

Start A Blog In 5 Steps



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This white paper is a plain language crash course on the foundational elements you need to consider when starting a blog. By the end of this white paper, you'll be equipped with the basic knowledge necessary to get your personal or business blog up and running.

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Thanks For Downloading My Whitepaper

Going through the process of researching and setting up my blog taught me a ton about interactive marketing. The creative process and interaction with readers and bloggers is really satisfying. Hopefully you can benefit from the many cups of coffee I bought while working on [Digital Alex](#) and I can save you a few headaches along the way. If you like what you read, the biggest thanks you can give me is to:

- Pass it on
- Send a link my way and
- Subscribe to my blog at www.alexcohen.com

I want to hear from you, so drop me a line at alex@alexcohen.com

Step 1: Questions To Ask Before Starting A Blog

Mad men and geniuses, housewives and teenagers, tycoons and cube dwellers—everyone and their mother has a blog these days. And why not? Blog service providers and software make creating and posting on a website as frictionless as email. In this white paper, I'll walk you through the steps of how to create a blog in 5 minutes or 5 days.

Does Anyone Care About What You Have To Say?

A commenter on Digg once quipped that the biggest mistake that people make when starting a blog is choosing to start one in the first place. There's some truth in that snarky comment for a couple of reasons.

1. **Blogging Is Like Dieting** - A lot of people start with the best of intentions only to fall off the wagon in a couple of months. You've probably heard some ludicrous statistic that thousands of blogs are started every minute. The statistic you probably haven't heard is how many of those blogs are still thriving after 6 months. Just remember, blogging is a game of endurance and it's a slow rise to readership.
2. **Want To See Pictures Of My Kitten?** – There is nothing wrong with personal blogs; in fact I think they're a great idea if you want to write. There's also nothing wrong with rambling, unfocused musings on whatever catches your fancy. However, if your blog has a purpose, say to help you land a writing gig or get you invited to speak at a conference, neither of these will get you many readers. A clear purpose consistently met over time is the way to go.

Define The Purpose and Focus Of Your Blog

You have to find your particular niche in the blogosphere, which generally comes in one of 3 ways:

1. **You've Got Something Unique To Say** – This is a self-evident concept. A great example is the Julie/Julia Project. One woman decided she wanted to change her life by cooking every recipe in *Mastering The Art of French Cooking (MTAOFC)* by Julia Child in a year. MTAOFC is at least 3 inches thick. She stuck with it, her writing was great and now she's a published author of 2 books. If you've got an idea, do a little research to see if anyone has pursued it. [Technorati](#), [Google Blog Search](#) and [IceRocket](#) are all good places to start.
2. **You've Got A Unique Way Of Saying It** – In an ocean of blogs, it's hard to find untapped opportunity. Instead, you might differentiate yourself by attacking the subject differently—humorously, very in-depth, with pictures, with video, podcasts, or just through the lens of your own experience. Find the angle about your topic that you're especially good at using to connect with your audience and flavor your blog accordingly.
3. **You're Uniquely Qualified** – This last method is reserved for people who already have a measure of fame, respect or notoriety before they start. If you're Marc Andreessen then of course people are going to want to hear what you've got to say. If you're already a success in other channels, a blog might be another venue for your thoughts.

There's one final question you have to ask yourself: are you looking for a relationship with your readers, or are you the love 'em and leave 'em type? Everyone is inundated with information these days, so if you're not going to commit to your readers, why should they bother to read you?

Step 2: Pick a Platform For Your Blog - Are You A Needy Control Freak?

This is essentially the step where you have to decide whether you want to go with an out-of-the-box free host or something with more flexibility. This is the splitting point that decides whether you can setup your blog in 5 minutes or 5 days. Really, your answer to this will be most influenced by how tech savvy you are and whether your blog is for business or not. There are a couple of key questions you need to answer:

- **Do You Need Complete Control Over The Look and Code?** – Many of the quick start blog providers offer some set of themes to tweak the look and feel of your blog. If you want to import something designed by someone else, or have your own designers match your company's style guide, then you'll need a platform that supports this level of control. Similarly, if you want to add in special code, say for web analytics, you'll want to pick a platform that lets you insert your own code wherever you want. That's a lesson I

learned the hard way when I needlessly wasted \$10 and several hours thinking that buying the CSS extension to [Wordpress.com](https://wordpress.com) (the hosted version) would let me setup Google Analytics (it doesn't, duh).

