

# Provoking change

## A Toolkit for African NGOs

### Updated chapters

- Engaging with traditional media
- Engaging with new media
- Basics of film making



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Provoking change, our toolkit for African NGOs, was published in 2006. Many of Fern's partners have told us that some parts – specifically its case studies and social media chapters – require updating. So here are new sections on those areas, as well as a greatly expanded chapter on media work in general.

The media can exert a powerful influence over the public, as well as politicians and other decision makers, so getting your message or story covered by them is one route to changing things.

The way media operate can differ from country to country. Similarly, the capacity of NGOs to act on these suggestions will vary. With this in mind, this guide is based on general and widespread principles, and we have tried to cater for those with fairly advanced understandings of the media and those with none.

These updated chapters are therefore intended as ideas that could be useful for any organisation, regardless of their size or location.

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# Engaging with traditional media

## What makes a story?

One of journalism's oldest clichés is as true today as when it was first used more than 100 years ago: “When a dog bites a man, that’s not news, but when a man bites a dog it is news.” A variation on this is: “You never read a story about a plane that did not crash”.

In other words, everyday occurrences aren’t newsworthy, extraordinary ones are.

If you’re not sure whether you have a story, ask yourself three simple questions:

*Is it new? Is it interesting? Is it significant?*

For a journalist, a story certainly doesn’t have to contain all those elements, but it’s extremely unlikely it won’t contain at least one to interest them.

Here are some other factors to consider:

- **Message.** What do you want to say, to who and why? This may sound basic, but it helps you decide which newspaper, radio or TV broadcaster to target.
- **Exclusivity.** Journalists love exclusives, and, depending on the circumstances, you might consider pushing your story through one trusted journalist rather than pitching it more widely.
- **Timing.** Is there a hook?<sup>1</sup> In other words, is there a related event, anniversary or policy development that you can link to the story you are trying to promote? This can help generate media interest for it. A hook could be anything from international climate change negotiations to major trade talks in your country, or the passing of a new law in the area in which you work. Keep a


*For more on establishing relations see the Building relationships with Journalists section.*

<sup>1</sup> For journalists a good **hook** or **peg** for a story can make all the difference. As the words suggest, this is something you can hang a story on. For instance, when the European Union reviewed its flagship tropical forests, the Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade (FLEGT) Action Plan, it could be used as a hook for stories about how it has benefitted specific African communities through its Voluntary Partnership Agreements (VPAs).

communications' calendar marking out key future events, so you can plan ahead. Update this calendar regularly.

- **Rapid Response.** An issue can often be thrust suddenly into the media spotlight. Act fast and respond with quotes or related stories. Do you have a new angle, or some information that balances or counters the official version of events?
- **Campaign aims.** How does media coverage further your campaign goals? While the media can be a hugely effective means of influencing policymakers and the public, there are times where behind the scenes lobbying or other tactics can be more effective – or something to use in tandem with publicity. Weigh up your options carefully.
- **Impact.** Are there any potential risks, in terms of legal trouble or physical danger?

*For more on potential hazards, see the Basics of defamation section.*



## Good Writing

### 1) Some general tips

One of the best guides on how to write clear English is Plain Words, by the late British civil servant Sir Ernest Gowers. One of its key pieces of advice is: “Be short. Be simple. Be human.”

Another classic on good prose is George Orwell’s 1946 essay, Politics and the English Language, in which he lays out six golden rules:

- “Never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.”
- “Never use a long word where a short one will do.”
- “If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.”
- “Never use the passive where you can use the active.”
- “Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or a jargon word if you can think of any everyday English equivalent.”

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- “Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.”

Here are some other principles which can help improve your writing - whether for press releases, blogs or reports:

- **Try to tell a story.** Stories are how we make sense of the world. Research suggests that our brains are built to respond to them. They can engage us emotionally as well as intellectually. Try to create stories which follow natural sequences in your writing: who did what to whom, when, where, how and why – and what were the consequences.
- **Know your audience.** Who is your story aimed at? Tailor your writing to the audience. There’s little point in quoting Che Guevara to anti-communists, or using lots of technical jargon if you are writing for a general audience. If your intended audience has specialist knowledge – for example journalists, policymakers or other NGOs working in the same area as you – then you can assume a certain level of specialist knowledge, and don’t have to provide explanations for things they would naturally know.
- **Be direct.** Expanding on Orwell’s instruction to favour active over passive language, instead of saying, “The lion was killed by the hunter”, write, “The hunter killed the lion”. Vague, long sentences will lose readers fast. So will using too many clauses (or subsections). A sentence with more than four clauses should be broken up.
- **Flow.** Each sentence should directly relate to the one before. This makes writing easier to understand and more enjoyable to read.
- **Repetition.** Repeating something doesn’t make it any truer - but it can undermine your case and bore your reader.
- **Exclamation marks!** Don’t use them. They can make you look shrill and your arguments less credible.
- **Read it aloud.** The best way to see if your writing is working is to read it out loud. If it sounds garbled, awkward or you run out of breath, then that’s exactly how it will read to your intended audience.
- **Don’t be scared to delete.** Numerous sayings emphasise the value of getting

