

THE **C**ONVERSATION

Writing, pitching and training

Guide for academics





Writing, pitching and training

Guides for academics

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THE CONVERSATION

Communicating research to a wide audience:

104.7 million readers in 2016–17

1.4 million users a month to our site

8 million reads a month of UK content

(on average, including republication)

The Conversation UK helps **raise the profile of you, your work, and your university**, positioning you as an **expert voice to address a global audience**. It is a new approach to journalism now supported by more than 75 universities in the UK, Ireland and Sweden, with dozens more in the US, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and France.

Our team of editors work with academics like you to unlock your knowledge, connecting university researchers directly to the public. We seed the mainstream media with expert voices and researched opinions. Together, we **build you and your institution's reach and global reputation** through social media and republication.



Writing for The Conversation: a guide for academics

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.

The Conversation is a not-for-profit company and UK charity funded by participating member universities – around 150 worldwide – and through grants from government agencies and NGOs. Other editions of The Conversation are based in Australia, the US, Canada, South Africa, France and Indonesia.

All content is published under a [Creative Commons \(BY-NC\) licence](#), similar to some open access journals, which means articles are free to read and free for other organisations to republish – unchanged, and crediting the author.

More than 90% of Conversation articles are republished in other newspapers, magazines and websites. By giving away our content we can tap into the large audiences of other already established media organisations – our content is republished across the globe, generating greater impact for authors' research and expertise.

Contributing authors have a public profile on the site (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 believe authors will find this useful in terms of gauging and demonstrating the reach and impact of their research.

Uniquely, The Conversation's collaborative online editing platform gives authors control by requiring their approval before publication. For their efforts, authors improve their writing skills, build a higher profile, find a wider audience for their work, and the further opportunities that greater visibility brings.

In short, here are nine reasons to write for The Conversation: <https://theconversation.com/why-write-for-us-60664>

Interested? [Read on.](#)

The Conversation editorial process

What we publish

Our editors commission **short, first-person written pieces of around 600-800 words** giving their expertise and insight into the news stories of the day. To be eligible to write for The Conversation you should have a current position at a (generally publicly funded) university or academic research institution, whether full or part time, visiting, associate, or emeritus.

Our **monthly, thematic podcast The Anthill**

(<https://theconversation.com/uk/podcasts/the-anthill>) provides an alternative medium for our audience, for which academics are interviewed. For any questions, or for a forward plan of upcoming episodes, contact podcast producers Annabel Bligh and Gemma Ware at podcast@theconversation.com

Our recently-launched **long-read section, In Depth**

(<https://theconversation.com/uk/topics/in-depth-38616>) is an opportunity for academics with especially enthralling tales to tell to wax lyrical up to around 3,000 words. Contact stephen.harris@theconversation.com for further details.

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 a polish. 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

Articles published on The Conversation are either:

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, perhaps 70% of pieces published. These may be prompted by the news agenda, based on new research, or one of the types of separately labelled content mentioned below.
2. **Pitches**, either from academics or from press teams on their behalf. Comms 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 to first set up a short profile (name, position, university, brief research interests and photo), and then guides you through the process of describing the article you wish to write. This goes 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.

We have several content streams with their own label and style:

- **Explainers**: timeless, neutral and objective explanations of complex topics.
- **Fact Check**: a rigorous analysis of claims made in the press, 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 Conversation editorial process

What we want to hear from you:

- Your informed opinion on something in your area that you read or heard in the news, as soon as possible
- New angles or new approaches to stories that are being talked or written about
- Ideas for 'big picture' pieces or analysis
- New published research from you, or from others in your field that you'd like to write about
- Important research or newsworthy events that are NOT being talked about. The news agenda isn't always right – as you are the expert, let us know about research, issues, or events you think are important that don't get the coverage they deserve

You can pitch ideas directly to the section editors by signing up and creating a profile and using the pitch form, found at:

<http://theconversation.com/uk/pitches>

Use your press office – they can help you focus your ideas and sharpen your angles into something suitable for a general public audience. And be sure to keep your academic profile on your university's website up-to-date.

Several of our member institutions have produced short videos featuring authors giving their thoughts on writing for The Conversation. Take a look at what academics felt at Lancaster (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m6e2YjCwwIM>), Queen's Belfast (<https://vimeo.com/130198058>), and Open universities (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hnSfJvPiYPM>).

The expert request

The expert request is a daily call-out containing a handful of stories the team wish to cover, but for which we haven't yet identified a writer. Going out at around 10am every weekday to our member universities, the expert request is an opportunity for press teams to highlight academics or research groups working in the area editors have identified in their requests.

As there are many members and only a few requests each morning there is an element of competition, and a speedy response to the press office and to editors is appreciated, particularly for fast-moving stories. However content is king: editors are most likely to choose to write the piece the researcher who can bring the most in-depth understanding of the topic, the most insightful analysis, or the most original angle to the story – not just the first to reply.

As a potential author, you can help by making your press office aware of your areas of expertise and current research and that you're interested in writing when the opportunity arises. As timeliness may be a factor in an expert request, this may mean you have to drop everything for an hour or so to write a first draft, and be available some time later for 10 or 20 minutes in order to check the edit, make any amendments necessary and sign the piece off for publication.

If this timescale sounds unrealistic, remember that the editors offer considerable support, and can ensure a first draft is polished into a final piece that shines. It's easier than you think.

The Conversation editorial process

Benefits of writing

By writing for The Conversation you make yourself more visible to the world beyond the circle of academic peers in your field. Our surveys show The Conversation's readers are business people, teachers, students, journalists, politicians and policymakers, retirees, academics, and readers drawn from the publications worldwide that republish our content. Our articles are read by around 8m people every month, of which more than 80% are outside the UK.

This will often lead to further contact from the media for follow-up interviews or articles, or from academics interested in your work seeking collaboration or further information. But a wider awareness of your name and work can lead to more interesting opportunities, for example:

- Hull academic commissioned to write book for the Royal Society of Chemistry. Invited to give TEDx talk
- Durham PhD's article on space crime scene investigation republished in 20 countries in eight languages, later invited to collaborate at NASA
- Cardiff academic given regular column in The Big Issue magazine after writing article on migration crisis
- Nottingham researcher wrote an article for The Conversation on her paper published in Frontiers, which became one of the journal's most-read papers. She was subsequently invited to become a reviewing editor and to guest edit a special issue on the topic.

