

Socializing Science

MANUAL



a PhD's blog from VU Social Sciences
VU University Amsterdam

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Graduate School of Social Sciences

VU University Amsterdam

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Science Blogging

Graduate School of Social Sciences

VU University Amsterdam

Period: flexible, throughout PhD employment

Coordination: Camiel Beukeboom in collaboration with an assistant

1. Socializing Science Blog

The VU-GSSS [Socializing Science](#) website provides an online platform for all PhD candidates within the VU Faculty of Social Sciences. On this Socializing Science website PhD candidates can post blogs about their own research, scientific research they read, hear about in colloquia, and reflect on other PhD relevant issues. The Socializing Science website aims to create a lively platform showcasing the work of FSW PhD candidates both within and outside the Faculty and to facilitate the valorization of scientific knowledge. Moreover, writing blogs gives PhD candidates the opportunity to publish, albeit in an informal manner, at an early point in their PhD trajectories, to build a reputation, and to practice writing by explaining scientific research to a broader audience.

The blog was launched on 19 February 2014. The title of our blog was the result of a prize question among all FSS PhD candidates. This title was submitted by Sothy Khieng. It is both catchy and nicely covers the goals and content of the website: i.e., bringing social science to a broad audience, explaining science to society, and while doing so, building a lively scientific and public community. The website link is www.SocializingScienceVU.com. The website design is by Robert Paauwe. We also have a [Twitter](#) account (@SocSciVU) and [Facebook](#) page to share our published blogs efficiently. Recent published blogs will be brought under attention by other faculty member in the monthly FSS newsletter.

1.1 Target audience

By explaining both the process, practice and results of scientific research to a broader audience, we aim to reach a broad worldwide audience interested in Social Science research. The target audience may thus include laymen with a general interest in science, people working in practice interested in the practical relevance of science, and even people who don't like to read about science.¹ Other academics working in similar or different areas, and other PhD candidates and staff within VU-GSSS and the VU in general, are a more nearby target group. A specifically relevant target group are your fellow PhD candidates working on PhD projects all over the world. As the experiences of these young academics are very comparable, your blogs about your research and general PhD issues, PhD careers, and tips and tricks are appreciated and shared by a large community of international peers. The website is visited by a still growing number of visitors from all over the world.

1.2 Website content

On the website you will find:

- Blog Entries: On the home page is a stream of blog entries. These are posted in chronological order with the most recent first. They are categorized for topic (e.g., scientific area of FSS departments, PhD issues, Tips & Tricks), and tagged. Under each blog there is a possibility to

add reactions. The website also lists the most popular blogs, and you will find a Twitter stream from @SocSciVU. Social media share buttons allow for easy sharing.

- Upcoming events: Up-to-date schedule of VU-GSSS courses, PhD platform events, colloquia at FSS, elsewhere at VU and outside VU.
- People section: Profiles with picture of all PhD candidates connected to the various departments within FSS: photos, brief information, link to full profile on VU website, link to published blogs.

2. Organization of Socializing Science blogging

The blog is edited by Camiel Beukeboom, an editorial board with PhD candidates from various departments, and an assistant – Alexandra Filius – who runs the daily management of the website and editorial process of the submitted blogs.

To submit a blog or blog posts idea, and for all questions and remarks email SocializingScience.fsw@vu.nl. Other postings for the website besides blogs are also very welcome (e.g., video's, funny comics, reading tips, announcements of upcoming events or brief notes about past event, agenda items, etc.). We strive to keep the website alive by posting new blogs regularly.

2.1 Editing process

Before you start writing a blog post please have a look at the tips at section 3. These tips will for instance help you to find a clear focus and text structure, which are crucial elements when writing a good blog. After you wrote your blog, check it later whether your text meets these criteria before you submit. If you have questions, or want to discuss a blog idea, don't hesitate to contact us; we may be able to help you.

Structure and a clear focus are important. This will take some careful writing and a few rounds of revision. When you submit your blog the first time you will receive feedback from the assistant. After you revised it, your blog is sent to the editorial board and you will receive suggestions for improvement. After you processed the feedback, your blog will published on the website. The aim is to ensure that your post clearly and coherently exposes one argument or message by maintaining a focus throughout the piece, and uses a proper style, text structure and sentence formulations.

