commonly encounter when talking to others about what you do? How could you debunk this myth and help educate people on effective practices?

Share tips, tricks, and best practices.
Another way you can provide educational content is by sharing tips, tricks, and best practices in the realm of online and blended learning. What are some great ways to create a student-centered learning environment in your face-to-face class? What are some simple mentoring hacks that you can use to boost student success? Again, remember that the goal is to be *provider agnostic* if possible, so any reader could benefit from this knowledge, not just our current customers.

Picking a Topic

What should you write about? Hmm, good question! When it comes to selecting a topic, you'll want to start more broadly with your passions and expertise before whittling down your scope to focus on a narrower, audience-centered topic.

Here are some questions you might ask yourself to get the brainstorming process started:

- What are you passionate about when it comes to learning innovation?
- What are some commonly asked questions in your area of expertise?
- What do our customers need help with in your area of expertise?
- What do you wish more people understood about your area of expertise?
- What are some myths and misconceptions you often encounter in your area of expertise?
- What tips, tricks, strategies, or best practices could you provide to readers on your area of expertise?

- Do you have any suggestions for tech tools that are affordable and helpful in your area of expertise? Do you have examples of implementation for these tech tools?
- Are there any educators you could interview or ask to write a guest post? What examples and stories could they provide to help support and clarify your argument? Who do you know who's out in the field doing cool things in their online or blended classroom?

Pro Tip: Focus on ONE main idea per blog post.
I know it's hard. It's easy to want to cram everything that you know (and want others to know!) into a singular blog post. Once you get those ideas rolling, it's hard to turn them off. And I'm not suggesting that you should turn them off — Please keep those ideas rolling! But each blog post really should focus on one main idea. If you have a bunch of ideas, write them down for later and consider writing *multiple* blog posts.

Besides, here's one awesome thing about blog posts: They often perform best when placed in a series of related content. If you have a topic idea that spans *multiple* posts, then, great! We can work together to create a series of related blogs that link to each other.

This boosts our overall website's search engine optimization (SEO) AND lets the reader drive their own learning journey by navigating the parts that are relevant to them. As they say, a rising tide lifts all boats!

Structuring Your Blog

Now comes the tricky part: Structuring your blog. You have your basic idea. Now how do you make it come to life on the page (or the screen)? How do you turn a bunch of loosely connected ideas into a compelling narrative that sucks the reader in?

Here are a few common blogging structures you might consider:

Common blogging structures
Choosing a structure or formula for your blog isn't cheating. These formulas are popular for a reason. They are audience-oriented by nature and generally quite skimmable. Readers recognize their structure and are already comfortable with interacting with this kind of content. You don't *have* to choose one of these structures when writing a blog, but they are helpful options worth considering!

Below you will find links to templates created by HubSpot on a few different common blogging structures:

- "What is" articles
- "How to" articles
- List articles

These templates provide helpful tips for structuring an article that explains *what something is* (e.g. "What is online learning?"), *how to do something* (e.g. "How to use Google Classroom to boost student agency"), or *provides a list of resources or suggestions* (e.g. "10 ways to boost the success of online learners at your school").

Though I don't have a template for it, another one I might add to this list is the "Why" blog (e.g. "Michigan's Literacy Crisis Is A Public Health Crisis"). While this example doesn't have "Why" in the title, it explains a phenomenon (here, the literacy crisis) and WHY it's a big problem for our students and our state.

Creating a compelling narrative
Regardless of whether you choose to follow one of the structures linked above or not, I implore you to ask yourself the following questions when organizing your blog:

- What is the story I want to tell in this blog?
- Who are the main characters?
- What is the main source of the conflict? The problem that needs solving?
- Who or what can help solve this problem?
- What does the happy ending look like?
- What does the not-so-happy ending look like?

By thinking of a story with characters, conflict, a beginning, a middle, and an end, you might be able to more readily visualize the structure of your blog post. At its heart, a blog post is telling a story. You already know how stories work! You tell them all the time! You know how to do this!

Considering your blog through the filter of these narrative elements can help you figure out where you should start, who you should focus on, and how you should end. In later sections, we'll dive into introductions and conclusions in more specific detail.

