ICCON News

WRITING GUIDE

September 2020

Contents

Preparation

What makes news—an introduction to news values

It is new. It is about current events that affect people. The key questions news answers are **what** is happening and **why** does it matter to your audience. This is different to information, which is just facts about any subject.

News values can help you understand why this matters to your audience.

News values are criteria that influence what is selected and published or broadcast as news. These values help explain what makes something 'newsworthy' or 'in the public interest'.

While there are differences in news values (including the terminology used) between different countries, universities and media outlets, the list below is a summary of commonly used news values.

Generally, the more news values a story contains, the more newsworthy it is.

The first three news values listed (i.e. timeliness, impact/relevance, and human interest) are most likely to appear in ACIAR news stories.

When you are pitching a story and writing it, ask yourself 'What news values are in this story?' if you answer none, then it is not a news story.

News values:

Timeliness: Current news has more impact than something that happened yesterday or last week. The news media loses interest quickly and past events become stale when there's always fresh news somewhere.

Impact/relevance: If the impact of an event may directly affect readers, they'll want to know about it.

Human interest: If a situation draws any sort of emotional reaction, it might contain the news element of a human-interest story.

Prominence: A well-known person, place, or event has a stronger news angle than something that the audience isn't familiar with.

Oddity/unusualness: If something is unusual, shocking, or bizarre, the strangeness alone could make it newsworthy.

Extremes/superlatives: Reporters and audiences might be interested in the first, the best, the longest, the smallest, the highest—if you can legitimately claim one. Be careful. Do not overly focus on this, create hyperbole, or exaggerate claims. Dishonesty here will come back to bite you.

Scale/magnitude: The more people involved in or affected by the event, the more newsworthy it is. Similarly, the number of people affected by the event will affect its newsworthiness, whether it's an adjustment of minimum wage or a disease outbreak.

There are two other news values that are **not used** by ACIAR:

Proximity: This can be geographic (e.g. an event happening nearby) or cultural (e.g. an event happening in another place to which your audience had strong cultural connections, such as speaking the same language).

Conflict: Audiences are always interested in disagreements, arguments, and rivalries. If an event has a conflict attached to it, many people will be interested on that basis alone. Conflict is not a news value that ACIAR focuses on.

Additional sources about news values:

- Watch: What Makes News: Universal News Drivers (News Values) and News value: What Makes Interesting Reading
- Read: 10 elements of news and newsworthiness and News value types Part 1 and Part 2

Examples of news values in ACIAR work

1. *Lead from article '[Ocean Jewels: Tonga's Mabé Pearls a potential economy booster](#)'*

   Pearl farmers in Tonga can achieve double the average national income and capture value-added opportunities locally by growing unique mabé pearls cultured using winged pearl oysters, according to a new report.

   This lead shows:
   - **Impact**: double the average national income
   - **Oddity**: growing unique mabé pearls

2. *Lead from article '[Safe pork program improves food safety in Vietnam](#)'*

   On World Food Safety Day, ACIAR is celebrating its SafePORK project, which is successfully working with wet market retailers and small-scale abattoirs in Vietnam to increase the use of improved food safety practices in the handling of pork.

   This lead shows:

   - **Timeliness**: went out on World Food Safety Day and amidst COVID-19
   - **Conflict:** wet markets were being discussed as the source of COVID-19 at the time of this news item and were a controversial topic, so demonstrating a positive outcome from working with wet markets rode on the back of that hot topic
   - **Impact/relevance**: highly relevant because of the impact of COVID-19 on the world and the implied poor food safety practices that may have been the source, whereas this news item focus on improving food safety so relevant to a wider audience as well as Vietnamese pork eaters

3. *Lead from article '[Ugandan mums get fish booster to fight COVID-19](#)'*

   A new fish-enriched maize meal has been fast-tracked to mothers and their young children in a Ugandan hospital to help improve their nutritional status and reduce the impact of COVID-19.

   This lead shows:

   - **Timeliness/Relevance**: was happening at the height of the impact of COVID-19
   - **Human interest**: the solution is targeted at helping mums and their young children
   - **Oddity**: fish booster sounds curious and interesting

Finding a news story for ACIAR

Be curious!

Actions you can take to find news stories for ACIAR:

- Listen to what people in your office or in your team are talking about.
- Attend project meetings.
- Talk with local research coordinators.
- Set up regular meetings with country managers to map out possible topics.
- Read project reports (but remember news is a different format to a project report, so you must understand the report content and then transform it into news that explains clearly and concisely why this matters to your audience).
- Review trip reports.
- Brainstorm with other communication officers if ACIAR work relates to any topics that are currently being discussed in the news or on social media.
- Discuss among your colleagues if ACIAR work relates to announcements from governments, other organisations and businesses.
- Consider project milestones:
  - **When a project starts, write a news story announcing it.**
  - When an important result is published, write a news story about it.
  - When a project is concluding or a final report is published, write a news story that promotes what the research achieved.

