Bringing
expert insight
to the **public**

THE C⃝NVERSATION

Writing for the public: why and how

Why work with The Conversation?

Overview

High-quality, independent and expert journalism is a vital part of democratic society. The Conversation provides readers with a better understanding of current affairs and the complex issues the world faces, improving the quality of debate by introducing the views of real experts.

A new model for journalism, The Conversation pairs the rigour of academic analysis with the journalistic approach of professional editors in order to present the sharpest academic minds and latest research in short, timely, informative articles for the general public.

The Conversation is not like other mainstream news publications. But our focus is the same: the new, the important, the interesting, the unusual, and the insightful. All this we get from our expert writers drawn from across academia.

Not-for-profit

The Conversation is a not-for-profit company and UK charity funded by participating member universities – around 75 in the UK and 300 worldwide including those affiliated to our sister
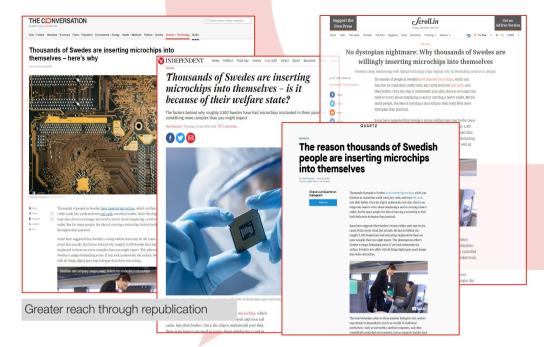
editions in Australia, the US, Canada, South Africa, France and Spain – and through grants from philanthropic organisations, NGOs, and government agencies.

Open access

All our content is published under a [Creative Commons (BY-NC) licence](#), a similar approach to some open access journals, through which articles are free to read and free for other organisations to republish – so long as they do so without altering the text and with proper credit to the author.

More than 90% of The Conversation's articles are republished elsewhere by newspapers, magazines and websites (see above-right). By giving away our work we can tap into the large audiences of other established media organisations.

Our content is republished across the globe, generating greater visibility and impact for authors' expertise.

Greater reach through republication

Readership metrics

Contributing authors have a public profile on theconversation.com (ranked highly by Google), and a dashboard that records readership metrics for their published articles, such as details of where articles have been republished, reader numbers, geographic location of readers, and social media mentions on Twitter. We hope authors find this useful in terms of demonstrating the reach and impact of their research.

Integrity and control

Uniquely, The Conversation's collaborative online editing platform gives authors control by requiring their approval before publication. This is to ensure that any impreciseness or error that may have crept in during editing is detected before publication, and to ensure academics are happy with the final text before it is published.

For their efforts, authors have the opportunity to work with professional journalists to improve their writing skills and approach to a different audience, and the opportunity to build a higher profile, find a wider audience for their work, and to benefit from the opportunities greater visibility brings.

In short, here are nine reasons to write for The Conversation:

https://theconversation.com/why-write-for-us-60664

Writing for the public: a guide for academics

What we're looking for

Our editors commission short, first-person pieces of around 800 words from academics which offer some analysis and insight into news stories of the day.

For example, such a piece could be a response to events in the news. It could be a discussion of new research. Or it could be a discussion of a broader topic or theme, anchored in a discussion of recent events, current affairs, or an interesting example or story. The key is that our pieces provide some expert insight or analysis from academia that our readers would not find elsewhere.

These analysis pieces are our main output, although we sometimes also publish Q&As or other formats.

Our thematic podcast The Anthill (https://theconversation.com/uk/podcasts/the-anthill) is an alternative means for academics to get involved, offering our audience academic expertise in a different medium.

For any questions, or for a forward plan of upcoming episodes, contact podcast producers Annabel Bligh and Gemma Ware at podcast@theconversation.com

We also have a long-read section, In Depth which is an opportunity for academics with especially enthralling tales to tell to wax lyrical up to around 3,000 words.

