



RESEARCH  
PROGRAM ON  
Dryland Systems

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# **Blogging Guidelines and Template**

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*Food security and better livelihoods  
for rural dryland communities*

The CGIAR Research Program on Dryland Systems aims to improve the lives of 1.6 billion people and mitigate land and resource degradation in 3 billion hectares covering the world's dry areas. Dryland Systems engages in integrated agricultural systems research to address key socioeconomic and biophysical constraints that affect food security, equitable and sustainable land and natural resource management, and the livelihoods of poor and marginalized dryland communities. The program unifies eight CGIAR Centres and uses unique partnership platforms to bind together scientific research results with the skills and capacities of national agricultural research systems (NARS), advanced research institutes (ARIs), non-governmental and civil society organizations, the private sector, and other actors to test and develop practical innovative solutions for rural dryland communities.

The program is led by the International Centre for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas (ICARDA), a member of the CGIAR Consortium. CGIAR is a global agriculture research partnership for a food secure future.

For more information please visit:  
[drylandsystems.cgiar.org](http://drylandsystems.cgiar.org)

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# I. Introduction

Many people come to know the CGIAR Research Program on Dryland Systems through our electronic presence. Some come across the website or Facebook page on a random search; others receive our electronic updates or simply seek us out and return to us repeatedly in search of new information and resources. The way in which Dryland Systems and its activities are presented and discussed on the website and social media channel is fundamental to our identity and integral to engaging with our beneficiaries, scientists, partners, donors and other stakeholders. As a result, writing clear, accessible, compelling content for our electronic platforms is crucial. This document provides tips on writing for the Dryland Systems website, and a template for developing blog articles and social media posts.

This document is intended primarily for scientists and science communications specialists, who would like to contribute regularly to the Blog platform featured on the website of the CGIAR Research Program on Dryland Systems. The guidelines and template can be used to draft and submit blog articles of professional quality following our standard requirements for:

- telling timely and relevant research outcome stories,
- promoting program activities and events,
- and encouraging critical discussion of the systems approach to research and development in drylands.

Our blog stories are published without formal scientific review, thus placing a high level of responsibility on the author, to make sure the readers are not misled and scientific research evidence is not misrepresented.

## II. Blog Communications Goals

The goals of the Dryland Systems blog are summarized as follows:

1. Inform the public, the scientific community and program scientists, partners, donors and stakeholders on key program research achievements, outcomes and activities.
2. Stimulate a new and critical discourse on integrated and multidisciplinary systems research approach to addresses key development challenges in drylands, such as poverty, food and nutrition security, climate change, sustainable resources management (including water management), ecosystems services, gender and social equity, capacity development, migration, etc.

The expression of critical opinions, new propositions and innovative thinking is encouraged, provided they are backed by credible scientific evidence and relate to the main research themes and development challenges Dryland Systems seeks to address.

## III. Blog Audience

The Dryland Systems blog targets an informed, global audience from developed and developing nations with an interest in the development of agricultural livelihoods in rural drylands and a host of development challenges linked to climate change, land degradation, poverty, food and nutrition security, sustainable use of natural resources including water management, ecosystem services, gender equality, capacity development, migration, etc.

## IV. Why Should You Blog About Your Research?

In today's interconnected world, blogs are a powerful tool that allow scientists to:

- Carve out their own voice and space in the world wide web.
- Connect with peers and reach out a much larger audience in terms of partners, potential donors, media and the interested public.
- Keep these constituencies up to date with your research or news in your field of science, and allow them to offer their comments, support and ideas.
- Provide inspiration to others to become interested and involved in science.
- Receive feedback and insights on your analysis in an open forum.
- Source and share content that interests you.
- Improve your writing and communications skills.

Great science bloggers are often invited to speak at conferences and as experts in the media, not because they are the most knowledgeable and decorated in their field of science, but because they have learnt to communicate their science clearly and concisely.



# V. Requirements For Blog Submissions

The blog articles must feature content that is informed by Dryland Systems research outcomes according to our strategic research priorities (Resilience, Wealth and Well-Being, Food Access, Natural Resources Management, Gender Empowerment and Capacity to Innovate) in the three main agricultural livelihood systems (Pastoral/Agro-Pastoral, Rainfed and Irrigated, including Tree-based systems) in the program's five geographical regions (West African Sahel and Dry Savannas, North Africa and West Asia, East and Southern Africa, Central Asia, South Asia).