Pathway to impact

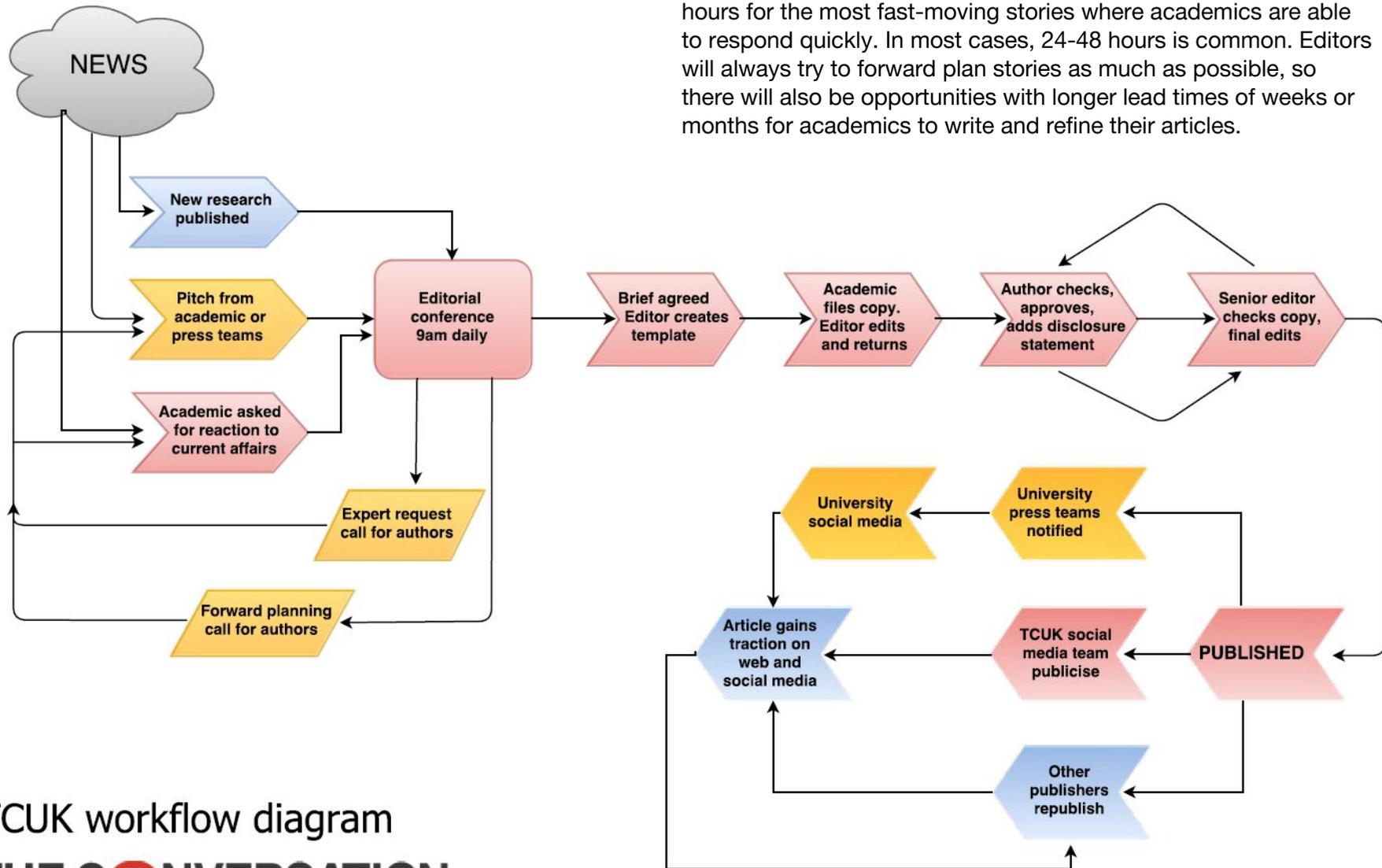
Taking research findings to the public is now a key part of how universities are judged under the Research Excellence Framework, and is a required element of research funding applications. While media coverage is not impact per se, it is an essential step on the pathway to impact. For example:

- Brighton academic's research on earthquake-proof building technology cited in European Parliament debates
- York researcher's article on African air pollution republished in Guardian and BBC World Service. OECD report subsequently cites his research and quotes Conversation article
- Conversation articles cited in evidence submitted to parliament on topics such as digital democracy, welfare reform, criminal justice, reform of the Mental Health Act, and women in parliament
- Conversation articles cited in select committees discussing Brexit, fisheries, restoration of the Houses of Parliament, EU-Russia relations.

This sort of post-publication follow-up is important for universities to record for their REF impact statement. Our post-publication engagement feature makes it easy to record this within your profile on The Conversation, so please do use this feature (further details later in this document) so you and your university can draw on this information in the future.

The Conversation editorial process

From commissioning and editing to publication can be a matter of hours for the most fast-moving stories where academics are able to respond quickly. In most cases, 24-48 hours is common. Editors will always try to forward plan stories as much as possible, so there will also be opportunities with longer lead times of weeks or months for academics to write and refine their articles.



TCUK workflow diagram
THE CONVERSATION



The news value of academic expertise

Knowledge worth writing about

As academics you are probably used to being drilled by your university press office to write third person, reporting-style press releases describing your new published paper, complete with pithy quotes from yourself and co-authors. We at The Conversation would encourage you to think of yourself as an expert with informed opinions worth listening to – not just every 18 months or so when you have a new paper to publicise, but at any time when a topic on which you can provide some expert comment arises.

The Conversation's real value for academics lies in drawing upon our editors' sense of what is newsworthy and ability to find ways of making your expertise relevant to topics readers seek to understand. The key is to think about how to present that information in a way that is appealing for a general reader.

The sorts of things that make good articles are:

- New
- Dramatic
- Fun
- Unusual
- Surprising
- Timely
- Explanations
- Opinions
- Personal stories
- Questions
- Universal
- Timeless

Note the timely and timeless. Timely, because news events require timely responses; but also timeless, because some topics are interesting at any time. We need not be a slave to the journalistic need for a “news hook”.

Examples of approaches that could deliver an article that would suit The Conversation might be:

- An explanation of a topic in the news, providing background or context unavailable elsewhere
- Expert comment or analysis of current affairs, offering a deeper understanding or new angle not found elsewhere in media coverage of the topic
- An article that takes a broad approach to an interesting topic, using a recent event or news story as a peg
- An explanation of new or recent research, either your own or the work of others in your field that you'd like to write about
- Lists are a good way of providing readers with bite size pieces of information that explain a topic
- Pose and answer an interesting question (but not a rhetorical or academic one)

How might your work or expertise be arranged in a format such as these? Have a look at the examples overleaf.

