

TIBBS Career Blitz - January 2012

Career Profile of Science Writer/Editor: Robin Arnette, PhD

What is your current title and how long have you worked in your current job?

I am a science writer/editor in the Office of Communication and Public Liaison at the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS) in Research Triangle Park, NC. I started at NIEHS in 2006.

Where did you get your PhD and what discipline was it in?

I received my Ph.D. from The University of Toledo, Toledo, OH. I studied the anaerobic mitochondrial metabolism of the parasitic nematode, *Ascaris suum*, so my discipline was biochemical and molecular parasitology.

Did you do a postdoc?

I did my postdoc in the Department of Biochemistry and Biophysics at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Medicine.

What are your main daily responsibilities?

My responsibilities include a range of writing/editing duties as well as public outreach:

1. Writing and editing for the [Environmental Factor](#), the NIEHS newsletter. These articles are about the scientific seminars that occur on campus and 200-word summaries of peer-reviewed journal articles.
2. Writing and submitting articles to other National Institutes of Health (NIH) publications and websites.
3. Writing news releases that announce recently published or soon to be published research performed by NIEHS scientists.
4. Writing, producing, and directing video shorts that publicize NIEHS research to the general public.
5. Updating content on the NIEHS website.
6. Working with the media to arrange interviews with NIEHS scientists.

What are the keys to success in your career field?

There are many keys to success in my career, but I'd say the top three are being able to multi-task, having a love of science, and developing mechanisms or outlets that alleviate stress. Writers live and die by tight deadlines, so doing things that you enjoy outside of work is key.

What were the most important factors in choosing your career path?

Most bench researchers spend a lot of time in the lab, and I wanted a career that allowed me to stay involved in cutting-edge science, but give me a more flexible schedule. With science writing and editing, you can do it anywhere. All you need is a laptop and an internet connection.

What 1 or 2 pieces of advice do you have for people who want to land a job like yours?

Near the end of my postdoc, I knew I wanted a career in science writing, so I started volunteering to write for as many places as I could. Having “clips,” or examples of your work is critical to getting your foot in the door. Most of these writing assignments were unpaid, but making money shouldn’t be the issue if you are just starting out. This exercise will help you get valuable experience and tell you if science writing will be a good fit for you.

Also, start reading really good science articles. Some examples are pieces in *The New York Times Science News* and *The New Yorker*. There are several others, but the point is to learn how the pros do it and then try to incorporate their techniques in your work. After a while, you’ll develop your own ‘voice’ in your writing. Never stop wanting to learn and improve, and the sky will be the limit.