The standard advice for writing a report on a sporting event used to be to use a notebook and a laptop. You take notes on paper and then, early in the second half, you start writing your polished report which you aim to file “on the whistle” – or at match point or stumps.

Today reporters are expected to file as the event unfolds. The notes that used to be written in a notepad are now published immediately as a “live blog” or “minute-by-minute” account, either on a blog or on Twitter.

For football or rugby matches, some media companies will expect the same reporter to write both a live blog and a considered report. However, in this book, we are treating them as distinct skills as they require different approaches.

Live blogs may be the work of one person or of a team. A local paper is unlikely to devote more than one reporter to a lower league football match on a Tuesday evening. But the BBC or Telegraph may have a team of three or four people working on a big match with one person responsible for the main blog, one for images, one for video etc. In the case of a test match, writers will probably work shifts as it isn’t really possible to blog solidly seven hours a day for five days. In fact, even one-day cricket matches are normally covered by more than one person. Athletics events where several contests are taking place simultaneously are also hard to cover without several people. Sometimes, there is a clear handover when a new writer takes over.

The technique has proved so effective that it has been extended to cover sports news that breaks over the course of a day. Several organisations produce day-long live blogs on the last day of European football’s transfer windows, the day of the NBA or NFL drafts or during the Olympic or Commonwealth Games.

There is a wide audience for live blogs, from people glancing at their phone during a wedding to those who are watching on television and seeking someone else’s perspective on the game. It might even include people in the stadium. Perhaps it’s the last day of the football season and goals are going in elsewhere that could keep your team up or send it down.

Some guides to writing blogs say that the key skill is to come across like a mate who’s at the game or down the pub with the reader. This is only half true – the secret is to be a well-informed friend. Phil Harlow (see top tips, below) believes that the “old media” format which live blogging most closely resembles is radio commentary. There are certainly similarities: the absence of moving pictures means they are very dependent on the personality of the commentator. They also both depend on the ability to suddenly change gear,
switching from trying to fill dull patches of play to dramatic periods of action. A study of live blogging written by a Swedish academic concluded it is “a hybrid of oral commentary and written reports in newspapers” (Burgh, 2011, cited in Hurrey, 2014).

THE BACK STORY: THE EVOLUTION OF THE LIVE BLOG

The Guardian claims to have developed the live blog – or minute-by-minute (MBM) as they called it – during the 1998 Football World Cup (Hurrey, 2014). While I can’t verify this, I haven’t been able to find any earlier examples of the technique being used.

One of the earliest live blogs of a British sporting event was the Guardian’s blog of the 1998 FA Cup semi-final between Manchester United and Arsenal (Guardian, 1999). It is worth looking this up to see how much the craft has changed. There are no photographs, no videos, no social media posts (this was six years before Facebook launched, eight years before Twitter), no bylines and no comments from experts. To modern readers, it seems to be upside down: new posts are added underneath the previous ones rather than on top of them, as they are today. The writing itself is strictly informative and reads like a set of notes:

5 Anelka ambles down the right flank but his advance is easily snuffed out.
8 Butt hacked down near Arsenal box. Looks for penalty but referee waves play on.

The Guardian suggests you might want to follow the blog “if you can’t get to a TV” (ibid). In other words, it saw it as a poor man’s alternative to being able to watch on TV. The writer, doubtless, imagined people who were forced to work in office jobs on Saturday afternoon, flicking occasional glances at the blog. No reporter is bylined.

Around the same time, the BBC began a feature called Clockwatch. The 2000 FA Cup final is described as “a minute-by-minute guide” though (BBC, 2000), in fact, some posts are five or more minutes apart. The writing is more colourful but it is still one reporter’s perspective.

