Chapter 4

Using RSS to Spread Your Blog

In This Chapter

- ▶ Understanding just what a blog is
- Creating the blog and the feed
- ▶ Using your RSS reader
- Creating a blog using HTML
- ▶ Maintaining your blog
- ▶ Publicizing your blog with RSS

hat's a blog, after all? *Blog*, short for *Web log*, is just a Web site with a series of dated entries, with the most recent entry on top. Those entries can contain any type of content you want. Blogs typically include links to other sites and online articles with the blogger's reactions and comments, but many blogs simply contain the blogger's own ramblings.

Unquestionably, the popularity of blogging has fueled the expansion of RSS feeds. According to Technorati, a company that offers a search engine for blogs in addition to market research services, about one-third of blogs have RSS feeds. Some people who maintain blogs are publishing an RSS feed without even knowing about it, because some of the blog Web sites automatically create feeds (more about how this happens shortly). If you think that blogs are only personal affairs, remember that Microsoft has hundreds of them, and businesses are using them more and more to keep employees, colleagues, and customers up to date.

In this chapter, I give a quick overview of blogging and how to use RSS with your blog to gain more readers. If you want to start a blog, this chapter explains where to go next. If you already have a blog, I explain how you can create an RSS feed and use it to publicize your blog.

If you're totally not interested in blogs, feel free to skip this chapter. You won't hurt my feelings, honest.

Bloggers Unite!

Blogging has become a movement. Blogs have become influential, and even the mainstream media are taking notice — and reading. Web sites have been around for a long time. How did a few daily entries balloon into millions (yes, millions) of blogs and an entire industry?

Blogging is the back to our roots part of the evolution of the Internet. The Internet started as a tool for researchers, scientists, academics, and the government. The early days of the World Wide Web (which grew out of the Internet) contained lots of personal sites and free information, as people discovered they could post anything they wanted. Still, the great expansion of the Internet was driven by commercial uses.

However, people never forgot those earlier days of personal interests, and they still had more to say. People discovered that they could *publish*, meaning that they could create a Web site whose main purpose was to provide ongoing updates on anything — current events, social mores, technical advances, and so on — including their opinions on these topics. It was the opinions — well-researched, smartly written, often funny — that hooked people on reading blogs.

A history of blogging

The earliest blogs were simply updates on the early history of the Internet. In early 1992, Tim Berners-Lee (the inventor of the World Wide Web and now Director of the World Wide Web Consortium (www.w3c.org) regularly posted the progress being made on the development of what would become the Internet. In 1993, Marc Andreesen, known for his creation of the Mosaic and Netscape Web browsers, created a "What's New" log at the National Center for Supercomputing Applications. These were mostly news items to keep colleagues up to date.

A very early site that is recognizable as the kind of blog we know today contained Justin Hall's daily ruminations. You can still see his first daily page at www.links.net/daze/96/01/10/. It's more like free poetry than prose. He starts, "daily thoughts, a useful notion" and ends with "sounds like a good idea to me, I think I'm gonna

have a little somethin' new at the top of www.links.net every day."

Dave Winer, whom we could call the father of RSS, started a news page in 1996, also for techies, but he added personal commentaries, in true blog fashion. Slashdot (www.slash dot.org) started its "news for nerds" in 1997. Jorn Barger coined the term Weblog in December 1997 for his own Web site. By 1998 and 1999, a couple of people created lists of Web logs, of which there were 20 to 30 at the time. By 1999, Peter Merholz had shortened Web log to blog. Rebecca Blood, who maintains a history of blogging at www.rebecca blood.net/essays/weblog history. html, started her well-known blog in 1999. Blogging was limited to people who knew how to create Web sites until 1999, when Pitas (www.pitas.com) started the first free buildyour-own-blog Web tool. Other tools soon

followed. These tools allowed bloggers to edit their blogs right in their browser, without any knowledge of HTML or Web design. Blogging became easy, and the number of blogs grew exponentially.

A few incidents helped to make the blogging world an important phenomenon. A story about White House intern Monica Lewinsky broke in Matt Drudge's blog (www.drugereport.com). One of the best examples of the influence of blogs occurred after Senator Trent Lott made a comment at Senator Strom Thurmond's 100th birthday that seemed to be a favorable reference to Thurmond's earlier support for racial segregation. While the mainstream media virtually ignored the comment, bloggers, including

www.talkingpointsmemo.com, pounded the issue. People read the blogs, and within a few days, TV and newspapers picked up the issue. After two weeks, Lott had to resign as U.S. Senate majority leader.

