Writing for online channels – notes for presentation

Posting engaging content – Olivia Williams (slide 2)

Long-term digital success is all about making your website **habit-forming** and pushing it onto that **'must-check'** list that we all have in the back of our minds these days. I have a few websites that I go back to again and again, and I'm sure that you do too. Ideally you want your own website to be one of those.

Remember that the internet is an extremely **competitive place**, so you need to make your content as appealing and authoritative as possible. Try to put content up at the **same pace every week** so that people learn, almost subconsciously, when to check in. It's very off-putting to check back on a website and see it looking exactly the same as last time you went on.

Timing

To avoid missing any major events or news announcements think about building an **editorial calendar.** Your readers will be more likely to engage with your posts when they're related to subjects that are top of their minds, like current events, Oxford specific events, or holiday times. For example, the main University website was heavily involved in creating content for **#EducationDay** on Twitter on 15th October and it performed really well on social media.

You might want to think ahead to events such as the Boat Race, Varsity Match or undergraduate admissions dates. Repurposing relevant website or video content could also work well for freshening up your website if you notice something is being discussed online and you have a relevant article or image.

Think about **time differences** for your various audiences around the world because you want to schedule your posts when most of your fans are online. Oxford is of course a globally significant institution so we are not just focused on British audiences. For example it is good to post at the end of the working day here for **America.**

Writing your article (slide 3)

It can help to tempt readers when you **flag up what type of article it is in your headline**. For example, is it a podcast, gallery, video or a video that you are offering? You can also **add command words** such as 'watch, listen, explore, see' to create a compelling website. Don't want to overdo it or the website will start to feel a bit aggressive, but when used sparingly it can be dynamic.

Take the time to come up with a **tantalising summary** as a subheading, which will also help you to compose your tweets and Facebook posts as you think of the buzzwords for your entire piece.

Try to keep your posts between 500 and 800 words to get more engagement. Shorter, more **succinct posts are better received** as a general rule. Use short paragraphs too – four or five sentences at most.

Think about the tone that you want. If there's more than one person working on content, read each other's work to keep consistency. This will also help to eliminate mistakes as it's very hard to proofread your own work.

When you read it, can you think of anyone who you would want to share the story with? If not, then that might be a sign that you need to make improvements. Content that friends and family want to share travels much further.

Visual appeal (slide 4)

Images are the lifeblood of online journalism so you will need **high-quality** pictures if you want to make an impact and engage your users. Photo-based posts do really well, particularly as Oxford is such a photogenic, iconic place.

Ask your audience and current undergraduates and staff to share their thoughts and images. The Oxford University **Instagram** is great inspiration for this.

Just in case you forget: always give people proper **credit** for their work, and make sure you have the right to use something with attribution before you publish. It's nice to use pictures that undergraduates have taken for example.

Remember to check **OU Images**, as Oxford-specific images look much more interesting than the generic shots that you get from other picture websites. Check it as it is regularly updated.

Your pictures need to be well-chosen and well-cropped. Use **captions** to generate greater interest and make them thoughtful. Use pictures about every three paragraphs if you can manage.

Story choices (slide 5)

To quote **Oxford's own digital guidelines**, they have grouped University content into four main themes. You can see these **in full in the University's digital communications strategy document**: http://po.st/digicommsstrategy.

1. Oxford's reputation as a world-leading centre for research
2. Understanding that Oxford is a cutting-edge university – and has been so for 900 years
3. Broad understanding of the uniqueness, quality and value of an Oxford education
4. Access to the University (and its resources) and diversity – "Oxford is for people like me".

More particularly for you, it might be about raising the profile of your college or department. It is handy to keep in mind that through social media and Google searches you can reach all sorts of people online - not just those who have signed up to follow or 'like' you. You **might want to actively encourage expanding your audience with the following groups**, for example: prospective students, current students, or alumni, the media, interested members of the public, academics, people who live in the local area.

While we are thinking about your readers: take a minute to consider what they like. Check your Google Analytics, or another such as Parsley, regularly to understand what's working to keep your posts relevant and engaging to your readers. It will help you understand what they want from your website and what types of content interests them.

On a micro level if **you feel that a particular article isn't as popular as you expected** then try tweaking the headline or the images to see if you can tempt more readers, you don't have to leave it sitting there.

Once people are on your pages, reading your content…

- **Increasing pages per visit:** Make sure that you include **prominent links**, particularly ones that are similar in the body of the text. Then down the side too you might like to point to other latest news and 'most read'.