The 2002 World Cup was held in Japan and South Korea so the time zone proved a boon for live bloggers as games took place while most of the UK population was at work. By this time, publishers had worked out that it made more sense to order posts so that the most recent events appeared at the top of the page. The Guardian continued to innovate with Scott Murray and Rob Smyth becoming recognised masters of the genre. Murray began his account of the 2002 World Cup final with “feel free to email scott.murray@theguardian.com, not that I’m expecting any” (Murray, 2002). In fact, he received plenty – including from Luke Gibbs who couldn’t watch the game because “in Springfield, Missouri there isn’t enough of an interest in the World Cup for the local [ABC] affiliate to be bothered with carrying the match live”. (Contributions from frustrated ex-pats were an almost compulsory feature of early live blogs.) “Isn’t Springfield where the Simpsons live?” replied Murray.

To appreciate just how quickly minute-by-minute reporting moved from the pedestrian style of 1999 to being a vehicle for a reporter’s personality, read Murray’s “over by over” account of the 2003 Cricket World Cup semi-final between
New Zealand and India (Murray, 2003). It begins with a 500-word stream of consciousness rant in capital letters about how unhappy he was to be sitting in front of a boring computer screen writing something his bosses probably wouldn’t read.

This was Smyth’s reaction to Zinedine Zidane’s infamous assault on Marco Materazzi in the 2006 World Cup final (Smyth, 2006):

> it was a disgusting, nasty, blackly comic chestbutt, delivered with a Hitchcockian suddenness, and it’s an unbelievable ending to Zidane’s lustrous career. It was a JFK moment and a GBH moment rolled into one oh-my-giddy-aunt moment. And he could still end up lifting the World Cup!

Remember: that was posted within seconds of the incident itself. Leaving aside the hyperbole, Smyth instantly recognises that this incident will overshadow the great Frenchman’s legacy.

By now, live blogs were not just being used to cover football but rugby, tennis, cricket and other major sports. Broadcasters set up live blogs to cover each day of the 2004 Olympics. The BBC started running a daily “Sportsday Live” blog. But these blogs were still mainly text-based with the odd picture. Mobile phone data speeds still weren’t sufficient to support video and Twitter had yet to take off. So, there was much more opportunity for blog writers to inject their own personality into their work. Murray and Smyth became minor celebrities and published a book of imaginary blogs of famous football matches from the pre-internet era, such as the 1966 and 1970 World Cup finals.

The Guardian continues to publish this sort of minute-by-minute report where the writer is the star; it remains a distinctive feature of the organisation’s sports coverage. But editors were beginning to think about media convergence. If, say, the BBC had the services of a former England star as an expert analyst on Radio Five Live’s coverage of a big football international, then it made sense to repeat his observations on the BBC’s live blog of the match. Other organisations started using blogs to promote their own writers, as in this example from Bleacher Report’s Dylan MacNamara covering the 2010 NFL draft (MacNamara, 2010):

> 8:44 EST: And the 49ers take Anthony Davis. Described by B/R’s Aron Glatzer as a mental wildcard. No one handles those guys better than Mike Singletary. This definitely fills a need for the Niners... should be a day one starter at RT.

The same blog also used polls, encouraging readers to choose between the different options open to the sides competing in the draft:

> 8:36 EST: Second poll of the evening is closed. You guys think Earl Thomas will be a better pro than Joe Haden, 65% or 35%. Interesting. Maybe will pan out that way, but Haden will definitely be richer.

At this time, most blogs would have still been read on computer screens, like Scott Murray’s gloomy account of the 2003 India–New Zealand game. If you wanted to follow a game live on your phone, then the best option was to look at Twitter – most
professional football games had someone in the pressbox live tweeting. Not many media organisations had specialist sports apps; BBC Sport launched its app, for example, early in 2013, responding to a changing audience:

“There is something different about sport”, Ian Singleton (2017), head of BBC Sport Online, believes:

“You’ve got that passion for your team, your clubs and you want to know those live updates, those scores, which make you keep in touch more when you are out and about on your phone. Maybe other people [ie people who aren’t sports fans] don’t have that need to keep in touch at three o’clock in a supermarket on a Saturday.