2.2 Blog topics

PhD candidates are free to determine the content of their blogs as long as it is within a Social Science scope or about PhD relevant issues. Blogging allows you to show the practical relevance of your expertise and experience, but off course you can also write about PhD issues or science in general (e.g., a PhD experience, tips and tricks). Obviously you should not write a blog that is overlapping too much with an already existing one. It does help if you inform us in time about your planned contributions (see above, organization).

Below is a non-exhaustive list of potential blog topics:

- Conference or workshop visits. Examples include:
- <http://bit.ly/14uOCC6> "Visiting Conferences abroad: cherries on top of an academic cake or absolute necessity? By Demet Yazilitas

- Attended courses
- Attended colloquia within or outside the VU. It would be great if most or many colloquia by prominent researchers held within our own Faculty are covered in a blog on the website.
- Experiences as a PhD student (e.g., frustrations, emotional roller coasters, celebrations and great enjoyment). Examples include:
 - <http://bit.ly/1C2aU9G> “Thank you for your kind permission to reprint.” NOT by *Gijsbert van Itersen Scholten*
- Advise for PhD candidates (e.g., what to gain from visiting conferences, writing tips). Examples include:
 - <http://bit.ly/1wTPOXH> “Is participating in academic conferences worth the time and money” by Anouk van Leeuwen
 - <http://bit.ly/1yeX82U> “Three good reasons to write like a monk” by Annemiek van Os
- Tips and tricks for PhD candidates (e.g., how to make a poster, how to use powerpoint). Examples include:
 - <http://bit.ly/1nw16PA> “How to make a successful (and attractive) research poster? Tips and tricks” by Tamara Bouwman.
- Summary of own (preliminary) study results
- Summary / description of own written articles
 - <http://bit.ly/1vgc02k> “Born into inequality: How neighbourhoods influence birth outcomes in the Netherlands” by Vera Schölmerich
- Report of PhD defense
- Summary of dissertation
- Reflections on actual topics (e.g. in the news, TV show, etc.) from a scientific perspective
- Contributions to societal debates
 - <http://bit.ly/11GxAOY> “Why the poor remain poor” by Vera Schölmerich
- Discussing scientific practice (e.g., pressure to publish, ethical issues, sloppy science, etc)
- Discussing the use of academic blogging
- Read Literature
- Methodological tools or methods
- Etc. etc.

3. Concrete tips for writing good blogs

Compared to scientific articles, a blog gives you more writing freedom and your style can be much looser (i.e., informal and entertaining). However, just like an article a blog certainly also needs to be proper, correct and well written. Structure and a clear focus are thus important. Therefore we provide you tips and tics in the following section.

3.1 Tips & trics

We learned that writing a good blog boils down to the following general issues:

- 1) **What is the message?:** Irrespective of the topic, it is essential that you can clearly explain why your blog is interesting and relevant for the audience, and what the reader will gain from reading your post. Therefore, it is pertinent that you figure out what the message or

learning is that you want to convey to your readers. This learning must be clear right from the start (i.e., the title and the first paragraph, see also 3 below). It helps if you make it personal; when your blog provides advice or tips you can reveal what you have gained yourself. Personal stories and experiences are also more appealing and make for an interesting read. You could also relate to everyday questions or current issues to make your work relevant and appealing for a wide readership.¹

For example: When you write a report of a conference you could sum up the details of the venue, the speakers, and what you have done, but this hardly provides worthwhile information for your readers. It will be more interesting when you talk about what you have gained from visiting the conference (e.g., your personal “aha Erlebnis”, frustration, or learning), as your readers may then profit from your experience.

- 2) **Your blog should have a clear focus:** Note that when you think about the message or learning you want to convey in your blog (see 1), it is better to focus on one main coherent topic than to cover many topics in one blog. If you note that you find it hard to convey one clear message in your first paragraph (see 1) you might realize that you have material for two or even more blogs.
- 3) **The text must be well structured:** The blog text should have an opening paragraph, a main body (usually consisting of a number of separated paragraphs) and a concluding paragraph.
 - Opening paragraph: Upon reading the first few lines, or only the headline (which is usually also in the tweet about your blog), the reader should get a good idea of the blog's main focus and learning (see 1 and 2). It is important that this paragraph immediately catches the reader's attention and interest. When the reader knows what they will gain from reading the post, they will be lured to continue reading. Don't be afraid to use provoking ideas and titles to trigger people. You can for instance use an anecdote, a quote, a bold statement, pose an important (research) question, or refer to a current happening. Also explain its' importance and relevance, and announce what this blog will add to it. In this opening you thus raise a relevant question or issue, and suggest it will (at least partly) be answered in the remainder of the blog.
 - In the main body of the text you work out a number of subtopics in separate paragraphs that work towards resolving the issue raised in the opening paragraph. This may differ depending on your topic, but usually you follow an hourglass structure; start out broadly and only then specify to details of lesser importance. When you discuss research on a particular important research questions separate paragraphs usually cover prior research, method, results.
 - The concluding paragraph ideally refers back to your broad and catchy opening. Here you provide the resolution or answer to the issue or question raised in the title and opening paragraph. If this is done well the reader will be left satisfied, as he/she has gained a learning that was promised at the start of the blog.
- 4) **The topic must be easy to understand.** Keeping in mind the goal of our blog to translate scientific research to a broad target audience, our blogs should have a popular scientific

