

Guiding editorial principles for Forests News

Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR)

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Section 1. Introduction

Forests News: A blog by the Center for International Forestry Research (www.blog.cifor.org) has amplified the reach of CIFOR's work like no other medium. In just a few years, Forests News has become a crucial resource for researchers, journalists, academics, policy makers and students.

Since its inception in August 2010, readership of Forests News has increased by over 1500%, now averaging 35,000 pageviews per month. The quality and frequency of new, original articles posted to CIFOR's blog have resulted in it being recognized by Google News as a legitimate news source, and many stories are syndicated to respected platforms such as [AlertNet: The Thomson Reuters Foundation's humanitarian news site](#), AllAfrica.com, Forest Carbon portal, and Latin American media — lending Forests News further public credibility.

The blog is a crucial part of CIFOR's social media strategy. Figure 1 shows a schematic representation of the three tiers of CIFOR's social media tools, where the "teasers" link to the "store front" which links to the "key content"¹. The aim of CIFOR's social media strategy is to lead stakeholders through an information transition — where a tweet or Facebook post piques interest in a matter of seconds, links to an easy-to-read and visually enticing blogpost that, in a few minutes, stirs up enough curiosity in the reader so they go on to read the hyperlinked key scientific content.

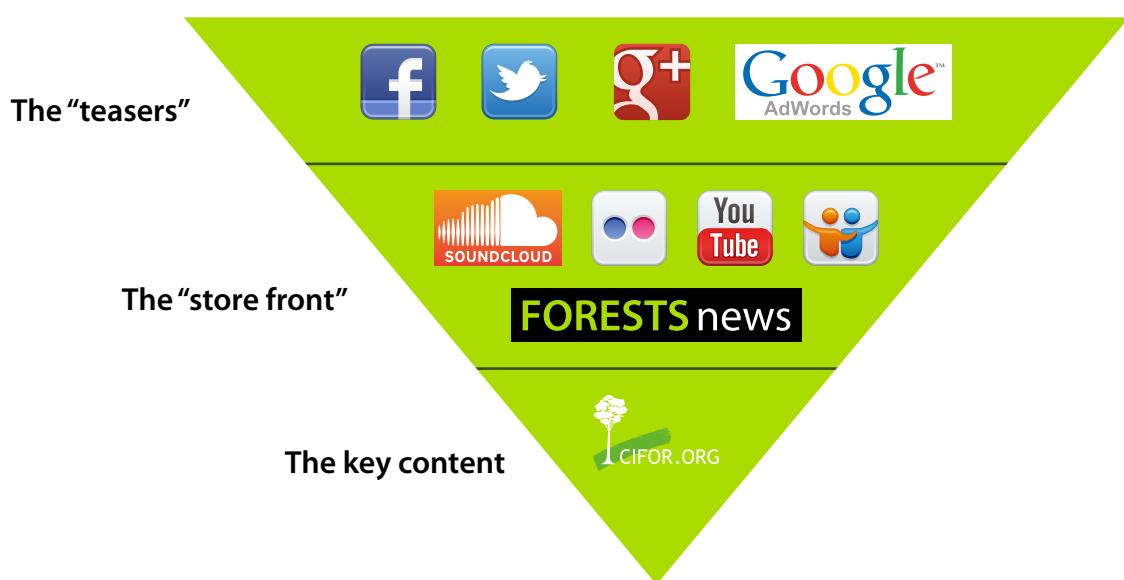


Figure 1: Structure of CIFOR's social media channels.

- The "teasers" (Facebook, Twitter, Google+ and Google AdWords) convey short, snappy bits of information that draw people in to read, watch, look, listen to and download content in the "store front".
- The "store front" (Forests News blog, videos, pictures, audio and presentations) all offer links to our key content in a way that is easy for people to read/watch.
- The key content is CIFOR's scientific information — reports, publications, workshop outcomes etc - collated on the corporate website (cifor.org).

1 Adapted from <http://www.blogtips.org/category/blogtips-primers/making-a-social-media-strategy/>

1.1 Aim of this guide

This guide intends to codify editorial processes and procedures, as well as set forth recent refinements in the purpose, content and tone of Forests News.

1.2 Why blog?

“Publishing is good. Being read is better.”

