Writing for Impact
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Start by not being an academic hermit

In our research project, *The Impact of the Social Sciences*, we tried to establish what made some academics well-cited and well-regarded academically, and what also made them influential in spheres of life outside academia. To do this we created a dataset of 360 researchers at UK universities, assembled everything we could find on them and their career, their academic citations as well as references to their work in external to university sources.

Our biggest single problem in doing all this was that a high proportion of our sample were clearly academic hermits, sitting alone on top of a pillar somewhere in academia and doing their level best not to communicate in any way with the outside world, or let any information about their work leak out. Try as we might, we could not assemble even the most basic demographic information on fully 35 per cent of our target British academics. Their university or department websites contained no details of their PhD or career track. And these researchers had no personal website, no online CV, and were absent from every known digital listing of scholarly activity.

There is clearly a significant fraction of academics and researchers that need to reassess their stance and to try systematically to reverse years of quiet solitude by going out into the digital world and making their name and works as well-known as they can possibly be. There is no point at all in undertaking research, and authoring papers and books about it at great pains and over many months or years, but then not doing your level best to communicate your corpus of work to professional and wider audiences.

Five essential digital showcases

Therefore these are some key locations where everyone in academia or research should be listing their work. Some of these need you to do it once only, others need more regular checking. But this effort is worthwhile and is something that is now just part of academic life.

**Google Scholar Citations** (GSC) is a really useful way to collect all of your outputs together, both traditional academic outputs like your books and articles, but also less traditional ones such as blog posts and briefing papers. Setting your GSC page up takes just 5-10 minutes and once it is done you never really need to do anything more – Google Scholar will automatically update your page with new publications as it find them.

**Research Gate** (RG) is a useful newer addition. It works in a similar way to GSC (and it is equally easy to set up) but it also allows you to upload versions of your work along with supporting materials and link them to your profile straight away. A nice feature is that people can request copies of your work or suggest that you upload a free version. This can help to create links with other academics working in your field.

**Academia.edu** (AE) is well used in the US but less so in the UK. It does not update automatically so you will probably need to revisit your page every six months or so and manually input new items. However, a nice feature of AE is that you can easily put up links to your social networks, which is a sharing capability that other systems don’t offer.

**Mendeley** is a free referencing system and PDF organizer but it also allows academics to create a public profile and share papers with other users.

Lastly **LinkedIn** is a place for your CV details and a way to create links to all your academic and practitioner contacts that they themselves will update from their end. Because business and government already use LinkedIn a lot, getting yourself an account is a great way for researchers to reach external audiences beyond the university world. It is a key first step in beginning to build your external visibility and research impacts with these audiences.
Writing for impact means writing differently

Once you have decided to try and step out of your academic comfort zone and write something that those both inside and outside universities might want to read, you need to re-think some of the comfortable conventions you may have slipped into in terms of how you set up and write academic pieces. Writing with an eye to impact means looking again at all the things you routinely do in your writing to see if they need to be altered, updated or done away with all together.

Don’t choose a useless title for your work

Titles play a key role in helping people find your work in the first place and then convincing them it is worth reading or downloading. Most people find articles, chapters and papers now via Google Scholar or other online sources. So for potential research users (such as business, public policy or media people), incorporating some widely used but subject-specific vocabulary in your titles will tend to improve the visibility of your work.

Yet too often academics choose ineffective titles that utterly fail to communicate what the research is about. Some particularly bad habits are to choose titles that are similar to a thousand others, use phrases that mean much to those within that discipline but little to those outside, or provide essentially an ‘empty box’ that gives a topic and sometimes a date range but without actually telling readers anything about what findings have been made, or what line of argument is being followed.

It’s not hard to improve. The first step is to look seriously, critically and comparatively at a range of possible alternatives. Try and think things through from a reader’s point of view: How will this wording be interpreted by someone scanning on Google Scholar? What will attract them to click through to the research? We recommend generating a minimum of 10 possible titles and consider them carefully. Compare these alternatives with each other and see if recombining words from different titles might work better. Type your possible titles as search terms into Google Scholar or subject-specific databases and see what existing work comes up. The second step is to look at whether your title words are picked up in the abstract of the piece, and in the internal sub-headings. It’s a good sign if the title, abstract and sub-headings all use consistent, linking, meshing or nesting concepts and vocabulary. A third step is to consider using a full narrative title, one that makes completely clear what your argument, conclusions or findings are. It seeks to summarize the substance or core value-added of your argument, that is, the one key point that you want to stay in readers’ minds a week after they have read your paper and forgotten most of its details.

Keep readers interested via ‘attention points’

Writing for external audiences will usually mean shorter pieces than traditional academic articles. In order to keep words to a minimum you will need to make excellent use of attention points which are any exhibits that stand out or attract readers’ focus in the text, especially tables, graphs, charts, flow charts, graphics, diagrams, example boxes, case study boxes, and so on.

