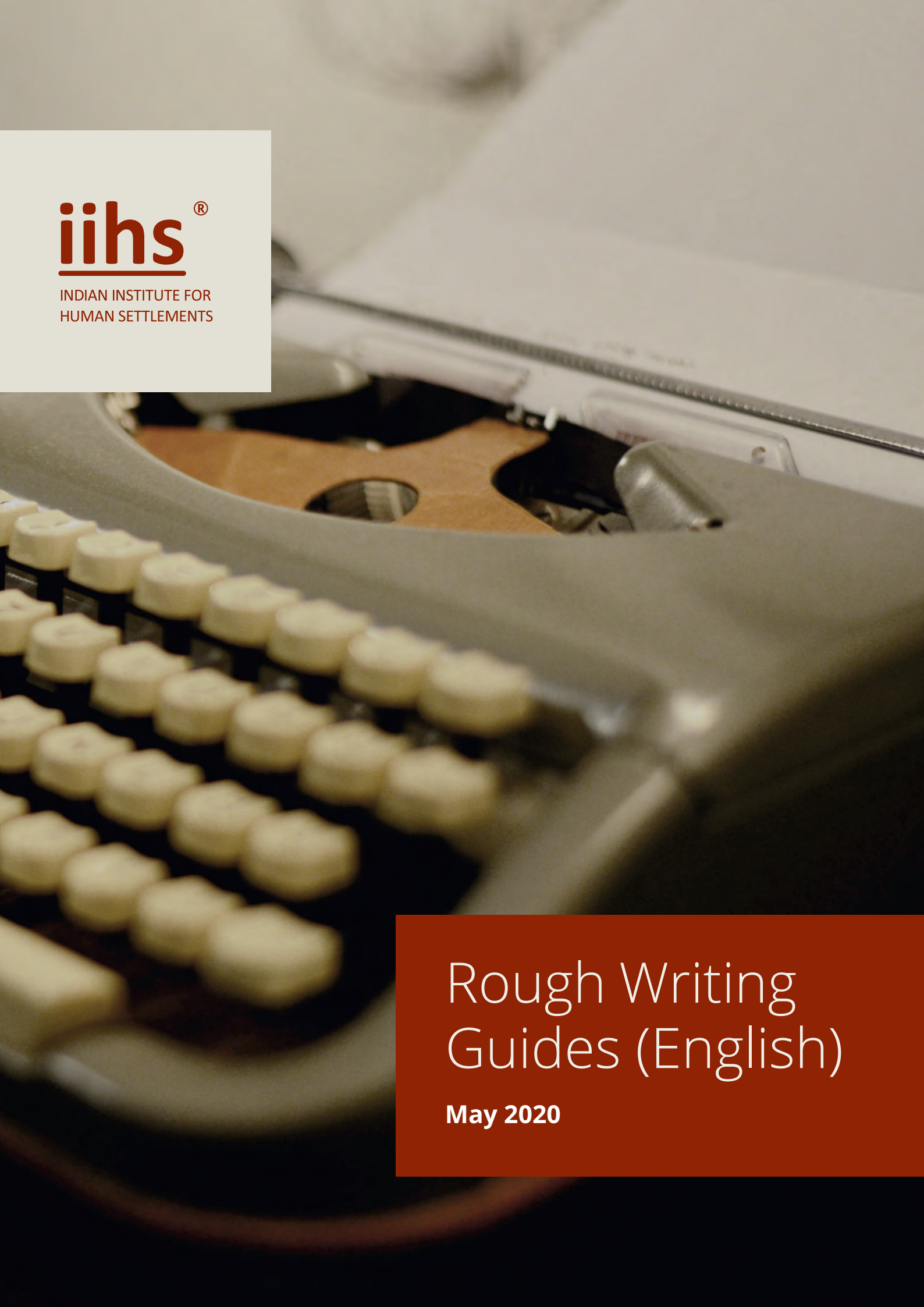


iihs®

INDIAN INSTITUTE FOR
HUMAN SETTLEMENTS

Rough Writing Guides (English)

May 2020

iihs®

INDIAN INSTITUTE FOR
HUMAN SETTLEMENTS

Rough Writing Guides (English)

AUTHORS
Archita Suryanarayanan, Nishtha Vadehra, Rekha Raghunathan

DESIGN & LAYOUT
Vikrant M S, IIHS Design Team

EDITING
Archita Suryanarayanan, Anjana Balakrishnan, Kaavya P Kumar, Mandara Vishwanath, Nishtha Vadehra, Rekha Raghunathan, IIHS Word Lab

e. DOI: https://doi.org/10.24943/RWG.2020

Contents

Journal Articles

Journal Articles

By definition, anything you write has the function of helping your reader understand better something they want to understand well. (McEnerney, 2014)

Structure of a journal article

- **Title**
  - Choose an engaging and accurate title and subtitle. This is your first chance to grab the reader's attention. The title also provides vital cues for readers to understand the rest of the paper.

- **Abstract**
  - The abstract is a dense summary of an article.
  - This is what usually helps journal editors, reviewers and readers decide whether or not to read the rest of the article.
  - An abstract should include the following information:
    - Context—thematic and geographic
    - Main argument
    - Methodology/approach
    - Key finding/s
    - Value or implications of the study/project
    - Relevance to the aims of the journal

- **Keywords**
  - Keywords help make your article discoverable, so choose carefully. Usually, it helps to go with a mix of general and specific keywords.