rid of unnecessary words, including: “Prose is like hair – it shines with combing”; “Kill your darlings”; and “The first draft doesn’t have to be good, it just has to be finished”. Watch out in particular for redundancies (where two words essentially mean the same thing, such as: *merged together, chased after, final outcome, net result, free gift*), and deadwood, where words serve no real purpose (for example, *in the event that* could simply be *if*; *to such an extent that* could be *so*; and *due to the fact that* could just be *because*). William Strunk jr, author of Elements of Style (rated as one of the best 100 books in the English language by *Time* magazine), sums it up expertly: “Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should contain no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts.”

- **Difficulty.** Good writing can be time-consuming and involve multiple re-writes (and even some heartache). For hectic NGOs trying to get a story or message out, time can be tight. Do your best to finesse your writing within the time you have.
- **Fresh pair of eyes.** Always try to get someone else to read what you have written before sending it out into world - and preferably someone with a communications, media or writing background.
- **Use technology.** There are now numerous websites that help readers to simplify their writing. One of the most famous is the Hemingway App. You can use the site to grade your text and find ways to make it shorter and more effective. This App is a good tool for guarding against using passive or over long sentences, but shouldn’t be regarded as a fool-proof guide to good writing, as some have pointed out.

## II) Press releases

Here are ways to produce a sparkling press release capable of capturing a busy journalist’s attention:

- **Strong, clear messages.** Keep them few, simple and brief. Boil the story down to its essence. Make sure every word can be understood by the ordinary reader and that every sentence is clear at a glance. Wherever possible, tell the human story: who does it affect and how does it affect them?



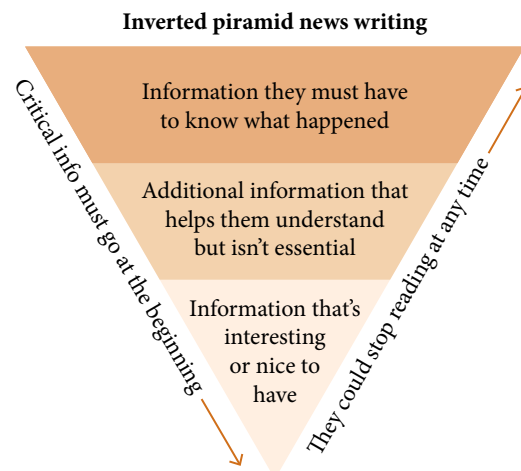
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- **Facts.** A message without proof is nothing. Provide evidence and sources for your claims. Use footnotes, [hyperlinks](#) and case studies. If possible, bolster the story's credibility in the eyes of journalists by asking independent experts to endorse your findings. If you are releasing a major report based on original research, and have the necessary resources – i.e. time and money – you could consider getting it peer-reviewed. In eight simple words – “62 people own same as half the world - Oxfam” - [this](#) press release is a powerful example of how to effectively grab peoples' attention.
  - **Turn facts into killer facts.** Make your facts come alive. Reeling off statistics or figures can be meaningless without some kind of simile or physical comparison. For example, saying [11.9 million hectares](#) of forest world-wide is threatened by coal mining is pretty abstract to most people and won't convey the scale of the problem. But saying an area of forest the size of Portugal is threatened by coal mining will resonate with most Europeans. Likewise, stating that it would take \$66bn to lift every person in the world out of poverty is an arresting fact, but drawing a comparison with [spending on arms](#) – [by revealing that this equates to just 4 per cent of global military spending in one year](#) – makes it truly shocking.
  - **Include quotable quotes.** These should be brief, evocative and avoid technical language or jargon. They should also try to summarise your key message. The most memorable and powerful quotes are decisive and certain. The weakest are vague and confused.
  - **Visuals.** Strong photos, an instantly clear infographic or graph can help explain your story and can make it more attractive to journalists, who in most cases will be looking for strong images to accompany a story.
  - **Headlines.** Breaking down your key message into a few words that can grab people's attention is challenging, but worth the effort. The headline is the first thing the reader will probably see and if it doesn't entice them to read on, then however significant your story, you will have failed. Think digitally. Because so much content is shared through social media these days, your headline – or a variant of it – should be [tweetable](#), i.e. 140 characters of text. More detail can follow in the sub-heading. [Research](#) has shown that press releases with numbers in the headline have a better response than those without. It's also generally best to write your headline last.

