

ADVICE

# 10 Questions Every Academic Should Ask Before Writing for the Public



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*By Katie Rose Guest Pryal* | DECEMBER 01, 2019

**W**elcome to a new series, "The Public Writing Life," about how to write for a popular audience (and get paid for it) when you are part of the academy.

There's plenty of good writing advice out there, and I'll talk about some of it here. There's also plenty of bad advice, and I'll talk about that, too. As an academic, a longtime freelance writer, and an editor, I am aiming this series at anyone looking to connect with readers beyond the ivory tower — whether you are a faculty member, a staff member, or a "staffulty" member; whether you are tenured, tenure-track, contingent, or still in graduate school.

Academics are having an ongoing conversation about how much to engage with the public. And public engagement has different consequences for different people — consequences we all need to pay attention to — which is what this new series and this first essay are about.

Here are 10 questions that every academic should ask *before* writing for the public.

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**No. 1: Who is my public?** Chances are, you already write for "a public." If you are a faculty member, you might write articles for journals or give talks at conferences. If you are an administrator, you might write reports for various stakeholders, including the general public. If you are a graduate student, you might already be presenting at conferences or publishing in journals.

But here we'll talk about expanding your definition of "public," understanding who that audience might be, and then making sure you know how to best write for your new readers.

For now, consider "the public" to mean this: educated people who read popular magazines and websites that you also like to read. What venues do you turn to for your daily commentary on world events, large and small? The readers of those venues compose your public audience. For now.

**No. 2: Why do I want to do this?** Some people start writing for popular publications because they think they'll earn money. Some do it because their institution encourages public engagement. Others do it because they want to make sure their research is accessible to as many readers as possible. Whatever your motivations, you need to have a clear idea of what they are before you get started. Your reasons might change as you go along, and that's fine.

But just a warning: If you go into this work seeking fame and fortune, you probably will be disappointed. There is hardly any money in public writing — at least not for the kind of writing that most people think of (those short, interesting pieces you like to read). And any fame you might gain from writing a piece that goes viral is fleeting, at best, and dangerous, at worst (more on that in a future essay).

**No. 3: Have I done the reading?** Before you join a new scholarly group or write for a new academic journal, you do a little research about that group and you read that journal — that's just Academic 101. And yet, over and over, newcomers to public writing submit pieces to publications they've never actually read, send in articles that don't meet the venue's submission guidelines, and/or draft essays that repeat (without attribution) arguments that have already been published.

In short, too many academic writers show no familiarity with the world into which they've entered.

Don't do any of those things. If you want to write for the public, you have to become a part of the public you will be writing for. Read the magazines you want to write for. If you have a particular topic you want to write about, do some basic internet searching to see which journalists are experts on the topic, and then read everything those people have written about it lately. Just because others have written already on your topic doesn't mean you can't. It just means you have to cite them properly and say something new (or say something old in a new and compelling way).

The best part of reading is that you get more ideas for writing. You'll see what kind of conversations people are having, and you will find areas where you can contribute.

**No. 4: What does my institution think?** In recent months (and years), many smart academics have said many smart things about the institutional consequences of putting your thoughts and ideas before the general public. In a recent *Chronicle* essay, "Public Writing and the Junior Scholar," Sarah E. Bond and Kevin Gannon mount a convincing argument for public engagement as essential to the health of higher education: "We believe that the very survival of academe is, in part, predicated on encouraging both graduate students and junior scholars to engage in activities that speak to and for the public." They argued that academe "must find effective ways to assess these pivotal forms of outreach" and offered some suggestions on that front.

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While Bond and Gannon are optimistic about the positive influence that public writing can have on higher education as a whole and on a young scholar's career in particular, other academics — particularly those from marginalized groups — have been more cautious, and with good reason. There is a risk of backlash. In fact, Bond herself faced a public backlash in 2017 for a piece she wrote about white supremacy.

If the fallout turns ugly, you will need your institution's support. But can you count on it?

In a much-read blog post, "Everything But The Burden: Publics, Public Scholarship, and Institutions," Tressie McMillan Cottom, an associate professor of sociology at Virginia Commonwealth University, wrote: "In this moment we should call for institutions to state explicitly what they owe those who venture into public waters." She noted: "Institutions have been calling for public scholarship for the obvious reasons. Attention can be equated with a type of prestige. And prestige is a way to shore up institutions when political and cultural attitudes are attacking colleges and universities at every turn."

Trouble is, a lot of institutions aren't doing a good job of backing up their workers when public engagement causes controversy — which, as Cottom points out, is inevitable. She offered six questions that any institution could use to evaluate whether it's prepared to support its employees' efforts at public engagement.

