Author guide: pitching & writing for The Conversation

TheConversation.com is an independent, not-for-profit educational website, helping academics and researchers share their expertise with a broad, global audience.

We currently publish editions in Australia, the UK, US, South Africa and France: theconversation.com/au, theconversation.com/uk, theconversation.com/us, theconversation.com/africa and theconversation.com/fr We also have a Jakarta Editor. But our reach extends far beyond those countries through free, international republication.

A broad audience, from kids to politicians

Our Readers Are

80% non-academic

Monthly Audience

2.7 million users on site

23 million reach through republication

66% employed full or part time
22% studying full or part time

52% have a household income of over $100,000

56% are under 45

19% academia
13% gov, policy or public sector
13% teachers
10% healthcare/medical

26% of teachers use The Conversation as a classroom resource

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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. Being a *past* graduate does not qualify you.

We do *not* publish paid or unpaid PR.

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In exceptional circumstances, people without a current academic/research affiliation may be co-authors: for example, Traditional Owners or consultants who have been research collaborators. All co-authors must still be accompanied by a lead researcher.

We strongly encourage universities to give Honorary or Associate recognition to Indigenous research collaborators, so that we can give them a complete Conversation profile. You can see a good example here: https://theconversation.com/profiles/laklak-burarrwanga-137834

We aim to provide a fact-based, editorially independent forum. That's why our **disclosure process** (explained later) is so important, so readers know who funded your work, if you have political affiliations, or about any other possible real or perceived conflicts of interest.

We *don't* publish undergraduate students or Masters students. **We *do* publish PhD candidates** but often also require a supervisor or another senior co-author, and will opt for more experienced writers if they are available.

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?**

Time-saving tips *before* you pitch us a story

- **Read before you write.** What kind of stories do we cover? Do you think yours would work for a broad local and international audience?
- **Have you done a quick keyword search?**
- **Is this your area of expertise?**
- **Have you discovered something new?**
- **Can you translate tricky issues for others?**
- **Pay attention to the news.** What are people talking 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?

An easy way to know what we publish is to subscribe to our popular morning e-newsletter (theconversation.com/newsletter). You can quickly scan its headlines, read about new research, and know what others in your field are writing about.

How we help you reach a young, global and growing audience

Our 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 – including major media outlets – can republish our stories for free. Read more at theconversation.com/republishing_guidelines

How can you pitch like a pro?

If you're ready to pitch, go to theconversation.com/pitches/new

Or scroll down on the front page of the site until you see
Pitch an idea on the right hand side of the page. Click on **Tell us**.

You'll then be asked to sum up what you want to write about **in one sentence**, and then given space to flesh that one sentence out further in **an outline of no more than 200 words**.

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Most Conversation articles are only **600-800 words**. Being very clear from the outset about 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.

Don't forget: tell us **why this story matters** to a wider audience – and **why now?**

But how do you write a punchy pitch in 200 words or fewer?

Working with your university or institute's communications staff can make a big difference. You can also hone your pitch by talking to others outside your field of expertise. What questions do those smart but non-expert people ask you? And if they were to ask you, **"So what? Why does this really matter?"** – what would you say?

If you can answer that "So what?" question well, it will greatly improve your chances of your pitch being accepted, and then seeing more people read and share your article, helping your work reach a bigger national and global audience.

Once you're happy with your pitch, fill in your details on the online pitch page, pick the section you think it might be best directed to, write your pitch, then hit 'Pitch idea'. You'll get an automated reply saying when to expect a reply, and what to do if you don't hear back from an editor quickly.

Pitching through our website – rather than emailing unsolicited drafts that risk getting lost in overflowing spam folders – is the best way for you to get a rapid response.

Multimedia: Photos, videos, audio, graphs & more

We're always looking for strong photos, videos, audio, tables or graphs to bring stories to life. If you have any of those, mention it in your pitch.

What happens next? And what if it's a no?

