

Talking About Science and the Environment

SPJ Region XII Conference 2014

Getting started

- Writing a science piece should be treated just as you would write a government, economics or education story. The same principles of fact-checking and due diligence apply.
- Do your homework. Talk to the people behind the story so you have a grasp of the information before you file. Your story can only be as good as your knowledge of the subject will allow. If you don't get it, your audience won't either.
- Don't overestimate the audience's diet for statistics, numbers, facts and figures. At the same time, don't talk down to them. Preserve the important numbers and concepts from the research, and use narrative storytelling to help fill the gaps. Why does it matter? Why do we care?

Finding the story in the science

- Why did the researcher decide to go into his or her chosen field? Is there a personal story that explains their passion?
- How could the research help people? How is it applicable to your audience?
- If benefits aren't immediately known, what's the 'gee whiz' factor? What makes the research or project so compelling?
- Keep asking questions. If the scientist you're talking to gets a little technical, stop them and ask for a clarification. Don't leave their office or hang up your phone until you understand what they're saying in clear terms.
- As stated above, a science piece doesn't have to be a drab recitation of facts and figures. Read the story or script back to yourself. Is it interesting to you? How would you tell the story to a personal friend?
- For complex or large-scale issues, try to find a local example. How is climate change affecting your state? How many people in your area suffer from the illness your source is studying? Then zoom out. Bringing the topic to the local level can help your audience grasp its implications.

Going forward

- Do you work in a university town, or near a major research center? Get chummy with the people who work there. They can tip you off to exciting or interesting research going on.
- Find out if your local university/research center has a press release list. If nothing else, it's a good way to sort through the work they're doing and decide whether or not it's worth filing a story.

- Keep up with science headlines. Sometimes you can take an example of national-scale research and apply it to the local level.
- Find local science organizations in your community, such as astronomy clubs, geologic or paleontological societies. They sometimes hold public events or field trips that would make good fodder. Plus, you can call up the knowledgeable members to help point you toward good sources of information when you're working on a piece.