



Going Public: Managing and Promoting Your Writing Life

Session 4: Setting up Your Website

Saturday, June 27, 2009 (11:45 a.m. – 12:30 p.m.)

Room 1800, SFU at Harbour Centre, 515 West Hastings, Vancouver BC

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Learn why you need a web presence and how to build one, as well as how to market yourself in today's wired world and win an audience.

Okay, we've only got forty-five minutes – not enough time for an in-depth exploration of the intricacies of building websites, but more than enough to highlight why you, as a writer, need a website, and to decide what you want that website to do. Along with filling out a writer's website planning worksheet (which, alas, does not include detailed design requirements), we'll look at the four areas outlined in our course description:

- why you need a web presence,
 - how to build a web presence,
 - how to market yourself in today's wired world, and
 - how to win an audience.
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Why You Need a Web Presence

- **Build an audience.** Give site visitors a reason to return often through regular updates. Readers want to know more about their favourite author – help them become fans by building a relationship.
 - **Create the right image to set yourself apart.** Too slick and visitors will think your website is a marketing gimmick prepared by your publisher (and not you). Too sloppy, and visitors will think your writing is careless. Strike the right balance – templates can help (after all, your readers expect you to be a writer, not a web designer).
 - **Help interested visitors find you.** Google can't parse Flash sites. Yet. Dial-up connections can't download huge graphics quickly. Period. Build a website your intended audience can find and read without frustration.
 - **Showcase your writing.** What better way for readers to learn your style than to actually read it? However, be careful with what you publish on your website – once creative work is on the Internet, first electronic rights are gone forever.
 - **Announce news and upcoming events.** Let your fans know when your next reading, presentation, workshop, signing, or book launch will be. Tell them where, too. Use your website as an electronic invitation so you'll never have to read to an empty room.
 - **An online store.** Advertise, sell, or even give your work away for free. The choice is yours. You could even have an online registration system for the workshops or classes you're teaching.
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How to Build a Web Presence

It's really not as hard as you might think. Unless you want your site to be able to accept online credit card payments or use other dynamic applications, you can probably build your website yourself with a little planning, a bit of effort, and very little expense. However, the option to pay someone else to build it for you is always there (but can become expensive quickly). Here are the basic steps involved in building a website.

1. **Decide what you want your website to do.** Build an audience? Sell your writing? Register workshop participants? The more focused your site is, the better. My site is built around a limited blog where I only discuss issues related to my writing.
2. **Register a domain name.** Make it simple and obvious. Your name is probably the best choice, followed by *.com* (my website is *www.johnmavin.com*). Country-specific domain names (*.ca*) are often more expensive, while names like *.biz*, *.ws*, or *.info* seem like poor second choices. An optional step, but I'd recommend going to the expense for branding and portability (in case you want/need to change hosts in the future).
3. **Find a web host.** It's easiest to get your domain name and web hosting at the same time, from the same company. I use *smallbusiness.yahoo.com*. Another large host is *www.powweb.com*. There are also free services (*www.writersownwords.com*, *wordpress.com*, *www.geocities.com*, *www.freeservers.com*, and *www.blogger.com*), but these won't carry your own domain name and may require you to include advertising (which may or may not be an issue for you).
4. **Get a webpage editor.** Some hosts provide templates and online editing tools, some don't. If you prefer the do-it-yourself method, Adobe Dreamweaver, Microsoft Expression Web, or the outdated Microsoft FrontPage all work well. I prefer ColdFusion Studio, but I wouldn't recommend it unless you're comfortable working directly with HTML code.
5. **Build your website.** Which pages you include depends entirely on what you want your website to do. I'd recommend you avoid fancy, bleeding edge technologies and ultra-cool widgets – more often than not, these technologies are not universally supported by all Internet browsers and my alienate visitors using slower Internet connections. My site, which is straight HTML with no dynamic code whatsoever, has the following pages:
 - **blog** (doubles as my home page, with links to five years of archived entries)
 - **news**
 - **bibliography** (with links to interviews and press articles)
 - **manuscript consultation**
 - **bio** (with links to high-resolution head shots)
 - **contact**
6. **Launch your website.** Your web host will provide you with detailed instructions on how to do this.
7. **Test your website.** Repeatedly. At least once a month. You're checking for dead links, typos, and anything that doesn't work the way it should. Fix problems before your visitors find them.

