

## Vault University: Setting Up An Author Blog

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This document is part of the **Author Platform/Book Promotion curriculum** offered by **Vault University** at <http://vaultu.publetariat.com>, and was authored by [April L. Hamilton](#).

There are lots of blog services out there, many of which are free. Some options to look at are [www.blogger.com](http://www.blogger.com) (free), [www.typepad.com](http://www.typepad.com) (fee-based) and [www.wordpress.org](http://www.wordpress.org) (free). To find more, just do an internet search on “blog” or “free blog”.

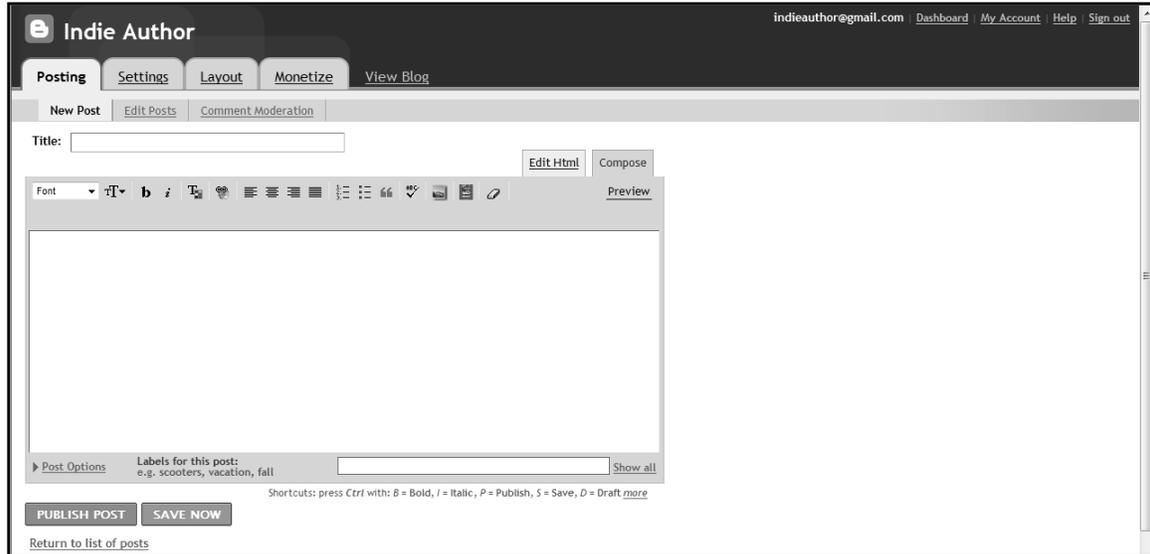
Blogs begin with the same kind of sign up and template selection process as fill-in-the-blanks websites: you create an account, then choose from a selection of pre-designed blog layouts which feature different colors, design elements and fonts. From there, blogs all work in basically the same way: you type an entry (a “post”) into an online form that’s much like an email “compose” form or word processor interface, apply the same types of formatting options to your text as you might in an email form or word processor (i.e., bold, italic, font, etc.), click a button to preview your post, go back to make changes if necessary, preview again, then click another button to publish your post.



To create a new post on Blogger, I log in to my “Dashboard”, then click the “New Post” button. Once I do that, this is what I see:

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Creating a new blog post is as simple as entering a title, then typing my post into the big text box. The formatting and tool buttons on the toolbar look and act just like the ones in my word processor, so it's really very easy for beginners to get started quickly. Blogger doesn't force you to preview your posts before clicking the "Publish Post" button, but it's a good idea to use the little "Preview" link to see how it's going to look before publishing. All blogging services provide the user with some way to preview the post before publishing, whether via a "Preview" button or a "Preview" link. Get in the habit of previewing to avoid embarrassing mistakes.

The blog service will automatically date- and time-stamp your posts. Text formatting options will generally be much more limited than what you get in a word processor, but they will generally work the same way they do in a word processor: highlight the text you want to format, then click a toolbar button to apply formatting changes.

Most blog services will also have a button for inserting hyperlinks in your posts, and some even allow full use of HTML to insert pictures, video, widgets, etc., but these are all optional to the user: if your preference is to simply type in plain text, you can do that. The blog service will also provide a profile page, on which you can provide as much or as little personal information as you like to create something akin to an author website's About page.