Before we move onto the actual writing part, however, let's address the elephant in the room:

Determining Your Word Count

How much are you asking from me here? 500 words? 1,000 words? What's the best rule of thumb?

The cop-out answer that you've probably heard a million times from your high school English teacher is:

As long as it needs to be to sufficiently cover the topic on which you are speaking.

And there is some truth to this somewhat obnoxious heuristic. If you are attempting to write a blog on a BIG topic, you will need to cover more ground than if you are writing on an extremely SPECIFIC subject. The more ambitious the scope of your topic, the more words you will likely need to do it justice.

That being said, there has been research on the ideal blog post length. In an analysis conducted by HubSpot, they found that the ideal blog post length is **2,100 words.** In an age of purported dwindling attention spans, this may seem crazy long, but when you really start to think about it, it makes more sense.

Our blog is designed to provide *thought leadership.* This isn't always easy to do in just 500 words. We're writing for people who genuinely want to learn more about online and blended learning. We're aiming to answer their questions and provide best practices. If the answers were easy and obvious, everyone would already be doing them. We have to account for complexity, empathize with their problems, and provide helpful solutions.

We may have short attention spans, but if there's a problem we need to be solved, we're usually willing to put in the effort in return for advice that makes our lives easier or better in some way. I mean, heck, you're already 1,900 words into this style guide, so your attention span can't be that crippling, can it?

Generally, I think the attention span problem is a misnomer. Our attention spans are fine. It's the fact that we're constantly bombarded with information that's the problem. We now have the luxury of being far more selective about which content we choose to engage with. But if someone is providing us value and solving our problems, we'll make time to listen. It's in our best interest. Our content simply needs to find the *right* audience.

When it comes to your word count, I'd posit a large range of between 500 - 2,500 words for your consideration. I would generally recommend that you aim for a sweet spot of 700-1,200 words for the average blog post.

Shorter posts (500 words) would likely be reserved for brief explanations of a specific practice or a digest of a larger work. Longer posts (1,500-2,500) will likely be those that try to capture a BIG question that requires more exhaustive coverage to do them justice.

Setting the Tone

When writing a blog, it's worthwhile to put some thought into what kind of tone you want to convey to your audience. How do you want them to feel after reading your blog? Inspired? Motivated to act? Empowered? Supported?

Here are a few tips for following our brand voice when writing a blog:

Be positive & empowering

Overall, we want our brand voice to be *positive.* In particular, we want to keep this in mind when it comes to talking about our competition, traditional schools, or Michigan's educational system. It's okay to talk about *problems* that need to be addressed, but we have to be careful about how we go about this. Avoid finger-pointing for the problems and instead, keep your focus on solutions. We want to leave someone feeling hopeful and inspired to act!

Be helpful

Overall, with our blog, we want to be helpful. That means writing with the audience in mind, addressing their needs, and providing solutions. It might even help to pretend you're talking to someone who has the problem you're writing about. Address them with second-person pronouns ("you" and "your"). Speak to them directly and help them solve their problems. Ask yourself: How am I helping this person? What could I write that would be helpful to them?

Be human

When writing your blog, do your best to use simple language. It's okay to name concepts and jargon words, as long as you slow down to explain them rather than taking it for granted that the reader will know what you are talking about. Write like you are speaking to someone you know and love. When revising, try copying and pasting your blog copy into the Hemingway Editor, which will highlight your longer, more complex sentences and offer suggestions for how to reduce wordiness.

Be provider agnostic
As mentioned earlier, our goal is to talk about our *industry,* not our *company.* If possible, in our blogs we want to talk more broadly about best practices for online and blended learning, rather than specifically about *Michigan Virtual* products. We'll go through later and add relevant product offers through interactive calls-to-action when publishing the blog post!

