

# NASW Workshops Address Internet Use, Biography Writing, Humor, More

**Yolanda Lukaszewski**

How are people using the Internet to get science information, and what does this mean for journalists and editors? What are some ways to infuse a little humor into science writing? What are some interview techniques that journalists can use to get difficult information from their sources? These were some of the questions discussed at the 2001 National Association of Science Writers (NASW) workshops, held 14-15 February 2001 in Berkeley, California.

The plenary session, "Science Dot Com(munication): Ethics and Enterprise for Converging Media", addressed issues raised by the growing use of online news sources. Marion Lewenstein, a professor of communication at Stanford University, began by discussing the results of a joint eye-tracking study between Stanford and the Poynter Institute that monitored where on the computer screen a person was reading. Lewenstein said that people are interlacing—clicking from one site to another, then clicking back to the first site. Readers are also paying more attention to article text (92%) than to graphics (22%). One misconception had been that readers do not scroll down to read the rest of an article, but the study showed that readers read about 75% of a story, compared with about 25% of its print counterpart.

Charlene Laino, executive health editor of MSNBC.com, said the results of the Poynter study indicate that writing clear headlines to grab readers' attention is important. The text at the top of a page should get their attention. She said that MSNBC.com provides readers with a short synopsis at the beginning of a story, then offers links to related stories before pro-

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viding the rest of the story. Graphics are also important, particularly for interactive applications such as those showing how tumors develop, she said. The results of the study can be found at [www.poynter.org/eyetrack2000](http://www.poynter.org/eyetrack2000).

The Internet challenges the traditional way of delivering news, said Paul Grabowicz, of the New Media Program at the University of California, Berkeley. Because an Internet user visits an average

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of six sites in a half-hour, editors need to see their pages as "jumping-off points" rather than as a final source of information, he said.

The second half of the plenary session discussed the results of another recent Internet study, this one done by the Center for Communication Policy at the University of California, Los Angeles. Jeffrey Cole, director of the center, discussed patterns of computer and Internet use among 2000 households. The researchers plan to expand the long-term study to other countries. The report, released last fall, is available at [ccp.ucla.edu/pages/InternetStudy.asp](http://ccp.ucla.edu/pages/InternetStudy.asp).

During the session "Writing Biography", biographers shared advice and discussed the ethical dilemmas they faced while writing biographies. Robin Marantz Henig, author of *The Monk in the Garden*, recalled how she organized her biography of Gregor Mendel.

Her original plan was to alternate chapters on Mendel's garden with a larger picture of evolution, but this turned out to be too confusing, she said. Instead she arranged sections in the book chronologically. She also advised biography writers to choose subjects on whom much more source material is available than was available on Mendel, whose notes were burned after he died.

George Johnson, author of *Strange Beauty*, a biography of physicist Murray Gell-Mann, faced an ethical dilemma. Gell-Mann asked that sections about his troubled daughter be left out of the book, but Johnson included the sections anyway. People who knew the story surrounding Gell-Mann's daughter would wonder what else Johnson left out of the book and would question his credibility as a writer, Johnson said.

The "Meet the Editors Chat Session" began as a panel discussion with editors from *Popular Science*, *Physical Review Focus*, *Nature*, *Environmental Science & Technology*, *Analytical Chemistry*, *Praxis Post*, and *Science* providing basic information about freelancing for their publications. David Ehrenstein of *Physical Review Focus*, Dan Clery of *New Scientist*, and Dawn Stover of *Popular Science* said they prefer writers with expertise in a given subject. Clery, Colin Norman of *Science*, and Elizabeth Zubritsky of *Analytical Chemistry* said that freelancers just beginning to write for their publications usually start by writing news stories. They then move on to writing longer feature stories. These publications pay new freelancers about \$1 per word. After the panel discussion, freelancers in the audiences met with the editors one on one.

In the session "Savvy Interviewing—The Art and Craft of Talking with People for Publication or Broadcast", Doug Levy, of the Mutual Broadcasting System/NBC Radio Networks, said the difference between interviewing a scientist and inter-

viewing a layperson is that the scientist does not always like to break down information into simpler terms. Levy suggested using a technique that he used once during an interview in which a scientist was reluctant to explain scientific information. Levy incorrectly summarized the research, hoping to irritate the scientist enough to lead him to break down the information into simple terms, which he did.

When Sandy Blakeslee, science correspondent for *The New York Times*, writes about a topic for the first time, she first asks her source for a history of the research. This gives scientists a chance to talk about their mentors and background, helps relax them for the tough questions to follow, and gives Blakeslee background for her article.

When writing an unusual story, “Keep

your ears open for golden moments”, said Mary Roach, freelance writer, in the session “Humor in Science Writing”. She said some topics are so inherently funny that it can

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be too easy to make puns or jokes. When including humor in a story requires more effort, Roach suggested using word play.

Steve Mirsky, of *Scientific American*, suggested writing with an attitude and using alliteration. He also suggested put-

ting into the article something that’s “over the top”. Your editor might cut it out, he said, “but will leave in the other funny line you really wanted as a compromise.”

Other sessions included “The Incredible Vanishing Science Writer: How Corporate Management is Changing Science News”, “From Fuzzy Notion to Bestseller—How to Mint a Good Book”, “Maximizing News Release Effectiveness”, and “Art and Craft of Science Writing: Making the Transition to Literary Narrative”.

A full list of the sessions can be found at NASW’s Web site, [www.nasw.org](http://www.nasw.org). Tapes from the sessions can be ordered from Diane McGurgan, executive director, NASW, PO Box 294, Greenlawn, NY 11740; telephone 631-757-5664. 

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