

apolitical

The Apolitical template for writing excellent ‘how to’ guides

This template will help you write an effective how to guide. If you don't think this is the right format for your article, please visit our contributor page and see our other templates.

What is it?

A how to is a chronological step-by-step guide and is grounded in your expertise as the author. The main purpose is to give the reader concrete tools and advice they need to perform a given practical task or assignment.

What is it good for?

The how to guide is an ideal format when you're dealing with a subject that is simple enough to be adequately described in a brief article, and so standardised that the same approach is useful across a wide range of contexts and topics.

What is it not good for?

Not all things that are relevant to Apolitical's readers can be defined as tasks, and not all tasks are so simple enough that they can be covered in a brief guide. If you want to describe a complex problem in detail, the solutions-focused article may be a better fit for you.

What are some good Apolitical examples?

This is a new format on Apolitical, so the examples below don't fit the template 1:1. However, the examples all feature some of the key ingredients that make a how to guide effective:

- [How to negotiate a higher salary — in 3 steps](#)
- [Read this before you brief your senior minister](#)
- [The 6 principles of a successful design sprint](#)

How long does it take to make one of these?

As with all writing, the time it takes varies from person to person. Experienced writers will be able to write one of these in a day or less, while new writers may need a week or so to deliver a first draft.

Detailed production guide:

Below is a chronological outline of what a 700-900 words how to guide can look like.

Intro

The purpose of the intro is to grab the attention of the reader and set the tone for the rest of your article. But in the introduction to a how to guide, the balance will often be weighted more towards setting the context and explaining when the guide is relevant. In other words, you can afford to be more descriptive because the reader is motivated to learn from your experience.

Therefore it is also often a good idea to introduce yourself as a subject matter expert in the introduction. No one would take advice on how to build a house from someone without experience — the same applies to your guide, so don't be shy about introducing your expertise.

Once you have introduced yourself, set the context and explained how to use this guide, you can begin guiding the reader.

Step 1: Before you begin.

This is where you set the stage and help the reader prepare for the task at hand. You can do that by explaining:

- What, if anything, the reader will need to do before starting the task.
- Whether there are any specific skills or tools that will be needed to do perform the task well.

Step 2: Describing each task in turn.

This is the body of the text and where you break down the task in bite-size elements. There are no limits to how many or how few steps you should include, but as a rule of thumb, you can break it up in different sections every time you change location, jump forward in time or change focus.

Step 3: Covering pitfalls.

Once you have adequately described the process from beginning to end, it is often beneficial to introduce some of the most common pitfalls or mistakes people make as they try to perform this task. You may also want to point out best-practice examples that the reader will be able to use as guidelines if such examples exist, or cover frequently asked questions in this section.

Step 4 (Optional): Setting yourself up for next time.

Some tasks only need to be done once, and others will be done daily or even more often. Depending on the task you are describing, you may want to guide the reader on how to prepare well for next time it becomes relevant. You may also want to point to further resources — on Apolitical and elsewhere — in this final paragraph.