- **Introduction**
  - Build a problem or establish a gap in scholarship around your subject.
  - Mention your interest in it (optional, but often a useful entry point for readers).
  - Set the context—thematic and geographic.
  - Introduce the methodology or approach used in the article—primary/secondary data, methods and tools.
  - Have a thesis statement or main argument.
    - Make sure this is clear and focussed. Topic sentences are useful for this ('This paper argues…').
    - The rest of the paper has to speak to this central claim.
  - Mention key findings.
  - What are the value and implications of your research? Why should the reader care? What is at stake?
  - Provide a roadmap to the rest of the paper—this is optional but useful.

- **Section headings**
  - These give your article structure and make it more readable.
  - You don't have to stick to standard section headings like 'Introduction', 'Methodology', 'Literature Review', etc., unless the journal submission guidelines insist on it.

- **Literature review**
  - Use this section to enrich the problem: what are the key debates in the field?
  - Acknowledge prior work that is relevant to yours. Position yourself as an informed and engaged member of a community that is producing knowledge in a specific field.
  - Do not simply list studies; respond to them. Use this section to create tension/build gaps in research in order to locate your own work.
  - Exercise academic integrity: quote or paraphrase external sources, but always cite the authors.

- **Methodology**
  - Include details of how the study was conducted—site of the study, duration, tools used for data collection and analysis, etc.—and offer a rationale for selecting a particular method.
  - Mention challenges faced, if any.
  - This is what helps readers assess the reliability of your findings.
  - This section is often useful for other researchers in your field, especially if the methodology adopted is innovative.

- **Findings and discussion**
  - You can treat this as one section or break it into two (results/findings + discussion/analysis).
  - Do not simply report or summarise your findings; analyse and interpret them, and connect them with your main argument.

- **Conclusion**
  - Use this section to close the loop from your introduction, but also suggest a trajectory beyond your paper.
    - Summarise the main findings.
    - Mention implications for further research and/or practice.
    - Include action points (optional).
  - Reinforce the value of your work.
  - Briefly mention the limitations of your study, if any.
  - Avoid introducing new information in this section.

- **References/Bibliography**
  - This is an alphabetical list of all sources cited (quoted or paraphrased) in the article.
  - The format depends on the house style followed by the journal.

- **Acknowledgements** (optional)

What editors and reviewers look for

- **Relevance**
  - Does the paper adhere to the standards and scope of the journal?
  - Is the topic timely and important?
  - Is the study innovative or original? Does it challenge or add to existing knowledge?
- **Structure and clarity**
  - Is the research question clear?
  - Is the article well-organised?
  - Is there a clear and logical flow of thought and narrative?
  - Are the title and abstract useful and appropriate?
- **Methodology and analysis**
  - Are the study design, methods and analysis suited to the research question?
  - Is the methodology clearly explained?
  - Are the tables and figures appropriate in content and number?
  - Is the statistical analysis of the data sound?
  - Does the theory connect to the data?
- **Reliability and significance of conclusions**
  - Do the findings follow clearly and logically from the discussion?
  - Does the author answer the questions he/she sets out to answer?
  - Are you convinced by the author's results? Why or why not?

Source: *Urbanisation* journal review guidelines

Other points to keep in mind

- Read journal articles and other relevant literature to familiarise yourself with the current conversations and debates in your field.
- Identify the most suitable journal/s for your work. Considerations could include the following:
    - Impact factor and other such metrics
    - Journals where you have found quality articles in your field (you could also ask your colleagues which journals they find useful)
    - Journals that have published prominent researchers in your field
    - Whether or not there is a submission fee
    - Whether or not the journal is open access
    - Frequency of publication and publication timelines
    - Steer clear of predatory journals.
    - The Library team is happy to help.

- Carefully go through the journal/s you intend to submit your article to—the aims and scope as well as submission guidelines.
- You can only submit to one journal at a time, so prioritise.
- Create a structure before you begin writing.
- Put some thought in framing your headings and sub-headings to ensure logical flow.
- It is hard to convey complex ideas with clarity. Try to keep your language simple and accessible.
- Academic writing does not have to be boring. Read extensively and diversely. Use your field notes. Learn from scholars whose writing styles you admire. All these will help you forge your own voice.

List of references

McEnerney, L. (2014, June 27). *Leadership Lab: The craft of writing effectively*. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vtIzMaLkCaM

Public Writing

Public Writing

Public writing includes op-eds, commentary pieces, blogs, data stories, photo stories, reportage, feature articles and news analysis, among others.

Why is public writing important?

- It can drive debates and conversations around topics that are otherwise part of more structured spaces (such as educational institutions, think tanks, etc.).
- Research is often funded using public money. So it is only fair for the public to have access to it.
- It is a great way to draw attention to your scholarly work, which tends to be published only in journals and books, which many people may not have access to. A blog post or op-ed based on a journal article will almost certainly bring more visibility in wider circles than academia.

Can anyone write for the public?