How to Market Yourself in Today's Wired World

Once you've launched your website, you're going to have to let people know about it. While there are many, many ways to market your website (both on and off the Internet), I've listed some of the more effective strategies below:

- Register your website with online search engines. While this costs money in some cases, not every search engine requires a fee. At the very least, register your site with Google (www.google.com/addurl/?continue=/addurl) and the Open Directory (www.dmoz.org/add.html). Your web host might also provide a URL submission service. Another service can be found at www.businessinfoguide.com/submitsite.htm.
- List your website with all associations where you are a member.
- Trade links with other websites.
- Always reference your website in your bio for any journal publishing your work or reading you do.
- Always reference your website in your news releases and announcements.
- Got a business card? Put your website on it. Got letterhead stationery? Put your website on it. Got a signature file for your email? Put your website on it. Got an untattooed patch of visible skin? You get the idea.

How to Win an Audience

There are many different ways of building a following, and you're going to have to decide what's right for you. Here are some of the more creative ideas I've encountered on the Internet:

- Cory Doctorow (www.craphound.com) gives away free copies of his books to whoever cares to download them.
- Ken Follett (www.ken-follett.com) has his website available in seven languages and offers an online master class in how to write.
- Chuck Palahniuk (chuckpalahniuk.net) reviews stories his visitors have submitted to him.
- T.C. Boyle (www.tdboyle.com) holds online writing contests.
- Mary Robinette Kowal (www.maryrobinettekowal.com) keeps a very detailed and intimate blog.
- Lisa Gardner (www.lisagardner.com) asks readers to submit true crime ideas, with selected ones being published, the submitter acknowledged in a book and given free copies.
- Tim Winton includes MP3 audio excerpts of his work (breath.timwinton.com.au).

Website Planning Worksheet for Writers

Defining Goals

Why do you want to build a website?

- Build a brand Gain an audience Interactive feedback
 Provide information Sell directly Other (list below)

What is the main message you want your website to convey?

What is your budget?

Who is your target audience? Are they likely to be tech-savvy, or tech-limited?

Setup

Desired Domain Name:

Registered? Yes No

Web Hosting Service:

Webpage Editor / Contracted Designer:

Content

What information do you wish to have available from every page (global navigation)?

- Home Biography Blog
 Bookings Contact Downloads
 FAQ Interviews Media
 News Publications Q&A
 Recommendations Reviews Services
 Store Writing Other (list below)

What information do you already have available that you want to include in the website?

What content do you need to create that you don't have yet?

How often will you update the content on your website?

Design

Do you have a photo or graphic or slogan that you'd like to use to create the design theme of your website?

Which font style do you prefer for your website (sans-serif fonts such as Arial and Verdana aid onscreen legibility)?

Arial Courier Times New Roman Verdana

Do you have a preferred colour scheme (a white background with one or two accent colours is most legible)?

List any existing websites your find compelling and why they interest you (style, colour, layout, organization, etc.).

Perception

List three adjectives to describe how you'd like your website to be perceived (conservative, progressive, friendly, casual, serious, expert, humorous, professional, etc.).

Information for Search Engines

List keywords or phrases that describe your website that could link search engines to your website. The keywords tag is used by some search engines to help place your page in the results of a search. Keywords can be up to 1,000 characters long.

What title best describes your website? This title, which also can be referenced by search engines, can be up to 100 characters long.

Write a description of your website. This description is used by some search engines and can be up to 250 characters long.