For further details, contact:
stephen.harris@theconversation.com

See our previous long read articles at https://theconversation.com/uk/topics/in-depth-38616

In all cases, our approach is a collaborative effort combining your expertise and our journalistic approach: you bring the facts and the arguments, we suggest good angles that tie your expertise to the news agenda, and give it an edit and polish to ensure it's as readable as possible for a non-academic audience.

But you are in control: articles are only published once they have been approved by the author. This is to ensure the piece has been checked for accuracy once it has been edited, and also to ensure the author is happy with the version to be published under their name – there are no nasty surprises.

Sourcing content

The Conversation's editors work with content from a number of sources:

1) Direct commissions from editors, who search for and contact academics with the right expertise to write the piece. These are the majority of our content, around 75% of pieces published.

2) Pitches, either from academics or from press teams on their behalf. Press teams may email editors directly, while academics are invited to pitch through the website at: http://theconversation.com/uk/pitches.

The pitch process requires you first to register and create a short profile (name, position, university, brief research interests and photo – as would appear on your university page), and then guides you through the process of describing the key elements of the article you wish to write. This is sent to the relevant section editors, who should respond within 48 hours.

3) Via the expert request, a daily call-out for experts to write specific stories, sent to member press teams who forward it on to relevant academics. Make yourself known to your university press team and let them know your areas of expertise and what topics you could write on so that they are aware of you for the next time a relevant request arrives.

We have several other named approaches to written content with their own style:

- **Explainers**: timeless, neutral and objective explanations of complex topics.

- **Fact Check**: a rigorous analysis of claims made in the media, a Fact Check is the expert opinion of one academic, peer reviewed by a second.

- **Scientists at Work**: an opportunity for academics to show that academic work doesn't just happen in a lab.

The news value of academic expertise

Developing the 'top line' of your story

The best stories can be summarised neatly and succinctly. If it takes many words or sentences (or minutes) to explain what the piece is about, the idea may be too abstract, too complex, or too niche to interest a general reader. What is required is a pithy summary – what journalists refer to as a story's "top line".

Strong stories can summarised with a clearly understood top line. The trick is to identify what aspect of the story will most interest the readers and focus on that, even at the expense of other elements of the story. You can't fit everything into 800 words. Get used to leaving things out.

To do this well, it is crucial to **think about the reader**: they are intelligent, curious, interested in the world, but they're not specialists.

What is the article's most interesting aspect to them? What about it is new, has not been previously discussed, is unusual, or provides a new analysis, perspective, or comment?

It may or may not be the aspect that is most academically interesting. Often you need to take a few steps backwards and give readers context, the bigger picture to help make sense of the small.

Stories might be framed as:

Led by events:
Respond to events or anniversaries to provide insight into story and its context. Easy to plan in advance.

Comment or analysis of topical issues:
Identify a topic, debate or question in the news and offer greater detail or a new perspective on the issue.

Research on topics in the news:
Which allows authors to introduce new angles and perspectives from their work.

Or, use a news hook for your research:
Even quite niche research can be given an added sense of relevance when it is linked to something current.

How-tos or expert advice:
Readers are a keen to hear expert advice based on research findings.

Tell an interesting story:
Research may uncover interesting stories that can be told any time.

Use the list format approach:
Such headlines promise bite-sized pieces of expert information that appeals to time-poor readers.
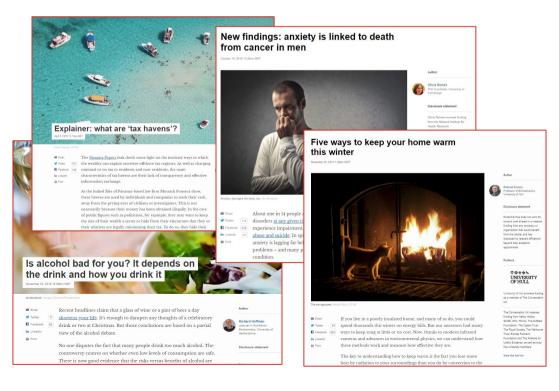
Good starting points