Most blog providers allow you to choose whether or not blog visitors will be allowed to post comments and feedback to your posts; this and other blog settings are specified in the "Settings", "Options" or "Administration" menu after you log in. In most cases, there's an option

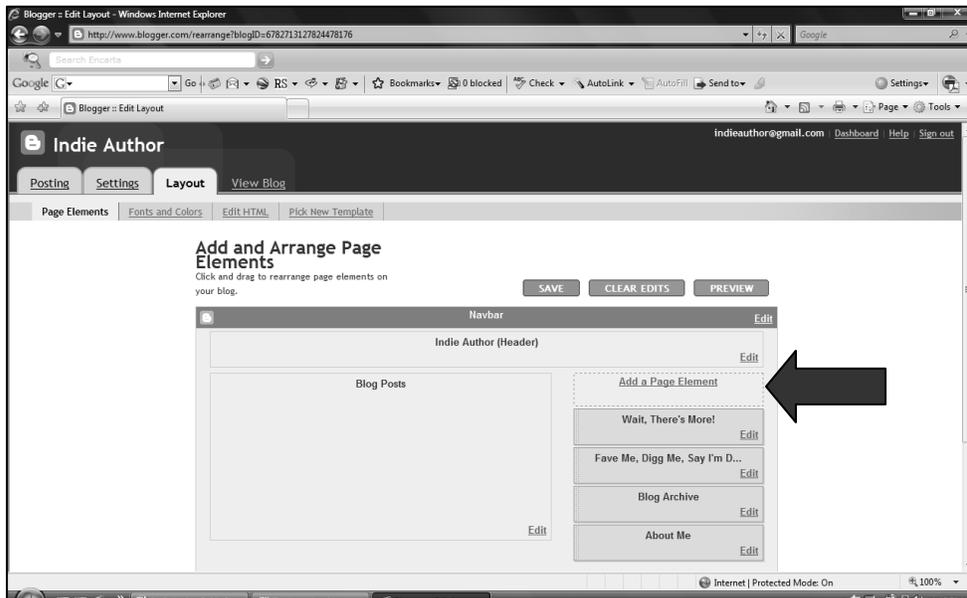
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allowing the blog author to review and approve any comments and feedback before they become visible on the blog; this is called "comment moderation".

You can blog under any name you wish, but since the purpose of your blog is to promote your work, it makes sense to blog under your author, or 'brand' name.

Most blogs will automatically generate a link to every post you create and keep a running list of those links displayed on your main blog page, but they will also provide the option to turn this feature off if you wish (in the "Settings", "Options" or "Administration" menu). It's typical for blog authors to be able to categorize the list by topic or date by adjusting their blog settings as well. Increasingly, blog services allow users to employ HTML and site widgets. Blogger, for example, has an "Add a Page Element" feature in the "Layout" section of the user dashboard.



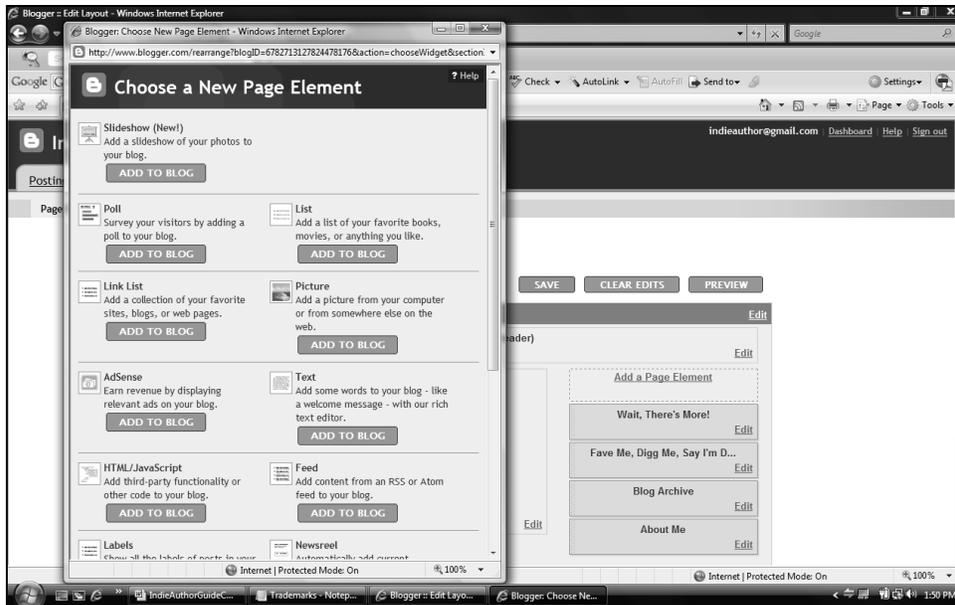
When the user clicks the "Add A Page Element" link, a new window opens and displays all the available site tools and widgets that can be added. The "HTML/Javascript" feature presents a text box into which the user can type (or paste) HTML and internet scripts to add special features to his blog.

