

Lost in Translation?

Communicating academic research to different audiences

Workshop Guide

Produced by the Environment and Sustainability Institute (ESI), HASS Cornwall, Policy@Exeter, Public Engagement with Research (PER), and the University of Exeter Press Office.

Introduction

Rigorous academic research rarely holds just one simple message; it tends to be nuanced, information-rich, and complex. These essential features of research make it invaluable yet hard to communicate to audiences outside academia – or, at times, even within specific disciplines or subfields. How do we engage – and hold – the interest of such audiences? How do we focus on the central message of a study, while conveying nuance and complexity? How do we connect research to practical challenges and solutions to societal problems?

Addressing these questions is vital for public engagement and research impact. This ‘How To’ Guide is based on using real-life, interdisciplinary academic outputs and translating them into: (1) a press release, (2) a policy brief, and (3) a blog post. These communication methods speak to policymakers and political practitioners, the media, and the public.

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Press, Media and Press Releases

News consumption has diversified, but the practice of writing a press release hasn't changed that much.

Engagement with the media can be driven by academics commenting on news related to their field, or by presenting their latest research to the media for public consumption.

News and media coverage of academic research can lead to influencing public policy or public attitudes and behaviours. It is about changing perceptions with expert knowledge.

Storytelling – anything can be engaging, no matter how niche. It is about finding and explaining the relevance to current affairs or people's everyday lives.

Relevance – academic expertise is still relevant! It is about meeting the demand of the news cycle. The news cycle moves fast, so anticipating what is needed in response to world events is crucial. Presenting and promoting your own research can be planned, allowing a certain level of control over public messaging, but responding to the news cycle is fast-paced, and political nuances change quickly.

Any engagement with the media can help build your academic and professional profile. To help you plan how to engage with news and media in a positive way to build your public profile, the university has created the [Reputation Accelerator](#).

However, many academics may have concerns about how the narrative is used or changed, by whom, and why. There is a worry that journalists and the media may present your research without nuance, which can be misleading to the public. While most journalism cannot present the full scope or nuance of academic research, it puts an accessible version in front of the public. Media interviews with academics are generally conducted differently from those with politicians, but they still carry a political angle. Most journalists respect academic expertise, so it is about presenting your research or comment as concisely, accessible and engaging as possible.

Research funders, such as [UKRI](#), and sector bodies, such as [Universities UK](#), generally encourage media engagement, but their priorities are publicising research impact and justifying interest in and funding for academic research.

UKRI and any public or government funding, as with many other funding sources, comes with rules regarding partial vs impartial engagement with the news and media, particularly regarding anything directly related to public politics. Always check the specific rules and guidance attached to your funding and confer with the university Press Office and/or legal team before giving a comment to the media. It is

okay to have topics you do not comment on or engage with the media about. It is okay to not engage with a particular question or topic in an interview.

Be open-minded about engaging with a wide range of news and media outlets and platforms. However, be mindful of which news and media outlets you choose to engage with, their political angles, and always confer with the university Press Office before agreeing to do so. The university Press Office can provide media training and advice on navigating uncertainty when presenting research to the media. This may involve concerns about media engagement or how best to discuss uncertainty, ambiguity, and nuance in the research itself. Contact the university [Press Office](#) if you have any concerns, want some advice, or don't like how the media is presenting your research and want to change the narrative.

When writing a press release, the key points should be prioritised and clearly communicated accordingly. Avoid opinion; keep press releases focused and neutral. Start with the headline, as this will drive the order of the paragraphs. Focus on the 'elevator pitch' style of communication; convey the core message quickly, clearly, and concisely, as this will encourage news and media outlets to engage. Consider the limited time the public spends engaging with news coverage; ensure you push the core message and name-check the researchers and the university.

Press releases should be at least 400 words and no more than 600 words.

The university's Press Office will usually write a press release on your behalf, and researchers can then review it to add, amend, or correct information before the release goes public.