- Make attention points stand on their own. Attention points focus readers’ attention – that is what they are there for. Exhibits are especially salient for experienced and skilled professional readers, the potential users and citers of your work, because they provide direct windows into your thinking or results. If the exhibits suggest that something novel or worthwhile is going on, these readers are much more likely to continue with the piece. This means that every chart, table and diagram should be labelled as fully and as informatively as possible, using accessible language, or commonly understood abbreviations in this specific research field. Never use a symbol or formula alone where space allows for a fuller descriptive label.

For more on nesting and connections amongst titles, keywords, and abstracts, see Anne-Marie Green (2013) ‘Search Engine Optimization and Your Journal Article: Do you want the bad news first?’
• **Show readers what they need to know – no more, no less.** Exhibits must be designed for their audience, not for the text author. That means thinking through in advance who your audiences are, and what their needs or interests are likely to be. For example, by presenting the data in a chart or a graph instead of using a table, you will normally radically simplify the numbers involved.

• **Make the messages in attention points as simple as possible.** As academics are used to dealing with jumbled data or complex understandings of processes, it can be difficult for us to ‘see’ tangles and difficulties present in data because they are so familiar to us. So look again and see whether it is possible to make messages clearer by altering how you show them. A good example is the relatively common use of alphabetical orderings within data displays that create completely jumbled tables and charts. The maximum simplicity principle dictates that alphabetic or customary-sequence listings in tables or charts should always be reorganized so as to create a descending numerical progression in the data displayed. Here the region or locality with the largest number on a key variable comes at the top of the table or chart, the second largest comes next, and so on, with the others arranged in descending order below.

• **Use a single sequence to order attention points.** Scholarly convention was that figures and tables were numbered separately in any text. This is often an artificial distinction and is completely unnecessary. Pick a label, ‘figures’ works well across most exhibits, and number all the things you are displaying for readers in a single, easy-to-follow sequence.

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### Only report data in ways that readers need to know

There seems to be an academic syndrome of overly precise reporting of results, often paradoxically allied with an under-description of charts and tables. Often this reflects an effort to cram into one table or chart all the information that might be needed by multiple different readers. Instead here are three suggestions for improving the accessibility of your data reporting, without sacrificing academic respectability.

• **Separate out main text tables and charts** from large-scale results and data presentation in Annexes. Exhibits within the main text should fulfil a single purpose, being carefully chosen to support that part of the core argument. Annex tables, by contrast, can be far more detailed, encompass multiple purposes, play a ‘version of record’ role, and be the main place where you demonstrate the accuracy and replicability of your work. Quote numbers that are only as detailed as most readers need.

• **Only quote numbers at a level of accuracy that is credible.** If a government reports 2,816,013 unemployed people, what credence can we attach to each digit here? Putting the complete number implies that you believe the total is correct to ± one person, which is highly unlikely. Quote only as many numbers as readers need. The great vehicle for poor academic communication has been the giant table, spread across whole pages with dozens of numbers. This is especially true of regression and other multi-variate analysis outputs.

• **Avoid using unnecessarily complex numbers,** ones that that most people (usually including the author) find hard to understand.

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### Writing for impact also means writing different outputs

For engaging with academic colleagues, for promotion and professional advancement traditional academic outputs of articles and books are still the norm. But for research users outside the academy, it is unlikely that these output types will be as useful. They are long and often jargon-heavy, and they are likely to be expensive to buy or access. But more than that, the research set out in them is unlikely to have been mediated or translated by the academic in a way that makes the findings or conclusions relevant for what a policymaker, journalist or business official is able to quickly use.
So when you are considering your publication pipeline, you need to think about other outputs that are more suitable to audiences that you are trying to engage with. Unfortunately producing these outputs will tend to be in addition to traditional publications, so they are more work. But for those working in applied fields, or those seeking to create some impact from their work, these outputs are a crucial stepping off point in interacting with practitioners, funders and the public on the outcomes of research.

What different types of outputs can you publish?

The range of output types that you could produce is wide and depends on both your subject area and the sector that you work on or with.

- **Briefing documents** are a very common output type for those trying to impact on policymakers or corporate officials. These are often very short (2 pages) with lots of data, figures and key facts in order to synthesise complex analysis into as accessible a form as possible.

- **Research reports** are often commissioned or co-produced with external organisations. They cover more applied research and often include recommendations that can be used by, for example NGOs or charities, to lobby policymakers about a particular way forward on an issue.

Another key way to reach a number of external audiences is now via social media with academic blogging being an essential part of the landscape of scholarly communication (see the next chapter). These short (between 800-1,200 word) blog posts should be punchy and accessible. They are written more like newspaper articles in that the concluding messages should be at the start of the blog post rather than at the end. Although conference papers are fairly traditional academic outputs, they still can be a useful way of updating practitioner audiences with new or interim research findings, or discussion points. They can also be written in a more informal style or make fairly controversial judgements to stimulate discussion. Their key advantage when thinking about impact is that they are quicker to be published than waiting for journal versions two years down the line when the research or ideas may have been supplanted by newer work.

For more on writing for impact see the [LSE Impact blog](@LSEimpactblog on twitter) or [Writing For Research](@Write4Research).