How the ICCON find news stories

- **Prompt project leaders:** Provide project teams with a 'cheat sheet' that outlines what makes a good news story. Outline the news values and importance of focusing on the human-interest angle. Prompt them to ask and answer the questions: How are people benefiting from their research? What impact does the research have on different people?
- **Join project meetings:** Building relationships with the research teams means they have started thinking about communications as an important part of ACIAR work. Talk to your Country/Regional Office colleagues about project meetings that you could join (e.g. mid-year/annual reviews), from which you could draw story ideas. Follow up separately with the project team if/when you have identified story leads.
- **Identify international or national observance/celebration days:** Look for how ACIAR work support or relates to these days. Ask if projects link or contribute to the issue (e.g. World Food Day, World Oceans Day, World Soil Day, etc).
- **Keep updated with project reports:** When a project finishes read the final report and identify the best outcomes/values and write about it. Make sure you are aware of mid-term reviews—join the mid-term review meeting/field-trips and read ay mid-term reports to identify story ideas.

Pitching a news story

To pitch a news story is to write a short email or summarise in a few words during a conversation a story idea, including what is newsworthy about it.

Before the ICCON start writing a news story, they must pitch it to the Outreach Assistant Director Patrick Cape via phone/video call or email.

Patrick will say whether the idea is appropriate for an ACIAR news story and give direction on whether the ICCON should write the story and what it should include.

When pitching a news story, the ICCON must answer:

- What makes it new or newsworthy?
- Why does it matter to your audience?
- Give some details (five Ws and the H: who, what, when, where and how) and who you will interview.
- What multimedia will you provide?
- Is a news article the best format? Or would this story idea be better for a *Partners* magazine article, a blog post, a post on the ACIAR Facebook page or another format?

Pitch your stories by linking them to thematic areas and providing a short summary of key messages, e.g.:

Women improve soil health through agroforestry

Pitch: An ACIAR-supported project leads the community of Nadroumai to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 15 which aims to protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and biodiversity loss. It also enables local women to create income opportunities for their community.

ACIAR Food systems assessment amid COVID-19

Pitch: Governments and food systems stakeholders in the Indo-Pacific are seeing emerging risks to food systems resilience as a result of public and private sector responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. In Stage two of ACIAR's Integrated Assessment of Food System Security, Resilience and Emerging Risks in the Indo-Pacific, PNG is one of the countries that will be the focus of a deeper, more comprehensive and data driven investigation into response options. The outcomes of the assessment will be of interest to ACIAR audiences because COVID-19 is still of high importance globally. PNG and the Pacific are a high priority for Australia. The new research is relevant, timely and has an impact on countries that are the subject of the research.

Mitigating the impacts of COVID-19 on food security among communities in the Philippines

Pitch: With support from ACIAR, the Visayas State University (VSU) in Baybay City, Leyte, is distributing free vegetables to students and families in communities in central Philippines affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. This initiative is helping to ensure a steady supply of different vegetable crops in response to stresses on food supply caused by the pandemic. This activity is part of an ACIAR-VSU project assisting farmers acquire accreditation to market 'safe vegetables' under the banner of the Philippines Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) certification.

Researching a news story

In your research and interviews, you are seeking answers to the five Ws and the H. These are:

- **Who** is involved/affected?
- **What** happened? What was the impact?
- **Where** did it happen?
- **When** did it happen?
- **Why** did it happen? Why does it matter?
- **How** did it happen?

Note: When you are thinking about the **why**, remember all ACIAR projects are part of a wider portfolio. That could be in a particular country/region, research program or other strategic area of work. It is important to include this to explain **why** a project matters. This only needs to be one or two sentences.

Who to interview?

- ACIAR Research Program Manager (mandatory)
- Project leader
- In-country contacts
- On-the-ground researchers
- People who will be affected in-country (e.g. farmers, extension officers) – not essential for news stories

Interviewing tips

It is always better to speak to a person than emailing them questions because you usually get a more 'human' response and you have the opportunity to clarify information and ask follow-up questions. Before conducting your interview:

- **Do your research:** research your topic before your interview (e.g. read the project report) so you are asking good questions and not ones you can easily answer from research.
- **Prepare three or four key questions:** if you have too many questions to ask the person, the interview will likely feel rushed. Many questions can be answered by doing research before the interview. If you have fewer key questions, you can keep the interview on course but also give room for the person to tell you the story and hopefully something new you didn't know.
- **Ask open-ended questions:** this includes questions that require more than a 'yes' or 'no' answer. These are questions that start with 'How', 'Why' etc.
- **Don't be afraid to clarify:** constantly check you have understood what your interview subject means. It is also useful to ask if there are there any problems or sensitivities with doing a news article on this research.
- **Ask questions that can't be answered from your research:**
  - Remember you're looking for news that affects people, so ask how the research will affect people and why it matters.
  - Ask a few questions about the researcher's experience doing this work. What stood out to them as important? What surprised or impressed them?
- **Record your interview:** Use your phone to audio record your interview. Then try using a transcription service (e.g. Rev) to transcribe the recording to make sure you didn't miss anything.

Examples of ICCON interview questions related to ACIAR work

- What is the latest results or activities happening on your project?
- What are you planning next for this research?
- What do these results mean for farmers in this region?
- How do you hope these results will be used?
- What was it like doing this research? Did anything unexpected happen?
- What was the best thing about doing this research?
- Can you connect or introduce me with someone who has benefited from this research? Perhaps a local farmer?
- Is there anything else readers would like to know about the project?
- Can you clarify some technical words such as <insert terms>
- In the previous site visit, you said that <insert statement>, do you have any updates on this?
- According to the final report, it showed <insert statement> however you said <insert statement>, could you help to explain why?
- Why is this research important, how does it benefit farmers, and local communities?
- What was the need for this research?
- Can you tell me more about <insert fact about the research>?

