Writing for General Audiences

Creating simplicity out of complexity

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UNC Gillings School of Global Public Health
Why Write for General Audiences?
Do people want to hear about my work?

**YES!**

You might just have to explain it. A little bit.
People are curious

There is a misconception that the public isn’t interested in science.

• Trust in scientists, academic institutions and medical experts is still high; some partisan gaps. (MIT, 2022)
• Half of Americans recognize a hypothesis. (Pew Research, 2019)
• Two-thirds think the scientific method produces accurate conclusions. (Pew Research, 2019)
• 94% are interested in one aspect of science. (Kavli Foundation, 2022)
Trust increases when research is accessible

• 57% of Americans trust research more when data is openly available. (Pew Research, 2019)

• “Accessible” is subjective
  • Is the research accessible?
  • Is the language accessible?
  • Is the medium accessible?

• Getting science from publication to the public is a matter of equity.
WHY WRITE FOR GENERAL AUDIENCES?

OK, but why ME?

1. Inform legislators who can impact policy you care about
2. Get funding from donors and other agencies
3. Recruit future scientists and practitioners
4. Meet requirements for projects that require public outreach and education
5. Improve trust and appreciation of science
6. Increase understanding of the societal benefits of your work
7. Improve likelihood that your research will be seen/cited by your peers
8. Get connected to potential collaborators
9. Put a face to an otherwise impersonal concept
10. And much more!
WRITING FOR GENERAL AUDIENCES

Know Your Audience
Audiences can be broad

**Experts in your field**
- Peer reviewers
- Journal editors
- Grant reviewers/funders
- Conference organizers

**Experts in other fields**
- Journalists
- Policymakers
- Businesspeople
- Educators

**Non-experts**
- Community leaders
- Students
- Donors
- General public
KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

Listen before you write

• Who is my readership?
• What do they care about?
• Look for questions they’re asking
  • Google search queries or trends (https://trends.google.com)
  • Questions from colleagues, students, friends or family
  • Discussions on social media, message boards, news articles, etc.
WRITING FOR GENERAL AUDIENCES

Know Why It’s Newsworthy
Know Why It’s Newsworthy

Make the public health connection

• What public health challenge is your work addressing?
• How does your work connect to lived experiences?
  • Does it have health equity implications?
• What impact does it have on the future of public health?
  • Policy
  • Practice
  • Clinical care
  • Research
• What are you doing next to build on your work?
“Enduring writing goes beyond fun facts to present big ideas. One trick that helps me turn fun facts into big ideas? Three simple questions: What? So what? Now what?”

What is “newsworthy,” anyway?

1. Impact
2. Timeliness
3. Debate/Conflict
4. Prominence/Celebrity
5. Human interest
6. Proximity
7. Novelty/Exceptionality
8. Pathos
9. Continuity
10. Convenience
Let’s Talk About It!

WRITING FOR GENERAL AUDIENCES

THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT CHAPEL HILL
Storytelling helps connect the complex

• Tell a story in a few sentences.
  • Aim for 3-5 sentences.

• Build a narrative:
  • Did you feel an emotion?
  • Did a trigger cause you to act?
  • Did things go the way you expected?
  • Could you draw comparisons or analogies that aid comprehension?

• Keep it succinct. Think:
  • Elevator pitch
  • What, So What, Now What?

• Consider the story arc:
  • Landscape (“We used to think…”)
  • Problem (“But we noticed…”)
  • Solution (“Our research shows…”)

• And, But, Therefore (ABT) technique
LET’S TALK ABOUT IT!

The ABT technique

• ______ and _______, but _______, therefore________.
• An easy formula for telling the story of your work in one sentence (or a few)
• “In my lab, we study physiology AND biochemistry, BUT in recent years we’ve realized there are important questions at the molecular level, THEREFORE we are now investigating the following molecular questions…”
• Set up facts, identify a problem, establish a resolution.

Always put people first

• Language evolves, and we must evolve with it.

