How to write for The Conversation

TheConversation.com is one of Australia’s largest independent news and commentary sites, delivering expertise from the academic and research community direct to the public. In a not-for-profit collaboration, our small team of professional editors work with universities, CSIRO and other research institute experts to unlock knowledge for a wider audience.

We now have a sister UK site, with its own team of editors: theconversation.com/uk. Together, we’ve published more than 11,000 academics and researchers from 725 institutions worldwide in just our first three years of operation.

Can you write for us?

To be a lead author on an article, you must be a current researcher or academic. Associate or honorary roles with universities are usually fine.

In exceptional circumstances, some people without a current academic/research affiliation can be co-authors: for example, Traditional Owners or research consultants who have been research collaborators. However, these co-authors must still be accompanied by a lead researcher. We do not publish paid or unpaid PR.

We aim to provide a fact-based, editorially independent forum. That’s why our disclosure process (covered in more detail later) is so important, so readers can know who has funded your work, whether you have any relevant political affiliations, or any other possible conflicts of interest.

We don’t publish undergraduate students, and only use PhD candidates where there is no one more senior able to write on the topic (for instance, if it is a new area of research) and with a supervisor or another senior co-author.

Quick checklist:

• Are you an academic or researcher?
• If not, do you have a current academic/researcher as your lead author?
• Can you answer a simple, three-step disclosure statement?

If the answer to those questions is yes, please read on!

How to register as an author

Register as a potential new author: theconversation.com/become-an-author.

Complete three short steps and you’ll be set to write.

1. Verify Institution
   Please identify your current institution.

2. Education History
   Tell us a bit about your formal qualifications.

3. Account Password
   Set your password, agree the terms and write!
Save yourself time before pitching a story

- **Read before you write.** What kind of stories do we cover? Do you think yours would work for a broad Australian and international audience, written and edited in plain English? Have a quick look through our sections.

- **Have you done a keyword search** to check if your issue has been covered? This search box appears at the top of most pages on our site.

- **Is this your area of expertise?**
  - Pay attention to what’s going on in the news. What’s being talked about?
  - Do you know something no one else knows? Is it the kind of thing the general public – not just other specialists – might be interested in?
  - Have you discovered something new that significantly changes the way we think about or understand a wider issue?
  - Have you read and could interpret an important, complicated document no one else understands? (For example, a new Productivity Commission report.)

An easy way to keep on top of what we publish is to subscribe to The Conversation’s morning newsletter. You can quickly scan the headlines, read about new research, and know what others in your field are writing about. The Australian edition of the newsletter goes out to more than 63,000 readers around the world each weekday: [theconversation.com/au/newsletter](http://theconversation.com/au/newsletter)
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Who are you writing for?
Our audience is incredibly broad. While one-in-five of our readers are academics, most are not. Our readers include senior politicians and public servants, journalists, business people, students, retirees, and people who are simply curious and have Googled in search of an answer. A third of our readers are from outside Australia. If you do write for us, think of a friend who’s not an expert in your area, and imagine you’re having a conversation with them.

That broad readership means that we don’t assume expert knowledge. Our job is to ask, “What does that mean? And why does that matter?” because those are the questions readers will ask. The majority of our readers are aged 18-44.

Unlike most media sites, all of our content is published under Creative Commons. That means that anyone – from bloggers to major media outlets – are welcome to republish our stories for free, and of course so are you and the institution you belong to. As a result, more than 90% of our articles are republished elsewhere. We attract around 5 million reads of our content per month.

Republishing guidelines

Steal our articles (no, really)
Rather than charge you for our content, we believe in a free flow of information. So unless otherwise noted, you can republish our articles online or in print for free. You just have to credit us and link to us, and you can’t edit our material or sell it separately.

Using the “republish” button that accompanies every article is the easiest way to meet our guidelines, which are as follows.

Read more here: theconversation.com/au/republishing_guidelines
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How to pitch like a pro

Go to theconversation.com/pitches/new Or scroll down on the front page of the site until you see this on the right hand side of the page, and click on Tell us:

Then write a 100-word explanation of your idea, ideally including an example to show why this story matters.

If explaining why your story matters seems hard, try talking about it to someone else, outside your field of expertise. What questions do they ask?

If they were to ask you bluntly, “So what?” – what would you say? That’s the first question readers will be asking in trying to decide whether to spend the time reading your article. If you can answer that “So what?” question well, it gives you a much better chance of your pitch being accepted; more people reading your article; and more people sharing it, greatly increasing your work’s reach.

Once you’re happy with your 100 word pitch, select what you think would be the most appropriate section via our online pitch page, fill in your details, and hit ‘Pitch idea’. You’ll get an automated reply explaining when to expect a reply, and what to do if
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you don’t hear back from an editor quickly. Each section can get dozens of pitches a day, so we can’t say yes to every pitch. However, we still aim to reply within a day (apart from on weekends), at least to say it’s been received and if there are other stories already underway on that topic.

Most Conversation articles are only **600-800 words**, so starting with a clear idea of the most important point(s) you want to cover will save you time, and help us give you a quick, clear response to your pitch.

**Agreeing on a brief & deadline**

If your pitch is accepted, the editor will **send you a brief**. It will include a link to your **author dashboard**, where you can write your story directly into our system. You will be able to discuss this brief/structure of your article with your editor by email/phone.

It’s important to get this mutually agreed brief right before you start writing, to save everyone time. If the article that is submitted is different to what was agreed, it may mean your editor may have to ask you to revise the piece again. You’ll also agree on a first draft deadline; if you’re not sure you can meet it, please say so.