The latest news can be found on the university's [News](#) website.

Policymakers and Policy Briefs

Several roles help connect academics with parliament and policymakers.

Parliamentary research staff are embedded across different stages and areas of the Parliamentary process and are often useful contacts.

Other individuals, such as Chief Scientific Advisers within Government bodies, are also well placed to connect academics and policymakers.

The UK Parliament also has designated Thematic Research Leads, who are academics on a secondment from their institution.

Groups, such as the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST), and the Knowledge Exchange Unit also offer a way for academics to connect with policymakers.

There are also policy-related newsletters that provide news on the policy interests of parliamentary committees.

Be prepared to email your local MP directly, or even better, a relevant MP in the House of Lords. Peers often have more time to focus on niche policy areas and the most valuable networks, resulting from decades of experience in politics and public service. Constituency MPs rely on their staff, whereas Peers are more personally engaged.

Be prepared to liaise with clerks of parliamentary select committees, who can advise on what is required when engaging with committee members. Parliamentary Researchers will also be able to engage more with the substance of the research and will help to draw out the key elements to discuss with MPs.

Devolved parliaments in Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland can be more engaged, interested and responsive than the national UK parliament in Westminster.

At the local level, politics and policy are more selective and are often a question of resource allocation.

Be mindful of the wider network of stakeholders and interested parties. Who will be impacted by public policy informed by your research? Will it be beneficial to them?

Think about what the policy areas are to which your research is most valuable, and what relevant and useful recommendations you can make based on your research. Your research and recommendations become more valuable the less they cost to implement. Remember that policy is about creating societal change and impact. It is not about credit. Policymakers may acknowledge the research but will not emphasise credit to the researcher.

A flexible approach to writing policy briefs is prudent, as different committees or groups may be looking for different lengths, styles, etc., so it is good to be aware of word count limits and that details required are subject to change. It is advisable to discuss the requirements for the policy brief with the committee clerk or relevant contact before producing the brief.

However, in general, policy briefs must be evidence-driven, focused on key actions for implementation, and presented to relevant stakeholders and policymakers.

When writing a policy brief, keep it simple, clear, concise, and to the point. State clearly who the researcher is, what their qualifications and expertise are, and what the research is about. Focus on the key lessons from the research, the relevance for policy decisions, and the key actions to be implemented. Narrow the focus to one key societal/policy question and ensure the recommendations align with stakeholders' needs and parliamentary committee objectives. Make the key points clear from the start and ensure any recommendations are clear and relatively practical to implement within parliamentary or local government systems. It is best practice to list up to three key, concise, and practical recommendations. Start with one recommendation that already has agreement or is already in the process of being implemented. This demonstrates the practicality and existing research impact. The second recommendation can be more complex, driven by deeper long-term impact. The third and final recommendation could be technological: quick and easy to implement. Drawn together, these recommendations demonstrate existing implementation that encourages further engagement, practical, technical solutions with quick implementation timelines, and actions for deeper, long-lasting impact. Packaging your recommendations in this way aligns with the format that most policymakers are looking for.

It's best to use clear, accessible language and present the brief in an accessible format. This is now the standard that is expected of anything published by the UK Houses of Parliament.

When writing a policy brief for campaigning bodies, think tanks and charities, it's best to follow similar principles, but always check exactly what their requirements are and in what format they would prefer the brief.

Don't be afraid to engage – people who engage with you actually want to and are genuinely interested in your research and the possibilities for policy decision-making. Policymakers are all about making positive, impactful changes in society, regardless of party politics.

Present your research, recommendations, and policy brief in a bipartisan or non-partisan frame, focusing on factual accuracy, relevance and potential impact.

Remember that anything that is submitted to parliament must be factually accurate and may be subject to Parliamentary privilege. The policy brief should be detailed and factual, but concise and accessible. Remember that your audience will be parliamentary committees, and that Peers can engage with more detailed documents, while constituency MPs will prefer more concise précis. Parliamentary committees prefer footnotes with hyperlinks to relevant sources.