### iii) Structuring press releases and news stories

The classic structure for writing a news story<sup>2</sup> – which also applies to a press release – is the ‘inverted pyramid’, which is designed to grab the reader and instantly summarise what the story is about. The introduction should contain all the essential information. The Guardian newspaper in the UK describes it like this: “If the intro was the only paragraph left [in the story] it [would] still make sense. The good intro depends on your judgement and decisiveness. It declares why the story is being published, what is the newest, most interesting, most important, most significant, most attention-grabbing aspect of the story. It is not a summary of everything yet to come. The best intro has two or three facts, maybe one. The worst intro is uncertain what the story is about and will contain several ideas. The best intro will demand that you read on. The worst will make it likely that you will move on.”

The paragraphs which follow contain details supporting the facts in the intro.

The ‘inverted pyramid’ is valued for two reasons: the reader can leave the story at any point and understand what it’s about, and it should be easier to edit, by cutting from the bottom without losing meaning. This doesn’t mean that a story should just peter out, and it may end with a ‘kicker’: a conclusion, a call to action, a telling quote, which comes after the end of the ‘inverted pyramid’.



<sup>2</sup> Newspapers are traditionally made up of a balance of news, comment and feature articles. News writing is generally more rigidly structured, and aims to impart the key facts – who, where, what, when and how; comment pieces (or op-eds) are articles in which the author offers his own take on a given subject (underpinned, hopefully, by solid facts); features are longer, more in-depth, descriptive articles with greater more fluidity in style and structure than news stories.

#### iv) A few words on jargon

Jargon is language that serves as a kind of shorthand between particular groups of people, usually those working in the same field. Many in the NGO world use vast amounts of it every day. Phrases and words like “capacity building”, “holistic”, “stakeholders”, “deliverables”, “civil society”, “forest governance” and “readiness measures” are scattered across conversations, meetings and emails. Since this communication is with others working in the same field, it’s not necessary or realistic to avoid it.

But this is not how most people speak. To outsiders, specialist jargon like this is often impenetrable and meaningless. So if you want to communicate effectively with those beyond your world, including the vast majority of journalists, it should be avoided. Otherwise – however important your message – to the reader it could seem nonsense.

What’s more, using jargon can also suggest a lack of respect for your reader: a laziness of language that implies that you cannot be bothered to rethink or properly explain the matter, as Alistair Fowler says in his guide, *How to Write*: “Of course each profession, each science, has a legitimate need for its own specialised vocabulary. But soon jargon comes to be used as a convenient cover for laziness of thought or even (one suspects) obfuscation.”

One way to avoid jargon without spending ages pondering alternatives words, is to build your own easy to use jargon buster – a kind of thesaurus with everyday translations of your specialist language. For example, here’s a European Union one, giving alternatives to the bureaucratic jargon used in much EU debate. And here is an interesting BBC article about the language of climate change, and the gulf between the importance of the issue, and how bewildering the language used by climate specialists is to most people. Finally, here’s a thought-provoking piece on the way jargon is used to obscure the truth by the military and politicians by the renowned UK war correspondent, Robert Fisk.

## Building relationships with journalists

The more that journalists get to know you as a good source for stories, the easier it is to pitch ideas to them and the more they will start seeking you out. Mutual trust is key.

If you are unreliable and prone to getting your facts wrong, you will be of no use to any half-decent journalist; similarly, if a journalist mis-quotes you, misreports your findings or puts a false spin on a story you have given them, then there's little point in dealing with them.

Nurturing a relationship with trusted journalists who write about your area though, can be a significant way of getting your message out.

Here are some tips:

- **Press contacts list.** Understand the media you are pitching to and what subjects they generally cover. Do they report on serious issues or mostly trivia? Who are their audience and how big is it? Build a comprehensive database of journalists, with notes on their job titles, contact details and the kind of stories they write. Don't limit it to journalists in your own countries or regions. The internet has turned national publications into global ones and the days when a newspaper's readership was limited to the country it's published in are gone: The Guardian in the UK, for example, is the world's third most read newspaper website with 30.4 million readers, divided pretty much equally between the UK, the US and the rest of the world.

