CENTER FOR GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT

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Notes on How to Write a Blog

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Is "writing a blog" one of your new year's resolutions? Here at CGD we regularly invite others to collaborate and co-write a blog with us, and in response, I'm often asked for advice on how to write one. Everyone has a different style and approach to writing blogs, but I thought it might be useful to share how I think about writing blogs aimed at policy influence.

Why write a blog?

For me, the most important reason to write a blog is an interest in policy change, or as CGD's tagline says, "Ideas to Action." I would argue that blog writing is a distinctive tool of think tanks unlike universities. CGD was an early adopter of blogs, a key medium for CGD's impactful policy influence.

Regrettably, academia has few incentives to write blogs since they are typically not counted as part of tenure and promotion dossiers. Even in the 21st century, it's still uncommon for professors to write such pieces.

But blogs are the core of policy influence and dissemination of research to a broader audience. They have a wider reach and are more accessible than research papers for several reasons. They are shorter than research articles, and their language is easier to understand. They are also free to access, unlike many journal articles. I've met academics who dismiss the blog piece as if blogging were an unproductive use of time or even frivolous. As a colleague once told me, "people read blogs; they don't read papers. So don't dismiss the medium."

Blogging is an easy way to increase visibility of research as well as of one's professional expertise. Research shows that papers that are blogged about also have higher research citation counts, indicating higher dissemination. I might be lucky if more than 10 people cite my research paper, but it's no big deal if a blog gets hundreds of clicks. The scope and potential for influence with a blog are much greater than with a research paper alone.

The World Bank has had an annual blog-writing competition for graduating PhD students for more than 13 years, as well as a joint Youth Blog competition with the *Financial Times*. These examples reflect the value not only to the World Bank for translating evidence to policy through blog writing but also to graduate students just starting their careers.

What's your hook?

What you write about will depend on your knowledge and expertise. But perhaps the most important aspect is to be on the look-out for a news' hook—something timely or new. The hook is the reason why someone needs to read your blog *today*. Some sample hooks are:

- A policy announcement, declaration, decision, or change
- A new research paper
- A new event or gathering
- Something brewing or that will be happening soon

Sometimes, I have ideas for blogs that sit on a back-burner list until the right hook to appears. I also have ideas waiting for the right collaborator or coauthor to come along!

How do I write a blog?

I usually take one of two approaches to writing a blog. The first is exploratory, where I start writing out my ideas on a particular topic. This exploratory approach can take a free-writing approach (thank you, Peter Elbow!). It can also be derived from new data analysis or emerging insights. Sometimes an outline helps, but not always. Insights can emerge while one analyzes and writes.

My second, and preferred, approach is to start with the key message, the thesis, or the title. What is the key message that I want to communicate? If I have a clear message, then writing the blog around the core thesis or message is much clearer.

Sometimes when I start with the first approach, I step back to re-read my draft and ask myself, "what is the key message that I want to communicate?" From there I whittle down the piece to its essence with a key message and organize the piece accordingly. Writing is nothing other than rewriting.

The art of distillation: Getting the title and opening right

Getting the title right is crucial because others choose to read the blog based on the title—sometimes dismissively called "click-bait."

Blogs are not short stories or novels. Discreetness, hints, or messages left to be uncovered by readers are not recommended. Directness and clarity are paramount.

I usually brainstorm multiple titles to generate a variety of (sometimes zany) options. This creative and generative process can also help to sharpen the key message that I want to communicate. Talking with others in real time also helps with shaping the message.

In addition to the title, I like to craft a one-sentence summary of the message, which can also help with finding the right title.

Many people only land on the blog for only a few seconds. So it's necessary to hook a reader in the first paragraph. Sometimes, writing the first paragraph is best done at the end, similar to writing the abstract at the end of writing a scientific paper. All in all, regular distillation gets to the essence of one's message.

