Making Everything Easier!

Blog Design

Learn to:

- Create an effective blog design
- Apply design principles that make your site appealing and easy to use
- Work with basic CSS and HTML

IN FULL COLOR!

Melissa Culbertson

Blog Design For Dummies

Chapter 7: Developing Your Overall Blog Layout

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by Melissa Culbertson



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Introduction

The average person spends roughly three seconds on a website before deciding whether to stay. That's not enough time to read your latest blog post and know your blog is awesome. Instead, design impacts that decision. If the visitor does happen to stay, you want to keep them around with a blog that just plain makes sense to use.

This book seeks to help you improve your blog design, whether you're starting from scratch, redesigning an existing blog, or simply tinkering with your current design. I cover blog design in ways you might expect — design principles, colors, and fonts — and in ways you might not know are actually part of design — navigation, usability, and shareability. This book breaks all that down in an approachable, easy-to-use format so you can design a blog that encourages readers to stick around.

About This Book

Think of this book as a design guide for the average (and awesome) blogger. Most bloggers don't have experience with design or coding. You simply have a voice you want to share through your blog. Whether you design a blog yourself, hire someone, or purchase pre-made design elements, this book gives you to tools to understand what makes a blog successful from a design and navigation standpoint.

This book is geared towards bloggers of all skill levels, although if you've been blogging for a while you may already know some of these tips or techniques. But not so fast! You may have been blogging for a long time but never knew underlying design principles, basic color theory, or exactly how to do a particular technique I mention. That means everyone learns something from this book.

By the end of this book, you'll know:

- What constitutes good blog design and why design matters in the first place
- How to ensure your blog design syncs with your blog goals, your audience, and your content
- ✓ Ways to customize your blog design, from headers to footers and everything in between
- How to design your blog to be easy to navigate and use
- ✓ Ways to create design-friendly content to improve readability

You can work through this book page by page or completely out of order. You'll find value either way. In typical *For Dummies* fashion, this book makes it easy to find what you're looking for with clearly outlined parts, chapter intros that spell out what you'll learn, and a detailed index to find your way to something specific.

Finally, this book isn't meant to intimidate you when it comes to blog design. In fact, my goal is to empower you to take control of your blog design and feel confident about it. Even when your design is complete, use this book as your design guide when you need help with a specific piece of your design or just want to browse through examples of great blog design.

Foolish Assumptions

Forgive me, but I'm about to make some assumptions about your blogging knowledge. I expect that if you picked up this book, you know some of the basics of blogging such as uploading a photo, publishing a blog post, and installing plug-ins. I assume that most bloggers who buy this book already have a blog, but if you don't then you can still find value in this book. It just won't cover the beginning steps of how to set up a blog and get things rolling.

The majority of this book is not geared towards any specific blog platform; however, when I show you steps, they are typically for the WordPress.org platform because it's the most popular one. The majority of plug-ins that I mention are also for WordPress, although some plug-ins can be used on multiple blog platforms. When possible, I mention options for Blogger, Tumblr, and a few other platforms, too. I also assume that you aren't a developer or professional blog designer. I wrote this book to make good blog design achievable for the masses, so my advice won't always be the most complex or require you to dig deep into your code. However, it will always be geared toward helping bloggers without a design or technical background achieve a blog design they can be proud to show their friends and fellow bloggers.

What I don't assume is the type of blogger you are. The information in this book isn't just for a parent blogger or a food blogger or any other type of blogger. I wrote this book with all bloggers in mind and with oodles of fullcolor examples of great blogs on the Web. In fact, pay special attention to those blog designs outside your niche because you might discover cool ideas you don't see within your own blogging circles.

Conventions Used in This Book

Throughout this book, I use a few basic conventions over and over to make the information I present easy to understand:

- If you see text in **bold**, you're meant to type just as it appears in the book. A little exception though: when you work through a steps list, then each step is bold to make the steps easier to follow. In those cases, the text to type isn't bold.
- If you see text in italics, this means I'm introducing a word or phrase you might or might not know, then defining it.
- Web addresses and code appear in monofont. If you're reading a digital version of this book on a device connected to the Internet, note that you can click the web address to visit that website. Nice!
- ✓ When you need to select an option in a menu, I use a little arrow (↔) to let you know the path to take, such as Dashboard↔Appearance.

Icons Used in This Book

This book features little icons like these to point out special points of interest:



The Tip icon marks tips (well, duh!) and extra ideas that you can use to make your blog design even better. Consider these the make-designing-your-blogeasier icons.

When you see the Remember icon, store this information in the back of your mind for future use. This icon marks things I want to reinforce as super important.

Red alert! Red alert! This little gem marks important information that may alert you to design pitfalls or save you a headache or two. I don't use this one often so pay special attention when I do.

Information tagged as Technical Stuff means extra geeky stuff that you can normally skip over. Unless, of course, you love getting technical.

Beyond the Book

Blog Design For Dummies isn't just what you see within the book you're holding. Here's a glimpse at this book's companion content, which you can reference online at anytime:

Cheat Sheet: Whether you want to know the meaning of a term or refresh your memory about main design principles, you have those answers and more in this book's online Cheat Sheet (www.dummies. com/cheatsheet/blogdesign). Consider this Cheat Sheet your handy

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reference guide for content you use again and again. It also includes a list of links for all the plug-ins covered in this book.