Blog authors should look to promote research solutions to development challenges, and seek to stimulate open and critical discourse and collaboration among scientists, development professionals, policy makers, and academics. Blog authors should frame their arguments around solid research findings and facts from Dryland Systems and other credible sources, with clear links to the research evidence. Please consider the following when deciding to draft and submit a blog post:

## 1. Types of Blog Posts

- **Overview of recently published journal articles or books**, linked to major development challenges, issues and news related to drylands development.
- **A personal account of a research solution** you are working on. The blog could describe the problem being addressed, the genesis of the potential solution, challenges faced in implementing the solution, and a discussion of the overall success of the solution. An effort to explain how this particular solution could be applicable on a larger scale is appreciated.
- **An editorial analyzing a particular research solution** or proposing solutions to a certain development challenge in the drylands.
- **A reportage on a successful** or promising research outcome; interviews with and testimonials from people directly benefiting are encouraged.
- **An opinion piece** related to current events and global affairs that related to drylands issues.
- **Critical insights, analysis, learning** and reflections from events, workshops or field work that contribute to the critical discourse of drylands development.
- **Short pieces to introduce a video, a tool or other multi-media material** produced to inform about and scale up and out research results in drylands.
- **A photo story** with brief accompanying narrative.

## 2. Blog Length

Between **500-1500 words** of text, depending on the type of blog as listed above.

## 3. Images and Other Visuals

In order to strengthen reader's engagement and interest in the blog, we will illustrate the blog posts with photos, charts, maps, illustrations, infographics, and other relevant visuals. Please provide us with images and visuals you have authored/produced or have permission to publish by original author/producer, so that we avoid breach of copyright.

- **Number of images:** Send us multiple images so that we may choose ones that fit our layout.
- **Size:** Images must be at least 1, and preferably 3 or 4, megabytes. Please do not resize your images through your email program or prepare them for the web. We will make any adjustments necessary.
- **Author photos:** Send us a recent photo of yourself for our contributors' page. Your head and shoulders/torso should take up most of the image. If you have a photo taken for us, please do not stand right in front of a wall and do not have the photo taken using direct flash.
- **Captions:** Send us caption information for your images. For photos, tell us who is in the images, what they are doing, where and when it was taken, what any equipment in the photos is called, and what the equipment's function is. For graphics, illustrations and other visuals, tell us who created it and the source of any data.
- **Credits:** Tell us the person and/or organization to credit for each visual.

#### 4. About the Author

Please submit 2-3 sentences detailing your name, position, current organization and research interests to be included in "About the Author" at the end of each blog.

#### 5. Editing and Revision

All blog submissions will be copy-edited by the Dryland Systems Communications team for clarity, consistency of style, spelling mistakes, and extra punch if needed. The author will review all edits and revisions before the blog is posted in the website. Once agreed on a final version, we will notify the author of the publishing date within one week, depending on the publishing queue or communications opportunities related to specific events.

#### 6. Promotion Post-Publication

Your blog story will be sent to the subscribers of **Dryland Systems newsletter**, posted in our **Facebook** page and shared via **Twitter, LinkedIn, Yammer** accounts. It will also be sent to the **CGIAR Consortium website** and its periodic electronic newsletters, and a version of it may be featured in **Dryland Systems annual report**.

In order to ensure maximum outreach, we encourage all blog authors to share their published blog stories via their own personal social media accounts and electronic communications of their home organizations in order to create buzz and engagement. We also encourage you to reply to the comments of the readers to keep the conversation going by being polite, constructive, and positive.



# VI. Twenty Tips For Science Blog Writing

People read and use text very differently on the web/screen compared to the printed page. Online articles differ from print articles or documents in various ways. A print document is a complete entity, and the reader is focused on the entire body of information. The computer screen displays about 1/3 of a printed page, so context is lacking. Material needs to be ‘chunked’ into parts, and each chunk needs to make sense on its own. While readers of print materials are more likely to analyse material carefully and sequentially, online, people tend to jump around and read things out of order or context, depending on what grabs the reader’s attention. Therefore, the online articles and messages need to be crisp and easily understood. An online text should have about half as many words as the print version of the same text, since users generally find it difficult to read too much text on screen. Therefore, writing for the web is very different than writing for print articles. You may find the quick tips listed below useful when getting ready to draft your first and hopefully many blogs in the future:



## **Tip 1. Assume the reader knows nothing about drylands**

Put yourself in the position of someone who has no knowledge of the drylands development challenges, the Dryland Systems program and its activities. Therefore:

- Put all statements in context.
- Avoid scientific jargon or excessive “research or research-for-development talk”, which could alienate readers.
- Write out all acronyms the first time they appear on the page.
- Read text out loud to make sure it is clear and concise. After writing your first draft, put it away temporarily and then re-read and edit it if necessary.



