



Career of the Month

October 2009, Based on Interviews With Professionals Using Science in the Workplace

Megan Sullivan

Science Writer

The term *science writer* describes a range of careers. Some science writers author books. Others work for colleges, universities, or businesses and communicate research underway at those institutions. Some help scientists compose grant applications for research money or write newsletters to keep doctors up-to-date about important discoveries and new procedures. Tina Saey is a science journalist at *Science News*, where she unearths news about groundbreaking findings in science and shares the information with the public.

Career path.

I became a science writer on a need-to-know basis—I feel like I need to know about all of the really cool discoveries in science, and I should share what I find with others. But I was not always a science writer. First, I was a scientist; I have my doctorate in genetics. I was always interested in writing about science for magazines, but thought you had to be an English or journalism major to do so. When a friend of mine—who also had a science-related doctorate—entered a graduate program in science writing, I realized I could do the same. So, a week after I finished graduate school, I began a science journalism program. After completing internships with a newspaper and with *Science News*, I went to work at the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* for about seven years before returning to *Science News*, where I now work.

Covering beats.

Journalists, like police, have “beats.” My beat is molecular biology, but I write about discoveries in genetics, microbiology, cell biology, and neu-

rosience. I am always searching for news that is important to share with the public. Every day, I dig through internet sites for story ideas, read scientific papers, interview scientists on the phone or in person, and write and discuss stories with my editors. One perk of being a journalist is we generally get notifications about new discoveries a week or more before they actually are published. The lead time gives me an opportunity to read the related papers, talk to the scientists involved, and find other scientists who can evaluate the work and put it into perspective.

As part of my job, I get to talk to some of the most brilliant people in the world. For instance, the day the 2001 Nobel Prize in Chemistry was announced, I was living and working in St. Louis, Missouri, home to winner William Knowles. I went to his house and waited until the local TV stations had finished interviewing him. I was his last interview of the day and talked with him over left-over vegetable soup and a sandwich. Since then, I have interviewed many other Nobel Prize winners on their big days.

Background and skills needed.

Although having a background in science is helpful, many writers in this field have an interest in science but have degrees in other subjects. What we all have in common is the ability to do research on and understand scientific topics, and then write about those topics in ways the average reader can understand.

Sometimes we have to write about unfamiliar subjects. For example, I often write stories about disciplines I have little background in, such as geology, chemistry, physics, and astronomy. When this is the case, I rely on my skills as a reporter and ask questions to better understand the material and explain it to my readers. I am never afraid to ask questions.

Science writers must also be translators. Although some scientists are good at explaining their research to the public, many use jargon—words that are extremely useful and meaningful in their field, but are difficult and foreign to someone who is not in the same line of work. This jargon must be translated into everyday language.

And finally, good reporting and interviewing skills are important, but it is really essential to be a good writer—one who is descriptive and accurate and has a strong sense of grammar.

Advice for students.

Students interested in learning more about a career in science writing should start by visiting the National Association of Science Writ-

ers' (NASW) website (see "On the web"). NASW has many resources available, including an advice-packed book called *A Field Guide for Science Writers*. Students could also try contacting a science writer at a local newspaper, favorite magazine, or college or university.

Being a science writer is fun, rewarding, and challenging. I have watched surgeries, held a preserved human brain, visited laboratories, and

gone out in the field with scientists. Just last month, I took a trip to Boston to visit a sleep study clinic. Researchers were studying people's natural rhythms and investigating what variables—green or very bright lights—most effectively reset their biological clocks. I may have had to go through many years of education to find my niche, but I am happy I made the choice to switch careers. It is never too late to find your passion.

BONUS POINTS

Saey's education:

BS, Biology; PhD, Molecular Genetics; MS, Science journalism

On the web:

NASW (www.nasw.org)

Related careers:

Science editor, technical proofreader, TV science host, science fiction writer

FOUR THINGS TEACHERS AND STUDENTS SHOULD KNOW ABOUT TROPICAL FORESTS AND CLIMATE CHANGE

(before the new climate change agreement is framed this December)

- Rainforests are disappearing faster than ever.
- So fast...that deforestation in the tropics accounts for about 20% of all our greenhouse gas emissions.
- Our greenhouse gas emissions are driving climate change.
- Protecting rainforests offers us an immediate and relatively cheap way to mitigate climate change.

To endorse a declaration asking world governments to protect rainforests as part of the new climate change agreement go to www.saverfn.org.

Email beedle@eishome.com and you will receive a bulletin to share with students in your classroom.

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