



Daniel Maidman working on a blog post at his studio.

# The Artist-Writer

In-depth information on how to begin writing about art

**I**n an era when every artist is expected to have a personal website, more and more artists have turned to writing about their work. As a result, a new generation of artists who blog and write about art is emerging and there is no reason why any visual artist should hesitate to give writing a try. Writing gives an artist a certain power in the art world apart from that of their art itself. Writing can be creatively rewarding and it can broaden an artist's social circle.

This Q-and-A with John Seed and Daniel Maidman focuses on how an artist might start up an art writing practice, with a focus on blogging, the most readily available contemporary public writing format.

John Seed is a painter, curator and arts journalist who has contributed over 200 blogs to *The Huffington Post's* Arts page since it first appeared in May 2010. He has also written about art and artists for *Hyperallergic*, *Arts of Asia*, and *Art Ltd.* Seed is a specialist in the Bay Area Figurative Art movement, having studied with many of its major practitioners, including Elmer Bischoff, Frank Lobdell, and Joan Brown. Seed is a professor of art and art history at Mt. San Jacinto College. His most recent book, *Ten Rather Eccentric Essays on Art*, can be found on Amazon.com. Personal blog: [www.johnseed.com](http://www.johnseed.com)

Daniel Maidman is a painter and art writer. He has written about technique for *International Artist* since 2010. He writes art criticism for *The Huffington Post*, and covers his practice and thoughts on art at his personal blog. His art and writing on art have been featured in *ARTnews*, *Juxtapoz*, *Hyperallergic*, *Whitehot Magazine*, *American Art Collector*, *Poets/Artists*, *MAKE*, and *Manifest*. He has produced paintings in collaboration with best-selling novelist China Miéville, award-winning poet Kathleen Rooney, and legendary actor Martin Donovan. Personal blog: [www.danielmaidman.blogspot.com](http://www.danielmaidman.blogspot.com)

**How does writing help you, in terms of your art?**

**Daniel Maidman:** Making art is a learning process. Even though I'm an artist, I always think of myself as "becoming an artist" too. For me, writing is a powerful learning tool. It forces me to organize and clarify my thoughts, about my own work and the work I look at—both in terms of technique and meaning. Once I do that, mistakes I keep making get driven into the open, and new creative avenues present themselves. Writing about art helps me grow as an artist. That said, I'm a highly verbal person, and my blog is extremely wordy. Other artists who are less verbal but would like to blog might consider posting more art and shorter blocks of text, or just art.

**John Seed:** Dan is so right about the power of writing as a learning tool. Just as an artist should always step back from the

A previous article by Daniel Maidman in *International Artist* magazine.



Daniel Maidman's blog.



John Seed works on a blog post in his office.

easel and think hard about each work in progress, writing offers the chance to disengage from art-making and think through one's artistic practice.

### How does writing help you, in terms of your career?

**DM:** I started blogging because my actual art website wasn't dynamic enough. I wanted to post new content faster than I could paint. Writing seemed like an easy option. It turned out it wasn't, but it was a lot of fun, which is almost as good. I wound up developing an audience and a relationship with my audience. I was able to spread my art and thoughts on art much farther than I anticipated. My experience and exposure led to writing opportunities elsewhere—including here and at *The Huffington Post*.

How does that help my career? It's not entirely quantifiable. I've certainly met collectors through the exposure my writing brings to my art. But I am also able to take part in the conversation about what art today is and should be. I'm able to argue for my point of view, and for work by others that I believe in. For me, that's an important part of a career too.

**JS:** Blogging has completely transformed my career. It has made me realize that I don't need to define myself solely as an artist: I am definitely a writer now too. The social side



# 9 Step

## PHASE ONE: STARTING WRITING

### 1 *Clarify your Vision*

Decide what you want to write about. A strong angle is good (e.g. “an art student from Detroit draws every day on a six-month tour of Tibet”) but not necessary. Brainstorm posts and write a list of ten ideas. Look at them—they’ll illustrate your interests. Let your interests suggest a name and look for your blog.

### 2 *Create a Blog*

Blogger and Wordpress are the leading free blogging options. They offer many sophisticated control options, but at the basic level of choosing a design template, getting a blog up, and posting your first post, they are very simple, with clear instructions. You can learn as you go.

### 3 *Write a Post*

Write your introductory post. People want to “meet” you and your art. Don’t feel like you have to tell “all” but in your first post—and in your blogging profile—tell your readers just enough that they understand what you and your art are about.



Daniel Maidman painting.

of blogging has been extremely powerful and I’ve formed a new network of friends whose work I have been able to support and comprehend through writing. In turn, my new friends and contacts take a real interest in everything I do. Even if you live a ways out of the city—as I do—blogging can make you feel like you are in the thick of things.

**Talk a bit about hosting, domain names, and blog design.**

**JS:** My personal blog is a Google “blogger” site that is “parked” at a domain name. It is free, and in fact I’m even making a bit of revenue via Google AdSense, which places targeted ads alongside my content. The blogger templates and designs are easy to implement and other than a custom header



Daniel Maidman starting a new post using the Blogger platform.

