Technical Communicator Profile: Dr. Sarah Sharman

Writing about the Cool Stuff at Hudson Alpha

By KaiLian Davis

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Dr. Sarah Sharman waved hello through her laptop camera to me at the beginning of our video conference. Only three months into her role as a science writer for the HudsonAlpha Institute for Biotechnology, she has grown accustomed to virtual communication due to the remote nature of her job. By sharing the experiences that led to her current role and the insights she has gained throughout her career, she shed light on how an aspiring science writer like me might come to find her place within the world of technical communicators.

Originally from Birmingham, Alabama, Dr. Sharman was familiar with HudsonAlpha before beginning work there. She explained, “Being from Alabama is probably what led me to
HudsonAlpha. They definitely stand out in the state, and I’ve always been interested in health and biotechnology.”

The HudsonAlpha Institute for Biotechnology is an award-winning nonprofit focused on genomics in Huntsville, Alabama. It opened in 2008 with four mission areas: education, research, clinical health, and entrepreneurship. As science writer, Sharman is part of HudsonAlpha’s communications team and serves as a liaison to the research mission area. Her role at HudsonAlpha is primarily to communicate the work of faculty investigators and their labs to various audiences. Sharman writes press releases and web content related to new research findings, and she also is preparing to take over HudsonAlpha’s podcast Tiny Expeditions. Aside from her daily writing responsibilities, Sharman budgets time to work on large institute-wide projects. “Right now, I’m working on the 2019-2020 Research Report, which comes out every two years. It’s basically for the investigators to send to their colleagues as an update on what they’ve been doing for the past year,” she described. Sharman contacts the researchers to discuss what will be part of their reports and sends them drafts of her work.

One word that kept coming up when asked about her job was “cool.” Sharman initially thought her writing would be limited to research, so she particularly enjoys collaborating with the other mission areas. Recently, she has written for the Educational Outreach Department’s annual guidebook, described by her as “a lot of short stories about interesting things that happened in the science world over the past year.”

Her experience at HudsonAlpha has been full of challenge and variety, allowing her to learn all the time. She can be creative with her writing to get many different people interested in learning about science. Her emphasis on the different audiences of her writing resonated with a core idea in good writing practices. “One day, I could be writing to someone in your
neighborhood who has no science background, and the next day, I’m writing to more of a research audience,” Sharman said.

During a typical week, most of Sharman’s deadlines are ones that she sets, and there are rarely tasks with extreme deadlines. She communicates frequently with investigators and the communications department through video call meetings. The communications department has nine people, and because there are certain channels within the department that projects must go through, Sharman described the main challenge as “getting everyone all on the same page.” One of the tools that the communications team uses is management software: “We have project boards, and you can add people to your project board. We have so many different mission areas and people working on so many different things. It’s a way to track what’s going on.”

Although she loves her job now, Dr. Sharman’s path to technical communication unfolded gradually. Because of her interest in biomedical sciences, Sharman attended Birmingham-Southern College to study biology and psychology. She then went to graduate school and now holds a Ph.D. in Biochemistry and Molecular Biology from the Medical College of Georgia at Augusta University. “I realized about one year into my Ph.D. that I didn’t want to run my own lab, so I started searching early for alternative careers. I knew I was good at writing and enjoyed it, so I looked at careers like science writing and science policy,” Sharman said. Immediately after graduate school, her first writing job was as a patent agent in a law firm. Although she found it “fun” and was “good at it,” it was highly stressful. “This job is a lot more enjoyable and more my speed,” Sharman commented.

Her journey to becoming a science writer is rooted in her combined love for science and writing. Her communication skills were developed over her lifetime; she noted that “I always really enjoyed reading from a young age.” Sharman credited her undergraduate classes for giving
her experience with writing in different genres and credits graduate school for helping to hone
her communication skills. “We had this program called the ‘Three-Minute Thesis’ where you
had to describe your thesis project for a lay audience in three minutes using only one slide. I
realized that things that were second nature to me, someone else might not understand,” she said.

At HudsonAlpha, her significant biotechnology knowledge has helped her to write highly
technical pieces, but she mentioned a science background was not always necessary for this type
of role. What was more important, Sharman noted, was the ability to learn quickly and the
commitment to finding answers, whether that is by using Google, YouTube, or other review
articles.

As for the current trends in the job field, Sharman believes the COVID-19 pandemic has
brought science and technology into the spotlight. From a writer’s perspective, Sharman noted
the importance of paying attention to the way news is reported and how the public is addressed.
“It’s important to tell the difference between good reporting and bad reporting. Seeing how other
people write and seeing what is being put out there is important for educating yourself on
eventually doing that,” Sharman said.

Sharman had valuable insights into the science writer job market as a recent hire herself.
She believes that there are plenty of jobs available, especially remote positions. “I think that
there is a growing need for more recent grads to want to enter into this field. We are going to
need it to keep up with the rate at which discovery is happening now,” Sharman said.

Her advice for anyone looking to enter the job field was simple. “Don’t get frustrated
when you’re applying for jobs. Apply for all different jobs. What helped me the most was
networking. Not just for knowing people, but for knowing different companies and different
institutes,” Sharman said. She recommended checking frequently for job openings and
leveraging existing connections at companies to vouch for your qualifications for the job. “And, as for actually preparing for the job,” Sharman added, “I think practicing all different kinds of writing is important. If you’re compelled to write a blog, that’s often helpful, and that way you have writing samples to provide to a potential employer.”

Although new to HudsonAlpha, Sharman’s last words convincingly conveyed wisdom to an aspiring science writer: “If you’re driven, and you’re a quick and willing learner, and you enjoy writing, you will go far,” she assured me.