

Alexandra Witze

Freelance Science Journalist



What is your current occupation?

I'm a freelance science journalist who writes for a number of digital and print magazines. I cover primarily topics in the earth and planetary sciences, as well as some astronomy and research policy. My job is to find and pitch story ideas about new developments in the sciences to my editors, then report and write stories on those topics. I write everything from short summaries of journal articles to long investigations of newsy topics. My articles are typically published in the news section of Nature, although I also write for other publications including Science News and Knowable magazines.

What is your educational background?

I have a bachelor's degree in earth, atmospheric and planetary sciences in MIT as well as a graduate certificate in science communication from the University of California, Santa Cruz.

A key message for students is that the geoscience workforce is dynamic, and boundaries between sectors and occupations are fluid. How has this been true in your career?

I never worked as a geoscientist; as soon as I got my bachelor's in geology from MIT I went straight into a graduate program to train as a science writer. I've been a journalist ever since, working at a variety of newspapers and magazines around the country. But I certainly know lots of science writers who moved into the field from academia or more technical fields, so the

transition is a common one that can be made at any point of a person's career path. For more on how many science writers have gotten into the field, see <https://www.theopennotebook.com/on-the-origin-of-science-writers/>

Where do you see your sector moving in future years? How would you advise students to prepare to be competitive job applicants and successful employees?

Journalism is an extremely fluid career with a lot of media publications closing or shrinking their newsrooms in recent years. That uncertainty is likely to persist. As a freelancer I developed a set of skills to make myself more marketable in times of change, such as switching between writing and editing depending on who was hiring at any given moment. Working as a staffer in various newsrooms exposed me to many other excellent journalists whom I learned from over the years. I would advise students to take advantage of on-the-scene learning opportunities to work alongside professionals with varied skill sets. A couple of months working on a job will almost always teach you far more than an academic class ever would.

What is the role of networking in your sector? Do you have advice for a student who is just beginning to build their network? What is the best way for students to get their foot in the door?

Networking plays a significant role in making people aware of opportunities in journalism. Professional organizations such as the National Association of Science Writers, plus smaller regional groups of science writers, provide conferences, meet-ups, internship fairs, and other opportunities for students to enter the field. Students who are looking to get experience in science writing often get those first published clips by working at their campus newspaper or their department or campus news or media-relations office. Free educational resources such as The Open Notebook (theopennotebook.com) also provide self-guided training.

What does a “typical” day of work look like for you?

I'll start with a detailed news scan — reading national and local newspapers, the websites for specialized science magazines, and my carefully curated Twitter lists of sources for the beats I cover. Then I'll dive into the Nature news team Slack with notes on the top stories of the day and commentary on topics that other reporters and editors are discussing. Typically I will have a news or feature story to be working on, so the bulk of my day will be in researching that topic, putting out interview requests to scientists, conducting phone or video interviews with scientists, structuring and writing the story itself, or responding to edits on stories that are currently in production. I might also do tasks like a podcast interview about an upcoming story, or some community efforts like work for our regional science writing group of which I am president.

What is the best part of your job?

Getting to learn about new developments in science without having to do all the grant-writing, lab-building, experiment-doing, coauthor-wrangling myself!

Do you have any other comments or advice for students looking to enter your sector of the geoscience workforce?

Science communication is a broad field that encompasses many types of jobs, from journalism to public relations to education. Across the board, a common theme is the need to be deeply informed. Read widely and thoroughly across a range of responsible information sources in order to understand the context and perspective of new developments in science.

Connect

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/alexandrawitze/witzescience@gmail.com> (best way to reach me, I don't check LinkedIn messages very often!)

Learn More:

<https://spectrum.mit.edu/continuum/science-to-science-writing/>