— Bruno Locatelli, CIFOR senior scientist

The purpose of Forests News blog stories are to distill detailed, specific and complex research findings into a form that non-scientists can understand and appreciate, while still communicating the information accurately.

Blogs also act as “teasers” for the research — encouraging readers to go on to read relevant scientific studies that are featured in the story. A study conducted by Harvard University and Indiana University found that social media — including Twitter, Facebook and blogs — play an important role in determining the scientific impact of an article (read the report here: <http://arxiv.org/pdf/1202.2461v2.pdf>). The study showed that publicizing articles on social media platforms leads to increased article downloads and citations.

This effect has also been observed with CIFOR’s blog platform. In 2011, researcher Bruno Locatelli tracked readership of a CIFOR paper in the journal *Forests* on climate change adaptation and mitigation ([Figure 2](#)). Before CIFOR’s communications team published a blog about it, the journal article was downloaded, on average, three times a day. During the three days after the blog was published, the paper was downloaded 105 times and for weeks afterward was downloaded an average of seven times a day.

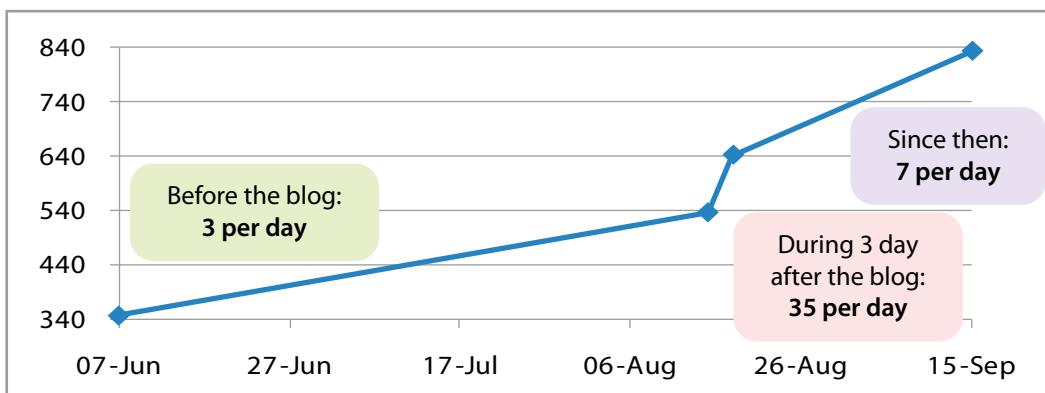


Figure 2: Three days after a blog was published, downloads of the corresponding journal article increased by over 1000%

1.3 Who is our audience?

In 2012, CIFOR’s communications team conducted a survey of our blog readers. Some 2,690 people responded. [Figure 3](#) is a breakdown of them by sector — with a pleasing mix of all our target groups. Some 55% said they download journal articles after reading the blog stories. Notably, 83% said they prefer to read articles written by scientists.

