Increasingly academics find themselves called upon to write for general audiences. For those used primarily to addressing a specialist readership in scholarly journals this can be a challenge. But clear, effective writing is crucial for engagement and impact – both within the discipline and the wider world.

That academics ‘cannot write’ has become a truism. This, in my experience as editor of Political Insight, is simply not the case. But where scholars are most likely to struggle is with the very different styles and conventions required of non-academic writing.

Journalism – like scholarly writing – is a genre. When writing for popular audiences, academics need to recognise this and shift registers accordingly. As an editor, the last thing I want to see is verbose, multi-clause sentences peppered with neologisms. Such writing is confusing to follow, lacks clarity and, perhaps most crucially, is too abstract and lacking in precision.

I often suggest that the best way to begin a Political Insight piece is with a vignette or brief anecdote that will offer the reader a window into the world that they are discussing. This approach is far more likely to produce vivid, direct writing than the jargon-heavy prose that, unfortunately, can be a feature of some academic publications.

When writing for a general audience there are a number of questions that must be asked: why use a longer word, if a shorter word will do? Is this sentence grammatically and structurally sound? Is this piece of writing repetitive or overly wordy? The key to effective writing is as simple as it is difficult: revise, revise, and then revise some more. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences.

Arguably the most important part of the process of crafting a piece of writing is figuring out the overall structure of the argument – what points need to be developed first, and then what follows naturally from them and so on. An ideal piece of writing should have a built in sense of logical inevitability so that the reader moves along the argument and supporting evidence as effortlessly as possible.

When addressing a general audience it is important, too, to consider the ‘why’ of a piece of writing. While ‘a gap in the literature’ is a perfectly reasonable hook for a journal article, it is not a good reason to write a piece for a general audience article. Editors are looking for originality, timeliness and distinctiveness.

Academics have a huge amount to offer editors. They are experts in their field, with a deep understanding of their subject that most journalists lack. Timing, however, is key. Editors will be far more interested in an academic’s expertise if it pertains to the current news agenda. This does not mean a war has to have broken out or a government fallen before you can consider proposing an article, but it is important to think about why the proposed piece should appear now.

Pitching to Political Insight is very similar to pitching to any media outlet. We welcome submissions and discuss articles in detail with authors during the commissioning process. The best way to pitch is via an email of around 100 words setting out the proposed piece and specific expertise. Never send an already-written piece. Don’t assume prior knowledge of the subject area.

Good writing is the key to successful communication. It helps people to understand complex ideas, informs accurately without unintentional ambiguity and can shift opinion. Good writing is also far more likely to get commissioned than mediocre writing. So there are plenty of reasons for academics to think about writing for general audiences!