Each section of The Conversation will often receive **dozens of pitches or more a day**. It is very competitive, so not all pitches can be accepted; even experienced authors will sometimes get an email saying "thank you, but unfortunately we can't run this at this time…" That can be for a wide range of reasons, including that there are already stories already commissioned and underway on that topic. We accept as many pitches as possible, but we are a not-for-profit and do have limited editing staff.

We aim to reply within a day (apart from weekends) to say that the pitch has been received. Even if we can't say yes to your article, once we know about you and your expertise, there's a far greater chance of publishing your work in future.

But if you follow the tips in this guide, it *will* help your pitch stand out from the crowd.

Agreeing on a brief & deadline

If your pitch is accepted, the editor will call or email to discuss the article further, including whether there are any embargoes involved and how quickly you can write it. You can discuss this brief/structure of your article with your editor. They will then **send you an agreed brief**. It will include a link to your **author dashboard**. You can then write directly into our system.

It's important to get this mutually agreed brief right before you start writing. If the submitted article is different to what was agreed, you may be asked to revise the piece. You'll also agree on a **first draft deadline**; if you're not sure you can meet it, please say so immediately.

Writing tips

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,

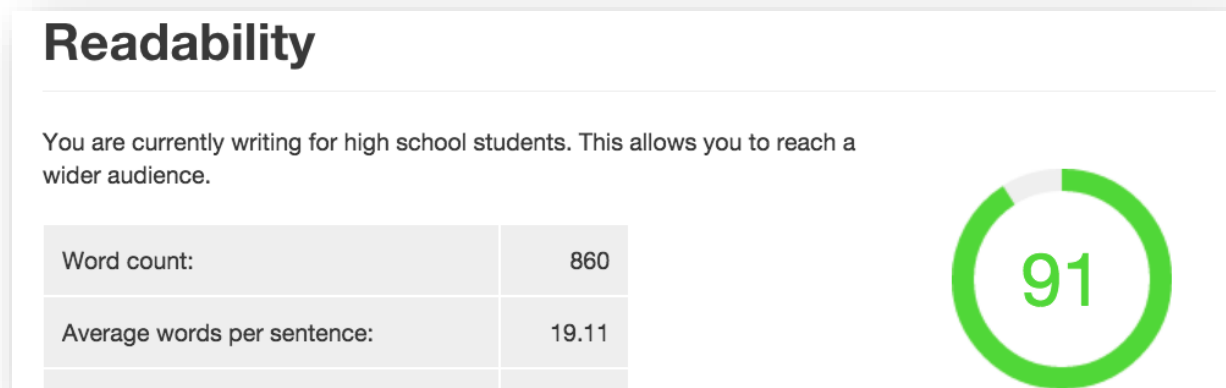relevant, or surprising. Readers want to know Five Ws: who, what, where, when, why, and sometimes how.

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 and 'Readability'

Write the way people talk. Why say "A male person disembarked from the vehicle", when you could say "a man stepped out of the car"?

Explain complex ideas. Don't get too technical. Avoid jargon.

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 most media outlets. And we focus on 'readability' because we want to share your expertise with everyone – including young people and a big, global audience of people whose first language isn't always English.

Readability

You are currently writing for high school students. This allows you to reach a wider audience.

Word count:	860
Average words per sentence:	19.11

91

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 draft one, try these tips:

- 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, unless it suits the story. Instead, aim for an accurate and engaging label that summarises the content.
- Names of people, things and places are good. Don't abbreviate these.
- Aim to employ active verbs, which add muscle and emphasise the "actor" in the story, eg. "Aspirin cuts cancer risk" or "WikiLeaks reveals flaws in new privacy laws".

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- Think of ways to distinguish your article from others. Is this new, or a first? Does it answer an important question, or solve a puzzle?
- Would you read it? Remember, you are writing for people reading online. What keywords would you Google to find a story like yours? Try using those.
- Would you feel compelled to read beyond the headline or first sentence?

When you're done, hit the 'Submit' button to send an email alert to your editor.

Disclosure

As soon as possible, fill in your disclosure by clicking on the red box beside your name where it says Disclosure on the right hand side of your article page. That will bring up a pop-up box, asking three simple questions about any potential conflicts of interest or affiliations.