• The roadmap is empathy
  • Can I make a more inclusive word choice? (terms that are non-gendered or broader in scope, e.g., “health care providers” instead of “doctors”)
  • Is there person-first language I can consider? (e.g., “older people,” “people without housing,” “people with diabetes”)
  • Can I reduce harm? (terms that reduce stigma, e.g., ”Global South” vs. “third world,” or “substance misuse” instead of “abuse”)

• These are not settled terms. Even ones acceptable today may change.

• Honor the language preferences of the communities you work with.
Uninformed ≠ unintelligent

- Technical terms are not off limits!
- Define them on first appearance.
- Do not expect audiences to “look it up.”
- When given a choice between a technical term and a more familiar one, choose the latter (if you do not lose precision).
  - Elucidate vs. explain
  - Proximal vs. close
  - “I write about the shapes of living things but not the morphology of organisms.” — Ed Yong
“The more technical you get, the more restrictive you get, even if people are writing for a scientific audience. Eventually, other scientists who aren’t from the same narrow specialty become part of the amorphous ‘general public’.”

ED YONG, “ON JARGON AND WHY IT MATTERS IN SCIENCE WRITING”
Name that department
Name that department
Name that department
The Title

Legacy and emerging airborne per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) collected on PM$_{2.5}$ filters in close proximity to a fluoropolymer manufacturing facility

https://pubs.rsc.org/en/content/articlelanding/2022/em/d2em00358a/unauth

The Headline

Forever chemicals found in air pollution near Fayetteville manufacturing plant

Life Course Racism and Depressive Symptoms among Young Black Women


Experiences of racism in adolescence raise risk of depression for Black women

WRITING FOR GENERAL AUDIENCES

Communications Can Help
COMMUNICATIONS CAN HELP

The Gillings Communications Team

- **Matthew Chamberlin**, Associate Dean for Communications and Marketing, mchamberlin@unc.edu
- **Branson Moore**, Associate Director for Strategic Marketing, eb@unc.edu
- **Jennie Saia**, Associate Director of Communications, jsaia@unc.edu
- **Meg Palmer**, Public Communications Specialist, meg@unc.edu
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- **Mark Scott**, Web Communications Specialist, mark_scott@unc.edu

- You can reach all of us in one convenient place: sphcomm@unc.edu
Tell your story.

Research, practice and beyond – we can help you share it with the world. One email is all it takes. Send one to sphcomm@unc.edu to get started!

How we can help:

- Photo and video
- News media engagement
- Event communication
- News features
- Print and mixed media
- Social media
# Our Monthly Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Theme</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>January</td>
<td>Innovation and Entrepreneurship</td>
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<tr>
<td>February</td>
<td>BIPOC Public Health Champions</td>
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<tr>
<td>March</td>
<td>Mind and Body</td>
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<td>April</td>
<td>National Public Health Week</td>
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<tr>
<td>May</td>
<td>Our Graduates are the Future of Public Health</td>
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<tr>
<td>June</td>
<td>Celebrate Pride Month</td>
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<tr>
<td>July</td>
<td>Addressing Climate Change</td>
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<td>August</td>
<td>Healthy Families</td>
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<td>September</td>
<td>Working Toward Systemic Change</td>
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<td>October</td>
<td>Global Health</td>
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<td>November</td>
<td>What Is Public Health?</td>
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<tr>
<td>December</td>
<td>Public Health Wins</td>
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Helpful resources

- Public Health Communications Collaborative (https://publichealthcollaborative.org/)
- The Diversity Style Guide (https://diversitystyleguide.com)
- CDC’s CERC training (https://emergency.cdc.gov/cerc/)
- Carl Zimmer’s list of banned words (https://carlzimmer.com/the-index-of-banned-words-the-continually-updated-edition/)
- CDC’s Clear Communication Index (https://www.cdc.gov/ccindex/index.html)
- The Open Notebook (https://www.theopennotebook.com/)
- Kavli Foundation (https://kavlifoundation.org/)
- Writing in the Sciences - University of Guelph (https://writinginthesciences.uoguelph.ca/storytelling-in-science-writing/)
Let’s tell your story!

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