

A few guidelines on writing popular science

As a researcher, you may benefit of sharing your knowledge with various groups, such as stakeholders, research funders, other researchers or the general public. There are many people that might be interested in the findings you have arrived at.

One way of communicating your research is writing popular science. That could mean writing textbooks or articles for popular science magazines. Oftentimes research funders require a popular science summary in applications for funding. And sometimes you might want to reach out with your research results to journalists or to the communications officer at your department.

In a sense, popular science is about “simplifying” and “translating” research into something that could be understood by people outside the research community.

Since it’s a whole genre in itself, I will not go into depth on how to write popular science here, merely give you a few guidelines / bullet points on things to consider when doing it – first a few points on the content itself, followed by a few points on language:

The content

- What are the new findings, the research results? Take that as your starting, summarise your main message of main findings at the beginning of your draft. – or as a journalist would say “What is the news here?”
How would you convey your results and express them in a way so the general public understand?
- What needs/problems being addressed in your research?
Who benefits from the knowledge in your research?
- How can the knowledge be applied?
- How does the research relate to other knowledge in the subject?

What did you do? (Method) – Put this part towards the end of your text!

Language

- Avoid technical terms! However, if absolutely necessary, do provide an explanation. Totally avoid technical terms in the introduction, the lead or the headline – so you don’t disrupt the reading experience.
- Avoid vague and/or ambiguous words. Be specific!
- Try to use vivid language. That is, use varying recurring words and terms, even if that means that they come on as non-specialised as for your research field. After all, it’s the non-specialists we are writing for.
- Short sentences are easier to read. Simple words are grasped more quickly. It might also be necessary to vary the length of sentences.
- Use straightforward sentence structure and “ordinary” vocabulary, without bureaucratic constructions.