NUFFIELD DEPARTMENT OF
PRIMARY CARE
HEALTH SCIENCES

UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

Blogging for academics and students: The Ultimate Guide

You might find some of the advice here differs from what you'd find elsewhere. There's a reason for that.

Many online blogs – and therefore advice on writing them – are about trying to optimise metrics like social media shares, audience engagement, traffic generation, and ultimately, monetisation in some form.

Academic blogs, on the other hand, while aiming for visibility, prioritise sharing research findings, promoting discussion, and establishing thought leadership within a field.

For our departmental blog, we aim to promote impact and generate discussion. Simply reporting that something happened isn't enough – we're looking for:

- Student, alumni, and researchers' stories, in their own words.
- Opinion and thought leadership pieces on topical issues.
- Further context or 'deep dives' on published papers or work not covered in the paper or a news story.
- Comment on current primary or health care related issues or research stories.
- Explainers on complex or controversial topics making them more accessible.

For the difference between a news story (these will always be written by the comms team in partnership with staff/ researchers) and a blog, it helps to think of it like this:

- **News stories should be objective** – reporting on the facts of a thing and their meaning or context as clearly as possible.
- **Blogs are more subjective** – they're the place to give your take on something, your experiences, what it means to you or what you think about a thing.

In this guide:

Contents

Why Blog? Finding Your Voice and Reaching a Wider Audience

In today's world, the measure of impact needs to go beyond academic publications and conferences. It's about sparking conversations, shaping debates, influencing decision makers, and ensuring your research or experiences reaches those who can benefit from it most. Blogging offers a platform to achieve that. It's your chance to:

- **Amplify your research:** Translate complex findings into digestible insights for a broader audience.

- **Engage in new conversations:** Connect with policymakers, practitioners, other researchers, students or academics, and the public, inspiring dialogue and influencing real-world issues.
- **Shape your voice:** Break free from the constraints of formal academic writing and share your expertise in an accessible, engaging way that builds your profile.

Before you hit the keyboard, however, take a moment to consider your purpose and, crucially, *who* you're talking to.

If you've got an idea for a post, speak with the [comms team first](#) to make sure it's suitable, ask any questions, and – especially if time is important – to make sure it fits into the departments editorial calendar.

What's the point?

Every blog post should have a clear purpose. Ask yourself:

- What do I want readers to take away from this?
- Is a blog post the most effective way to achieve this? Perhaps a case study, policy brief, or a plain-language summary on your project page would be more suitable.
- Am I aiming to spark discussion and encourage interaction?
- Am I trying to inform? If so, why should my audience care about this topic?

Understanding your audience

Who are you talking to? Understanding your audience is key to writing an engaging and effective blog post.

For the departmental blog, our target audience is broad and includes: health and care policymakers, health professionals, students (current and prospective), researchers (within and without the dept and potential collaborators), funding bodies, *and* the general public.

This means writing in an *accessible* and engaging style that resonates with a non-specialist audience.

- Remember, decision-makers – such as funders or policy makers – and the wider public (including PPI contributors on project and funding boards) are unlikely to be familiar with the intricacies of your field, yet they may all have an impact on your plans, from projects to funding approvals.

When crafting your post, consider:

- What unique perspective can you offer on your topic?
- How does your work contribute to broader conversations in primary care or public health?

- What questions or ideas might spark meaningful dialogue among our readers?

By focusing on these elements, you'll create writing that not only informs but also engages our diverse audience, encouraging them to think critically and participate in the ongoing discourse surrounding primary care health sciences.

Writing somewhere other than our departmental blog? Here're some more tips

- Define your desired readership: Are you writing for peers within your field, for those outside your speciality, for the general public, funders, or policymakers?
- Consider their context: A working GP will approach your post with a different perspective than a statistician. Your writing should bridge this gap and resonate with their individual experiences and knowledge. Even if that means taking a moment to explain a key term or concept.
- Let your audience guide your choices: From the title and tone to the images and your call to action, each element of your blog post should be tailored to engage your target audience.

For example, if you're writing about a new diagnostic tool for primary care, consider:

- For GPs: Focus on how it can improve patient care and streamline their workflow.
- For policymakers: Highlight the potential cost savings and public health benefits.
- For the general public: Explain how it could lead to earlier detection and better health outcomes.

Crafting your post: From engaging hook to compelling call to action

So, if you're ready to put pen to paper (fingers to keyboard?), here are some tips for crafting a blog post that captures and captivates your audience, leaving a lasting impact.

Structure and Content

A well-structured blog post guides the reader seamlessly from start to finish:

- Hook your reader: Begin with a compelling hook – a thought-provoking question, a relatable anecdote, or a surprising statistic.
- State your purpose: Clearly articulate the main message or purpose of your post early on.