- Yes and no. If you have your own blog, you can write about anything, but if you want to write a more informed article for a wider readership than your family and friends, it will take a bit of effort.
- The digital revolution has created new media outlets. It has enabled much greater access to information. Getting published is not as restrictive or difficult as it used to be.
- Multiple language platforms are also emerging. Translation is gaining popularity because of this.
- Diverse forms of writing as well as platforms have emerged, making it easier to write blogs, data stories, infographics and photo essays, among others.
- Most online platforms—such as Scroll.in, The Wire, Indiaspend, Huffpost, e-versions of all print newspapers—have syndication deals with other papers including international ones. Many have blogs sections with wide readerships, where it is easier to publish.

What do editors look for in an article?

Editors usually look for pieces that are well-written, timely and provocative, and not necessarily pure expertise. The idea is to generate discussion among a wider audience and drive public debate.

How do you pitch a piece?

You need to tell an editor **why** they must publish your piece, **why now**, and **what** you will be telling the reader that they haven't already read. This means that you need to

have a good sense for the topic you are writing about and how it has been written about across print and online platforms.

Here is a list of questions that could help you write a sharp pitch:

- What is the issue you are writing about? What are your key arguments and takeaways?
- Why are you writing it now: is it timely and relevant? Is there a news peg you can use (for example, a recent event or policy announcement, anniversary, day of observance)? If you haven't written your piece with a specific event in mind, you could look out for one at the time of pitching.
- How are you equipped to say something about the issue? (This could include primary or secondary research.)
- What other articles have been written about this? (Include links) What is new about what you have to say? (This could be new information or a different perspective.)
- What is the evidence you draw upon to support your arguments (for example, data, reports, primary research, expert quotes)? You could share samples of such quotes or data.

Before you start writing, ask yourself

- If you have a clear point to make. If yes, what is it? (This is your topic—person, place, issue, incident, or the thing that is the primary focus of the piece.)
- Who would/should care? It is important to know the specific reader group you are targeting and why.
- What is the overall message you want to get across?
- How is your message different from already published opinions or analysis, if any?

Planning your piece

- Do some research to see if the topic has already been written about on media platforms. If so, think about what new angle or opinion you can add to the conversation.
- Note down the points you want to write about in any order. Create a word cloud or mind map if those work better for you.
- Shortlist the most pertinent four or five arguments.
- Create an outline.
- Divide your piece into paragraphs—think about this carefully. Each paragraph needs to make one major point. List the relevant sub-points that need to go into each paragraph.
- While people tend to add a title and teaser towards the end of the writing process, having even a tentative title at the beginning can help you hold your piece together right from the start.

Why is it important to have a structure in place before you start writing?

- Given the number of reading choices people are faced with, it is safe to assume that you may lose a reader unless your writing has a logical progression of ideas.
- Structuring arguments before starting to write brings greater clarity to the piece.

Start writing your first draft.

Broad structure of an op-ed

Lede: sets the scene for your article. This could be a news hook or hot topic.
Thesis: statement of argument, explicit or implied.
Argument: based on evidence (such as statistics, news, research, expert quotes, personal experience, etc.).

Lede: The hook

- This is what will set the scene and grab the reader's attention. So make it count.
- Say something dramatic, refer to pop culture (even turn it on its head), use important dates (World Water Day, Best Friends Day, the anniversary of a historical event, etc.) or refer to a new research study.

Thesis: Statement of argument

- Connect your broad theme to your hook in the first paragraph. Focus on one issue or idea. Briefly express your opinion.

Argument: Based on evidence

- Write one to three paragraphs for each supporting reason, beginning with the most important. Back your viewpoint with factual, researched or first-hand information.
- End with a paragraph reinforcing your thesis. Your conclusion should tie back to the lede. A strong ending usually provides closure to the issues raised in the introduction; calls the reader to action; and could even be the most memorable part of an op-ed. So put some careful thought into your conclusion.

Specific tips for op-eds

- If a technical detail is not essential to your argument, do not use it.
- Simple language is not simple thinking; it means you are being considerate of readers who lack your expertise in a subject.
- Personal, conversational and humorous (when appropriate) writing is important for readability, and to capture the reader's attention.

- Keep your paragraphs short and focused on one main idea.
- Use facts, statistics, examples and studies to support your arguments.
- You cannot solve all of the world's problems in 750 words, so be satisfied with making a single point clearly and persuasively.
- Stay current. Follow the news—both general and specific—relevant to your areas of expertise.
- Respect your reader. Never underestimate your reader's intelligence or overestimate their level of prior knowledge.
- If you are writing an op-ed, have an opinion and state it clearly and forcefully. Many opinion pieces turn out to be explanations of an issue rather than knowledgeable arguments.
- It is perfectly alright to criticise ideas, reasoning or positions that you disagree with but it is not okay to make personal attacks. Be civil.
- Presenting both sides of an issue is a powerful tool. After you make your own case, bring forward the strongest contrary case and unpack it.
- While writing about a problem, suggest a simple solution and present a successful example of it working elsewhere.
- Putting the personal in your writing can help draw the reader in. Why do you care? And by extension, why should anyone else care about the issue?