Admittedly, some blogs are not distillations but can be more rambling and verbose than others. Such blogs can often take the shape of recapping an event or being reflective. In that case, distillation is less a concern.

Make it easy to read

Researchers are trained to write in a complex, technical manner to a very specialized audience. But writing blogs is arguably the opposite. Blogs represent an intermediate medium between research papers (which have a narrow, technical, specialist audience) and the policymakers (who are often generalists and the lay public).

For a blog to speak to a lay audience, the piece requires plain language so that everyone can understand. Such a writing style also requires training, practice, and not to mention critical feedback, not unlike scientific or technical writing.

In particular, blog writing is improved by receiving feedback from generalists. I like to share my blog with someone who knows little about my topic, to see what makes sense to them and what does not. While researchers are not known for their willingness to be wrong, this quality of humility is necessary to seek and accept feedback from communication professionals who can help you to widen rather than narrow your audience.

Unlike in research papers, I avoid acronyms, jargon, or other specialized technical terms in blogs that policymakers—or someone from the general public—will not understand.

Regrettably, academics are rarely trained or gain practice in writing or communicating for lay audiences! (As an aside, this weakness may be one of many reasons why academics are not viewed favorably these days. I'd argue that the objective of academic communication is to have the least number of people understand, whereas blogs have the intention of having the most number of people to understand.) I have been inspired, however, by my brilliant teacher and University Professor at Harvard, Gary King, who writes incredibly clear yet highly rigorous scientific papers in the most accessible language. He encouraged us to write as if we were writing to our grandma. If you can explain a topic to your grandma, you've met a very high standard!

Others have noted that popular politicians, who are reaching a general audience, use a shorter sentence structure. You can't go wrong keeping sentences short.

Know your audience

If one has the goal of influencing policy, then we must use the tool of communication. Effective communication requires understanding the audience to whom we are speaking. It also requires listening—including getting familiar with how your audience thinks, their values, their preferences, and all the different aspects that make us human. We might think that blog-writing is a one-way form of communication, but it's really part of a two-way dialogue of communication. Impactful blogs can spark a dialogue with the policymaker audience, which is often where the real policy influence happens.

As I write, I imagine my audience, such as a policymaker, and write accordingly. Not knowing your audience while writing risks a muddled message at best. My writing style and even the arguments I use change depending on the audience. So clearly identify your audience early on.

Metaphors, idioms, and humor all help

Unsurprisingly, technical ideas and concepts on their own can be perceived as boring by most potential readers (though not to the researchers, of course!).

In trying to communicate complex ideas, using metaphors and idioms is helpful in making a topic more enjoyable—or even fun. In the United States, sports metaphors are common, but having cultural awareness, sensitivity, and competency are also important (beyond the scope of this piece here).

In addition, humor and whimsical energy cannot be undervalued. Humor can make an otherwise dull topic more fun or at least less boring. Here are some examples:

- "If the Global Health Donors Were Your Parents" with Rachel Silverman
- "Malaria Estimate Sausages by WHO and IHME" with Felix Lam
- "Global Health Halloween: Sick or Treat?" with Rachel Silverman

Taking a position is risky

A key difference between academic writing and blog writing is that academic writing seeks to be dispassionate and neutral, whereas blogs, often but not necessarily, have an opinion. For example, I tend to take a more neutral tone of voice when writing a blog that incorporate data analysis.

Expressing an opinion is rife with risks, including accusations of partisanship or bias. Taking a position on an issue requires courage as well as the willingness to disagree. One could argue that it's a cop-out to rely on facts alone, which is simpler and less rife with hazards. Having an opinion always leaves one vulnerable to criticism.

Maintaining an independent nonpartisan voice is always a challenge while having an opinion. But humor and humility can go a long way in any form of communication, and blogs are no exception. Acknowledging that one can be wrong or that one does not have all the information should be part-and-parcel of every communication toolkit.

