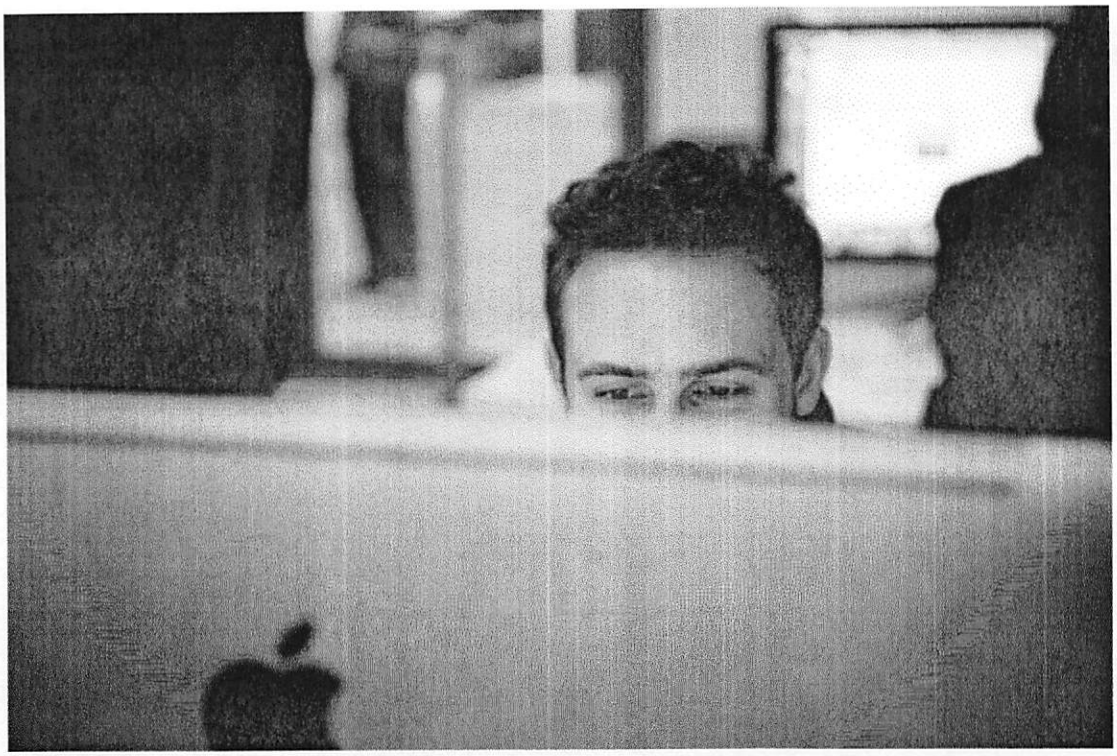

The heart of both science and journalism is inquiry—asking questions in ways that will hopefully get you the answers you are looking for. Although science writing might on the face of it largely seem about organizing and explaining concepts in ways understandable to audience, if the science writer did not ask the right questions to begin with, he or she will be at a loss to explain anything.

So what are the kinds of questions science journalists regularly ask? There are questions that I and most science journalists generally ask during interviews:

- What do you personally find most surprising or exciting or important about your work?
- What specific directions do you think your research might or should go from here? What obstacles do you foresee in future research or development?
- Are there any specific questions or criticisms you feel others might have about these findings?
- What specific potential applications might this research hold?
- How did you become interested in this idea to begin with?
- What difficulties did you run across in your research? How did you surmount those challenges to reach your current insights?
- Could you describe the research a bit - anecdotes about the field work, for instance? What did things look, sound, taste, smell and feel like?
- Is there anything else you would like to say? Are there any questions you would have liked to answer that I didn't ask you?
- Are there pictures, videos or audio associated with your research that you could provide me?
- Is there any research of yours that journalists have not reported on yet that might be interesting for a story?

Science blogging usually differs from general science journalism by asking different kinds of questions during writing. Mostly, science blogging is more personal—science bloggers often ask more questions of themselves, such as, "What do I know about this subject?" and "What do I feel about this subject?" There's also a large subset of science blogging posts that grouse about perceived mistakes in mainstream science journalism, so a question they ask is, "What did reporters do wrong now?"

Authors of science books often rise above the hustle and bustle of both science news and science blogging for a more long-term view. The questions that science authors ask themselves and others are similarly often wider in scope, as I found out in interviews with them—for instance, background details about the science and the scientists that may never find use, but inform the way in which they might get presented.

Fundamentally, I think the question that science journalists and science authors ask that is hardest for others to answer is, "How can I sum up this topic in just one or two sentences that will make audiences want to read more?" I can guess that hearing me say that might bug scientists, prompting some to indignantly ask, "How dare you try and reduce a body of research into a shallow soundbite?"

I'm not saying that a science news story should only be one or two sentences. That's ridiculous. I do think that having a very tight thesis helps writers know what a story should be about, and they can then ask questions and organize the story accordingly, putting in and leaving out material driving toward that one goal. If those one or two sentences—what journalists call a "nut paragraph"—are not clear, then the story will meander; if that nut paragraph is not engaging, then getting readers to finish the story will be a chore at best. If done right, this nut paragraph will not distort your writing, but guide it.

Ultimately, another reason to be able to sum up a story in an engaging nut paragraph is to snag readers as much as possible. This isn't solely or primarily about "selling papers," as some might think. It's just that if readers aren't interested by a story within the scant few seconds it takes to read a headline or paragraph, they'll move on. If you make it your job to let readers know about science, then your job is more than just explaining science—it's getting them to actually read your writing in the first place. If no one wants to read your work, than any posturing about what science writing should or should not be seems quite empty.

Anyway, that's my last post for my week on ScholarCast! Thank you so much for reading, and I hope to write more for you in the future!

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Image credit: Sourcefabric (from Flickr).

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