The war in Iraq and the 2004 U.S. presidential campaign (which started in 2002) were also hot blog topics. Democratic candidate Howard Dean started the first campaign blog by a presidential candidate. Now, several mainstream media outlets have their own blogs, including *The New York Times* and *The Washington Monthly*.

So when will you join the march of blog history?

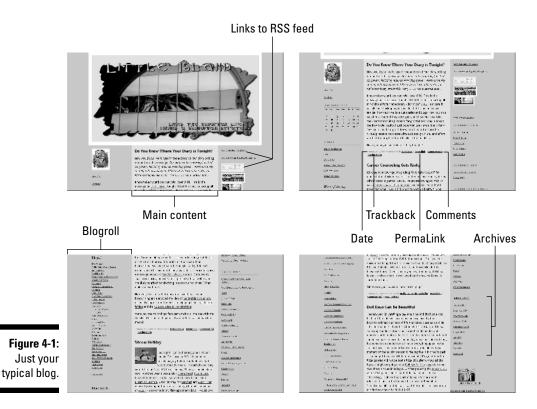
Figure 4-1 shows a blog that contains many typical features of blogs, as follows:

- ✓ Main content: A regular, often daily, entry.
- ✓ Link to RSS feed: A link to the RSS feed, so the visitor can subscribe.
- ✓ Date: The entry's date, with the most recent entry always on top.
- ✓ PermaLink: A permanent (nonchanging) URL that contains the same content as the entry. The blog's main URL changes whenever the blog is updated.
- ✓ Comments: A way for readers to comment about the entry. Many blogs don't have this feature, because it requires a lot of time on the part of the blogger to respond to the comments.
- ✓ Trackback: A list of other sites that link to the entry. The more trackbacks, the more popular the entry.
- **▶ Blogroll:** A list of the blogger's favorite blogs.
- ✓ **Archives:** A list, often by month, of previous entries.

Bloggers discovered that it was fun to write about what they thought. They felt they had something to say, and now anyone, anywhere in the world, could read it. They didn't have to get a job as a reporter or write a book. Blogging is the true democratization of publishing.



Keep in mind that you don't need a blog to create an RSS feed. An RSS feed can contain press releases or computer tips (that's what I use mine for) that are not based on a blog, because the format of the source content on the Web site is simply not blog-like.



Who started the first blog? Of course, it's hard to know, but for the curious, see the sidebar "A history of blogging."



For lots more on blogging see *Buzz Marketing with Blogs For Dummies*, by Susannah Gardner from Wiley Publishing.

Creating a Blog

If you want to create a blog, you need to decide which type of service or technology you want to use. Your choice of blogging tools is an important decision — after all, you'll probably use that tool almost every day.

The easiest way to start a blog is to use a Web-based service. You don't need your own Web site, because the Web service hosts your blog for you. This means that the blog resides on their computers, not yours. You just enter your content into a Web form in your browser and click a button to post your blog.



If you want to run your own Web server, you can. Several blogging programs work on a server. The disadvantage is that you need more technical skills. The advantage is that you have more control over your blog. Also, you don't have to worry about your blogging service going under or its servers crashing. In this section, I emphasize programs that host your blog for you. In the next section, I explain how you can create a blog without a blogging service.

Choosing a blogging service

Blogging services offer a bewildering array of features. Before you start, you should think about the type of blog content you want to create so you know which features you'll need. Here are some questions to ponder:

- ✓ Do you want to be able to include images? How about audio and video? Some services let you upload files; others don't.
- ✓ Many blogs create a *community* by allowing readers to respond to blog entries. A community is an amazing animal if you have the time for it. After all, you'll want to read all the comments and perhaps reply to them. Do you want to allow readers to comment on your entries? If so, will the service you choose allow you to control spam comments?
- ✓ Do you want to put out an RSS feed? Of course you do! What kind? RSS? Atom? Which version? Is the creation of the feed automatic? If you have comments, are they included in the RSS feed or do you want a separate RSS feed for the comments?
- ✓ Do any restrictions exist on content? A few services restrict you to noncommercial use. Hosted services don't allow you to post certain types of content (adult, racist, and so on) to your blog.
- Does the service place ads on your blog pages? If so, can you opt out by paying a fee?
- ✓ Can you write in any language (as opposed to just English, for example)?
- Can you create more than one blog?
- Can you customize the look of your blog? If so, how much can you customize it, and is it easy to do?
- Can you make your blog private if you want? Can you require a password? (This option is important for groups that want to limit accessibility to specific individuals, such as employees or family members.)
- Can you get statistics on how many people are visiting your blog page?
- ✓ How much does the blogging service cost, if anything?
- ✓ Does the service offer more than one level of features? Some offer a free version as well as an upgraded version that you pay for. Compare the feature sets to decide which level you want. Remember that you may want to upgrade in the future. Does the service allow that?

