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**Design & Content
Secrets to Skyrocket
Your Blog**

**Presented by Carol Tice of [Make a Living Writing](#)
And Judy Dunn of [Cat's Eye Writer](#)**

INTRODUCTION



Hi! We're Carol Tice and Judy Dunn, and in 2011 we were both winners of the [Top 10 Blogs for Writers](#) contest on Write to Done.

We would both like you to know that our blogs did not start out at the level of success they enjoy today. Not long ago, our blogs started from scratch and slowly improved to become what they are now – successful platforms that sell our products and bring us clients.

If you're blogging, you know that it's hard work writing all the posts. It's frustrating if you do all that work and nobody visits, nobody comments, and nobody subscribes. You may have the nagging sense that there are ways to make your blog better – or that top bloggers are doing something different on their blog from most bloggers – but you're not sure exactly what. This report will help you identify exactly how you can improve your blog.

As you go through these tips, don't feel bad about how your blog looks now – feel proud that you are taking steps to make your blog better.

In this report, we're going to break down blogging into its components – design, usability, and content. Then, we're going to show you specific changes you can make in each of these areas that will immediately turn your blog into a more useful tool for attracting readers, getting comments, and getting subscribers.

DESIGN & USABILITY



JUDY'S DESIGN SECRETS



rainfall in Belize, but they just water down your brand—and confuse your readers.

- **Pay attention to your header. It's the first thing people see when they land on your blog.** Here's a header that [captures attention right away](#). Consider a tagline that goes right under the name of your blog. It should be short, powerful, catchy, but most of all *clear*, so first-time visitors know in scant seconds what your blog is about. Because that is all the time you have to catch and keep them. Learn more about [crafting the perfect tagline](#).



[more about design](#).

- **Make the design clean and uncluttered. As in one right-hand sidebar, period.** You never want a glitzy, busy design to compete with your content. So ditch the blinking graphics, loud sounds and pop-up windows. Pay attention to every single thing you put in your sidebar area. Ask yourself, "Does this move my blog forward? Do my readers need this? Do they want this?" You may love the Top 10 Songs by Decade widget or the one that shows the daily rainfall in Belize, but they just water down your brand—and confuse your readers.
- **Don't confuse your readers with too many choices.** Your blog's design has the potential to get your readers to respond to your call of action or turn them away. Decide the one most important function of your blog's home page and make it prominent. For instance, your blog subscription signup box. If you offer too many choices, your reader will not click on any of them. [Learn](#)

• **If you use captcha, make your readers register /log in w/password to comment or moderate your comments, realize that you will lose some people.** Your reader is busy. She wants to get in, read comment and get out. Help her do that by removing the barriers. A good spam filter should catch most of your spam comments—and save readers from that annoying “awaiting moderation” message.



• **Do you have tags and categories to make it easier for readers to find the content they are interested in?**

Categories help the reader see at a glance what your blog content is about. They are like chapters in a book—the broad, major topics you blog about. Categories are most often found in the sidebar. For instance, as a blogging coach, some of my categories are blogging, branding, copywriting and social media marketing. Readers can click on your categories to find all the posts you've written on that particular topic. Tags are more specific, like a book's index. Every time you write a new post, you tag it with words that best describe its content. They are usually displayed in a tag cloud. The more you write about a specific topic, the larger the word appears in the cloud. So readers can tell at a glance what you blog most about. [Read more about tags, categories and other design features](#) that pull your readers into your content.

• **Use liberal white space and bolded headlines and sub-heads.** Like most online visitors, your blog's readers are skimmers and scanners. Picture a red Miata, traveling down a highway at 60 miles an hour. As they look for content that is new or interesting, your readers are guided by billboards, signs and rest areas. Make them easy to find. Your bolded headlines and sub-heads are your billboards, drawing readers' attention to your content. Using lots of white space—including short paragraphs—gives their eyes a rest and helps them speed (or skim) through your post and find what they need.

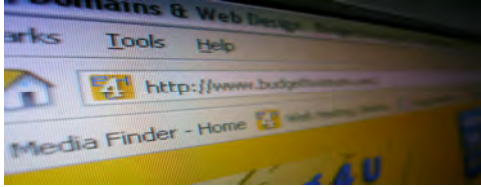


• **Make sure your RSS/email feed boxes are big and easy to find—and test them to be sure they work.** Your subscribers are gold. Make it easy for them to join your community. I am a fan of a big, bordering on huge, subscription sign-up box. I can just say that when I figured this out, I started getting a lot more subscribers. Your visitors are attention-disordered and unless it's right in front of them, they won't see it! So ditch those tiny boxes people have to squint to see. If you have to, pay a designer a few bucks to make you a custom one. It'll pay off a hundred fold. (And be sure you don't lose a single subscriber by having feeds that don't work.)