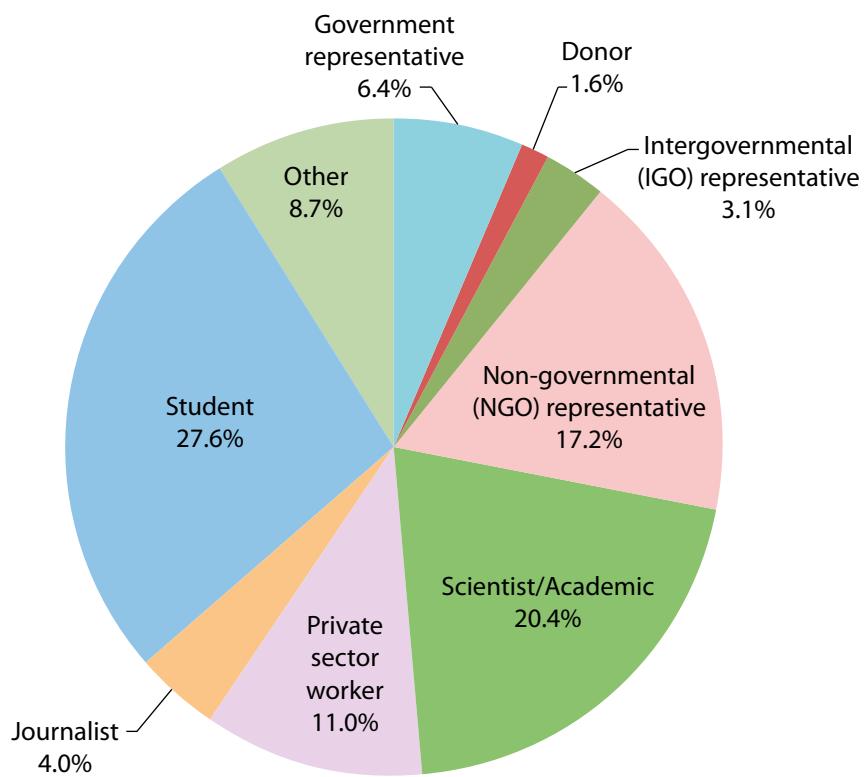


Figure 3: Results of a survey in 2012 of the readers of CIFOR's Forest News blog by sector

1.4 What writing style does Forests News use?

Articles on Forests News are typically written in a “hard news” style — the style that most newspaper articles use. This style of writing is described as [inverted pyramid](#): The essential elements of a story are put at the beginning, with supporting information following (see [Figure 4](#)). This structure enables readers to stop reading at any point and still come away with the essence of the story. It also allows people to explore a topic to only the depth that their curiosity takes them but still making that information available to more interested readers.

Example of “Hard News style”: The multi-million dollar question: Is forest certification working?

BOGOR, Indonesia (19 September, 2013)_Forest certification is considered a promising tool to improve forest management, but there needs to be a robust evaluation of a complex web of factors to establish its true value for various stakeholders, according to a new analysis.



Figure 4: The inverted pyramid structure – the way most newspaper stories are written.

Credit: Wikimedia commons

Occasionally we publish articles written in a more narrative style – this is usually reserved for special features from the field. These “feature” stories are often told through the characters or using anecdotes to help illustrate the events. They also tend to use more colorful language than news stories, are sometimes more playful, and usually engage the reader more than a traditional news story does (more detailed writing style tips in Sections 3 and 4).

Example of “Feature style”: Taming Okok: Domesticating forest foods in Cameroon

YAOUNDE, Cameroon (14 November, 2012)_For villagers in Cameroon’s Central region, the forest creeper known as okok is a wonder plant. High in protein, it’s believed to cure hemorrhoids and hypertension, combat malaria and HIV/Aids – and even frighten off snakes.

“When you are tired, it rejuvenates – even old ladies like myself,” says Calixte Mbilong, the head of the local okok cooperative in Minwoho village. “It also makes you more intelligent.”

And woe betide the young bride who doesn’t know how to prepare the leaves – she won’t be considered a suitable wife by her husband’s family.

It is crucial to maintain the editorial consistency of the blog by ensuring that everything published conforms to a journalistic approach — this is what has made Forests News a credible and highly sought source of information. Posting anything that resembles a press release or a “book report” synopsis will very quickly erode our credibility and our readership.

Spelling, grammar, abbreviations etc. follow CIFOR’s Style Guide, which is available for download from myCIFOR, under Tools and resources > Toolkits > Communications Products.

1.5 Who writes for Forests News?

The majority of articles published on Forests News are written and edited by staff and consultants of Information and Communication Group (ICG), CIFOR’s communications department. ICG has a pool of freelance senior science writers who have extensive and demonstrable experience in scientific writing and editing. These stories are categorised on the blog as “General News”.

A growing number of articles are contributed by CIFOR scientists. These blogs are published in a distinct category, formerly “Science Dispatches” but recently renamed “POLEX: A blog by forest policy experts” (see Section 4).

By communication staff

General News

Scientists tap local expertise to deepen knowledge of threatened species

Traditional knowledge fuels climate change adaptation in Ghana – study

Feudal past still discourages Ethiopia's farmers from planting trees

West Africa adopts regional approach to manage forest ecosystems

Why isolated attempts at tenure securitization through REDD+ pilot projects are insufficient

The IPCC report: What does it mean for the world's forests? (Part 1)

Indonesia Burning: Information about the 2013 Southeast Asia haze crisis

DG's BLOG

Fires and haze – how to maintain a glow of interest? BY PETER HOLMGREN

REGISTER NOW

Global Landscapes Forum | Warsaw 16-17 November 2013

20-21 March 2014

Forests Asia Conference Opportunities for Green Growth

Shangri La Hotel Jakarta, Indonesia

Most Popular Editor's choice

- 1 The multi-million dollar question: Is forest certification working?
- 2 Fires and haze – how to maintain a glow of interest?
- 3 Feudal past still discourages Ethiopia's farmers from planting trees