## **Tip 2. Assume the reader encounters the blog page for the first time**

Users rarely begin reading web content from the home page. Most readers will come to the page from a search engine or an external link. Therefore, make sure the information presented in your article can stand alone by:

- Addressing the topic cohesively.
- Giving your article a clear and concise heading and sub-headings.
- Provide context for all statements.
- Spell out acronyms the first time they appear.
- Providing link to further resources, materials and publications.



## **Tip 3. Structure your thoughts and ideas**

Online readers generally scan text, looking for specific words or interesting points. To make sure your blog grabs the readers’ attention, you must structure your ideas and stick to the following suggestions, which are expanded upon in other tips below:

- Start with the conclusion and a short summary of the content: Put main ideas, conclusions and important points at the beginning. Few people read entire web pages – if you put the most important points at the end, most visitors may never see them. By all means, avoid a rambling first paragraph!
- Write captivating headlines and use subheadings.
- Make sure each paragraph contains one main idea, and limit paragraphs to no more than 100 words.
- Keep vocabulary simple and use non-discriminatory language.
- Use compelling visuals, photos and illustrations.
- Use bulleted and numbered lists to draw attention.
- Keep punctuation simple.
- Use relevant and working links.
- Use bold sparingly, only to highlight key information and concepts.



#### Tip 4. Write captivating headlines

Headlines or titles are critical – they determine whether or not readers decide to “invest” their time in reading your blog. Successful headlines tell the gist of the story in a few powerful words and catch the reader’s interest. When brainstorming for a great headline:

- Think about the most important point in the blog content and incorporate it into the headline.
- Think about your audience and what matters to them.
- Identify the tone of the blog piece and make the headline compatible with it. The tone should also be appropriate for the audience and true to Dryland Systems identity, standards, value and voice.
- Pose a question or start your headline with a relevant number or statistic to help it standing out. Just as the human eye is drawn to contrasting colours, we’re also naturally drawn to the juxtaposition of digits resting beside text. This will reader a clearer idea of what to expect in your post, as well as promising a quick, scan-friendly read.
- Address readers in the 2nd person to grab their attention by calling them out.
- Break Conventions: Headlines that elicit controversy or critical thinking draw in curious readers.
- Use key words and keep the headline short, preferably fewer than 70 characters if you want your headline to look good in Google and prevent it from being cut off.



#### Tip 5. Hook the reader in

This should be a summary 1-2 line statement (Hook) that highlights the main point of your blog. It is the statement upon which your blog is firmly anchored and which helps establish a personal connection with the reader.





## Tip 6. Use subheadings

By structuring the body of your blog article in different/distinctive parts with short subheadings, you enable the reader to scan and read your blog more easily, especially since many readers nowadays read on phones and tablets, or will have multiple tabs open on their laptops or desktops. Subheadings allow readers to quickly glance over the main topics/issues/messages discussed in your blog. Make subheadings bold so they are easily visible. Good subheadings:

- Give readers a glimpse of the content.
- Organize the content into readable chunks.
- Tell a story that makes it possible to grasp the gist of the blog quickly.



## Tip 7. Stick to a discursive and balanced tone

Never write as if you are an expert in a subject, unless you are. Better still, write as an intelligent and informed reporter of someone else's work.

- If you wish to express your opinions in a piece (and in the realm of research this is expected, as your role as a scientist is to help solve development challenges through research, not just write about it), make it very clear that these are your opinions.
- Never generalize beyond the evidence, and where possible use multiple sources. Note however that different sources should be weighted differently according to their authority – a blog post carries less authority (usually) than a peer review paper for instance.
- Read around your subject – never present a single paper/report as authoritative without cross-referencing it to other work in the field.
- Do a Google search of your subject to make sure you are not repeating what others have written before you, or you are not missing an important angle.
- If there are controversies or differences of opinion surrounding your subject, report these in a fair and balance way.
- Ask someone else to provide feedback on your draft to improve your argument, language or narrative structure.