- ✓ How good is the support in case you have questions? Can you call? What are the support hours? Is the documentation helpful?
- ✓ Is there a backup system in case the service goes under or you decide that you aren't satisfied with the features and you want to transfer your blog to another blogging service?
- ✓ Does the blogging service restrict the amount of traffic to your blog? For example, if your blog is reviewed by *The New York Times* and millions of people come to visit your blog, do you have to pay extra?
- ✓ Can you view sample blogs that use the same service?

In the next few sections, I delve into some specific blogging tools that you may want to use. However, there are many options out there, so don't feel that you need to limit yourself to these choices. Some blogging sites are so easy to use that you can try them out and then go on to another one if you decide to: In other words, getting in with these sites is simple and getting out is too.

Blogger.com

Blogger.com (www.blogger.com/start) was one of the first major blogging tools and is probably the best-known blogging site. As of this writing, Blogger.com hosts over 292,000 blogs. It's owned by Pyra.com, Ltd., which was itself recently bought by Google. (This suggests that Google may soon follow Yahoo into the news feed world.) Blogger.com creates Atom feeds. (For more information on Atom feeds, see the section "How RSS Started," in Chapter 1, as well as Chapter 7, "Creating RSS Feeds from Scratch".)

You work in your browser to write, manage, and post your blogs. If you don't have your own Web host, Blogger.com hosts your blog on its servers, using its BlogSpot service.

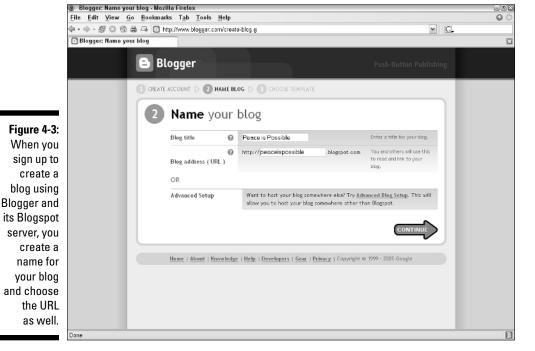
Blogger is free — so the price is right. BlogSpot is free but puts ads on your blog. Figure 4-2 shows the Blogger.com home page.

To sign up for Blogger.com, go to the Blogger.com home page and perform the following steps:

- 1. Click the Create an Account Now button.
 - Fill out the form that appears, including your name, password, e-mail address, and so on.
- 2. Check the Acceptance of Terms check box to agree to the Blogger.com terms. These include not using your blog for anything illegal or offensive.
- 3. Click Continue.
- 4. Enter a blog name and URL, as shown in Figure 4-3, or click the Advanced Blog Setup link if you want to put your blog on your own Web site.



Figure 4-2: Blogger.com is an easy place to start blogging.



- 5. If you want to use the Blogspot server, click the Continue button.

 If you choose the Advanced Blog Setup link, you need to provide the information that Blogger composeds to upload the blog. This is not have
 - information that Blogger.com needs to upload the blog. This is not hard to do, but the site doesn't offer much help; I had to change my publishing settings a couple of times before I got the blog to work properly.
- 6. Choose a template from the choices provided, as shown in Figure 4-4.
- 7. Click the Continue button.
- 8. Click the Start Posting button to starting creating your blog.

Once you've followed these steps to create the blog, you can immediately start writing anything you want, using the posting text box shown in Figure 4-5. Click the Publish Post button and you've posted your first blog content.

You can allow comments on your blog if you want to create a conversation. Just select the Yes option button under the Allow New Comments on This Post label. But be forewarned: you have to be prepared to answer these comments!

Blogger offers some other helpful options for posting. You can post by e-mail, use Blogger's BlogThis! browser button to post from any Web site, post photos with Blogger's Hello add-on, or even use AudioBlogger to post audio files by phone. You can create a group blog — this would work well for a family or even a business group. For information about these features and others, click the Help link.

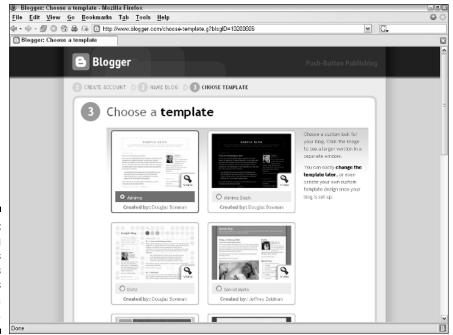


Figure 4-4:
Designing
your blog's
look is as
easy as
choosing a
template.

