

# Tim Oleson

Senior Science Editor at Eos



## **What is your current occupation?**

I work for the American Geophysical Union (AGU) as the Senior Science Editor at Eos, AGU's news site and magazine. My main responsibility involves working with scientists interested in writing about their research, expertise, and opinions in Eos. I provide guidance and editing to help them convey their work and perspectives clearly and engagingly for a broad audience comprising not only other Earth and space scientists but also policymakers and the science-interested public. Among other responsibilities, I also help plan editorial themes for upcoming coverage and solicit invited articles related to those themes.

## **What is your educational background?**

I have a B.S. in chemistry, an M.S. and Ph.D. in geology, and an M.A. in journalism and mass communication.

## **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?**

Yes, I'd say that's been true. I haven't worked across many sectors in the geosciences, but I've often viewed my education and career not as any kind of straight line but rather as a series of course corrections or changes that, in hindsight at least, each steered me closer to a career path in

science writing and communication that suits my interests and skills and that I find very worthwhile and rewarding.

After studying chemistry as an undergrad, I spent two years out of school looking half-heartedly for a job as a chemist and working in retail in the meantime. In this time, while trying to think of ways I could combine my chemistry background with other interests (traveling, spending time outside, etc.) into a career, I took an introductory summer course in geology as a non-degree seeking student. I loved the course and the instructor, who encouraged me to apply to geoscience graduate programs. A few years into my time in graduate school, it became clear that despite how much pride and enjoyment I took in my research, a life in the lab was not what I wanted, which pretty much ruled out academia and industry. I did, however, feel strongly about the value of science journalism and communication. So after finishing my Ph.D.—a decision I wasn't sure was best at the time I made it but that turned out well—I entered a professional master's program to get a crash course and gain experience as a journalist. During that time, I interned for a magazine that focused on covering Earth science for a wide audience (i.e., not only geoscientists). It turned out to be a great fit, and I ended up working as a staff writer, and later news editor, for that magazine for seven years. From there, I moved into my current position, in which I primarily edit and guide scientists in their writing—a role that draws on pretty much the full scope of my past experience in science, journalism, etc.

**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?**

Science journalism, like all journalism, has been doing its best to adapt to constantly shifting landscapes of publishing and media consumption. And, of course, it has moved progressively more online and toward multidimensional and multimedia presentations. I don't see those trends changing any time soon—people aren't going to stop consuming news online or stop creating new platforms and ways to convey news and information more efficiently and effectively. Yet the core qualities (e.g., curiosity, tenacity, etc.) and skills of successful journalists haven't changed.

For anyone interested in pursuing a career in science journalism or communication, being able to write about (or otherwise explain) complex topics clearly, concisely, and accessibly is probably the most fundamental skill. And the way to improve that skill is through practice, experience, and learning from others. So, look for chances to write—about your research or interests, or about others'—and practice, practice, whether that means writing on a blog, a lab website, or social media; applying for writing internships; reaching out to your school's communications office to ask about opportunities, etc. Also, whenever possible, ask for, welcome, and heed constructive criticism—it all helps you become a better communicator. Keeping up with the landscape of news and current events (in science and in terms of how science intersects with society) and familiarizing yourself with different platforms, tools, and forms of multimedia communication and journalism are also great ways to stand out.

**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 in science journalism and communication is definitely important, both within the field as a way to learn the ins and outs, improve skills, and gain professional experience, and with scientists and potential sources. My advice to students aspiring to get into science journalism is to be bold—reach out to writers, reporters, editors, etc., to ask questions. In my experience, science journalists are typically a collegial and supportive group. (Do recognize, however, that everyone is busy with their own careers and lives, so people may not always respond or have much time to offer. But it doesn't hurt to try.) I'd also direct people to professional societies like the National Association of Science Writers and the Society for Environmental Journalists, which often offer resources and mentorship opportunities for students and early-career journalists.

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

A typical day for me mainly involves reviewing proposed articles for Eos; researching, editing, and production for articles we have accepted; and talking with scientists about their work. I am in frequent contact with colleagues on the Eos staff via meetings and informal chats and conversations to talk about upcoming coverage and directions, share ideas and ask opinions about in-progress stories, and any number of other topics. I also occasionally contribute to our social media presence and to other initiatives.

**What is the best part of your job?**

I'd say there are two aspects of my job I enjoy most. First, I appreciate being part of a very talented and supportive team, and one in which everyone contributes their unique strengths and personalities to make a great overall product. Second, I love the exposure to such a wide breadth of fascinating and important science that my position entails, as well as the interactions I have with the many scientists—from all career stages and from around the world—doing this work. As an editor, I consider my main responsibility to be to the people reading our articles, which sometimes means disagreeing with scientist-authors or pushing them out of their comfort zone a little to write in ways they're less comfortable with that but may be more engaging for readers. Nonetheless, the collaborations and conversations I have with are nearly always interesting, rewarding, and productive.

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

Read Eos! I'm half joking, but seriously, beyond practicing your own writing, reporting, and editing skills, reading—and even dissecting—other peoples' work (in a variety of outlets) is the next best way to learn different styles and skills of the trade.

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