

Science Writing for a General Audience

Writing for a general audience, sometimes called science journalism, presents a special challenge and opportunity. On the one hand, writing for a general audience can help you sharpen your thinking skills and, in the process, your writing skills. After all, if you can explain a result or research paper to someone else, you probably understand it well. On the other hand, and perhaps most importantly, keeping lines of communication open between scientists and nonscientists is becoming increasingly important as such issues as stem cells, cloning, nanotechnology, climate change, and the like enter the public arena. In this way, writing for a general audience can be thought of as less of a task and more of a responsibility of scientists.

There are aspects of writing for a general audience that are shared with other forms of writing. For example, writing for a general audience requires that you know your audience. At times you need to understand how to summarize, at times simplify, at times explain to get scientific ideas across. You need to understand when you can avoid technical language, as well as when a key term cannot be left out but needs to be explained. You need to understand what background you need to provide and what knowledge can be assumed. Knowing your audience is a key aspect of any sort of writing, even research papers. In this case, you need to keep in mind whether your audience is general, from any field of science, such as when you write for journals such as *Science* or *Nature*, or more specialized, as is the case for readers of *Genetics* or *Animal Behaviour*. The kind of words you use and the amount of background you provide will vary depending on who you expect to read your paper.

In addition, writing for a general audience is an excellent exercise in summarizing. Often we are asked, when writing for a general audience, to explain an exciting new result or discovery. To do this, we need to fill in the background, describe the key experiment, and convey the major result, all in a relatively small amount of space. Understanding what to include and what to leave out and how to simplify a complicated idea or apparatus is often key to a good piece for a general audience.

While there is no one way to write for a general audience, there is a certain style that often shows up in this form of writing. For example, the paragraphs tend to be short, shorter than you are probably used to in scientific or expository writing. Technical words are often avoided. Important terms that cannot be avoided are carefully explained. Finally, writing for a general audience often begins with a “lead” or “hook,” something that is written in a way to grab the reader. For example, the hook may be a simple, dramatic statement of a finding, a narrative, or a twist or surprise from what is expected. However you open a piece for a general audience, and however you write it, you will want to keep the piece moving and your reader interested. Try not to get bogged down in technical explanations or lengthy descriptions, unless it works for the story you are telling.