

Research Writing 101

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UNIVERSITY OF
GEORGIA



Why bother?

- Research is one of the most concrete examples of how universities give back to the community.
- Research informs student education and training.
- Research helps drive the economy.
- Research stories do well.



Stage 1: News assessment



News assessment

- Perhaps a researcher approaches you about a peer-reviewed paper, a conference presentation, a grant, or a special project. Always begin with the question: “Is this news?”
- For example:
 - Significance
 - Timeliness
 - Proximity
 - Human interest
 - Prominence





News assessment

- Some other considerations for peer-reviewed studies:
 - When did the paper publish?
 - How prominent is this journal? What's its impact factor?
 - Is a UGA researcher the lead or corresponding author?
 - Have we written about this in the recent past?
 - Are other universities/organizations also doing a news release?
 - Is there an embargo?
 - Is the researcher willing and able to talk with media?





News assessment

- What is UGA's relationship to the study?
 - Is this a “best at” for UGA?
 - Is this work exclusive to UGA?
 - How can UGA uniquely tell this story?
 - Does it have a connection to ongoing UGA initiatives?
 - Is this something that has garnered press coverage in the past?





Look for additional story assets

- Do we have a recent photo of this researcher(s)? Make sure you check Widen!
- Do they have video/photos/graphs/figures/infographics that we might use/adapt?
- Does the story beg for a more compelling photo (e.g. if someone is studying volcanic eruptions, I want to see a volcano).
- Make sure you have permission to use photos, and be especially wary of students or people outside the university.



Stage 2: Preparation



Preparation

- For our UGA people: If you are confident that the research has real news value, let me or Sara in know that you're working on it and begin prepping for your interview.
- Researchers can't (and shouldn't) write the news for you.
- Don't go into an interview expecting the researcher to define or explain every single concept.