The news value of academic expertise

Examples: explanation

This piece took as its starting point the achievement by SpaceX of launching its Falcon rocket into orbit and successfully landing it on a ship at sea, part of its programme to develop a reusable launch vehicle. The author explained the physics and engineering techniques behind such an achievement. (27,000 reads)



How to launch a rocket into space ... and then land it on a ship at sea

April 13, 2016, 11:12am BST



SpaceX's Falcon 9 rocket blasts off. [SpaceX/ Flickr](#)

Email 46
Twitter 66
Facebook 12
LinkedIn 41
Print

On Friday 8 April 2016, [SpaceX's](#) Falcon 9 rocket launched a mission to deliver a spacecraft called [Dragon](#) with its payload of supplies and experiments into a trajectory towards the International Space Station (ISS). Most remarkably, the first-stage booster then landed on a ship (see below).

Author



Hugh Hunt
Reader in Engineering Dynamics and Vibration, University of Cambridge

Disclosure statement

Hugh Hunt does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond the academic appointment above.

Partners



University of Cambridge provides funding as a member of The Conversation UK.

The Conversation UK receives funding from Hefce, Hefcw, SAGE, SFC, RCUK, The Nuffield Foundation, The Ogden Trust.

Examples: new research

An explanation of new research, this piece explained the new findings of a research study, put them into context, and provided some expert analysis and comment on why they're important or interesting. (20,000 reads)



New findings: anxiety is linked to death from cancer in men

October 18, 2016 10:39am BST



Anxiety: damages the body, too. [Shutterstock](#)

Email 112
Twitter 536
Facebook 41
LinkedIn 41
Print

About one in 14 people around the world are affected by anxiety disorders [at any given time](#). Those who suffer from these conditions experience impairment, disability, and are at a [high risk for substance abuse and suicide](#). In spite of these considerable risks, research on anxiety is lagging far behind that of other common mental health problems – and many people affected don't even know they have this condition.

Author



Olivia Remes
PhD Candidate, University of Cambridge

Disclosure statement

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Partners



University of Cambridge provides funding as a member of The Conversation UK.

The Conversation UK receives funding from Hefce, Hefcw, SAGE, SFC, RCUK, The Nuffield Foundation, The Ogden Trust, The Royal Society, The Wellcome Foundation and The Alliance for Useful Evidence, as well as sixty five university members.

[View the full list](#)

The news value of academic expertise

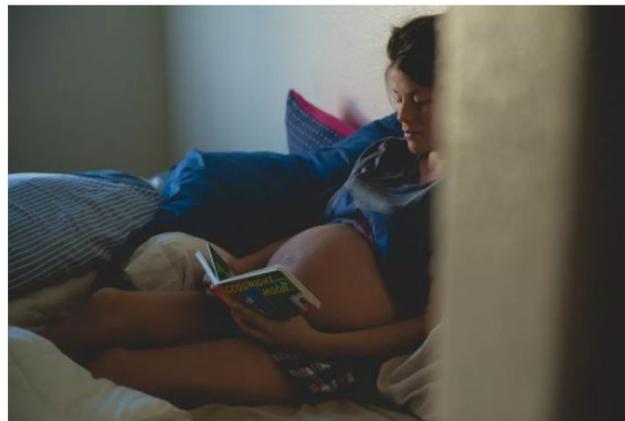
Examples: analysis + comment

This article takes a subject of frequent discussion – social media – and introduces a new angle and perspective the reader may not have previously considered, based on the author’s research. (42,000 reads)



Social media is putting pregnant women under pressure to look perfect

July 13, 2016 1.18pm BST



There's no such thing as a perfect pregnancy body. www.pexels.com/Josh Wilkins, CC BY-SA

Author



Amy Brown
Associate professor of psychology, Swansea University

Disclosure statement

Amy Brown has previously received funding from the Economic and Social Research Council for her work exploring infant feeding

Partners



Swansea University provides funding as a member of The Conversation UK.

The Conversation UK receives funding from Helios, Helios, SAGE, SFC, RCUK, The Nuffield Foundation, The Ogden Trust, The Royal Society, The Wellcome Trust, Esmeé Fairbairn Foundation and The Alliance for Useful Evidence, as well as sixty five university members.

There is no doubt that social media and its instant availability has changed the way we engage with the outside world. As the popularity and [influence of sites such as Facebook](#) continue to grow, few can argue that these are not among the most important tools for social contact in the modern world.

At any time of life, whatever we may experience, social media has

- Email
- Twitter 83
- Facebook 86
- LinkedIn 11
- Print

Examples: questions

Prompted by continued focus on the subject in the media, this piece examined what we know about North Korea through the accounts of defectors and escapees, based on research conducted by the writer. (135,000 reads)



What happens to North Koreans who flee their country – and what can they tell us?

September 7, 2017 9.49am BST



Could be better: daily life in Pyongyang. EPA/Franck Robichon

Author



Alexander Dukalskis
Assistant Professor, School of Politics and International Relations, University College Dublin

Disclosure statement

Alexander Dukalskis' research on North Korea has received funding from the Korea Foundation, the East Asia Institute, the University of Notre Dame, and University College Dublin.

Partners



University College Dublin provides funding as a member of The Conversation UK.

The Conversation UK receives funding from Helios, Helios, SAGE, SFC, RCUK, The Nuffield Foundation, The Ogden Trust, The Royal Society, The Wellcome Trust, Esmeé Fairbairn Foundation and The Alliance for Useful Evidence, as well as sixty five university members.

- Email
- Twitter 18
- Facebook 100
- LinkedIn
- Print

There is no shortage of commentary on what should be done about North Korea weapons programmes. Op-eds in major news outlets variously [advocate for talks](#), a strategy of deterrence combined with [progress on humanitarian and economic issues](#), and even [regime change](#).

But while rhetoric about North Korea [heats up](#), the abstract talk about military options, sanctions, and engagement obscures the people at the centre of it all: millions of ordinary North Koreans.

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. This pithy summary is what journalists refer to as a story's "top line".

Strong stories have a strong, 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.

It's also crucial to **think about the reader**: they are intelligent, curious, interested in the world, but they're not specialists and they're unlikely to want to plough through academic text. What is the article's most interesting aspect to them? What about it is new, not previously discussed, is unusual, or provides a new analysis, perspective, or comment? It may or may not be the aspect that is most interesting academically.

The easiest way to keep up to date with the issues we're following and get a sense of what we cover and the style and tone we take is to read what we publish, by subscribing to our email newsletter. Arriving first thing each morning, you can quickly scan its headlines, read about new research, find out what others in your field are writing about, and get a sense of what we cover and how.

You'll find the link at the top of the homepage:

 [Get newsletter](#)

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.

The first and last sentences are the hardest to write, and the most important. It's often easier to write an intro and then the rest of the piece, and then go back and re-write the intro and outro now that there's a written piece to reflect on.