Policy briefs should be a maximum of 1,500 to 2,000 words, depending on the required word count.

Follow up with policymakers and committee clerks to get written evidence of how they are using your research and policy recommendations and what impact they have had. Collating evidence of positive, impactful policy engagement is crucial for future funding applications.

The university has resources available through [Policy@Exeter](#) to help you engage with policymakers. These include regular newsletters, a template for writing policy briefs, example case studies, and guidance on preparing for meetings with stakeholders and policymakers. You can also check parliamentary newsletters for the latest calls for papers from parliamentary and select committees. Check the call for papers and contact the clerk to check requirements and interest.

Public engagement and Blog posts

Members of the public or public groups can be included in the research design process and data collection, or serve as an audience for the dissemination of research. Either way, engaging public audiences with academic research is important and, where possible, can include opportunities for public feedback.

The core principle of public engagement with research is increasing awareness and understanding of the research and its relevance to the public.

One form of public engagement is publishing blog posts about academic research. When writing a blog post, storytelling is vital. The aim is to create an engaging narrative about your research, using accessible, concise and clear language. Focus on key lessons from the research and their relevance to public audiences. Create a focused, engaging headline and make the key points front and centre in the post.

The structure of a blog post should include an engaging hook, brief context and summary of the research process, the key research findings and their implications for public audiences.

Starting with your research Abstract can be useful, but rework it to suit public audiences with an accessible narrative, less focus on methodology, and more focus on the underlying tension between the research question and the subsequent findings.

Consider which elements are more or less important to convey; what do you need to explain in detail, and what is not necessary to convey the core message. Context matters, but should be active in conveying the core message to the reader.

Remember to begin and end with the key takeaway message; the one thing you want the reader to take away when reading the blog post. Opening with a strong title and a quote from the research helps grab the reader's attention and set up the post's narrative. However, don't overpromise and underdeliver; ensure you produce a post that lives up to its title and regularly refers to it, reiterating the core message.

When quoting research participants, always consider the ethical implications. In general, avoid identifiable details by anonymising the research participants. However, some blog posts will actively be promoting certain partnerships and researchers, so it isn't necessarily inappropriate to use names and descriptions of the individuals involved in a project, provided they have consented to all the information shared.

Blog posts should be around 300 words minimum and no more than 800 words maximum. Ask a colleague to read it before you publish; they will tell you if it is engaging and conveys the core message clearly.

Remember that a blog post should be written with an engaging narrative; use short, clear sentences and easy, familiar language to make the research relatable to public audiences. Writing for public audiences is closer to the spoken word and should be more conversational.

Publishing blog posts can serve as evidence of public engagement for university publicity and future research funding applications. When writing and publishing blog posts, consider how to maximise their visibility online and in search results. Write with Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) in mind and tag keywords and phrases.

Consider how and where to publish a blog post about your research. There are many thematic and research-related blogs that engage with specific public audiences. Think about who your audience is and which audience you wish to engage with. If one blog or media outlet is not interested in publishing your post, rework it and pitch it to another. All writing is useful, and all public engagement has the potential to be positive and productive. Leave nothing unpublished.

Research may sometimes be best presented in multiple blog posts, each focusing on different elements of the research. Whether multiple or singular, any blog post will benefit from the clear, contrasting use of research-based case studies that reinforce the post's narrative structure. As with any writing, the more you practice, the easier and more robust it will become.

Blog posts can be used as evidence of your research, writing, and public engagement when pitching ideas for more substantive long-form articles. Publishers will also want to know more about you. Ensure that your research and public profile on the university website are up to date.

The university website offers guidance on public engagement, including resources on writing and publishing blog posts, as well as a regular [Public Engagement with Research](#) (PER) newsletter.