

Setting Up A Classroom Blog with Edublogs.org

This guide will cover a small portion of setting up and using a blog site for free through the Edublogs.org website. There are many advanced options and tweaks available to a blogger, but we only have a limited amount of time to create and learn to use our own. Since Edublogs.org and Learnerblogs.org are using the WordPress blog engine, this workshop will use the name WordPress whether specifically speaking of WordPress, Edublogs, or Learnerblogs directly.

Web Browser

Your browser is the software you use to view web pages. For a long time, Internet Explorer was the standard used by most computer users. While it still works fairly well on Windows, it is no longer maintained for the Macintosh. A very good alternative to both computer platforms (Mac and Windows) is the FireFox web browser. To get full use of all features on most blogs, it is suggested that the user download and use the free FireFox web browser. (Download at www.mozilla.com) Safari is a wonderful browser, but there have been a number of blog features with Edublogs that are unavailable if you are using Safari.

Edublogs.org

This training is using the free subscription to edublogs.org. It is based on the WordPress blog engine, but had been customized for educators. You only need to give them a working email address and create an account to get started. Go to <http://edublogs.org>, select 'Join' or 'Get a blog now', and click to create a new account.



First, you will need to create your username. This has to be unique and will be the username that your students will see with your posts and comments. Use an email address that you can check now. You can always change that address later. You will select 'Create your blog' and then click Next. Some users only wish to have a 'Just username' so they can leave comments on other blogs, but they don't wish to maintain their own.

(Some ideas passed around mention that you can have your community of users each create their own username without having to create a blog. It is one way to protect the blog from unwanted users by allowing only invited usernames registered with Edublogs.)

A screenshot of the Edublogs.org account creation form. The form is titled "Get your own Edublogs.org account in seconds". It contains the following fields and options:

- Username:** A text box containing "joeteacher". Below it is a note: "(Must be at least 4 characters, letters and numbers)".
- Email Address:** A text box containing "newblog@txrw.com". Below it is a note: "(We'll send your password to this address, so triple-".
- TOS:** A checkbox area with the text: "Edublogs.org is a site specificall... professors, administrators, corpor... by ticking the box below you agree".
- I Agree:** A checked checkbox.
- Verification:** A CAPTCHA image showing the number "2366" and a text box containing "2366".
- Radio buttons:** Two radio buttons at the bottom: "Gimme a blog!" (selected) and "Just a username, please.".

Next, you need to create your domain (website address) name. It can be different from your user name or it can be the same. It must however be a unique name within the edublog system. The name you choose will be the first part of the website address your students or parents will enter to access your blog. “Hot Teacher” probably wouldn’t go over well with the principal, so choose wisely. Second, you will give your blog a title. This will be the name shown at the top of your browser’s window and does not have to be unique. One can limit random visitors by keeping the blog private and not listing your blog with search engines. Checking that box could cause problems if you want parents or others to see your work. Lastly, select ‘Teacher’ as your blog type.

Activate the account by clicking ‘Signup’. You will get an email that will give you a link to follow. The resulting email will give you your password needed to administer the blog. Do not lose the password. Do not give it to students. Do not pass ‘Go’ or collect \$200.



Check your email now.

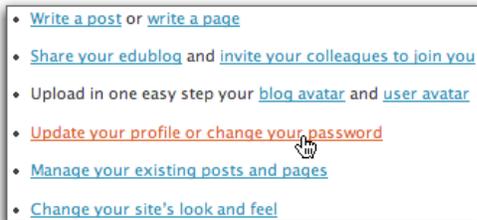
Setup Notes For Your Records:

Email address used: _____

Domain used (###.edublogs.org) : _____

Username used: _____

As soon as you check your email, you will have a randomly-generated password to access your ‘dashboard’. Only you have access to the dashboard since it is the main ‘control center’. There are two ways to get into your dashboard. The first is after you login, you enter the dashboard automatically. The second, and easier, way is to use the ‘Site Admin’ link on your blog home page listed under your Meta links. *The Meta links are one of the widgets provided by Edublogs. If you remove this widget when you choose to customize your blog, you will lose the easy access to your dashboard.*



Your dashboard will have a number of sections to amaze and confuse you. We’re going to start by looking at two of the links in this section; Update Your Profile and Write a Post.