- **Is Tech Support Critical?** – There is no free lunch when it comes to blogging. If you choose a free vendor or free host, then you will be at the mercy of user forums the good graces of the internet to solve any dilemmas you have. This problem is exacerbated if you're not technically inclined or are running a business blog without a blogging guru in-house to help you out. Of course, sometimes learning by doing is the best way to master the medium (hence, [Digital Alex](#)).

Once you've decided which kind of blogger you are, then you have to stake your lot with one of the 4 major blog platforms:

1. **Wordpress** – This is an open source, community supported tool available 2 flavors, the free, fully hosted version with limited control ([Wordpress.com](https://wordpress.com)) and the free, unhosted version with unlimited control ([Wordpress.org](https://wordpress.org))
2. **Blogger** – This is the granddaddy of platforms. Blogger helped launch the blogosphere and was later snapped up by Google.
3. **Typepad** – This is Six Apart's more personal-oriented service.
4. **Moveable Type** – Also from Six Apart, this version is more oriented toward business and enterprise level bloggers.

Your own blog needs, budget and personal preferences will dictate which of these platforms appeals most to you. Personally, I favor Wordpress because it supports the open-source movement, it has a ton of community developed plug-ins and its size and goodwill mean that it'll probably be a good bet for the long-term.

I wanted control over my blog, so I chose the downloadable version of Wordpress (aka [Wordpress.org](https://wordpress.org)) and found a host to set it up to my specifications. The consequence of this choice for me has been that I've had to delve farther into the technical details than I might normally, but the experience has been very educational. I'd recommend it to anyone interested in influencing their site directly and who is willing to put in a bit more effort into the nitty gritty.

For a much more specific breakdown of the various features, benefits and technical specifics of each vendor, check out this [blog comparison chart](#).

Pick a Blog Host (You Have To Put That Thing Somewhere)

If you've decided to go the fully hosted route, say through [Wordpress.com](https://www.wordpress.com), then you're already setup with a host. Simply follow the instructions and you're good to go in 5 minutes. If you're going with a platform you have to host yourself, say [Wordpress.org](https://www.wordpress.org), then you'll need a place to host the software. If you're a business, this will be with whoever hosts your regular site. If, like me, your blog *is* your website, then you'll have to start looking.

I started with [the list](#) suggested by my platform, though you might just want to ask around to some friends or colleagues who have blogs to see which one they're satisfied with. Here are a few tips to consider:

1. Aside from the usual price considerations, check their feature list to see if they offer any particularly interesting features that you need (ex: easy synching with PayPal or automatic installation of Wordpress).
2. If you're not technically inclined, make sure the interface is user-friendly. Many hosts use standard software called [C-Panel](#) that is point-and-click.
3. Test out their customer service before you buy, particularly on the weekends (chances are that you'll be blogging then). Trust me; this one is *definitely* worth the time. I was close to signing up with one vendor and decided to ask for a preview of their Wordpress theme gallery. Well, 45 minutes later and I was brusquely informed that I couldn't have a preview. Another vendor answered all of my questions quickly and graciously, so I switched to them at the last minute.

I ultimately signed up with [HostiCan](#), though after digging around a bit, I wish I had considered [MediaTemple](#). If you do choose one of the larger hosting services, do a quick check for discounts at [RetailMeNot](#).

Step 3: Brand Yourself, or The Internet Beauty Contest

Ok, most of what lead up to this point was not particularly glamorous. Now that you've decided that you have something worth reading and figured out how you're going to get the word out, it's time to pick just how your name will appear in lights.

There are volumes of books and blog posts on branding out there, so I'm not going to repeat what you can read elsewhere. Instead, here are a few key points you need to consider when picking your blog and domain name:

1. **Your Name May Haunt You (Or Bring You Riches)** – If you're writing great content and being social in the blog world, you'll probably start getting some links and people may even add you to their blogroll. The text they use to link to you, aka anchor text, can have some influence on how well your site ranks in search engines. So, if your blog is called [Search Marketing Gurus](#) people are more likely to use those words when linking to you and, thus, the search engines will be more inclined to rank you for those terms (assuming you actually have related content on your site). Conversely, it may be more of an uphill battle to rank for phrases like "web analytics" if your blog title doesn't include that phrase.
2. **Less Typing is Better** – Pick a short and easy URL when you can. The more memorable and typable it is, the better off you are. Al Ries once recommended no more than 8 characters with some repetition of letters, a la Zillow. I'd argue that's not a hard-and-fast rule, but some wise words to consider, especially if the URL is to be reproduced in print.
3. **Go Domain Hunting** – It would be grand if we could all have the exact right domain, but many have been snapped up, so check through any of the major domain registration services to make sure no one has snagged alexloveskittenpictures.com yet. [MyDomain.com](#) is a good place to explore.