flavor. This means that potentially difficult information should be well explained, interesting, and easy and pleasant to read. Also avoid details or terms that are only understandable or relevant in your scientific subfield (no jargon), remember your diverse potential audience.

- 5) ***The text should be easy to read:*** Note that reading online content is structurally different from reading print content. Content on the Internet therefore has to be particularly easy to digest and easily scannable, otherwise you will quickly lose a reader. This is already facilitated by the above points, which help the reader to quickly understand the main points and organization of the content, and allowing them to scan for the information they need, while bypassing the rest (if they wish). The following textual aspects are also important:
- Keep it concise. As a guideline, use between 500 and 1000 words for one blog. When you extensively violate this norm you run the risk of “TLDNR” responses (too long did not read).
 - Avoid large blocks of narrative text; make sure it’s “chunked out” (broken down into smaller paragraphs of text separated by a white line break, and/or subheadings). The first line of each new paragraph should reveal the paragraph’s content. You may also want to highlight buzzwords, important passages or quotes in your blog in bold.
 - Use brief sentences! When a sentence is much longer than approximately one line, break it up.
 - Make it personal: Use of the I-perspective, and/or address the audience directly (you)
 - Use active voice (I conducted research) rather than passive voice (research was conducted by me).
- 6) ***Your blog must look good:*** Your blog will be posted in the website’s format with your picture above the text. Under your blog a brief bio is posted. Powerful visuals that are relevant to the main topic are also important to make it appealing (e.g., photos, drawings, figures; check copy rights or use free stock photos), so please submit these with your blog. Also make sure to add references and links to other sources (other blogs or articles) in your blog. This does not only contribute to your credibility but will also help you in terms of search engine optimization, links are also typically reciprocated.

3.2 Blog structure Template

You can use the following structure template to help you write your blog. This template is based on the concrete writing tips described above.

Template Socializing Science Blogging

- Guideline word count: 500-1000 words.
- Keep the message simple, do not dig into extensive discussions or use jargon.
- Use brief sentences.
- Use I perspective.
- Use active voice.

Headline

Make clear what the main message or the learning is: formulate in one sentence what the message of this blog story is.

Opening paragraph

Make the opening catchy by using personal stories and experiences, or relate to everyday questions or current issues. Suggest it will (at least partly) be answered in the remainder of the blog: Explain the importance and relevance of the topic + announce what this blog will add to it.

Body

Work out a number of subtopics in separate paragraphs that work towards resolving the issue raised in the opening paragraph (usually you follow an hourglass structure; start out broadly and only then specify to details of lesser importance.)

Remember to keep it simple: Potentially difficult information should be well explained and interesting, easy and pleasant to read. You can use a case and examples to explain a specific term.

“Chunk out” your text: make paragraphs.

Concluding paragraph

Make your story round: ideally you refer back to your catchy opening. Provide the resolution or answer to the issue or question raised in the title and opening paragraph. Keep in mind that the reader will be satisfied when she gained the learning promised at the start of the blog.

Finishing touch:

- Submit at least two powerful visuals to support your story.
- Submit references and links to other sources.