- **Make your social media connection buttons prominent.** One of the best strategies for getting more readers is to give your visitors lots of options for sharing your posts on Twitter, LinkedIn, Facebook, etc. and other platforms. But a word of caution: Don't put "connect with me" buttons on your blog for sites where you are not active. Be sure you are actively involved there.



CAROL'S DESIGN SECRETS:



Carefully select your blog name, tagline, and URL. Your URL and blog name should be the same – you don't want one to be your given name and the other says "gardening tips." Avoid confusion and make sure your URL contains words that can help search engines direct relevant readers to you. Also, get the "blogspot" or "wordpress" out of your URL and pay for hosting – free hosting URLs communicate that you're not serious about blogging.



Make your email subscription more prominent than your RSS subscription. You want email subs so you can build your list – it should be easily visible. You can't market to RSS subscribers because you don't capture their email addresses. RSS-savvy people know what that orange icon means, so they'll find it. In designing your email signup box, know that many people think the word "subscribe" means they will be asked for money. Find a less-threatening way to state it, as in "Get free blog updates here"...and the button says "sign

me up."

One advanced strategy – create a free product giveaway for subscribers, write a landing page for it, and make your home page subscription box send them there. Studies have shown it converts better.

Ask for the subscription – and offer a free giveaway to encourage it. Consider ending posts with a subscription bar– there are even cool ones that appear when you scroll to the bottom of posts. Or simply ask, "If you enjoyed this post, consider subscribing..." and provide a link. You can also put your subscription link in your outgoing emails. Having a free report you can offer subscribers will greatly increase your number of signups.





Spy on your blog. Use tools such as [Google Analytics](#) or [CrazyEgg](#) to discover what your most popular items are in your tabs and sidebar. Make those items more prominent and move down or eliminate little-clicked elements. Prime targets for elimination include blog archives, calendars, blogrolls, recent comment widget. You can also shrink your tag cloud to show just the biggest topics. Clean up the clutter to deliver just what readers want. I did a short video of [what I found out about my blog](#)

[on Google Analytics.](#)

Don't have too many top tabs. The more tabs you have, the more confused readers are. Try to keep it to one single row of top tabs. Use jumps within pages to get people to items down the page without creating more pages – or create hidden landing pages that don't show up in tabs. You can also use pillar content strategies to create collections of blog posts in the sidebar rather than adding more tabs.

Use Disqus or Commentluv to encourage feedback, and LinkWithin to make your site more sticky. People love to comment on blogs where they get link love, and they stay longer and become more loyal readers when they read more than one post per visit.



Carefully consider your ad strategy. Too many ads annoy readers. Consider a Products I Love strategy where you affiliate sell under a tab, or maybe sell only one or two large ads. If you've slapped up a box of Google AdSense ads and you've earned \$1.95, take it down – you're not getting rich, but you are alienating readers. Know that having ads “above the fold” – visible in your opening window – can be a real reader turnoff

CONTENT



JUDY'S CONTENT SECRETS:



reading.

- **Put your best content 'above the fold.'** Yes, it's an old term journalists used to use when the latest edition was delivered to those plastic newspaper boxes on city sidewalks (do they still do that?). The idea was that the most important, earth-shattering, buy-and-read-now stories should be above the part that was folded when the papers were put in the box. And it still applies in the online world. For you, the blogger, it means your blog header, post title and first paragraph needs to immediately grab your visitors' attention and keep them

- **Set your reader up for what they are going to get in your first paragraph.** Lead with your main point. If your reader only reads the first sentence, is it enough to tell her what your post is about? Will it make her curious to read on? Consider your headline and first paragraph together. Your headline is the hook (without deceiving your reader about your content, of course) and your first paragraph has just enough to whet the appetite for more. Don't give it all away in the first paragraph. Build suspense.



- **Do you have an interesting, appealing About page on your blog?** Your about page is consistently your second most highly viewed page. Many times, first-time visitors will skip your posts altogether and go directly to your about page. They want to get to know you first. Other times, a reader will be so impressed by your post that she just has to know who this unique blogger with the amazing posts is. Either way, you need to be ready. Do you have an about page? Does it say enough (who are you, why you blog, your blog's mission/purpose, what you write about—and why they should care)? Make sure, at the minimum, they know what you do and for whom, the purpose/goal of your blog, how

to contact you and a little about you personally. And, of course, include your photo. See the [CatsEyeWriter blog's About page](#) for an example.