- **News**: insight/analysis of current affairs, or new angles on current or old stories

- **Research**: discuss your new findings, or comment on other people's research

- **Timeless**: tell an interesting story, answer an interesting question

- **Unusual, surprising, counter-intuitive**: readers love a contrary view, backed by research

- **Personal stories**, human interest

- **List format**: "Five things to know about…", or "Ten reasons why…"

- **How-tos and guides**: Readers like advice that could help them

Most importantly:

- **Tell me something I don't know...**

- **...and tell me why it matters**. Why should I care?

Explainer: what are 'tax havens'?
April 5, 2016 12.11pm BST

The Panama Papers leak sheds some light on the intricate ways in which the wealthy can exploit secretive offshore tax regimes. As well as charging minimal or no tax to residents and non-residents, the main characteristics of tax havens are their lack of transparency and effective information exchange.

As the leaked files of Panama-based law firm Mossack Fonseca show, these havens are used by individuals and companies to stash their cash, away from the prying eyes of civilians or investigators. This is not necessarily because their money has been obtained illegally. In the case of public figures such as politicians, for example, they may want to keep the size of their wealth a secret or hide from their electorates that they or their relatives are legally minimising their tax. To do so, they hide their

New findings: anxiety is linked to death from cancer in men
October 18, 2016 10.39am BST

Author
Olivia Remes
PhD Candidate, University of Cambridge

Disclosure statement
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Anxiety: damages the body, too. Shutterstock

About one in 14 people a disorders at any given ti experience impairment. abuse and suicide. In spa anxiety is lagging far be problems – and many p condition.

Five ways to keep your home warm this winter
November 25, 2014 1.39pm GMT

Author
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Partners

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View the full list

The cat approves. Michel Filion, CC BY

If you live in a poorly insulated home, and many of us do, you could spend thousands this winter on energy bills. But our ancestors had many ways to keep snug at little or no cost. Now, thanks to modern infrared cameras and advances in environmental physics, we can understand how these methods work and measure how effective they are.

The key to understanding how to keep warm is the fact you lose more heat by radiation to your surroundings than you do by convection to the

Is alcohol bad for you? It depends on the drink and how you drink it
November 23, 2018 12.06pm GMT

shutterstock. Sergey Ryzhov/Shutterstock

Author
Richard Hoffman
Lecturer in Nutritional Biochemistry, University of Hertfordshire

Disclosure statement

Recent headlines claim that a glass of wine or a pint of beer a day shortens your life. It's enough to dampen any thoughts of a celebratory drink or two at Christmas. But those conclusions are based on a partial view of the alcohol debate.

No one disputes the fact that many people drink too much alcohol. The controversy centres on whether even low levels of consumption are safe. There is now good evidence that the risks versus benefits of alcohol are

Structure and style

Three principles to keep in mind

BE CLEAR
- The purpose of communication is *understanding*. Words that are not understood are a waste of your time to write and the reader's time trying to read.
- Remember who you're writing for, remember who you're NOT writing for, and write accordingly. Write to express ideas, not seek to impress others.
- Get the important facts and findings in early on.
- Use narrative to connect elements of the piece together. People remember stories, not lists of disconnected facts.

"The paragraph is essentially a unit of thought, not of length; it must be homogeneous in subject matter and sequential in treatment."

— Henry Watson Fowler, Dictionary of Modern English Usage

BE CONCISE
- Don't use any more words than you need to express something. Cut words ruthlessly. A two-stage approach: write it out first, then edit. Editing down is essential and the end result will be much the better for it.
- "Never use a $5 word when a 50¢ word will do" – attributed to Mark Twain, with similar thoughts expressed by many others (see right).

