

Kathryn Hansen

Science Writer and Video Producer for the NASA Earth Observatory Website



What is your current occupation?

I am a government contractor with SSAI working as a science writer and video producer for the NASA Earth Observatory website. Our group publishes daily visual-driven narratives relevant to NASA Earth science, natural events, and climate change. I work with subject matter experts to interpret remote sensing imagery, and then craft stories via text or video to explain what the imagery shows and why it matters. In short, I am a translator between scientists/engineers and the science-curious public.

What is your educational background?

I have earned a bachelor's degree in physics and astronomy, and master's degrees in science writing and video production.

My peers in the science writing graduate program at Johns Hopkins University (2006) had backgrounds in the natural sciences or journalism/communication. Science communication is a fitting choice for people struggling to choose between these career paths. As it turns out, you can do both.

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?

Since setting out to pursue science communication, I have stayed within the sector, but the type of work has evolved. I entered the workforce as a journalist for the news media, then transitioned to science writing for a non-profit (AGI), and then transitioned to science writing for a government agency (NASA).

Even within NASA I have held different jobs that require different styles of writing. Initially my work involved writing press releases and holding press events—content intended for the news media, who in turn digested it for the public. Nowadays my work involves reporting and writing directly for the public—closer to the type of work traditionally done by news media journalists.

This profession can take you in so many directions, from a newsroom to a scientific institution to far-off fieldwork locations. You can pursue a nine-to-five desk job, freelance, or write books.

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?

Since entering the workforce after graduate school in 2006, I have observed the field of science communication becoming increasingly competitive. This is reflected in the numbers of applicants submitting for job positions. You will stand out to employers if you have an additional skillset, such as experience with video, social media content production, image or graphics development, or perhaps something unique that the employer didn't know they needed until they met you.

According to a [Pew Research Center report](#) (July 2021), newsroom employment has fallen since 2008, but the digital publishing sector is continuing to grow. As I see it, the world will always need proficient writers and editors. First make sure the grammar on your resumé is solid. Then practice the craft and write every day.

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 crucial. Fortunately there are plenty of fantastic networking resources for science writers and science-writers-to-be.

If you are coming from a background in science, I suggest looking into the [AAAS Mass Media Science & Engineering Fellowship](#). The 10-week summer program places undergraduate, graduate, and post-graduate scientists in media organizations across the country, where they work alongside communication experts and learn the craft of science communication. For everyone, I recommend checking out the [National Association of Science Writers](#) (NASW). This professional society offers tools to learn about the profession and the means to connect with writers near you. It also hosts a robust list of job opportunities.

For me, the most productive networking early in my career came from internships. The work—on top of graduate school thesis writing—was well worth the opportunity to dive right in, work with a team of writers and editors, and build up some published works that I could later show to potential employers. Sometimes, internships turn into full time jobs.

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

We publish daily, so our team starts the day by meeting and deciding on the story that will run that evening. We typically have a few stories planned in advance, but natural events can take priority. Today, for example, we had fantastic imagery from satellites and from astronauts on the International Space Station showing the smoke plumes from the Dixie fire in California. I researched the story, worked with our team of visualizers to select imagery, learned what the images were showing us, wrote the story, passed it by my editor, revised the story, and finally published it as the Image of the Day. At the same time, I’m usually working in the background on more robust stories that involve interviewing scientists and/or translating a research paper.

What is the best part of your job?

Two things: Access to the experts and perpetual learning about the newest research in Earth science. Something that I missed when I left NASA (and part of the reason I later came back to NASA) was the direct interaction with scientists. I walk the hallways (virtual hallways, for now) with some of the smartest people on the planet, and most of them are excited to talk about their work. It’s exciting to be engaged with the unfolding of the scientific process. Additionally, NASA holds frequent seminars for employees on a wide range of Earth science topics. It is literally my job to never stop learning.

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

Give it a try! In addition to graduate programs, some schools offer undergraduate level classes in science communication. If a career in science writing ends up not being for you, the practice will at least make you a stronger writer and communicator—an important skill that applies to any career.

Connect

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From Astronomical Observatory to Earth Observatory: Translating Science With Kathryn Hansen: <https://www.nasa.gov/feature/goddard/2020/from-astronomical-observatory-to-earth-observatory-translating-science-with-kathryn-hansen>