- Extras: There's so much about blog design to share that I even wrote four more pieces of content that couldn't fit inside this book. Be sure not to pass over the extras for Parts II through V. In each of those parts, I include a link to an online article that extends beyond what I cover in this book. You'll find how to create a favicon, ideas for using navigation to drive traffic to your blog pages, clever ways to greet new visitors, and ten great websites for design inspiration. Discover these extras at www. dummies.com/extras/blogdesign.
- ✓ Updates: The tech world is fast-moving so sometimes information published in a printed book does change. When substantial changes impact the accuracy in this book, we let you know. You can find these updates at www.dummies.com/go/blogdesignupdates.

Where to Go from Here

You don't have to start this book by flipping the page to Chapter 1 and reading chapter by chapter until you get to the Appendix. But, hey, you can if you want! Start anywhere your burning questions take you, whether you're dying to know how to select colors or fonts (Chapter 6) or ways to make your content easy to find (Chapter 12). However, consider the first few chapters mandatory. They provide you a basic foundation not only in design, but in understanding your blog. These basics will undoubtedly lead to a stronger blog design.

If you have a question or want more tips on blog design (or blogging in general), find me on my blog Momcomm (www.momcomm.com), Twitter (www.twitter.com/MelACulbertson), or Facebook (www.facebook.com/momcomm).

For additional blog design inspiration, take a peek at my Pinterest boards (www.pinterest.com/melaculbertson). I have boards dedicated solely to blog design goodness from color combinations to even more blog design tips.

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Developing Your Overall Blog Layout

In This Chapter

- Exploring a variety of layout types
- Choosing a blog theme or framework
- ▶ Looking at options for laying out your home page's main content
- Changing full posts to excerpts
- Including advertising that doesn't scare away your readers

very blog starts with a skeleton. In fact, one of the greatest things about using a blog platform is that you don't have to build a site completely from scratch. Whether you're designing your blog for the first time or going through a redesign, creating your overall blog layout is like forming the skeleton that you then flesh out with your design and content.

This chapter walks you through building that skeleton and then some. In this chapter, I talk about blog layout types as well as choosing a theme or framework that becomes the foundation for your blog design. I also discuss options for featuring content on your home page and show you ways to create blog post excerpts. In looking at your blog design as a whole, you need to consider how advertising affects your entire design, so I cover that, too.

Getting Familiar with Common Layout Types

Figuring out how to lay out your blog isn't a cut-and-dried decision. Design is subjective. You might choose a blog design layout based on its functionality or just because you like how the layout looks. Deciding on a layout type makes choosing a blog theme or framework easier because you can immediately narrow down the theme choice (of course, you can change your mind). And although the layout types in this section are by no means a comprehensive list, they do give you a sense of the possibilities for your own blog design.

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Two-column right sidebar

Your standard, run-of-the-mill blog design displays your main content on the left side with a sidebar that goes along the right side of your blog. But blogs designed using this layout can be anything but run-of-the-mill. In Figure 7-1, The Nailasaurus uses a two-column layout, drawing attention to the main post with a large photo that you see before you scroll down further into the blog post. The font in the navigation menu also exists in the sidebar, and the clever social media nail icons reinforce what this blog is about. Together, these design elements unify the blog header, sidebar, and main column.



© Samantha Tremlin, www.thenailasaurus.com

Figure 7-1: This blog uses a two-column layout.

Here is why this layout works well for blog design:

We read from left to right. Because English and most other languages move from left to right, this layout style makes your most important content (blog posts) the first thing someone sees to read. In fact, a study from the Nielsen Norman Group (www.nngroup.com) concluded that web users spend 69 percent of their time viewing the left side of the page.

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This layout is familiar to blog readers. Because this layout type is so popular, readers who frequently visit blogs are familiar with where to look for the blog post content and sidebar information.

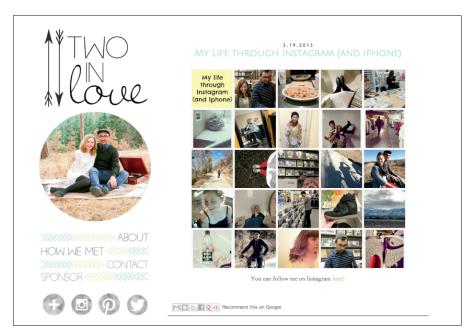
Of course, using a blog layout that so many others choose can also make your blog harder to stand out in a sea of blogs. In addition, while using only one sidebar usually makes a blog design less cluttered, you have to be more selective as to what content to feature.



Split sections of your single sidebar into two parts if you need more space but don't want to commit to two full sidebars.

Two-column left sidebar

The mirror image of the previous layout, this two-column blog design showcases your main blog content on the right side with a sidebar on the left. Opting for a sidebar on the right is definitely the more common choice in blogland, but using a left sidebar can still make an impact. In Figure 7-2, you see the blog The Two in Love (www.thetwoinlove.com) uses this layout style beautifully. This blog design starts off with a large blog name and photo that pull you down towards the navigation menu and social media buttons.



© Becky Hankla at TheTwoinLove.com, Blog Design by Bri Lamkin at TheSecretLifeofBee.com

Figure 7-2: This layout features main content on the right side, drawing attention with large graphics like this gallery of images.