- **Does every post have a call to action at the end?** What do you want readers to do? Sign up for a class? Participate in the comments by answering the question(s) you end your post with? You do end with a question, don't you? (Questions at the end will get you at least twice as many comments (assuming you already have the readers and page views). But don't confuse your reader by asking them to do too many things. Pick the one most important thing

you want them to do.

- **Are you posting consistently so your readers (and Google) are trained to come back on a certain day(s)?** Both the search engines and your readers need to know when to expect a new post. Google actually comes by your blog at regular intervals, looking for fresh content. If, for instance, you always post on Tuesday, those spider-things will come back every Tuesday to gather and index your new post. If they come back one or two or three Tuesdays and there is nothing new, they will go away—and not come back. You will have to start "training" them all over again. The same with your readers. The more consistent you are, the more you will keep them with you, waiting eagerly for your next post.



- **Don't have too many outbound links in your content.** Your readers will wonder what you want them to do: stay with you or leave. And if they leave, they might not come back. If you have ever seen a post crammed full of links, practically one on every line, you know what I mean. And if one of those links is just too tempting, they may leave your blog, travel to the new site, click on more links there and, well, you get the

picture.

- **Respond to readers who leave a comment about your content. It's one of the best ways to get more.** Everyone wants to be recognized. If they feel like they are talking to a wall, they won't return. You may not be at your computer every second of the day, but try to allot a few minutes a couple of times a day to responding to your comments. It's one of the best ways to keep your readers coming back.



- **Remove unnecessary words and watch sentence length.** Stephen King said, "The road to hell is paved with adverbs." He's right. Words like "very" add little meaning. Most sentences can be trimmed nicely without affecting the content or meaning in any way. And read your

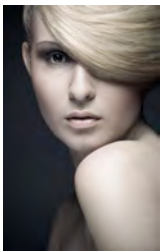
sentences aloud. Usually, if you can't say it in one breath, it's too long.

CAROL'S CONTENT SECRETS:



Headlines are all-important. I see a lot of blog headlines like these: "Watch out for the Red Flags." "Receiving End." "Work in Progress." "Pucker Up." "Task Master." What's wrong with these headlines? *You can't tell what the posts are about from reading them.* Blog headlines need to include key words, or no one will discover your post. It's just that simple. Learning [how to write strong headlines](#) is vital to your blog's success.

For more about headlines, see Psychotactics' report [Why Do Some Headlines Fail?](#)



Understand blog style. A blog post is not an article you stick online. Blogs are generally short, and link to other useful resources. Paragraphs and sentences are short, too. Good blog posts make a single point and they're done. Blog style includes a nice, big photograph which ordinarily should not link anywhere – click "links to none" when you're adding it -- or links to a relevant sales page.

Stick to a niche topic. It'll be hard to keep readers if your topics change from week to week. If you have several topics you want to write about, consider creating several blogs, or giving each a separate tab on one site, with separate subscription signups. Sticking to a niche also makes your blog a great audition piece if you want to blog for pay for others.



Watch your tone. Understand that the tone of your writing tells your readers about who you are. [Be conscious of your tone](#) and try to keep it consistent. See if you can name five descriptive words that sum up your tone – is it friendly?

businesslike? snarky? – then, use these words as your guide to ensure consistency.

Invite guests, and write guest posts. One of the best ways to find new readers for your blog is by guest posting on other, more popular blogs. Some, such as Problogger, have [writer's guidelines](#) posted right on their site. Other blogs you may need to network to get an introduction for guest posting. You could also get noticed by targeting posts from your blog to thought leaders, or simply by circulating them in social media. By the same token, it adds wonderful variety to your blog if you can have guest posters add their views and bring their own audiences to your blog.



Ask your readers what they need to know. If you feel like you're wandering in the wilderness on your blog, start asking your readers questions in your posts. Find out why they visit and what they hope to learn. Then, write more about that. If you have few readers, read the comments on a successful blog in your niche. (My friend Derek Halpern from DIYThemes did a hilarious video recently about this we could show on the presentation.)

Vary your post types. Don't make every post start with "How" or "10 Kinds of..." It gets boring fast. Do list posts, best-ofs, roundups, interviews, Q&As, case studies, voice an opinion, foment a controversy, or answer reader emails. Have a contest, take a poll, or review a product. As you see what [post types get lots of comments](#), write more of those.



SPECIAL OFFERS

We hope you found this report on blogging success helpful. If you'd like to learn more about blogging or freelance writing, we have the following special offers for you – just our thank-you for participating in this Webinar:

Subscribe to the *Make a Living Writing* blog and receive the [free report, 40 Ways to Market Your Writing](#).

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