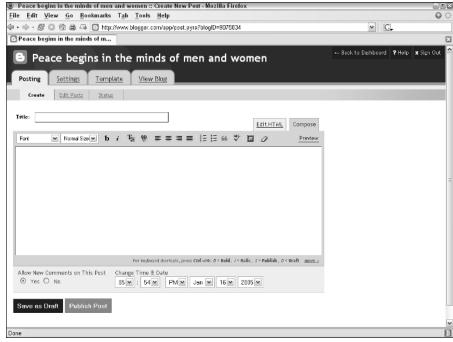


Figure 4-5:
The blank
box before
you
challenges
you to
express
your
creativity!

Figure 4-6 shows my first blog created with Blogger. I chose to create it on my own Web host's server. The blog took just a few minutes to create.

Publishing your blog creates the Atom feed by default, although you can turn off the feed. (Now, why would you want to do that?) The default filename is a tom.xml, which I found unhelpful. You can change the name — I chose the same name as my HTML file so that I had peace.html and peace.xml files.

Of course, I immediately subscribed to my feed. Figure 4-7 shows it in Feedreader. It's just a short feed, but I like it anyway!

LiveJournal.com

LiveJournal.com (www.livejournal.com) has over 2 million active blogs as of this writing. This Web-based service is also free, although you can also buy into an upgraded version of the service.

LiveJournal was started by Brad Fitzpatrick in 1999, based on a system he had been using for his own journal. The software is open source, which means that anyone can use the software, view the source code, and contribute to its development. LiveJournal doesn't offer the option of hosting your blog on your own site, although if you have your own Web server, you could use the software on your server — but that would require some advanced configuration.

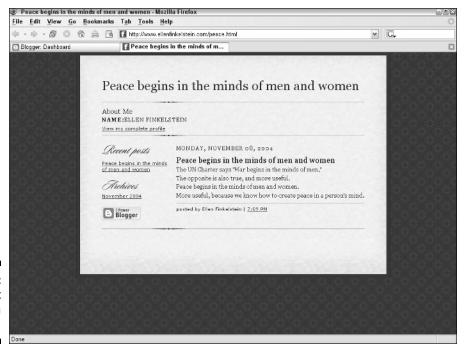


Figure 4-6: My first Blogger.com blog!

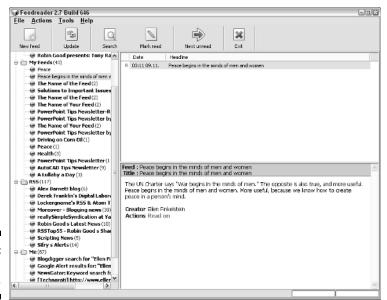


Figure 4-7: My blog in Feedreader.

LiveJournal creates both RSS 2.0 and Atom feeds automatically. Interestingly, LiveJournal.com is also an RSS Web-based reader, providing you with a personal Web page where you can subscribe to and read news feeds.

Live Journal offers both personal blogs — that is, journals — and *communities*, which are blogs in which a number of users can post entries about a topic.

To create your blog in LiveJournal, do the following things:

- ✓ Register by providing a username, password, and e-mail address.
- If you want, you can choose a paid account, which offers some additional features, including a shorter domain name and a LiveJournal e-mail address.
- Confirm your e-mail address by responding to an e-mail that you receive immediately after signing up.

After you are all set up, you can customize your layout by choosing a template and setting text colors, background, and colors of other elements on the page. You can choose a mood icon as well.

Figure 4-8 shows my blog in LiveJournal, after choosing the Notepad template and changing the background and text colors. (I admit, I just copied and pasted from my Blogger.com blog. I can think only so many deep thoughts in one day!)

Finding your feed is not that easy — the URLs for both the RSS and Atom feeds are buried in FAQ 149 (choose Support Frequently Asked Questions Syndication Where can I get an RSS or Atom feed of my journal?). After I found the URLs, I was able to subscribe easily.



Figure 4-8: My blog in LiveJournal.

Movable Type and TypePad

MovableType (www.movabletype.org) is different from Blogger and LiveJournal because MovableType is software that you download and use on your own Web site. (Therefore, in case you were wondering, you need a Web site.) On the other hand, TypePad (www.typepad.com) is the hosted version (like Blogger and LiveJournal) and doesn't require that you have your own Web site. Six Apart (www.sixapart.com), the owner of both MovableType and TypePad, is coy about its exact user numbers, but it estimates that it has over a million users worldwide.

MovableType is free only for personal use and with a limit of three blogs. If you want to have more authors and unlimited blogs, you'll pay one-time fees ranging from \$69.95 to \$99.95. Fees for nonprofit, educational, or commercial use range from \$39.95 to \$199.95. (The fees may change over time, of course.)