Because we read left to right, content placed in a left sidebar often takes more prominence than content in a right sidebar. This makes a left sidebar a good place to have advertising or something important you want the reader to know or do. In addition, you want your main column to be especially attractive in order to draw the reader's eye over to read a post. You can achieve this with good imagery and a blog post title style that uses a special font or color.

A blog design that uses a left sidebar does have some disadvantages. First, this layout type can negatively affect search engine optimization (SEO). Search engines scan content from left to right (just like how most humans do) and place more importance at what they scan first. You want search engines to read your main content first rather than something like navigational links or an advertisement.



You can get around the search engine disadvantage by ensuring that the HTML structure of your site places your main content first instead of after the left sidebar content. The good news is that many themes do this for you; otherwise, you have to adjust your CSS to implement this, which may not always be easy to implement. For an introduction to CSS, see Chapter 9.

Three-column right sidebars

Another common blog design layout type features a main column on the left with two sidebars on the right side. The blog grain edit (http://grainedit.com), shown in Figure 7-3, uses images to highlight featured posts and a gray box to draw attention to subscription options and social media links.

Many bloggers like having two right sidebars because more key sidebar content can appear toward the top of the page. However, with two sidebars, you can easily get carried away with heavy advertising, buttons, or widgets, making your design look junky and cluttered.

If you'd like the extra sidebar space that two sidebars offers, create a hierarchy to avoid a cluttered design. Some bloggers merge the two columns at the top of the blog layout and separate the columns further down the page. In addition, group similar items within the same column. For example, don't place some social media buttons in one column and a few more in the other. Place all the social media buttons together in the same column.



If you decide to go for a three-column layout with right sidebars, keep your sidebars a reasonable width so they don't make your main column too narrow.

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© grain edit, http://grainedit.com

Figure 7-3: This blog keeps the sidebars uncluttered and balanced.

Three-column with split sidebars

This layout also uses two sidebars, but the sidebars appear on either side of your main content area. Symmetrical design can sometimes come off as too static, but it can also provide balance and order to your blog layout. Figure 7-4 shows the blog Olivine's Charm School (http://olivinecharmschool.com), which features a beautiful three-column layout with split sidebars.



With sidebar content separated by a main column, one of the best ways to decide what content goes in which sidebar is to place key sidebar content in the left column, where your readers will look first. Olivine's Charm School uses the left sidebar for navigation, instead of displaying the navigation across the top — a great example of keeping a three-column layout looking clean and organized, with important content in the left sidebar.

When working with a layout that splits up your sidebars, avoid making your sidebars so large that your main content feels squeezed in the middle. A narrow column for your main blog content hinders readability.

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© Olivine, Design by Freckled Nest

Figure 7-4: This design points you to the left column, which houses the navigation menu.

Magazine style

Magazine-style blog designs have two distinct calling cards: they rely on imagery and serve as a portal to your content.

This layout type often features small teasers of text with images. Sometimes, though, bloggers use only images with very little text. In Figure 7-5, you can see how the Parent Pretty blog (http://parentpretty.com) features a larger image as the star of the page and blog post teasers. After you click an image or blog post title, the full blog post opens.



For blogs that write about highly visual topics like fashion or travel, this layout type can work great. However, magazine styles also work well for bloggers who write about many different topics. Typical blog layouts put the most recent content at the top of the page, but magazine-style layouts give

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readers to a chance to see blog post excerpts from different categories all at one time. When a reader clicks to read more, they are directed to a full blog post. When done well, this layout style helps readers easily scan a home page to find the topics they're most interested in. The layout then directs readers to individual posts around those topics.

Magazine-style blogs also give bloggers a chance to break away from the typical left-column, right sidebar look on their home page. A magazine style layout can help a blog appear more like a large online publication (similar to a professional magazine) rather than a blog.

So what's are the downsides of magazine-style blog layouts?



© ParentPretty.com, blog design by PurrDesign.com

Figure 7-5: This design focuses on imagery to entice readers to click over from the magazine-style home page.

- ✓ They can easily become cluttered and overwhelming. To avoid this, consider the hierarchy and organization of your home page content. For example, Dear Crissy's blog includes a post excerpt with a large photo to showcase the most current post. A comparatively large image tells visitors where to look first. Underneath this most recent post, other blog posts are organized by category to help readers navigate to the content that interests them most.
- If you feature four topics on your home page yet write about only one of those topics every six months, your home page can look outdated, which looks especially awkward if that post was time sensitive.
- This layout asks readers to click to reach your a full blog post, versus having at least one full post on the home page.

Adaptable layouts for different devices

When working on your blog design, you might wonder what layout width your blog design should be. Lucky for you, blog theme developers handle that for you. Most blog themes adjust your blog layout to work with your visitors' screen sizes by using either a fluid or responsive layout.

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A *fluid layout* is based on proportions so that blog elements take up the same percentage of space from one screen size to another. In essence, fluid layouts shrink or enlarge a layout design proportionally.

A website with *responsive design* takes fluid layouts a step further by using queries that determine what device type the visitor is using. The website then presents a different layout based on that device. For example, a layout could be three columns on a computer screen but only two columns on a tablet. I cover responsive design a little more in Chapter 10.



