

# Express yourself



Creative members of Manchester WI's blogging sub group (from left): Verity Longley, Ashley White and Laura Collinson

A blog is a great way to celebrate your WI, share news and be creative, as Julia Banim discovered when she set up a writing sub group at Manchester WI

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## TOP TIPS for starting your own blog

- ✓ DO pick a subject you're passionate about. Not only will it make the writing process more fun, but your audience will pick up on your enthusiasm and will enjoy the reading experience more too.
- ✗ DON'T be intimidated by the technology. There are plenty of easy-to-use blogging platforms, including WordPress, LiveJournal, Blogger and Tumblr.
- ✓ DO use social media to share your blog posts and connect with other writers, and always read and comment on their work too.
- ✗ DON'T get too wrapped up with how many hits, likes or comments your blog gets, especially at the beginning. It takes time to build up a readership.
- ✓ DO develop your own style. Writing authentically will always make for a better blog than trying to put on a style that you're not comfortable with.



Being quite a shy person myself, I know how tricky it can be for more introverted members to express themselves during meetings. Even as a committee member who regularly has to make public announcements, I still feel a little dizzy at the prospect of people's eyes on me as I speak.

But just because we quieter members may be a little more nervous than our talkative counterparts, it does not mean that we are not fiercely opinionated and passionate about all things WI.

For me, writing has always been an easier way of expressing myself when speaking up feels too overwhelming. And as I discussed this with members during our meetings at Manchester WI, Lancashire Federation, it became apparent that I was not alone.

I spoke with journalism students and baking bloggers and even an aspiring fantasy novelist, and an idea started to form. We already had a working blog on our website to publicise branch events and news – so why not use it as a space to celebrate the warmth, humour and intelligence of our members?

My vision was to bring together a group of women through monthly meetings and literary outings

to help us develop as writers and build friendships based upon a shared love of writing. Our WI has a number of vibrant sub groups, and one on writing would complement our craft and book clubs that are full of creative women. There was a need to provide a platform for the diverse views of our members.

We pride ourselves on being a WI that openly discusses issues that are pertinent to contemporary society. We welcome experts to speak on sensitive subjects, such as gender identity and mental health. We participate in events like the Manchester Pride Parade and actively support services for women who are engaged in sex work. So it's natural that our members have a million things to write about.

Although blogging can bring exciting opportunities for writers, going it alone can be daunting and often feels as if you are trying to speak up in a very loud, crowded space. By creating a welcoming writing community, taking those first tentative steps towards becoming a blogger can feel much less nerve-racking. Most of all, it is incredibly encouraging to walk into a room and be among people who share your interests and ambitions.

It has been a privilege to welcome Manchester-based writers to our meetings, and it is a fantastic



By coming together, members express their original ideas and inspire each other

way for members to connect with the local creative community. So far, we have enjoyed talks by writers ranging from fashion bloggers to restaurant reviewers and podcasters.

Recently, we hosted Polly Checkland Harding, an award-winning writer and exhibitions editor at arts and travel website Creative Tourist. Polly spoke to us about her experiences of working in journalism, and gave some very encouraging career advice. Another recent guest was Esther Jackson-Burton from feminist podcast Vulva La Revolution, who facilitated an engaging discussion about women and the media.

We have learnt so much from writers who have visited us and shared laughs, stories and experiences. We have discovered how to use social media effectively, how to pitch to magazines and how to build an eye-catching website. Sophie Elizabeth from food and travel blog Sophie's Scran explained how to review restaurants with honesty, wit and passion, while lifestyle blogger Clare Potts taught us how to think about fashion writing in the age of the internet.

Our very first speaker at the blogging group was Cherry Styles, who runs the Chapess Zine. Cherry was an excellent speaker who enlightened us about zine culture. Zines – self-published and often niche magazines or websites – have traditionally been used as a means of being outspoken and expressing individuality, which is a core focus of our group.

Cherry's enthusiasm inspired us to create our own zine. Not only was this an opportunity to work on a project together, it was also a chance for members to use their artistic skills, with one – Kate Trevor – creating a distinctive front cover that really showed off the vibrancy and fun of the Manchester WI.

In the age of the internet there is something very special about making a personal publication that can also serve as a piece of art in its own right. One of my fondest blogging group memories so far has been our visit to the Manchester Zine Festival, where we managed to sell a number of copies.

I am delighted to say that our discussions have become one of the highlights of my month; I always leave at the end of the evening feeling inspired and

invigorated. And the talent that we have unearthed in our little group has been astounding.

We've published an article exploring the life and work of the legendary Patti Smith, written by Emma Lauren Roberts, and PhD student Amber Phillips shared an educational article about the Italian mafia. One particularly moving post, written by media professional Laura Collinson, explored the multitude of benefits of getting involved in the modern WI and drew from interviews with her grandmother, who is also a longtime member. Reading it makes you realise what a very personal organisation it is and how it is a movement that truly connects family

members and those from different generations.

The range of styles on the blog is as diverse as its subjects. Some members write in a lighthearted, humorous manner, whereas others prefer a more serious, journalistic tone. We encourage everyone to develop their own voice and to become more professional and confident in terms of their writing ability.

We don't have a particular house style, but we do like members to reflect the ethos and warmth of our organisation, so we welcome positive and inspiring voices. We have a no-nastiness policy, emphasising support at all times.

This group stems from a simple love of writing and an appreciation of the traditional values of learning and self-improvement that have always been at the heart

of the WI. I sincerely hope it will help give budding writers the courage to push forward with their own writing projects. For some, it may be the beginning of a lifelong hobby; for others it may help them build a career. I believe that our blogging group is the perfect environment to give a voice to the women who make our organisation so very special.

My advice for other WIs who would like to set up a blogging group would be to start your research with regard to the writers in your local area, and think carefully about the type of guests that would be of interest to your members.

At our first meeting I made sure that I asked our members what they wanted from their blogging group, and I then tried to structure our meetings accordingly. I would also advise being bold about branching out and getting creative with the form of your content: consider creating zines, podcasts or even videos. Each WI is unique and your blogging group should fully reflect this. [WI](#)

### Three WI member blogs to read today

***The foodie*** Mum of four Michelle Rice, a member of Mill Road WI, Cambridge Federation, blogs about budget-friendly, easy to prepare, nutritious and tasty food for busy families at Utterly Scrummy, [utterlyscrummy.blogspot.co.uk](http://utterlyscrummy.blogspot.co.uk)

***The bookworm*** Discover a new novel at literary review blog Dot Scribbles, [dot-scribbles.blogspot.co.uk](http://dot-scribbles.blogspot.co.uk) run by Dot Steadman, member of Newbold Verdon WI, Leicestershire & Rutland Federation.

***The crafter*** Amanda White, Westbury Park WI, Avon Federation, blogs at Gift Frippery, [giftfrillery.co.uk/gift-wrapping-blog](http://giftfrillery.co.uk/gift-wrapping-blog) – showing how to write about your passions while also marketing your business.

• **Julia Banim is a member of Manchester WI, Lancashire Federation. Read the Manchester WI blog at [manchestersi.org.uk/blog](http://manchestersi.org.uk/blog)**  
 • **Find the NFWI blog at [behindthedorof104.blogspot.co.uk](http://behindthedorof104.blogspot.co.uk)**