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Tips for blog writing

- Think about your audience. What do they want or need to know?

- Find a "spine" or backbone that is your main story and throw out anything that doesn't fit (or, if the things you have to throw out are the important things, find a better spine). It's less complicated than it sounds. For example, in a piece about Brexit's impact on legal publishing at the National Archives¹ the spine was, "Here is an impact of Brexit you probably didn't think about and here's how they're solving this surprisingly hard problem." Then the problem had several parts: presenting law to the general public, being able to show the legitimacy of every piece of legislation, and the technical details of how they're doing it. I had to leave out a really interesting part of the story, which is the influence of the legal profession on the development of markup languages, and hope to write that another time.

- In academic writing, you tell people what you're going to say and why, then you say it, then you tell people you've said it. In writing intended for a general audience, this is repetitive, and readers will bail. Instead, start with the most important single finding or research result, then explain why it matters and what you expect its broader impact to be, and finally explain how you reached the result and why people should trust it.

- Even though of course you hope it won't be true, assume that people will only read the first paragraph, and put everything that matters most in it. This is especially true if the blog you're writing for only posts the first paragraph on the front page and users have to click to see the rest.

- Explain without talking down to people who are less technically knowledgeable than you are. They are generally smart, even though they don't know what zero knowledge proofs are.

- In general, popular writing is less formal than academic writing. Try reading your posting aloud and see if it sounds natural. While writing is always more disciplined than speech, writing that seems to the reader as if the writer is speaking directly to them is generally more appealing, the equivalent of seeming relaxed in a face-to-face conversation.

- Without being technically inaccurate, use words people are likely to understand. In other words, don't search the thesaurus for the longest and least frequently used words. Unnecessarily complex language does not make you sound more authoritative; the best explanations are the ones that seem effortlessly simple

¹ At <https://www.computerweekly.com/feature/National-Archives-races-to-convert-millions-of-web-pages-of-EU-law-ahead-of-Brexit>.

(and it usually took enormous amounts of work to make them seem that way). For an example of a *tour-de-force* in this area, have a look at Randall Munroe's Thing Explainer,² which explains complex subjects using only the most commonly used 1,000 English words.

- Avoid the passive voice. Passive voice: The frogs were killed by raising the temperature of the pot to 100C and allowing it to boil for five minutes. Active voice: We killed the frogs by placing them in a pot and boiling them for five minutes. Three reasons to avoid the passive voice: 1) it makes sentences longer, more convoluted, and harder to read; 2) it makes whatever you're describing seem dead (even before boiling); 3) the resulting text is almost always clearer (even if you'd rather not admit to having killed the frogs).

- If English is not your native language, until you've gained some experience ask a friend to read the posting over with you for errors and awkward phrasing.

- Learn to be your own first, and toughest, editor.

- Until you're practiced at it, proofread on paper, as you're likely to catch more errors that way. Double-check that all links you include work correctly, and remember to proofread the headline. There is a rule: the bigger the type the less likely you are to notice typos.

- Do not use "my mother" or "my grandmother" as an example of a clueless, technically uneducated user. a) because it's overused; b) because it's offensive to the many technically adept older women in the world; and c) because the women in your audience will hate it.



2 At <https://xkcd.com/thing-explainer/>.