The first step in building a list of contacts is searching the internet, newspaper databases and even papers and magazines on newsstands for stories related to your area, making a note of the journalist's name on it, then finding their contact details. This is often on the internet, but if not, if you call the publication's switchboard or news desk you should be given it. Think laterally. For instance, if you work on forest governance, don't just search for journalists who write about the environment – but related issues, such as human rights or indigenous communities. Similarly if you are campaigning against palm oil expansions, then business and consumer journalists might be just as interested in your story as environmental ones. Some publications don't have specialist reporters, so do include general ones in your database. It could also include broadcast journalists, both radio and TV. You need to know what programmes

See further details in the *Basics of Film Making* section.

might cover your issues - and who the producers, directors or reporters are behind them. If you have a story that you want to pitch to TV, remember “show don’t tell” – meaning that pictures should tell the story more than words. So think about what images a broadcaster could film. Finally, beyond the traditional media, are there any bloggers or tweeters with large followings who might be interested in your stories? If so, include them in your contacts list, which should be regularly updated as journalists regularly change positions

- **Make it personal.** The simplest way to build a relationship with a journalist is to provide them with good stories which are clearly explained. But there are other things you can do to open the doors of communication, including: giving them background briefings on your area of expertise; guiding them to other sources of information or useful contacts; arranging field trips for them and setting up interviews with people directly affected by the issue you are working on; and holding press conferences. Press conferences should be called sparingly and only if you have a story that is significant and interesting enough to justify it which needs to be communicated in person to a group of journalists together – a good example would be if you are hosting visitors (maybe indigenous leaders or forest community members) from another region or country who have a story to tell, but limited time for interviews.
- **Establish yourself as an expert.** Once you are seen as an expert in your field, the media will naturally come to you for quotes and information. Ways to make this happen include: immediately sending succinct and well-informed quotes to key journalists when anything related to your field is in the news, writing interesting and well-informed blogs and using social media effectively. This is expanded on in the Engaging with social media section.
- **Protect yourself.** The best means of stopping you, your organisation or your story being misrepresented is to know the journalist you are dealing with. If you don’t already have a relationship with them and you don’t know anyone who does, you should at least study their work. An independent journalist should never give an outside party the final say over the content of an article (known as ‘copy approval’), but you can always ask a journalist to read back the quotes you have given them to make sure they have taken them down correctly.
- **Take control.** Preparation is key. Only speak to journalists or give interviews when you are prepared and clear about what you want to say. If you have time, jot down your key messages and work out some pithy quotes beforehand. You

Explore how to use social media to establish yourself as an expert in *Engaging with new media*.

could also email your quotes to the journalist immediately after speaking to them.

- **Alert journalists in advance.** The more advance notice you can give journalists of your story or publication launch, the better. If possible, find out their deadlines. If a newspaper goes to print at 5pm, then its journalists are unlikely to be welcoming calls at 4pm. If you don't know a journal's deadlines, you can always ask the journalist when you call. This applies more to print newspapers than online publications for obvious reasons. A lot of journalists prefer being reminded about stories by email than phone.
- **Things that annoy journalists.** A recent survey journalists found that their biggest complaints against press officers were (in descending order): being pitched stories too late; that the press officer (or person pitching the story) couldn't be found when they needed them; too much jargon in pitches; being sent too many useless emails; that emails and press releases don't get to the point; that people didn't grasp the kind of stories they wanted; that press releases had too much spin (exaggeration); that press officers (or people pitching stories) were pushy or inarticulate.
- **Blurred lines.** Journalists should cherish and protect their independence. If they don't, the bond between them and their audiences will break. This means not having any potential conflicts of interest, such as being paid to write a particular story by the people or organisation they are writing about without declaring it, or simply regurgitating press releases without checking them. As media budgets are slashed, however, these practices have become increasingly common as journalists look to cut costs or for extra sources of income. From an NGO or campaigning perspective, it is fine as a general principle for NGOs to pay the travel and accommodation costs of journalists on field trips or to interview people, for example (although the better media organisations and journalists will always declare this to their audiences). Directly paying journalists to write particular stories should be considered unethical however, as it threatens the independence of their journalism.

## Some words on defamation

A libel is when you make a false allegation in printed words or images that could damage someone's reputation. In general, the best defence against being accused of libel is that the allegation you are making is true - and you have the evidence to prove it. Sometimes even the truth is not enough though. Libel laws vary from country to country, and more authoritarian governments often use unjust libel laws to silence critics – including journalists or NGOs – who expose things that they would prefer to remain buried.

If you are considering making serious allegations against individuals or companies and publicising them, you should have powerful evidence. Issues to consider include:

- **Physical proof.** Do you have physical evidence, such as photographs, film, or contemporaneous notes? For legal purposes, a contemporaneous note is an accurate record, made at the time, or as soon after the event, as possible. This could be notes, minutes of a meeting or a diary. If this evidence is particularly sensitive keep it in a secure place.
- **Verification.** If the proof is in the form of documents, have you verified them? If the documents contain data or financial details which you cannot interpret, have you had an independent expert assess them?
- **Witnesses.** If you are relying on witness testimony, how credible are your sources? How many sources do you have? The more sources you have the stronger your evidence will be. Are they independent of each other? What is their motivation for speaking out (it may not alter the truth of what they are saying, but it's good to know)? Would they be prepared to give evidence “on the record”?<sup>3</sup> If you only have one source for your information, what other efforts have you made to corroborate it?