Good writing tips

- Avoid using technical terms and jargon unless absolutely essential—in which case, explain them.
- Understand the voice that your piece needs to take. Personal pieces are usually written in the first person. Institutional pieces need to be written in third person, keeping in mind the institutional position and not the author's personal opinion.
- Use concrete details such as names of people and places to make your writing come alive in your reader's mind.
- Where relevant, add photographs, infographics and other visuals.
- When elucidating a point, do not use more than two or three examples; it becomes tiring to read. If it is necessary to mention more, make a bulleted list.
- Re-read your piece and cut out anything that might seem irrelevant to the main point your piece is trying to make. When you have a tight word count, every word matters. Catch repetition and redundant words and phrases such as 'the fact that', 'foreseeable future', 'the point I am trying to make', 'needless to say', etc.
- If you are using data, use visualisations to present it rather than mentioning figures in the text. Patterns reveal much more than plain numbers.
- Edit, revise and rewrite. First drafts are rarely ever final drafts. Consider showing your piece to someone you know and trust before submitting it.
- Stick to the word limit. This is important when you plan to submit to external platforms. Plus or minus 20–25 words is okay—not more than that.

Data Stories

Data Stories

Data stories present key data points from practice or research work to explain an issue or support an argument, to a general audience. The data is set against a narrative and the broader context of the topic being presented.

It is not necessary to present every single finding of a survey or report in a data story; the focus should be on key points of interest, one particular part of the study, or even just one interesting finding around which a compelling narrative can be built.

Purpose of data stories

- To generate wider interest around research or practice in specific sectors.
- To inform and build awareness on research or practice work that has implications for the public.
- To reach policymakers and other practitioners who read public media platforms.

What data stories are not

- A presentation of all the findings of a survey.
- A summary of a piece of research or practice report.
- A number-heavy piece not tied to a broader narrative.

Audience

- General public, often busy and with no prior knowledge of the issue.
- Policymakers, practitioners from similar or different sectors (with varying levels of prior knowledge).

Planning a data story

When planning a data story, identifying potential platforms to pitch the story to can help with understanding the audience to tailor the story accordingly. The search for suitable platforms also helps you come across previously published pieces around your topic and understand the writing style, level of detail, kind of topics covered, etc.

Before you begin writing, ask yourself the following questions:

- **What stands out in the report or study?**

This is usually highlighted early on. Unlike a report, which would begin with the aims of the study, followed by methods and conclude with findings, for a data story you need to highlight the most important findings (hopefully one with a human interest perspective) in the first couple of paragraphs to draw the interest of the reader.

- **Why is that data point/highlight important for the public?**

Bringing in a public interest perspective is essential. Links with factors like health, environment, pollution, water quality, jobs, housing are a good way to do this, and these connections should be made right at the beginning. For example, for a data story on the training of masons in building septic tanks, you could begin with emphasising the consequences (health hazards, groundwater pollution) of incorrectly built tanks.

- **How can you quickly explain the background and context?**

All technical terms and insider jargon needs to be explained briefly, with just enough information to help the reader understand the concept. Avoid unnecessary, long-drawn details. Provide a quick summary of the organisation, the project or study and the main research question. This information will help the audience understand the relevance of the data points you discuss.

- **Can you keep it timely by finding a news peg?**

A news peg always helps in keeping your piece relevant by linking it with current events and making it easier to get accepted by publications. Your research could be pegged to recent happenings like a global development in the same sector, a specific event (like a natural disaster, water crisis, a strike in a particular city), a special occasion (World Water Day) or the anniversary of an event (three years since the launch of the Smart Cities Mission in Pune).

- **How can you build a narrative? Where can you get this additional information from?**

Editors of media platforms love anecdotes and examples. Using plenty of examples from the field can really help build a narrative. These can work especially well as the lead sentence, and can also be interspersed through the story alongside your findings and numbers. If the research is ongoing, make sure to conduct interviews and identify quotes that would work well with your data story. If fieldwork has already been completed, think of other ways to get this information (going back to the field, getting in touch with partners, looking through existing field notes for interesting asides).

- **If the issue has already been written about, what new perspectives can you bring out?**

Look for other public writing on the same topic to see what new data and perspectives you can highlight to make your pitch stand out. Topics written about often (such as lack of toilets, inadequate public transport, issues of housing resettlement) need new perspectives or new ways of presenting data to capture and hold the audience's interest.

- **Have any solutions or recommendations been proposed?**

Readers and editors of mainstream publications are usually interested in recommendations, solutions and suggestions on the way forward rather than stories that highlight the problem alone. Look for these to conclude your data story more effectively.

Other things to note

- Please get in touch with the Word Lab before you start writing for help with finalising your topic and structuring the piece. This will reduce the number of changes afterwards, at the editorial stage.

- The length of a data story can vary depending on the topic and the publication, but it is usually between 800 and 1,400 words.

- Before writing, create a structure and note down the important points and arguments gleaned from your research. Write a short pitch on what the piece is about and why it is relevant—you will need to send this to potential

publishers. Writing a short strapline also helps firm up the idea and structure the flow.

- Check if the publication you wish to approach has its own writing guide or requirements and make sure you follow them.

- Use additional information and sources (besides your own research). Ensure that all secondary sources are authentic, well-known websites or publications and that none of the links are broken.

- Do not use academic citations. Hyperlink sources into your piece if they are meant for an online publication. If they are not, they can be quoted as a sentence.