You'll have to meet the following requirements to use MovableType:

- ✓ A Web host that allows you to run custom CGI scripts: CGI scripts are little pieces of code that run between a browser and a Web server. You need to check with your Web host to find out if they allow this. My Web host (at my subscription level) does *not* allow custom CGI scripts, so that would immediately stop me from using MovableType. However, many Web hosts do allow these scripts. Contact your Web host's technical support to determine whether the host supports custom CGI scripts. Often, you can upgrade to a level of service that allows you to run CGI scripts.
- ✓ A Web host whose servers run Perl: Perl is the programming language that's often used to create and run CGl scripts. You need version 5.004_04 or later. If you're not sure about the version, ask your Web host.
- ✓ An FTP program to upload files to your Web server: You currently may use an FTP program to upload files to your Web site. If not, you can get one; two well-known tools are Cute FTP (www.cuteftp.com, \$39.99) or WS_FTP (www.ipswitch.com, \$34.99).
- ✓ A Web browser with JavaScript enabled: Almost all browsers support JavaScript; just check that you haven't disabled JavaScript in your browser.

When you download MovableType, you need to find the installation instructions. (Hint: Click the Documentation link on the home page, and then click the Installing MovableType link.) These instructions are very specific (and long). You need to change some of the CGI scripts to specify where your Web host's server keeps Perl (here again, you'll probably have to ask) and where you plan to install MovableType. Then you upload the required files to your Web host's server to install the program.

After configuring the files, you go to the Web location where you have installed MovableType and you see the MovableType program in your browser. You can start your blog. MovableType comes with templates, but you can customize them.

While configuring MovableType seems difficult, the advantage is customizability and top-notch features.

MovableType's sister product, TypePad, makes creating a blog simpler. TypePad uses MovableType, but TypePad keeps everything on its own servers, so you don't have to install or configure anything. TypePad costs from \$4.95 to \$14.95 per month, depending on the level of features you want. You can also download a 30-day free trial.

Signing up for TypePad is similar to signing up for Blogger and LiveJournal. Because TypePad uses the MovableType software, signing up for the trial is a great way to see whether you would like to eventually upgrade to MovableType. Figure 4-9 shows my blog (you must be getting bored with it by now) in TypePad.

You can see some useful features of TypePad in Figure 4-5. For example, viewers can comment; I've already added a wisecrack comment. (The other blogging sites also allow comments.)

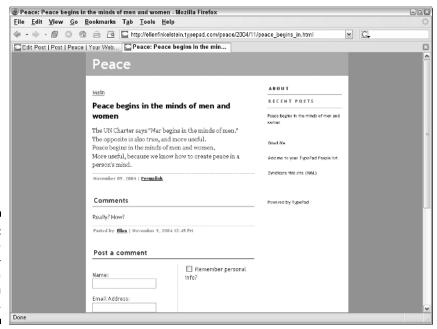


Figure 4-9: Now for the third time the same blog in TypePad. Note the Syndicate This Site (XML) link, which allows viewers to add your feed to their readers. Obviously, TypePad creates the feeds automatically — in both RSS and Atom formats. Again, you need to search in TypePad Help (look for "Syndicating Your Weblog") to find the URL.



Of course, you can also right-click the link in your own blog and choose Copy Shortcut or Copy Link Location from the shortcut menu. Then copy the URL into your RSS reader to subscribe to your own blog. (I always subscribe to my own feeds so that I can check them when I update them.)

Bloglines

Bloglines (www.bloglines.com) is an interesting mix of a blogging tool and an RSS Web-based reader. Bloglines claims tens of thousands of users. I discuss Bloglines in Chapter 2 (see Figure 2-1) as a reader. Here I cover it as a blogging tool.

Bloglines is simplicity incarnate, as shown in Figure 4-10. What you lose in customizability, you gain in ease of use. You just type inside the box and click the Post to Blog button. That's all there is to it. If you know some HTML, you can format your blog. For example, you can add hypertext links.

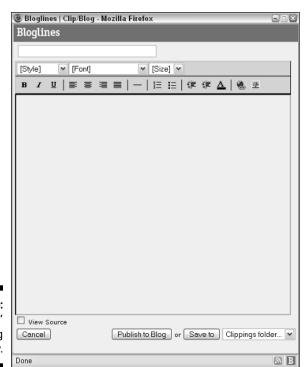


Figure 4-10: Bloglines' blogging window.

Figure 4-11 shows my first blog in Bloglines. (Thank goodness, I finally came up with something new!)