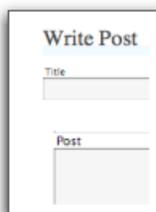
Update Your Profile

The first thing we’ll do is change our password. Clicking ‘Update your profile’ lets us personalize the blog user settings. That link also shows you your contact info in case you want to change the contact email address later. Anything you put in your profile could be seen by visitors. You can change your password at the very bottom. After making any changes to your profile, click ‘Update Profile’ at the very bottom of the page.



Write A Post

Clicking the ‘Write’ tab on the dashboard gets you started on your first post. We are going to make a simple post for our students to read and respond to.



1. First, give the post a title. This not only gives a framework for the post, but is also a nice reference.

2. Click inside the ‘Post’ box and start typing meaningful and thoughtful text that will provoke students to respond in a similar deep manner. You have 30 seconds. Go! One has as much room as needed. A scroll bar will appear as your text gets close to the bottom of the window. It is suggested that for your longer posts, type first in a word processor, copy and paste it into this box.



3. When you are done, ‘Save’ will save the post as a draft and exit the new post window without putting your writing online; ‘Publish’ assumes you have finished and want the post shown on the blog.

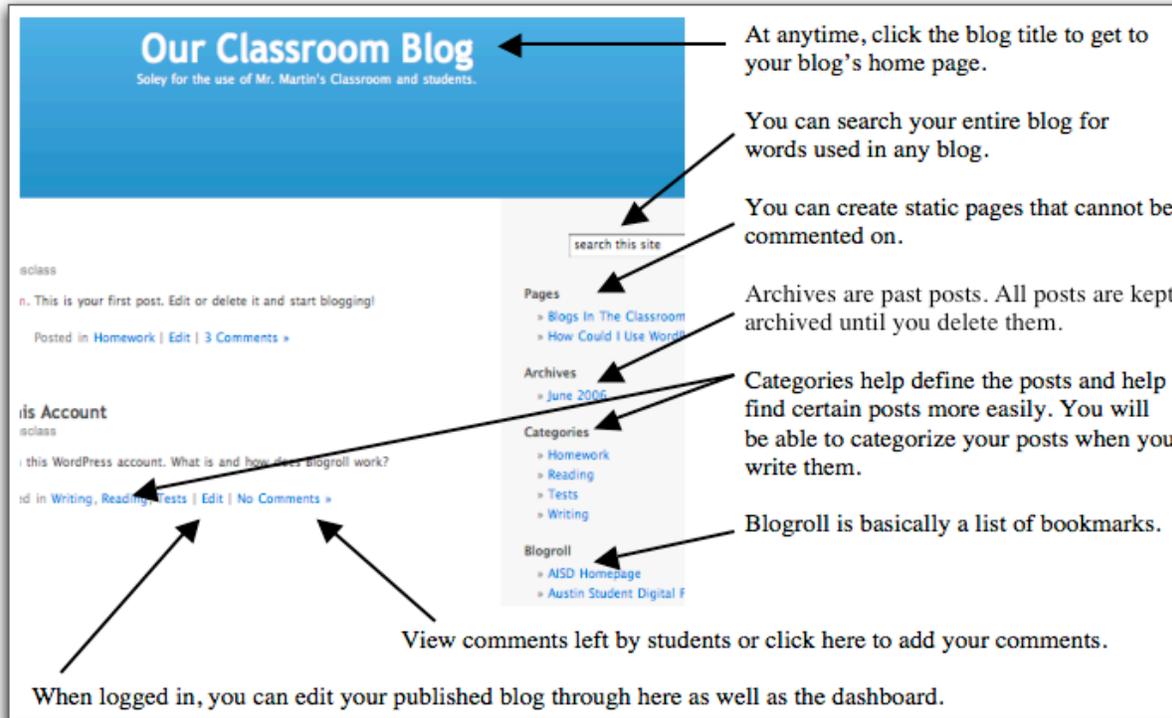
Drafts are not visible until they are published.

Viewing Your Page



The 'Visit Site' button is at the top of your dashboard window. Edublogs sets up the blog with a default theme. Clicking this link will show you what your page looks like. You can change almost any of the visual aspects of the page that you see at first by going back into your dashboard.