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 do not under any circumstances close by remarking that "more research is needed."

The Conversation uses The Economist style guide (<http://www.economist.com/styleguide/introduction>). And, while written in 1946, George Orwell's six rules for writing (<https://www.economist.com/blogs/prospero/2013/07/george-orwell-writing>) still resonate today.

The news value of academic expertise

Style and tone

Journalistic writing is different to academic writing, but the differences can be boiled down to a few essentials:

- **Get to the point** – start with the latest events, what we learned, implications or conclusions. Don't write chronologically, starting at the beginning and only getting to what's new in the penultimate paragraph.
- **Battle for the reader's attention, from the opening sentence.** It is said that a writer loses 10% of their audience with every paragraph. Why should they read on? Make sure the important elements are included early on, and make every word count.
- **Use plain English.** Get a feel for the informal – how you might explain the topic to a non-specialist friend in the pub, rather than apply for a loan from the bank manager.
- Make sure your piece answers more questions than it poses to the reader: the key questions of **Who, What, Where, When, Why**, and sometimes **How**.
- **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, but that they will once explained to them.

Simplifying language

It's important to remember who your audience are, in this case curious, interested but non-specialist readers, and write accordingly. For example:

Original:

“To understand the formation of rip currents one must consider the processes that occur as wave transformation occurs at the beach – the key requirement is that spatial gradients in wave breaking must occur parallel to the shoreline. The usual driver of these gradients are sandbars that have formed due to the deposition of sediment in the nearshore zone.”

After editing:

“For rip currents to form, there must be areas close to the beach where some waves break and other areas where they do not. Usually this is caused by sandbars on the seabed that form from the sediment deposited by waves and tides.”

However, don't worry about this too much – ensuring the language of the piece is as easy to read as possible is what The Conversation's editors bring to the table.

How to pitch ideas to editors

We're always interested in hearing ideas from academics. The best means to do this is to send your story idea through the pitch function on the website, which you will find here: <http://theconversation.com/uk/pitches>

Each section of The Conversation receives many pitches every day, and not all will be suitable for us, for all sorts of reasons. But a **well-crafted pitch** that **identifies the most interesting aspects of the story** will help persuade an editor and speed their response. Even if your idea isn't used, editors may have other suggestions for articles you could write, and in any case will know to keep you in mind next time a topic in your field of expertise comes around.

Things to think about before getting in touch:

- **What's in the news?** What are people talking about?
- **Explore the site first.** What kind of stories do we cover? Do you think yours would work for a broad international audience, written in plain English?
- **Have we covered this before?** Use the search box to look at our archive
- **Is this your area of expertise?** We're looking for experts who know their topic well
- **Do you know something no one else knows, or can you understand important documents or difficult topics?** Is it something that would interest the general public, not just other academics or specialists? Can you explain why something will significantly change the way we think about or understand a wider issue?

Writing a great pitch

Most Conversation articles are fairly short, so be clear from the outset about the most important points you have to make, and the structure of how you will do so. It's particularly important to explain:

- What, in short, the story is about
- Why it matters and why it's interesting – what is the significance to a non-specialist audience?
- Why it matters now, rather than at some other time, and what current events if any it relates to

In other words, answer the question that will be in our readers' minds: "**So what?**". Tell us why this is interesting or important. Tell us something we don't know. Remember that our audience includes politicians, journalists, businesspeople, – students, teachers, and retirees. Don't assume readers or indeed the editor reading your pitch have expert knowledge of the topic.

Make a compelling case by answering these questions well, and your pitch is much more likely to be accepted. The pitch process is designed to help you formulate your idea in this way.

Fill in the details, pick the section you think it most suited for (don't worry, the editors will pass it onto colleagues on other sections if needs be), then hit the Pitch idea button.

You'll receive an autoresponse with a senior editor's email address to follow up with if necessary, and should hear back from a section editor within 48 hours.

How to pitch ideas to editors (...cont.)

If your pitch is accepted, the editor will (for new authors) **set up an author profile** for you, which you're welcome to edit and fill in with details of your research interests, expertise and work history. At a minimum, we require name, job title, institution, a short biography and indication of your research interests and expertise, and a profile picture.

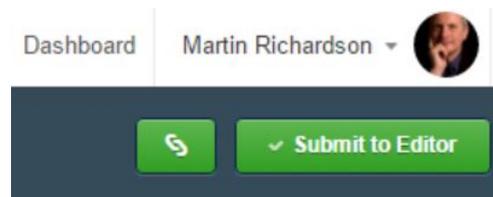
The editor will then **send you the brief** that you have agreed, and a deadline for submitting the first draft. If you're not sure you can meet it, please say so. If the article you submit is very different to the agreed brief, you may be asked to revise it.

You'll receive a confirmation email that will include a link to your **author dashboard**, from where you can access the article template (top left hand corner). The online content management system allows you to write directly into the interface as you read, saving as you type. It's very easy and straightforward, similar to using any word processor.

Using the online editor

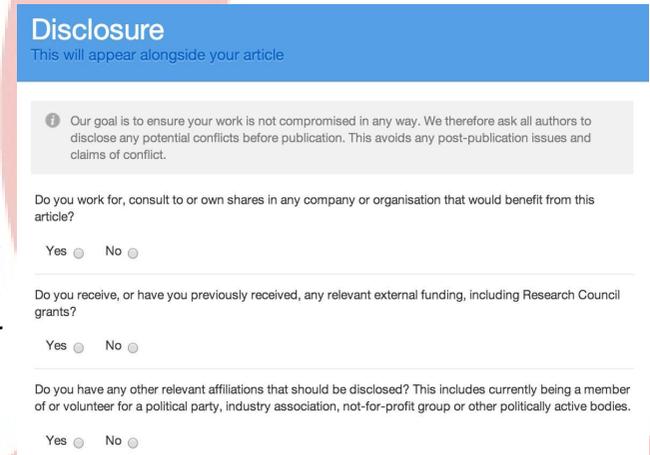
Once you have written your piece, there are several steps that you and the editors need to go through in order to publish.

When you've finished writing the draft, **hit the Submit button** in the top right-hand corner to notify the editor that the piece is ready for them to take a look.



Please fill in your **disclosure statement** as soon as possible. This is on the right-hand side of the editor, next to your name in red. These are the same sort of disclosure questions you'd find elsewhere.

It's important to be upfront about any affiliations, associations and funding. We can't publish without it. This is to protect you and The Conversation from any accusations of bias or undisclosed interests. Your editor can answer any questions you may have.