The most important thing to do in an interview is **LISTEN**.

It is best to record each interview. It makes writing a story much easier. It ensures you capture everything that was said and also lets you concentrate on asking questions. To protect people's privacy, you must ask them before you record your conversation.

To save time, you can get your interview transcribed on https://www.rev.com/. This does have a cost. And the resulting transcript can have errors, so read through it carefully and refer back to the recording if you need to check anything.

Solutions to common ICCON challenges	
Challenge	**Ideas to help address the challenge**
Not getting a response from a local researcher	• Get someone more senior to introduce you or encourage the conversation. • Ask the project team to recommend on-ground researcher or beneficiaries. Sometimes that includes getting a project team member to translate. • Seek approval from the researcher to use information from own research (and attribute it to local researcher.
Interviewees not responding quickly or have limited time.	• Do as much of your own research as possible before requesting the interview so you are well prepared and don't waste their time. • Draft content and then ask for them to review it.
Receiving highly technical content.	• Research and read until you understand something, such as a project report, and can put it in your own words. • Ask and clarify again with researchers/project coordinator. • Talk to other ICCONs and the ACIAR Outreach team to help brainstorm ideas. • Ask technical project staff (project leader or coordinator) to describe the project and research results in their own words.
Partner organisations not giving relevant information	• Instead of an email try and schedule a video call so that you can ask follow up questions. • Ask technical people to explain things in the most simple language they can. • Don't be afraid to ask the 'so what' questions. For example: So what does this mean for farmers?

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Writing a news story

Your target audience

ACIAR news stories target an Australian audience.

They should be written so a **wide audience** understands them. This includes people who do not know much about agriculture, or the countries within which ACIAR operates.

The best way to do this is by using common words, or plain English. Writing in plain English means using simpler and more direct language and shorter sentences.

Write so an average 12 to 14-year-old can read and understand it.

Writing style

Be accurate. If in doubt, leave it out.

Use plain English. Writing in plain English means using common words and more direct language. It does not mean dumbing down information. Plain English means most people can understand it.

Writing in plain English means avoiding scientific or other jargon (i.e. special words or expressions used by a profession or group that are difficult for others to understand).

Find plain English words and terms from the Australian Government Digital Guide - Writing Style and always double check the ACIAR style sheet to make sure you are using the correct ACIAR word.

Write in active voice. Active voice follows the sentence structure subject-verb-object. Active voice gets straight to the point.

To work out these elements of a sentence, ask:

- Who/what is doing the action? This is the **subject**.
- What are they doing? This is the **verb**.
- To what/whom are they doing the action? This is the **object**.

Avoid passive voice (object-verb-subject). Passive voice usually makes it difficult to know who did who did the action. You can use passive voice if you can't specify the who did the action, e.g.: the part-time role was approved in March.

Write short, simple sentences.

Each paragraph should ideally be one sentence long, or two short sentences. The average sentence length should be 23 words long and any individual sentence should not be longer than 30 words.

Using these principles, will make the article easier to read. ACIAR articles should be written so an average 12 to 14 year-old can understand it. People should be able to read a news article on its own and understand it, without background knowledge or content.

The Australian Government provides additional information about writing style.

> **Plain English**
> +
> **Active voice**
> +
> **Short sentences**
> =
> **Readability**
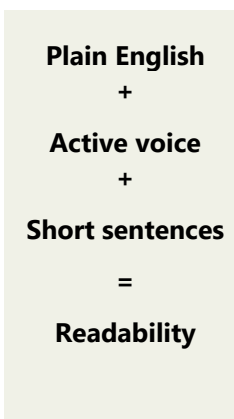
Examples of sentences in active and passive voice

Subject in purple

Verb in blue

Object in red

Active:

The project introduced farmers to higher-value crops, improved seeds and other farm inputs, and new markets and farming practices.

Passive:

Through this project, farmers were introduced to higher-value crops, improved seeds and other farm inputs, and new markets and farming practices.

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Active:

Staff will use the fish-enriched composite flour to prepare meals for mothers whose children are admitted to the unit. It can replace ordinary maize flour.

Passive:

The fish-enriched composite flour will be used to prepare meals for mothers whose children are admitted to the unit—it can be used to replace ordinary maize flour.

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Active:

Fishmeal is a delicacy within the region. High demand and overfishing put pressure on its price.