POLEX: A blog by forest policy experts

By scientist

1.6 Translation

All blogs are written in English and then translated into Indonesian, Spanish, French and Portuguese and published on the multi-language sub-sites of the blog:

- Kabar Hutan: blog.cifor.org/id
- Nouvelles des Forêts: blog.cifor.org/fr
- Los Bosques en las noticias: blog.cifor.org/es

Section 2. Blogs by CIFOR's communications team

2.1 What do we blog about?

The scope of Forests News has been narrowed somewhat in order to focus more directly on science undertaken by CIFOR and its direct partners, and to avoid the appearance of endorsement of non-CIFOR-related science. This means that Forests News will be more judicious about what is posted on the blog. This line is not easily drawn, and can vary depending on circumstances. CIFOR research does not exist in a vacuum — our work affects, and is affected by, trends and events in economics, development, politics, etc. Articles in Forests News must acknowledge these trends, but we will generally avoid writing about them outside of the context of CIFOR research.

Topics that we **do** write blogs about include, but are not limited to:

- Published research by CIFOR scientists
- "Q&A"-style articles to explain current and complex events that CIFOR scientists have researched intensively (fires in Sumatra, e.g.)
- Recorded interviews with CIFOR scientists, which will be expanded further in the future with CIFOR TV and podcasts
- Features on scientific activities in the field by CIFOR scientists, including but not limited to field research and training workshops

Topics that we **do not** blog about include, but are not limited to:

- Institutional announcements
- Trends or current events in forestry that don't relate specifically to CIFOR research
- Presentations and/or publications of research from other organizations that are not part of CIFOR research or are not in partnership with CIFOR

2.2 Presentations and preliminary research

Many topics, however, fall somewhere between these two categories. This section will discuss some common situations.

Conference presentations: In the past, Forests News published blog articles about presentations at scientific conferences, regardless of whether the presentations were given by CIFOR scientists.

In the future:

- When feasible, ICG will record video of the presentation and post the recording online, **in place of** writing a blog article. The video recording will be paired with a brief explanatory text, along with the PowerPoint slides from the presentation, when available, and then posted online.
- We will **not** write articles about presentations — by CIFOR or non-CIFOR scientists — unless **specifically requested** to do so by a senior scientist or senior CIFOR staff, and **only** if there is a scientific focal point willing to read/approve the article and to have his or her name at the end of the article as a contact. (More on focal points in Section 2.3.)

Unpublished research: Generally, ICG prefers to cover only research that has been published (whether by CIFOR or in a peer-reviewed journal). However, given the fact that many research projects take place over several years, it does not seem useful to wait until the end of a project to announce preliminary findings that are of particular interest — and many times, those preliminary findings are the subject of conference presentations.

The preferred solution is for the scientist who is undertaking the research to write his or her own blog article, to be published as a POLEX. A good example is some recent preliminary research that used satellite images to determine the locations of peatland and plantation fires in Sumatra. Given the topic's timely nature and news interest, it was determined that although the research was not complete, it was strong and credible enough to draw conclusions from, and thus it deserved to be presented as a POLEX (more details on POLEX in Section 4).

2.3 Science focal point

Processes are in place to assure that Forests News fulfills its mission to promote evidence-based research.

Each article will be related to CIFOR science, so each article must have a scientist who is the article's focal point. The focal point is either a senior scientist or the scientist whose project is the subject of the blog, and who will be consulted on the content and tone of the article. No article will be posted on Forests News until the focal point formally approves a final draft.

The focal point's e-mail address will be placed at the end of the article, as follows:

For further information on the topics discussed in this article, please contact Terry Sunderland at t.sunderland@cgiar.org.

CIFOR scientists may request, when appropriate, for the non-CIFOR lead author to be listed at the end of the article, as the non-CIFOR authors may be more pertinent contacts to discuss the research. In that case, both the focal point's e-mail address and that of the non-CIFOR lead author will be placed at the end of the article, as follows:

For further information on the topics discussed in this article, please contact Terry Sunderland at t.sunderland@cgiar.org or Claude Garcia at claude.garcia@cirad.fr.