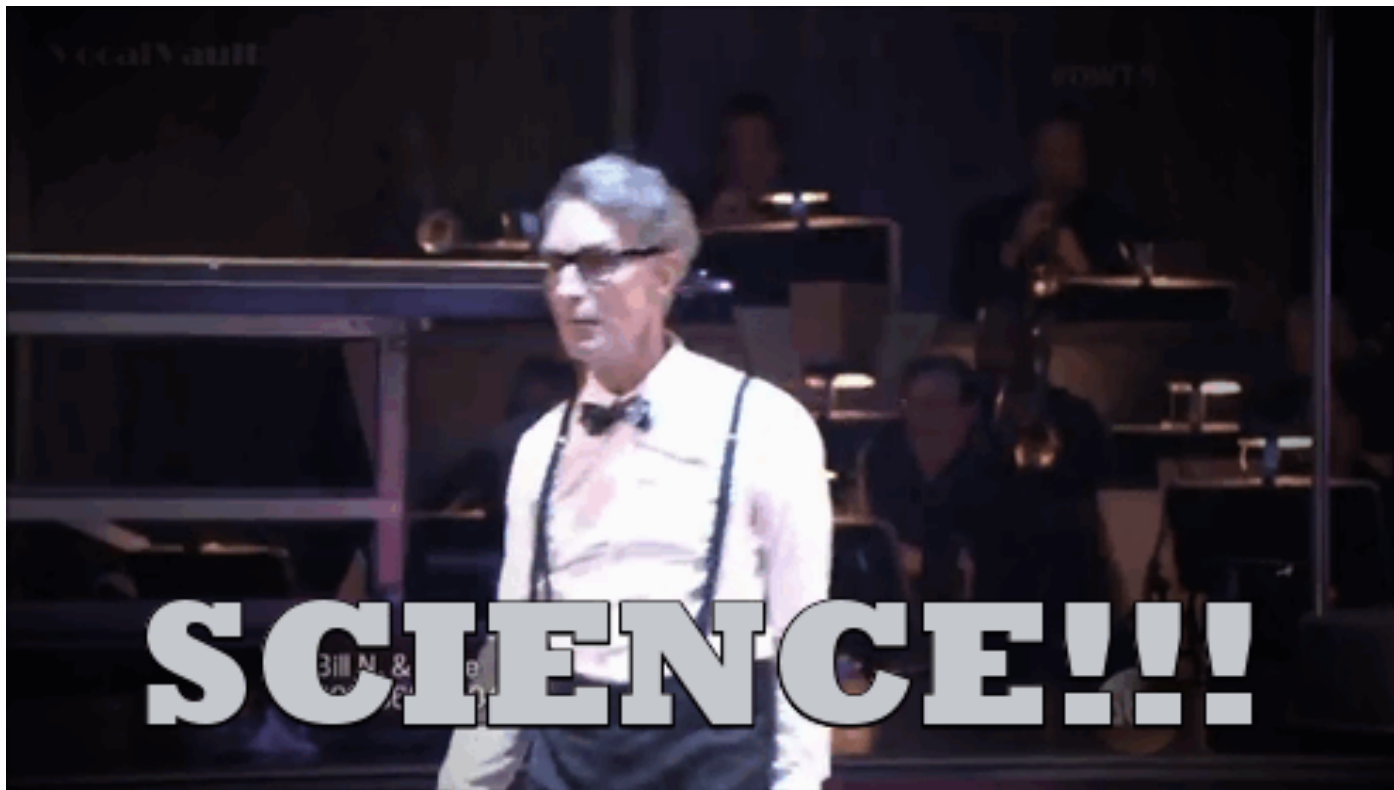
Do some research of your own

- Before the interview:
 - Try to find more information about the researcher and his/her interests.
 - Ask for any relevant information in advance.
 - Read the paper/abstract/grant carefully, identify words or concepts that you don't understand and look them up in a dictionary, encyclopedia, or online.
 - Pay particular attention to the abstract, introductory paragraphs and the conclusion/discussion.
 - Check out a textbook, look for videos on YouTube, read other news stories about the same subject. There is a wealth of information out there.
 - Write down questions as you go along.
 - Don't get discouraged.



Blinded by science

“The ubiquitin ligase CRL2^{ZYG11} targets cyclin B1 for degradation in a conserved pathway that facilitates mitotic slippage.”





Blinded by science





Look for keywords

- Here's part of that paper's abstract:
- “Mitotic cells arrested by the spindle assembly checkpoint, which inactivates APC/C, often exit mitosis in a process termed “mitotic slippage,” which generates tetraploid cells and **limits the effectiveness of antimitotic chemotherapy drugs.**”
- Prompting one of UGA's communicators to write this story:
- “New drug combination has potential to significantly improve chemotherapy success”



Time to talk



Time to talk

For the interview:

- In person > a phone call
- A phone call > email
- Email is not an interview.
 - People do not talk the same way they type, and email correspondence does not allow you to direct the conversation. Avoid at all costs.





Time to talk

- Be professional, but also try to be relaxed.
- When you're ready to begin the interview in earnest, ask them if it's OK to tape record the conversation.
- Begin by telling them (honestly) that you've read through their paper/abstract/grant carefully, and say something that will let them know you've done your homework.
- Don't ask things like:
 - "What's this paper all about?"
 - "Why is this work important?"
 - "What are the conclusions of your paper?"





Time to talk

- If, despite all your preparation, you're still unsure about the research, say something like: "So it sounds like your research sheds considerable light on X problem. How did this project come about?"
- If you're really struggling with the subject matter, be honest with them. But do so in a way that reinforces the homework you've done.
- Don't be afraid to interrupt and ask questions.



Pen to paper



Pen to paper

“Clear thinking becomes clear writing: one can't exist without the other. It is impossible for a muddy thinker to write good English. He may get away with it for a paragraph or two, but soon the reader will be lost, and there is no sin so grave, for he will not easily be lured back.”—William Zinsser, “On Writing Well”

- Take time to think about what you've learned.
- Make notes.
- Chart your narrative from beginning to end.
- Look up supporting information (e.g. vital statistics from the CDC, or a recent report from the WHO).