Many developers create blog themes that fit the 960 Grid System, This grid system uses 960 pixels as a maximum width with portions of a design divided into 12 or 16 columns. With this grid system, your blog's main content would fit within this width and then your background image or color would fill the sides to fit the width of the visitor's screen resolution. You can learn more about how the grid system works at 960 Grid System (http://960.gs).



To see what your design looks like at different resolutions and even on different devices, give Screenfly (http://quirktools.com/screenfly) a try.

Selecting a Blog Theme

One of the biggest decisions you make about your blog design is deciding which blog theme to choose. A *blog theme* is a collection of files — such as functions.php and style.css files — that work together to produce the functionality and design of your blog. Some themes adhere to a certain layout type, and others give you the flexibility to adjust the theme layout to reflect your preferences.

Overall, you choose a theme based on your blogging platform. (Your platform is the service or software that transforms the content you input into the blog format that your visitors see and use online.) Popular platforms range from free services that host your blog for you (such as WordPress.com, Blogger, and Tumblr) to more advanced options such as WordPress.org (which requires web development skills to set up and host yourself). The free options are easier to use but less flexible. The advanced options are more flexible but require web development skills. Regardless of your platform, your blog's theme must work that platform and all the popular blogging platform's offer a variety of themes you can choose from.

These next few sections get you familiar with things to look at when picking out a theme, whether you should invest in a premium theme, and places to find themes.

Considering a theme's flexibility

Not all blog themes are created equal. Some give you more design flexibility than others. Here are some things to consider when selecting a theme for your blog design:

- Overall design: Of course, how a blog theme looks should play a role in your decision. Thinking about the things you decide about your blog (see Chapter 3), ask yourself how well the design — before any customizations — fits with your brand.
- Customization: Some themes enable you to make a lot of customizations in your design and functionality whereas others don't. When deciding on a theme, understand what design changes (like a color scheme) you can make from the theme's options. Also, pay extra attention to how much you can customize a header because this becomes the first part of your design a visitor sees.

In Figure 7-6, you can see customization options (color scheme, link color, layout) for the WordPress theme Twenty Eleven, which is quite basic compared with some other themes.

Layout options: In the beginning of this chapter, I share some common layout options. Some themes provide layout options, while others might keep to one style (like solely a magazine layout).

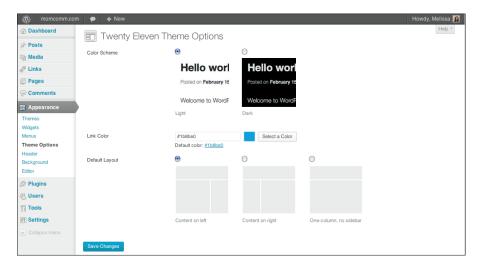


Figure 7-6: Some themes offer minimal choices.

- Widget-ready: Widgets enable you to easily add content and features to your blog design, such as a category list and search box for readers to search your content. Nearly all themes allow you to use widgets (if a theme doesn't, don't use it), but some also offer custom widgets, like one that shows Recent Posts or an image gallery.
- Page templates: Some themes include multiple page templates that make it easy for you to create a full-size page with no sidebar or a page that showcases your images in a predesigned gallery.
- Cross-browser tested: Many themes are tested to ensure they work on all major browsers.
- Search engine optimization: Some themes are developed to make it easier for search engines to index your site. Also, some themes are built with a structure to ensure that important content precedes less important content so search engines read your blog post content first. I cover search engine optimization more in Chapter 12.
- Date last updated: Before deciding on a theme, check to see the last time it was updated. Themes should stay current with the latest platform releases.
- Responsive design: Responsive designs ensures your blog design looks great on all devices, whether someone is viewing your blog on their desktop, a tablet, or a mobile phone. Read more about responsive design in Chapter 10.



If you're unsure about downloading or purchasing a particular theme, try doing an online search for "Theme Name + Review" to see whether anyone has written about their experiences with that theme.

Choosing between a free or premium theme

With blogs being so popular, blog themes have sprung up all over the web. Literally thousands of themes are available that might work for your blog design. Aside from a theme's flexibility, one of the main factors in choosing a blog theme is, of course, the cost.

You can find many, many free and premium themes. Of course, a free theme is, well, free!, and you aren't out any cash if you decide months down the road that you don't like your theme. In addition, if you're just starting out as a blogger and unsure whether blogging is for you in the long run, a free theme is probably the best solution for you.

Premium themes can range in price but offer many advantages:

More customization options: Premium themes typically have more ways that you can customize your theme. You can often make changes without doing any coding by using the option panels shown in your dashboard. As I mention in the previous section, some themes include custom widgets and page templates, too, like the Raffinade theme on Themeforest (see Figure 7-7) which costs about \$35. The search box is customized to match the design and this theme also.

Well-coded: Premium themes are more likely to have cleaner code under the hood of the design. A poorly coded theme can slow down your blog's loading time and make it more difficult to interpret the code if you need to modify it. Sure, a free theme can most definitely be well coded, but developers of premium themes have more at stake because a poor-quality theme can hurt their reputation and affect sales.

Sometimes a poorly coded free theme is a result of inexperience, but occasionally, a free theme has malicious code that can harm your blog. If you stick with the reputable theme sources I discuss in this chapter, you're not likely to run into this problem. If you find a theme by doing a basic Google search, research the provider first to make sure others have worked with this provider for some time and its themes are worthwhile.