"When your story is ready for rewrite, cut it to the bone. Get rid of every ounce of excess fat. This is going to hurt; revising a story down to the bare essentials is always a little like murdering children, but it must be done."

— Stephen King

BE CREATIVE
- Your enthusiasm for your subject is why you research and study it. Let some of that enthusiasm come through in the way you write about it.
- Drop the conventions of academic writing – you're not shackled to the template of introduction –> method –> conclusion, nor to the "Official Style".
- Write as if you want it to be read – by people who may not know about the subject, but having read your piece will be glad they did.

"A wise editor observed that the easiest decision a reader can make is to stop reading. That means every sentence has to count in grabbing the reader's attention, starting with the first."

— Bret Stephens, New York Times

Get to the point!
Start with the latest events, what we learned, implications or conclusions. Don't write chronologically.

Battle for the reader's attention right from the start
Make sure the important elements are included early on, and make every word count.

Be clear, be concise
Use active sentences, not passive, concrete nouns and verbs.

Use plain English
Get a feel for the informal – how might you explain your topic to a non-specialist friend in the pub, or to a teenager?

Offer examples
To help make the abstract more concrete.

Polish your intro and payoff
Write and re-write your opening and final lines until they sparkle and speak directly to the subject in hand.

The reader does not know the subject like you do
Explain (or avoid) technical terms. Don't assume the reader understands abstract or complex concepts without explanation.

George Orwell's six rules for writing

From *Politics and the English Language (Horizon,* 1946)

1. Never use a metaphor, simile or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.

2. Never use a long word where a short one will do.

3. If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.

4. Never use the passive where you can use the active.

5. Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.

6. Break any of these rules sooner than say anything barbarous.

Don't pose questions, answer them
Make sure your piece answers more questions than it leaves the reader wondering: **who**, **what**, **where**, **when**, **why**, and sometimes **how**.

Have you got a story you want to write?

Pitching ideas

We receive many thousands of pitches each year. Not all will be suitable to publish, for all sorts of reasons. But a well-crafted story pitch that clearly identifies the most interesting aspects of the story is the best means to persuade an editor that it one to commission.

Even if your idea isn't used, editors may have other suggestions for articles you could write based on your expertise. In any case, it's useful to have introduced yourself and your expertise for next time those topics are in the news.

Before pitching:

- What are people talking about? What's in the news? What are the big talking points of the moment?

- Read The Conversation first. Have we already published the same piece you'd wish to write, or near enough? What other aspects of this subject have we written about? What aspects have we missed? Think about how would your piece might advance our coverage of the topic, rather than how it stands alone.

- It is not enough for a story to be worthy; it must also be *newsworthy.*

Do:

- **Think of your audience Tell us something we don't know**

- **What's the story?** In a nutshell, what is your point, conclusion, finding? Be bold.

- **Why now?** Does it relate to something in the news, either now, recently or to something forthcoming? What is the 'news hook' that makes it relevant now, rather than six months ago or in six months time?

- **Flesh out some of the key points**

- **Why you?** What is your specific, relevant expertise or experience that makes you the person to write this?

- **Answer the question: "so what?"** The reader must not be left to wonder why this is interesting or important. You may think it's important or interesting, but you know the subject well. Be sure to explain – to reader and editor alike – the reasons why this story should be commissioned and read by all.

Don't:

- **Don't assume the editor knows the topic. Don't use jargon**
  We editors are no more experts in your topic than our readers are likely to be. Jargon is confusing, and dull.

- **Don't send abstracts or papers**
  The idea is to get away from academic writing.

- **Don't write the piece in full first and send it in on spec**
  Once in a blue moon we might use such a piece, but it's more likely to be declined, and we don't want you to have wasted your time. The best pieces are achieved when editors and academics work on something from the start.

- **Avoid awareness weeks**
  If the story is interesting enough to write about then it doesn't need a manufactured awareness day to hang it from.

