



Writing citizen science ● project descriptions that spark interest and attract volunteers – a ten-step guide

Broadening our knowledge about citizen science by investigating citizen science activities, disseminating good practices and formulating knowledge-based policy recommendations to maximise the potential benefit of citizen science activities for individual citizens, organisations, and society at large.



CS TRACK
Investigating Citizen Science

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About the authors

Dr. Yaela Golumbic is the Head of citizen science research at The Steinhardt Museum of Natural History. She is a science communication and science education researcher, emphasizing on citizen science as a way for enhancing public participation and engagement with science.

Marius Oesterheld is a research associate at the German science communication organisation Wissenschaft im Dialog. A historian by training, he co-founded an open access journal and international student conference before joining CS Track to study the European citizen science landscape.



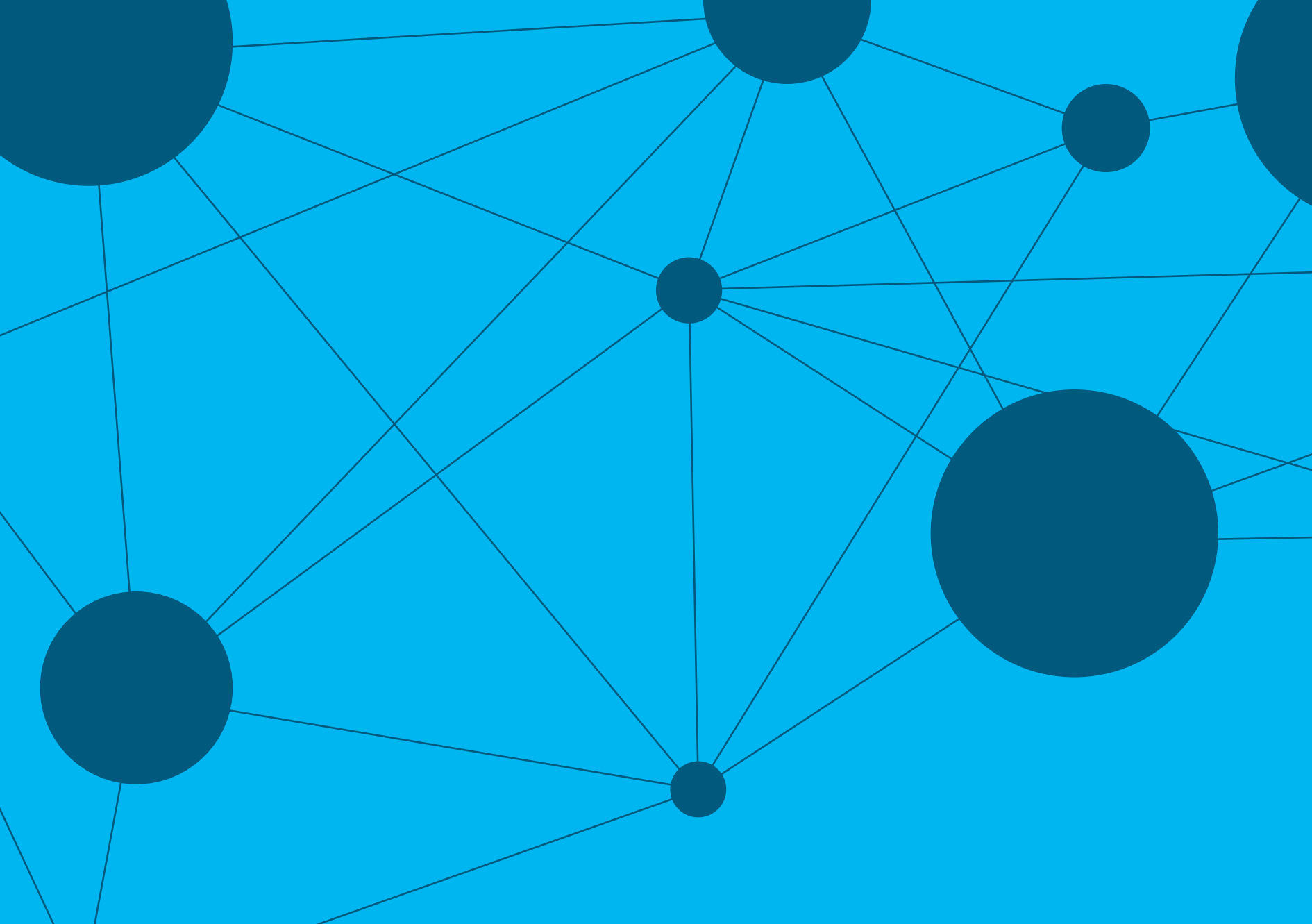
Project descriptions – what's in a template