- Use short paragraphs (2-3 sentences). If your 1,500-word post is three paragraphs, you're doing it wrong. Readers won't like it. It's intimidating and makes it look like your thoughts are muddy and unclear.
- Link paragraphs: Use transitional phrases or sentences to ensure a smooth flow between paragraphs and sections. For example:
    - use a phrase or word from your previous sentence / paragraph to begin the next sentence. Sentences strung together like this create a pleasing link between them[1].
    - Or, be more direct with something like "Building on this idea, let's look at…" or "Now that we've covered X, let's turn our attention to Y."
- Practical takeaways: Provide readers with the practical implications or "so what?" takeaways. What does this mean for them? How can they apply your insights, research, or advice?
- End with a 'call to action': What do you want readers to do after reading your post? Encourage them to leave a comment, share the post, attend an event, or learn more about your research.

Be clear. Be concise.

> "Je n'ai fait celle-ci plus longue que parce que je n'ai pas eu le loisir de la faire plus courte." – Blaise Pascal

The above quote roughly translates to "I have made this [letter] longer than usual because I have not had time to make it shorter." Clear, concise writing takes time and thought. It's a skill.

Remember, a blog post isn't an academic paper. It's best to get straight to the point and say what you need to say in as few words as possible. This benefits both you and your reader:

1. It keeps readers engaged: Concise writing prevents readers from getting lost or losing interest.
2. It sharpens your argument: Brevity forces you to be clear and logical in your thinking, making your message more impactful.

Signposting: guiding your reader

Think of your blog post as a journey. Clear signposts and navigation ensure readers move through it smoothly, staying engaged without getting lost.

---

[1] This is actually called 'anadiplosis'…

Use headings

Headings are super important for structuring a blog post. They break it up into more 'skimmable' sections, improving readability and helping readers find the info they're interested in faster.

- Make sure they use keywords – the relevant terms readers might be searching for.
- Keep them concise – aim for short, descriptive headings (6-7 words).
- If using sub-headings, follow a logical hierarchy: Use H2, H3, etc., in descending order, without skipping levels. But don't use too many levels. Keep it to 2-3 at most.
- Format correctly: Use your blogging platform's built-in heading styles, not just bold text. (In the department, the comms team would typically upload your post and take care of this.)
- Try to avoid questions as headings.

Use lists

Some of our [most popular](#) (and shared) [blog posts](#) make good use of lists. Lists can make information much easier to digest than lengthy paragraphs. Consider using them to:

- Improve 'skimmability' – help your reader quickly grasp key points.
- Group related information, improving organisation and clarity.
- Illustrate relationships or show how different items connect or differ.
- Outline steps in a process by providing a clear sequence of actions.
- Rank by importance, highlighting the most critical items.

But avoid overusing lists. Too many items or separate lists can make your writing choppy and difficult to follow. Use them strategically for maximum impact.

Wanna see how much harder to read that info looks in a paragraph?

> Some of the departments most popular (and shared) blog posts make good use of lists, and they can make information much easier to digest than lengthy paragraphs. You can, for example, use lists to help readers skim information, to group related information together, to help readers understand how different thing might relate to each other, to show the order of steps for something, or to arrange information by importance. But beware that writing with too many lists can become hard to follow, so use them sparingly.

Tone and Style

Aim for a conversational, approachable tone that reflects your authentic voice:

- Imagine you're talking to a colleague or friend. Avoid overly formal language or jargon.
- Be professional but relatable. You can maintain a professional tone while injecting personality and engaging language. Even humour! For example:
  - Instead of: "The findings indicate a significant correlation between variable X and outcome Y."
  - Try: "Turns out, when you play with X, Y comes along for the ride too."
- Explain technical terms. If you must use jargon, provide clear explanations for a non-specialist audience.

The ideal length

In print, length is dictated by finite space. Online, length is dictated by finite attention.

Your post should be as long or as short as it needs to be. Don't trim important context or nuance, but don't add spurious padding to boost your word count.

Despite the rise of short-form social content, there's still a strong appetite for well-written, in-depth pieces that allow readers to delve deeper into a subject.

- Aim for 1,000-2,000 words: This provides enough space to explore your topic while respecting readers' time.
- Consider your goals: Longer posts work well for in-depth analyses or narratives, while shorter posts (around 500 words) can be effective for sparking discussion and soliciting diverse perspectives.

It's also worth noting that search engines tend to see longer content as more reliable and authoritative, boosting it further up the search listings. So, while longer posts tend to be shared less on social media or get fewer comments, in the long term they can lead to greater exposure.

The Headline: Your first impression

Your headline is your first (and sometimes only) chance to grab a reader's attention.

Get it wrong and people will shoot straight past it. It's the worm on the hook. If it's ugly and unappealing, you'll go hungry for readers. So, make it compelling, informative, and relevant to your content.