- **Don't bury the reader in caveats**
  Don't stretch the truth, but be bold - write with an air of confidence in your topic of expertise.

Pitch follow-up

Having sent in your pitch, the section editor will respond within a day or two.

If your pitch is accepted, your editor will be in touch to agree with you a brief for the article, including suggested angles or aspects to include. They will create a template for the article in our online content management system, into which you can type or copy/paste your finished draft. The editor will then take a look and respond with edits and suggestions. Finally, once both author and editor are happy, you must approve the piece for publication.

The Conversation receives around 4,000 pitches a year, of which we turn down around two-thirds. This may be because the subject isn't something editors feel would interest a non-specialist reader. It may be a good idea, but too late for the news hook upon which it hangs (timing is everything). It may be a good idea, but the same piece has already been written by someone else. And so on.

Try not to take rejection personally – it is no comment on the quality of your research or your degree of expertise. Try again with another idea. Statistically speaking, if your first and second pitches aren't accepted, your third may be.

Putting your story into words

Headlines

A headline is more than a title. It should accurately summarise the piece, but it must also act as an advert that captures readers' attention and tempts them to read what follows. Most people scan headlines and images to decide what to read – their importance cannot be underestimated.

In general all the usual rules apply: write tightly using strong, active verbs and nouns, without jargon. You're best off not trying to use funny or clever wordplay – this will almost inevitably only end up being obscure. Don't try and fit the whole story into a headline. Do use names of people and places, and stay relevant – the story will be found online by readers searching for keywords. For example:

Academic
Flaubert Postsecular: Modernity Crossed Out

Tabloid
Mad Müller: hate preacher goes shopping for yoghurt

Enigmatic
Nose Dive
(an article about a fall in cocaine sales)

Straight summary
Grammar schools do nothing for social mobility

There's more opportunity to play with words in the crossheads that separate the sections of the piece. For example, from The Economist:

> *The health of nations*
> *An Apple a day*
> *How the other half dies*

While your editor will work on the headline, it may be useful to consider the TACT approach to headline writing devised at the Columbia University School of Journalism:

Taste: is the headline in good taste? Can it be taken the wrong way?

Appeal: will it attract potential readers? Can it be improved without sacrificing accuracy?

Clarity: does it communicate clearly, quickly, without confusion? Any odd words, or double meanings?

Truth: is the headline accurate, true, and does it accurately reflect the story?

Here, a single "no" in any of the above would mean objections from thousands of readers – go back and try again.

http://www.columbia.edu/itc/journalism/isaacs/client_edit/Headlines.html

Starting and ending

The first and last sentences are the hardest to write, and the most important. It's often easier go back and re-write the opening paragraphs after writing the piece, once there's text to reflect on.

Compare these two introductions to the same story:

Allergan Plc will transfer to the Saint Regis Mohawk Tribe the rights to its blockbuster Restasis dry-eye treatment, the drugmaker said on Friday, in an unusual deal to protect it from patent challenges. (Reuters)

This straight approach is a bit dry, and seems a waste of an unusual subject.

"The headquarters of the Saint Regis Mohawk Tribe, a Native American community in upstate New York, is an unlikely venue for one of the most controversial patent disputes in years.

But this low-slung building, located on a barren strip of highway just a few minutes drive from the Canadian border, has become the testing ground for a brazen new strategy in intellectual property.

This month, Allergan, the US drugmaker, transferred patents protecting its lucrative eye drug, Restasis, to the tribe, which received an upfront payment of $13.75m and a potential $15m a year in royalties." (Financial Times)

The "delayed drop" is a more engaging way of telling a story with the colourful aspects first, before giving the details.

If you make statements, especially contentious ones, please back them up. Statements of facts and statistics should also be backed by links to research, media reports or reference material. These should be internet hyperlinks that readers can click and follow, not inline or footnote citations to material that may not be accessible online. We can help you add these, but you will most likely know what is most suitable.

