

Carolyn Gramling

Earth & Climate Writer at *Science News* Magazine



What is your current occupation?

I'm the Earth & Climate writer at *Science News* magazine, which is published by the nonprofit Society for Science. I write news and feature stories about new research and current events, and cover any topic that is even tangentially related to earth science, including climate change, ocean science, plate tectonics, earthquakes, volcanoes, planetary science and paleontology.

What is your educational background?

I have a Ph.D. in marine geochemistry from the MIT/Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution's Joint Program for Oceanography. I also have a B.S. in geology from Florida International University in Miami and a B.A. in European history from the University of Pennsylvania.

My transition from academia to journalism began with several internships: I was a AAAS Mass Media Fellow, which included a 10-week internship during which I wrote and voiced science stories for an NPR affiliate station, WOSU-AM. I also interned at *Science* and at *Science News*. Before my current employment at *Science News*, I was a writer and editor at *EARTH* magazine and at *Science*.

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?

As a graduate student in the MIT/WHOI joint program about 20 years ago, I was pretty sure that I wanted to continue in a science-related career, but not in research. My adviser was very

supportive, but the program overall was strongly academia-oriented at the time; successful graduates entered academia, or perhaps government labs or private industry. Other careers weren't much discussed, and science journalism wasn't really on the radar at all. I was the first graduate of my program (that I know of) to make that leap to journalism.

I began the AAAS Mass Media fellowship just after defending my dissertation. This fellowship is geared toward graduate-level students in the sciences, and I suddenly found myself among people who had had very similar experiences to mine: highly trained scientists who really wanted to be writers, and who worried about disappointed or disdainful colleagues at their institutions. We had all felt alone — and, it turns out, we weren't.

Although I have stayed in journalism since then, my perception is that the landscape has changed a lot in the last two decades, and there's a much more encompassing definition of what successful in science means. I went back to WHOI for a reunion a few years ago, and found that my classmates were now pursuing all kinds of different careers — academia, industry, journalism, policy, advocacy. As a journalist, I know of many scientists who also are strongly committed to science communication and education, and are finding ways to juggle and move between these worlds.

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?

Every journalistic outlet is struggling to stay in the black; there are a lot of wonderful things about being a science journalist — fascinating topics and people, often amazing places for on-site reporting, and the joy of a well-turned phrase. But people don't do this job for the money.

A few decades ago, many newspapers began shuttering their science desks as expendable; I've been fortunate to work at magazines that are science-focused and where that wasn't an issue. But now, I would say, science as a subset of journalism is increasingly in demand across the board. That's because science-related stories have taken center stage over the last decade — climate change, COVID — and I think there's growing demand for scientific expertise, and familiarity with scientific concepts, even at more general-audience publications.

To make that transition to journalism, I strongly recommend applying for internships at magazines, newspapers or other publications. There's really no substitute for learning on the job when it comes to juggling deadlines, writing clean and accurate copy, interviewing techniques and working with editors to improve a story. And internships also offer excellent networking opportunities.

Getting those internships can be really competitive, however. Good clips — published examples of your work — are key. Those might come from stories written for a school newspaper, an online blog, or freelance submissions to publications.

I've helped evaluate candidates for internships, and the applicants that stand out have clearly read the publication they're applying for to understand its style, and have included solid and relevant clips. There are also professional science writing organizations that can help prospective science journalists get started, such as the National Association of Science Writers, which has annual meetings, online forums and can also offer mentorship.

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 is extremely important in science journalism. Internships can help writers hone their craft, but also help them network within their newsroom and beyond. Attending professional science journalism conferences is also a great way to network. In addition to NASW, there are many local chapters of science writing organizations, such as the DC Science Writers Association. There are often pitch slams and internship fairs at these meetings as well, which is a great way to have one-on-one interactions with editors and find out about internships and freelancing opportunities.

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

In my job, I'm covering a mix of breaking news, embargoed science research and longer-term feature stories. So there's a broad range of types of deadlines. It's hard to describe a typical day — no day is exactly like any other! A typical week generally starts with sifting through upcoming embargoed research news and current events to see if there's anything I want to cover from a science/research angle. We have a weekly all-staff news meeting where we might discuss any big stories, but mostly story pitching takes place online and on a rolling basis, since the news never really stops. Then I spend time calling sources to discuss those stories, lining up any additional commenters I might need to provide outside perspective on those stories, writing and editing a couple of new stories for the website, looking through fact-checks and copyedits of previously written stories to prepare them for print publication, sitting in on team meetings to discuss upcoming story or special issue ideas (such as on climate change). There's a LOT of multitasking.

What is the best part of your job?

It's the intellectual challenge, for me. I love learning new stuff and sharing what I've discovered with readers. I'm an introvert, so calling sources can be daunting, but then sometimes you get into these really amazing and fascinating discussions, too, that just change your whole worldview for a bit. I love that feeling. Pre-COVID, I also was able to do some travel for work, to do on-site reporting for a feature story or to attend scientific conferences and report directly from them.

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

This is just my opinion, but I think science journalism is a labor of love — it can be a difficult and demanding job (climate change and COVID, for example, are particularly grueling stories to cover day after day after day). But it can also be really rewarding. The most successful science writers I know really just love science and want to tell people about it.

Connect:

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Also, my twitter account is here: <https://twitter.com/CarolynGramling>

Learn More:

My bio page at *Science News*: <https://www.sciencenews.org/author/carolyn-gramling>

My bio for the Energy Journalism Initiative, a recent fellowship through Columbia University: <https://www.energypolicy.columbia.edu/meet-participants-eji-seminar-2021>

Here's an old bio from when I was a AAAS Mass Media Fellow: <https://news.agu.org/mass-media-fellowship/past-fellows-archives/carolyn-gramling/>

I also wrote a story about my experience in the Mass Media Fellowship and my transition from scientist to science journalism for the American Geophysical Union's publication EOS: <https://agupubs.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1029/2004EO280006>