

# You Want to Write for the Public, but About What?

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*By Katie Rose Guest Pryal*

Whenever I am approached by academics who want to make the transition from scholarly to public writing, they always ask me the same question: "What should I write about?" But, really, that is a two-part question.

One part is about genre. Newcomers to public writing typically don't know the genres — that is, the differences between an op-ed, an essay, a profile, a reported article, or a well-researched think piece. You have to learn your journalism genres before you can decide which kind of piece to write (more about those genres in a future essay). The other part of the question has to do with figuring out what you have to contribute to public discourse. That's what this month's column is about.

In this new series — The Public Writing Life — I first set the stage with "10 Questions Every Academic Should Ask Before Writing for the Public." By "the public," I mean people who read the same popular magazines and websites as you do. Once you've decided to broaden your reach beyond the scholarly realm, then comes the larger issue of what to say.

How do you take your academic expertise and turn it into something that you, and your public, will want to read?

**You can write about your research — but not just about it.** In graduate school, we are trained to focus our scholarship narrowly. Eventually that limited focus helps us become experts and make new contributions to our subfield. The way academe defines expertise makes it hard to come by: If you haven't read *everything* on your topic, then you aren't an expert.

And so we end up being experts in very narrow things: We are not historians, or historians of U.S. history, or even historians of the Civil War, but rather, experts in military battles, aspects of slavery, or in Civil-War munitions. In my own research, I wasn't an expert in English (my doctoral degree), but rather in rhetoric, and not just rhetoric but genre studies, and not just genre studies, but how genres can be a lens to view disability (genre and disability memoirs; genre and mental-health reporting; genre, mental-health reporting, and mass shootings). And so on.

That mind-set has to change if you're going to write for the public. Your expertise as a public writer is broader than your scholarly expertise. In fact, one of the most freeing things about writing for the public is that you get to use your expertise in a larger context. You don't have to focus on Civil-War munitions anymore — you can write about the entire Civil War, or move beyond even that topic and write about U.S. history more broadly.

So how do you make that transition? How do you go from a scholarly expert in something narrow to a public expert in something broader?

The answer: Stop thinking about yourself and your research, and start thinking about the world around you. Your inspiration for your public writing should come from what you are reading and seeing now, not from what you already know. Those of us who already write for nonacademic audiences were inspired to do so because we heard about some news story, public issue, or event, and thought, "I have something to say about that. I have something to contribute."

Public writing makes some academics nervous because they don't trust that their expertise extends beyond their narrow scholarly niche. But it does, out in the public sphere.

Here's an example from my own experience. After writing many scholarly articles about disability studies, I decided to branch into public writing about disability. I used my scholarly work as a foundation to leap from disability-studies scholar (narrow) to public writer on mental-health and disability (broad). Colleges debating whether to ban laptops from the classroom (again)? I wrote about that, because such bans create serious problems for students with disabilities. Another tragic shooting in which mental health gets used as a scapegoat to avoid banning guns? I wrote about that, too.

If you try to pitch a piece about your narrow slice of research to general-interest magazines or websites, it's highly unlikely to be published. There just won't be an audience for it, even if the publication covers higher education.

Kelly J. Baker, a former faculty member in religious studies and now editor of the newsletter *Women in Higher Education*, fields a lot of unsuccessful pitches from academics new to public writing. One of the most common mistakes they make, she said, is a failure to move beyond their scholarship: "Their pitch is too specific to their discipline. They rely on too much jargon or write a pitch that would be a better fit for an academic journal rather than a magazine." (Baker offers further advice on this in [her blog post](#) on writing for nonacademic readers.)

To succeed in public writing, then, you have to take that brave first step beyond the small but safe territory of your scholarly expertise. Use your academic training as a foundation and then do the additional research and reporting necessary to write a journalistic piece. I used current events as the driving force of my freelance writing, and my expertise followed.

**Mind your audience.** Once you start writing for the public, keep reminding yourself that your audience has changed, drastically. That shift in audience means you have to shift your language, your persona, your tone — or however you wish to describe the writing choices you make for different types of readers. It involves more than just dropping the academic jargon.

Kevin Kruse, a professor of history at Princeton University, has written trade books for popular audiences and many (so many) op-eds and essays for public venues. I asked him about how to successfully switch from writing for a scholarly to a popular audience. His first piece of advice: Keep in mind who your audience is. "A successful op-ed is one aimed at an 'intelligent audience of nonspecialists,'" he said, noting he's heard that same phrase from many different editors for years.

How does he approach writing for a public audience? "I've found that constructing a piece, much as I would a lecture for my undergraduate survey, is the best route to take," he said. Kruse follows three general practices:

- "Write with clarity," using plain language and avoiding academic jargon.
- Include "clear examples."
- Assume your audience is interested in your topic but doesn't know much about it.

Make it relevant. Your starting point in deciding what to write is not your research, but current events. You can't write about what you know unless you can make it relevant to what is happening right now. That is critical when it comes time to pitch pieces that editors will actually want to publish.

Sarah Bond, a professor of history at the University of Iowa and a public writer, touched on

this advice in an essay she wrote for academics-turned-public writers: "React to the world we are living in." Why? Because, she said, that's how you figure out what to write about: "Did you see a parallel with Cicero in Trump's State of the Union rhetoric last night? Write about it. Are there early Christian saints who had similar #metoo moments to women of today? Write about it."

You need a "news peg" — an angle that makes your article timely. Alternatively, your topic might be "evergreen" — meaning: always of public interest — in which case you should point that out in your pitch.

"Timeliness and relevancy matter" in a pitch, said Baker, the Women in Higher Education editor. Pay attention to current events, she said: "When what you study appears in the news cycle, be ready to pitch an idea quickly. Look at what publications publish and how your area of expertise might fit into their coverage."

Kruse has similar advice: "A successful pitch is one that has an obvious 'hook' — a connection to the news cycle then unfolding — and virtually no newspaper or magazine will want to run a piece that lacks that hook." And don't bury your angle in your pitch letter, he said. "The hook needs to be laid out quite simply and directly in the opening paragraph." Don't make an editor guess why your piece is relevant; it should be apparent in the very first sentence.

If all of this sounds like fast-paced work, compared with scholarly articles, it is. Be prepared to pitch and write quickly. Even a turnaround time of 24 hours isn't unusual these days.

Get plenty of advice. The goal of this series is to share practical tips on public writing, but you should seek out additional guidance, too.

- Your own colleagues are one resource. Your discipline might have a group that trains academics to write for the public. For example, Sacred Writes "provides support, resources, and networks for scholars of religion committed to translating the significance of their research to a broader audience."
- A group like the OpEd project offers workshops and other resources to "scout and train underrepresented experts (especially women) to take thought leadership positions in their fields (through op-eds and much more)."

Stepping into the public arena can be intimidating and even scary, but the skills you need to be successful in it can be learned. From now on, when you read your favorite websites or magazines, read them as a potential writer, not just as a consumer. Start thinking about ways you can contribute to the publication. And perhaps, someday soon, your name will be in the byline.

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