Note: Articles occasionally require multiple rounds of edits and correspondence to ensure that the science is being described accurately while keeping with Forests News' style. We strive to keep requests to a minimum, but sometimes it is necessary to consult a focal point several times to ensure accuracy. Writers and editors are instructed to coordinate to ensure that focal points are not being asked the same questions multiple times, for example.

2.4 Evidence-based blogging: Hyperlinks and further reading

All facts and figures in each blog post must be sourced and cited, with hyperlinks to primary material — chiefly other research papers, fact sheets or databases. Scientists and focal points are urged to provide links/citations/footnotes to primary sources; Forests News editors will ensure that hyperlinks are inserted properly into the text.

It is imperative that each article includes links to other publications, including research papers, other blog articles, fact sheets, websites, etc. — even if they are non-CIFOR materials. We want to provide Forests News readers with as many related resources as possible. It is incumbent upon scientists and editors to think of related publications to link to in each article.

At the end of each blog story, there are several publications listed for “Further reading” — these are to be either CIFOR publications or other evidence-based materials. Building on corporate product recommendation models perfected by Amazon (<http://tech.fortune.cnn.com/2012/07/30/amazon-5/>) that customize the browsing experience (“other books you may be interested in”), CIFOR’s web team have developed an algorithm that, based on keyword identifiers, populates the right hand column of each blog story with a related list of publications.

Section 3. Tone and approach

3.1 Beyond ‘journalism’

As mentioned in Section 1.4., Forests News takes a strongly journalistic approach to the articles it publishes; that is, it is written in the style of a story you would read in a newspaper. This is to appeal to the widest possible audience for the widest possible uptake. However, much day-to-day journalism as practiced in mainstream media focuses on conflict and problems. This approach is not always advisable for the communications arm of a research institute, for two main reasons.

First, articles that focus too heavily on the negative or problematic aspects of complex and controversial issues (such as land tenure reform, gender, REDD+, etc.) do not inspire confidence among policy makers and donors who are counting on CIFOR to make sense of these issues for the purposes of informing policy.

Second, there exists a palpable sense of “doom and gloom” surrounding such issues as climate change, development and deforestation. Take these recent news headlines, for example:

- Amazon could shrink by 85% due to climate change, scientists say
[www.theguardian.com › Environment › Trees and forests](http://www.theguardian.com/environment/trees-and-forests)[†]
- Forests and water could be doomed in 2060
www.smokymountainnews.com/.../9562-forests-and-water-could-be-doo...[†]
- Fate of the rainforest is ‘irreversible’
[www.independent.co.uk › News › Environment › Climate Change](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/environment/climate-change)[†]

The phrase “climate change” bespeaks bad news by its very nature, and this cannot entirely be avoided. However, the mention of forests and climate change in the same sentence condemns forests, by association, to perpetually being part of a problem. This has led to negative connotations about the word “forest” when it appears in a news headline. (When was the last time you read a newspaper story about forests that had anything but bad news?)

Daily journalism’s focus on conflict has led to an endless parade of headlines that place forests in a starkly negative light. This problem is compounded by wide variations in the quality of science journalism, which leads to

headlines that are speculative and/or lacking in nuance (“Amazon **could** shrink...”, “Forests and water **could be** doomed...”, “Fate of the rainforest is **irreversible...**”).

This combination of factors causes “reader fatigue” when it comes to news about forests and climate change, and about science in general. While many readers might click on “bad news” stories about politics, health care or consumer news, fewer readers are likely to click on “bad news” stories about science or the environment — in large part because many readers feel powerless about solving problems related to climate change and deforestation.

This feeling of powerlessness represents a major opportunity for organizations like CIFOR to show how solutions are being devised to address intractable environmental problems. We cannot and will not deny the negative aspects of the issues our organization is researching — we do a disservice to readers, and to our work, if we put a disingenuously “happy” spin on our articles. But there are many opportunities for the tone of Forests News to be more positive and forward-looking — by focusing on solutions.

3.2 Stories focused on solutions

Solutions stories are driven by problem-solving. Stories that are focused on solutions pose questions about promising potential actions to address a problem. Drawing attention to programs or projects that are working on solutions does two things.