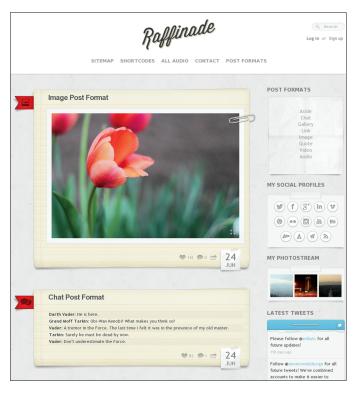


Figure 7-7: For a fee, premium themes offer a robust list of features.



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- Support: Nearly all premium themes offer some type of support for implementation or customization issues with a theme. Larger theme developers or framework creators such as Thesis (http://diythemes. com) even have robust support forums where you can learn and get support from peers and moderators.
- Security: Premium themes are more likely to be updated along with the blog platform's updates. Many blog platform updates are to fix security issues or potential issues so a free theme that hasn't been updated can leave your blog vulnerable.



You can definitely find great, high-quality free themes that you'll be happy with. If you consider using a free theme, just stick with reputable sites to ensure the quality.

Finding sources for themes

Finding the perfect theme can sometimes feel like trying to find a needle in a haystack. The following list doesn't cover every great site out there, but it should give you plenty of themes to choose from should you decide to use a theme.

WordPress.org

WordPress.org (http://www.wordpress.org) is flexible platform for new and experienced bloggers. You install and host this platform from your own server. Most bloggers pay companies like Hostgator a fee to host their blogs versus needing to own their own server. For more about self-hosting, refer to Chapter 1.

- WordPress: free; http://wordpress.org/extend/themes
- WordPress: premium; http://wordpress.org/extend/themes/ commercial
- WPExplorer: free and premium; www.wpexplorer.com
- WooThemes: free and premium; www.woothemes.com/productcategory/themes
- ElegantThemes: premium; www.elegantthemes.com (see Figure 7-8)
- Themeforest: premium; http://themeforest.net
- The Theme Foundry: premium; http://thethemefoundry.com
- Templatic: premium; http://templatic.com

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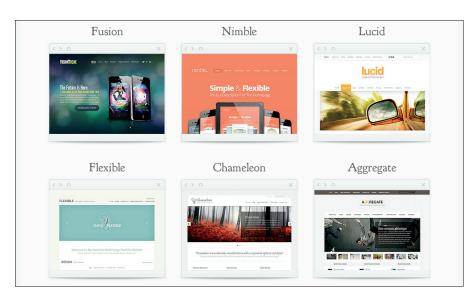


Figure 7-8: ElegantThemes offers clean, professional theme designs.

Blogger

Blogger (www.blogger.com) is a popular hosted blog platform from Google. Instead of handling the blog hosting yourself, Google hosts the blog for you (for free).

- BTemplates: free; http://btemplates.com
- Blogger Templates Hub: free; http://bloggertemplateshub.com/ blog
- Splashy Templates: free; www.splashytemplates.com

Both WordPress.org and Blogger

These two sites are good places to find themes for both WordPress.org and Blogger:

- Deluxe Templates: premium; www.deluxetemplates.net
- Etsy: premium; www.etsy.com (search for "WordPress theme" or "Blogger theme")

WordPress.com

WordPress.com (www.wordpress.com) is a free hosted blogging platform option for WordPress. One of the biggest differences between WordPress. com and WordPress.org is that you can't upload plug-ins or install a custom theme with a WordPress.com blog. However, you can customize the more

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than 200 themes that are provided. You can find these themes at WordPress. com (http://theme.wordpress.com).

Tumblr

Tumblr (www.tumblr.com) is a free, easy-to-use hosted blogging service. Tumblr is a considered a *microblogging*, platform, meaning that the platform is geared towards publishing short posts of text, images, and videos.

- Tumblr: www.tumblr.com/themes
- Themeforest: http://themeforest.net/category/blogging/ tumblr

Gaining more flexibility with a WordPress framework

If you're looking for the most flexibility to build whatever your heart desires, I suggest you look into WordPress frameworks as the basis for your blogging platform. A WordPress framework is basically a very plain structure that supports a custom WordPress.org theme (known as a *child theme* because, in the hierarchy of files that create the blog, the framework is the parent and the theme is the child). You can purchase a child theme to layer on top of your framework (then customize it) or build your own child theme, using the framework as your base.

With so much flexibility, give yourself time for the learning curve until you get the hang of how that framework operates. *WordPress Web Design For Dummies* by Lisa Sabin-Wilson can help you learn the technical skills you need to get started.

Note that you can't just put a regular WordPress. org theme over a framework. You have to use a child theme.

You can find free and premium WordPress frameworks that might suit you. Some frameworks offer more drag-and-drop functionality, and others provide extensive menus with ways to customize your design. Here are some popular WordPress frameworks:

- Genesis: \$59.95; http:// my.studiopress.com/themes/ genesis
- Thesis: starting at \$87; http:// diythemes.com
- Headway: starting at \$87; http:// headwaythemes.com
- Canvas: starting at \$70; www.woothemes. com/products/canvas
- PageLines: starting at \$97; www. pagelines.com
- Hybrid: free; http://themehybrid. com/hybrid-core
- Thematic: free; http://wordpress. org/extend/themes/thematic
- Atahualpa: free; http://wordpress. org/extend/themes/atahualpa
- WP Framework: free; http:// wordpress.org/extend/themes/ wp-framework

Exploring Ways to Showcase Blog Posts on Your Home Page

Regardless of the type of blog layout you want (see earlier sections on your choices), you still need to consider how to display blog posts on your home page. Some bloggers feature full blog posts, some just use excerpts, and others use a mix of both.