**Writing tips**

**Start strong; answer the obvious questions**

Work hard on the first paragraph to grab the reader’s interest. Start with a short, sharp statement of the article’s essential facts, in no more than two sentences. Start with what’s new, relevant, or surprising. Readers want to know Five Ws: who, what, where, when, why, and sometimes how.

Make a brief sketch of your main points and stick to them. Put the most important information first. That allows readers to explore a topic to the depth that their curiosity takes them (not everyone reads to the end).

**Tone**

Write how people talk. A man should never “disembark from a vehicle” when he can “get out of a car”. Explain complex ideas. Don’t get too technical. Avoid jargon. If you write in our system you can take advantage of our ‘Readability index’.

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Our readability rating is based on Flesch-Kincaid readability tests, set at the level of an educated 16-year-old. That’s still higher than many news media outlets (for instance, many newspapers still aim for a 12-year-old level of literacy). But there are good reasons to keep our articles that simple: we want to share your expert knowledge with everyone, including people whose first language is not English.

Referencing

If you make contentious statements, please back them up with research. The same goes for facts and figures; e.g. if you’re saying 28% of Australians are obese. We reference with online links that readers can click on, preferably to full research papers, but to abstracts or news stories if the full paper isn’t available. We’ll help you add those in. But we can’t use footnotes or endnotes. Ideally, please put your reference/web link in brackets beside each statement to be referenced.

How to end

The last sentence should aim to summarise or reiterate the point made in your opening paragraph. Or you can just raise the question of what should happen next. Check you’ve stayed within the agreed word count, typically 600-800 words.

Headline tips

You can leave it to your editor to write a headline, but if you want to do a first draft, the following tips can help:

• Keep your headline simple and direct – it should be seven to ten words at most, with the most relevant and important words at the start.
• Avoid puns and “smart” headlines. Instead, aim for an accurate and engaging label that neatly summarises the content.
• Names of people, things and places are good. Don’t abbreviate these.
• Aim to employ active verbs, which lend muscle and emphasise the “actor” in the story, i.e. “Aspirin cuts cancer risk” or “WikiLeaks reveals flaws in government legislation”.
• Think of ways to distinguish your article from others. Is this a breakthrough? Does it answer an important question or solve a puzzle?
• Would you read it? Remember, you are writing for an online readership. Ask yourself what keywords you would use in a search to find your story. Assuming you find it, would you then feel compelled to read beyond the headline? If not, try again.

Multimedia: Photos, graphs, videos & more

Photos, videos, tables and graphs can bring a story to life – so if you have any of those, it’s worth mentioning that in your pitch and in discussions with your editor if the pitch is accepted. We now have a Multimedia Editor, who may also be able to help with interactive features for your story.

What’s next after you submit for editing?

When you’re done, hit the ‘Submit’ button. This will email your editor to let them know you’re done.
Disclosure
As soon as possible, fill in your disclosure on the right hand side of your article page. If you have any questions about it, ask your editor.

Your author profile

Make sure you have a complete author profile: it’s a free, high-profile place to be found by media and academic colleagues looking for experts in your field.

Most Conversation author profiles show up first in Google searches, typically above your official uni/research organisation profile, LinkedIn or other profiles. What do you want the rest of the world to know about you?
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Wendy Miller’s profile (on the previous page) shows the value of an author spelling out her expertise, research areas and recent publications. Since first publishing with us in January 2014, her publication downloads have hit new highs.

So don’t be shy; it’s in your interests to have a good, current profile. Current contact information including a mobile phone (shown only to editors; you can tick a box if you want your email and work phone number to be public) is a huge help. Outdated contact details, or only providing your email address, could delay publication.

Final approval – from us and from you

Once your editor is finished revising the article, they’ll send it back to you for approval. Respond to any questions or suggestions the editor has. Review the text, photos, captions and headline to make sure they’re all accurate. To see how the article will look when published, click ‘Preview’ at the top of the page.

If you want to make further changes, let your editor know you’ve done so. We’re happy to keep reviewing the article until you and the editor are both happy with the content. When you are, hit ‘Approve’ in the top right corner of the editing page.
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We can’t publish until you have approved the story and filled in your disclosure statement.

Publishing
Talk to your editor about when your article will be published. Some articles go online quickly, others may not be published for a while.

We always respect embargoes.
When your article is published, please send it around to your contacts. If you keep your uni/research organisation’s communications team informed ahead of publication, they’ll also be able to share your work through social media and other channels.

Comments
Please keep an eye on comments to see if there are any important questions you want to answer, or discussions you’d like to be involved in. We actively moderate our comments – but if you see any comments that concern you, you can hit the ‘Report’ button at the end of the comment, which will alert our site moderator and your editor.

For more tips on comments and engaging with readers, we’ve prepared an author’s guide on “How to engage with comments”.

Measuring your readership
On your author dashboard, you can see how many people are reading your article, where in the world it has been read, the latest tweets and comments on it, and where your article has been republished.

Those metrics are increasingly being used in formal university Key Performance Indicators as a measure of public engagement. Ask your department or university if they’re using them too, so that you can get more credit for your contribution.

Media follow-up
You may get calls from other media to do follow-up articles or interviews, which can have a great impact on increasing the reach and public impact of your work. Talking to your university/research institute’s communications staff can be a good place to get tips, especially if you haven’t been interviewed much before.

But whether it’s talking to journalists or to the general public, you can apply many of the tips in this guide. Don’t forget to clearly answer “So what? Why should people care about this?” even before you’re asked – that way, there’s a good chance you’ll get people’s attention and keep them listening.

Many of our authors have been approached not only by news media, but also by respected journals, prospective students, new academic collaborators and even new research funders.

We hope to see you join The Conversation. Good luck!