People always have their phones with them all the time. I always keep an eye on how people are using their phones in the different places they can do it. It’s not a desktop era, it’s not 2011 where you sit and your whole focus is on that screen in front of you, that’s not how people are consuming media in the main today.

Once media organisations started embedding views of their own expert analysts, it was a small step to embedding the views of other former players and fans, even if they weren’t actually officially working for you.

Today, reporters are under pressure to include expert comment from a variety of sources plus photos and videos. One major employer gives reporters a list of requirements which includes “at least 15 tweets” in every live blog. Others expect writers to include links to other stories on their site.

Also, remember that, for a significant section of your audience, your blog will be on a second screen. In other words, they’ll be watching the event itself on a television – or even in the ground itself – while occasionally glancing at your blog to see what other people are saying about the game.

For a really good, modern live blog, I’d suggest looking at the way the BBC covers cricket. The Beeb seems to have captured the richness of Test Match Special, its long-running radio programme, while eliminating some of its overly whimsical elements. For example, in September 2017, England were on their way to a comfortable victory over the West Indies in a one-day international at Bristol. As the tension ebbed out of the game in front of them, the BBC’s expert analysts’ thoughts turned to the upcoming tour of Australia. Graeme Swann says he thinks England need to rethink their test batting order and move Joe Root up to number three. Michael Vaughan disagrees – he thinks the Australians will be wanting Root to move up so they can target him sooner with the new ball. Soon texts and tweets are coming in from the audience siding with one or other of the two retired players. So, the blog contains elements of a match report, an opinion piece and a phone-in or message board all in one.

Clearly the BBC benefits from better resources than most of its rivals and is able to draw on expertise from across its platforms. You may not be in such a strong position; but it is worth looking at some of the techniques BBC reporters use.
HOW TO DO IT

Live blogs can be written at the sporting venue, in a media company’s office or by a reporter sitting in the comfort of his or her living room watching a television. If a local newspaper reporter is expected to interview players and coaches after the event, then it makes sense to be at the ground. But the big set-piece live blogs that you see on the BBC, for example, are typically done from an office – partly because they need more space than they would get in the average press box.

As you may have to write on your own or as part of a team, it’s worth practising both. You could create a live blog by simply creating a new post on your website each time you have something to say. In practice, this approach is likely to prove slow and cumbersome, and the end-result won’t look very elegant.

So, you’ll need a tool to help you blog. There are plenty of live blogging tools around, including several which are quite expensive. But you don’t need to pay for blogging software. There are many free plug-ins that will work with paid-for and some free websites. In my experience, students tend to find 24liveblog quite easy to use – and it claims to work with any type of website.

Most free websites, such as wordpress.com or Blogger, don’t allow you to add plug-ins to your website. But you can still set up an account with 24liveblog. This will enable you to produce a minute-by-minute report on their site and then embed it on your own site. So, the blog won’t actually be on your site, but visitors will be able to view it.

I’d recommend a bit of experimentation with the software before you do your first blog.

TIP: Every sport has its own conventions. Before you try to blog live, make sure you look at how that particular sport is covered by live reporters.

First steps

As with any match report, you’ll have done some prior research. You’ll know who all the players are and whether there are any important milestones coming up (Carney is on 19 goals so far this season; Broad has taken 349 test wickets etc), whether any players are up against their former clubs, what was said in the pre-match press conference, whether the international coach is here to keep an eye on particular players etc.

It’s also worth opening a few webpages. Make sure you have a source of statistics close to hand, particularly if you’re covering a data-heavy sport like cricket or baseball. In football, it might be useful to have open the player profile pages of the two competing teams. It’s also a good idea to have your own website (or your employer’s) open so that you can post links to previous pieces you’ve written about the competitors.

This is where TweetDeck (Chapter 3) really comes into its own as you can follow multiple feeds at the same time. TweetDeck allows you to follow individuals, topics and lists.

