Imperial College London

How do I engage through writing?

Using writing to engage, from information to entertainment

This guide will help you consider what to write about, as well as discussing how to adapt your writing to suit the different purposes of information or entertainment.

1 | Engaging through writing

Science can be communicated through numerous written formats, from short press releases for media outlets to whole monographs that cover a topic in detail. It might be useful to think about written engagement as having three potential goals:

- **To disseminate information:** Designed to share information quickly. For example, news articles, press releases, announcements, recruitment calls, scripts for news videos and other communications.

- **To entertain:** Designed to immerse the reader. For example feature articles, opinion pieces, blog posts, popular science books or scripts for in-depth science shows.

- **To engage in two-way conversation:** Designed to enable your target audience to ask questions and engage in a conversation with you via written text. This might be in a live online chat, in an online forum or on social media.

Each approach will be suitable for different needs. For example, you might want to script a play about patients' experiences with radiotherapy, which might be writing to entertain. However, when creating a mailshot to recruit patients to your project, you will need to write to inform.

2 | News values

News values are characteristics of a topic or story that make it more interesting to a reader. Though normally applied to news stories, considering news values can also help you write pieces that appeal to wider audiences, such as feature articles or blog posts.

Timeliness	Happened recently or relates to a timely event – e.g. breast cancer awareness month.
Proximity	Is close to the reader somehow – e.g. happened near to where they live or happened to people within a similar social group to the reader.
Impact	Had a large impact, either through affecting a large number of people or affecting people to a deeper level.
Prominence	Involves public figures or people of high status and influence e.g. celebrities, politicians or CEOs.

Oddity	A strange occurrence or something that is very rare.
Relevance	Something that the reader needs or wants to know.
Conflict	Involves disagreement or violence.
Human interest	Involves a person (protagonist) to care about.
Continuity	Has already been covered and gained a groundswell of interest.

Note: a story need not have all these characteristics but they are useful to consider when deciding what to write about and how you might frame it.

3 | Structuring your writing

The way you structure your writing will usually depend on what purpose it is aiming to serve. When writing to inform, our priority is to get information across to as many people as possible in the smallest number of words. A common technique for this is the inverted pyramid, a writing structure where information is given in order of its importance (see right).

For informative pieces of writing, your copy should start with the most crucial information. Within the first 100 words try to answer the questions of who, what, when, where, why and how. This is usually followed up with some important details, possibly over a handful of paragraphs that help the reader understand the crucial information. You may wish to break this up with subheadings. Subheadings make it easier for the reader to find the information they're after and they help make your piece more visual by breaking up the text. This middle section is also where you might include quotes or perhaps images or graphs. End your piece with some general background information that provides context or adds human interest. You may also want to add a call to action.

Most Newsworthy Info
Who? What? When? Where? Why? How?

Important Details

Other General Info and Background Info

Check out the Imperial news site for some great examples of this structure: https://www.imperial.ac.uk/news/

4 | Writing to entertain

Whether a science play, popular science book or feature article, most entertaining writing will involve some kind of storytelling. Here you might be most likely to put characters* at the heart of the piece and perhaps follow a three-act structure:

A protagonist faces a problem ------ there is a journey and conflict ------ the problem is overcome.

*Remember!
Your characters don't have to be human. Depending on your target audience, you can be as fantastical as you like. Perhaps you're telling a story about a fish who gets caught in some plastic packaging in the ocean. Your story could be about a fairy princess trying to get as close to the Sun as possible and how she finds the best material to protect her wings from the heat.

Consider first, who could be your protagonist and what problem they are facing. Here are some examples:

Protagonist	Conflict and/or journey
A researcher or someone involved in the research project	Their struggle to seek the answer to a research question
Someone (or something) outside of the research but affected by it	Their struggle with a real-world issue and how the research may provide an answer
You yourself	Your journey to understand more about a topic, what event drew your interest and how you found your answer

This will help you decide:

- The 'angle' or 'theme' of your piece
- What you'll need to find out
- Who you might interview

Interviewing can be a valuable tool in creating feature articles or blog posts as quotes will inject life into the 'characters' of your story. The more material you have to work with, the better your choice of story elements. Through researching the piece, it is likely that you will end up knowing far more about the subject than will end up in the final draft.