If you see a widget you like on someone else's blog, look for a "get this widget" link near the widget. Click that link to go to the widget provider's site. From there, you can fill in a brief web form by answering a few questions that will customize the widget for your site. When you submit the form, you will be presented with a box containing a bunch of web page code. Just copy all of that code (but don't close the page it came from, in case you need to re-copy it), then return to your blog's "Add a Page Element" or "Add HTML/Script" feature and follow the prompts to paste

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the copied code into your blog. In the screen capture shown below, I'd select the "HTML/Javascript" item from the Choose a New Page Element menu to paste in a new block of widget code.



Like Blogger, most blog services also provide widgets like those shown above (i.e., photo slide show, visitor poll, link list, etc.). Users can add the widgets and services to their blogs with just a button click, or by selecting the item from a list. Setting up any widget is usually as simple as following a step-by-step, fill-in-the-blanks web form.

### Getting Your Blog Up and Running

Remember that while your new blog will be "live" and visible online as soon as you've created it, no one is likely to accidentally stumble across it until you begin promoting and linking to it. Therefore, create a 'welcome to my blog' sort of post to get started and have something to preview, then experiment with the various widgets and settings until you're happy with the look of your blog. But try to get through this process within an hour or two, don't let it drag on for days, because it won't be long before people *do* start finding your blog and you don't want their first impression of you to be a bad one.

### What To Blog

First, you must identify the target audience for your blog. This is because the content of the blog will be dictated by the target audience. If your target audience is readers, for example, you'll want to blog about books, writers, literature in general, issues related to book pricing, ebook technology and so forth. If your target audience is other writers, some of those same issues may

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be appropriate but you will also want to blog about craft, the writing life, your experiences in self-publishing or trying to get an agent or mainstream contract, etc.

Regardless of your target audience you'll want to use the blog as an outlet for promoting your books and related work, though you don't want the blog to become little more than a collection of sales pitches. It's reasonable to blog about a book or seminar/event you're selling on just three occasions, and even those may be two occasions too many if your blog content is otherwise sparse: when the book is released for sale or your seminar/event is opened for registration, when the book hits a bestseller list/sells out its print run/makes the mainstream news or your seminar/event is nearing its registration deadline or is nearly sold out, and when the book wins a contest or award or the seminar/event is over and you wish to blog about how it went.

This isn't to say you shouldn't be more subtly promoting the book or seminar/event between those three post types. You should always have where-to-buy links for your books or registration links for your seminars/events prominently displayed on your blog and author website, and it's also a good idea to mention those books and events in the context of other posts wherever they're germane to the topic of those posts (e.g., in a post about characterization you can talk about how you approached character in your novel and provide the name of that novel with a link to a page where the reader can buy it). I'm just saying that if the sole purpose of a given post is to sell a book or event/seminar, its informational value is very limited.

It's entirely legitimate to inform your readers about the availability of your books and events, but abusive to constantly pummel them with sales messages. Therefore, try to limit such posts to situations in which you genuinely have something newsworthy to say about the book or event.

Your blog entries must be compelling enough to keep people coming back. Since anyone can write a blog, there are lots of boring and pointless blogs out there. Your blog posts will be most effective if you wait until you've got something worth writing about, but not every post must be a wellspring of pithiness.

Most writers are interested in learning more about other writers' technique, or even just commiserating over common challenges. You can blog about your process, your stumbling blocks, your frustrations and triumphs in writing. When you attend a writers' seminar or class, blog about it. Blog about great new writer resources or websites you've discovered, promotional activities and your degree of success with them, books you've read and your opinions about them, and of course, about your works in progress. You can blog about contests, writers' groups,

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the publication process...just about anything writing-related, so long as it's interesting, informative, surprising or provocative.

Blogging about your experiences querying or dealing with agents and editors is another popular option, but if you do this be careful not to write anything that could be construed as defamation or libel; it's safest not to name names at all when you're writing about another person, regardless of who that person is, unless you're showering him or her with praise and admiration or crediting the author of an article/post upon which you wish to comment.

About the only people who can get away with mere pontificating in an author blog are celebrities and lively nonfiction authors. Plenty of people would love to read David Sedaris' description of a typical day in his life, because it would undoubtedly be just as funny and insightful as his published articles and essays. As for the rest of us...the general public probably won't be all that interested in reading that your cat threw up on the quilt again this morning and you finally figured out how to send pictures with your new cell phone. Remember that people visit your blog because you're a writer: because they're fans of your work or they're seeking a writer's viewpoint on things. Try to keep your posts relevant and on-point.

### **Blog Integrity**

While blog services allow the author of a post to go back and edit or delete a post anytime they want to, you should only use this feature sparingly, and only to correct mistakes on the order of typographical errors. From the time your post goes "live", people all over the world may be linking to it or telling friends about it via email. These people will be very annoyed if the post they were excited about has changed since they linked to it or told other people about it, especially if the particular thing that piqued their interest in your post is no longer there. Consider the following scenario.

