

# **Writing for Bellingcat & A Rough Guide to the Editorial Process**

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Bellingcat has developed an editorial process to meet its needs as an open source investigative outlet.

While we may not have the same resources as other publications, it is vitally important that we remain thorough and professional. Failure to do so can lead to unfortunate mistakes. As the organisation has grown significantly in scope and prominence since its early days, any mistakes we make will attract ever greater scrutiny.

Such missteps can negatively impact our reputation and trust in the eyes of readers or, in the most serious cases, see us pursued for damages.

This may sound intimidating on first reading, but the editorial process is in place to help protect and support researchers/writers. Importantly, editors are available to speak with every step of the way.

The editorial process also looks to help researchers/writers best tell and structure their stories. We want our articles and investigations to be engaging, as well as of the highest quality and readability. Good work is likely to travel further, so care and thought should always be given to storytelling and the methods used to convey Bellingcat's always outstanding research.

Editors are, again, here to help and advise on the best way to tell stories and always keen to hear ideas and suggestions of how you would like to present your work.

With all that said, here is a rough outline of the process a story will go through on its journey from idea to publication.

## **Our Standards**

It is first important to familiarise yourself with our editorial standards and practices. These can be found [here](#) and detail our ethics and principles around publishing.

Our standards should guide you during the writing and research process. It is important to follow the framework they set out.

## **Pitching**

Before beginning to write or, in some cases, carry out your research, you'll have to pitch your idea to the editorial team. Editors will give you suggestions and guidance on how to proceed and best present/structure your findings as well as highlight areas of potential difficulty that may require closer focus. Editors will also be available during the research/writing process to answer questions or give advice should it be required.

It can help editors if you identify at an early stage whether you want to pitch a resources piece (in which methodology is central, detailing tools and techniques of use to other researchers) or an investigation (in which findings are central, often newsworthy, and the methodology is detailed mostly in order to support them). It is also important to remember that not all stories need to be hugely long and complex. A story can even be as simple as a short, [newsworthy geolocation](#), a quick [analysis](#) of a social media platform or a clever [guide](#) detailing a research technique.

Pitches can be made to Bellingcat's editors over email, Slack or Signal (if a story is particularly sensitive) and fleshed out in calls or messages.

## **Writing**

Care should be taken in ensuring everything is factually accurate before submitting your article for review. The author is the first fact-checker and it is your responsibility to ensure your work is of the highest standard. If information included in a submitted article is found to be incorrect, it could mean a more lengthy and time-consuming editorial process. In some cases, it could prevent an article from being published if issues of factual accuracy cannot be satisfactorily resolved.

Although Bellingcat's readers may have an above average understanding of open source techniques, our remit is to spread awareness of these techniques – meaning that our articles must be intelligible and enticing to those who may not. You must be prepared to walk through every stage of your research, describing succinctly how you know what you know and showing the reader in the process.

Bellingcat's researchers are experts in open source research. But nobody is obliged to accept our expertise at face value. Our expertise is implicit in how we report and research, not explicit in how we present our findings – for example, we don't present a conclusion that states Bellingcat or a researcher's opinion, as can be the case in academic or other types of research, we let the evidence speak for itself in full context. The more open we are at how we arrive at our conclusions, the more trust will be afforded to our work.

On occasion, we may suggest that you interview an expert from outside the organisation. If you're not used to doing this, don't worry – editors are on hand to help, as are several colleagues with reporting experience. Doing so not only increases Bellingcat's credibility – it might well help refine and reframe your research, improving its quality.

## Legal and Technical Review

If your article is technically complex, it may be reviewed by another researcher who has the skill set to replicate and assess the research you have undertaken. This will help ensure everything is factually accurate and presented in full context. If your article contains claims of significant wrongdoing by named individuals, organisations or companies, it may also be reviewed by our legal counsel prior to publication.

## The Edit

When editors review a story or piece of research they are looking at multiple factors. These include:

- Factual accuracy
- Does an article meet Bellingcat's editorial and research standards?
- Structure
- Style
- Storytelling method
- Sourcing
- Full context of subject matter
- What is the public or wider interest in a story/why are we doing it? (i.e. the topic may be interesting or important to you personally – but what's the broader relevance? And why now?). Is this a story that is of interest to a news/public interest audience or something that may be useful to our peers/advance knowledge in the open source community?
- Has a story been done before/is the article original?
- The information an article will amplify (try not to promote harmful or damaging content needlessly. Follow best practice from the field, such as Data Society's [Oxygen of Amplification](#) report)
- Issues around copyright (for images, videos etc that may be used in research)
- Potential legal issues
- Do all claims made in a story add up (full context of claims)?
- Are rights of reply required?
- Are subjects treated fairly?
- Is more research required to establish claims within a story?
- Is expert comment required to establish claims, give further context or valuable insight?
- Grammar and copy
- Technical review if necessary (with help of researchers)

It is good to be aware of these factors prior to submitting a piece of work. Considering them during the writing process can help make the editorial process itself easier and swifter.

## **Editorial Oversight**

In some cases, a second editor will provide editorial oversight for a story. This is essentially a double check on the story itself, the standards the article is held to and the work of the first editor.

## **Use of Images**

Researchers must take care in their use of images and videos in articles they submit. Ensuring you have the correct permissions is key and should be something you factor in to your initial planning around a story. Questions on whether or not you can use particular images or videos should be directed towards editors. Researchers should also try to provide the highest resolution imagery that is available when submitting their stories.

## **Layout and Uploading Story**

Editors will lay out stories in Bellingcat's content management system prior to publication before promoting on social media.

## **Communication and Submitting Work in a Timely Manner**

Given the thorough nature of the editorial process, it is important that articles are submitted in a timely manner. For example, if you decide to submit a 10,000 word article out of the blue with multiple claims of wrongdoing by named individuals and say it has a deadline for publication in 48 hours, it is not reasonable to expect an edit to be conducted in that timeframe.

In breaking news scenarios, editors can try and fast-track the processes described above. If care is shown by researchers on the likes of factual accuracy, standards, ethics, storytelling etc, it will make the edit and publishing process far quicker. It must be noted, though, that self declared deadlines are not breaking news scenarios. Neither are pacts to publish at a certain time with partner organisations without first discussing with the editorial team.