We can't publish your article without a complete disclosure statement. If you have any questions about disclosures, please ask your editor.

Your author profile

Make sure you fill in a detailed author profile: it's free, high-profile exposure to media and academic colleagues looking for experts in your field.

Many **Conversation author profiles show up first in Google searches**, often above your official uni/research organisation profile, LinkedIn or other profiles. What do you want the rest of the world to know about you?

Why bother? **Dr Wendy Miller is a great example.**

Her profile (http://bit.ly/1JLQBWM) details her areas of research expertise, as well as her recent publications. After first publishing with us in January 2014, her university e-publication record revealed that her publication downloads jumped that month and stayed higher for months.
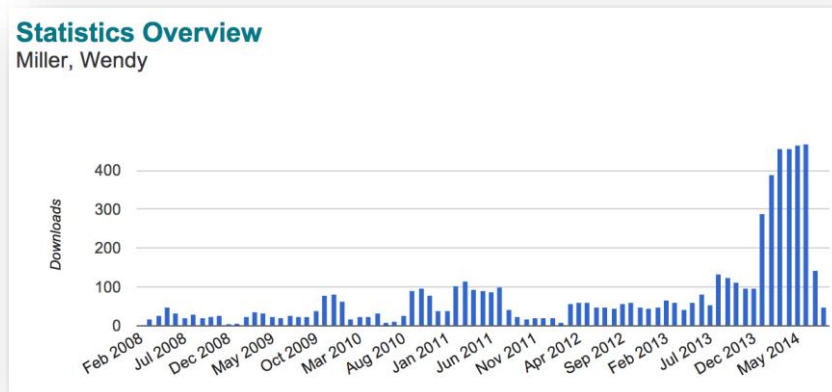
So don't be shy; it's in your interests to have a good, current, online profile.

Current contact information – including **a mobile phone** – 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, please let your editor know you've done so.

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It's a collaborative editing process, so it's important that you *and* your editor are happy that the final article is accurate and suitable for a broad, non-expert audience.

When the editor has requested your final approval, please read the whole article thoroughly and then hit 'Approve' when you're done. **We can't publish without your approval.**

## When we publish – including embargoes

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 share it with 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.

Measuring your readership on your own author dashboard

On your author dashboard, you can see how many people have read your article or articles, where in the world it has been read, the tweets and comments on it, and where your article has been republished. Our readership figures are independently tracked via Google Analytics.

Our metrics are used at a number of universities to help them more accurately public engagement and impact.
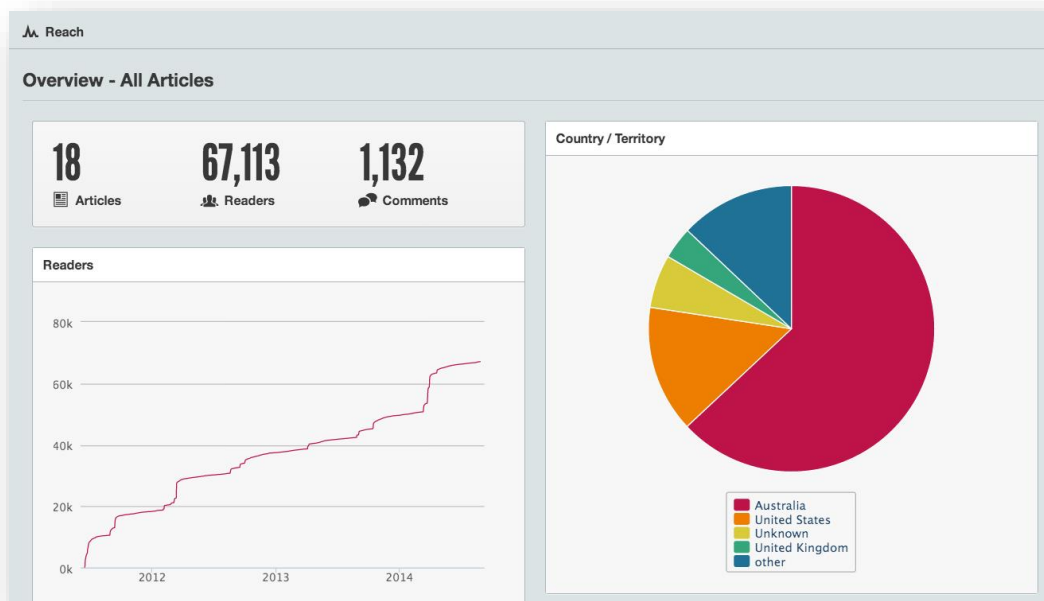
Online comments: tips for a better online conversation