You blog about a writing seminar you'd like to attend. Other writers who are interested in the seminar bookmark your post and email their friends about it. Some writers even put the link to your post on their websites. You decide not to attend the seminar after hearing bad reviews from members of your writers' group. You don't want to have any part in promoting a bad seminar, but you also don't want to badmouth anyone online, so you decide to simply delete the post. All the links to it on websites where it was added are now broken, which reflects badly on the owners of those sites. People who received the link in an email find the link is broken, which reflects badly on the person who sent them the link. All the bookmarks to it are now broken, which annoys the people who bookmarked it. In the end, all of this confusion and annoyance reflects badly on you, and it's a safe bet none of those people will visit your blog again.

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It would've been better to leave the original post intact and enter a new blog entry about your decision not to attend the seminar, along with a boldface note at the top of the old blog entry directing readers to the new post. You can avoid seeming to badmouth the seminar by choosing your words carefully, and limiting your remarks to statements of fact (i.e., "My writing partner attended last year and he said it was disappointing...").

I recently read an article that said bloggers should never delete a post, nor even edit a post without making the edits known, even if the blogger learns she has written something that's factually inaccurate. It was suggested that in such a case, the blog author should handle the situation the same way a magazine would: by leaving the original post intact and printing a formal retraction or correction notice. Given that people who have bookmarked, or linked to, the original post may not see your notice, a suggested alternative was to edit the original post by formatting the incorrect text as "strikethrough" (like this: ~~strikethrough~~), then to enter your desired changes. This makes it clear to the reader that something has changed without breaking any links or bookmarks, and avoids any hint that you may be trying to hide your mistake.

One good way to avoid blog mistakes and revisions is to compose your blog posts offline in a text editor or word processor first. Take all the time you want to write, revise, spell check and polish your post offline, then copy, paste and post with confidence.

### **Blog Maintenance**

Try to blog regularly and frequently (no less than twice per month, but once a week is ideal), and always be sure to respond to any comments or questions you receive on your blog. This sort of interaction with your blog visitors is a sign that people are interested in what you have to say, and your responses encourage them to keep the conversation going.

### **AMAZON AUTHOR PAGE AND AUTHOR CENTRAL BLOG**

Authors with at least one book for sale on Amazon's U.S. site can blog on the site using Amazon's Author Central feature (formerly known as AmazonConnect). You can learn more about this service at <https://authorcentral.amazon.com>.

Once you've signed up for the service and your application has been approved (following a verification process to ensure you have books available for sale on Amazon – and note that your books can be self-published, or available in Kindle format only), your Amazon Author Page will be created and ready for you to complete.

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The page includes a Biography area, a listing of all your Amazon books, an area to post videos (like book trailers or video blog entries), an area to list any upcoming events or appearances, and a Latest Blog Posts section.

While it's not a complete author web presence solution, an Amazon Author Page is a powerful marketing tool and should be used by every author whose books are available on Amazon. Your Author Page puts you in almost direct contact with your readers and potential readers because links to your Author Page are provided on each of your print-edition book listing pages on Amazon. As of this writing those links do not appear on Kindle book listing pages, but according to Amazon support this is a feature that should be available in the future.

Author Pages can also be searched or browsed alphabetically by Amazon site visitors, so there's more than one way for readers to find your Author Page on the Amazon site.

You can use the Author Central blog tool on the Amazon site itself to set up a free blog which will display on your Author Page, or you can link your Latest Blog Posts area to a pre-existing blog following a simple, step-by-step process in the Author Central area of Amazon. For example, I've linked my Blogger blog to my Amazon Author Page so that anytime I create a new blog entry on my Blogger blog, the title of the new post and a link to it are added to my Amazon Author Page in the Latest Blog Posts area. In my opinion this is preferable to using the Author Central blog because that blog doesn't have all the same features as a dedicated blogging service like Blogger or Wordpress, and the URL, or link, to your Author Central blog will be long and difficult to remember. Also, your Author Central blog posts will be surrounded by all the usual Amazon site content: links to other products, paid advertising, etc.

Blogging on an Author Central blog works much the same as anywhere else, but while the Author Central blog has some features that make it very easy to include links to, and pictures of, Amazon products (like your books!) in your Author Central blog, it lacks the full set of features and widgets you'll typically find on a dedicated blogging service.

In terms of other blog content, you must follow the Amazon Author Central Terms of Use. They're fairly standard and self-explanatory, but do take the time to look them over when you first set up an Amazon Author Central account. In addition to the Terms of Use, apply the same common sense when posting to your Amazon Author Central blog as if you were posting to any other blog: always consider the impression your post will make.

To view an example of an Amazon Author page, go to Amazon and look up the print edition of any current bestseller. On the book listing page, scroll down to the More About the Author

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section, immediately beneath the Product Details section, and click on the Visit [Author Name]'s Page link.

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