800 Words by Noon Today, Plus Photos

Science writing for fun and profit

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Notes posted at www.wordchemist.com
Careers in Chemical Information, ACS March 2006
Making the change

When?  
1993: Freelancing on the side
1995-1996: Freelancing full-time
1996: Full-time staff writer/editor

Why?  
Job instability in my lab research career
Multiple relocations

How?  
Long-time interest and talent for writing
Career counseling
ACS career resources
Volunteer work
ACS Resources for the Change

Career consultant program
CEN-chemjobs.org
Volunteer work, ACS local section
Regional, national meetings
What’s out there?

**Writing**
- Documentation, regulatory reports
- Trade magazines
- Front sections for journals
- Newsletters
- Corporate reports
- Consumer media: print, web, TV, radio, books
- Products for kids
- Public affairs

**Editing**
- Copy editing and proofreading
- Research, fact checking
- Technical or substantive editing
- Acquisitions and Management

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Where the science degree helped

Scientific concepts, methods, terminology
Research skills
Evaluating the evidence
  How do they know that?
  What are their (and my) biases?
Evaluating uncertainty
  Early-stage research, ambiguous results
Where industry experience helped

Consistency of style

Precise terminology
Integrating writing by several authors

Know your audience

In-house technical group reports
Executive summaries for management
Presentations outside the company

Multitasking and good-enough results
Things I had to learn

Writing to spec
  Length, deadlines, assigned topics, assigned angles

Engaging your audience
  Chemists, lawyers, grocery store guy, first graders

I’m not the expert
  Locate and contact experts, ask them open-ended questions, don’t assume you already know the answers

Beyond “science stenography”
  Social and political impacts, public perception, the limitations of the scientific approach
Trying it out

Report on this ACS National Meeting
- The local angle
- The interest group angle

Newsletters for ACS local and regional sections

Write a magazine piece about your research
- Check their author’s guide for instructions

Start a blog
Starting in earnest

Science writing degree programs
UC Santa Cruz, Johns Hopkins

Workshops and short courses
Santa Fe Science Writers Workshop, Edward Tufte’s seminars, ACS Effective Tech Writing

A Field Guide for Science Writers (NASW)

Professional societies and listservs
NASW, SEJ, SPJ

Local societies
DCSWA, SWINY et al.
Questions?

Did I mention that my notes are posted at www.wordchemist.com?
Getting the story

Get to know the PAO and other sources of information

Where can you go to find things out quickly?

What sources give you the most reliable info?

What are their assumptions, agendas, biases?
He said what?

Interviews
  Getting source to talk to you
  Preparing your questions
  Recording and note-taking
  Extracting quotes
  Author verification: how much control?
  Framing the issue
Red-pencil surgery

Editing
- Preserve the author’s voice (don’t insert yours)
- Diplomatic skills
- Driving the deadline
- Fitting the space
- Copyrights and permissions
- Evaluating pitches
Works well with others

Working with artists
Concrete visuals for abstract topics
Conveying your idea to the graphic artist
Is this graphic necessary?
How literal should you be?
Rights and permissions

Working with advertisers
Know your editorial/advertising divide
Know your ad department’s boundaries

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Reuse, recycle, repurpose

Writing the same story for several publications

- Tech sheets
- Press releases
- Science magazine articles
- Newspaper articles
- Blogs
- Op-ed pieces

Each one of these is a distinct product with its own audience, focus, and format
Truth, truthiness, spin

What’s your angle?
- Straight reporting
- Publicity
- Promotion
- Crisis communications

What are your restrictions?
- Pushing the company line
- Avoiding controversial or sensitive issues
- Classified or proprietary information