Navigating Your Edublogs Blog

A screenshot of a WordPress blog dashboard titled "Our Classroom Blog". The dashboard includes a search bar, a "Pages" section with links to "Blogs In The Classroom" and "How Could I Use Word...", an "Archives" section with a link to "June 2006", a "Categories" section with links to "Homework", "Reading", "Tests", and "Writing", and a "Blogroll" section with links to "AISD Homepage" and "Austin Student Digital F...". Annotations with arrows point to various elements: the blog title, the search bar, the "Pages" section, the "Archives" section, the "Categories" section, the "Blogroll" section, and a "View comments" link. A note at the bottom states: "When logged in, you can edit your published blog through here as well as the dashboard."/>

At anytime, click the blog title to get to your blog's home page.

You can search your entire blog for words used in any blog.

You can create static pages that cannot be commented on.

Archives are past posts. All posts are kept archived until you delete them.

Categories help define the posts and help find certain posts more easily. You will be able to categorize your posts when you write them.

Blogroll is basically a list of bookmarks.

View comments left by students or click here to add your comments.

When logged in, you can edit your published blog through here as well as the dashboard.

Edit Posts



From the dashboard, select the 'Manage' tab and then the 'Posts' tab when it appears. This window will show you the posts that you have saved on your blog. To edit one, click the 'edit' link to the right of the post you wish to edit. This takes you to the 'Write Post' window that you used to create the post initially.

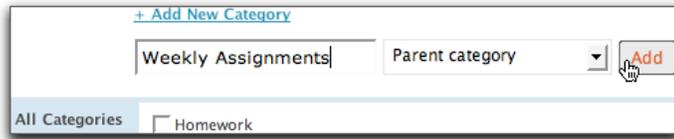
Categories

One can live without categories, but if your blog grows through frequent use, then categories can be a life-improver. Possible uses:

- label post by curriculum area if used in self-contained room
- label post by period or class
- label post as 'test' for review information that could be covered on a test
- label as genre of literature, style of written response requested, etc

Whether you do this when you are creating a new post or by editing previously created posts, adding a category is the same. First, get to the 'Write Post' window as discussed above.

Scroll to the bottom of the window to see the Categories section. Click 'Add New Category' to create a new category of your choosing.



Select the checkbox next to a category that you've already made. You can use multiple categories with one post. All posts will be uncategorized until you create your own.



Alternatively, one can manage categories from the dashboard. Click 'Manage' and then 'Categories' and you'll be able to create, edit, or delete categories for your blog.

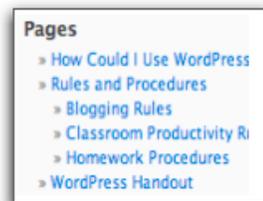
Once categorized, a user can click that category on the front page to show matching results. For example, a student wants to view posts that were marked as test review material. By clicking the 'Tests' category, that student can remove all non-matching posts from sight.

Create a Page

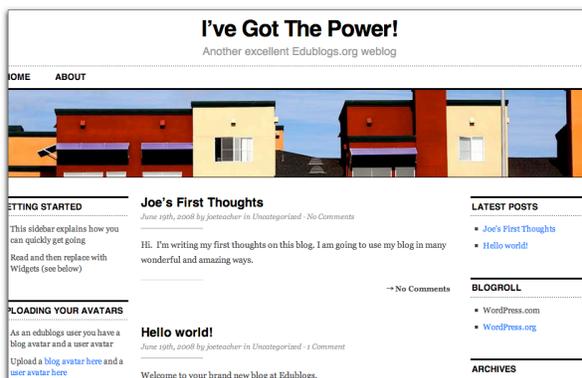
Pages are different from posts in that they do not contain chronologically-organized posts. In the classroom, this holds good promise in that procedures, teacher notes, or other static information can be placed here. Pages are linked to from your blog's home page.

Go to the dashboard and select the 'Write' tab and the 'Page' tab afterward. Give the page a title. This title will be shown on your homepage. Next, type your information in the 'page content' box.

Options for pages vary. Since pages are listed on your home page, you could organize pages by giving specific topics. Pages can have sub-pages on listed on your home page. That means, you could create a 'main' (called a parent) page called rules. This main page would give some general rule information. A second page could be created for blogging rules and you could select the 'main' page as the parent. The figure to the right shows three pages that have Rules and Procedures as their parent.