Once you've picked the perfect URL, register it (~\$10/year). Usually the host you choose will let you do this as you sign up for service and this is definitely the most convenient option, because you don't have to keep 2 sets of records or deal with domain mapping (it's a few easy technical steps where you point your URL to your site host, but why do it when you can avoid it?)

Pick Your Theme and Give Your Blog a Makeover

This is where you might start to go a little nuts. A theme is the visual look and feel of your site. It determines what visitors see and how they navigate throughout your blog. There are literally thousands of free themes available to download. If you're particularly crafty, or you're setting up a business blog and you have a creative team at your disposal, you can even [design your own theme](#).

The exact choice and details will vary by which blog platform you chose. Personal taste aside, just remember to pick or develop an uncluttered theme that makes it simple for people to do what you want: read and interact with you and your content.

1. **Steal Other People's Hard Work** – For the technically and artistically disinclined, the simplest route to aesthetics is to adopt a theme that someone else developed. Here are some good resources for Wordpress: [ThemeViewer](#), [Minimalist Themes](#), [Free Wordpress Themes](#), [Themes from Pearsonified](#), [83 Beautiful Themes](#).

2. **Make Sure Your Theme is SEO Friendly** – You may love search engines and all of the ways it can bring you fame and fortune, but [your theme may be holding you back](#).
3. **Tweak Your Blog** – Once you pick a theme, most of the platforms will let you add in 3rd part developed [plugins](#) to add to the look or functionality of your blog. I'll cover this more in another topic, but there are plenty of ways to add to your site. If you're really neurotic, like I am, you can even [create your own favicon](#) (specific to Wordpress [here](#)).

That's it! Now you're off and running with a slick and ever so personalized theme. The good news is that if you change your mind, you can always change your theme without trashing all of your content. I think full control over your theme is one of the particularly strong selling points to skip the fully hosted version of a blog and strike out on your own.

Step 4 - Promoting Your Blog (And Yourself)

If you're going to bother dedicating your time to blogging, then you should make it easy for people to find and read your content. The truth is that blogging is a slow meritocracy and you have to earn your readership with relevant, well written posts consistently produced over time. That said, there are some fundamentals to remember:

1. **Syndicate Your Content With RSS** - I was reading the blog of a usability research company and I was shocked to see that there was no easy link to subscribe to their blog's RSS feed. It seem like a direct violation of the [don't make me think](#) school of usability. For those of you who don't know, RSS stands for really simple syndication. For blogs, it lets users subscribe to your blog and receive content directly through email or an RSS reader like [Google Reader](#) or [BlogLines](#) (Still confused? Check out this [explanatory video](#)). Make sure you include an RSS feed on your blog. [Feedburner](#), acquired by Google, is a popular and free service. [Feedblitz](#) is another option. Some people may not know about RSS feeds or may prefer an email newsletter, so it's in your best interest to provide that option (also available through Feedburner or [Zookoda](#)). The additional benefit of collecting email addresses is that should you have a special announcement, say a new business or blog, you have a built in audience to email.
 - o Add your RSS feed in your left or right navigation near the top of your blog so people can easily find and subscribe to your feed. You can get the standard RSS icon [here](#). If you're using [Wordpress](#), you add this in the Presentation tab under widgets. I recommend against using the built in RSS widget (when I added text it kept redirecting my visitors to a non-existent page). Instead, simply use the Text widget and past the code from Feedburner.
 - o If you're into [bedazzling](#) your blog, you can also add chiclets. These are small buttons, usually on the side nav, that act like mini-banners to advertise anything

you want, often different ways to subscribe to your RSS feed, e.g.



. There is a Wordpress [plugin](#) to create these for you.