A screenshot of a 'Disclosure' form. The title 'Disclosure' is in a blue header, with the subtitle 'This will appear alongside your article'. Below the header is an information icon and text: 'Our goal is to ensure your work is not compromised in any way. We therefore ask all authors to disclose any potential conflicts before publication. This avoids any post-publication issues and claims of conflict.' The form contains three questions, each with 'Yes' and 'No' radio button options:

- Do you work for, consult to or own shares in any company or organisation that would benefit from this article? (Yes No)
- Do you receive, or have you previously received, any relevant external funding, including Research Council grants? (Yes No)
- Do you have any other relevant affiliations that should be disclosed? This includes currently being a member of or volunteer for a political party, industry association, not-for-profit group or other politically active bodies. (Yes No)

Once your editor has finished revising the piece they'll send it back to you for approval. Respond to any questions or suggestions the editor has left. Review the text, photos, captions and headline to make sure they're all accurate. Click **Preview** at the top of the page to see how the article will look when published, complete with images and links. Let the editor know when you've finished and they will go over the piece again. The process may be as quick as one back-and-forth, or it might take several iterations before author and editor are both happy with the piece.

Finally, once you're happy with the piece, hit the **Approve** button in the top right corner of the editing page to provide your final approval. The editor will then line the piece up for approval from senior editors and then publication.

How to pitch ideas to editors (...cont.)

Examples

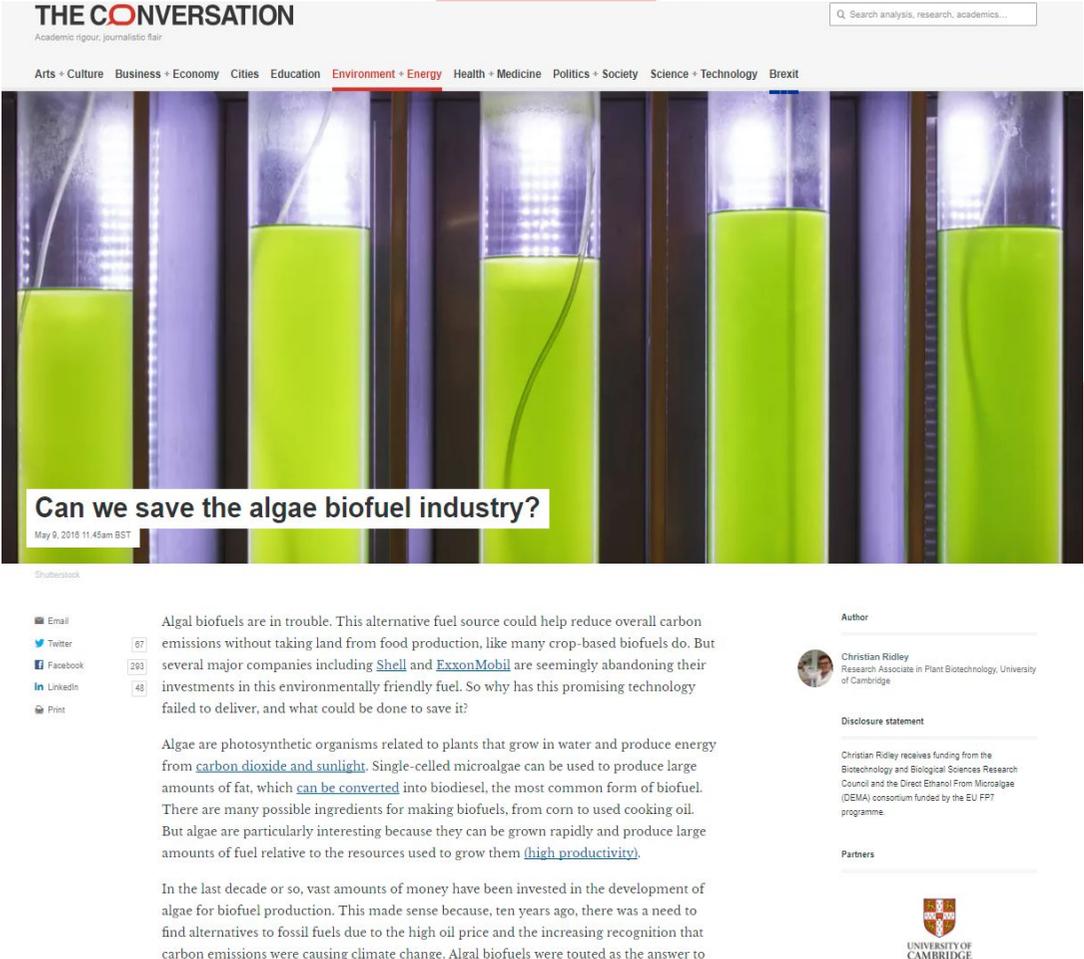
This pitch:

“Biofuels from algae is relatively well known, and were covered on this site in 2013. But in reality, algae are being researched for much more than just fuels. In fact, algal growth is probably unsustainable from an economics point of view, unless we produce biofuels alongside other high-value products. This topic has never been covered in The Conversation, but represents a huge area of research in the field at this time.

In this article, I will:

- Introduce algae and algal biofuels
- Describe how algal biofuels have failed to be commercially successful despite massive investment
- Explain the other products from algae being researched, including bioplastics, cosmetics, nutritional supplements and even medicines
- Show how we can combine biofuel production with other products in a ‘biorefinery’, using recycled sources of light, energy and nutrients
- In this way, I will show that we can improve the economics of biofuel production and potentially realise the potential of algae as a sustainable biotechnology.”

Became this story:
(13,000 reads)



THE CONVERSATION
Academic rigour, journalistic flair

Arts + Culture Business + Economy Cities Education **Environment + Energy** Health + Medicine Politics + Society Science + Technology Brexit

Can we save the algae biofuel industry?

May 9, 2018 11:45am BST

Algal biofuels are in trouble. This alternative fuel source could help reduce overall carbon emissions without taking land from food production, like many crop-based biofuels do. But several major companies including [Shell](#) and [ExxonMobil](#) are seemingly abandoning their investments in this environmentally friendly fuel. So why has this promising technology failed to deliver, and what could be done to save it?

Algae are photosynthetic organisms related to plants that grow in water and produce energy from [carbon dioxide and sunlight](#). Single-celled microalgae can be used to produce large amounts of fat, which [can be converted](#) into biodiesel, the most common form of biofuel. There are many possible ingredients for making biofuels, from corn to used cooking oil. But algae are particularly interesting because they can be grown rapidly and produce large amounts of fuel relative to the resources used to grow them ([high productivity](#)).