- **Dwell time:** How long readers spend on your page has become an **important metric** that mainstream media are focusing on it over page views because it shows high engagement. The most obvious ways of increasing dwell time include **multimedia, poll, comments and pull quotes**

- **Comments:** when responding to questions, comments, complaints and compliments, timeliness is important. The faster you reply, the more likely fans will engage with you in the future and create a chatty community.

- **Search Engine Optimisation:** Google's algorithms are updated all the time so don't get too hung up on Search Engine Optimisation. **Key phrases** are the main thing to remember. You need to put them at the top end of the article, in your captions and in the headline. You can check key terms by using **Google Trends** to see the phrase or word that people generally use for the subject of your piece (eg whether people search for Obama, Barack Obama, President Obama etc). Don't get too hung up on it if it's going to become repetitive, but handy to remember, and do use them naturally. Fill in pictures' alt tags and titles with the keywords if appropriate.

Newsletter (slide 6)

If you are putting together a newsletter for your readers **do not overload it** - very off-putting to see a load of text in your inbox. If possible use bullet points, **do not make the format too regular**, better to crop down the text and make more use of **leading images**.

Good behaviour

Finally - remember that you're representing the University in your content and that we are subject to a great deal of **media scrutiny**. If you're posting an opinion piece, for example, clarify that you're expressing the views of one particular person and not those of the University. This type of clarification won't be needed for most of your posts but sometimes it will be important to distinguish between personal stances and the University's views. For example, **we put up a book review about 'Rangoon' and 'Burma'** so at the end we just put a note to say that the University has no official policy on which words to use.

Introduction to writing for social media (slide 7)

A lot about writing for social is not actually about writing, it's about **understanding the context**: the context of your **channel**, the context of how your **audience** perceives you and the wider brand you represent, in terms of **what is expected** of your brand and in terms of **what's going on** in the world (divestment, lion conservation etc).

In terms of your actual content, it's increasingly **multimedia-led**, and then your copy has to sell those visuals, those videos, those links as well as possible. Start with the content and then work out the best way of promoting it. So almost before you think about writing well you have to think about where you're going to get that content from, how frequently you're going to update it and who's going to do that.

How we read content today (slide 8)

There's reams and reams of data, a cacophony of voices all over the world in real time.

When we first started spreading stories it was through the medium of something called the 'oral tradition', Homer: 2 volumes of 24 books each: 48 books in total, in pentameter, committed to memory – that was how

people used to tell stories!

We now live in an age where we have trouble remembering a single quote or phrase accurately. We are in the age of the soundbite, never more than a minute away from information – and seem much less bothered by words that don't add meaning to a sentence.

So how do you compose a good tweet? (slide 9)

What are you trying to promote? What's the content? Be content led and consider the best way to promote whatever format of content it is you want to promote…

On Twitter, you have **various different formats**. (slide 10)

On the right you can see the quoted tweet, a reasonably new feature. This is nice if you want to give another handle a push and add a comment to your followers – slightly more sophisticated/valuable to your followers than a retweet (RT). In our experience it works better if the original image has a picture (eg bottom left example).

Equally sometimes you have nothing to add, and then a RT will work fine (example top left).

Consider embedding video too (slide 11). Can either embed video from YouTube or Vimeo (example on the left), or you can now have 30 seconds of native video, uploaded to Twitter directly (example on the right).

Some principles of good tweeting (slides 12 to 14)

From the University social media strategy:

- Include a picture, yes decreases your character count but dramatically increases engagement and so reach [140chars – 114 chars]
- Most of the time, add a link, Twitter is by nature about getting people's attention, once you've got that attention you can convert that into more meaningful engagement by pointing people to longer content [114-93 chars]

As an example, consider the need for the media relations officer on duty to respond quickly over the weekend when the brother of Cecil the lion was found to be alive and well. This ultimately proved to be one of our most popular tweet.

Consider an example of how the famous first sentence of a Pride and Prejudice might be recrafted for a tweet (slides 15 and 16).

Exercises

Exercise 1: Consider how you would redraft the following first sentences from two novels as a 140 character tweet! (slides 18 and 19)

Exercise 2: Consider how you would convert a longer Facebook post into a tweet. (slides 20 and 21)

Creating a tweet to publicise a webpage (slides 22 and 23)

Here's part a full length interview that we did with an Oxford historian on randomness. He didn't talk about the randomness of historical events but instead the randomness of the historical archive, the 'accident' of what survives.