- Be specific about your topic, using precise language and relevant keywords.
- Intrigue your audience: highlight key findings, pose thought-provoking questions, or use numbers to pique interest. For example:
  - "3 Ways our research is transforming patient care"
  - "Could this new diagnostic tool revolutionise early cancer detection?"
  - "What we learned from analysing 10,000 patient records"
- Aim for 6-12 words, using active voice and strong verbs.

- Consider the value and relevance to the audience. Show readers why your post is worth their time.
- Avoid clickbait and jargon. Maintain academic credibility with clear, professional language. We're not BuzzFeed, don't do this:
  - "You won't BELIEVE these 3 weird tricks GPs use to cure EVERYTHING! (Hint: It's not what big pharma wants you to know!)"

Introduction: Setting the Stage

Your introduction should:

- Tell readers what to expect: Briefly outline the key topics you'll cover.
- Hook them in: Pique their interest and make them want to read further.

Main Body: Developing Your Argument

- One idea per paragraph: Each paragraph should focus on a single main point or idea.
- Support your claims: Use evidence, examples, data, and anecdotes to support your arguments.
- Maintain momentum: Subtly hint at what's coming next to keep readers engaged and wanting more. Think of it like leaving breadcrumbs throughout your post.
- Ask questions: Encourage interaction by posing questions throughout your post.
- Share personal insights: Connect with your audience by sharing relevant personal experiences or reflections (but only if you're comfortable doing so!).
- Use analogies and examples: Make complex concepts more relatable and understandable.

Conclusion: Leaving a Lasting Impression

Summarise your key points, recapping the main takeaways of your post.

But don't just end your post. Give your reader something to do! This is what a 'call to action' (CTA) is for.

CTAs encourage readers to engage with your work on a deeper level, sparking discussions, promoting collaboration, or guiding further exploration. Examples for our blog might be:

- Further Reading: Direct readers to your published research.
- Join the discussion: Encourage comments and sharing experiences.
- Participate in research: Invite health and care practitioners or members of the public to contribute to studies.
- Attend events: Promote webinars and conferences.
- Share knowledge: Ask if people might want to submit a case study.

- Access resources: Point people to related tools, toolkits and downloadable content on the department site.
- Collaborate: Looking for people to work with? Ask them to get in touch if they're interested in being research partners.
- Provide feedback: Request input through surveys.

General tips for CTAs:

- Be clear and specific, keeping it relevant to the post.
- Use action-oriented language. Start with verbs like "download," "register," "share," or "learn."
- Clearly state the benefit of taking action, e.g., "Help shape our future research! Take our short survey on research priorities [link]."
- Make it easy with direct links or instructions.
- Place your CTA prominently.
- Maintain a professional tone.
- Limit the number of CTAs in a single post to maintain focus and avoid overwhelming the reader.

A word on photos / images

Images can really enhance the appeal and engagement of a blog post or story. Here are some guidelines for using images effectively:

1. Relevance: Choose images that are directly relevant to your content. For event coverage, include photos that capture key moments or speakers.
2. Quality: Try to use high-resolution images that are clear and well-composed. Avoid blurry or pixelated images.
3. Landscape, rather than portrait will generally work best, especially for main images.
4. Variety: If possible, include a mix of images – e.g. for an event, you could include pics of the speakers, audience, and (especially!) any interactive elements.
5. Permission / consent: If your images include identifiable individuals, ensure you have their consent for the image to be used on the blog. For stock photography, ensure you have the right to use and publish any images. For events, inform attendees that photos may be used for the blog. We might not be able to use them on the department blog if we don't have permissions.
6. Captions: Add informative captions to provide context and enhance accessibility. Especially names if it's of a small group of people.
7. Diversity: When selecting images, aim to represent the diversity of the attendees, our department and field.
8. File size: Optimise images for web use to ensure fast loading times without sacrificing quality.
9. Alternative text: Always include alt text for images to improve accessibility for visually impaired readers.

Remember, while images from events or research activities are valuable, they should complement rather than replace the substantive content of your post. Use images to break up text, illustrate key points, and make your post more visually appealing.

Profread, proofreed, proofread!

Before hitting "publish" – or sending it to the comms team! – take the time to:

- Ensure clarity and flow: Read your post aloud to check for awkward phrasing or confusing sentences.
- Verify your facts: Double-check any claims or statistics. Once it's out there, it's out there…
- Get a second opinion: Ask a colleague to review your post for clarity, accuracy, and accessibility.
- Use tools like Grammarly or the Hemingway app to help identify and correct grammatical errors, awkward phrasing, or overly complex sentences.

So, there you have it – your ultimate guide to blogging for researchers and academics. Now go forth, share your knowledge, and make your mark in the world of academic blogging and start crafting your first blog post today!

All posts on the department blog are subject to approval and a light edit from the comms team.

Need help getting started? Contact the communications team communications@phc.ox.ac.uk for guidance and support with your blog post.