First, these articles are generally more widely read, cited and talked about — a sad commentary on the rarity of such articles in mainstream media. Second, they also contribute to a feeling of empowerment among readers. Instead of “doom and gloom,” stories with a more positive focus tend to appeal to the problem-solving curiosity of people who otherwise have little knowledge of, or interest in, forests and climate change. Such articles also offer hope that the problems of climate change and deforestation are not too big or too complex to address (if not solve).

Engaging readers is a challenge of framing an article, and the headline is the starting point. Forests News must ensure that headlines draw attention to the puzzles, the questions at issue, and the insights the stories contain.

In contrast with the news stories mentioned earlier, a headline that reads “Tackling climate change may lessen Central African Republic conflict risks” is preferable to “Climate change seen as key threat to Central African Republic conflict.” Even though the article explores the pathways by which climate change contributes to conflict, the headline shows that something is happening, that an action could address a problem.

More information: <http://www.solutionsjournalism.org>

3.3 Avoiding advocacy

Because CIFOR is a research institution, care must be taken to avoid the perception of advocacy in Forests News articles, especially on controversial topics such as REDD+ or the recent haze from the Indonesian island of Sumatra.

This risk is largely avoidable. An article that explains how and why a project is working (or not); that puts the subject in a broader context; that bases claims, facts and figures in evidence; and that provides a critical analysis about the strengths and limitations of the project or program — in short, by acknowledging the negatives — can protect against allegations of advocacy.

Scientists and editors must be vigilant to ensure that Forests News articles follow these guidelines and are based in evidence.

Section 4. POLEX – Blogs by forest policy experts

"Even if you choose not to blog, you can certainly expect your papers and ideas will be increasingly blogged about. So there it is — blog or be blogged."

— Professor Paul Knoepfler, University of California, Davis

4.1 What is a POLEX?

POLEX (abbreviation of Policy Experts) are articles written exclusively by CIFOR scientists. A former CIFOR DG started POLEX in the mid-1990s as an email listserv to provide summaries of important recent research about tropical forest issues, highlighting their significance for the development and refinement of local, national and international policy.

CIFOR no longer disseminates POLEX as a separate email, but posts the articles on the Forests News blog and features them in its monthly news update. POLEX articles can be about:

- **A new paper you or your colleagues/peers have published** – rather than reporting the findings however, the POLEX should discuss why are the findings important, what significance they carry, how they advance knowledge in the research field and how this new knowledge could potentially change policy and practice.
- **Reflections from a recent conference you have attended**
- **An analytical view of various topics of research in forestry**

Any scientist can write a POLEX at any time (and all scientists are encouraged to do so). In fact, a POLEX often gets wider readership than a blog written by communications staff as it carries the authority of a researcher's opinions and analysis. This is something that CIFOR blog readers have expressed a real keenness for.

However, POLEX must still undergo the same editing processes that any other blog article does. This is to ensure consistency with CIFOR editorial style.

While there is no standard approach to writing a POLEX, one of the most important keys to success is to communicate concepts clearly and from a personal perspective. The best POLEX blogs are well thought-out and contain provocative, interesting and unique content. Try to write the stories as if you were telling a friend about the key issues over coffee.

There are many different ways to construct a POLEX, here are some different examples:

- Should the media pay for wildlife conservation?
- [Green growth in Myanmar: An emerging democracy's vision for future development](#)
- [What open access science research could mean for the developing world](#)
- [Soybeans and forests in Brazil's Arc of Deforestation: A temporary truce?](#)
- Killed for keratin? The unnecessary extinction of the rhinoceros

4.2 Tips for writing a POLEX

Here are some golden rules that we encourage you to follow:

Tell a story: Although many researchers are excellent writers, they are bound by a formulaic approach to reporting on their research. In nearly every scientific field, journal articles start with a general introduction, then

provide methods, results, and a discussion. In a blog, you are not subject to those limitations — and nearly always you should not follow this structure. What you want to do is grab your readers' interest, then lead them through the research in a way that satisfies their curiosity. You might start off with an anecdote, or describe the location of your study, or the way of life of the people in the region. The trick is to start off with something interesting that catches their attention, but leave a few questions unanswered so that the reader wants to follow along with you all the way to the end.

Clarity and simplicity: The blog post should be easy to understand for a broad audience. Many of our blog readers are not scientists or necessarily informed on the topic. Don't use a bigger word when a smaller one will do. The ideas you are conveying are complicated enough without making the language complicated, too.