Notice the Sub Bloglines button in the upper-left corner above the calendar. This is the RSS feed that Bloglines automatically creates for your blog. Clicking this button subscribes you to the blog's RSS feed. In Figure 4-6, you can see the list of the RSS feeds that I've subscribed to. A list of links to other blogs is called a *blogroll* (but don't eat it for breakfast with coffee).

Bloglines has a unique Clip Blog feature that takes advantage of its dual nature as both an RSS reader and a blog tool. Many blogs are collections of links and content from other feeds or blogs. The blogger then comments on content and provides the links for further reading. Bloglines facilitates this process of collecting information (usually by reading RSS feeds) and reorganizing it into another source of information (which is also an RSS feed).

Here's how you add items to your blog and publish comments with Clip Blog:

1. When reading your feeds in Bloglines, if you see an item that you want to put into your blog, click the Clip/Blog This link, as shown in Figure 4-12.

A small window opens with the item's title and URL.

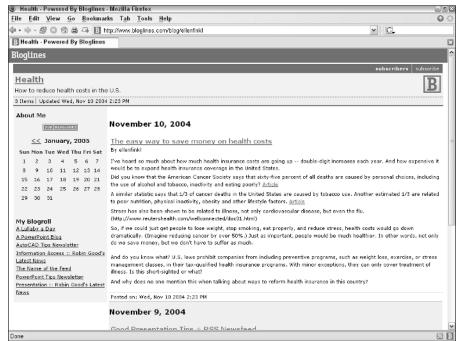
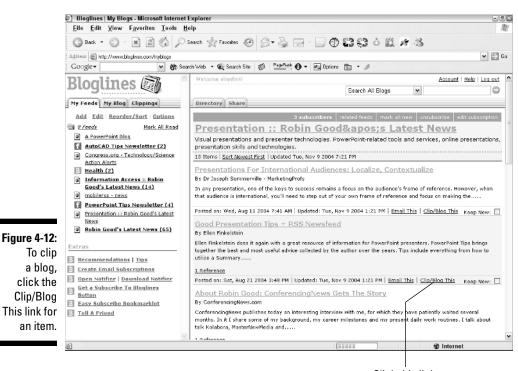


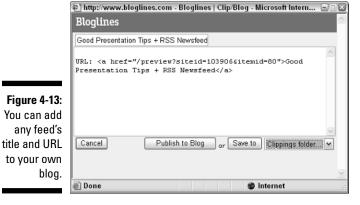
Figure 4-11: My first blog in Bloglines.



Click this link.

2. Click the Publish to Blog button to add the item's title and URL to your blog, as shown in Figure 4-13.

You can also choose to save the item to a Clippings folder, where you save material for later use. The window now displays the message, "The item has been blogged" and has a Close Window link.



- 3. Click the Close Window link to close the window.
- 4. Click the My Blog tab in Bloglines (see Figure 4-12) to go from your feeds to your blog.

In the Edit Posts section, you now see the new post that you saved. You usually want to add some more content.

- 5. Click the new post to open its editing window and add any content that you want.
- 6. Click the Resave to Blog button.

You've just created a new blog entry!

7. Click the View Blog link on the My Blog tab to see your new entry.

You can see my entry in Figure 4-14. I diverged from the topic of health, as you can see, and started showing off, adding an item announcing one of my own feeds.

MSN Spaces

The new kid on the block is MSN Spaces (spaces.msn.com), Microsoft's blogging service, which opened for business while I was writing this book. You can see this home page in Figure 4-15.



Figure 4-14:
My new
entry
consists of
the URL of
an item from
another
feed plus
some text
that I added.



Figure 4-15:
The home
page for
MSN
Spaces,
a new
blogging
service from
Microsoft.

MSN Spaces is free and allows you to:

- make your blog public or private
- upload images
- allow comments

You should be aware that MSN Spaces is somewhat integrated with MSN Messenger. For example, if you make a blog private, you must start by choosing the people who can view your blog from your MSN Address Book. After that, you can add other people one-by-one.

Getting started

Obviously, once you have chosen a blogging tool, you'll be eager to start writing. Perhaps you already know what you want to say — in fact, maybe fully developed ideas are practically exploding out of your head. But for most people it's a good idea to think a bit about how their blog will develop:

✓ Decide on your blog's purpose. You may want to write a mission statement that describes what you are trying to accomplish and why. Include your expected audience. For example, are you creating a blog to promote yourself or your product? Are you trying to rally support for a cause? Are you sharing information about a topic of interest? Is your blog just a water cooler for your family members to swap stories?