Passive:

While price pressure on fishmeal is driven by overfishing and human consumption given fishmeal is a delicacy within the region.
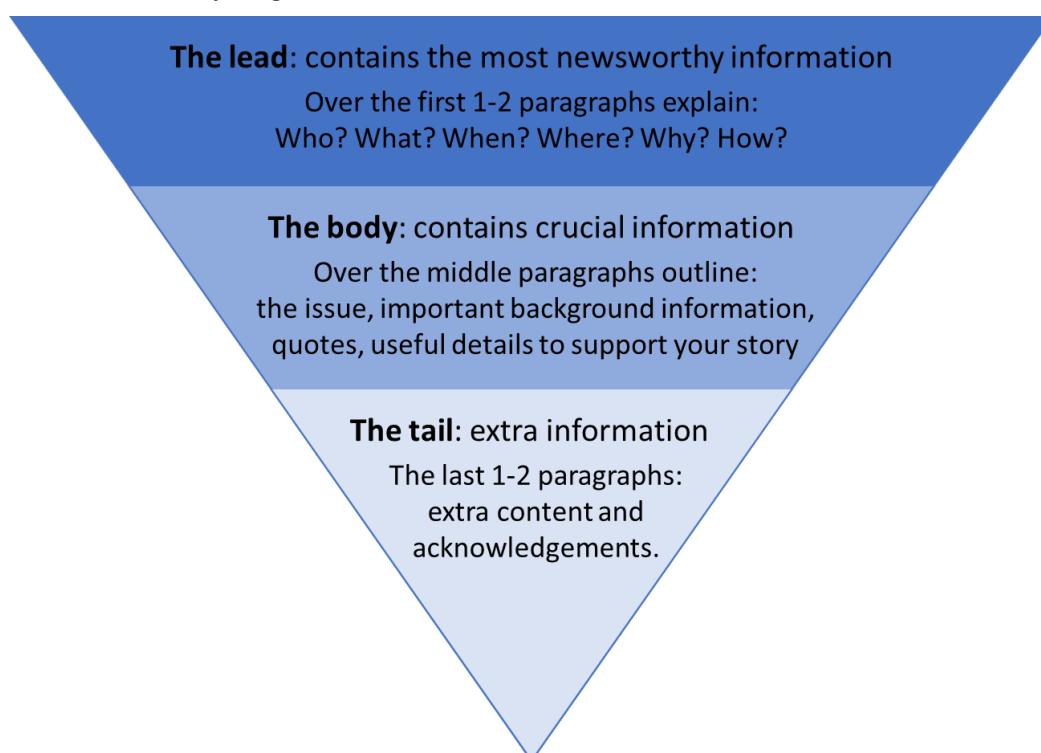
Length

The optimal length of an ACIAR news article is 400-450 words, however a maximum of 500 is allowed if it cannot be avoided. It can be difficult to write to a short word limit. It often takes more time to write a shorter story because you must craft it more carefully. But keep asking yourself if a particular detail helps people understand the story and why it matters. If you have more to say, it could become a series of articles or you can include links to more detailed information.

Structure

News articles should follow the 'inverted pyramid' structure. This structure has the most important information first. The who, what, when, where and why appear at the start of a story, followed by supporting details and background information. This structure developed so newspaper editors could cut a story from the bottom to allow it to fit into a space on a page and the story would still make sense. It is still favoured because many readers don't continue reading/watching/listening to a story all the way to the end.

Here is a summary diagram.

The lead: contains the most newsworthy information
Over the first 1-2 paragraphs explain:
Who? What? When? Where? Why? How?

The body: contains crucial information
Over the middle paragraphs outline:
the issue, important background information,
quotes, useful details to support your story

The tail: extra information
The last 1-2 paragraphs:
extra content and
acknowledgements.

A news article's structure is made up of a headline, lead, body and tail. Each should contain different information to draw the reader into the story and to comply with a news article style.

Headline

The headline communicates the main idea of a news story in a way that will capture the reader's attention. Traditionally news headlines are:

- **Short, typically eight words or less.** People scan headlines, so they need to be understood quickly. For ACIAR, target a headline of 8-10 words, with a maximum of 15 words if necessary and beneficial. In total, the headline (including spaces) should not exceed 55 characters.
- **Information-rich.** The headline should include the key information.
- **Starts with keywords.** When people scan, they tend to read the first words most of all.
- **Understandable even out of context.** Headlines often appear on their own e.g. in social media, search engine results and website previews.
- **Predictable and match reader expectations.** Readers should get what they expect from the article after reading the headline.

In the days of digital news, we are seeing longer headlines that include more key words for search engine optimisation. However, for ACIAR articles, follow the approach above.

To write headlines that meet these requirements:

- Practise and write many drafts.
- Write it after you finish writing the article, so you have a complete understanding of the story.
- Focus on key words and do not include words such as 'a', 'an', and 'the'. You can use a comma instead of 'and'.
- Use present-tense verbs for events in the past or present. For events in the future, use the infinitive form of the verb e.g. 'Local store <u>to open</u> new location'.
- Write in **active voice** (i.e. subject + verb + object).
- Select strong, effective words including great verbs.
- Write headlines in sentence case because people use the shape of words to read as well as the letters. Sentence case means that only the first letter of the sentence and only the first letter of proper nouns are capitalised. (e.g. This is a sentence in sentence case. This is a Sentence in Title Case.) Use sentence case.

Examples of ACIAR ICCON article headlines

- ACIAR awarded Vietnam's Friendship Order
- Accredited 'safe' vegetables help Vietnamese farmers earn more
- Safe pork program improves food safety in Vietnam
- Ocean jewels: Tonga's mabe pearls a potential economy booster
- Plant health clinics benefit Samoan farmers
- A sweet deal on clean planting materials
- Fresh vegetables delivered to Filipin communities affected by COVID-19
- Relationships for improved agriculture research in PNG
- Vietnam breeds productive, resilient hybrid grouper
- When less is more: growing vegetables the safer, healthier way
- Filipino women breaking new ground in science and agriculture

Lead

The lead is the first paragraph of a news story. It is typically one sentence long. It concisely tells the reader the main idea of the story and conveys its news value. It aims to hook people in, so they keep reading.