# How to Writing

## 4 Tell your Friends

Share your post by email, Facebook, and other platforms with friends who are interested in the topics you're discussing. They will be your first and most encouraging readers—and if you can't keep them, that's a good sign to up your game. If you don't have any friends who share your interests, just keep blogging. You will.

## 5 Come Back in a Week

This is the hardest part: keep blogging. Inspiration lasts only so long before you have to decide to go on as an act of will. Set a weekly alarm on your computer, make a date in your calendar, do whatever it takes to make sure you regularly put time and effort into your blog. Fortunately, you already have a list of ten posts to write. That'll keep you going for a couple months.

## PHASE TWO: IMPROVING YOUR WRITING

## 6 Respond to your Readers

As you attract readers, you will gain two valuable sources of feedback: analytics and comments. Analytics are the tracking data on blog visits provided by your blogging platform. You can learn a lot about what topics people found interesting by how many visits particular posts got. Study your analytics data. You don't have to slavishly chase popularity, but seeing when you connected with readers helps provide insight into how well you're communicating. Comments are a much more specific and incomplete data set. They come from your most enthusiastic and committed readers, and can suggest topics that might be worth covering in the future. Writing in public involves interaction with your audience. That's fine; actors and serial writers (like Charles Dickens) have always done great work that way.

## 7 Practice

Above all, your writing will improve with practice. This is one of the chief uses of blogging—it keeps you practicing. Writing is like any other expert field, and you will only get good at it by doing a lot of it. Your writing in year three will be worlds better than in year one. You'll be actively embarrassed by your earliest posts. That's great! It means you're improving.

## PHASE THREE: YOUR WRITING IN THE WORLD

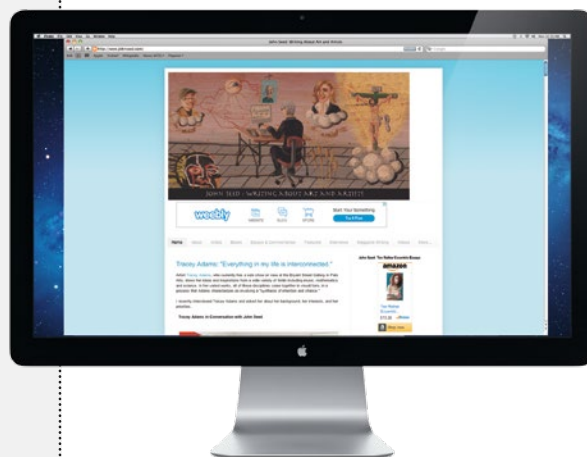
## 8 Expanding your Sphere

Once you've established a long-term track record of public writing, and the writing expertise that results from practice, you can begin to leverage your hard work to get your writing into non-blog formats. Consider where you'd like to see your writing. Art magazines or websites? Which kind? General interest magazines, newspapers, literary journals, university presses? Make your list of first, second, and third choice publications, and start submitting. You may well have to start small, but that's fine too. It builds your resume and your reputation.

## 9 Refine your Goals

Now that you've developed your writing abilities, and built a niche in the world for your writing, ask yourself again why you're doing all this. Is writing your primary interest, or does it serve your art? What would you like your writing to accomplish? Consider again how you're spending your writing time and energy, and what you can do to adjust your practice to advance your core goals. It is worth highlighting that "enjoying writing" is a perfectly valid core goal. You do not need to strategize your way into anything beyond that.

John Seed's blog.



banner at the top my blog design is very simple and straightforward.

**DM:** I'm on a Blogger site as well, without a custom domain name (i.e. the URL includes the "blogspot" term). If I were starting today, I'd go with Wordpress, which also offers free blog hosting. Based on what I've seen, Wordpress is a more flexible and up-to-date system. As far as design is concerned, I haven't made a single change since I started blogging in 2009. This means my blog looks kind of dowdy these days. That's an important principle—design is more central to a lot of web presences, but my readers are there for words and pictures. They don't care that much how it's packaged.

## What role do images and videos play?

**JS:** People think blogging is about writing, but the ability to post images and embedded videos is part of blogging's power. A great blog is sometimes as simple as this: put up an image of a work of art in progress and let your readers know how it is going and what you are trying to do. Art is a conversation, and images and videos are now some of the best conversation starters on social media.



