National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement

How to…
…write for non-specialist audiences

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Who are you writing for?

There are a number of different ways you might end up writing for a non-specialist audience

1. You might be approached, by a particular publication or website, and asked to write a contribution
2. You may decide you want to submit an article for an existing publication or website (this could be your own departmental web pages, the university website, or an external site)
3. You may create your own way of engaging with non-specialist audiences – perhaps by creating your own blog

Getting started

Before writing anything, you need to follow the guidelines for any engagement process ie why you wish to communicate, what you want to get across (the purpose) and who you are trying to engage (the audience). If you have not already been approached by a publication this will help you to decide where to position the article.

Finding out about the audience

If you are writing for an existing publication read previous content to get an idea of the 'style' and 'voice' of the publication. Think about the background of potential readers and their values. This will help you work out how to pitch the article to make it relevant, interesting and understandable to the target audience.

If you have not already been approached to provide content, you will need to propose your article idea to your chosen publication. First find out the relevant contact point for the publication i.e. the editor, section editor or commissioning editor of the publication or blog. In many cases there will be guidance on submitting proposals on the publication's website. Send an outline of your article idea, paying close attention to the purpose of the article and the relevance to readers, (in order to display an understanding of the publication's aims and audience), and include an example paragraph. You need to outline your expertise, experience and, if you have a portfolio of previous writing for non-specialist audiences, include clippings.

Writing an article

Once you have the go ahead you will decide how to structure your writing. You may have a word limit – which may help you be concise.

- The initial paragraph (or 'standfirst') should summarise the main points. You might use this introduction to sum up the answers to the What, Where, When, Who and Why of the article.
- You will need to think about the bigger picture – the applications and implications in society – and work out the best way to make it relevant and to grip the readers. Avoid technical jargon and make use of metaphors, examples and stories which will help non-specialist readers to better understand complicated issues.

- Edit edit edit. Having done an initial draft – see where you can reduce the word count by writing in a more concise way.
- If you know anyone who fits your target audience – ask them to read it and let you know what they think. Did they understand it? Was it interesting? What did they want to know more about? What did they think they didn't need to know?
- Re-drafting –there is often a lengthy editing process with the publication - to make sure the article is fit for purpose. Don't be discouraged – this is normal.
- Finally, there will usually be a final edit to ensure that the article fits the target word count, to correct any grammatical errors or repetition, and to ensure that it is clear, relevant and fits the brief. Be advised that some publications will edit your article quite heavily and not send it back for your approval – therefore you may be disappointed by the end result.

What it can be used for

- To promote research, developments and discoveries; both in the interests of publicity and sharing information, as well as to gain public support, attract interest from potential funders or partners, and to increase the footfall of people entering careers in the field.
- To inform/educate different groups about a complicated or contentious issue and empower the reader to contribute to ongoing public debates.
- To highlight important yet little known, or badly understood, issues.
- To inspire people with particular aspects of research and to encourage new conversations about ideas and discoveries which have not yet been explored by different audiences.

Things to bear in mind

Before writing for non-specialist audiences, there are a few things you should consider:
- Does the article say something new? Why would people be interested?
- Why now? Is it timely? If you leave it too late it might become 'old news'. But it might be of more interest to readers if it is supported by a current flurry of public interest in the subject matter, or if it coincides with an important discovery/event/report
- Make sure that your writing is clear and free of technical jargon. Your audience may not have your specific knowledge or expertise, so do not write as if you are writing for an academic journal. It can be very difficult to step back from your own body of knowledge and see how it reads to a non-specialist, so you might wish to ask a colleague from another discipline to read it through and check that it is easy to understand
- Avoid lecturing. Try to be objective and show an awareness of the differing values and expertise of the audience. You might wish to ask other people to provide quotes
- Is the article contentious? If so, you will need to be particularly careful to ensure that the article is balanced and that it does not alienate readers.
- Do your research. Once your comments are published in a public domain, it is very difficult to retract them – so, check your facts!
- Don't assume that the publication will publish your article in its entirety

Cost and time requirements

Example costs

The main cost is your time, which varies depending on the length of the article, the amount of additional research necessary and the lead times of the publication. In some cases you may be paid by the publication.

Example timings

If you are writing for a publication, you will need to find out their lead times (how far in advance of publication they need to receive the finished article) and ensure that you give yourself plenty of time in advance to do your research, write it up and to leave enough time for editing. (The editing process can be lengthy in order to make sure it is well structured, grammatically correct and, crucially, is cut down to fit the word count).

Time the planning process takes: Be realistic about how much work is involved. Don't start too late. Remember to allow time for research, sourcing opinions/quotes from someone else, structuring and editing the piece.

Lead times vary across publications – some have very short lead times whereas others require the finished article months ahead of publication.