The lead should:

- Be 30 words or less.
- Answer who the article is about, what they are doing or how they are affected.
- Make the topic relevant immediately.
- Clearly demonstrate at least one and ideally two news values.

To write leads that meet these requirements:

- Think how would you start telling the story to a friend or family member (one who doesn't know anything about the topic).
- Write in active voice.

Examples of ACIAR ICCON article leads

- Soil water monitoring tools have helped small scale farmers in Kiwere, Tanzania, reduce irrigation time by 65%.
- With ACIAR support, the Visayas State University (VSU) is distributing free vegetables to communities in central Philippines affected by COVID-19.
- ACIAR is working with wet market retailers and small-scale abattoirs in Vietnam to increase the use of improved food safety practices in the handling of pork.
- A successful breeding program in Vietnam has developed a new hybrid grouper that could double fish farmers' incomes.
- ACIAR was awarded the Friendship Order from the Vietnam Government in Hanoi today— the country's most prestigious award for foreign organisations.
- Pearl farmers in Tonga can achieve double the average national income and capture value-added opportunities locally by growing unique mabé pearls cultured using winged pearl oysters.
- ACIAR has launched a scholarship program that supports domestically-led agricultural research to address the needs of people in the Pacific region.
- Local farmers in the highlands of Papua New Guinea can harvest up to five times more sweetpotato and earn more thanks to new ACIAR research.

ACIAR ICCON tips on writing the lead

- Always think about the impact, how it will affect people.
- Sometimes if you are not sure of the lead or the news angle, just start writing.
- Write the most important information of the article, follow the Ws and H format
- Simple easy to digest information that can summarise the entire article.

The body

This is the part of the news article that adds details to the story. The body of an article includes supporting facts, as well as direct and paraphrased quotes.

Each paragraph in the body should flow clearly from one to the next. Likewise, each sentence should make sense, on its own and in the context of the full article.

The body should make the issue clear and go into enough detail to demonstrate why the topic of the article is important. Background information should be provided in the body, as should supporting information.

Each paragraph should ideally be one sentence long, or two short sentences. The average sentence length should be 23 words long and any individual sentence should not be longer than 30 words.

You should hyperlink mentions of research organisations, government pages and university websites. If the article is about a specific research project, link to the relevant web page. Hyperlinks help with the search engine optimisation and are particularly effective when they link to highly-ranked websites. Hyperlinks should not add to the overall word count.

Example of using hyperlinks well

From the ACIAR news article Ugandan mums get fish booster to fight COVID-19

> …In response to the Ugandan President's appeal for help, the NutriFish project team prioritised its development of a nutrient-dense fish-enriched maize meal flour and donated 2.5 tons of it to the Mwanamugimu Nutrition Rehabilitation Unit at Mulago Hospital in Kampala.
>
> NutriFish is one of nine projects under Cultivate Africa's Future (CultiAF)—a co-funded partnership between ACIAR and Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC)—which aims to improve food and nutrition security, resilience, and gender equality across eastern and southern Africa.
>
> 'The fish-enriched composite flour will be used to prepare meals for mothers whose children are admitted to the unit—it can be used to replace ordinary maize flour,' says Dr Dorothy Nakimbugwe, NutriFish project coordinator, Director of Nutreal Ltd, Uganda, and Associate Professor, Department of Food Technology and Nutrition, School of Food Technology, Nutrition and Bio-Engineering at Makerere University…

Using quotes

Quotes from people involved with or affected by ACIAR work give credibility to an article. Use direct quotes to record the opinions, emotions, promises, and unique expressions of your sources.

A news story lets the direct quotes do as much of the work as possible. Avoid pulling your punches by summarising the quote before introducing it.

Quotes must add value to the story and not be mundane, that is, quotes for the sake of quotes.

For ACIAR news articles you should quote the ACIAR Research Program Manager. In every ACIAR news article you need to state why ACIAR is funding the initiative. This information can be provided via a simple one sentence statement, or it can be provided by quoting an ACIAR spokesperson—such as the relevant Research Program Manager (RPM). You should therefore always ask the RPM to review your news article and to check whether a quote or statement from them is required.

Then include a quote from either the project leader, on-ground researcher or in-country person affected by the research.

For ACIAR news articles you can include direct quotes from up to two people, up to three may be considered in exceptional circumstances.

If you take the time to introduce a person to quote them, give them at least two direct quoted sentences. For example, in one sentence they could introduce an idea and then they could address the idea in the second sentence. You can always suggest slight revisions to a direct quote from a spokesperson to make it easier to read or more succinct. However, you must not change the meaning or their intent, and you must approve your proposed changes with them first before publishing the article.

Remember it is ACIAR style to use single quotation marks and the past tense (i.e. he said, she said) for quotes.

