Recognizing all great science writing

In 2018, CASW’s young Showcase website will celebrate its second anniversary. So far, this new activity, selecting and sharing award-winning science journalism, has generated more questions than answers. What is excellence in science writing? And do we know how to nurture and celebrate it?

Storygrams—produced and co-published by our partners at The Open Notebook (TON) and described in this issue—poke at the first question, drawing on commentary by a professional science writer to reveal the elements of superb reporting and writing.

Storygram annotations demonstrate that deep, exhaustive reporting is as important to science journalism as to any other area of journalism. Award-winning stories combine a dogged search for truth, context, impact and insight with the unexpected nuggets of pathos, humor, outrage or surprise that a skilled storyteller uses to pull a naive reader deeper into the subject.

As we build up our collection of Storygrams, we’re finding patterns in the stories that win awards and in the techniques winning writers use. These writers clearly set the bar for excellence in the craft of science journalism.

But there’s that second question too. We wonder whether there are forms of excellent science writing that often go unrecognized in the world of science journalism awards. For example, journalism educators have asked us to provide exemplars of daily news coverage and accurate science journalism done in the context of a non-science story—politics, business, a local land-use fight, a natural disaster.

Such reporting rarely garners science writing prizes, and yet it is vitally important in a world where science touches nearly every issue and every home. Workaday reporting done with accuracy and intelligence can show how the essential techniques of good science writing can be put into practice in myriad contexts and for diverse audiences.

Even as we celebrate excellence in “deep dive” science reporting, we at CASW are discussing how to highlight and recognize vital kinds of journalism that get missed...
by our awards programs. Keep an eye on Showcase as we widen our gaze. We welcome suggestions and, yes, more questions!

Gratefully,
Rox
Rosalind Reid
Executive Director
Council for the Advancement of Science Writing

Storygrams: Dissecting excellent science writing

Storygrams, or “story diagrams,” dissect award-winning science stories to reveal how the best writers make science sing. A growing collection of annotations illuminates features of high quality writing.

Freelance science writer and editor Siri Carpenter conceived of the idea while teaching science journalism at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. “So many things go into making a great story and wash over us as readers as they should, so we just enjoy the stories,” Carpenter said. “But as writers, it’s so important to understand those things and the functions they serve in a story.”

Carpenter, currently vice president of the National Association of Science Writers, is the co-founder and editor-in-chief of TON, an online publication devoted to helping science writers improve their craft. For her UW students, she created a guide for how to read stories closely, but she realized she could do more to show how writers have tackled the challenges of covering science.

Carpenter shared her idea for an annotation project with CASW Executive Director Rosalind Reid and Immediate Past President Cristine Russell as a CASW committee was designing Showcase, a CASW website that presents a curated collection of award-winning science writing. A three-year grant awarded to CASW by the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation launched both the Storygrams and CASW Showcase. Stories to be annotated are selected with input from CASW and TON leadership; the annotations are produced by TON and published jointly at TON and Showcase.

Hallmarks of quality
Since May 2016, TON and CASW have published ten Storygrams, with plans to publish eight more with current funding.

What are some takeaways from Storygrams so far? Detail, character, and diligence are key to successful science journalism.

“I think probably every one [of the Storygrams] has highlighted examples of a writer using vivid
details to draw readers in, to humanize subjects, to bring scenes to life, to give texture to what otherwise might seem like abstract concepts, or to evoke an emotional response in the reader,” Carpenter said.

The annotations have shown why science reporting can’t be rushed. Successful writers, Carpenter said, spend “enough time in the reporting to learn something deeper about what drives their subjects’ interests, what led them to develop those interests, how they’ve handled failures or disappointments, what they mean to the people around them.”

CASW Showcase managing editor Shannon Hall added: “The more phone calls you make, and the more trips you take, the better your story will be. If you can visit a scientist in the lab, for example, you’ll be able to write cinematically, placing the reader in the unfolding action.”

Here’s an example from Eric Boodman’s STAT story, “Accidental Therapists,” with an annotation by Brooke Borel:

She [entomologist Gale Ridge] had no particular interest in insects, though, and she grew up to be a pianist. Only in 1996, when she was looking for a more stable career that would allow her to raise a family as a single parent, did she return to school for biology. She thought she might end up in some medical-related field, but by chance she took a job in the Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station — and she fell in love with insects. These are excellent biographical details that go beyond your basic profile. In a few short paragraphs, we get a sweeping view of Ridge’s career path that helps show how she landed in an agricultural experiment station. The last sentence also reveals that at one point she was toying with a medical career.