The BBC's editorial guidelines are useful in showing the standards of proof and ways of operating that journalists should follow.

<sup>3</sup> On the record means you will be quoted by name. Off the record means that the journalist can use the information you give them, but not identify you as its source. Journalists' understanding of the precise meaning of the term can vary – so if you are speaking off the record it is best to clarify what they mean by it beforehand. Most journalists respect this convention since breaking it would mean sources of information dry up.

If you intend to make serious allegations against anyone, it's wise to get advice from a libel lawyer before doing so, as well as weighing up any other potential risks that you, your organisation or anyone who has supplied you with evidence. If you cannot get help from a libel lawyer, it may be possible to get assistance from international NGOs which can help you access legal advice, such as [Advocates for International Development](#), a global charity that works with law firms in providing free legal advice for NGOs.

If you have a story which stands up to rigorous scrutiny and you believe should be brought to light, then before making it public you should give a right to reply to the person or organisation you are making the allegations against, detailing precisely what you are accusing them of, and giving them adequate time to respond – out of fairness as well as to protect yourself.

There are instances when you may have a strong lead on a potential story, which you take to a journalist to follow up. Be clear with the journalist about how strong the evidence you have is, and if you put them in touch with sources, ensure that the sources are happy for this to happen and are aware of and protected from any potential risks.

If a publication runs a story based on your evidence, potentially both you and they could be sued. Any professional journalist should put serious allegations to anyone they are accusing of wrongdoing before publishing.



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# Engaging with new media

## Social media as an advocacy tool

Mobile phones can turn ordinary citizens into citizen journalists: on the ground reporters able to instantly convey to the world what they've seen.

This happened during Egypt's revolution in 2011, when bloggers posted phone footage by ordinary people exposing the government's crackdown on dissent. It happened in the aftermath of Kenya's violent 2008 election where ordinary people documented human rights abuses. And it happened more recently in America, where passers-by with camera phones captured the violent deaths of black men at the hands of the police.

For NGOs, the rise of the camera phone and social media such as WhatsApp, Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter has also had a profound impact. International coalitions can be built and mobilised, campaign messages disseminated across the world, and visual evidence gathered and passed on with the click of a button.

This is not to say that social media has supplanted traditional media (print newspaper, radio and TV), which it often complements, or that it is some kind of magic silver bullet in getting your message out - but it can be a critical advocacy tool.

### **Case study: This Is My Backyard – How smart phones are stopping forest destruction in Liberia**

Throughout much of its history, Liberia has been afflicted by what development experts call the ‘resource curse’. This means that rather than benefitting the nation, Liberia’s abundant natural wealth has fuelled wars, land grabs and misery.

From the foreign companies eager to get their hands on the country’s minerals, timber and rubber who followed in the wake of the American Colonisation Society’s arrival in 1822, through to the violent coups, dictatorships and bloody civil wars of the late 20th century, the corrupt minority have enriched themselves at the expense of the poor majority.

Since the country’s second civil war ended in 2003, Liberia’s path to stability and economic justice has been halting. Often it’s only been the bravery and resolve of activists and local communities which has put a brake on the land grabs and destruction carried out in the guise of development.

Some of these activists, such as Silas Siakor and the Sustainable Development Institute, were previously part of a network which hastened the downfall of Liberian president Charles Taylor – later convicted of war crimes – by revealing how he was funding the country’s last civil war with timber.

Today many of them are fighting new threats, which include forests being illegally cleared to make way for oil palm plantations, as vast tracts of land<sup>4</sup> are handed over to private investors against the will of the people living and surviving on it. But the activists now have an innovative new tool to assist them in their struggle.

It’s called TIMBY – aka This Is My Backyard - and it links remote communities with limited connections to the outside world, to activists, journalists, security experts and software developers from Liberia and

<sup>4</sup> By 2014 it was estimated that the government of resident Ellen Johnson Sirleaf had granted a staggering 30 per cent of Liberia to investors, including more than 1.6 million acres for palm oil production.

other African countries. All share the goal of monitoring the relentless acquisition of Liberia's natural resources - and stopping the land grabs, corruption and poor governance it is driving.

TIMBY is a classic example of citizen reporting.

It works like this: local communities in areas at risk of illegal logging and plantation expansions are given smart phones and trained to use them to gather evidence in the form of footage, images and audio recordings which use geo-referenced data (meaning they get the real world geographical co-ordinates of a location).