2. **Plant A Flag! (Claim Your Blog on Technorati)** - Many people have sounded the death knell for [Technorati](#), the blog ranking and search engine site. For the moment it remains a force in the blogosphere and can help people discover your blog. Once you've setup your blog, make sure you claim it on Technorati, ping it when you update (see the next bullet) and include tags when you write posts. (more on that further in this post).
3. **Pinging - Announce New Content To The World** - When you "ping" you are notifying blog indexing tools that you have updated your blog. It makes sure your fresh, fascinating content is represented in their service. Ping-o-matic pings automatically pings a lot of services when you notify them (which [Wordpress](#) does automatically and you should also add [these](#)).
4. **Be Shameless** - Link To Your Blog Elsewhere - If you're going to put your blog out there, then you might as promote it where you can: your email signature, IM profile, Facebook\MySpace account, on your LinkedIn profile, etc. I even put it as my "away" message in Gmail and I'm surprised at the number of my non-marketing friends who are actually reading this.
5. **Who The Heck Are You?** - Blogging is a part of *social* media and it's much easier to connect with a real person. If yours is a professional blog, then details some of your professional background. Include a link to your [LinkedIn](#) account or similar networking service. If it's a personal blog, write a summary of the blog's topics and so on.
6. **Make It Easy To Contact You** - This assumes, of course, that you want to be contacted. If you do indeed want people to contact you about blog story ideas, new opportunities or, say, to review a product then they shouldn't have to hunt to figure out how to reach you. Put your email address prominently in the side bar or include it on your About or Contact pages. Don't forget to format it like this alex @ alexlcohen . com or some variation to make sure only humans send you email (you can also put it in an image). If you don't want to list your email address, you can use contact forms like [cForms](#).

Who Loves Numbers? - Measuring Your Blog

I have to admit that I'm a bit partial to numbers because of [my background and profession](#), but measuring your blog is a great way to see what impact you're having and how you can improve.

1. [Google Analytics](#) - The web analytics community has varied opinions about this tool, but it is arguably the most powerful and intuitive free tool on the market and a no-brainer for anyone who wants to begin measurement. Installation only takes about 10 minutes. If you're using Wordpress ([.org](#) not [.com](#)), I recommend the [Google Analyticator](#) which

will keep you from having to mess too much with the code and automatically tags outgoing links.

2. [Feedburner](#) - In addition to syndicating your RSS feed, Feedburner will also provide you with stats about your subscribers (#, programs, used, reach, etc.). Google bought FeedBurner, so hopefully the two will be fused in the future.
3. **Measure EVERYthing** - Those two tools should get you pretty far, especially if you're new to web analytics. You might also want to check out some other tools like
 1. [Crazy Egg](#) - a cool, simple way to see a visual overlay of where people are clicking
 2. [MyBlogLog](#) - it lets you see who is reading your blog if they've installed the application
 3. [Quantcast](#) & [Compete](#) - Both companies are angling to provide overall statistics about sites on the web and competitive intelligence, similar to what Hitwise does. If you're writing a blog in hopes of gathering advertising revenue, these services will let you provide advertisers with a more objective, standardized way of comparing you to other site. Obviously, there's no benefit to a business blog that wants to keep its stats proprietary.
 4. [MeasureMap](#) - Currently, the program is closed to new users, because the company was acquired by Google and used to revamp Google Analytics. Hopefully they'll either reopen or integrate the features right into Google Analytics...

Widgets, Plugins & Navigation - Blog Accessories

Widgets and plugins are ways to extend the functionality of your blog beyond what's available out of the box with your platform. Plugin is a Wordpress term for 3rd party software that adds features to your blog (think applications on Facebook). Widgets can do the same thing, but the term is also used to describe tools that push your content out onto other people's websites. There are endless ways to customize your blog. So many that it's easy to get carried away (of course, you could choose the [opposite](#) direction). Here are some ideas to get you started.

1. **Widgetize Your Blog** - You or anyone can easily add scrolling list of your blog's content to any site with a blog widget (aka blidget—a terrible name if you ask me). I used [Widgetbox](#) and you can see it in action on this blog, just look for the black box in the right nav.
2. **Plugins/Widgets: WYSIWYG 2.0** - If you're chafing against the limits of your blogging platform's out-of-the-box options, you might want to consider dipping into the

community's own pool of useful plugins. The benefit is that once you go through the steps of adding a widget/plugin, you can get all manner of functionality without having to do a lick of code (great for the non-technical among us). For example, check out the [widgets for Typepad](#) and [Wordpress.org](#). If you're using Wordpress, I highly recommend you use the [PlugInstaller](#). It's a fantastic plugin that takes out many of the manual steps of getting a widget up and running.

3. **Make It Easy For Readers To Find Content** - When you first start blogging, it consists of a few quaint posts. Once you get the bug, you'll be pumping out content over the months and it's going to be harder and harder for a new visitor to find the most important information. Some basic navigation can help.
 1. Include a search box so users can find specific content.
 2. Categorize your posts and include a list of the categories in the navigation
 3. Show a list of recent posts
 4. Tag your posts and display a tag cloud - This is like an extended version of categorizing them. Most platforms support tagging natively, though you may need to download a widget/plugin.