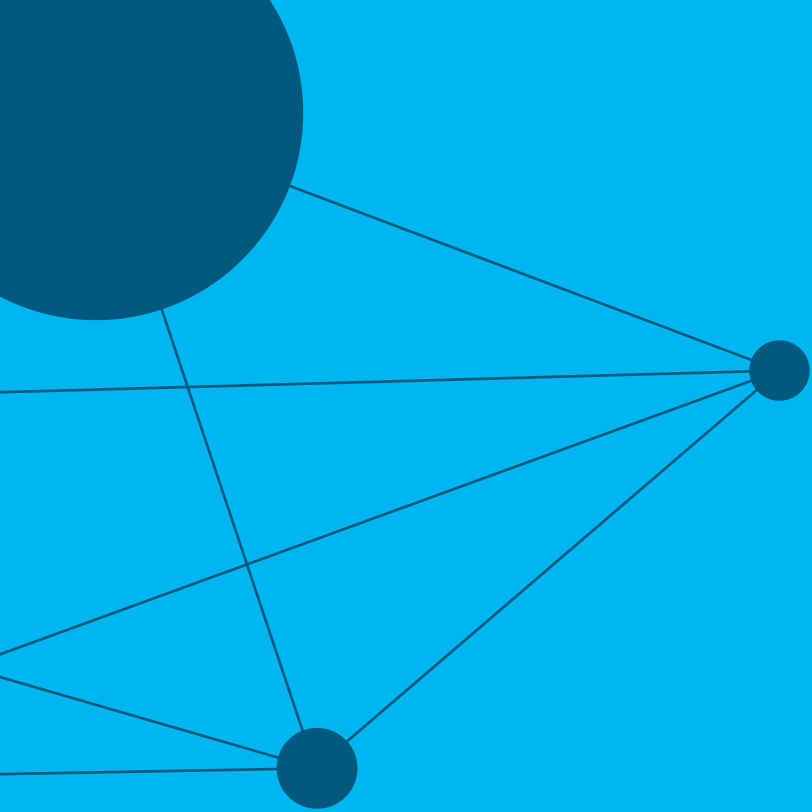
Project descriptions, often found on citizen science platforms, are the gateway for citizen scientists to engage with projects. They provide the first glimpse into what a selected project is about, how it operates and how participants can contribute to its efforts. As such, project descriptions play a key role in attracting volunteers to citizen science projects. For this reason, the importance of an engaging, clear and concise project description really cannot be overstated.

In this document you will find a 10-step template to help you write an attractive project description. It will guide you regarding the main topics and types of information to include in your description, offer explanations and suggestions for items to consider in each step and provide examples from two hypothetical project descriptions we prepared.

This template is an output of our research in CS Track, which involved analysing citizen science project descriptions to find out what can be learnt and understood from them. In the course of this work, we discovered that many project descriptions do not clearly articulate their project goals or the impact it may have on the scientific community, on the individuals participating in it, and on societal issues (such as public administration, policy-making or conservation efforts). We also noticed that often project descriptions do not explain which tasks citizen scientists will be asked to perform, what the time commitment may be and what prior knowledge or skills are required of them.

In short, we pooled our findings to design an evidence-based template for writing citizen science project descriptions. Enjoy!





The ten essential elements of an engaging project description

One-line overview

This is your opening line, your elevator pitch. What are the most important aspects of your citizen science project? Things you might want to consider saying include:

- » Participatory nature of the project
- » Scientific field
- » Societal impact
- » Location

Example 1 – Flowerfor Flowerfor is a citizen science project for monitoring the flowering patterns of south European shrubs.

Example 2 – WaterHaz WaterHaz engages the public in reporting environmental hazards in UK rivers.

Your project:

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Main Goals

This section should be short and to the point. Try to mention several different types of goals (scientific, educational, social, policy-related), but do not list more than 3 items in total.

Possible goals could be:

- » Digitizing records (scientific)
- » Collecting monitoring data (scientific)
- » Reaching underserved communities (social)
- » Influencing local administration (policy-related)

Flowerfor – We aim to map flowering timelines of dominant shrubs, assess their reproductive windows and raise awareness of the importance of local flora.

WaterHaz – Our goal is to identify local environmental threats, monitor the quality of waterways and rivers and bring environmental hazards to the forefront of public discussion.

Your project:

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Impact

Who will benefit from this research in the end? What are its broader, long term implications? Some options may be:

- » Filling a research gap
- » Giving marginalized groups a voice
- » Advancing conservation efforts
- » Improving water quality

Flowerfor – This will help scientists understand how flowering habits have changed over the years and design plans for conserving the diversity of local shrubs.