The following example shows my TweetDeck on the morning of the final test between the British and Irish Lions and New Zealand. I’m following former player and pundit Matt Dawson and the All Blacks official feed, and I’m doing a search using #NZLvBIL. Lists can be really useful here; you can’t really have more than ten columns open at the same time, but you can include 20+ people in a single list. In this case, I didn’t actually need to create my own list, I’ve simply subscribed to a list already created by the Lions’ supporters site.
FIGURE 4.1 Screenshot showing TweetDeck account
I actually had a few more columns set up to the right of this screenshot. I followed the Lions’ official feed, and I’m interested in what the Kiwis are saying about the game, so I decided to follow a leading New Zealand sports journalist, Marc Hinton. Finally, I made my own private list including the main UK rugby correspondents so I could make sure I didn’t miss anything that they spot.

Don’t forget other social media outlets. The BBC had been employing former Lions Gareth Edwards and Ugo Monye to provide analysis on Facebook during the tour, while you may find some great pictures taken by fans on Instagram.

You may be able to draw on a supply of pictures. Most sports photographers now have wi-fi-enabled cameras, so they will be constantly transmitting pictures back to their, or their company’s, website. If you are working for a big company like the BBC or a national newspaper, you may find they have an arrangement with a picture agency like Getty so that they can use their pictures. If you are working for a club, they’ll probably employ someone to file pictures.

Video is more complicated. If you are working in a team, you may be able to delegate someone to turn around important bits of the action. Of course, you can only use this if your company owns the rights to the footage.

There are likely to be more pithy comments on radio than on TV, so if you are part of a team covering the game, you may wish to delegate one person to monitor radio commentary. If you’re on your own, you might opt to listen to radio commentary – in headphones if you are at the ground.

OK, now – and this is important – take a comfort break. Make sure you have a full water bottle to hand. You are not going to get many chances to take a break for the next couple of hours.

The sticky

Very few people are likely to follow your blog throughout the whole 90 minutes. They may be at work, or a family wedding, where they can only sneak occasional glances at their phones. So, it is really important to make sure that they can see the score and the key incidents straightaway. This information goes in a short headlines section at the top of the blog. When you add new posts, this section, known as the “sticky” (because it sticks to its place on the page), remains at the top.

In a game like football, where goals are relatively scarce, it is easy to keep the sticky updated:

Arsenal 1 – Chelsea 1
Costa (76’) cancels out Sanchez’ opener (4’)
Chelsea down to 10 men after Moses’ sending-off (68’)

Other sports require more regular updating – but there are ways of simplifying the task. For example:

Heather Watson v Victoria Azarenka
Watson wins first set 6–3 but Azarenka bounces back to win the second 6–1 and has a break of serve in the third.
This requires less updating than saying “. . . and is leading 2–1 in the third” – as you’d have to change it after every game.

On some live blogs, particularly those written by one person, there is no sticky. In these situations, you need to make sure you begin each post with the score even if it hasn’t changed.

**Frequency**

Most bloggers begin their coverage well before the event starts. In football, for example, it’s rare to see a blog that begins after the team sheets have been distributed (normally 45 minutes before kick-off). This gives you an opportunity to set the scene, build in some colour and generally whet your audience’s appetite. For a big game, fans may be dipping in and out of different blogs at this point in time before settling on one to follow during the event itself; so it’s a good chance to set out your stall.

Despite the name “minute by minute” it is very hard indeed to post an update every minute of sporting event. You might be able to do it, but the quality will undoubtedly suffer.

On the other hand, if you leave five-minute gaps between updates then you’ll soon lose your audience. Why would they want to follow a blog that never updates?

Some sports have natural breaks when it makes sense to post – the ends of a game in tennis, for example. Of course, you’ll also need to let readers know if a game repeatedly returns to deuce, if there’s a long rally or if a player has a set or match point.

Similarly, in cricket, there’s an obvious break at the end of each over. But you should also report wickets, appeals and boundaries. ESPN provides ball-by-ball updates, but they are fairly dry. It’s hard to find something really interesting to say about each of 600 deliveries.