Pen to paper: Basics

- Make sure you adhere to AP style (if you don't already have one, ask if your office will buy you an online subscription to the stylebook).
- See also UGA's Institutional Style Guide (available on brand.uga.edu)
- Begin with the most compelling and unique part of the story (this should also help you write a good headline that's short and punchy)





Pen to paper: Basics

Now that you (hopefully) understand the research, it's time to write. Here are a few basic tips:

- Avoid flowery, adjective-laden sentences. Use strong verbs and short, clear sentences.
- You may have to translate some scientific jargon. Everything has a definition; see if you can substitute.
 - This is not “dumbing down,” it’s making things more accessible to non-experts
- But watch out for jargon/buzzwords of your own.





Pen to paper: Structure

- Your first paragraph should state what the researcher(s) did and why it matters. For example:
 - Infectious disease scientists from research institutions including the University of Georgia have reported the discovery and early validation of a drug that shows promise for treating cryptosporidiosis, a diarrheal disease that is a major cause of child mortality and for which there is no vaccine or effective treatment.
- Link your paragraphs. The last sentence in one paragraph should flow seamlessly into the first sentence of the next. Sudden changes in narrative are jarring to the reader.





Pen to paper: Quotes

- Quotes are important, as they are the only voice outside of your own. Use them wisely.
- A good quote should grab the reader's attention. It might be a strong call to action, a metaphor or an anecdote.
- Equally important is paraphrasing. Don't waste quote space on dry, academic speech about numbers and data; just paraphrase and move on.





Pen to paper: Show and tell

- We all know that our job is to promote the university, but don't club your reader over the head with that fact. Show, don't tell.
- Don't tell the reader the research is important, describe important research.
- Don't tell the reader the research is revolutionary, show me how it will change the world.
- Don't tell the reader the research is interesting, write about interesting research.
- If the research truly is important, revolutionary or interesting, the reader will come to that conclusion on his/her own.



Editing



Editing (and more editing)

- Everyone gets edited. Don't take it personally.
- Share your work with someone in your own unit or with James/Sara in Marketing and Communications for a first round of edits.
- Once those are incorporated, share with all relevant faculty/staff for their edits.
- Watch in horror as they fill your news story with scientific/professional jargon.
- It will feel something like this:







Editing

If you and a faculty member can't agree on wording:

- Try calling them to talk about it. It's easier to explain on the phone anyway.
- Explain that this is not for scientists; it is for the public.
- Give them specific examples from the text and ask if there is another way of explaining a term/concept.
- If possible, show them an example from another news article on the same topic.
- Be patient.





Editing

- Once you have a final draft, send it along to James or Sara in Marketing and Communications. We will check for AP style, etc, but we may also ask for some additional edits if something is unclear.
- This may require a bit more back and forth with the researcher.
- We're not trying to make your life miserable; we just want to make sure the release is as good as possible.



Publication



Publication

- If you know outlets that would be particularly interested in this research, let us know.
- Marketing and Communications will look for media outlets, reporters, editors most likely to cover the story.
- Be realistic in your expectations. Everyone wants to be in the New York Times, but that's a lofty goal.
- It may make more sense to pitch the story to a select group (Marketing and Communications can help you pitch stories any time).





Publication: Out to the media

- Marketing and Communications will distribute your news release, and compile reports on pickup (sent out at the end of every month).
- If your story catches on, be prepared to take calls from reporters and connect them with the right people.
- Check on news pickup yourself and make note of outlets for future stories.
- If you're not getting any pickup, don't despair, but do look back over the project to see if you could have done something differently.



If you do get lots of pickup...



A large red decorative shape in the top-left corner of the slide, resembling a shield or a stylized banner.

Thank you!



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