5 | Storytelling techniques

One you have all the components of a story, you can consider how you'll piece it together. Using some storytelling techniques can help your piece to be entertaining to the reader:

- **Suspense** – There should be something the reader wants to find out. Did the protagonist succeed? Was the antagonist beaten? Build suspense by withholding information and releasing it slowly.

- **Immersion** – A good story will thrust you into a completely new environment. How will you set the scene so that the reader can imagine being there?

- **Characterisation** – The more vividly you paint your characters, the more your reader will care about them. What is that person really like? What drives them? How can we relate to them?

- **Demonstration** – As they say, 'show, don't tell'. For example, don't simply say the natural disaster was devastating for locals, show us how that manifested. How were their day-to-day lives affected? What do they now miss having or doing? What unexpected difficulties arose?

- **Relevance** – Only include details in your story if they are relevant to your reader understanding the characters or the 'plot'.

- **Style** – Write as if you were speaking to your reader, picturing them in your mind. What is likely to interest them and how would you adapt your language to them?

- **Ending** – The ending should satisfy the reader by answering any raised questions and resolving any conflicts. If it's not possible to end it this way because you simply don't know yet, leave the reader with a profound question that gets them to wonder or reflect on their own thoughts.

George Orwell's 6 writing rules:

1. Never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.

2. Never use a long word where a short one will do.

3. If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.

4. Never use the passive where you can use the active.

5. Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.

6. Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.

6 | Get reading!

It's no secret that great writing often comes from great reading. Reading more can help expand your vocabulary and expose you to sentence structures and literary styles that may inspire your written work and spark your creativity. Creative non-fiction, in particular, is a burgeoning area of literature. Some popular science-based examples include:

• *The man who mistook his wife for a hat,* Oliver Sacks
• *Sapiens,* Yuval Noah Harari
• *Life on the Edge,* Jim Al-Khalili
• *A Short History of Neary Everything,* Bill Bryson
• *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks,* Rebecca Skloot
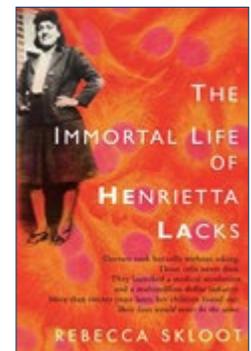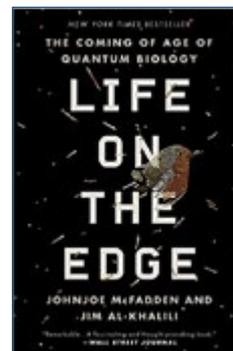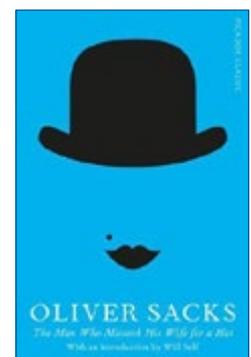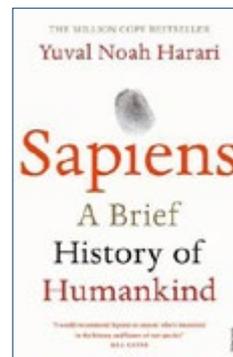
Further reading – let us know of others!

Secrets of good science writing:
www.theguardian.com/science/series/secrets-science-writing
Series by The Guardian with tips on how to improve your writing.

Nature Futures:
www.nature.com/collections/swmfrlfmcn
A collection of short science fiction stories for ideas / inspiration.

Imperial Creative Writing:
www.imperial.ac.uk/centre-for-languages-culture-and-communication/
lunchtime-learning/10-week-courses-april---july/creative-writing/
Creative writing course offered at the college.