This evidence is then used to expose government or company abuses on the ground. The TIMBY app (or programme) on their smartphones - which relies heavily on colours and icons, so semi-literate groups can use them - enables people to upload their data to a secure server, where the information can be verified and the links between issues and cases are established. The material is then uploaded on to the internet in the form of investigative stories for journalists and activists around the world to access.

TIMBY has so far reported on company fraud, government cover-ups and helped stop illegal logging.

Its use has not been limited to Liberia though. In Kenya it has been adapted by the country's third biggest media company as a tool for citizen reporting, and a group in South Africa have adapted it to create a tool for election monitoring.

In this way, ordinary people are telling the world what is happening around them.

*Tips on using smartphones for filming are in the Basics of film making section.*

Below are some guidelines on how social media can help you spread your message and build relationships, as well as on how to make more people see your website:

- **Search Engine Optimisation (SEO).** This is very important if you want people to find your website. SEO is the process by which a website gets ranked on search engines such as Google – in other words, how visible it is, or how quickly it comes up when people are searching for specific terms which relate to your organisation’s work. All search engines search using robots which read text and decide which is the most relevant to a person’s search. They read both the text (the words you put down) and the code (HTML) that sits behind the text, that is, the coding that you add. Some basic tips for increasing your site’s visibility are:
  - i) Use clear, concise language without many clauses (just as you should with your writing generally, see Good Writing section above). Use lots of sub-headings and try to limit one idea to each paragraph. Google bots (Google’s robots) look for what are called defining terms, such ‘What is [whatever the subject person is searching for], so try to use lots of them.
  - ii) Updating your site regularly with fresh content can also improve its ranking (how soon it comes up) in Google searches.
  - iii) Using Google analytics, a service which tracks and reports traffic (i.e. how many people come to your site) can help you understand which sections of your website people are visiting and what search terms are bringing them there. It also gives Google information on how long people are staying on your site.
  - iv) Google is blind and deaf. In other words images and videos do not come up in Google searches, but text does – so when you post videos and images, make sure they are accompanied by text or captions.
  - v) Use lots of internal and external links. The more your website is linked to by other authoritative sources, the higher it will be ranked.
  
- **Who uses what?** Facebook, used by 1.5 billion people globally (as of December 2015), is the world’s most popular social media, followed by WhatsApp (with 1 billion users). Instagram is used by 400 million people world-wide, Twitter by 320 million and Google+ 300 million. Obviously the functions of each vary as do who uses them: Instagram is popular with teenagers for instance, whereas Twitter and Facebook are being increasingly used as a news source, a kind of rolling newswire, and are used by journalists and policymakers.

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- **Visuals and links spread messages.** Content on social media with images or video is 40 times more likely to get shared than content without it. Always include links. Content on Twitter which includes links has an 86 per cent higher rate of being tweeted, than content without. Links are also critical for driving people to your reports, your website or whatever it is you want them to see.
  - **Testimony.** Social media can get the voices of the people affected by the issues you campaign on heard. Short interview clips, even if it's raw, can be captivating if this message is strong and authentic.
  - **Solutions.** Don't simply highlight the problems – offer solutions. Try to include calls to action in your posts – and make them as specific as possible.
  - **Length.** Twitter allows for up to 30 seconds of footage to be uploaded to its site. Here are the details of how to do it. Footage can be up to 45 minutes long (or a file size of 1.75GB). Unless you are uploading footage of professional standard, the material you upload should be as short as possible.
  - **How often?** You should be tweeting 2 – 8 times a day according to some social media experts if you want the maximum impact. For many people that is not practical (they may work in a country or region with erratic internet service) or necessary (other things take priority).
  - **Engagement.** Follow all the people on Twitter you wish to reach out to, who work in your area, or might be interested in your work (other NGOs, experts, media, activists, relevant policymakers etc). Some of them will follow you back. Do the same with Facebook by sending friend requests to people or organisations you want to connect with. Try to stimulate comments and invite feedback by engaging in conversations with people. Tag people who might be interested in specific posts and use hashtags (#) to find, follow and contribute to conversations. Instant responses to developments in your area or breaking news (see What is News? section) can also get your message heard. Plan your social media messages in advance of any future campaign announcements, important reports or other events you want your voice heard on.
  - **Analytics.** See the reaction to your posts with analytics, which allows you to monitor responses to your social media activity. The Twitter Analytics Dashboard allows you to see which of your tweets are getting the most

impressions. YouTube's Analytics also gives you plenty of data on your YouTube channel, and Facebook's Page Insights gives you information about visits to your page. You should be able to detect patterns, and act on them.