Although your layout type may dictate the need for only excerpts — say, a magazine-style layout — you still need to consider how many posts you display on your home page.



Your main goal here is to attract, not distract. A nice balance of blog posts pulls readers into your content rather than distracting them with too many choices.

Showing full blog posts or excerpts

Unless you decide on a layout type that calls for just excerpts or images (like magazine-style layouts), you have decisions to make regarding how content displays on the home page.

Using *full blog posts* means that if someone visits your home page, they see your latest blog post displayed in its entirety. Some bloggers show just one full post; other bloggers show a few.

When you show full blog posts, your visitors don't have to click a link to finish reading an entire post. Visitors can fully concentrate on reading through your entire post without having to break and wait for a new page to load.

On the downside, full blog posts can slow your home page's download time, especially if your home page includes a lot of full posts or if your posts have many images. In addition, full posts can limit a visitor's ability to see the breadth of your content, because you can fit only so many posts on your home page. Using a sidebar that effectively shows a wider array of posts gives readers a chance to see more without using post excerpts.



Of course, you can make some posts on your home page excerpts and still show full posts. See the section, "Creating blog post excerpts" for some ways on how to use excerpts.

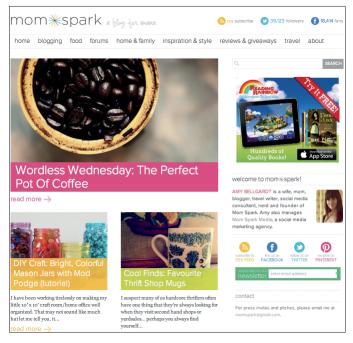
Using *excerpts* mean that you show snippets or teasers of multiple blog posts on your home page. To read the full post, a visitor clicks a link: something like Read More.

Using only excerpts on your home page has benefits as well. With excerpts, you fit more content in the same space, meaning you can show visitors more

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of what you offer within the main content area. With more to see in one location, visitors can easily scan multiple blog post titles and determine which posts they want to read.

Figure 7-9 shows a good use of post excerpts. With excerpts, Mom Spark (http://momspark.net) highlights the blog's diverse topics. A hero image (a large, attention-grabbing image at the top of a page) above the home page's main column signifies the most important post, and other excerpts nicely highlight other posts worth reading.



© MomSpark.net

Figure 7-9: This design highlights each excerpt with an image and a different color over the blog post name.

Because a visitor has to click to view a full post, using excerpts also encourages comments because the comment field is on the page with the full post. If you have full posts on the home page, visitors have to load a separate page after they read the post to comment. You also see an increase in page views due to visitors having to click (although better traffic should never ever be the main factor in the decision).

The downside of using excerpts is that not everyone will take the action to click a link to finish reading a blog post, especially if the excerpt content doesn't entice the reader enough. Instead, that visitor may read a little bit of

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each post excerpt and then move on. Also, if you already show full blog posts but then change to using excerpts, some readers may resist the change.



When making a decision between full posts and excerpts, consider your blog's topics as well as how long your posts typically are. If you write about a lot of different topics, using post excerpts makes that fact more apparent to your readers because they see snippets of different blog posts rather than scrolling through entire posts.

If your posts are shorter in length, using full blog posts might make more sense. A reader might be annoyed to click Read More and see only one more paragraph of content. Shorter, full posts can allow you to show more on the home page without using any Read More links.



Not all visitors start at your home page. Many people click a link from a social media site or a search engine that goes directly to an article. The decision for using full posts or excerpts affects just those who land directly on your home page, who often aren't familiar with your blog.

Deciding how many posts to put on your home page

Whether your home page displays full blog posts or excerpts, you need to decide how many posts should appear in your home page's main content section. If you want full posts on your home page, the number of posts to use mainly depends on two things:

- Length of posts: If your blog posts are long text, images, or both you probably want to include only one full post on your home page. If your posts are shorter, maybe you could use as many as three.
- Sidebar length: Some bloggers have a lot of sidebar content, and others keep it to a minimum. You don't want so many blog posts in your main column that visitors have to scroll way past your sidebar content. That leaves your content with empty space beside it. On the flip side, you don't want your main column to end and still have a never-ending flow of sidebar content, either.

When considering how many excerpts to include, some of that decision may be dictated by the blog layout or theme you use. In addition, consider the following:

- Length of excerpts: If your excerpts are on the longer side, you may want to use fewer of them. If you go for shorter excerpts, make them long enough to entice the reader to actually click through to the rest of the post.
- Categories to highlight: One of the great things about using excerpts is that you can show a better variety of your content in your home page's main column. That being said, if you show excerpts by categories and have 12 categories, posting 12 excerpts may look too confusing to a visitor. Instead, choose your most popular ones to showcase.

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After you decide how many posts you think work for your blog and make the adjustments on your site, be sure to check that your home page looks great visually with a good use of color, images, and overall appeal.

Creating blog post excerpts

So you want to use some blog post excerpts on your home page. Great! This section shows you a few common ways to do this in WordPress.org.