Other important tips:

- Whether you write for a blog, a magazine, an online newspaper or academic journal, your 'presence' should always be professional and passionate.
- Make sure to **share your blog** in your own social media account(s) (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, ResearchGate), post it on your website, and email it to potentially interested colleagues. All this will increase traffic to your blog, and to the Socializing Science website.
- Make sure to follow-up on the blogs you have published – **always reply to comments** and reactions posted with your blog and check whether and how it is shared (see 7). If you see spam reactions, please notify us.
- Learning to write good blogs is a matter of practice, but also of looking at good examples and advise by others^{7, 10, 11}. Thus, make sure to **follow new posts on Socializing Science**.
- Get involved in the scientific blogosphere (most easy through Facebook or Twitter) by **reading blogs and posts** about PhD issues and research in your field. You can gain a lot of information and stay up-to-date about your field and what others publish about it.

4. What to gain from science blogging?

In addition to the traditional outlets for scientific research, scientific discourse nowadays increasingly occurs on fast online blogging sites hosted by individual researchers or groups. Also, many interactive scientific news sites post (opinion) stories and allow reactions.

Some scholars manage to become well known experts in a given field just by continuously blogging about their work and build a repertoire of content. Will all this take tremendous amounts of my time? Not really. Andrea Doucet, professor of sociology at Brock University in Ontario, encapsulated this well: "I blog not in addition to what I do, but as part of what I do."¹

1. Creating an online presence

When your blogs fits the general topic of your PhD project, you can create a coherent image and show your area of expertise. By delivering valuable and insightful content in your blogs you can show your expertise and gain reputation in your specific field. Media attention, networking- or career opportunities may be the result.² Creating such a public face is particularly important for graduate students, given their lack of established publishing records³.

It makes perfect sense to add your blogs to your publication list on your CV. Given that many PhD candidates end up working outside academia, your online image may be very useful someday and will have a real impact when you apply for future jobs. Potential future employers may get to know you through your blogs even before you apply. And when they don't know your online presence yet they will when you apply, because a first thing they likely do is google you.

2. Publishing quickly

In contrast to the traditional publication cycle in scientific journals that usually rewards you with a publication after approximately two years (or more) of hard labor, blogging is very fast. The style

and brevity of a blog allow you to start producing mini-publications right now, which makes blogging a very satisfactory experience.

3. Writing with more freedom

In comparison to scientific publications, you have much more freedom in blogging. Not only in your choice of topics, but also in writing style which is less uptight, and not governed by strict regulations. There are no strict gatekeepers and you will not be criticized in lengthy reviews before being allowed to publish. Yet, you obviously still have to carefully consider your blog structure and writing (see above).

4. Blogging fosters your own understanding

In order to explain something complex to a broad audience you really first need to grasp what is most important to it. Blogging forces you to think about the real world relevance of scientific work, and about ways to explain it in a comprehensive manner. As Einstein puts it: "If you can't explain it simply, you don't understand it well enough". In the words of blogging PhD Student Rebecca Hogue: "I like to get my ideas out there, and by sharing them (and writing them down) they become more solid."³ In short, blogging helps you to make sense of your research and can be seen as a form of "learning by teaching".

5. Blogging enhances your writing skills

Blogging is a good practice for your writing skills. Since a blog forces you to get to the point fast and to formulate the core of topic, you will learn to get rid of unnecessary detail and jargon. You will also learn how to effectively structure your text, how to formulate clearly, and how to tailor content for your audience.

6. Reaching a larger and different audience

The traditional scientific publishing models keep scientific work inaccessible to the public, despite the fact that much of the academic research is publicly funded^{2,4}. Blogging - as a kind of open access publishing⁴ - can help to partly overcome this problem. By means of blogs scientists can reach a readership for whom the research is relevant but normally have no access to it. Moreover, blogging allows scientists to explain the importance of their work, and to add a valuable scientific perspective to current public debates.

7. Blogging is interactive

Blogging provides you with rapid feedback from others, especially when your blog is disseminated on social networking sites. The socializing science website also allows readers to comment. This can be both satisfactory as well as instructive. Your "ideas can be challenged, extended or affirmed - in almost real time."² The feedback may make you realize that you should rethink or reformulate things more clearly.

Moreover, this new interactivity in online scientific discourse has enabled researchers to publish thoughts and ideas that may be important but that are not fit for scientific journals. It also allows them to quickly vent their criticism on published work by other scientists. You can use your blogs to discuss or criticize articles or presentations. Recently, blogs have also been used to discuss

questionable activities or fraud of researchers.⁵ Blogging allows scientists to speak out quickly, and to discuss and combat misinformation. Blogs will also allow you to react quickly when others criticize your work.