## **Blogs / Opinion pieces**

A blog – short for 'web log' – whether published on your organisation's website, your own blog (some tips on how to create a blog site are [here](#) and [here](#)), or on a media website, can be a good way to get your message or story out.

Well-argued, persuasive blogs and comment pieces (in the US they are called Op-Eds, which is thought to mean Opinion Editorial, but means opposite the editorial page) can also help establish you and your organisation as experts in your field. Furthermore, they can allow you to say what you want unmediated by third parties. The advice in the Good Writing section is all relevant, but here are some more specific pointers for good blogs:

- **Length.** Anything from 300 – 800 words is the norm. Remember, as the former newspaper editor Harold Evans, said: "Nothing is so tiring to the reader as excavating nuggets of meaning from mountains of words."
- **Tone.** This can vary depending on where it's published and what the subject matter is. In general, blogs are unique, personal takes on an issue or event, so writing with informed passion, as if you were talking to a friend or relative rather than an academic seminar, can work well.
- **Structure.** The 'inverted pyramid' news story structure is generally too rigid for blogs. Unlike in news stories or press releases, you don't have to load the opening with the central facts, but make them unfold in the narrative. Your opening could be anecdotal: that is start with an eye-catching tale or anecdote. Alternatively you could start with a bold declarative statement, which immediately grabs the reader and compels them to read on.
- **What's your argument?** Before writing you should know what you want to say and whether it supports your campaign aims. The best blogs provoke an emotional response and challenge readers to question their beliefs. They should always be underpinned by facts. Express an opinion and don't sit on the fence. The worst blogs by NGOs are often those which have been vetted by so many

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people that they end up saying very little, or being full of platitudes. The use of phrases such, “While we cautiously welcome...” should be avoided. Nobody is going to read an opinion piece without opinions.

- **Your expertise.** Your authority on the subject should be revealed by how well-informed your arguments are. It could also be shown in a brief accompanying biography.
- **Hyperlinks.** Links are an essential part of web writing. The internet is full of rumours, gossip and half-truths. So links to trustworthy sources helps establish your credibility. If you are quoting a politician, referring to a report or an old news story, provide the link.
- **Respect the reader.** Unless you are writing for a very specialist outlet, your average reader will not be an expert in your topic, and it’s your responsibility to capture their attention, explain the arguments in language they can easily comprehend and make a compelling argument.

Finally, there are a number of international publications which promote voices from Africa (as opposed to just outsiders’ voices about Africa), including: [Guardian Development](#), [The Place](#), [AllAfrica.com](#) and [Thomson Reuters Foundation](#), Reuters’ news agency’s charitable arm. Before pitching blogs to them, study the kind of topics they feature to see if yours would fit.

## Basics of film making

Being able to film events you have witnessed, either for documentary proof or to upload to social media, is a useful skill.

The increasing availability and improvements in digital cameras, as well as the rapid spread of smart phones with cameras, means that anyone who knows the basics, can shoot watchable footage. An advantage of camera phones is that they are more discreet and don't attract the same attention as cameras.

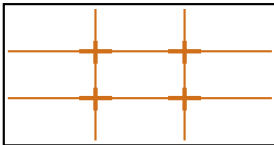
Attending beginner's courses or studying books are probably necessary for anything more advanced (although, if you have a camera, constant practice is an obvious route to improvement). In the meantime, here are some rudimentary tips for shooting with smart phones and cameras, and for filming short clips or interviews which can be posted online, to more extensive footage:

- **Use a tripod.** However steady you think your hands are your footage will invariably be shaky without one. This also applies to filming with camera phones, where the slightest movement can be distracting. Tripods for camera phones can be relatively cheap (around \$20 US or in some instances, less). However, there are times when you won't use a tripod: when you don't have one, when you are on the move, or when you are aiming for a particular effect. A lot of phone footage meanwhile, is spontaneous and relies on being able to instantly capture a moment, so using a tripod is not possible or practical in such cases.
- **Keep it simple.** Constant zooming and panning is disconcerting for viewers. This is just as true when using camera phones. If you want to get a closer shot of your subject, just move closer.
- **Lighting.** As a general rule, don't shoot directly into the sun, as it can lead to saturated or high contrast images. Lens filters can modify the light before it enters the camera and also protect your lens. However, for the more experienced camera operator, there are instances when shooting into the light can enhance your shots, and there are various techniques to enable you to do so. With camera phones, use natural light whenever possible. For shooting in



poor light, most camera phones have in-built flashes, for pre-planned shoots using off-camera studio lights (a decent kit can be bought for around \$100 US) is an option.