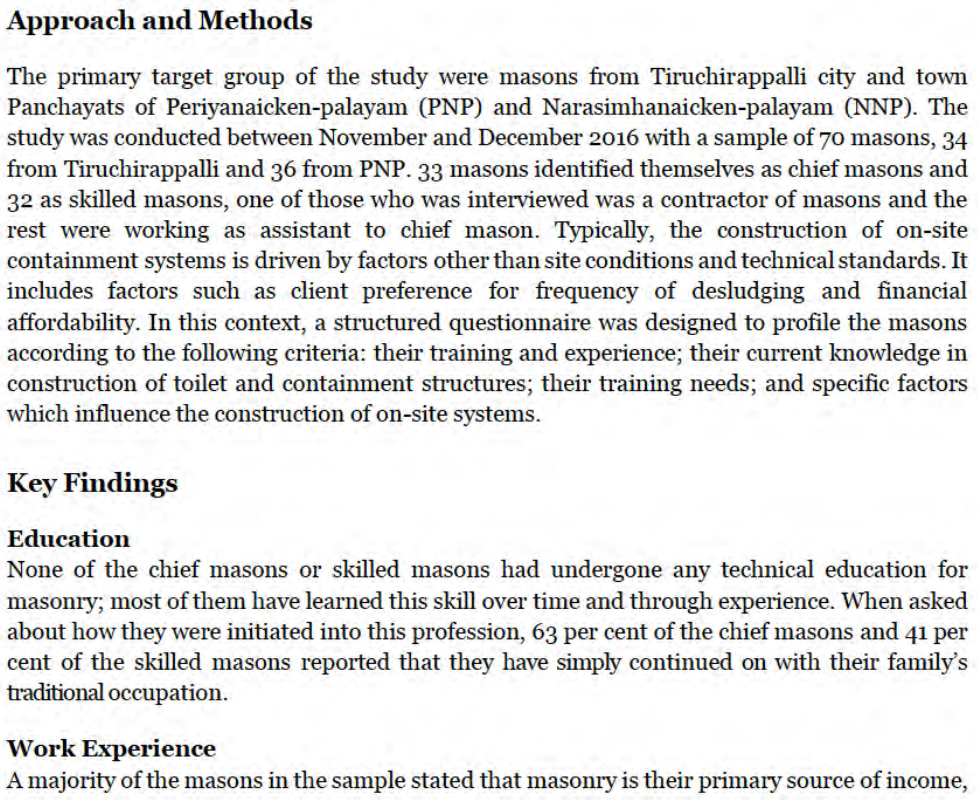
- Think about ways in which you can integrate visual data with your story, such as charts and graphs.

- After writing, read through the piece to check if it is coherent, conveys your main points and if it follows your original pitch and strapline. Check for flow, spelling and grammar.

Writing a data story from research: An example

Here is an example of a data story on why the training of masons is essential as part of India's sanitation drive, written based on a report that presents findings from a survey conducted in two town panchayats in Tamil Nadu.

Excerpt from the published report:



Approach and Methods

The primary target group of the study were masons from Tiruchirappalli city and town Panchayats of Periyanaicken-palayam (PNP) and Narasimhanaicken-palayam (NNP). The study was conducted between November and December 2016 with a sample of 70 masons, 34 from Tiruchirappalli and 36 from PNP. 33 masons identified themselves as chief masons and 32 as skilled masons, one of those who was interviewed was a contractor of masons and the rest were working as assistant to chief mason. Typically, the construction of on-site containment systems is driven by factors other than site conditions and technical standards. It includes factors such as client preference for frequency of desludging and financial affordability. In this context, a structured questionnaire was designed to profile the masons according to the following criteria: their training and experience; their current knowledge in construction of toilet and containment structures; their training needs; and specific factors which influence the construction of on-site systems.

Key Findings

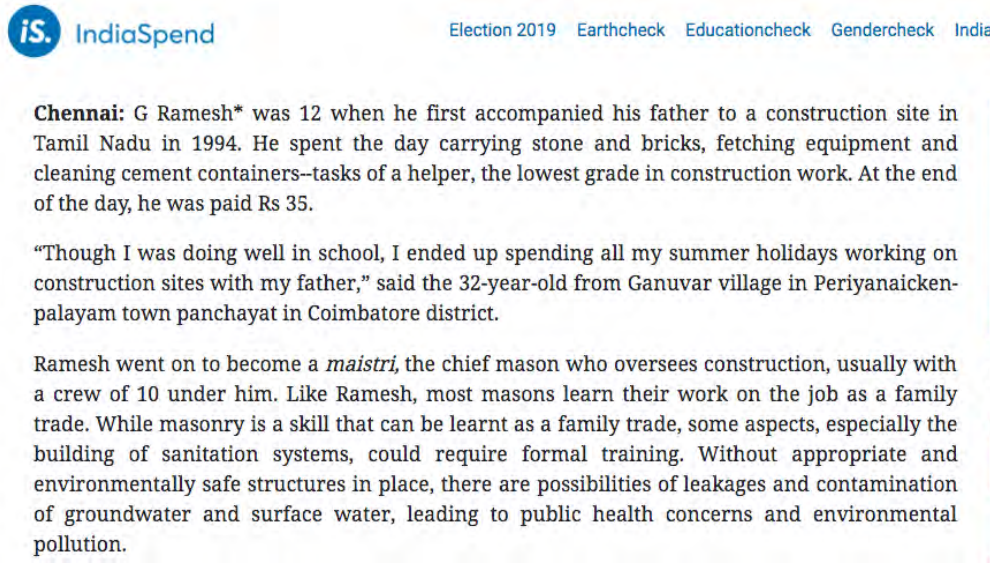
Education

None of the chief masons or skilled masons had undergone any technical education for masonry; most of them have learned this skill over time and through experience. When asked about how they were initiated into this profession, 63 per cent of the chief masons and 41 per cent of the skilled masons reported that they have simply continued on with their family's traditional occupation.