- ✓ What kind of content will you include? Do you just want to create a diary-type blog and write off the top of your head? Will you need a source of inspiration? If so, where will you get it? Or, do you want to collect news and comments from other sources and then remix them with your own thoughts to create something new? If you're the organized type, try listing the main points of your first few blog entries.
- ✓ What is the focus and format of that content? Will you focus on one topic or let yourself write about anything that interests you? Will people read your blog because you're a very interesting person, because you write well, or because they're already interested in a topic that you're covering? Will they come for information, opinions, or both?

On the other hand, you may be blogging for purely personal reasons and not care if anyone else is interested. That's fine, too.

✓ Consider your schedule. How much time will it take you to write a regular blog entry? How much time do you have every day to blog? Many blogs are started and abandoned (like the ones I started for this chapter). Good blogs are updated daily or almost daily.



If you're considering a blog for your business, and you're already spending lots of time communicating your thoughts via e-mail, blogging probably won't take you any more time.

Blogging can be very fulfilling for personal use and very useful for business use — blogging is a great way to communicate. So give it a try and see what happens!

Creating a Blog with Your HTML Editor

If you already have a Web site and maintain it, and you don't need fancy blogging bells and whistles, you may not need a blogging tool at all. For example, perhaps you don't want to allow comments or responses — this requires some sophisticated programming, which the blogging services offer but which you may not be able to do easily on your own. If you don't need this kind of feature, you may choose to create a blog on your own.

After all, what is a blog? It's just some text on a Web page, listed by date. If all you want to do is create a daily entry, you can create one in the same way you create any other Web content.

Figure 4-16 shows how I put the content of the two blogs I started earlier in this chapter (which you can see in Figures 4-9 and 4-11) on a page of my Web site. Here I'm working in Microsoft FrontPage and displaying the blogs in Preview mode.

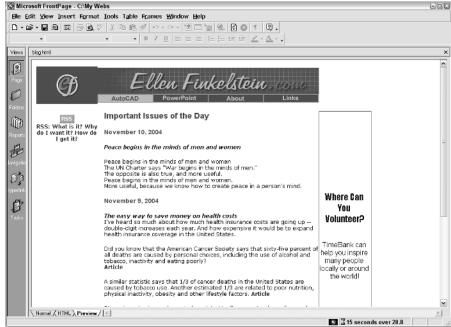


Figure 4-16: You can create a blog right on your Web site.

You can put each entry on a new page or put several entries on one page. Your choice may depend on the length of your blogs.

The only remaining step is to create your RSS feed. Part II of this book is all about creating your own RSS feeds.

Maintaining Your Blog

After you've created and posted a few blog entries, you'll establish a routine of maintaining your blog every day or so. The most popular bloggers put aside a few hours each day, usually at the same time, to blog. Of course, that's not considering those bloggers who seem to post 24/7. In this section I provide some ideas for efficient blog maintenance.



You may want to follow the example of one blogger gets all his entries out of the way in the morning but uses an automated system to post them throughout the day so that it seems as if he's always working — meanwhile, he's out having a good time!

Archive this!

Most blogs archive older issues to preserve their wisdom for posterity. In fact, in the sidebar "A history of blogging," I include links to the earliest blogs that go back to the mid-nineties; these are still available on the Web.

To archive older issues, decide how many blog entries you want on a page, and then follow these steps:

1. When your entries on a page exceed the number you want to include, create a new page.

Name and title the page according to the dates of the blogs. For example, you could name the page 2004-11.html for all your November 2004 entries.

- 2. Select older entries that you want to archive, and cut and paste them into the new page.
- 3. Add a link on the archive page to your current page, the one that always contains your latest entries.
- 4. Put a link on your current page that sends the reader to the archived page.

You can create one area that includes links to all your archived pages.

Getting input for your blog

Although many people write entries based on blogs or news stories that they've read, don't forget that you should add something meaningful to other peoples' content. Work on developing your own voice and your own point of view.



When you mention an outside source, provide not only a link but also a mention of the author and title. In other words, be generous about giving credit to your sources.

Maintaining your blog is more than just posting. If you allow people to add comments, you should comment on some of those postings. (You may want to delete some of them, too! Blogging tools allow you full control over your content.)



Comments from your readers can be a major source of content. Readers may bring up a source or idea that really gets your juices flowing. On the other hand, you will probably get a fair number of spam comments.

If gathering information is part of your plan for obtaining content for your blog, you need to find resources that you can read each day. Perhaps you're responsible for keeping your company or department informed on issues that affect them. Other blogs are probably not enough. You should also look at RSS feeds, news (which may or may not be available via RSS feeds), and Web sites (which also may or may not be available via RSS feeds).