Example of correct usage of quotation marks and tense

From the ACIAR news article New biosecurity lab boost Pacific research capacity:

> ...ACIAR Research Program Manager for Horticulture, Irene Kernot[1], said ACIAR is proud to support and enhance the Pacific region's research capacity.
>
> 'The facility allows SPC to achieve plans of a regional centre of excellence in pest and disease diagnostics while supporting regional food security amid a fast-growing influence of climate change,' Ms Kernot said[2][3].
>
> 'Climate change is a major factor driving the rise in the spread of pests and diseases, along with increased global export trade.[4]
>
> 'Changing weather patterns affect the survival rate and geographical distribution of pests; and the intensity, development and geographical distribution of diseases.[4]
>
> 'Growing and expanding the ability of our partner countries in the Pacific to manage this growing biosecurity threat is crucial to ensuring regional food security.' ...

Notes:

1. Introduce the person being quote.
2. Reference who is being quoted after the first sentence.
3. Use past tense (i.e. he said, she said, Ms Kernot said).
4. You don't need to use a closing quotation marks at the end of paragraphs if the quote continues onto the following paragraph. This indicates the person is still being quoted.

Paraphrasing

To paraphrase means to put something into your own words. This can include summarising a quote. Paraphrasing can clarify the message, make it more relevant to your audience, or give it greater impact.

Paraphrasing is a useful way to record what an interviewee has said, but to make it more succinct and to flow with the rest of the story.

Example of paraphrasing

Question to interviewee: What is social capital?

Interviewee's response:

"By social capital I think about things like... And we all... social capital's been defined over and over again through the academic literature. But I'll give you the applied sense of it. For me and for the project it's about how communities gel together from a family grouping through to a community grouping. How the... Where the social links are, who's talking to who in their day to day lives, how they connect for social interaction and business interactions and the two can be the same. So if I'm growing carrots and I want to go and sell them locally at the marketplace, I go out to do that I have relationship with the purchaser or the buyer that's part of social capital. It's also about the networks that are formed and importantly how those networks are used. So we can have a lot of people that we know, but how do we actually use those networks? Do we know... Can we call on people in time of need."

Paraphrase and related adjusted quote for news article:

The project leader says social capital is about the networks formed for social and business interactions, as well as how these networks are used.

What you can exclude from a news article?

A news article is much shorter than a project report, academic journal report or an interview with a scientist. It is also much shorter than a blog or feature-length magazine article. A general audience needs to be able to read and understand a news article.

With these differences in mind, the following elements should be left out of ACIAR news articles:

- Scientific processes or methodology (instead focus on outputs or outcomes)
- Scientific jargon
- Acronyms (they need to be spelled out in full. Acronyms should be used sparingly.
- The full project name and project code (instead use a hyperlink). This is because with the new website, *Related Projects* are listed in the column next to the body text.
- All the people and organisations involved
- Deep dive into the background/context
- References
- Long quotes

Quick tricks – what to leave out

Don't spell out ACIAR.

In ACIAR news articles, unlike for other acronyms, you don't need to spell out the 'Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research' the first time you reference ACIAR. Just use 'ACIAR'.	For example, in this sentence SPC is spelt out but not ACIAR: *Located within the Pacific Community's (SPC) Narere campus, the new facility is the first of its kind for the region and was built with financial support from ACIAR.*

You don't have to write the full project name

ACIAR projects may have long and complicated project names. You don't need to spell out the full project name in an ACIAR news article. You may give an in-line reference to the project instead and hyperlink to the project page.	For example, in this sentence the words 'SafePORK project' reference the full project and it is hyperlinked to the project page. *On World Food Safety Day, ACIAR is celebrating its SafePORK project, which is successfully working with wet market retailers and small-scale abattoirs in Vietnam to increase the use of improved food safety practices in the handling of pork.* In this example, 'ACIAR-VSU project' is used: *This activity is part of an ACIAR-VSU project assisting farmers acquire accreditation to market 'safe vegetables' under the banner of the Philippines Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) certification.*

Acknowledge key partners, but not everyone

ACIAR projects often have many partners. In ACIAR news articles acknowledge the key partners including the contracted Australian agency and the key in-country partners related to the news story being told. All other partners should be listed on the project landing page, a link to which should be included in the news article. In this way all partners involved in the project are acknowledged – just not necessarily listed on the news article itself.	For example: *...Established through an ACIAR-funded project run by Applied Horticultural Research, farmers from Taunbogyi village in the Southern Shan State delivered 900kg of tomatoes last week to retail markets in Yangon...* *...The project is also engaging with the private sector, with Fresh Studio responsible for the training, certification and linking the farmers with the market, with local logistics company Future Glory helping transport the farmers' produce the 600km plus journey to Yangon...* *...The Yezin Agricultural University (YAU) is also playing an important role in the project, helping farmers to build skills by running farm-based trials to assess new vegetable varieties, improved crop establishment and expanding the range of crops that can be grown in the region...*

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Tips for writing news about science

ACIAR news articles tell readers why ACIAR-supported research matters to people. They also promote ACIAR as a trusted and expert science partner.

Here are five tips to help write news about science for ACIAR.

1. Tell a story

This includes having:

- Characters – explain who is involved/affected and what makes them important and interesting. Characters can include farmers, scientists, politicians, officials and businesspeople – not just the scientists.
- Setting – many readers won't be familiar with the areas and countries, or even the agricultural sectors, where ACIAR works, so paint a picture of what it is like there. What is the scene or setting like? What makes the place or location unique?
- Problem – explain the problem in a way that the audience can understand and relate to it. How big or important is the problem. This could involve sharing a person's personal story of how they are affected.
- Solution – explain how the people solved the problem; the result; and the impact on the people involved.

