

How to write in public

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Most of the documents we read are finished pieces of work, carefully crafted and edited in private before being shared with anyone else. *Writing in public* utilises a different kind of process – the paper is shared online from a very early stage, when the initial handful of ideas are incomplete, poorly phrased and tactless. The work is then edited many times, and on each occasion a revised version replaces the earlier material online. This process does not end, and so the paper may still be lacking crucial concepts, evidence, structure and grammar¹. As potential readers are approached for comment and some provide feedback, further insights are used to update it, so please contact peter.bates96@gmail.com with your contribution.

Unless stated otherwise, the examples given within the text are not intended to provide a full evaluation of the service that has been named, but rather as a glimpse to illustrate a single idea. The material has been discovered by a meandering search and so no conclusions should be drawn as to the overall quality of the service provided by the named organisation or the comparative rarity of the practices described. The purpose of the search is to collect different approaches and ideas until saturation is reached, rather than to find out anything about prevalence. In some cases, a single example is sufficient to secure the idea, and in others, a second or further example is listed as opportunity arises, but the author does not generally return to websites previously examined to check if they exhibit the practice too.

Data drawn from websites are ephemeral, since material published on the internet can be updated. A more diligent researcher would collect all the data over a brief time interval and indicate the date each site was visited, but this has not been done here as the intention is to survey options and possibilities rather than count frequencies. As the work is conducted in public, the goal is that each site is notified and invited to comment the first time they appear in the paper. For this or other reasons, an example cited may be altered or disappear entirely from the internet. If sharing the emerging paper leads to reflection and positive improvements, then the disappearance of the evidence that formed it would be a triumph.

Websites and the teams that maintain them are not generally anonymised. This is because they are already in the public domain and readers may wish to look at a site or consult with their peers. Occasionally, individual commentators are quoted, and, if the author is suggesting any criticism of their stance, the item is generally anonymised since the aim of the paper is to reflect on issues rather than pass judgement on individuals.

This way of writing is risky², especially as it opens opportunities to those who may misunderstand, mistake the stopping points on the journey for the destination, and misuse or distort the material. This way of writing requires courage, as an early version can damage the reputation of the author or any of its contributors. At least, it can harm those who insist on showing only their ‘best side’ to the camera, who want others to believe that their insights appear fully formed, complete and beautiful in their simplicity. It can harm those who are gagged by their employer or the workplace

culture, silenced lest they say something in a discussion that is not the agreed party line. It can harm those who want to profit from their writing, either financially or by having their material accepted by academic journals.

In contrast, this way of writing can engage people who are not invited to a meeting or asked for their view until the power holders have agreed on the 'right message'. It is fast, since positive insights and examples are made public as soon as they are discovered, rather than waiting months for the academic publishing machine to grind forward. Since it is unfunded³, it is free from vested interests. It can draw in unexpected perspectives, stimulate debate and crowdsource wisdom. It can provide free, leading-edge resources.

¹ As a result, the author assumes no responsibility or liability for any errors or omissions in the content of this paper. The information contained is provided on an "as is" basis with no guarantees of completeness, accuracy, usefulness or timeliness. Responsibility for the content remains with the author. Undated or early versions should be replaced with the most recent, available at [Library – Peter Bates](#).

² Bates P (2021) *Dilemmas of writing in public*. Available at <https://peterbates.org.uk/dilemmas-of-writing-in-public/>.

³ See Professor Rosalind Edwards at <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2020/08/13/unfunded-research-why-academics-do-it-and-its-unvalued-contribution-to-the-impact-agenda/> for a discussion of the prevalence and benefits of unfunded research.