Work Experience

A majority of the masons in the sample stated that masonry is their primary source of income,

In the data story published from this report, the lead paragraphs include a narrative from the fieldwork, which reflects the main data point (lack of training of masons). It also highlights early on how the topic is connected to sanitation (which is obvious only to a practitioner but may not be to a lay reader), with emphasis on the public interest links of health and environmental risks.



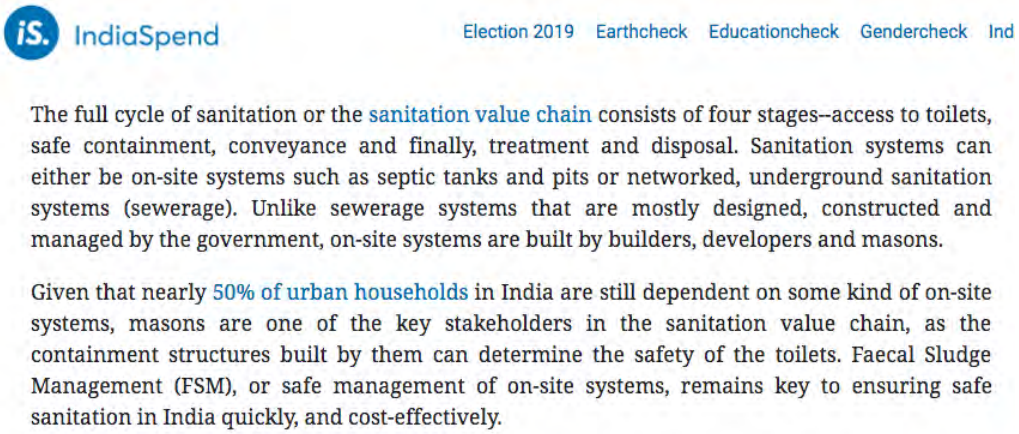
IndiaSpend Election 2019 Earthcheck Educationcheck Gendercheck India

Chennai: G Ramesh* was 12 when he first accompanied his father to a construction site in Tamil Nadu in 1994. He spent the day carrying stone and bricks, fetching equipment and cleaning cement containers--tasks of a helper, the lowest grade in construction work. At the end of the day, he was paid Rs 35.

"Though I was doing well in school, I ended up spending all my summer holidays working on construction sites with my father," said the 32-year-old from Ganuvar village in Periyanaicken-palayam town panchayat in Coimbatore district.

Ramesh went on to become a *maistri*, the chief mason who oversees construction, usually with a crew of 10 under him. Like Ramesh, most masons learn their work on the job as a family trade. While masonry is a skill that can be learnt as a family trade, some aspects, especially the building of sanitation systems, could require formal training. Without appropriate and environmentally safe structures in place, there are possibilities of leakages and contamination of groundwater and surface water, leading to public health concerns and environmental pollution.

Next, the technical context and background are introduced and explained in fair detail.



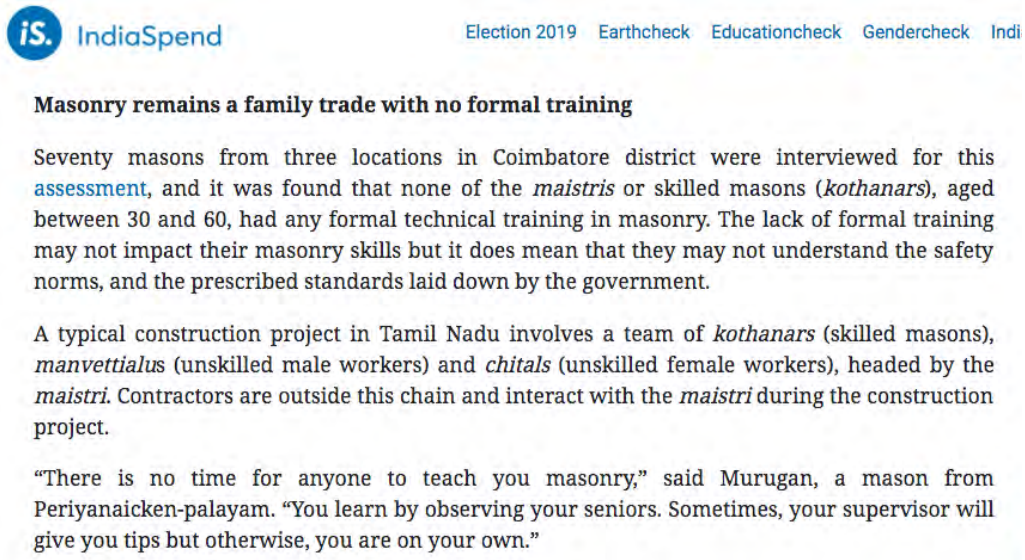
IndiaSpend

Election 2019 Earthcheck Educationcheck Gendercheck Ind

The full cycle of sanitation or the sanitation value chain consists of four stages--access to toilets, safe containment, conveyance and finally, treatment and disposal. Sanitation systems can either be on-site systems such as septic tanks and pits or networked, underground sanitation systems (sewerage). Unlike sewerage systems that are mostly designed, constructed and managed by the government, on-site systems are built by builders, developers and masons.