Step 5 – Succeed at Blogging by Being Nice

Step 5 is really an ongoing process. It's about the basics of being a nice, friendly blogger and why it's important to blog success. As I've said before, being a successful blogger is a slow rise to the top with quality posts produced consistently over time. In the realm of social media, just like in any social situation, you have to earn your reputation and that doesn't happen overnight. I think there are some basic common sense things that hold true:

1. **Be Nice** - It seems like a simple concept, but it's easy to get carried away when the only filter between you and the object of your instant emotional gratification is a screen. Assume positive intent and give people the benefit of the doubt. Take the higher road.
2. **Love What You Write** - If you have a genuine interest in sharing your topic, your enthusiasm will come through. If you're just going through the motions, that will come through as well. There's no substitute for excitement.
3. **Write From Experience and Your Heart** - You can always tell a blogger who writes with a certain amount of authority and sincerity. The posts and tone of the blog just ring more true. If you've found your niche, this shouldn't be hard.

Blog Like You Give A Damn

Setting up a blog is nearly frictionless (at least if you go the fully hosted route). Actually creating something worth reading, however, is still hard no matter what medium you're in. When you start blogging, there are particular traps of the blogosphere that are worth avoiding.

1. **Create Original Content** - Feeding the content beast is no small task ([Lorelle has some ideas](#)), which is exactly why it's easy to fall into the "echo" chamber where all you do in blog about topics raised by other bloggers. Eventually, you're just becoming reactionary. Give people something worth reading and writing about if you want to stand out. I think [Copyblogger](#) is the best example of this—they consistently produce educational and original posts about how to improve your copy.
2. **Be A Curator** - If you still stumble across something that is worthy of posting, don't just repost links. Take the time to synthesize the discussion and put out your own viewpoint or critique. This is what I did when discussing [whether or not you should only hire experienced web analysts](#).
3. **Link Bait With Politesse** -Don't be afraid to stake out a position that other people might disagree with, but don't be provocative or misleading for the sake of attention. If you're going to offer commentary on other people's posts, remember to clarify with them if you intend to take them to task. Again, with just a screen and a keyboard between anyone and their emotions, common courtesy rules the day.

None of these ground rules are earth shattering; in fact they're all common sense. It takes a little patience and hard work to earn a reputation, but only seconds to destroy it. Of course, you can have fun too...

Big Blog Group Hug - Love Your Readers!

You are nothing without your readers and subscribers (have you [subscribed](#) to Digital Alex yet?), so take care to nurture your virtual community. The same is true of your blogging peers, both big and small. This is not a zero-sum game, everyone can succeed at the same time. There is plenty of pie to go around, so let's talk about ways to dish some out.

1. **Long Live Comments** - It goes without saying that you should read and respond to comments on your blog. More important, you should do so promptly. I get email alerts and I'm on those things like a hawk. What's also true is that, if appropriate, you should comment on someone else's blog if they write about you or link to you in some way. You don't want to be too overwhelming here, but if you have a way to add to the conversation, or just want to thank them, do so. You're trying to cement these relationships and show your appreciation.

2. **Entertain Me** - Don't forget to make your fun to interact with: pictures, video, podcasts. Long, dense blocks of text are not very readable or approachable. People will definitely take the time to read relevant content that helps them, but why put up a barrier or turn off new readers? Think about how easy it is to scan and digest your blog.
3. **Write Better And For The Right People** - Unless you're pumping out podcasts or vodcasts, then you need to work on your writing and voice. It's not just what you say, it's how you say it. Again, I favor Copyblogger, but there are plenty of options. My opinion is that you should write for your audience first, but remember the search engines too ([here](#) and [here](#)). It's your blog, so you can say whatever you want, but if you're narcissistic and don't keep your readers' interests and needs in mind, soon you'll be talking to yourself.
4. **Lift Other Bloggers Up** - We're all in this together. Whatever your niche, there is a community of bloggers of which you're a part. Lift them up. Link to the ones you admire. Quote them if they say something great. Interview people in the space. The more you give, the more you get in my opinion. It's something I learned from [Keith Ferrazzi](#) and his book [Never Eat Alone](#) and it's true no matter what medium you operate in, especially the blogosphere.

More than anything, I hope you got the spirit of blogging from this post. It should be fun. It should be social. It should be rewarding. It may be tough, but it's always an adventure.

Credit where credit is due, I consulted a variety of sources when I started up my blog and I've listed them below.

Contact Me

By now your blog should be humming along. Do you have any steps or revisions to suggest? Email me at alex@alexcohen.com.

Resources: [Guy Kawasaki](#), [Web Pro News](#), [eMomsAtHome](#), [Squidoo](#), [Blogger Help](#)