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, in accordance with our Community Standards – https://theconversation.com/community-standards. We take that 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 ever come across a comment that might breach our standards, please click the "Report" button (at the end of every comment) to alert us.

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

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- 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.
- Individual troublemakers: report and ignore. "Don't feed the trolls" in combination with answering valid reader questions and comments is an effective way to keep the discussion on track and useful to all.

Our comments are generally better than most online news or commentary sites because we do have Community Standards, aimed at making The Conversation a place for civil debate. We also run initiatives including Author Q&As to improve the quality of discussion for all.

Public and academic impact

We regularly survey our authors to find out what happens after they publish in The Conversation. Many of our authors have been contacted not only by news media outlets, but also by respected journals, industry leaders, prospective PhD students, new academic collaborators, governments seeking policy advice, United Nations agencies and even new research funders.
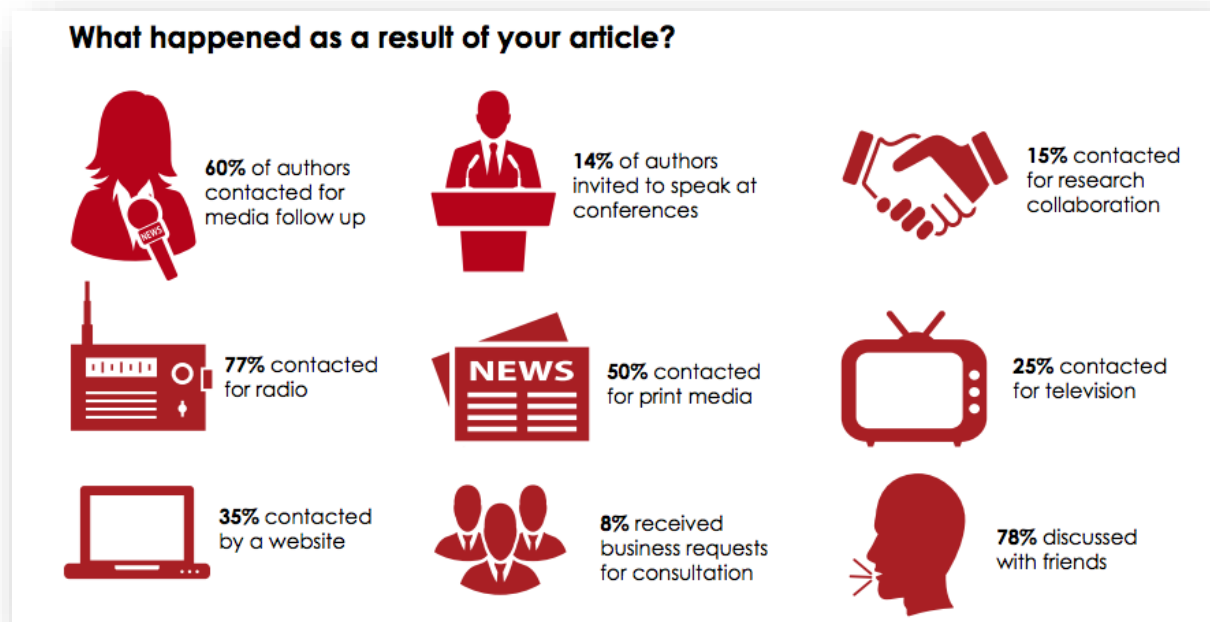
We hope to see you join The Conversation. Good luck!