2. Know your audience

Remember ACIAR news articles target a general Australian audience. Many of them will have limited knowledge of agriculture and science.

ACIAR news articles should be written so an average 12 to 14 year-old can read them and understand what is happening and why it matters.

With this in mind, make sure the first few paragraphs hook that general audience's attention and make the story relevant to them.

If you do need to introduce a new term or idea to the reader because it is fundamental to the story, then explain what it means in plain English.

3. Know what you want to achieve

The reason why a news article is worth writing and being published should be in the back of your mind as you develop it. Examples of reasons could include:

- Showcase the impact and value of the ACIAR investment into research.
- Announcing funding of a new project or a scholarship program.
- Announcing an event or a milestone.
- Inform the audience of the broader issues ACIAR is trying to help solve.
- Support ongoing and productive relationships with partners.
- Support technology adoption or policy change.

These reasons will help you decide who to interview and what to include.

4. Facts are not enough

When writing about science it is easy to get caught up in the technical detail. While everything you publish must be technically accurate, just reporting the facts is not enough to tell a good story.

Consider how you can tap into people's emotions to communicate your story. Ask yourself why might people care about your news? And what can you say that might evoke an emotional response in your readers, so they feel the impact of your news?

Dealing with sensitive topics

Consider whether the topic you are covering is sensitive. Is it dealing with a sensitive scientific topic or issue that people may have an adverse reaction to such as genetic modification or even climate change?

How you 'frame' the topic matters. How you frame something or someone is how you represent it. It includes what information you present and what words and/or images are used. It can change the audience's perception without altering the facts. Consider how you introduce the topic and how you talk about it so it shows the reader the perspective of ACIAR and leaves less room for confusion.

Check with ACIAR Outreach and Capacity Building team if you encounter a sensitive issue to check if ACIAR has a position it communicates about the topic.

It is also important to think about how you frame the people involved. For example, smallholder farmers could be framed – as destitute farmers ignorant of technology or as small business entrepreneurs looking for new solutions? Which is appropriate for ACIAR?

Examples of ACIAR ICCON dealing with sensitive issues in writing news articles

When one solution does not fit all.
Due to COVID-19 and border closure one Meryl Williams Fellowship candidate has been allowed to carry out her research in Fiji. The story had to be written in a manner providing justification why the candidate had been allowed to do so, so that other MWF candidates didn't feel left out or that she got special treatment.

Portraying vulnerable people

This may include sick people or children. Consent must always be sought, accompanied by an explanation about the nature of interviews, photos of videos including what they will be used for and who is likely to view them. Consent must then be sought.

Long acknowledgements

In-country project leads/coordinators want to include or acknowledge all the VIPs involved with or supporting the project (i.e. including all the names because they feel the VIPs will feel slighted if they were not acknowledged. Explain to them that the focus of the story is the results/activities of the project and if it is really needed to include VIP name it could just be the top person like the university president or the Australian Ambassador.

5. Help scientists shine

ACIAR articles should share and celebrate the work of scientists and other researchers.

Scientists are not journalists. It is up to the ICCON to 'translate' the scientist's work into something meaningful and engaging to the wider public.

Focus on what the outcome of the work will be for people.

The job of the ICCON is to make scientists look good and make the importance of their research abundantly clear.

Additional resources

- Join a science communication group on Facebook (AAAS, Australian Science Communicators) or find and follow great science communicators

- Read a journal article... on science communication! (JCOM, Science Communication, Public Understanding of Science)

  Read these articles: https://www.scidev.net/global/communication/practical-guide/planning-and-writing-a-science-story.html and https://www.writing-skills.com/top-ten-writing-tips-for-scientists

Editing and proofreading

Editing and proofreading are separate processes to review content. The ICCON must edit and proofread their own articles before submitting them.

Editing

This is the process of actively improving writing. It looks at the big picture. It includes reviewing:

- Structure and flow
- Focus – relevance to readers
- Content
- Suitability of sources
- Readability

When editing your work, start with the big questions and then work down to the details. Use the ICCON news articles checklist to help you with editing.

Use can use readability tools to help with editing, but use them with care. Readability tools can show where you can improve content. They can give you useful metrics that provide an overview of your work.

For example, the Flesch reading ease index is a commonly used readability test. It indicates how difficult a passage in English is to understand. It uses word length and sentence length. The index is a scale from 1 to 100. A higher score is easier to read. A score of 90 to 100 indicates the text is very easy to read and can be easily understood by an average 11-year-old student.

Many online readability tools incorporate the Flesch reading ease index, such as the Hemingway Editor, which the Australian Government recommends.

Some tools (including the review or editor function in Microsoft Word and Grammarly) give suggestions to make text more readable. Be careful using automatic recommendations.

Proofreading

This is the process of catching and correcting errors. It looks at the details. It includes reviewing:

- Spelling and typos.
- Grammar (i.e. the structure of language). You can think of it as word order and choice. How we order our language is part of what determines meaning.
- Punctuation (i.e. symbols we use to clarify meaning e.g. full stops, commas, question marks, inverted commas etc.).
- Choice of words and tone.