You should aim to end with a flourish, not a whimper: return to the words and phrases or the point you made in the opening paragraph. Where do we go from here? What have we learned? Pose readers a question, make them think. But don't round off an article with an empty expression such as "In conclusion…" or "only time will tell", nor under any circumstances close by remarking that "more research is needed."

Further reading

- **How to write a blogpost from your journal article in eleven easy steps**
  Patrick Dunleavy, LSE Impact Blog

  https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2016/01/25/how-to-write-a-blogpost-from-your-journal-article/

  Professor Dunleavy articles and others from the Impact Blog at LSE Blogs are a great source of excellent advice and suggestions.

- **Shorter, better, faster, free**
  Patrick Dunleavy, Write4Research

  https://medium.com/advice-and-help-in-authoring-a-phd-or-non-fiction/shorter-better-faster-free-fb74bddaec03

  Another excellent discussion on writing/blogging for academic and non-academic audiences from Dunleavy, who argues that "in research terms blogging is quite simply one of the most important things that an academic should be doing right now."

  You can find more from Dunleavy at Write for Research on Medium:
  https://medium.com/@write4research

  and on Twitter:
  https://twitter.com/Write4Research

- **Publishing with Objective Charisma: Breaking Science's Paradox**
  Zoë A. Doubleday and Sean D. Connell (2017), *Trends in Ecology and Evolution*

  https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tree.2017.06.011

  The authors give clear pointers on how to write clearer, more memorable academic articles. Also discussed in an article for The Conversation:

  https://theconversation.com/bored-reading-science-lets-change-how-scientists-write-81688

- **Scientists are talking, but mostly to each other: a quantitative analysis of research in mass media**
  Julie Suleski, Motomu Ibaraki (2009), *Public Understanding of Science*

  With scientific literacy declining in the face of growing scientific output and public interest in science, this study shows that reliance on journal publishing and subsequent media pickup is failing to communicate science to the public.

  https://doi.org/10.1177/0963662508096776

- **Stylish Academic Writing**
  Helen Sword (2012)
  Harvard University Press

  http://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674064485

  This the first of several books by the author, a professor at the University of Auckland, New Zealand, which contain good advice to help academics write clearly for both academic and non-specialist audiences.

  You can also try her 'Writer's Diet' test, scanning your text to highlight issues: http://www.writersdiet.com/test.php

  Or watch her Ted-ED talk about the danger of Zombie Nouns, and how to excise them from your writing:

  https://ed.ted.com/on/eJKYN8dx

- **The Science of Scientific Writing**
  George D. Gopen and Judith A. Swan (1990), *American Scientist*

  https://www.jstor.org/stable/29774235

  "If the reader is to grasp what the writer means, the writer must understand what the reader needs," say the authors, who include seven principles to help writers do so.

- **The Chicago Guide to Communicating Science**
  Scott L. Montgomery (2nd edn, 2017), University of Chicago Press

  https://www.press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/C/bo18111315.html

  The author, of the University of Washington, offers clear advice for approaches that will work for different audiences, from grant writing and theses, to blogging and writing for the public.

- **The write stuff**
  Henry Gee (2004), *Nature*

  https://www.nature.com/news/2004/041129/full/041129-14.html

  It's not just you: science papers are getting harder to read
  Philip Ball (2017), *Nature*

  https://www.nature.com/news/it-s-not-just-you-science-papers-are-getting-harder-to-read-1.21751

  Two columns in Nature written 13 years apart that show that readability or the lack of it in academic writing has been identified as a problem for a long time, alas with little progress.

The Conversation is now a crucial channel for academics seeking to share their research knowledge with the world. Thousands of researchers are able to engage with millions of readers across the globe thanks to the work The Conversation does.

It has created a unique pathway that starts with training, leads authors through publication and republication and often generates impact beyond academia. For universities that are members, it is a vital pillar in building a strategy that exhibits their research excellence.

David Sweeney
Executive Chair, Research England

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