

Marguerite Meitzler: Editing, Teaching, and Much More

If you are looking for Marguerite (“Maggie”) Meitzler, you might try Chincoteague Island, Virginia, where she and her husband have a summer home. She might be stargazing there. You might find her in the urban garden across the street from her condominium (which is in what used to be a convent) in Washington, DC, 10 blocks north of the White House. She can’t imagine anywhere more perfect for her and her husband, John D Strom, who is Web manager at the Carnegie Institution of Washington. Meitzler might be browsing in one of the myriad museums in Washington, people-watching on the Mall, or taking courses and attending lectures at the Smithsonian Institution, where she recently took an Italian course in preparation for a trip to Italy. You could check on whether she is curled up on her couch reading one of her extensive collection of science-fiction books or watching the new *Battlestar Galactica*.

But if Meitzler has a choice, you will find her doing what she loves most—teaching scientific-writing classes to postdoctoral fellows and new investigators at the National Institutes of Health or Walter Reed Army Institute of Research.

Meitzler says that “teaching research scientists how to write and publish scientific papers is a rewarding experience like none other. Making a difference is what counts most.” She adds, “Most scientists dislike writing. I expect there is a level of intimidation. After all, they’re scientists, not writers.”

“Most new researchers are very nervous about publishing papers,” Meitzler says, “but writing a scientific article is not a solitary sport. You have coauthors, peer reviewers, science editors, manuscript editors, and production editors reviewing a manuscript many times before it’s published. It is in everyone’s interest that the paper be good, so the author shouldn’t be so worried about making it perfect before everyone else has a chance to help.” Meitzler sees a wave of relief wash over her students’ faces when they recognize that.

“Writing scientific papers is probably the easiest type of writing”, Meitzler says.

“The scientific paper has a built-in structure that readily breaks into subsections that can be more easily written. Getting the research findings down on paper is the most important part; perfecting it comes later. Write first, then edit.”

Meitzler grew up in the suburbs of Vineland, an agricultural town in southern New Jersey with a large Italian population. She dropped out of high school in the 1960s (“it seemed like a good idea at the time”) and traveled with a friend to Boston. There she found employment “clerking at the *Journal of Bone and Joint Surgery*, when it was on the top floor of the Francis A Countway Library of Medicine”, which serves the Harvard Medical School. “Everyone there and across the hall at the *New England Journal of Medicine* impressed me because they seemed to be so knowledgeable about everything. I was definitely missing something.”

It was obvious to Meitzler that she needed a college education. She enrolled in Hood College, a women’s college in Frederick, Maryland, where she got her bachelor’s degree in English and philosophy. “Now, if you’re asking how I did this [without completing high school], well, it wasn’t easy. You learn more in high school than you think you do”, Meitzler says. “For most of my 101-level courses, I had to do massive background reading in the library ahead of time. It was tough, but I know I did well because I received [a scholarship] after my first semester, which extended throughout my 4 undergraduate years.” Of Hood College, Meitzler says, “I received an excellent education in a nurturing and progressive atmosphere. My graduation was one of the proudest days of my life.”

Meitzler attended graduate school at Louisiana State University, where she completed the coursework for her master’s degree in philosophy of language. She met her future husband there, where they were both teaching assistants. She speaks with obvious affection as she reflects on how lucky she was to have met and married him.

One of Meitzler’s first jobs after her graduate studies was as an editorial assistant, and later writer and manuscript editor, at the

Other than Editing

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Journal of the National Cancer Institute (JNCI), which was then based at the National Institutes of Health (NIH). One day, she was editing a paper that contained so many major mistakes, she called the Foundation for Advanced Education in the Sciences Graduate School at NIH and asked whether it offered a writing class for scientists. The person who had been teaching the writing classes had recently retired, so Meitzler was asked to interview and was then offered the job teaching “Manuscript Writing for the Visiting Scientist”. She taught there in the evenings for the next 11 years and has since taught the class elsewhere.

For the better part of a decade, Meitzler worked as manuscript editor and managing editor of “four bimonthly journals, a four-color magazine, and a monthly newsletter” at the Entomological Society of America (ESA), including the *Journal of Medical Entomology*, *American Entomologist*, *Journal of Environmental Entomology*, *Annals of the ESA*, *Journal of Economic Entomology*, and the *ESA Newsletter*. From there, Meitzler returned to *JNCI*, which had moved to Oxford University Press, as senior production editor. When that position was outsourced, she moved to her current position at TechBooks in Fairfax, Virginia.

Since April 2005, Meitzler’s “day job” has been project manager at TechBooks, “a production vendor to journal and book publishers”. Meitzler follows “a project, be it a journal or book, from the completed manuscript, through hiring freelance editors and indexers, and through the typesetting phase”. In addition, she teaches “Writing About Science” (a 5-week workshop that meets one afternoon or evening per week) six times per year at NIH. She also teaches “Writing a Research Paper” (“a two-morning seminar”) once per year at the Medical Research Fellowship Program at Walter Reed Army Institute of Research. Those taking her workshops are divided into review groups of three or four people each. The students review each other’s work and write their abstracts in class. She says she can imagine nothing more rewarding than teaching her writing workshops. Teaching is Meitzler’s true passion. She says that “the

key to life is a sense of humor. [Teaching] is like standup comedy—you can’t be afraid to try new material, and you must know your audience.”

According to Gabe Waggoner, technical editor and writer at StataCorp in College Station, Texas, and a former *JNCI* colleague of Meitzler, “Maggie is a live wire. She has a laid-back approach to life and work, but she’s also very professional.” Waggoner and Meitzler met during Waggoner’s interview at *JNCI* when Meitzler was senior production editor. He and Meitzler worked together until Oxford Press outsourced the work to India and their department was downsized.

Waggoner says that “work doesn’t define Maggie”—she has many outside interests. For instance, she is writing a comic, large-recipe prison cookbook, which she says was an idea that grew out of a joke. “I recognized that what the cookbook world needed was a funny large-recipe cookbook”, Meitzler says. “All recipes in the cookbook are in batches of 100 servings, which could just as well apply to a church social.” Meitzler also loves astronomy, and she could gaze at the moon through her telescope at Chincoteague Island—where there is little light pollution—for hours on end. She enjoys finding different locations on the moon with her lunar maps as guidance. “Viewing the Sea of Tranquility and knowing that humans walked there is sobering.”

Meitzler has three younger sisters—one a homicide investigator, one an accountant with the Internal Revenue Service, and the youngest a homemaker. Meitzler published a monthly family newsletter for 10 years, until the Internet and personal blogs made the newsletters obsolete. She and her husband “have dozens of collections of butterflies, beetles, and giant moths hanging on the walls of [their] beach house, which are a holdover from working at ESA”. She says she bought a surfboard a few years ago and will try surfing in the future.

Waggoner says there are many layers to Maggie. Indeed.

KATHY M CLACK prepared this article while a Science Editor intern.