The most obvious way is to select a theme or framework that either uses excerpts automatically or makes it easy for you to add them. For example, a magazine style theme uses excerpts by default. Also, WordPress.org frameworks like Thesis and Genesis make changing your posts to automatic excerpts (sometimes called *teasers*) really easy to do.

In Figure 7-10, take a look at the teaser options for the Genesis framework. The featured post settings (middle section) let you place more prominence on your most recent posts by making them different than the other teasers. To make featured posts display as full posts, just leave the field blank for the Limit Featured Post Content to *xx* Characters. In the

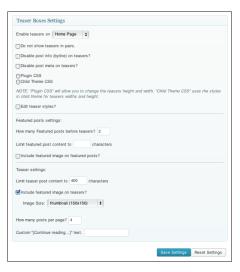


Figure 7-10: Teaser options depend upon framework settings.

Teaser Settings section, you have options for teasers that display in pairs underneath the optional featured posts. Finally, you can select the number of posts and customize the "Continue reading" text.

If your blog theme doesn't have teaser-creation options in your dashboard settings, you can do it yourself within the WordPress.org theme.

To make every post on your home page an excerpt that offers a teaser of your blog post, follow these steps from your WordPress Admin area:

1. Log into your WordPress.org dashboard.

2. Go to Appearance ditor.

This brings up all your template files, the files that control how your site displays on the web. On the right side, you see a list of your template files while one file loads in the main window.

3. Click your index.php file to open the template in the main window.

4. Find code that starts with <?php the_content.

The exact location of this code varies by theme. If you don't see it in index.php, look for templates called content.php or loop.php.

For example, in the Twenty Eleven theme, this code can be found in the content.php file. The entire snippet looks like this:

<?php the_content(__('Continue reading →', 'twentyeleven')); ?>

5. Change the_content to the_excerpt.

This makes your blog posts always display on your home page as excerpts instead of full posts.

You can also customize the excerpt link from Continue reading to something else.

6. Submit your changes by clicking Update File.

As an alternative, you can also create a simple post excerpt for individual posts, rather than modifying a PHP file to automatically do this for every new post. Here's how to do this in WordPress. (In Blogger, look for the Jump Break tool in your Post Editor.)

- 1. Log into your WordPress dashboard.
- 2. From your menu, choose Posts Add New.
- **3.** Type your post and then decide where you want to end the excerpt, putting your cursor there.
- 4. Click the Insert More Tab button from the Visual Editor (it looks like two boxes stacked on top of each other, separated by a dashed line).

This places a faint line with a More tab to mark the place where your excerpt ends, as shown in Figure 7-11. If you click the Text tab, you see this button added the code <!--more--> to the HTML. Note that previewing this shows a full post because a preview shows your actual post URL — a *permalink* — not your home page.

5. Click the Publish button to make your post live.

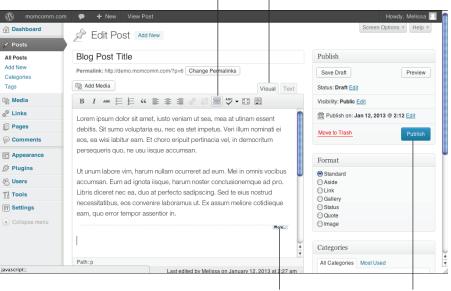
Visit your home page to see how your post excerpt appears. You can see in Figure 7-12 that on the home page, the post ends with a Continue Reading link to lead to the full post.



To change Continue Reading to something a little more exciting, click the Text tab (refer to Step 4 of the preceding list) and then add your custom content to read something like <!--more See How the Story Ends-->. This changes the message for that particular post only, but have fun with it!



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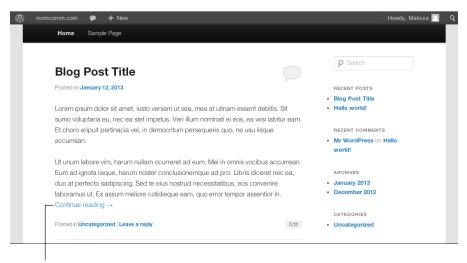


Insert More Tab button Click the Visual tab to use the Visual Editor

Marks where excerpt ends (

Click Publish to make post live

Figure 7-11: The More tab within your blog post marks the end of your excerpt.



Continue Reading line

Figure 7-12: A Continue Reading link appears at the bottom of this post excerpt.

One final option for using excerpts is using a featured post carousel or gallery that rotates a large image and sometimes a teaser for a selected number of blog posts. Jump to Chapter 15 for some gallery plug-in options.

Deciding Where to Place Advertising

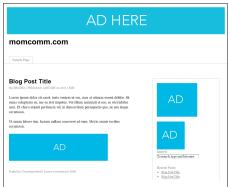
Some bloggers get into blogging primarily to make money, so they advertise on their blog from the get-go. Some bloggers start writing and later decide to try advertising. And of course, some bloggers want to keep their site free from advertising. (If that's you, just skip this section.)

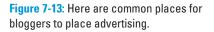
Advertising plays a crucial role in the impression your overall blog design makes on the reader. How do you use advertising in a way that actually makes you money but keeps your users from thinking you're greedy? These next sections highlight some things to keep in mind so your readers don't go running.

