

What's the best way to get into science writing?

There are of course many formal degrees and training courses and these have proved really useful for some seeking work in science communication more broadly and science journalism, more specifically. However the best way to get into science writing, regardless of whether you are on a course or not, is just 'do it'. The more you write the quicker you'll find your voice and get used to the habit of writing. Anyone can start a blog and get practicing. There really is no excuse. Lots of people "want" to get into science writing in the same way that you might "want" to be able to play the piano. In other words, it's a lovely aspiration but you are doing nothing at all to make it happen, you are kind of expecting to wake up one day already a pianist.

Reading others work from a whole host of sources and analysing what it is that you like about your favourite writers is also invaluable in giving you ideas for stories and styles of writing.

What makes a good science writer?

A passion for telling a good story, an interest in other people, and being able to see things from the perspective of your audience. It's not just about being a good writer or about the science it's about being able to spot what makes a good story, and pin pointing why someone else should care about it

Any advice for budding science writers? Pros and cons of the job

Speak to as many science writers as you can - many are on social media (especially Twitter) or you can interact with them in blog comments. It's a friendly community and everyone's willing to offer advice - make contacts where you can - you never know when they'll be useful.

Exploit all networking events to their full and just keep pitching your ideas. See this article on how not to pitch as it is a skill in itself! <http://www.theopennotebook.com/2012/01/04/how-not-to-pitch/>

Try and get experience anywhere you can, places like the Science Media Centre (www.sciencemediacentre.org) will give you exposure to science organisations, scientists and science journalists. The Association of British Science Writers (www.absw.org.uk) is also a great forum for networking with other science writers and journalists and for keeping up with the profession in the UK. Internationally keep an eye on the World Federation of Science Journalists (www.wfsj.org).

Read Ed Yong's Origins of Science Writers thread:

<http://blogs.discovermagazine.com/notrocketscience/2010/07/29/on-the-origin-of-science-writers/>

One final piece of advice: don't narrow your job search to just journalism. There's a lot more to science writing than just journalism. Plenty of good science writing goes on in organisations, press offices and other places.

The pros of the job are that you'll meet brilliantly interesting people, go to places you'd never normally get access to and you'll learn a lot about whatever you're writing about. The cons are it's not necessarily that well paid, getting work is tough (although this applies more to journalism than the broader field of science writing), also it's very easy to be very bad!

Why you think science communication is important

It might be a cliché, but science really is a part of almost everything and it is for everyone. To be able to bring it to people and overcome their 'oh it's too hard' preconceptions is a really noble calling. If you are a fan of what thinking scientifically has achieved and what it can continue to do for our society, then you'll no doubt enjoy making science part of the national conversation, a part of everyday culture.

One important point to make here though is the clear difference between science communication and science journalism. One is engaging the public with science, which requires making it interesting and bringing it to life in a different way to journalism, which will necessarily need to take a more critical look at science. Of course, science communication can look critically at science and scientists, and journalism can engage the public, but at a very basic level you need to be aware of the distinction. As has been said many times, journalists should not be 'cheerleaders' for science.

In the changing nature of science communication in the current age of blogging, how do you think this affects the way you need to communicate and the people you are reaching?

The web has been a great democratic leveller and anyone can now contact anyone else, so if you're a good writer with flair and a passion for the subject, you can progress your career more easily than in the past when there were perhaps more barriers. The interactive and immediate nature of online communication also keeps people on their toes, if you make a mistake anyone can and probably will call you out on it online. In terms of engagement, the web has really facilitated dialogue; we're now finally seeing the public as people whose respect and interest we have to earn.

In terms of the actual job though the medium may have changed and you may reach more people via the internet than a printed product, but it doesn't change how you "do" your story.

Also a word of caution on blogs, as the blogosphere can be a bit of an echo chamber, so you do need to make sure you are adding something to what others are saying, this goes back again to being clear of your audience, who your blog is aimed at.

Compiled by Sallie Robins, freelance Science Publicist and Director of the UK Conference of Science Journalists, from the thoughts and comments of the following science journalists and writers:

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