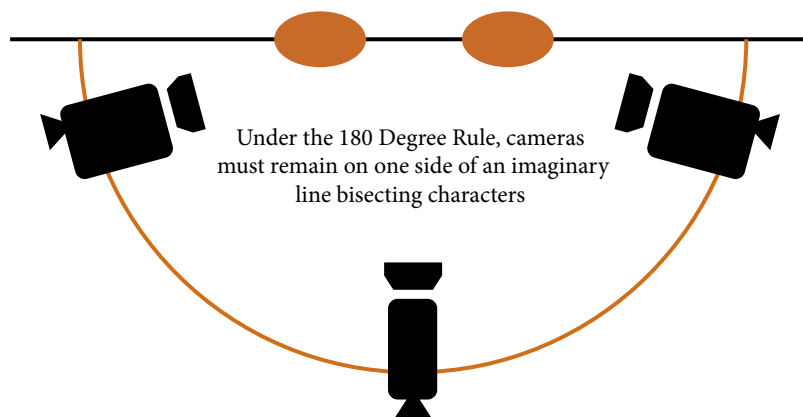
- **Widescreen world.** If you are using a camera phone, remember that TV and computer screens, as well as social media, are all widescreen – so turn your phone sideways: in other words, shoot horizontally not vertically (in landscape rather than portrait mode). A video pleading with people not to shoot vertically was a minor internet hit.
- **Exposure lock.** Camera phones will focus and expose your shot automatically. This can create problems when filming one person talking to the camera, as smart phones tend to keep adjusting and refocussing, which can result in jumpy looking footage. Using the exposure focus lock on your phone will help to keep the exposure and focus constant throughout.
- **Sound.** For the best sound consider using external microphones for both normal cameras and smart phones. If you don't have one, as a general rule for clear audio you need to be close to your subject. With smart phones, an option if you have two phones is positioning one of them very close to your subject to record the audio (on your phone's voice recorder). You can clap at the beginning of the interview to give yourself a reference point for syncing the better quality sound of your audio recording from that of your camera phone.
- **Take charge.** If you're filming an interview, and you're not happy with the sound, how the shot is framed, the background (either visually or noise), don't be afraid to ask your interviewee to wait while you address them. Unwatchable footage is rarely better than no footage at all.



- **The 'rule of thirds.'** This applies to both video and photographs. Imagine your screen is divided into thirds both horizontally and vertically. The lines and their intersections are where everything of interest should be (see below). Framing a shot in the centre should only be used when intentionally trying to draw the viewer's eye there. Here are a couple of short videos explaining more.
- **Cutaways and other shots.** Cutaways are vital shots which you give you options in your edit, help you tell your story and make it visually interesting. For example, if you are shooting a man walking in a city, possible cutaways would be buildings, traffic, the bustle of the crowd. You should try to get a variety of

different shots: close ups, big establishing wide shots, panoramas and lots of what are known as general views (GVs), essentially shots of the surrounding environment. So called establishing shots are particularly important if you want the viewer to know where you are. So if you are filming a significant meeting, for instance, get lots of exterior and interior shots of where it is taking place. Make sure you cover your story from lots of different angles – the more different types of shots you have, the more interesting your footage will be.

- **Don't cross the line.** The 180° rule states that if you have two people in a scene – for instance an interviewer and interviewee – they should maintain the same left/right relationship to each other. An imaginary line called the axis connects the characters, and by keeping the camera on one side of the axis, the first character is always framed on the right of the second character, who is always on the left of the first. Once the camera passes over the axis, this is called crossing the line. This means that if you are filming an interview and want to feature both the interviewer and interviewee, one person should always face the camera left and the other should be camera right. If close ups showed both characters looking to the camera right, the immediate visual assumption of the viewer would be that they were talking to someone else, off camera. The 180° rule is also important in scenes where you only have one person. For example, if you film someone walking to a shop and they walk right to left and then you cut to them walking left to right, the implication is that they are walking in the opposite direction. This is a concept which is easier to understand visually than in words, so here are some examples which help explain it more clearly:



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A famous example where the line was crossed:

<http://www.criticalcommons.org/Members/ogaycken/clips/getaway-axis.mp4/view>

A music video by the band the Red Hot Chilli Peppers is a striking example of crossing the line. The band are driving through the desert. For the first 21 seconds, they are filmed from one side of the car, after that from the other – giving an optical illusion that the car is suddenly going in the opposite direction: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mzJ5-lubeM>

Videos explaining crossing the line:

<http://www.raindance.org/crossing-the-line/>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jymstCy-jp0>

Finally, collaborations between NGOs and production companies or broadcasters are a growing trend and worth considering if you have a story which would make a good documentary – that is, potentially visually arresting and fulfils some of the criteria outlined in this chapter (e.g. interesting, new, with a strong narrative, and powerful human interest).



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