## Tip 8. Use simple, concise and precise language

Simple words are helpful to all readers, especially to those whose English is not their native language and to those who quickly scan the blog post. Convoluted writing and complex words are even harder to understand online. Choose words that are short, common and unlikely to be misread. You can read out your draft because sometime the spoken language is more direct than written language, and hearing your words spoken might reveal convoluted sentences.

- Use simple, short sentence structures and get to the point.
- Use plain language.
- Write short, declarative sentences in the active voice.
- Structure your sentences simply – subject-verb- object – and put the main information up front.
- Eliminate non-essential adjectives and adverbs.
- Do not repeat yourself. Reading the same thought twice is a waste of time and annoying to readers.

- Check all facts and figures.
- Check all links.
- Spellcheck the text.



### **Tip 9. Use short paragraphs and sentences**

It is hard to read long, dense paragraphs on a computer monitor. Even a relatively short paragraph of 100 words looks like a lot of text on the screen. Short paragraphs help readers find what they are looking for and make writing easier to scan. A reader looking for a specific piece of information is likely to scan, but unlikely to fully read an entire article.

- Write paragraphs of two to five sentences. If the sentences are long, limit paragraphs further, to three sentences. Sometimes this will mean one thought straddles two paragraphs – that is okay.
- Have only one thought/idea/concept in each paragraph.
- Limit sentences to 25 words. Good sentences are concise and well formed, using logical order and solid grammar. They are easy for all readers to digest quickly, even those with limited literacy in English.



### **Tip 10. Avoid scientific jargon**

Avoid scientific jargon and specialized or technical terms. Using common terminology makes the text easy for all your visitors to understand.



### **Tip 11. Use acronyms sparingly**

Avoid the temptation to use acronyms as shorthand. If you must use acronyms:

- Make sure all terms are written out in full, followed by the acronym in parentheses, the first time they are mentioned in the text.
- Avoid acronyms in headings.
- Try using a synonym instead of an acronym. For example, say ‘the Goals’ instead of ‘SDGs’ on second reference to the Sustainable Development Goals.



### **Tip 12. Keep punctuation simple**

- Uncluttered sentences are easier to read. If you find yourself using comma after comma, try making two (or even three) shorter sentences out of that long one.
- Avoid excessive use of exclamation marks or emoticons: if your words are clear and strong, they will not require extra emphasis.



### Tip 13. Use lists

Remember that website readers are scanning for snippets of information. Lists are easy to scan and understand because they do not have to be read word by word.

- Use numbered lists when the sequence of reading web content from the home page. Most readers will come to the page from a search engine or an external link.
- Avoid lists of more than two levels: primary and secondary.
- Put no more than 5-6 items in a list.



### Tip 14. Use non-discriminatory language

Your blog post should not discriminate, stereotype or demean people based on gender, ethnicity, religion or any other characteristic. Moreover, you should avoid the generic use of masculine pronouns, such as: “Every farmer needs access to market to sell his produce.”

To avoid this problem, you may use plurals as appropriate to the story (“All farmers need access to needs access to market to sell their produce.”) or use the imperative, when the command form of a verb lets you use the second person (you and your) rather than the third (he and his or she and her).



### Tip 15. Use bold to highlight key concepts

Use bold to highlight key concepts within paragraphs. But do not go overboard. Use it sparingly, for words and phrases, not sentences. Bold is more effective and easily scanned when arranged vertically, such as by bolding the first word or two in each item of a bullet list. Too much bold scattered throughout text can be confusing.



### Tip 16. Include links to relevant resources and reference sources

Blog posts should be evidence-based with in text references or links to “Additional resources” at the end of the post. References may be links to published books, journal articles and other related publications. You may also include photos, power points, videos, or other material that can be embedded in the post.

- Place links in the body of the article where they are applicable – do not put them all at the end, where they might be missed. This will make it easier for visitors to find all the content you have on a particular topic.
- Hyperlink just a few words instead of putting the URL link in the text of your blog.
- Make links to text or resources that are valuable and directly relevant to the topic. Too many links may confuse, distract and overwhelm readers.
- Avoid having more than five links per topic.