8. Valorization and external impact

Recent developments have shown an increasing emphasis on societal relevance and real world impact in the evaluation of scientific research. The value of valorization has been settled in official agreements like the 'San Francisco Declaration' and the 'Standard Evaluation Protocol 2015-2021 (SEP)' agreed upon by important institutions like VSNU, KNAW and NWO. An important means for scientists to increase their societal impact and to valorize their work is by publishing about it on publicly accessible blog sites. Many scholars agree that this form of scientific communication has many advantages for academics. Below are a number of reasons that have been put forward to explain why blogging is both fun and useful for academics.^{6, 3, 4, 9}

While obtaining publications and citations in traditional scientific journals remains obviously very important for scholars (i.e., H-index), there is more and more recognition of the importance of external impact. Research can be said to have external impact when an auditable influence is achieved upon a non-academic organization, e.g., your research is used by a business corporation, a government agency, a civil society organization or a professional media organization.

In other words, we need to show that our academic efforts leave the scientific ivory tower. As noted above, the valorization of knowledge also becomes more and more important in the evaluation of universities and for grant proposals. Because blogging gives you the opportunity to communicate your research beyond academic circles and reach a wider audience, it may help you to achieve external impact.

9. Blogging as a mean for networking

The above points also highlight that blogging is a great means for networking. Your blogs can easily spread through social networks and you will consequently gain attention from a larger and different audience. That way, you can get in touch with other bloggers, other academics with similar interests who work in different areas, or people from the industry or government. A recent study on academic blogging showed that 73% of the analyzed blogs was directed towards other academics.⁵ While this last point suggests that public outreach is thus less crucial for scientific blogging, it becomes clear that network possibilities with other academics are likely to happen.

10. Gain ECTS for Scientific Blogging

VU-GSSS PhD candidates can earn credit points by blogging (published on Socializing Science blog or another outlet). When a PhD candidate has published a number of blogs, or when employment ends, he or she can apply for ECTS. Please have a look in the Graduate School's Study Guide for more information about obtaining ECTS with science blogging activities.

¹ Shipman, Matt (November, 2013). Expand Your Audience by Sneaking Up On Science. Retrieved December 13th, 2013, from http://www.scilogs.com/communication_breakdown/expand-your-audience-2013/

² Grant, B. (October 2012). *You aren't blogging yet?!?* Retrieved December 13th, 2013, from <http://www.the-scientist.com/?articles.view/articleNo/29276/title/You-Arent-Blogging-Yet---/>

³ Fullick, M. (October 21, 2011). *More than a storm in a teacup: The debate on academic blogging*. Retrieved December 9th, 2013, from <http://www.universityaffairs.ca/speculative-diction/more-than-a-storm-in-a-teacup-the-debate-on-academic-blogging/>

⁴ Thompson, P., & Mewburn, I. (December 2nd, 2013). *Why do academics blog? It's not for public outreach, research shows*. Retrieved December 8th, 2013, from http://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/blog/2013/dec/02/why-do-academics-blog-research?CMP=tw_t_gu

⁵ Lorch, M. (2013). *Accusations of fraud spur a revolution in scientific publishing*. Retrieved December 13th, 2013, from <http://www.theguardian.com/science/blog/2013/nov/08/fraud-revolution-scientific-publishing-peer-review>

⁷ Scheloske, M. (March, 2012). *Wege aus der Nische: Was man von erfolgreichen Wissenschaftsblogs lernen kann*. Retrieved December 7th, 2013, from <http://www.wissenswerkstatt.net/2012/03/13/wege-aus-der-nische-was-man-von-erfolgreichen-wissenschaftsblogs-lernen-kann/>

⁸ Terras, M. (April, 2012). *The verdict: is blogging or tweeting about research papers worth it?*. Retrieved December 13, 2013, from <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2012/04/19/blog-tweeting-papers-worth-it/>

⁹ Munger, Dave (2013). *How to write a good research blog post*. Retrieved December 13, 2013, from <http://scienceofblogging.com/how-to-write-a-good-research-blog-post/>

¹⁰ Lantsoght, Eva (June 2012). *Ten great blogs for PhD students*. Retrieved December 13, 2013, from <http://phdtalk.blogspot.nl/2012/06/ten-great-blogs-for-phd-students.html>

⁶ Rob le Pair (maart, 2012). *Het nieuwe publiceren: communiceren over onderzoek* Retrieved December 13th, 2013, from <http://roblepair.nl/het-nieuwe-publiceren-communiceren-over-onderzoek/>