

Career Series

Interview with Dr. Tina Saey, Science Journalist



Dr. Tina Saey is a Science Journalist with Science News magazine. She received her Ph.D. from Washington University in St. Louis and her Master's in Science Journalism from Boston University. After two internships and a position at the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, she became a reporter for the Molecular Biology beat at Science News.

Basic job description:

Science Journalist for *Science News Magazine*

Type of education/training required:

I have a Ph.D. in Molecular Genetics and a Master's in Science Journalism. The Ph.D. is absolutely not required, and most of my colleagues do not have Ph.Ds. Some went to the science writing programs, others just jumped in after being scientists. We also have people who have worked here for 30 years, and have always simply been journalists.

Special talents or skills that contribute to career:

It is definitely necessary to have an interest in science. You also need to be able to grasp what is important on your beat, and then translate that for people who don't know *anything* about what you are writing about. Journalists synthesize things and make connections where other people don't, and then tell that in a story form that the average person can understand.

Average income range for people working in your area (entry level through experienced persons):

This depends a great deal on whether it is a freelance or staff job. If you have a staff job, then salary depends on where you write for and how much experience you have. Someone who is just starting out as a staffer can expect a salary in the low \$30,000s.

Freelancers usually have contracts, and can write for many different outlets. Most freelancers tell an editor verbally or written form what their story idea is, and then the editor says yes or no, or has other stories that they would prefer them to work on. The income is highly variable.

Career Series

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How many science journalists work for your publication? How many science journalists would you estimate are in the U.S.?

Science News currently has nine science writers, four full-time editors and one part-time editor. One person does double duty as a writer and editor and another person is a writer and also edits our *Science News for Kids* web site. Several freelancers help out with editing from time to time or contribute stories to the magazine.

Tinsley Davis, executive director of the National Association of Science Writers, says that as of today we have "1,948 regular (i.e. non-student) members who are based in the U.S." There is no real way to estimate how many people are science writers that don't belong to that or any other organization.

What is involved in a typical workday?

I deal with a lot of email and phone calls, I look through journals searching for articles, I talk to scientists, I write stories, and I look for pictures to illustrate stories. *Science News* has a small staff, so we rely a lot on photos from researchers. This can be very challenging for my beat, since there are not a lot of photographs associated with molecular biology. For feature stories, we do have artists who will make some really fantastic pictures to go along with stories.

When I am looking for current research to report on, I focus on many different journals. Fortunately, science journalists usually get advance knowledge from many journals about what they will be publishing, but agree to an embargo. This gives us time to read the actual research paper, examine their findings and look at the data to verify their conclusions. It also gives us time to interview researchers, and find other scientists who can comment. There are a few people who are really reluctant to talk to the press, they have a conception that we are going to get things wrong, misquote them, or sensationalize their work. For the most part, though, people are excited to talk about their work and have it presented to the average person in a way that they can understand. I've had some people say, "My parents never understood what I did until they read your article," and that's a great feeling.

In this profession, it is a good idea to come out ahead of the curve in your beat and write your story as the first couple of researchers publish their papers. To get good leads I go to quite a few meetings each year, and talk to attendees to get a sense of where certain fields are going and the types of things I can expect to be published. I also take a look at the Table of Contents of notable journals and see what field has lots of papers being published, because that may be something that is ripe for a feature story.

Career Series

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What do you like the best about your work? The least?

Being a science journalist means being involved in science, but in a hands-off way. This job is constant variety, and sometimes switching gears can be quite dizzying. I got in to science writing on a “need to know basis,” because I like knowing lots of different things, and being in lab didn’t satisfy that. If you have been on beat for a long time, you start absorbing a lot of things. You have to have a fairly deep knowledge of a subject in order to look at new research and say “what is new here, and is this news?”

I like learning about new things, and I like talking to the scientists. It is really cool that I can call people up and ask them questions (even dumb ones), and they answer me.

The writing is the most difficult part. Sometimes it can be extremely painful, especially if you are writing a story that you really care about and you want it to be good. Some stories write themselves, but with others you struggle to get what comes out of your fingers on the keyboard to match the vision in your head. Even when you think that a piece is terrible, editors make it better, or you go back and look at it later and it is not nearly as bad as you thought. That is very satisfying.

How does your current position compare to working in other settings, like academia or industry?

I can’t compare this to industry, because I have never worked in that area. In terms of comparing this to an academic setting, I only have the graduate student perspective of academia. In my experience, you are very focused on your project and your very small slice of science. You may be interested in lots of different aspects of your field and others, but you don’t have time to go exploring those aspects. In science journalism, knowing about many areas of research is a must.

