Blogging Best Practices for Participants

Updated: May 2019
What is a Blog and Why Share Your Thoughts?

A blog is a collection of individual posts that focuses on timely events. It is usually written in a conversational style and highlights personal experiences.

At CIEE, we ask you to blog to share your experiences and help prepare other participants for the international educational exchange experience. We want to give you a space to share your experiences, voice, and passion. Your writings are the best way for another participant to build the courage to take part in an exchange program.

As a CIEE blogger, you will have an author page that will display all of your posts and help readers get to know you a bit through your bio and photo. This makes it easy for you to share your work with your friends, family, and network through social media, personal websites, and more.

Blogging for CIEE also provides you with personal benefits. Blogging provides you with an online diary of your trip. If you post regularly, you’ll put together an online scrapbook. It also becomes a part of your portfolio, or examples that you can share on applications for universities, positions with extracurricular activities, and even jobs. It gives you professional experience and maybe an advantage over the competition.

Know Before You Blog

As a blogger, you are representing both your own reputation as well as that of CIEE. There are a few things to keep in mind before you begin.

You are a part of a bigger team.

Your blog posts will be shared across the CIEE site. It could be featured on the homepage, program page, and other areas of the site. Your post will likely be read by participants who are deciding between multiple programs.

Remember your digital footprint.

Just as a blog can be a great feature of your portfolio, it also can be a liability if you are careless. Future employers are likely to find your posts, even if you don’t share them. What you write matters, and it’s important to leave a good impression.
Leave the f-bombs out.

We want you to be authentic and write in a personal manner, but remember that your content will be read by future participants to help them prepare. Keep it clean.

Have fun.

We want you to be creative so we have many ways for you to share on our blog. Do not think that it has to be a long written piece. There are tools for sharing photo galleries, videos, and more. Focus on telling the story and we will find a way for you to do that.

Writing a Blog Post

The two most important rules of blogging are to post regularly and timely. Blogs work best when updated at least weekly. If weekly is not possible, blog at least every other week. It is also important that what you write about is recent. It can be difficult to remember everything you wanted to share about an excursion a month later. Do not wait to write.

Do choose a specific topic or experience for each blog post.

This will help you stay timely. You should not share every detail of every day. Choose one memorable experience from each week to write about.

Don’t write a weekly or monthly recap.

As above, choose a specific subject or theme. The best blog posts cover one topic or event at a time. Choose a recent experience, event, or relevant thought.

Do set aside time in your schedule each week for writing.

Do you have a break on Wednesday afternoons? Always start your Saturday mornings at the local cafe? Just like you have a schedule of classes, put blogging in your schedule. Pick a time that works each week and set it aside for writing.
Don’t think that it has to be long.

Think about the type of articles you read online. It’s likely that these pieces are around 400 to 700 words. That’s a great length for a blog. Often, readers will leave the site before finishing blog posts that are extremely long. This is partly why a monthly recap blog post doesn’t work. Check out this blog for an example of timely and brief posts.

Your personality is what makes a blog shine and be relatable. We want you to write in a conversational manner. Be honest, authentic, and real. Write about the things that mean the most to you, which often are memorable, funny or difficult. Think about what you wish someone had told you and help other participants acclimatize to the location and culture.

If you need an idea, consider these great topics:

- Language concerns
- Living arrangements and host families
- Integrating with the local culture
- Excursions and activities
- Outcomes (a.k.a. What did you take away or what did you get out of the trip?)
- Academic experiences like interesting coursework or internships, or teaching lessons

We encourage you to write about very personal topics as well. As you encounter a different culture, you’ll reflect on how it differs from your own. Topics that may feel uncomfortable, such as racism and sexism, are perfectly fine to write about in respectful ways. Check out this example from a student in Botswana or this example from a student in Morocco.

Choosing categories and tags for your blog post

Categories and tags provide a way to group content on similar topics. When done correctly, this means we could highlight student blog posts from all over the world that, for example, feature packing tips or local food.

Your posts should automatically include selected categories for things like location, but you’ll need to choose other appropriate categories.

- Choose options that are connected to your main theme or topic.
- Be selective, but consistent. If you have one sentence in your post that mentions the sandwich you had for lunch, selecting a food category may not be appropriate.
• Try to choose up to three categories/tags. If you find yourself with more than five categories, your post is likely not specific and may be too long. Split the piece into multiple blog posts by topic.

Writing your bio

Your bio is like the About the Author in a book. It’s important to keep it short and simple. A great rule is to choose the three most important things you want someone to know about you. For example:

    Julie is a junior at State College studying international business. She hopes to serve in the Peace Corps after graduation. She’s an avid runner and excited to take on the mountains in Chile.

Writing a Headline

Headlines can be tricky. Even the best professional writers can struggle with headlines. In the most basic sense, headlines should tell the reader what, where, and why.

    ● Where: What country are you in? Where did you go on an excursion? Are you at a well-known location such as the Sydney Opera House?
    ● What: What is the topic of this blog post? Is it about a trip? It is about your favorites? Is it about your classes?
    ● Why: Why should I read this? Would the headline make you want to read it?