### Tip 17. Include relevant photos and other visuals to illustrate your story

An image or illustration is part of your narrative, and as such it should serve to enhance rather than detract from the narrative in your post.

- Illustrated you blogs with at least 1-2 photos/diagrams/cartoons.
- Write clear captions: All photographs, illustrations and tables need identifying captions.
- Please include appropriate credits and copyright symbols where appropriate.



### Tip 18. Use simple text alignment and typography

- Never use all capitals, and use italics sparingly, as they are difficult to read on the screen.
- Left-align and single-space your text.
- Graphics and colours can reinforce text – but only when they have meaning and help guide the reader, such as in explaining statistical information. Used pointlessly, graphics and colours are distracting and annoying.



### Tip 19. Acknowledge relevant research work and outputs appropriately

If your blog is about research work that is funded or mapped to Dryland Systems and also other CGIAR Research Programs, please include an appropriate acknowledgment sentence as follows:

*This research work is/was conducted under the framework of the CGIAR Research Program on Dryland Systems in partnership with ...and funded by... .*



### Tip 20. Use key words to help optimize

Finally, the use of key words in your blog content can help optimize the blog posts for search engine without necessary comprising with the content quality. Whenever you write blog post, always remember to add your key words in the first and last paragraphs of your draft, as well as your blog Headline and Image title and caption. These are all locations where search engines look for keywords in these to decide the ranking of our blog posts.

## Ready to start writing you first blog?

With these tips in minds, you are now ready to draft your first blog like a true professional. The following **Blog Template and Hints** will help you structure your thoughts and narrative, and ensure you have all the required elements before submission.

If you have any question, comments or suggestions for improving this document, please contact:

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# VII. Blog Writing Template and Hints

BLOG STRUCTURE	
SECTION	HINTS
<p><b>HEADING</b></p> <p>Draw the reader in and get them to click on the blog post</p>	<p><b>Hint:</b> First brainstorm a couple of title then come back to it at the end and choose the best. Allocate at least 25% of your time to a great title. For most people, it's all they'll see! Check out your favourite bloggers and their most popular headlines, and repurpose them for your own blog.</p>
<p><b>Images</b></p> <p>Get the reader's attention with an eye-catching image</p>	<p><b>Hint:</b> Please select at least 1-2 photos, diagrams or even cartoons that best illustrate your key message or the activity/phenomenon described. All photos and illustrations must be accompanied by appropriate captions and source.</p>
<p><b>HOOK OR SUBHEADING</b></p> <p>Make a personal connection with the reader</p>	<p><b>Hint:</b> Now think about your 1-2 sentence hook. Why should people read your blog post? What is the key message that will stay with them? What will they get out of it? If the headline has enticed your reader, the "hook" makes them read further.</p>
<p><b>BODY</b></p> <p>Make sure the reader has not choice but to keep reading and share your blog</p>	<p><b>Subheading 1:</b> You could start with describing a challenge; a personal anecdote, a global issue, a recent world event, a well-know fact, humor, and/or other relevant information that enables you to set the stage for the key message you are delivering.</p> <p><b>Subheading 2:</b> Main point (key message, opinion, recommendation complemented with appropriate scientific research evidence or recommendation):</p> <p><b>Subheading 3:</b> and so on...</p>
<p><b>CONCLUSION</b></p> <p>End with a bang</p>	<p><b>Hint:</b> This could be a reiteration of the take-away message or the things that make the reader want to come back for more or re-read your blog.</p>
<p><b>CALL TO ACTION</b></p> <p>Spark engagement and conversation</p>	<p><b>Hint:</b> You may pose a question to your readers, ask for their comments to instigate discussion of the issue, invite them to to find out more about the topic by offering additional materials that you have hyperlinked or a report or paper to download, etc.</p>
<p><b>ACKNOWLEDGMENT</b></p> <p>Required, no questions asked</p>	<p><b>Hint:</b> This is a pretty straightforward requirement explained in tip 19.</p>
<p><b>Illustrations and other media</b></p> <p>Be creative and original</p>	<p><b>Hint:</b> Same as for the Images.</p>
<p><b>Key words/tags</b></p> <p>Make your blog discoverable in the World Wide Web</p>	<p><b>Hint:</b> add your key words in the first and last paragraphs of your draft, as well as your blog Headline and Image title and caption.</p>



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