Given that nearly 50% of urban households in India are still dependent on some kind of on-site systems, masons are one of the key stakeholders in the sanitation value chain, as the containment structures built by them can determine the safety of the toilets. Faecal Sludge Management (FSM), or safe management of on-site systems, remains key to ensuring safe sanitation in India quickly, and cost-effectively.

This is followed by key findings and data from the report, interspersed with field inputs and explanations.



IndiaSpend

Election 2019 Earthcheck Educationcheck Gendercheck Indi

Masonry remains a family trade with no formal training

Seventy masons from three locations in Coimbatore district were interviewed for this assessment, and it was found that none of the *maistris* or skilled masons (*kothanars*), aged between 30 and 60, had any formal technical training in masonry. The lack of formal training may not impact their masonry skills but it does mean that they may not understand the safety norms, and the prescribed standards laid down by the government.

A typical construction project in Tamil Nadu involves a team of *kothanars* (skilled masons), *manvettialu*s (unskilled male workers) and *chitals* (unskilled female workers), headed by the *maistri*. Contractors are outside this chain and interact with the *maistri* during the construction project.

"There is no time for anyone to teach you masonry," said Murugan, a mason from Periyanaicken-palayam. "You learn by observing your seniors. Sometimes, your supervisor will give you tips but otherwise, you are on your own."

Policy Briefs

Policy Briefs

What is a policy brief?

A policy brief is a short, action-oriented document that conveys findings from research or projects (that have policy implications) to decision-makers, who are often non-specialists. It usually highlights gaps in the current policy framework and recommends specific interventions.

What is it not?

- An academic paper
- A report summary
- A research brief

What is the purpose of a policy brief?

- To raise awareness about an issue that has policy implications.
- Knowledge transfer, i.e., to convert research into action by identifying key policy gaps and proposing relevant and feasible steps to help decision-makers make informed decisions.
- Justify and/or secure funding for research.

Types of policy briefs

- **Neutral or objective briefs,** which provide an overall picture of a problem.
- **Interventionist or advocacy briefs,** which propose specific solutions.

Audience

- Policy actors: bureaucrats, politicians, think tanks
- Donors
- Journalists
- Typically, informed non-specialists

Things to keep in mind before writing

- Narrow down on a topic.
- If you are drawing from a larger study or practice report, identify its policy implications.
- Think about who your target readers are and how best to reach them.
- Create an outline, which can also double up as a content checklist.
- Identify the sources you will need to consult.
- Remember that this is a short document—typically four pages.

Structure of a policy brief

- **Masthead**: series title (if any), title, name and contact details of author/s and/or organisation.
    - Put some thought into crafting your title: use verbs, ask questions.

  - If you have a title and a subtitle, make sure one of them is short.
  - Generally, a mix of general and specific keywords helps.
  - If your work pertains to a particular geography, make sure to mention it.

- **Executive Summary:** a short summary of the policy brief, with a policy gap and key recommendations.
  - Enclose this in a box on the first or last page, with key recommendations as bullet points.
  - Keep this short—preferably one paragraph but maximum two.
  - This section usually determines whether people will read the rest of the document. Keep it as jargon-free and to-the-point as you can.

- **Introduction**
  - Introduce your topic.
  - Provide just enough background information for the reader to understand the problem.
  - Situate it in the appropriate context. Define its scope (village, city, state or national level).
  - If existing policies are inadequate, say why. If there is no existing policy, explain why one is needed.
  - Underline the urgency of addressing the issue. It is often useful to frame this in the form of costs (of not addressing it) and benefits (of addressing it).
  - Clearly define the aim of the policy brief ('This policy brief seeks to…')
  - Try not to exceed two paragraphs.
  - If the policy brief is based on a larger research study, mention it.
  - Avoid detailed descriptions of the methodology. Focus on key findings.

- **Body**
  - Signposting is critical. Break up your text using headings and subheadings.
  - Ensure a logical flow across the sections. It helps if just going over the headings gives you a sense for what the policy brief is about.
  - Focus more on the key takeaways of the study than the methodology used.
  - For information that is relevant but interrupts the flow of your narrative, use boxes. For example, technical definitions, cases.
  - Consider using a sidebar to highlight key findings.
  - Use images (photographs, data visualisation) rather than tables to communicate more effectively using fewer words.

- **Conclusion**
  - Use this section to reinforce the findings of the study and the urgency of addressing the issue.
  - Do not add new information here.
  - This section is optional. If you do include it, keep it short.