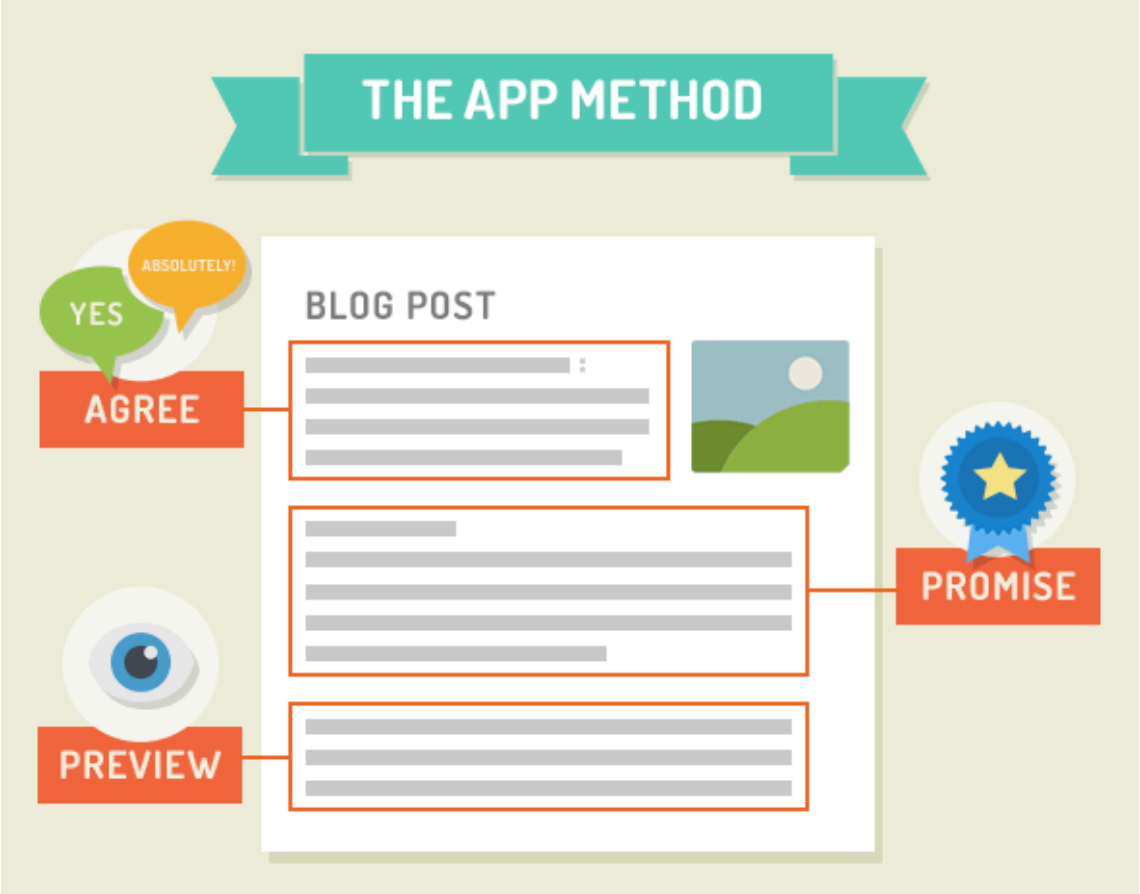
Writing Your Introduction

When someone seeks out a blog on a subject or chooses to read it, they do so because they see themselves in it. They typically have a *problem* of some sort. That problem could be as simple as being uninformed on this subject that could be valuable to their personal or professional lives. Or it could be a larger problem like: Online learners are failing their courses at my school and I need to figure out how to help them succeed.

When writing an introduction to your blog post, you want your reader to feel heard and understood. You want to grab their attention and not let go of it. There are a few different ways you can do this:

- **Empathize with their pain points**
- **Start with a relevant and compelling story** from someone else who had this pain point or problem (then, later, you can explain how they got their happy ending).
- **Surprise them with a startling statistic** that highlights a problem

Ultimately, by the end of your introduction you want to accomplish three things, which are articulated in the "APP Method" for blog writing:



- **Agree:** Agree with them that whatever they are struggling with is indeed challenging and a problem. Empathize with this problem by articulating it better than they could have explained themselves. Show why it is a problem and why it is hard and that you *really* get it before moving on to the solutions. This helps the reader feel acknowledged and understood.
- **Promise:** After you've agreed with their problems, you then have to create proof around how you are going to provide a solution. Here is where you promise to offer some sort of solution to help address this pain point and make their lives easier.
- **Preview:** The preview part of your introduction sets the reader's expectations by outlining what you will cover in this article and how it will help them solve their problems.

You can see an example of the APP Method provided in Neil Patel's "11 beginner mistakes that cripple blogs in their first year." (You have to scroll down a bit to get to it though!)