Be specific

Your headline should not be solely the program name or location. Think about headlines you see online, whether on social media or a news site. These headlines likely grab your attention because they tell you the topic and what to expect from the article.

It’s ok to include words that are in your country’s language, but remember that not everyone will be able to read it. If you include non-English words in your headline, be sure the rest of the headline explains the topic.

Highlight the theme

Don’t write your headline first. Write it after you’ve drafted your blog post. Look for a general theme in your post. Maybe you’ve written about you host family and living arrangement. Include that theme in your headline.
Keep it short, but not too short

Headlines should be more than the location name (ex. Prague) or the program title, but headlines also can be too long. Try to write descriptive headlines that are 7 to 12 words.

Example:

Let’s look at the blog featured above from a student studying in France. Her blog posts feature specific topics in a timely manner, which is great, but her headlines could be better.

In the top post, the headline is “VENICE!!!” It is specific, but not descriptive. We’d recommend a headline like “5 Days in Venice: overnight trains, gondolas, and glass blowing.”

In another example, she uses the headline “FAVORITES.” This not specific or descriptive. We’d recommend a headline like “French Favorites: cafes, organic burgers, and the American Library” or “Favorites: a French cafe with bathroom graffiti and a dog that looks like Chewbacca.” Both of these headlines tell the reader the location, what the post is about (favorites) and a couple specific details to create intrigue to read on.

Choosing Photos and Media

You likely will have many photos from your time abroad. Choosing a few photos to include in your blog post could be difficult. Taking the time to consider framing and lighting can make a huge difference in the quality of your photos. These guidelines also fit for video content.

Be specific when taking photos.

Choose a single detail or part of a larger area. Often, great photos of a wide landscape or area don’t show enough detail unless you have a professional camera. By choosing a smaller area that catches your eye, your blog photos can feel more intimate and engaging.

Put people slightly to the left or right of a photo.

When people take photos of you at a location, ask them to place you to the left or right side of the photo. This helps show both you and the background with interesting detail. This goes for selfies as well. The exception to this are photos of large groups of people. Often, they work better centered in the photo.
Face the light

When taking photos outside, consider the time of day. If possible, take photos during morning light or evening light. Often, photos taken during bright afternoon light include strong shadows and muted colors. Also, look for when the light is on the front of your photo subject. When the light is behind the subject of your photo, it’s called backlit and makes the photo very dark.

This also works with taking photos indoor. Don’t take a photo in front of a window with bright outdoor light. Turn on lamps to have the light in front of you.

If you are a squinter, ask the person taking your photo to count to three so you can open your eye right before the photo is taken.
Let’s look at a few examples of good photos:

Many of the places you will visit could be crowded and it can be difficult to get a clear photo. This student was able to find a colorful and meaningful section of the Berlin Wall to highlight during an excursion. The photo is more interesting because of the slight angle of the photo, rather than a photo facing the wall directly.

This photo is good because it highlights one small detail. The subject of the photo (the cake) is in good focus and the background does not take away from the detail. Again, the angle from which the photo was taken is better than most photos of a plate from directly above.

This photo is great because it is specific and takes advantage of morning or evening light. The sunlight is shining on the front of the building allowing the reader to see the bright color and details of the building.
Now, let’s look at a few examples of photos that could be better:

This is a well-lit photo, but less intriguing compared to the photo above of the same location. As mentioned above, larger landscape photos often lose detail and are less effective in smaller sizes like this. Don’t let the subject of your photo be the smallest part of your photo.

This is a great example of how many of your photos could be in crowded places. This photo doesn’t have a clear subject. It could be better in a few ways. First, the angle in this photo makes it look crooked or misaligned. The photo is not specific enough. Because it is a busy area, showing the entire corridor doesn’t add anything. It would be better by highlighting the intricate ceiling or a small area with one or two pillars.
This is an example of a backlit photo. In this photo, the people are the main subject, yet you can’t make out their faces well. The background in this photo is beautiful. Perhaps this photo would be great without the participants posing in front. Remember, you want the sun or light to be shining on the front of your subject whenever possible.
How many photos to include

The options you choose for the format of your blog post will help you decide how many photos to include. In general, consider these three scenarios:

**Your blog post tells a story through words.**
If the post is a well-written narrative in the 400 to 700 word style we mentioned above, then your photos are likely to be complementary to the story rather than the focus. Try to choose around three photos that show what you’ve written about and include them throughout the story.

**You have more photos than words to share.**
Sometimes your photos are the story. If you find that you only have around 200 words of text, consider a post that uses a photo gallery. Your text can become a short introduction to a series of photos. Include descriptive captions for each photo to tell your story.

**You have equal amounts of words and photos.**
Make it the best of both worlds! Choose a couple great photos to include with the text and include a gallery at the bottom. Or include the photo gallery near the middle of your post to provide a break from the text.

**Don’t forget video.**
All of the above also apply to great videos of your experiences. You can create a video blog and embed it in your post or add video to a written narrative to give it more life and excitement. Remember to edit your videos whenever possible to remove unwanted content from the final piece included in your blog post.