User feedback
The response from readers and annotators has been positive. Boston-based science writer Rebecca Altman had this to say:

“I have studied ALL of the Storygrams. I am a sociologist and not trained as a journalist or writer. I’m trained in research and ethnography and not one iota in writing. So, I’m trying to supplement my education and improve my craft, often alone, and the Storygram is remarkably helpful in that regard—to see how a writer navigated choices, to see how editors call out why a particular scene, moment, worked, etc. I come back to them again and again when I’m stuck or thinking through a structural problem.”

Feedback from CASW Vice President Robin Lloyd, who used Storygrams in her journalism classroom at New York University, inspired Carpenter and Hall to plan a Storygram for and by students. Andrew Grant’s Science News article “At last, Voyager 1 slips into interstellar space” was annotated by Marguerite Holloway and her students in the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism’s science concentration.

“We had a wonderful time doing such a close read of Andrew Grant’s piece because it gave us the chance to slow down, to pay careful attention to a wonderfully structured and written news story,” Holloway recalled. “We were able to see his careful choices, and then, during the interview, to learn about how he made some of those choices.” Each annotator also interviews the story’s author, and the Q&A is posted at The Open Notebook.

Storygrams are intended to expose the secrets of great writing for everyone who aspires to write vividly about science. Many science writers learn on the job and may not have gone to journalism school, Carpenter said. For others, writing is a lifelong learning project.

“My hope is that the Storygrams offer a really rich opportunity to study the craft for people of all levels of experience, from beginners to veterans.”
CASW welcomes Ashley Smart to its Board of Directors in April 2018. As a senior editor at Physics Today, Smart edits and writes about all manner of physical sciences great and small—from atoms to astronomy. He was a 2015–16 Knight Science Journalism Fellow at MIT, and he is cofounding editor of the science news blog HBSciU.com. Before becoming a science journalist, he studied complex fluids as a postdoctoral researcher at Caltech and granular networks as a graduate student at Northwestern University. Get to know Ashley and his aspirations for CASW in Spotlight's interview.

Spotlight: How did you come in to a career in science writing?

Smart: My restless curiosity steered me to it. Fairly early in my research career I realized I didn’t have the patience to work on the same problem for years at a time, which basically meant I wasn’t much good at research. But I knew I liked learning about science, and I knew I liked writing. I began looking for any opportunity to write. I wrote a blog that probably no one else but me ever read. I dabbled in sketch comedy writing. As my second post-doc year came to an end, I applied for a bunch of science writing jobs. I got the offer to join Physics Today, which for me was kind of a dream job.

Spotlight: As a science writer, what motivates or excites you most?

Smart: I’m really driven by curiosity. I love that I constantly get to talk with brilliant people and I’m always learning something new.

Spotlight: What do you see as critical issues in science writing today?

Smart: There are a bunch. How do we fund quality science journalism in the age of the internet? As writers, how do we earn readers’ trust in a “post-fact” world? But one that’s near and dear to me is that I feel a lot of important science stories are going untold due to a lack of diverse perspectives in the science writing community. That’s one reason a friend and I started HBSciU.com. We wanted to give young people at Historically Black Colleges and Universities a chance to write about the science that impacts their community and that captures their imagination. The good news is that I think the science writing community is increasingly recognizing the value of diversity—both of the stories we tell and of the people who tell them.

Spotlight: What inspired you to join the CASW board, and what do you hope to do as a board member?

Smart: I’ve experienced firsthand how valuable CASW is to the science writing community. I can’t tell you how many interesting story ideas I’ve picked up from New Horizons talks. As someone who still feels like he’s trying to find his way in science journalism, I regularly turn to Showcase for tips to hone my craft. And I see CASW contributing to the science writing community in countless other ways. When an organization gives that much to you and your peers, you jump at the chance to give something back.

As a board member, I mainly want to do my part to help CASW continue its tradition of being a valuable resource to the science writing community. But I also think there’s a growing sense that we can and should do more to bring diverse voices into our ranks, and I definitely want to help with that.
Susan Desmond-Hellman delivered the Fifth Annual Patrusky Lecture
"In Defense of Science"
at the 10th World Conference of Science Journalists.

Watch 18 video recordings of WCSJ2017 sessions.

Survey results confirm what we suspected: Our attendees loved every part of WCSJ2017!
Join us in Washington, D.C., for professional development workshops developed by the National Association of Science Writers, the 56th Annual New Horizons in Science briefings on research presented by CASW, and lab tours and science field trips organized by George Washington University and its hosting partners. Registration opens in August 2018.

Submit a session proposal by March 1

The organizers of ScienceWriters2018 welcome proposals. If you'd like to suggest a research topic or speaker for the New Horizons program, contact Ros Reid directly. Or propose your own session! Please submit by March 1 your NASW Workshop /Session proposal or propose a "Science + Science Writing" session, a dialogue between scientists and science writers, to be presented during the New Horizons program.

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