Ultimately the goal of your introduction is to spark reader interest, help the reader feel empathized with and understood in terms of the problem that led them to this blog, and entice them to *want* to read the rest of your blog to figure out a solution.

Some people prefer to write their introductions LAST after writing the rest of the blog. This can be a helpful technique to try out if you get stuck with writer's block and don't know where to begin. You often know more at the end of the drafting process than you did at the beginning, so it's sometimes easier to write your introduction last. But that part is totally up to you!

Formatting Your Blog Post

There are a few best practices worth following when it comes to formatting your blog post as well.

Here are a few tips:

Include subheaders.
Subheaders help to make long text more skimmable. Especially when we're busy, we don't always read an entire piece word-for-word. Often, we might read the introduction, then skim the rest of the article to see where it's heading, to see if it will be relevant and worth our time. Subheadings help to organize your blog and entice your reader to keep reading by giving them a sneak preview on how you are about to help them solve their problems.

White space is your friend.
When it comes to blogging, white space is your friend. White space refers to the empty space surrounding your text. This comes into play when you are structuring your paragraphs, in particular.

Best practices for blog writing involve short paragraphs! You might have been told in high school English class that a paragraph should have between 3-5 sentences, but with modern blogging, this isn't often the case.

Oftentimes, you might have paragraphs that have 1-2 sentences only.

Another strategy for pulling your reader's eye down the page is to use standalone, bolded sentences every few paragraphs.

This is great when you have a strong sentence that provokes the reader to keep reading. By bolding the sentence and letting it stand on its own surrounded by white space, it naturally draws the reader's eye and encourages them to keep reading!

Use numbered lists and bullet points when relevant.
Another way you can add more white space to your page is through the use of numbered lists and bullet points. If you have an itemized list that you are planning to share with your reader, consider formatting it using numbered lists or bullet points, rather than stringing them into a long sentence.

Link out to relevant resources.
Linking out to relevant resources not only helps your reader, but it also actually boosts our overall website's search engine optimization (meaning our ranking in search engines like Google) so long as the resources you are linking out to are reputable sources with high domain authority in the education space (i.e., MDE). Don't be afraid to link out to helpful resources both externally and internally in your blog as long as they're vetted and trustworthy!

Use videos and images.
Another great tool for making your blog less text-heavy is to incorporate videos and images. We'll add a featured image to your post, but if you know of something relevant (e.g. an infographic available on another site that helps explain a concept), feel free to include it!

Another thing we can do on our blog is embed YouTube videos. If you can, take some time to do a quick YouTube search to see if there is any quality content on your subject from a reputable source. For example, if you are writing on a tech tool that can be used in the classroom, check to see if there are any tutorial videos online that explain how to use it or how to incorporate it into your classroom.

Writing a Title

After you're done writing, you'll probably want to come up with a title! This can be tricky, but it's a very important part of the process. Most of the time, readers make decisions on whether or not to read a blog based on the title alone. You want it to grab someone's attention and make them want to read it.

Here are a few tips for coming up with your title:

- Keep it Short (60 characters)
    - Try using Moz's Title Tag Tool to see if you are under 60 characters and whether or not your title will be cut off in Google.
- Set reader expectations by hinting at what they're going to get out of this article.
- Make the value of the post clear in the title.
- Check out this HubSpot blog: How to Write Catchy Headlines and Blog Titles Your Readers Can't Resist

Additional Resources

- Creating a Blog Post [HubSpot Academy Lesson] (21 minutes)
  A free online lesson from HubSpot where they walk you through best practices for blogging. If you prefer to learn from video, rather than reading, this is a great resource to get you hyped up to write a killer blog post!
- How to Write a Blog Post: A Step-by-Step Guide [+ Free Blog Post Templates]
  A blog post by HubSpot where they walk you through a step-by-step process for writing a blog and share popular blog post templates.
- Hemingway Editor
  Copy and paste the text of your blog into this editor to receive suggestions for which sentences you could simplify and which words you might be able to remove. Don't feel bad if there are many sentences highlighted in red! It happens to me, too! Your blog doesn't need to receive a perfect score, but this tool can be helpful for you to locate long and wordy sentences worth revising.