WaterHaz – This will place WaterHaz as a strategic evidence-based platform for environmental decision making, bringing stakeholders together to improve the quality of waters in the UK.

Your project:

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Participants

Who are the potential participants of your project? How broad is your audience? Potential target audiences might be:

- » Nature lovers
- » Students
- » Farmers
- » Activists
- » The general public

Flowerfor – Flowerfor engages people of all ages who love the outdoors, spend time in nature and are keen to help preserve our flowers and plants.

WaterHaz – If you live near a water source, work in the proximity of a river or lake or just enjoy spending time in the natural waters, this project is for you.

Your project:

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Activities

What will people be doing in the project? What kind of technology will they be using? How much time will they need to invest? Does participation require any prior knowledge or skills? What is the setting (online/ in person etc.)?

Examples for activities include:

- » Transcribing audio files or handwritten records
- » Tagging images
- » Installing sensors
- » Collecting samples

Flowerfor – By using the specialized Flowerfor app, participants can report the flowering status of shrubs, take photos and record their location. This will only take a few minutes, and can be done as often as you choose.

WaterHaz – As part of WaterHaz you will become a nature reporter – reporting on any unusual activities, waste or pollution in the waters. This can be done on the WaterHaz website or app and does not require any previous knowledge or training.

Your project:

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Training & Resources

What kind of training or instruction is available for participants? Do you provide materials and resources for independent learning? Do you offer workshops or other learning opportunities? Some common types of learning resources and training are:

- » Downloadable guides
- » Q&As
- » Workshops
- » Community support
- » Video tutorials

Flowerfor – The app is interactive and provides explanations and illustrations of flowering stages to streamline the reporting and identification process.

WaterHaz – On the website you will find video tutorials guiding you through each step of becoming a nature reporter. You can also join our monthly get-togethers and get to know our community of scientists and volunteers.

Your project:

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Benefits

What will participants gain on an individual level?
Personal benefits could include:

- » Learning new skills
- » Enjoyment
- » Sense of community
- » Recognition
- » Self-Efficacy

Flowerfor – While participating in Flowerfor you will learn about local shrubs and their significance for maintaining biodiversity in South Europe. You will improve your identification skills and discover a new way to enjoy nature. And last but not least, Flowerfor is a fun family activity that will leave you with the satisfying feeling of having contributed to science.

WaterHaz – Through your involvement in WaterHaz, you will gain the knowledge and confidence to safeguard our UK waterways and join a community of like-minded individuals.

Your project:

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Access to project outputs & communication of results

Where can participants access the results of their efforts?
How will the project's findings be communicated?

Flowerfor – All Flowerfor data is openly available for public use. Explore the data online with our interactive interface, or download the full dataset from the Flowerfor website.

WaterHaz – *See the example below for a combination of steps 8 and 9.*

Your project:

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Acknowledgement

This is the place to show your appreciation for the participants' work. Let them know how you will acknowledge their contributions.

Flowerfor – We would like to acknowledge your contribution to advancing our understanding of shrub flowering patterns. Read more about how we do this on our website [provide link].

WaterHaz – WaterHaz could not exist without its volunteers. We are all part of one community and working together towards the same goal – bringing environmental hazards to public attention. To this end, all nature reports are posted online, acknowledging the reporter who contributed the data.

Your project:

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Collective identification & joining the project

Add expressions of collective identification or a call for action. This is a nice way to sum up the description and also give practical information on how to join.

- » Click on the 'register' button to join us in exploring [add relevant topics]
- » Take part in our adventure
- » Become part of the community
- » Come have fun with us over at [URL]

Flowerfor – So download the Flowerfor app today [add link], and join us for some science fun!

WaterHaz – WaterHaz is waiting for you. Register online [add link] and become part of our community!

Your project:

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General recommendations:

Description length: The ideal length of a project description roughly equals that of a standard abstract – i.e. around 250–300 words. In any case, it should not exceed 500 words.

Structure: Avoid long sentences and consider structuring the text to improve readability, for example by using paragraphs and subheadings.

Wording: Minimize the use of jargon and technical terms. Remember, you are writing this text for people who are unfamiliar with your project – try to be as clear as you can!

Style and register: Think about the style of your text – would you like to directly address your reader (which many people find more engaging) or do you prefer using the neutral third person? How formal or informal should your text sound?

Highlight key information: Make sure that contact details, registration button and links to further information about the project are clearly visible.

Links and accompanying resources: Take into account where you are publishing your text – online you can insert hyperlinks to relevant websites, in print materials it is better to use QR codes. Also consider incorporating graphics, images and AltText into your project description.

Test it out: Before publishing it, test out your text with friends who are unfamiliar with the project to check if it is clear and easy to understand.



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