

Introduction

Hi everyone, my name is Rowena, and I am the part-time communications officer at the Development Studies Association. It's really great to see so many people here today.

I started life as a journalist and a public relations practitioner before working to help researchers communicate, based at the Global Development Institute in Manchester—from which some of you may be here today.

I now work as a consultant for aid funders, helping to develop researchers' skills in communication and engagement. I hope that I have a few tips today that might help you, inspire you, or clarify something, and I know that my colleague Christiane from EADI will also have some great tips to share as well.

2. What's a "Blog"

I started putting my thoughts together about writing in general for non-academic audiences, because the term "blog" has really changed a lot in the last five years or so. The important thing to remember is that when academics and researchers talk about blogging, we usually mean writing for the public—writing outside peer-reviewed journals for a much broader audience.

That's an important distinction to make. Your journal article is a disciplinary conversation; your blog post is more of a public conversation.

To start at the beginning, I wanted to have a shared understanding of what blogs are and I came up with three categories

- **Personal Blogs:** For example, Substack, which some of you may have heard of, is a platform where you can write that is integrated with a newsletter facility. We are seeing an increasing number of researchers and institutes on Substack. There is also WordPress, which a lot more of you will probably be familiar with; it is the web platform on which you can publish your own website, but also use for blogging. Finally, we have LinkedIn articles, which allow you to write a lot more than a standard LinkedIn post to get visibility. On these examples, it's really a lot more of your personal voice. You have a lot more control, but the downside is that you have to build your own audience.
- **Edited News and Commentary:** Websites like *The Conversation*, *Guardian Development*, and *Mongabay* may be familiar to you. These are actually edited news and commentary platforms. If you're thinking of writing for them, what we're talking about today will help, because what makes good writing for the public is particularly relevant to them. They do have their own editorial policies, requirements on sources, and expectations for tone. The benefit, however, is that the audience already exists.

- **Specialist Development Blogs:** This includes platforms like *Global South Studies* (who are here today), *EADI*, and also the *Global Dev Blog*. Those audiences are a little bit more aware of some of our issues, but they're still looking for public writing, and they have an engaged audience that they want to maintain.

3. Why blog

I think it's really important, if you're thinking of blogging, to know *why* you're blogging. You're already quite busy as academics, researchers, and teachers, so having something else to do needs to be strategic and really important to you. Knowing your "why" will help you determine the best place for you to blog, what kind of blog you want, and how to know if that idea was successful.

Blogging is a great way of getting your research out there and getting more visibility for your topic. You may even reach some of your stakeholders who could be interested in your research. You can get early feedback, build networks, and foster collaborations, because people all around the world who are interested in your topic can reach out to you. Plus, you get to create a public voice and profile that goes beyond the university or your specific discipline.

If you are researching a particular country, and you are *from* that country, it's also a really good opportunity to make those issues known. I was speaking to a researcher from Indonesia who explained that by writing for journalistic blogs and websites—doing science communication, which is another kind of public communication—she was able to reach a lot more people in Indonesia than if she had written just for local news outlets. She was writing often in English, and she raised a really good point: the issues of her country were incredibly important to be known on a global stage, so she felt her role was to make the world more aware of them.

As you can see, there's a real gravitas to why you could blog. It's not any less serious than academic writing; it's just a different form of communication.

4. Know your audience

One of the things that's vital when you are deciding who to write for is knowing who your audience is. Knowing who is reading your blog helps you decide what they already know and what you need to explain. Having a really clear sense of who might be reading will directly affect how you write.

I would recommend that you focus on **one audience per blog post**. Don't think, "*Well, I really want this to be relevant for policymakers, and at the same time for the communities who are affected by my research.*" If you want to reach both, they are probably going to require different blogs, written in different ways, highlighting different points of interest to them. Really try to have one key message for that specific audience.

Wherever you see the "example" stamp on these slides, I've included a blog that really illustrates the points I'm making. In this example Thabit the researcher is from Tanzania has such a strong sense of his audience knowing the political situation, knowing where they sit

Rowena Harding blogging presentation notes.

politically that it's given him a real confidence - and because he is using Medium like a personal blog - he can use it to publish an opinion.

5. Academic Writing vs. Blogging differences

I tried to think about some of the biggest differences between academic writing and blogging to give you an idea of the contrast.