In the last decade or so, vast amounts of money have been invested in the development of algae for biofuel production. This made sense because, ten years ago, there was a need to find alternatives to fossil fuels due to the high oil price and the increasing recognition that carbon emissions were causing climate change. Algal biofuels were touted as the answer to

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Partners
UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

How to pitch ideas to editors (...cont.)

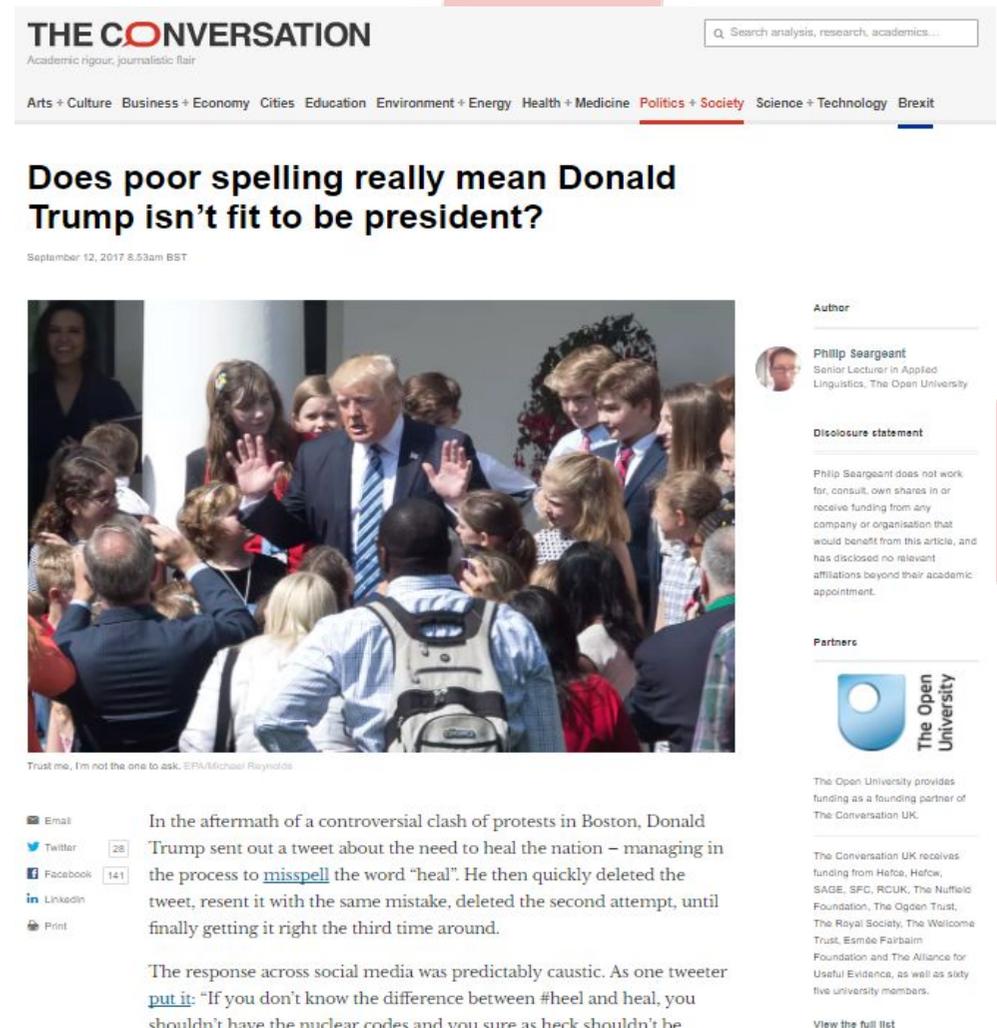
Examples

This pitch:

“Is poor spelling another sign that Donald Trump isn’t fit to be president, or simply an indication of the way that language and communication are changing – and what does this tell us about the role of spelling in society? Key points:

- Being poor at spelling is a trait Trump shares with his political hero Andrew Jackson, who famously remarked that ‘It is a damn poor mind indeed which can’t think of at least two ways to spell any word’, an attitude shared by eminent writers from Mark Twain to HG Wells. But mainstream social attitudes still venerate ‘correct’ spelling – along with ‘correct’ grammar – as hugely important. I will discuss why this is, whether it’s changing in the modern era, and what the uproar around Trump’s ‘heel/heal’, ‘unpresidented’ and ‘covfefe’ mistakes say about politics today.
- Spelling mistakes have greatly harmed the careers of politicians in the past. Being able to spell is seen as an emblem of proper education, and attention to detail and decorum. Trump’s slipshod spelling has provoked bursts of criticism but his standing seems unaffected. Is this in line with how social media is changing communication conventions, or does it really say something of his character and competence?”

Became this story:
(4,700 reads)



The screenshot shows a news article from 'THE CONVERSATION' website. The article title is 'Does poor spelling really mean Donald Trump isn't fit to be president?' and it is dated September 12, 2017, 8:53am BST. The author is Philip Seargeant, a Senior Lecturer in Applied Linguistics at The Open University. The article includes a photograph of Donald Trump surrounded by a crowd of people. The text discusses Trump's spelling mistakes and their impact on his public image. The article also features social media sharing options (Email, Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, Print) and a list of partners including The Open University, Hefce, Hefcw, SAGE, SFC, RCUK, The Nuffield Foundation, The Ogden Trust, The Royal Society, The Wellcome Trust, Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, and The Alliance for Useful Evidence.

Responding to comments

Please keep an eye on comments to see if there are any good questions you want to answer, or discussions you'd like to be involved in. We **actively moderate our comments**, in accordance with our [Community Standards](https://theconversation.com/uk/community-standards) (<https://theconversation.com/uk/community-standards>) which we take seriously, including enforcing a real name policy for readers. We reserve the right to remove any comments that violate these standards. Familiarise yourself with these standards and ensure your own comments adhere to them.

If you come across a comment that breaches these standards or concerns you, **hit the Report button at the end of the comment to alert our site moderator** and your editor.

Our comment sections are generally better than most online sites and our Community Standards are aimed at making The Conversation a place for civil debate. We also run initiatives such as Author Q&As to improve the quality of discussion for everyone.

We've noticed that the **quality of comments dramatically improves when the author participates in comments**. We encourage all authors to engage in comments where possible on their own articles, and others. Here are some tips to help you decide how and when to comment.