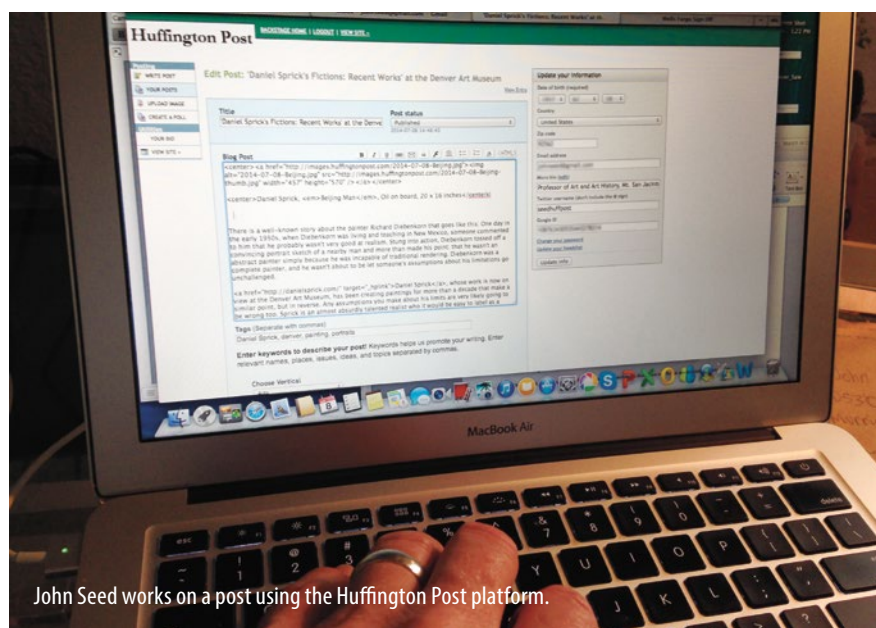


John Seed painting.

**DM:** I agree. Graphics are limited in printed material. In blogs, the sky is the limit. This provides room to develop a train of thought in words and pictures nearly simultaneously. In much writing, this would result in sloppy thinking, but in visual art, it's part of the point of the endeavor. It is good to learn how to use this capability.

### What was your first post like?

**JS:** I actually started out by submitting an art review to a local newspaper that had no art critic. They agreed to run it, but my review came back from the editor shortened and retitled: it wasn't my writing anymore. I complained about this on Facebook and a friend referred me to the editor responsible for developing *The Huffington Post's* Arts page. She loved the sample I sent her—"Picasso's



John Seed works on a post using the Huffington Post platform.

Recession-Proof Harem”—and she published it with no changes. That experience made me realize that blogging was going to be the right medium for me. I could control my own content and write with integrity.

**DM:** My first post was nothing special—just kind of a “hello,” with a little bit of art technique chat. When I started, I had no readers at all. Literally no one visited my blog for the first few weeks. This was during the honeymoon period when I was posting something new every day or two. Most blogs don’t make it through this first period. If writing carries its own reward for you, you will keep going until the stochastic processes of the Web itself eventually drive a few readers your way. From there, your work and writing will have an opportunity to keep them and draw more.

### Can you offer ideas for how to come up with topics?

**DM:** If you’re having trouble coming up with something, one surefire topic is the art you’re working on. No two artworks will take the same path or mean the same thing. Teach yourself to talk about your technique, what you’re getting at, and how your piece relates to art history. This is not a universally good idea for artists, but if you’re an artist-writer, it should be a good idea for you. Beyond that, keep a list of things about art that interest you—paints, media, tools, artworks, art movements, galleries, museums—and write about your thoughts on them. Remember that one paragraph is often more catchy than 12.

**JS:** Try interviewing some other artists you admire. Blogging is a social practice and you will find that other artists are pleased that you have taken an interest in them. They will likely share your interview with their friends: every time you feature another artist in your blog you will find yourself connected with his/her online circles.

### What kind of tone works best in writing?

**JS:** When I started writing about art I felt that I had to be serious. Sometimes, that is true, but humor can really add to your blog. People like to smile and when they are smiling they are more attentive to what you have to say. I have only had one post go truly



“viral” in my blogging career and it was a satire.

**DM:** Again, this is very close to my experience. My most-read post is a two-sentence piece making fun of Renoir (whom I despise). I have found that being funny is tremendously important. It is not always appropriate, so be judicious with it, especially as you move into print. But humor is a wonderfully inviting rhetorical position, and the heavier your topic, the more the jokes will help your readers make it through. Apart from that, though, you will discover your voice as you write. It will be eccentric and weird. Respect your voice. Don’t indulge it to the point of being incomprehensible, but cultivate it to make your work truly your own.

**JS:** Another point about tone. The web is full of shameless self-promotion. Yes, your blog is a way of connecting with others, but don’t just go on and on about yourself. Review shows you like, blog about other artists, and include just enough about you and your own art. Also, starting a blog is like buying a gym membership: it is a commitment, and you should plan on blogging regularly. In my case, I have averaged a blog post per week for over four years.

**DM:** I disagree! Put in as much as you like about you and your own art—as long as it’s interesting. Do, however, take a tone commensurate with your abilities—I think this might be part of what you’re getting at, John. What I mean is, Vermeer can write a blog about what a genius he is. Are you that good? No? OK, then you aren’t entitled to write as if you are. And we wouldn’t even put up with it for very long out of Vermeer—unless he made it very, very interesting. I do, however, agree with John about the other topics to cover. Everything he lists makes for great writing material. *la*

“Starting Over” by Daniel Maidman appeared in the August/September 2014 issue of *International Artist*.