There's also a shot of what appeared on the listing page, and in fact tweeting is a lot like writing copy on a listing page – you're trying to hook people's attention to click through to more information, not giving them the whole story.

You need to approach link posts differently on different channels. Consider using a link tracker to the track number of clicks and where they're from.

Po.st also allows you to create 'campaigns' of links, so for example the Digital Communications team could have a Twitter campaign to store all of those URLs and a Facebook one too and compare the relative strengths of the two channels for converting people to content. Note that links is more what Twitter is designed to do but we have a much larger Facebook base so Facebook still gets us around clicks 1,000 per post, Twitter more like 100.

What about the other channels? (slide 24)

In addition to Twitter, the University also operates on Facebook, LinkedIn and Instagram.

- How you approach your channels should flow from your **strategy** for engaging on social media– what are you trying to achieve with your channels? This can then be refined by trial and improvement, sense what your audience responds to and the technical side what types of content work best for you (video, images, link).
- Overall, remember that on social media you are part of a **community** – you are not just writing content, but rather you are managing a community through the content you put out.
- Consider your tone of voice and how it should be tailored for different channels (slides 25 and 26).

Facebook (slides 27 and 28)

As with Twitter, there are different post types: link, video, image.

- **Video: n**ative video does best (ie not linking to an external site like YouTube) – however, they are also most labour intensive to create.
- **Image:** these are fairly straightforward – you can have a single powerful image or a series of images.
- **Link:** these work least well as the algorithm used by Facebook to for organic reach tends to disadvantage them. You can get round this by putting URL in the comments section, for example where the main bit of content is more immersive, providing more information for really interested users. If you have some budget, you can boost link posts with some paid advertising.

Note that **Share** posts do really badly – and they haven't been run on the main University Facebook page for over a year

Call to actions (slides 29 and 30)

Be clear about what you want people to do in response to your post.

- How does your visual content interact with your copy, is it just asking people to enjoy it (biggest reach, easiest to like.
- Do you actively want someone to dos something off the back of your post?
- Mix of both (can't always be asking people to do things!).

Examples:

- Let us know in the comments below what your dining room looks like - and any tips on menu choices!

- Read the stories and then share them with your friends! (Or previous, subtler CTA in a link post 'read it now')
- Competitions (photo competition – double win)
- Send your photos to digicomms@admin.ox.ac.uk and our favourite shot this week will go out to millions as our new Facebook cover image.

Image posts – single and series (slides 31 and 32)

- Used on the main page to show things you can't normally see in Oxford as member of public (eg inside the Radcliffe Camera, Bodleian underground storage, college of the week
- If you are using a single image post, make sure it is a powerful picture.
- Note that square images don't display so nicely
- Bear in mind how multiple images display – where there's more than four, use an image that is already light for the greyed out image.
- Good place for calls to action (unlike link posts you're not pointing people off somewhere else) eg 'let us know in the comments below', 'share this', 'LIKE this if you remember Oxford in the snow…'
- Consider broader context of your content eg themed weeks allow you to spread content over 7 days rather than trying to get all facets of a story across in one post. Easier to create, more digestible for the reader to get, and more cumulatively memorable over longer period of time.

Link posts (slide 33)

- If you post a URL in Facebook you get the example on the left. It automatically pulls the images from the web page.
- If you link to multiple pages, it sets them up as separate spotlights. This is really useful if you're pointing people to a listing page where they can choose a variety of different pages. So here, on the right, we were pointing people to a new interview series on Research in Conversation, celebrating Ada Lovelace.

(slide 34) What you see in the example on the bottom right, when you enter the URL into your status bar, is fully customizable and you SHOULD customize it.

We have a testing brand page we've set up which isn't published (no one can see it, unless they're invited). This allows us to play around with things, and see how they render when they're published as well as view them on mobile (the majority of your users will be on mobile, so it's important to take this into account.)

(slide 35) Importance of **testing on mobile** – although on the desktop you didn't need to 'see more', on the mobile you did, so we changed text as a result.

LinkedIn (slides 36 and 37)

- An overlooked channel, particularly for more sophisticated content – it is much less crowded space with lots of people on there who are eager to do more. So it's a useful channel but with a poor interface.
- We're seeing really nice engagement and well thought through comments here. Works well to use questions – people comment much more meaningfully than on Facebook.
- Images work a wonder, and not many people are using them.
- Different types of pages: so for us, there is a university page (which comes up automatically if you list the University of Oxford in your education) and a company page (which comes up if you list as having worked here).

Exercise

Consider how you would create a LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter post for this web page .