Tips for dealing with comments

- **Get in early.** You can help set the tone for a constructive discussion
- **Brief answers to reader questions** referring to arguments in the article, or providing links to further research, are helpful contributions. **Facts are your best weapons**
- **Assume good faith**, but don't tolerate abuse
- **Humour works well** at puncturing what might be or appear to be aggression
- **Individual troublemakers: report and ignore.** Answer valid questions, but "Don't feed the trolls". This is effective at keeping discussion on track and useful to all.
- **Posing questions** to the community can be a useful way of guiding the direction of debate
- **Difficult areas or off-topic posts:** you might try to remind posters that they're off-topic, or gently direct them back on track. Use your judgement as to when it's no longer worthwhile trying to engage with a commenter
- **Report off-topic posts** if you feel they are nowhere near the subject or aimed at derailing discussion
- And in all cases, **report abusive comments so we can delete them** and ban those responsible if necessary.

Editor visits and training sessions

Editor visits are a key benefit for university members of The Conversation and their academics.

Our editors travel the country visiting universities to help academics understand the thinking behind The Conversation and how we work. We run workshop sessions to help academics understand how to consider the news potential of their expertise, how to look for story hooks and angles from the news, how to write a quality pitch to section editors, and other advice and guidance. We also offer short one-on-one sessions, which can be very useful for getting a sense of an academic's research area and identifying or steering authors towards aspects that might be promising for stories.

These visits are generally organised through the university press office, so if you'd like to attend one, or request that a visit is arranged for your department/school/faculty, contact your communications team in the first instance, or Georgina Hall (georgina.hall@theconversation.com).

Khalil Cassimally, our community coordinator (khalil.cassimally@theconversation.com), is also available to visit universities to talk about video content, and to film academics for short videos posted to our Facebook pages.

A brief outline follows of the sort of training sessions available to members:

- One-to-one sessions of around 20-30 minutes
- Introductory presentations of around 1 hour
- Interactive workshops from at least 1.5 to 2.5 hours
- Versions of the interactive workshop can be extended to half or full days
- Any combination of the above
- Sessions spread over two days makes sense for farther-flung universities

Editor visits and training sessions

Training sessions provide skills and confidence

“ The Conversation training session I attended in Oxford did two really valuable things for me. First, it helped me understand what editors and readers were looking for. Second, it gave me the confidence to approach an editor with my ideas.

As a direct result of the two articles I've published, I've been invited to speak on radio discussion programmes, collaborated on other projects, and had interesting dialogues with members of the public who wanted to know more about my areas of research. In the longer term, the feedback and advice from that original training session has also helped me shape other public engagement projects I've worked on, and made me think more deeply about the ways in which I can share my research.”

– Philippa Byrne, British Academy Post-Doctoral Fellow in Medieval History, University of Oxford

2 articles, 71,000 readers

“ I have often reflected on how my research, focusing on women, gender and Islam in modern South Asia, might contribute to contemporary debates, but I wasn't sure about how to link my material to news stories. The workshop gave me some very specific ideas about how I could make my historical research relevant to a wider audience.

Working with [the editor] was extremely useful for thinking about links to ongoing news stories and the format of my article, yet the process was always consultative with no changes made to my article without my agreement. It reached a global audience ... I never could have expected such a wide readership for my academic writing.”

– Siobhan Lambert Hurley, Reader in International History, University of Sheffield

1 article, 18,000 readers

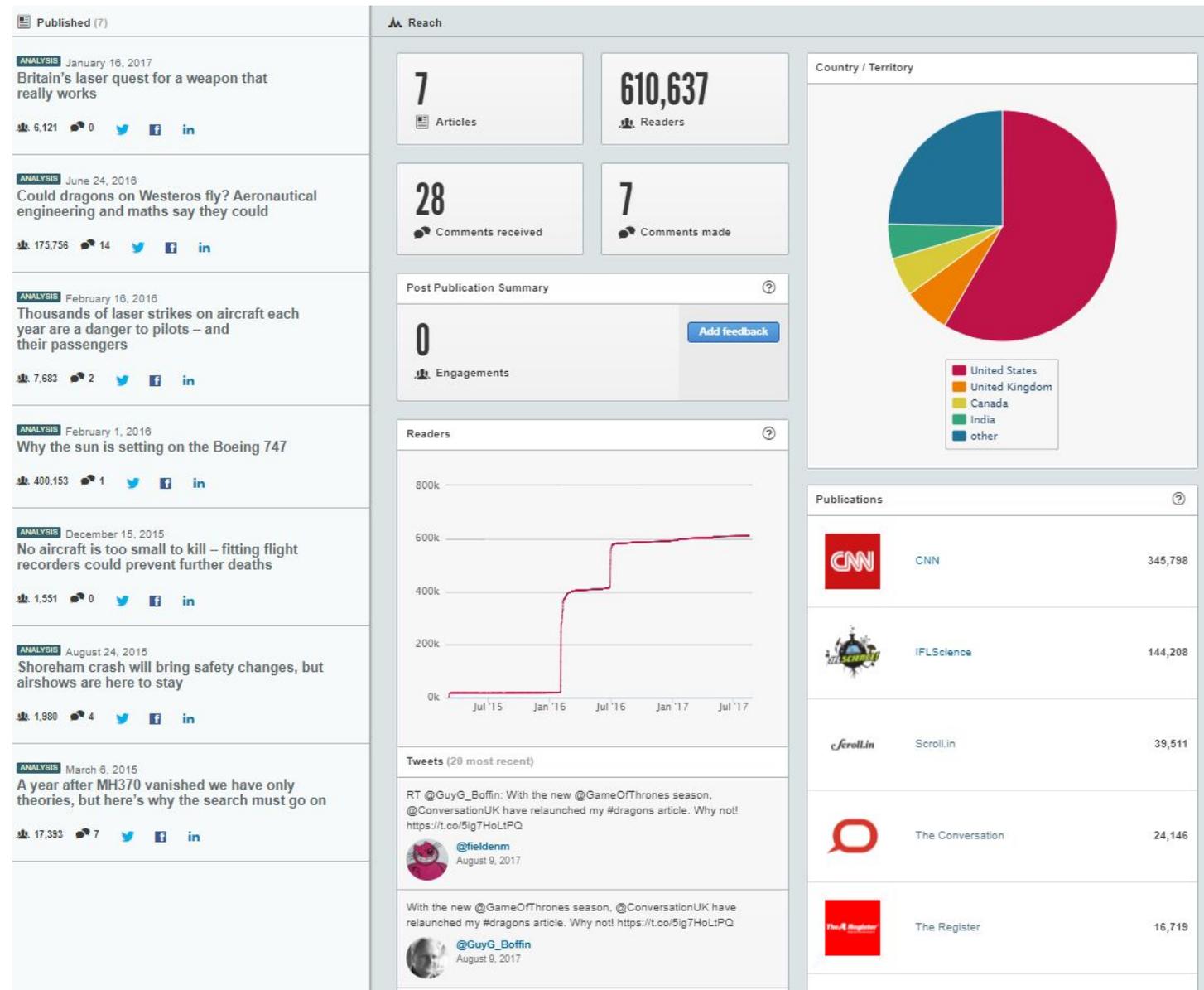
Using the readership metrics and analytics

Author dashboard for academics

On signing up for a profile, authors can access metrics relating to their articles immediately after having published a piece. The **author dashboard** (right) shows, from left to right:

- List of published articles, with the number of readers and comments
- Running totals of readership, number of articles published and comments posted and received
- Post-publication engagement and activity recorded on the profile
- A chart of cumulative readership over time
- Recent social media mentions of published articles
- Pie chart shows geographic location of readers
- Republishers, ranked by number of reads

Clicking on any of the articles narrows the view to show data on that article only. By putting in numbers the results of your efforts to take your expertise to the public, we hope these metrics will be useful in for example future funding bids.