Why did you choose this career?

I made the decision to pursue science journalism halfway through my graduate career. I was kind of bored in the lab, and I felt like maybe only five people in the world other than me cared about what I was working on. I had a greater curiosity about the world, and I wanted something different. Faced with the prospect of being a postdoc with one project or a principle investigator with one small slice of a field, I realized that I needed broader scientific exposure. Around the time I was having this crisis, a graduate student across the hall from me went to the science journalism program at the University of California, Santa Cruz. This was the first I’d ever heard of these sorts of programs, or that someone like me, trained as a scientist, could transition to

Career Series

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be a writer. I knew that I really enjoyed writing in graduate school, so it sounded like a great option. I now get exposure to lots of different topics, I write about fun and fascinating stuff, and I can emphasize to people why science is important, what it means, and why they should care about it.

What are your career goals?

I'm there! The reporting is what I enjoy most, and I have no desire to move up; for instance, becoming an editor. At this point, if I wrote a book I'd have to take time off to do it, because I can't imagine doing that on top of doing my regular job. This job is fantastic, I get to accomplish all of my work in-office, and then get to go home and just be a person. I don't work most weekends, and I don't usually work evenings. I value my free time.

What path did you take to get to your current position?

As I mentioned previously, I got my Ph.D. in Molecular Biology from Washington University in St. Louis and my Master's in Science Journalism from Boston University. The Master's program at Boston University is a three-semester program, and between the second and third semesters I was an intern at the *Dallas Morning News*. Immediately following my degree completion I did an internship at *Science News*. After interning, I was a reporter at the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* for seven and a half years, and then I came back to *Science News* to work for my old editor from the *Dallas Morning News*. It was a shock moving from a newsroom with 200+ people and constant noise to a room with only four people in it... and it was almost too quiet! Everyone at *Science News* has their own beat, and we divvy up stories between us when beats overlap. We have three interns per year, so many times if there is something that I think is important but I can't get to, I ask the interns if they are interested in covering it.

In what ways does your degree help you with this job?

Experience was more important than the Master's degree, but I felt that I needed to do the program in science journalism because I had no clue how the business worked, and in graduate school I got stuck in the passive-voice writing style. In many ways the program was invaluable; for instance, in class I learned how to write an obituary, among other things. This became very important for when I was at the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* because every couple of months we would have to work one day on the weekend as a general assignment reporter. This meant that sometimes I was on the cop beat, sometimes I was writing obits, and sometimes I was covering a parade. It

Career Series

Interview with Dr. Tina Saey, Science Journalist

was fun doing something completely different, and my degree helped me succeed in that.

After participating in a science journalism program, you automatically have a network of people who are extremely helpful for getting internships and getting jobs. At the time I was getting my Master's there were just a handful of programs, but now there are many different science journalism schools.

As far as the Ph.D. goes, the thing that it gives me is credibility. A lot of times scientists think that journalists are clueless, but when they see that I have my Ph.D. they think that perhaps I am not. It helps me get a call back from people I don't know. However, this can be a liability if they talk to me like I am a Ph.D. and I want them to help me translate their work for the general public. I can talk to them on that level, but then I don't get any nice quotes out of the conversation.

If you could begin again in your career, what would you do differently?

I would have liked to start my journalism career a little earlier, but other than that I have no regrets. I'm not sure I'd change anything about the path I have taken to get here. Sometimes I think that once I knew I wasn't going to stay at the bench, maybe I should have left academia before I completed my degree. But it's hard to be sorry that I completed a Ph.D. program!

What would be your career advice to someone who is currently in a genetics Ph.D. program? To someone who is currently a postdoctoral associate?

I've talked to a lot of people about becoming a science writer. The job market is really difficult right now, being a freelancer is incredibly hard work, and getting a steady staff writer job is tough at the moment.

In this profession it's not about how many degrees you have or how many *Science* papers you have, but how many clips you have, how often have you been published, and what the quality of your writing is in these publications. I advise people to write stories for their campus newspaper if they can. I wrote some science articles during my PhD, and those clips helped me get into the Master's program and help me get into my internships. If you can't publish in your campus newspaper (postdocs might have trouble doing so, for instance), there is usually at least one science writer in the university's office of public information. Contact the science writer there and offer to write press releases, because that is very similar to writing news for the general public.

Career Series

Interview with Dr. Tina Saey, Science Journalist

These days, you can write a blog and develop the skills that people like me use to get paid. As a professional writer it hurts me to tell someone to write for free and give everything away; at the same time if you are just starting out, you need to be writing and showing perspective employers that you can do it well.

My suggestion to anyone is: write!