

The Limit and Liberty of Blogs

The Liberty of Blogs

Blogs may cover a story in reverse order. If you blog about a trip with the football team traveling to an away game, your first blog may be about the last few minutes in class when the players pretend to be interested in the quadratic equations or Elizabethan drama, their legs twitching slightly under their desks. That story goes to the bottom of your blog when you publish the next one.

The next blog, above the first, may describe the eruption of football players out of the classroom doors at release time.

The next, now on top, tells of the plastic sound of shoulder pads and helmets clanking into each other on the grass before they are loaded onto the bus.

The next that now goes on top is about the quiet, a sacred silence, on the bus as it begins the hour-long journey.

Blogs use names and details not significant enough to appear in other media. People read school publications for many of the same reasons they read their community or small town newspapers, to see familiar names and faces. The more names and faces, the better. Blogs may enrich your publication. You can name the sophomore, about to play his first varsity game, who squirms silently in his seat at 1:27. You can name and describe the team's equipment manager and find out why he likes the job. You can tell the story of the player on crutches, in his jersey and jeans, who is going to sit on the bench that game.

Blogs may be rich in links to other sources. They may link to the school board's published minutes or to the education code you are discussing, to the policy statement of a neighboring district, to a professor of education's blog, to an interview on local TV.

Blogs may use many media, including video, sound files and still photos. The limitations are only what you can link to, what you can upload legally and what your audience can access.

Blogs may achieve balance by supporting and encouraging comments at the bottom of the blog. A reporter's blog is not an opportunity to throw a brick at a window and then hide in the bushes. It does, however, allow you to publish what you personally observed without waiting to talk to all sides, in part because your blog format allows for comments and criticism. You introduce the topic, but the blog becomes an open forum for student opinions. (Generally, student forums monitor comments for appropriateness before they post them.)

The Limits on Blogs

Blogs rarely reveal the reporters' opinions or prejudices about the topics they cover as a reporter. A blog is not the reporter's personal megaphone for whatever bugs her. If you usually cover sports, you may safely point out the amount of money spent on student body elections or write humor about how long it takes to get into tight jeans, but stay away from complaining about a walk-on coach. Save that for the sports column, or give up straight reporting for column writing. The two do not mix well. Why?

Imagine interviewing the athletic director after blogging about how lazy she is. That is not likely to be a great interview.

In addition, readers sometimes imagine that a reporter's bias may be the hidden agenda for the paper. If you scorn wrestling in a blog, the audience may suspect that your paper chooses not to cover wrestling as fully as basketball because it does not like wrestling. Your audience expects opinions in columns. It expects reporters to be neutral. Protect your paper.

In addition, your blogs, even the ones you write when you are 14, will be on the Web forever. Do not limit your college and professional options by what you write now. If you express scorn for Title IX and girls' athletics, you may not be asked to cover college sports or be hired as a color commentator. You may find yourself defending that blog when you are 23 and trying to get a job with a school district.