In golf, update your audience whenever one of the leaders, or players you are following, finishes a hole but, of course, if someone lands the ball on the green with his tee-shot on a par five, that’s also probably worth mentioning. Speedway lends itself to a post at the end of each heat.

Free-flowing sports like football, hockey or rugby are more complex. If nothing’s happening there’s no point in reporting something. On the other hand, if you don’t post anything for five minutes, you’re going to lose your audience. So, you may need to include references to people in the crowd or the coaches’ facial expresses to make sure people know that you are still blogging. *Daily Mail* chief sportswriter Martin Samuel once said that he and his fellow football journalists should be judged on how well they write up 0–0 draws; in the same way, live bloggers often do their best work when nothing very much is happening on the field of play.

In some sports, you can use lulls in activity to promote something that’s coming up later. For example, during a quiet phase at the 2017 Paralympics World Championships, the *Daily Telegraph*’s live feed alerted readers to action later on: “In about 20 minutes . . . Hannah Cockroft, Kare Adenegan, and Carly Tait will be on the track” (Davies and Stone, 2017). This was followed by a short preview of the T34 800m final in which the three British athletes were competing.

Don’t feel that you always have to post at regular intervals. Fans of a sport like cycling will expect the blog to get busier towards the end of a day as there are more breakaways;
in cricket, wickets will tend to fall more often at the end of an innings when numbers eight to 11 are at the crease than when the openers are batting.

Some live blogs will end on the final whistle, when the reporter will switch to writing a “considered” report (see Chapter 5). Others, particularly of major events, will continue with post-match reaction from expert analysts and interviews with the participants. You may find you are still blogging an hour after the end of the match.

**Writing the blog**

The speed needed to deliver a minute-by-minute account means there will never be any sub-editors – those wonderful individuals who can pick up mistakes and save reporters from embarrassing errors – for this form of writing. So, you need to make sure that your spelling, punctuation and grammar are all correct. Equally, you need to make sure you have your facts right. So, it’s worth taking an extra ten seconds to check and double-check your writing before publishing.

You can use notes or initials, but only if you think your audience would understand them. Most football fans would recognise RB and LB as right back and left back but probably wouldn’t immediately realise that HM means holding midfielder. There’s no harm in very short posts but it makes sense to mix these up with longer ones. For example, if you said “Stupendous Federer backhand winner” at the end of a particularly good point, you might wish to write a longer description at the next break between games.

Good bloggers learn tricks to develop interaction. If they are writing a blog about football transfers, for example, they’ll know that suggesting a particular club are out of their league if they pay £20 million for a new striker or implying that a central defender is not worth £30 million will prompt comeback from readers.

Use bold formatting and capitals to draw attention to the most important facts, eg “GOAL – Jodie Taylor makes it 2–0 to England. The Arsenal forward bends a 25-yard freekick round the wall to score her 41st goal for the Lionesses.” You may find that the company you are working for has a particular policy on the use of different formats.

Many blogs begin each post with a category heading. For example, you could start each post with “update”, “reaction” or “analysis” to signpost what kind of content is being provided. During multi-sport events like the Olympics, bloggers use headings like “result”, “confirmed times”, “preview” and “field report” to flag up the type of content that follows.

Finally, use hyperlinks to provide more detail about the participants. If you’re covering a transfer deadline day or a draft, you could have some pre-prepared stories on your website about some of the players likely to be involved. If you are working for a big company, it may expect you to link to other stories or recent games on its website.

What if you make a mistake? Inevitably there are going to be occasions when you wrongly identify a player in a penalty box melee. If you spot the error quickly, you may be able to delete the post and repost with the correct information. But your audience is likely to appreciate that you are working under pressure. So, another option is to send out another post, correcting your error – ideally with a touch of humour, eg “Jones is 6’7” and Hughes is probably the last man on the pitch to know that it’s raining so I won’t be making that mistake again.”

**TIP:** When you finish take a look at how other journalists blogged the same game. What did you get that they missed and vice versa?
TOP TIPS: PHIL HARLOW

Phil Harlow has been writing live blogs for 15 years, initially for the BBC and now for the agency Livewire Sports. His credits include a Rugby World Cup final, Premier League clashes and top games at Wimbledon (Harlow, P., 2017).