- **Recommendations/ Action points**
  - Arrange these in a numbered or bulleted list. Highlight key points.
  - Your recommendations should be based on evidence, and should logically flow from the body of the policy brief.
  - They should be feasible; keep your target reader in mind.
  - If action needs to be taken at different levels (city, state, national, etc.), consider breaking up your recommendations accordingly.
  - Rather than being prescriptive ('Step X should be taken'), highlight the benefits of each recommendation ('Taking step X will lead to benefit Y').
  - Offer solutions; don't be condescending.
  - If you don't have any recommendations to make, you can provide key takeaways from the study. The idea is to offer guidance to decision-makers.

- **References**
  - List any sources that you have used in the main text.
  - A short list of suggested readings is a good way to direct readers to other relevant work you or your organisation may have done.

Things to keep in mind after writing

- Go through your checklist and make sure you have included all the sections required.
- Read the entire document and make sure there is logical flow across the introduction, evidence and recommendations.
- Do a fact check.
- Do a source check.
- Go over each section and weed out repetition and redundancy; break up long, convoluted sentences.
- Edit for spelling, grammar and inconsistencies.
- Standardise to British or American English.
- Have a non-expert read it to make sure that it is accessible.

Examples of policy briefs

https://pubs.iied.org/17430IIED/

https://www.recoftc.org/publications/0000024

http://iihs.co.in/knowledge-gateway/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/4_Housing.pdf

Further reading

http://www.fao.org/3/i2195e/i2195e03.pdf

https://www.idrc.ca/sites/default/files/idrcpolicybrieftoolkit.pdf

https://www.researchtoaction.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/PBWeekLauraFCfinal.pdf

Practice Briefs

Practice Briefs

What is a practice brief?

- A short document that presents the findings and recommendations from a study or a project to a non-specialised audience.
- A way of exploring an issue and distilling lessons learned from past work, and to provide advice for future practice.
- A short, to-the-point, jargon-free document for non-specialists, aided by infographics and visuals to effectively communicate information.

What is it not?

- A report summary
- A project brief
- A presentation of survey results

What is its purpose?

- To explain an issue and raise awareness around a topic or practice followed in a sector
- To identify gaps in current practice
- To recommend relevant steps to address these gaps and improve future practice
- Justify and/or secure funding for projects

Types of practice briefs

- Neutral or objective: provide an overall picture
- Interventionist: propose specific solutions

Who reads practice briefs?

- Practitioners in similar or associated sectors; bureaucrats and politicians; think tanks, NGOs and other relevant organisations
    - Typically, their disciplinary background and level of prior knowledge is unknown
- People in senior positions who may not have much time to read longer reports

What can you include in a practice brief?

There are many ways to structure a practice brief. The key elements usually include an introduction, background, findings and recommendations.

- **Introduction**: Introduction to the topic or sector, and the specific aspects which the brief deals with. Explain the topic in simple language for someone with no knowledge of the sector. Explain why the issue is relevant and why it needs to be urgently addressed by stressing on the following:
  - Impact of not addressing it
  - Benefit of addressing it

- **Background**: Based on the focus of the brief, include relevant background information such as details of the geography being discussed, institutional arrangements, existing practices and regulations, etc.
- **Findings**: Each finding should be noted in a separate paragraph.
- **Recommendations**: Include lessons, recommendations and proposals for solutions.
- **References**, if any
- At the end, make sure to include some information about the project or study which the brief pertains to, along with links to other related resources, and contact information.

Before writing

- Identify your purpose: is a practice brief the best format for what you want to achieve?
- Identify your audience: who should be reading this?
- Develop an outline
- Identify the sources you will need to consult

While writing

- Put some thought into crafting your title. Use subtitles if it helps.
- Use verbs, ask questions
- If your work is part of a series, add the series title. It helps to have a short description on the first or last page
- Clearly define the aim of the brief ('This practice brief seeks to…')
- Focus more on your main arguments or key takeaways of the study than the methodology used
- For information that is relevant but interrupts the flow of your narrative, use boxes; for example, technical definitions, cases, etc.
- For vital findings that you want to highlight, use sidebars.
- Use visualisations (rather than tables) to communicate more effectively using fewer words.

After writing

- Make sure you have included all the required sections.
- See whether there is logical flow across sections. Ensure proper linkage between the introduction, evidence and recommendations.
- Do a fact check.
- Do a source check.
- Go over each section and weed out repetition and redundancy; break up long, convoluted sentences. Explain all technical terms.
- Edit for spelling, grammar and inconsistencies.
- Standardise to British or American English.

iihs®

INDIAN INSTITUTE FOR
HUMAN SETTLEMENTS

IIHS BENGALURU CITY CAMPUS
197/36, 2nd Main Road, Sadashivanagar, Bengaluru 560 080. India.
T +91 80 6760 6666 | F +91 80 2361 6814

IIHS CHENNAI
Floor 7A, Chaitanya Exotica, 24/51 Venkatnarayana Road, T Nagar
Chennai 600 017. India. T +91 44 6630 5500 / 6555 6590

IIHS DELHI
803, Surya Kiran, 19, Kasturba Gandhi Marg, New Delhi 110 001. India.
T +91 11 4360 2798 | F +91 11 2332 0477

IIHS MUMBAI
Flat No. 2, Purnima Building, Patel Compound, 20-C, Napean Sea Road
Mumbai 400 006. India. T +91 22 6525 3874

iihs.co.in