

Editors of Science Magazines and News Sections Speak at Science Writing Association Workshops

Barbara Gastel

What do editors of popular science magazines consider worth publishing? How have such magazines been changing, and why? What do such magazines and news sections of journals seek in freelance writing, and how much do they pay freelance writers? And what about science writing for children? Editors of science publications addressed these and other questions at the National Association of Science Writers (NASW) annual workshops on 17 February in Washington, DC.

As part of the plenary session “What Makes Science News?”, editors from *Scientific American*, *Discover*, *Popular Science*, and *Psychology Today* identified factors they consider in choosing content and discussed how their publications are evolving. Mariette DiChristina, executive editor of *Popular Science*, said that in considering topics for articles she asks whether an item to be reported is a solid step forward, how much it will affect people, whether a unique spin can be provided, whether a good story can be told, and whether there is a potential for effective graphics.

The articles editor of *Discover*, David Grogan, described recent changes in the magazine. *Discover* is using more photographs, which are less abstract than diagrams and so make the content seem more immediate. The magazine is also emphasizing use of narrative; publishing more columns, which allow authors to communicate with personality; and trying to keep

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advertisements separate from articles.

Psychologist Robert Epstein, who became editor-in-chief of *Psychology Today* last year, reported that he is having experts in the field, rather than journalists, write almost all articles in the magazine. Articles are then “heavily, heavily edited” or rewritten.

John Rennie, editor-in-chief of *Scientific American*, joked that science writing is like sports writing: No one cares how the writers dress, the important thing is the latest results and their significance, and there is an opportunity for memorable writing.

Intended largely for freelancers, the session “Meet the Editors: The Big East” featured speakers from *Science*, *Nature*, *Technology Review*, *New Scientist*, *Discover*, and *Popular Science*. Colin Norman, news editor of *Science*, reported that the *Science* news section, which started accepting freelance work about 10 years ago, now is about 30% to 40% freelance-written. Various editors emphasized the need to propose well-focused articles; in the words of panelist Herb Brody, of *Technology Review*, “Give us a story and not a topic.” Bob Holmes, of *New Scientist*, mentioned seeking feature articles that fascinate readers and change their view of the world—in other words, those with what his first writing teacher called the “Hey, Mabel” factor.

The panelists also addressed payment rates for freelance writers. Nearly all identified \$1 per word as the minimum at their publications. Payment sometimes increases, they said, if articles require much research or the content is new and exclusive. It can also increase if writers have long-term relationships with publications, help to obtain graphics, or, as stated by Brody, “write like angels and

behave like angels.”

The session included information on the rights that publications buy from freelance writers. Policies are being revised to deal with posting on the World Wide Web.

The session “Science Writing for Young Audiences” included remarks by Diana Lutz, editor of the nonfiction magazine *Muse*, which is a joint effort of the Cricket Magazine Group and *Smithsonian* magazine. Lutz distributed lists of what *Muse* wants and does not want. Among items that it favors are first-person writing, conversational style, wit, enthusiasm, and brevity. An example of what *Muse* rejects is “old news”, such as “Leonardo da Vinci—did you know that he was also an architect, engineer, and scientist?”

Other speakers at the session included Conrad Storad, director of research publications at Arizona State University. Storad, who founded and edits *ASU Research Magazine*, discussed establishing *Chain Reaction Magazine*, a children’s science publication for use in Arizona schools. He also described his experience in writing children’s books.

Titles of other workshops included “Mr. Wordsmith Goes to Washington: Freelancing in the National Capital”, “Follow the Money: Covering the Politics of Science”, “Visualizing Science: Images on the Internet”, and “Copyright: How to Protect Yourself”. The full program for the workshops has been posted at nasw.org.

Audiotapes of the workshops are available from NASW. For information, see nasw.org or consult Diane McGurgan, Executive Director, NASW, PO Box 294, Greenlawn, NY 11740; telephone 516-757-5664; fax 516-757-0069; e-mail diane@nasw.org. 