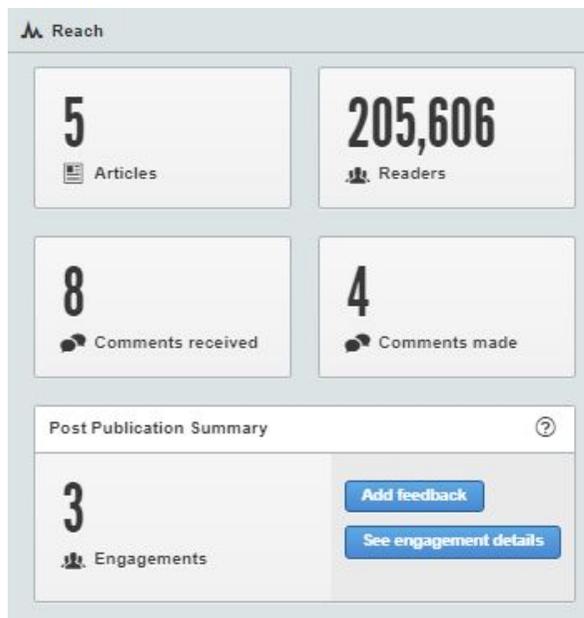
Using the readership metrics and analytics

Post-publication engagement

One of the effects of writing for a wider public audience is that you and your work tends to get noticed by a much broader range of people, some of whom may contact you. The post-publication engagement feature is a way of recording those details so that they can be used - for example, for evidencing REF research impact. Please do use it.

A week after publication authors will receive an email to prompt them to fill in these details. To do so, either follow the link in the email or from the dashboard.

1. The **post-publication summary** appears on the author dashboard (shown below).



2. Clicking the **See engagement details** button shows the details of all engagement you've entered (shown below).

The screenshot displays the 'All Post Publication Activity' dashboard. It includes a 'Return to overview' button and an 'Add feedback' button. Three engagement entries are listed, each with 'Edit' and 'Delete' buttons. The first entry is for February 10, 2017, with contact Mike Robins. The second is for February 9, 2017, with contact iNews. The third is for February 6, 2017, with contact Discovery Channel.

Engagement Created	Article Title	Contact Name	Outcome
February 10, 2017	Don't panic: the northern lights won't be turning off anytime soon	Member of the general public Mike Robins	Mike was interested in the historical aurora from Orkney (5000BCE). I was able to draw upon solar cycle data and extrapolations for the magnetic pole. Keeping in contact.
February 9, 2017	Don't panic: the northern lights won't be turning off anytime soon	Media iNews	Article was published in the i newspaper.
February 6, 2017	Beautiful green 'airglow' spotted by aurora hunters – but what is it?	Media Discovery Channel	Contacted for scientific background to a programme in production.

Using the readership metrics and analytics

Post-publication engagement (cont...)

3. Clicking the **Add feedback** button presents you with a **form** (shown below), from which you can select the article in question and add further details.

4. Alternatively, selecting an article from the academic dashboard presents a button marked **What happened after writing this article?** (previously known as “the blue button”, shown below). Click this and you will also be taken to the form in order to record the relevant details.

The form is titled "What happened after writing for The Conversation?". It contains the following fields:

- For which article?**: A dropdown menu with the placeholder text "Select/search for your article".
- Who contacted you?**: A list of checkboxes with the following options: Media, Industry, Government, Academia, and A member of the general public.
- Name of the organisations that contacted you.**: A text input field with the example text "e.g. The BBC, Department of Trade".
- What was the outcome?**: A text area with the example text "e.g. I was interviewed for television."
- Any extra information?**: A text area with the placeholder text "Anything else you would like to mention?".

A "Save" button is located at the bottom right of the form.



If you've any questions about the analytics or post-publication engagement feature, contact michael.parker@theconversation.com



Publicising and advocating for The Conversation in your department

Academics who have written for The Conversation are among our most powerful advocates. If you've written for The Conversation, enjoyed the experience, or can see the value in what we're trying to achieve, please do tell others. We have some suggestions and material that you can use to help spread the word among your colleagues.

Spread the word

It goes without saying that you should shout about your university's membership of The Conversation, and the fact you have written for us. This is something worth getting into internal magazines, websites, blogs, brochures and bulletins, as regular mentions of The Conversation helps ensure that other academics can recall seeing it mentioned in association with the university when editors contact them.

If you have written a piece that was particularly well read or republished, let the press office know so they can use it as an example to others of what is possible. And if you're able to say a few words about your experience writing for The Conversation during forums, public engagement sessions, or when editors visit to hold training sessions, please let the press team know you'd be willing.

Several of our members have produced short videos of authors giving their thoughts about The Conversation. For example Queen's Belfast (<https://vimeo.com/130198058>), Open University (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hnSfJvPiYPM>), and Lancaster (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m6e2YjCwwIM>). These are an excellent way to spread the word.

Involve senior academic staff

Securing support from senior academic staff is invaluable for helping spread the word through the university and help persuade academics to get involved. With many demands on academics' time, knowing that senior university staff have expressed their support and see writing for The Conversation as a good use of time can be enough to sway them.

If you are a head of department or other senior academic, please make others in your department, school or faculty aware of your views. We're happy to visit and address deans, heads of departments, and other senior staff in order to explain how The Conversation works and the benefits for authors and for the university as a whole.

Use our content

We encourage others to republish our pieces, so please make use of your articles. All the reads they receive on other sites will be reported to your author dashboard, so if you'd like to post them on university web pages, blogs, personal sites or push them out to other media you feel may be interested, please do.

The simplest way to do this is to click the Republish button on the right hand-side of the published article and take the HTML it offers. This will include the view counter that ensures that reads the article has had elsewhere are recorded properly.

Finally, we hope you find writing for public useful and enjoyable, and we hope to see you join the conversation soon.