It is difficult to proofread one's own work. We tend to read what we expect to see, not necessarily what is there. For the best chance of catching errors, we recommend:

1. **Take a break**
   Take a break from looking at your work. Ideally leave it overnight, but even a couple of hours is useful. This lets you look at your work with fresh eyes.

2. **Change the format**
   Print it out or change the font or the letter size. These make the words look different and words sit on different lines. This helps you see errors that you did not see before.

3. **Use a ruler/page to block the rest of the work**
   Blocking out the rest of the work forces you to look at one sentence at a time. This stops you scanning over errors.

4. **Read it out aloud**
   Ideally you can go to a separate space, such as a meeting room, and read the work. If that is not available, you can use the 'Read Aloud' function that is available in some versions of Microsoft Word.

5. **Ask a friend or another ICCON member**
   - Having a reciprocal agreement, in which you proofread their work and they proofread your work, is ideal. Make sure you ask people ahead of time and deliver the draft on time to them.

6. **Use a tool (but don't rely on it)**
   Tools such as Microsoft Word spellcheck and Grammarly. But you cannot rely on them to pick up all errors and sometimes their suggestions don't make sense in the context of every sentence.

7. **Double check the spelling of names**
   This includes people's names, locations, projects and organisations.

8. **Refer to the ACIAR style sheet**
   Check your usage of words, numbers and your spelling is consistent with the ACIAR style sheet.

Additional resources

- Watch: Editing and proofreading
- Read: How to Edit Your Own Writing and 11 tips for editing your own writing
- Watch: How to proofread your writing: 10 top tips
- Read: 15 common grammar mistakes that kill your writing credibility
- Use: Hemingway online editor – cut and past your text to see how it performs

Quick reference: plain English examples

Don't write this	Write this
a number of	some, many, few
address this issue	look for solutions, solve this problem
approximately	about
adequate number of	enough
aggregated	total
amongst	among
as a consequence of	because
ascertain	find out
assist	help
at a later date	later
at the time of writing, at this point in time	now
cognisant of	aware of, know
collaborate with	working with
commence	start, begin
concerning	about
consequently	so
create a dialogue with them	speak to them
deliver, drive	say what you are doing, e.g. 'increasing' …
despite the fact that	although
disburse	pay
discontinue	stop
dispatch	send
documentation	documents
due to the fact that	because, since, as, owing to

Don't write this	Write this
during the month of September	in September
establish	create, set-up, form
examine	look at, check, discuss
facilitate	help
give consideration to	think about, consider
going forward	future
have the capacity to	can
identify	set, create, decide on, know, recognise
if this is not the case	if not
if this is the case	if so
impact upon	affect
in accordance with	in line with
implement	apply, install, do
in order to	to
in receipt of	get, have, receive, receiving
in relation to	about
in the event of, in the event that	if, when
in the light of, in view of	because of
it is requested that you declare	you should declare
it should be noted that	note that, remember that
key, important, primary	main
leverage	use, build on
make an application	apply
make a complaint	complain
methodology	method
notwithstanding	even though, though

Don't write this	Write this
obtain	get, have
prior to	before
primary	main
provide	give
provide a response to	respond to
provide assistance with	help
pursuant to	under
reach a decision	decide
require	need or must
subsequently	after
table (verb) - unless tabling a document	address, discuss, release
that is the reason why	that is why
the way in which	how
the reason is because	because, the reason is
thereafter	then, afterwards
until such time as	until
upon	on
utilise	use
whether or not	whether
with reference to, with regard to, with respect to	about, regarding

ICCON news article checklist

Newsworthiness	
☐	Does the article have at least two strong news value?
☐	Does it answer the five Ws and H?
Headline and lead	
☐	Is the headline no more than 55 characters in total (including spaces)?
☐	Does the headline include the key information?
☐	Does the headline make sense, even out of context?
☐	Is the lead (i.e. the first paragraph) 30 words or less?
☐	Does the lead answer who the article is about; what they are doing?
☐	Does the lead clearly demonstrate at least one news value?
Content	
☐	Does the article quote a relevant person?
☐	Does it attribute quotes and data to their source?
☐	Does it explain ACIAR involvement and why ACIAR is supporting the work?
☐	Does the coverage of the research explain why it matters to people?
☐	Is it accurate?
Structure	
☐	Is it structured in an inverted pyramid?
☐	Does it have one sentence per paragraph.
Readability	
☐	Is it free of scientific jargon?
☐	Will an Australian audience unfamiliar with agriculture understand it?
☐	Does Grammarly give you a readability score of 60 or more?
☐	Is it under 400 words?
☐	Can anything be cut without affecting the whole?

☐	Is the average sentence length 23 words or less?
☐	Are all sentences shorter than 30 words?
☐	Is it more than 90% of it in active voice?
☐	Does it use plain English (i.e. common words)?
Editing and proofreading	
☐	Have you edited it?
☐	Can anything be cut without affecting the whole?
☐	Have you proofread it?
☐	Does it comply with the ACIAR style sheet?
☐	Are hyperlinks included to the research project, organisations and extra information?
Approvals and consent	
☐	Have the quoted people reviewed the article and consented to their quotes?
☐	Has the Country Manager approved the article?
☐	Has the Research Program Manager or relevant ACIAR technical person approved it?
☐	Has the Research Program Manager been invited to provide a quote?