And you, as a person interested in public writing, can use those questions to find out if administrators and colleagues on your own campus are likely to support you (or not) if there is a backlash to something you write. To gauge that, do some research on your own institution. Ask colleagues who have written for the public about their experiences. Use Cottom's questions to figure out what kind of reception and support you can expect.

At the very least, I recommend you try to answer two key questions:

- Do you get professional credit for speaking publicly?
- And will your institution stand by you if there are negative consequences to something you write?

**No. 5: Have I found my writing peers?** I'll delve into the details of this in a future column, but if you are going to write for the public, you are going to need help from a community of peers who also write for the public. They will read your pitches and your pieces. They will support you if (when) things go wrong. They will spread the word about your latest work by sharing it on social media. They will refer you to editors.

Every successful writer I know has a circle of peers providing support and encouragement. Public writing is a community-driven project. We need each other.

**No. 6: Do I have to be on social media?** Yes, you need a Twitter account.

No, really. Once you're famous, maybe you can quit Twitter. But for aspiring public writers, Twitter is where editors and writers hang out. I don't know why — we just do.

So swallow your objections and fears, join Twitter, and start engaging (politely!) in conversations. Listen to what others are saying. Follow editors and see when they put out calls for submissions. (Look for the hashtag #pitchme.)

And now that we've moved into the practical realm:

**No. 7: Have I read the submission guidelines?** I'm assuming (hoping) that, by this point, you've read the publication you want to write for. Next, turn your attention to the logistics: Do you know what the editors want in a pitch? Do they even publish freelance work? Do you know their guidelines for submitting something?

Writing for the public means learning a new trade: freelance writing. You can ask an experienced freelancer to teach you how to do it (that might be a hard ask, as we're really busy). You can pay, or barter with, someone to teach you how to do it (this is more likely, as we are desperate for money).

It's also possible to teach yourself the freelance ropes. The information is out there. In "How to Go Public, and Why We Must," Leonard Cassuto, a professor of English at Fordham University, reviewed a book that aimed to teach scholars how to take their work public. "Can a professor or a graduate student learn how to go public from a book?" Cassuto wrote. "From this book, yes."

Finally, you can often find panels on public writing at academic conferences. Just this month, for example, the American Academy of Religion offered a panel on "Pitching to the Media."

The point is: Don't start sending off pitches unless you're fairly certain you know what you're doing. There aren't that many publications, and editors talk to one another. If you come in looking like a rookie, that's potentially embarrassing but redeemable. If you come in behaving an entitled jerk, no one will want to work with you. So read the guidelines (more than once).

**No. 8: Can I write a pitch?** A pitch is a highly specific genre. Sometimes people (including me) give entire workshops on how to write one because they're not easy to write. Some people even write advice columns on how to write them.

Here's a good one to start with: "How to Craft a Pitch," written for *The Chronicle* in 2017 by Kelly J. Baker, the editor of *Women in Higher Education*. Read her advice. While you're at it, you can read her 2019 blog post, "Writing for a Public Audience," on the three most common mistakes she sees academic writers make in their public writing.

**No. 9: Am I prepared to share the credit?** When you write for general-interest publications, you usually don't have to worry about providing detailed footnotes, but that doesn't mean there are no citation norms. In public writing, citation is about two things: (1) giving nods to people whose work you leaned on to make your own argument, and (2) building community.

When you're new to it, the world of freelance writing might seem vast. But once you've been in it for a while, it starts to shrink. Everyone knows who's who — including the names of those repeat offenders who fail to credit other writers when they should.

If you have something to say about an ongoing debate, dive in. But remember: You're joining a public conversation already in progress. Show that you know who else is in it with you. Be respectful. Be kind. Be a good researcher.

And be mindful of who you are citing, and for what. Kecia Ali, a professor of religion at Boston University and a public writer, has done research on the politics of citation and how it relates to gender (and race and ethnicity). Her findings, not surprisingly, show that women are cited less than men. Likewise, the Cite Black Women Collective pushes for equitable citation at the intersection of race and gender.

As an eager rookie, you may have new and interesting things to say about a topic. But what you may fail to notice is that the new and interesting things you're saying have been touched on before, in similar ways, by other writers. That's one of the worst mistakes you can make as a new freelance writer. I'll devote an entire



column to this subject because it is so very important, but for now, remember this rule: If you can give a nod to someone who's written something on your topic already, do it.

**No. 10: Am I ready for this?** I named this series after Annie Dillard's *The Writing Life* because I learned one of the most important lessons about writing from her book. It goes like this: If you have a good writing idea, use it now. Don't save it for later, for a better time, for a better story or book or article. Or, as Dillard wrote: "One of the things I know about writing is this: Spend it all, shoot it, play it, lose it all, right away, every time."

She was talking about writing books, but her advice applies to writing anything. If you're ready to write for the public, don't wait till later. Don't wait for the perfect time. If you have the perfect words in mind, the perfect time to write them is now.

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