1 Preparation
This is within your control. Anything you can do beforehand, whether that’s researching history or stats, will help you. If you begin your blog armed with a bit of knowledge, then you’re going to be able to tell the story much better than if you pitch up blind. For Livewire Sport, the Premier League is an important client and we dedicate some resource on a Friday for someone to come in to go through the Opta Stats and pick out some landmarks that might happen. For rugby, I’ll spend an hour before the match getting some quotes and finding some nice social media stuff that the players have done during the week – that sort of stuff.

Anything you can do beforehand will be time well spent because, when you are working under pressure, you don’t have time to google “how many goals has Harry Kane scored against Arsenal”.

2 Personality
Tone of voice or style is what distinguishes a blog that I’d go out of my way to read. Some sound a bit dull or worthy or corporate; I think that’s a danger for blogs by teams themselves or governing bodies. We are conscious of that and try to inject some personality into it so it doesn’t sound like the voice of the Premier League press officer.

A lot of my former colleagues at the BBC, like Tom Fordyce and Ben Durrs, really carved out a name for themselves by finding a niche. In the same way as some people have a favourite radio commentator, people will stick with a blog a bit longer if it’s written by one of those guys.

So, try to inject a bit of personality, a bit of tone of voice.

3 Speed
Speed is crucial. It’s a live blog, so you have to get that information out there. When a goal goes in, before you’ve written your description, it’ll just be a news flash “Arsenal 1, Man United nil” and the goalscorer and the number of minutes and that will be published because that’s the key information. Everything else comes after it: your description, the photo of it and any reaction from pundits.

The reason ultimately someone is reading your live blog is to keep up to date with a live sports event. You need to understand when to pick up the pace and when to slacken off slightly.

4 Think beyond the text
Remember photos, videos and other voices, tweets, Instagram posts and so on. You want to try to find as many ways as you can to get it away from being a monologue and very text heavy. Photos and tweets are the most straightforward way of breaking
up the text. Every five minutes or so, take a deep breath and ask yourself how many entries there have been since the last photo or tweet.

5 Put the audience first

Put yourself in the place of the reader. Where’s the bulk of my audience reading this? Probably on a phone. So that means shorter paragraphs, keep it short and snappy and up to date. Try to make it a one-stop shop; don’t make your audience search for information. The first information they’ll want is “what’s the state of the game?” or “who’s won the medals?” so make that information easy to find. If you don’t, they’ll move on to someone else who does.

YOUR TURN

Practising live blogs at home is relatively easy. You’ll need to identify a match that is being shown on television. (I’d strongly advise you not to watch a match on the same laptop that you are going to use to write your blog – that’s going to get messy.)

Find a plug-in that you can use a few days in advance and get a feel for how it works. Do your research and get your TweetDeck set up well before the event starts.

At first, concentrate on getting the basics right. Make sure the sticky is regularly updated or, if you aren’t using one, that each post begins with a score update. Aim to report each goal within 30 seconds of it going in and to post something at least once every five minutes.

I get my students to practise by creating a blog based around the Premier League transfer deadline day at the end of January. There’s normally so much activity going on that you’ll need a team of people to cover all the action. You might delegate one person to focus on finding video, another on creating polls, another chasing pundits or former players on the phone etc.

SUMMARY

• Sports fans demand regular updates on games so live blogs, or minute-by-minute accounts, are likely to get more attention than finished match reports.
• Read live blogs to get a feel for different styles you can adopt. Good examples include the BBC, Bleacher Report, the Guardian and Eurosport.
• Get set up well in advance. Have plenty of statistics at your fingertips and make sure you’re following relevant people on TweetDeck.
• Aim to post updates at least every five minutes. Even if nothing’s happening, people want to know you are still there.
• Try to include a mix of content including pictures, video, social media posts and comments from expert analysts.
FURTHER READING


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