In Chapter 3, I cover ways to find resources using RSS. In the section "Using RSS directories," I explain how to search RSS directories for RSS feeds in your area of interest. In the section "Creating a new feed from a search," I show you ways to create a new feed from a keyword search.



Although the practice is somewhat controversial, you can also create a new feed from a Web site. Converting HTML to an RSS feed is called *scraping*. There is controversy over the question of whether you need to ask permission to do this. In Chapter 8, I explain methods of scraping RSS feeds from Web sites. A number of tools are available to help you accomplish this task.

Adding ads

Here's another consideration for maintaining your blog — do you want to make some money from it? If your blogging service is not free, you may want to at least make up some of the cost of using it.

The main way to make money is to place ads on your blog. Opportunities for including ads will certainly proliferate in the future — lots of people are trying to figure out how to make money from their blogs. You can expect to see more tools become available that help you make your blog financially — as well as personally — worthwhile. However, right now, ways to include ads with your blogs are limited.

You may not be able place ads on your blog if it's hosted. However, Blogger is now offering the opportunity to place Google Adsense ads on your blog. Adsense ads are like the ads you see to the right of your browser when you do a search on Google, except that they appear on your Web site. The ads are specifically chosen (automatically) to relate to the content of your site. So if you have a blog on health, you'll see ads related to health and health products.

If you create your blog on your own Web site, you can use Google Adsense, too. Go to www.google.com/adsense to sign up. You get paid a small amount for each time someone goes to your site and clicks one of the ads. Because the ads are appropriate for your site's content, people are likely to click the ads. Okay, so you probably won't make thousands of dollars per month, but if you work carefully at publicizing your blog and a few hundred people read it each day, you could make a few hundred dollars a month — certainly enough to pay for your blog.

A similar option is Blogads (www.blogads.com). Advertisers sign up and choose the blogs they want to advertise on. You can sign up to be listed as one of those sites.

Depending on your topic, you may attract sponsors. For example, if you blog about how to use a computer program, the software company that makes that program may sponsor you.

On the other hand, it's perfectly all right to keep your blog ad-free. In spite of the commerciality of the Internet, a strong culture also exists for keeping information and opinion noncommercial. Some topics lend themselves more to ads than others. You may feel that your blog will be corrupted by ads. If you're blogging because you love it, why bother with ads?

Finding other ways to make money

You can ask for donations. Some bloggers use Amazon's Honor System program, which allows site visitors to donate to your site. (Go to www.amazon.com and scroll to the bottom of the page. Click the Join Honor System link.)

If it's appropriate for your blog's topic, you can become an Amazon associate and recommend books that relate to your blog. If readers buy the books, you get a small percentage. (Go to www.amazon.com and click the Join Associates link at the bottom of the page.) Some blogging tools, such as TypePad and WordPress, include support for selling books via Amazon. Many readers will appreciate your recommendations for further reading and won't think of these links as advertising.

Publicizing Your Blog with RSS

If you feel that no one is reading your blog, it can be disheartening. But you can't just sit back and wait for the masses to come to you; you need to let people know about your blog. Just having an RSS feed doesn't guarantee that people will subscribe. And most people still read blogs by going to the blog's Web site.

The first step is simply to let people know about your blog. Tell them the URL of the blog and of your RSS feed. Send an e-mail to all your friends and colleagues. Put the URL on your business card. Explain to them the advantages of subscribing to your feed. (Give them this book!) Chapter 11 is all about how to promote your feed, so you can find more useful tips there.

If you used a hosted blog service, such as Blogger or LiveJournal, remember that they only list your blog on their sites. Therefore, you need to go out and make your blog and its RSS feed visible elsewhere on the Web.

If you can find other blogs on similar subjects that accept comments, feel free to make constructive comments and include a link to your own blog. Perhaps you can write some articles for online or offline publications and mention your blog in them.

Quite a few sites function as directories just for blogs, regardless of whether they have RSS feeds. People come to these sites to search for blogs on topics that interest them. You can list your blog on some of these sites to help people can find it.

Chapter 15 includes a list of the ten best RSS directories, but here, in Table 4-1, I include a list of some of the best blog directories. These directories list the Web site URLs of the blogs, and these blogs may or may not have RSS feeds. You can add your own blog's URL to these sites.

Table 4-1	Blog Directories
Site Name	URL
Blogdex	www.blogdex.net
Blog Search Engine	www.blogsearchengine.com
Blogwise	www.blogwise.com
Blogstreet	www.blogstreet.com
Web Portal	http://portal.eatonweb.com

Use a combination of blog directories and RSS directories to publicize your blog. Keep your blog interesting, relevant, updated, and useful, and people will come knocking at your door.