I still struggle with striking the right balance between facts and opinions. During the COVID-19 pandemic, while I was chairing the COVID-19 modeling taskforce for the State of Hawaii, I noticed that maintaining scientific neutrality was crucial for our role to gain trust as modelers, lest we be accused of being partisan in either direction. Similarly, we don't want a meteorologist to make climate policy recommendations, but just want the best weather forecast.

To avoid this problem, it can help to divide up the roles into different people—one role of being cold-hearted, even sterile, scientist, and another role of being opinionated, offering recommendations, and "being an advocate." It is a strange era to live in when "being an advocate" is viewed disdainfully. The alternative is to own up to one's biases and preferences and accept that everyone is an implicit advocate—a discussion to be continued.

How quickly can I publish a blog?

Publishing a blog is a much quicker process than publishing in a scientific journal. Blogs can be published on the order of days rather than months in the case of journal articles. Sometimes, if I have an analysis that can feed into an upcoming policy window, I might forgo the research paper and write a blog instead (e.g., my most recent blog on vaccination data).

Unlike CGD working papers or policy papers which are peer reviewed, CGD blogs are not formally peer reviewed. Nevertheless, I find that sharing my ideas in advance with others for their feedback before publication is always a good idea. (And to the academics on the fence about racking up academic credits by pushing research papers versus gaining policy influence through blogging, in the end you'll have to accept that sometimes, you can't have both.)

When circulating the piece with internal or external colleagues, I typically attach the piece, noting that it will be released shortly, but that we welcome comments and feedback. I avoid using the word "review" because some academics think of a "review" as something different and much more than comments. I also let people know that they can give comments publicly on the CGD website itself.

Making blogs visually interesting

Pictures and graphics are very useful. People prefer pictures over text, and pictures are more shareable on social media. Clearly labeling the X-axis and Y-axis in charts, and giving titles to all figures, are musts. I avoid putting the title in the graphic itself but leave the figure title in text to edit later.

Headings are useful to break up a long piece of text into something digestible. They can help with getting to the essence of a particular section, similar to writing a title.

I don't think there is an ideal length for blogs, but I generally aim for 500 words. Shorter is generally better, because people often do not have the time or patience to read more than a page—or the first paragraph. Inevitably, some blogs are longer with detailed analysis or recommendations. Links are a great resource for people who want to go in-depth, but often not necessary for the most general policy audience.

I like to make sure that my coauthors have their external profile linked to their names, again to increase my coauthor's recognition and visibility.

The joy of writing blogs

There's no secret sauce or recipe to writing blogs, and these lessons are based on my own experiences. But writing is never a destination. I still have much to learn, and being dissatisfied with my writing is an impetus for improvement.

Nevertheless, writing blogs should be enjoyable and fun, both the process and the outcome. But one should write blogs without expectation that the blog will have any impact at all.

External validation is always nice. It's satisfying when someone tells me they read my blog, they cited it in a presentation, or that it influenced their thinking. As a researcher, I have no hope that my research papers can reach everyone, but as someone wishing to translate research to policy, I might have such hope with blogs.

Bridging the evidence-to-policy gap (or research-to-practice gap or knowledge-to-action gap) remains the responsibility not only of policymakers but also scientists and researchers. Whenever there are siloed communities, it takes two sides to break siloes and communicate. I can only wish for academia to change its incentives to value this form of writing. But in the meantime, I hope this piece can encourage all budding students and academics to get out of our shells and take up the mantle of communicating with a wider audience.

I have many people to thank for their influence of my writing, and probably I should start with my elementary school teachers if not my parents. Liz Foster, my dear high school English teacher, was exceptionally influential. I am grateful to have encouragement from several mentors especially Natalie Kuldell and Susan Silbey at MIT. I'm especially grateful to CGD and my colleagues for inspiring me to write blogs. Special thanks to Lawrence MacDonald, CGD's former Vice President for Communications, and the CGD communications team for many words of wisdom featured in this note.

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