Writing a blog is very reader-led. Because of that, you put your main point first. You write in an active voice that is engaging, and you use less jargon. That means short sentences and no interrupting the writing with references. You're writing in a clear voice, and it's okay to have a distinct perspective. Any caveats you might want to make—about things you still need to learn or research—are put much later.

A great example of this is a piece of research I worked on in Tanzania regarding farmer-led irrigation. At the *Safi Research* link on the slide, you can see all of their policy briefs and informed outputs. Then, there's a piece on *The Conversation* that they wrote about their research findings. It covers the same findings in a much more accessible way. It's certainly just as important, but it has a very, very different tone.

6. Possible elements

One of the questions I'm often asked is, "*What sections should be in my blog?*" There isn't a strict formula as such, but it's important to remember that a blog is not just a simplified journal article so don't copy the structure of your traditional journal article. While it's okay to have an argument or an explanation, what you could also look at is having a reflection, an intervention, or a story within it. These elements help create an engaging piece.

In the example I've given here, we hear from a researcher who attended a workshop we did on equality, diversity, and inclusion. What's interesting is that some of the participants from that workshop are going to write a formal paper, but they started with a blog to capture their initial reflections and thoughts. This is a really good way of getting early ideas onto paper if a journal article seems a bit daunting.

7. Story telling formula

If you want a formula, I one structure that I think is useful for people new to writing for the public:

What is the problem - Why does it matter - What will you do about it - how will that make a difference

8. Tips for Improving Your Writing: talk to a friend

One of the key tips I give to researchers trying to develop their writing is to **speak it out loud**. Try to explain your research to a friend, or in my case, to my mum. Get on the phone and talk to

them—don't write them an email. The reason I say talk is because when we speak, we explain things very differently from when we write.

If you don't feel comfortable doing this with someone else, get your phone out, hit the record button, and just start talking. See how the words you use out loud are quite different from what you use when you write. Definitely play it back. Look for words that work, and look for where you're stumbling over yourself and need to explain things better.

If you find that your recording is going on for a really long time, take note of that. A good blog post isn't about saying everything you know; it's about helping the audience understand *one* important thing.

9. Tips for writing

- Keep the image of a **busy person** in mind when you write. That is exactly why you want the bottom line up front.
- So **BLUF**, which stands for **Bottom Line Up Front**. In a traditional journal article, the conclusion and the results are often buried right at the end. In public writing, that bottom line needs to be right at the top. You need to front-load the most interesting information.
- You also need to be prepared to cut your words. The easiest way to do that, I find, is to work in versions. It's very easy to tweak and improve sentences, but when you need to cut heavy chunks of text, just start a new version and give it a different name. This makes it much easier to delete sections that you might have worked really hard on, because you know the original is safe elsewhere.
- If a sentence is **over two lines long**, start reviewing it.
- Use **one idea per paragraph**.
- Consider using **subheadings**, which are becoming really popular and are a great way to highlight different sections. If you find you have too many subheadings, it's a sign you probably have more than one blog post there.
- **Avoid "development speak."** If you wouldn't use those words when talking to a friend, try to convert them into something less jargony. Be really specific about who you're talking about rather than using generic word or buzzwords.

11. How to Get Started

My suggestion would be to pick one thing that you want to write about, and, of course, know *why* you are writing it. Don't overthink it.

Then, start looking at blogs that already exist on that topic, or look closely at the platform you want to write for so that you can get familiar with their style, tone, and the sort of things they cover. You can practice doing some writing and get feedback. For instance, you have the DSA

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blog if you would like to start with an outlet where you know someone. You will also hear from other blog editors today who might be interested in your work.

My final piece of advice is this: if there is a dream platform you really want to be on—whether that's *Mongabay* or *Guardian Development*—don't contact the blog editor there first unless you're very confident of your writing. Start at a more familiar, known place, and see how your pitch (that's your suggestion for a blog) lands first and get that feedback and experience before taking it to the big audiences. .

12. Resources

I've left you with links in all of these slides, as well as links to various how-to guides.

I'd like to highlight *Global South Studies*, who have a range of wonderful material, including videos, slides, blog posts, and a list of blogs. They are actually here in the audience today if we have any questions for them.

The *Global Dev Blog* has also been very involved in supporting the DSA, and Global Development Network will be part of the next student webinar. They are definitely a platform to take a look at, and they publish in both French Spanish and English.

And of course, EADI will be speaking next.

I will end there, and if there are any questions, please let me know. Thank you.