Putting your visitors first

Although your readers probably don't mind you wanting to earn revenue from your blog, they don't want to be bombarded with ads. Whether you use a design network or sell your own ads directly, good blog design puts your readers first while still making the advertising beneficial for you.

Advertising can be located in just about any place within your blog design. Common advertising areas include the top banner (also called a leader board), anywhere within the sidebar, and within the actual blog post content (see Figure 7-13). You sometimes even see advertising replace a blogger's entire background.







When deciding where to place your advertising, consider whether your advertising hinders the usability of your blog. Ads should never make your blog harder to use or confusing to the reader. Here are some common culprits of not-optimal advertising:

- ✓ In-text ads: These are contextual ads that hyperlink words in your content to ads. When you hover over those words, they pop up with an advertisement. They tend to look unprofessional and spammy, especially when a lot of words within a blog post are linked. Also, in-text ads sometimes apply links to words completely out of context. For example, I've seen an in-text ad of a city name link to a travel site when the name was actually the name of the blogger's child.
- Autoplaying ads: Avoid any advertising that automatically plays videos (with sound) or music. These types of ads interrupt the visitor from exploring your site or reading your content.
- Intrusive ads: This type of ad can include anything from pop-overs and pop-unders (ads that display in a new browser window underneath the current browser window) to those ads that sweep over your blog when someone hovers over them.



Be wary of using ads that do this because they interfere with your content being read. Most browsers have pop-up blockers so pop-up ads may not be displayed, anyway.

Oddly placed ads within blog posts: Oftentimes, bloggers place text or banner ads within their blog post. This is fine when done well, but make sure that the size or the location of the ad doesn't affect the ability to actually read the post. In addition, a very large ad at the bottom of your post content could separate your content too far from your comment section, making it less easy for visitors to comment. Also, check your text-based ads to ensure they don't look too much like the blog post. Otherwise, you might frustrate or confuse the reader.

Avoiding advertising overload

You've probably been to a website where you felt like you just got smacked with a wall of advertising. Maybe on your blog, you've added advertising piece by piece — an ad network here and a row of ad banners there — but never stopped to look at your blog design as a whole.

So, if you have an existing blog, take a step back and take a look at your blog design's overall look and feel. Does an ad interfere with your overall blog design? Is advertising making it hard to concentrate on your content?

Too many ads in a sidebar, for example, become such a big jumble that you're essentially reducing the effectiveness of those ads. There are just too many things to look at in one view! In addition, a lot of bold, flashy graphics detract from your message and leave your visitor feeling overloaded with ads.



Good advertising placement should catch attention of visitors (after all, you want them to click) but never at the detriment of your overall design. Your blog content should always be easy to spot right away.

If you run ads with an ad network like Google AdSense — a program that allows you to display targeted Google ads on your blog — you don't always have control over the exact ads that run although you can sometimes make exclusions, depending on the network. Look at your ads from time to time to ensure nothing surprising sneaks past you.

One blog that does advertising right is the popular Young House Love (www. younghouselove.com). John and Sherry earn the majority of their income through advertising, but their blog doesn't feel overrun with ads. They organize the advertising in their sidebars into a few sections. One main advertiser appears above the fold. Two sections for sponsors are separated by ad size, with one size taking up wider with than the other (Figure 7-14). The blog features a We're Digging section for affiliate products, too. The result is a lot of advertising without feeling overwhelming or interfering with content.

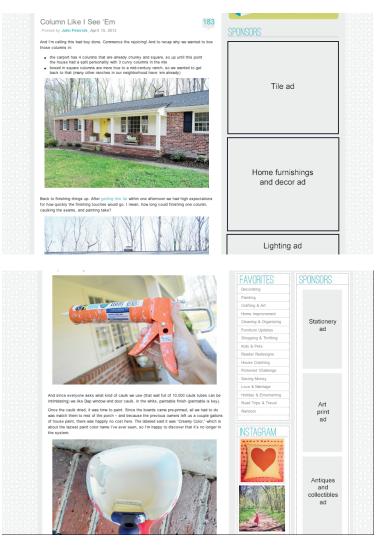
Taking care of your current advertisers

Not only do your readers matter, but so do your current advertisers. If you sell advertising space on your blog, you have a direct relationship with your advertisers. You gotta treat them right!

Have you ever been to a blog whose advertising section looks like the image in Figure 7-15? Surrounded by vacant advertising space, the one ad completely gets overtaken by Advertise Here buttons. Not only is this a disservice to the advertiser, but too many blank ad spaces can also deter potential advertisers. The blank spaces give the impression that your site isn't attracting enough visitors.

So what do you do? Try not to have more than one Advertise Here blank at any given time. (If you have eight spots or more, you can possibly get away with two blanks.) Then fill the rest in with affiliate marketing buttons. Also, consider adding a link like "Interested in advertising with me? Contact me." underneath the ads and link to your contact info.

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© John & Sherry Petersik, Young House Love

Figure 7-14: This design showcases advertising.

Chapter 7: Developing Your Overall Blog Layout

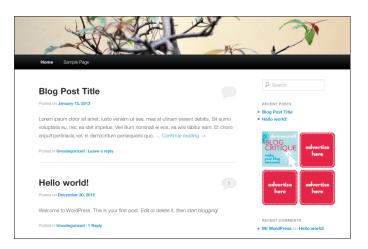


Figure 7-15: Don't fall victim to blank ad spaces.

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