

Popular Science Articles

Science and society are two worlds which unfortunately often lie far from each other and, in order to bridge the gap, scientists write popular articles for publication in magazines and newspapers. These articles strive to inform a non-specialist audience about new scientific insights and discoveries.

What is a good science story?

A good story is one that you start reading and can't put down! The most crucial thing to remember when writing popular science is that the intended reader is not an expert. That means readers have to find your article appealing to start reading. The next challenge for you is to maintain their interest until the very end.

Here are some tips and techniques for writing good popular science articles:

1. Ask the right questions

Begin ordering your ideas by asking yourself the questions: what? where? when? how? why? and who? When you know what you want to communicate, and why, you can then lay out your core idea first, and expand on it in the rest of the document. Always make sure you ask yourself the exact purpose of what you are writing. When you have a clear intent, you have a much better chance of crafting an effective document.

2. Structure your article well

Know where you are going. The take-home message should be at the end, and you should set up a human connection and a question that drives your reader from beginning to end, rewarded with clues along the way. Research has shown that when it comes to focus, people remember the beginning and end of something, plus a high point in the middle.

3. Use a catchy title

A good title will excite your readers and catch their attention. A popular science title should attract non-specialist readers and should be kept short. Avoid technical terms. Combining difficult terms with easy ones may sometimes make the reader curious, for example:

- Membrane proteins – Saint Peter of the cells
- Birds of a feather - do they always flock together?
- And God said: Let there be light - preferably modulated light.
- Can you control the genes or do the genes control you?
- What has 24 eyes but no brain?

4. Simplify the content

When writing a popular science article, research results often are communicated to audiences who are not specialists in your topic. When writing, assume that your readers have no knowledge beyond high school science, but always respect their intelligence. Give an overview of the study. Provide only the most significant information. Simplify results. Be accurate but avoid giving too many details. Avoid long flowery phrases and adhere to the principle of one idea per sentence.

5. Avoid jargon

There may be words, acronyms and abbreviations that people outside your area of expertise just wouldn't know. Be aware of your reader's knowledge and choose the words and phrases that you are certain they will understand.

6. Use the active voice

Where possible, use the active voice rather than the passive one. The idea is to engage the reader and active, personal language does just that. For example, instead of writing, 'the reactions of various metals were tested,' write 'we tested the reactions of various metals'. Adding in the word 'we' makes the document more personal.

Some concluding advice:

- Make sure that the contents and language of the popular article are suited to a wider circle of readers.
- Make the title short and catchy.
- Structure your article well.
- Describe the methods and techniques only briefly.
- When describing your results, focus on what they mean and how they can be applied.
- Use as few technical terms as possible, and avoid excessively long sentences.

Adapted from: Lund University. 2015. Academic writing in English: Popular science writing. [ONLINE] Available at: <http://awelu.srv.lu.se/genres-and-text-types/writing-in-academic-genres/popular-science-writing/> (Accessed 19 March 2015)

Compiled by: Karis Moxley, 2015



FHS

University of Cape Town



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