Changing the Look



The Design tab in the dashboard lets you change the look and feel of the blog. The default **Theme** here is a three column design with links, archives, categories, and more listed on either side of the blog posts that go down the middle.



By clicking the Design tab in the dashboard and clicking the Themes tab under that, you have the opportunity to choose a new theme. Each theme is different in its look and

contents. Clicking any of the themes will automatically change your blog design. Click the 'Visit Site' button to see your new design.

Each theme has a default set of **Widgets**. Widgets add special functionality to your blog page. Some widgets can add a calendar, a special link to social networking sites, a text block where you can type whatever you want, etc. *Warning: When you add widgets the first time to your sidebars, they replace the default set already there. If you add any widget, you will also have to add the ones that were already on the page, if you still want them.*

The Surmountable Downside- Commenting

One of the great things about WordPress and Edublogs is that you can set it to mandate the entry of identifiable information in order to leave a comment. The main identification can be a required email address or Edublogs username. Since students don't generally have email addresses yet, there are two workable solutions a teacher can utilize.

1. The First method is to first log out of Edublogs and go back to the main Edublogs.org webpage. Follow the directions from page one in this handout, but this time click the 'Just a username' button. Make this username for your students. You can create a user and password that all students will use when they blog in class. Perhaps I would use 'mrmartinsclasstudent' as an login ID. The trainable fix for identifying students with their work is that students must type their name or initials at the end of their comment. Otherwise, nobody will know who left which comments.

The second part to that is setting the blog to mandate the Edublogs ID. Using the Dashboard, select the Options menu and the General tab. By checking the box 'Membership', you are mandating that the only comments left will be left by Edublogs registered users. A

problem with this method is that you

Membership: Users must be registered and logged in to comment

are making any parent or sister class across the country also register a Edublogs account.

2. The second method is a much tighter lock down for comments. This can be used in conjunction with the first method to increase the security of posted comments. Using the Edublogs 'Moderation' tool, one can filter out undesirable comments and keep strangers from adding comments. We will set up the blog moderation tool in Edublogs so that once an email account is accepted by the teacher, that account is automatically posted from then on. The truly wonderful thing is that the email accounts do not have to be valid! Have students sign their comment with anonymous-like initials, but everyone uses an assigned fake email account. Fake email accounts mean that there is no actual email the students will use and their personal information isn't online anywhere. In the example below, I just used student initials with a bogus @email.com domain. You could use any domain such as @mrmartin.com, @class.email, or whatever. Each student should use a different fake email, which will register in your Edublogs dashboard, but not on the page viewed by others. Once you approve an email, that email address will be allowed to post without moderation. Other comment attempts will be stopped by the moderation tool and wait to be approved by the teacher.

The downside to Edublogs moderation is in the initial posting. The teacher will have to approve each student. That would only happen once for each 'fake email' account used. Another downside is that students who misspell their approved fake email will not see their comment until approved; a point for typing accuracy.

Setting Options in Edublogs

To set any options, login to your Edublogs account and find your dashboard. If you have more than one account, you will see it under the drop down menu.

Go to the Options tab and select Discussion. There are two settings that can really help manage your classroom blog.

Email me whenever:

The email feature is nice especially when the blog is not used on a daily basis. Emailing comments that are held for moderation will alert you to either outsiders trying to comment or the student who mistyped their fake email address and isn't recognized by your moderation filter.

Before a comment appears:

Some teachers want to approve every comment, which is what the first option shows. I firmly believe that in a collaborative classroom environment, delaying all comments will only slow the process, take away student-perceived ownership, and take away from the high level of student interest in immediate interaction. But there are times that this may be necessary. You will want the students to fill out their name and fake email. But the greatest tool is the automatic approving of previously approved comments. This is where the fake email comes in. Turning on the third option automates your moderating strategy.

Support

You can of course email me for additional support. The whole blogging community is a very supportive group and help can be found in many forms. For specific help with Edublogs, Visit <http://edublogs.org> for lots of help files, support links, and blog ideas.

This handout can be found online at <http://classroomblogging.wordpress.com> along with a new post every month about how teachers can use blogging in their classroom.