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THE WRITER

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BRIAN J. FORD

SCIENCE WRITING

SCIENCE WRITING is a difficult field in which to specialise, yet a very profitable one, too. And there are good reasons for both of these statements: the public are generally unaware of what the devil science is all about, or what scientists themselves are up to – hence the difficulty of the subject. So far as science is concerned, after all, writers are ‘laymen’ too and the analogy of the blind leading the blind rings true through very many attempts at scientific popularisation these days. It is a profitable field because it is a new one, and a rapidly expanding one; yet the demand for scientific articles is probably far greater than the supply.

Certainly the public are interested in science. A survey that was conducted by my laboratories last year showed that three-quarters of the public would like to see more popular science in the programmes they hear, and the publications they read. But, of course, it must be interesting. In a potentially dry-as-dust subject like science, you musn’t be merely clear and unambiguous in your writing; you must be exciting. And don’t feel that the whole idea is impracticable, either. It isn’t. Science can be one of the most genuinely exciting subjects of all, when you get down to it.

Very well: but how do you do it?

There is no need to be a specialist scientist. In fact, this can be a distinct disadvantage. There are, after all, a great many specialities within science – you can specialise in rocket propulsion, or in genetics, or medicine; the writer can specialise in the popularisation of science in just the same way. I think, in other words, that the scientific journalist is, in his own way, just as much a specialist as the research worker – but, like the researcher, he has to understand his terms of reference and the terminology of the trade. Too many producers and editors used to plump for the nearest specialist as soon as a scientific item was required, and yet, since these men have

never needed to explain things to the public, they talked in their own academic way without any real result at all – apart from confusing their own ideas almost as much as the audience!

The scientific populariser can study the techniques of the job, and so avoid the pitfalls. You must understand scientific words: you must know the exact usage of words like tumour, growth, cancer, malignancy, neoplasm, etc. – words which have very similar uses. And you must have an idea of the way in which the scientist looks at things (you must know about 'controlled experiments', statistical results and so forth).

None of these things are difficult to understand, so long as you are willing to learn them from a decent general book on the subject. Space is a good case in point (although editors are generally finding 'less space for space' – as one put it to me). Presumably, if you want to write about the subject, you must be interested in it. Your motives may, of course, equally well be a sagging bank balance... but starvation is as good an impulse to excitement as any amount of academic interest!

Write to the U.S. Embassy, or go to the library. If you write, do not sound pretentious and highly experienced if you aren't; if somebody asks to see your work you'll look a damned fool if you haven't any. State simply your wish to start in the field. And obtain, from one source or another, a good general book on space research. Note down the dates as you go through it. Keep a table of satellites and rockets, and learn the words as they occur. You will end up with quite an amount of intelligent know-how of the subject: when you hear announcements on the radio you can soon tell the difference between a Ranger and a Voskhod.

Get practical, too. Watch for orbital satellites if you happen to be out when they come over; the times are widely published and if you observe like this you will begin to have a certain degree of involvement with the so-and-so who launched the thing up there in the first place.

Soon you will be able to realise that little reports, snippets of information and different ideas in the various reports you see, formulate isolated patterns of facts in your mind. You might, for instance, write all you have found out about feeding in space... or the dangers of radiation. Now you can see where your special type of self-training comes in. You remember how mystified you were about certain ideas to start with – and so you can explain them far better to the public. Yet you don't write in a confused and elaborate manner! You will soon find that most scientists write in a manner which is far too flowery; it is verbose – or full of guff as I prefer to call it; part, one suspects, of academic professional snobbery. Everyone does it these days, but be careful you don't fall into the trap.