Style: Idioms don't always translate well, so we don't use them. We also must make sure all acronyms are written out in full on first use. On all editorial matters, from spelling to punctuation to how to write biological classifications, Forests News adheres to **CIFOR's Style Guide**, which can be found at my.cifor.org, under *Tools and Resources à Policies*

Keep it concise: About 600-800 words is a general rule. But there is no requirement. If the story is interesting, it can run long a little longer. If not, keep it short. If you can articulate your message in 300 words, then there is no need to write more. If the journal article you are writing about is especially complex, you could consider writing a two-part blog, or omitting some of the results (as long as you're not distorting the bigger picture). Remember that a blog is a 'teaser'. The purpose of the story is to entice the reader to download the paper or publication to fully understand the research.

Evidence-based blogging: CIFOR's reputation as a scientific research organization is based on the quality and credibility of the information we provide. As such, all our blogs must be based on primary sources of evidence. When you state facts or refer to an article, presentation or organisation, please ensure these are sourced and hyperlinked to a credible information source (e.g. UN agencies, IUCN, CIA Factbook, World Bank, other research organizations).

We use short paragraphs: Long paragraphs on a computer screen can be daunting for some readers. Paragraphs should not be longer than 2-3 sentences, normally.

Titles: Must be catchy so they attract attention (unlike scientific papers, which are not known for their catchy titles). And the shorter the better: we try to keep them under 15 words.

Writing from conferences: Don't document the entire event. Focus on the one most interesting thing you learned — and write your blog post as if you were telling a friend about it over coffee.

Photos and figures: A striking and unusual photo can engage a reader just like a good headline. Photos from conferences are nearly always dull. If you have a photo in mind, send it to us with your story. If not, we will try to find a relevant one in our archives or on Flickr. Similarly, include figures and tables in your story if they visually illustrate the point you are making — often these can convey a complex idea much more quickly than text can.

Have fun: It makes for better reading (and readers especially like to see your personality conveyed through your writing).

We're here to help: Last but not least, don't forget that the communications team is here to help you. Whether you only have time to set out a few ideas in bullet points and would like some help crafting this into an opinion piece, or would like some advice on how best to frame a story, please contact us early in the writing process so we can help you as much as possible.

Section 5. Visuals and Branding

5.1 Visuals

Forests News is a visual medium — whenever possible, blog articles should include additional multimedia content. This includes PowerPoint presentations, photographs/photo galleries, video and audio recordings, infographics and sidebars, all of which can be embedded into the text by editors. It is critical that scientists and editors seek out additional content that can be embedded. A good example is a PowerPoint presentation that a scientist recently gave at a conference — slideshows are consistently one of the most highly viewed of CIFOR's materials.

The upcoming expansion of CIFOR's capabilities in video producing, audio recording and informational graphics will create much new material to post, and will require further collaboration among scientists, writers and editors.

5.2 Branding

More than 90 percent of CIFOR's research falls under the CGIAR Research Program on Forests, Trees and Agroforestry. It is **mandatory** to include mention of this at the end of blog articles about projects that are part of CRP-FTA. It is up to the editors to verify whether the program is part of CRP-FTA, and to include this line at the end of the article. Starting in late 2013, this line must include a hyperlink to the new CRP-FTA website.

We must acknowledge donors whenever possible. Donor acknowledgements are placed after the end of the blog article. It is up to writers and editors to seek out this information and add it to the articles. An example of a branding boilerplate is:

This research was carried out by CIFOR as part of the [CGIAR Research Program on Forests, Trees and Agroforestry](#), supported by Australia, Belgium, Finland, the Netherlands and the [CGIAR Fund](#).

Section 6. Contact information

For general questions about Forests News and POLEX, contact Bruno Vander Velde, Outreach Manager, at b.vandervelde@cgiar.org

To submit a POLEX or to coordinate proposed blog articles, contact Michelle Kovacevic, Forests News Editor and Social Media Coordinator, at m.kovacevic@cgiar.org.

For editorial queries about specific blogs, contact Julie Mollins, Writer and Editor, at j.mollins@cgiar.org.



Center for International Forestry Research

CIFOR advances human well-being, environmental conservation and equity by conducting research to help shape policies and practices that affect forests in developing countries. CIFOR is a member of the CGIAR Consortium. Our headquarters are in Bogor, Indonesia, with offices in Asia, Africa and South America.

