

Writing excellent articles on Climate Change

This is a short report of a workshop on writing excellent articles organised by the BSA Climate Change Study Group. This was a topic suggested by members of the study group – and since we'd just announced the winners of the 2012 Climate Change Study Group article prize competition it made sense to draw on the talents of prize winning article writers and invite them to participate in a workshop that doubled as an award ceremony as well.

Few people get the chance to really learn about the stages of article writing from first glimmering of an idea through the printed page and it was great to have an opportunity to discuss the practical details and challenges involved.

Reasons for writing

The first part of the workshop involved the prize-winning authors describing how their articles first came about. In their talks, the authors focussed on what motivated them to write their winning articles and where they'd got their initial ideas from. Each of the four papers had a different starting point. One began life during a long car journey in which a discussion about divides between psychology and sociology led, - some 5 or 6 years later - to several publications and the shaping of a new research agenda. Other starting points included a specific opportunity to enter a competition, or contribute to a special issue; and more broadly an interest in writing about real-world events and theoretical topics.

Beyond these initial starting points, the authors identified several quite contrasting settings in which their papers were written. In some cases, writing was seen as a way of helping to analyse and think through empirical data such that the writing process was quite emergent and dynamic. In others, writing was fuelled by annoyance or even anger and a desire to correct perceived inaccuracies or injustices. And in still other cases, writing was seen as something of an obligation, to disseminate research findings, to meet deadlines or for the REF.

The writing process

The second aspect of the workshop was a more interactive session in which participants discussed the writing process with the authors. As well as the fairly straightforward observation that all four of the winning articles were born in quite different places - on planes, trains and in cafes as often as at desks in offices - perhaps the central issue to emerge from these discussions was that committing ideas to paper imposes some particular and demanding constraints.

No matter how well conceived the initial intention or idea, all of the authors recognised that writing their ideas down involved a level of discipline, and that thoughts and ideas continued to develop as part of the writing process itself. In some instances, authors worked to a rough template of academic writing: checking that they had clearly explained aims/objectives,

defining key terms, and ensuring that conclusions emerged from and obviously related to the data being presented. For others, it was more a matter of thinking about how ideas flowed into one another whilst ensuring that the logic and narrative of the argument being developed remained coherent.

One key message was that no matter how complete or finished you think your ideas are, they will always develop and evolve as you write them down.

Peer review

The third most revealing part of the workshop concentrated on the peer review process. All of the authors shared some of the comments they'd received from reviewers. Whilst all of the papers being discussed had subsequently been chosen as prize-winners, all of them had received some quite critical – and at times scathing - reviewers' comments. This led to a number of important insights for anyone who is striving to publish their research:

- It's very unusual for reviewers not to recommend some changes - so don't spend forever polishing your paper before submitting it. Peer review can provide extremely valuable feedback and advice on how to strengthen your ideas and this is worth seeking sooner rather than later. But not too soon. In short, papers need to be finished but not necessarily polished when they're initially submitted.
- Reviewers comments can be extremely helpful and should be taken seriously and responded to carefully but, at the same time, you don't have to do everything every reviewer says. Have confidence in your ideas and defend them robustly if you disagree with what the reviewers say.
- What end up as being excellent articles can receive fierce criticism from reviewers so don't let the peer review process put you off. Everyone - from PhD students to Professors - receives negative feedback at times and it is easy to see this as an attack on your very being, this does not necessarily get easier with time. However, nor do such comments necessarily mean your ideas aren't worth pursuing further, so don't give up too easily.

The workshop provided a really clear sense of the many different stages, changes, trials and tribulations that articles go through before they're published and before they become potential prize-winners. By implication, there's little point waiting around for the perfect, fully-developed idea to emerge before starting. Instead, the authors who took part in the workshop provided very clear advice: if you are going to write excellent articles on climate change, do not delay putting pen to paper, or finger to keyboard: start writing now.