

Portrait of a Journalist

By ReadWorks



Peter Smith is a science journalist in Brooklyn, New York. He travels the country to report stories for national newspapers and magazines. Since he doesn't work for a single publication, however, he does not have an office. He works out of his apartment, coffee shops, and the local library. Being a journalist is his dream job. He only wishes it paid a bit more money.

"That's the one big downside of working as a journalist these days," Smith says. "There are so many stories out there, and so many people to write about. But fewer places are willing to give you money to write about them."

Smith was sitting in a coffee shop in Red Hook, the neighborhood in Brooklyn where he lives. Last year, he and his girlfriend moved there from Portland, Maine. The two of them loved the summers in Maine and the lobster that came with it. But the winters were simply too cold to bear.

"I couldn't believe how cold it got in Maine during the winter!" he says, shivering at the thought. "Being from upstate New York, I thought I knew what cold meant. But I had no idea."

New York winters are not exactly mild, he admits. But they're warmer than Maine. More importantly, New York was a place where Smith could meet other writers. Being a journalist can be a solitary profession. To succeed, it is important to make friends in the field.

“It was much quieter in Maine,” he says with a laugh. “It was definitely easier to concentrate. But I didn’t have many other journalists to talk to and share ideas with. After a while, it got pretty lonely.”

New York City, he says, is the opposite of lonely. “I can’t walk from my apartment to the subway without bumping into another journalist.”

Smith grew up near Beacon, New York and graduated from Hampshire College in Western Massachusetts. From age 20, he knew he wanted to be a writer. The question was: What *kind* of writer?

He got his first job as an intern at the *Christian Science Monitor*, a national newspaper. A few years later, he started writing a column for a magazine that focused on health and the environment. It was that experience—writing about science on a weekly basis—that inspired him to become a science journalist.

Asked why he liked to write about science, Smith said it offered the best way to satisfy his endless curiosity.

“To me, science is the best possible subject for a journalist,” he says. “Scientists make major discoveries every day. And unlike music or art, these discoveries often have the potential to save hundreds, thousands, even millions of lives. It’s a pretty great feeling to study and write about research that will affect so many people.”

To find his stories, Smith often spends days digging through scientific journals and blogs on the Internet. He reads at least two newspapers every morning: the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*. On occasion, he will call up a scientist he knows and ask what she or he has been working on lately. When he finds what looks like a story, that’s when the real work begins.

“I spend a lot of my time doing research to see what other people have written about the subject I’m interested in,” he says. “Then I start contacting sources to see if they will agree to an interview. If they say yes, we usually talk over the phone. If necessary, and if I think they’re a good character, I will travel to meet them in person.”

“In-person reporting,” he adds, “is my favorite part of the job. If I have the chance to meet someone I’m writing about face-to-face, it always improves the story. And it’s fun, too.”

For Smith, working as a “freelancer”—as opposed to a “staff writer,” or someone who writes for a single publication—has both benefits and drawbacks. He doesn’t have a boss, for one. This means he can write about whatever he wants. And he is not expected to show up to an office every day at a certain time. He wakes up when he wants to, and sets his own schedule each day.

Not reporting to a boss, however, means there is no one there to help him. At newspapers, editors will often assign story ideas to a writer. As a freelancer, Smith has to come up with all his own ideas. This can be exhausting, he admits.

“There are weeks when I just can’t seem to find anything to write about,” he says. “It’s at those times I wish I had a nice cozy desk somewhere and an editor looking over my shoulder, giving me ideas.”

For the most part, though, he likes the freedom that freelance journalism entails.

“I’m the kind of person who likes to do things my way,” he says with a smile. “I have a bit of a problem with authority. If someone tells me what to do—even if it’s in my best interest—I tend to ignore him. At an early age, I knew that working at a desk job was probably not for me.”

As a boy, Smith was always examining bugs and asking his mother questions like how ocean waves form. His parents figured he would grow up to be a scientist. For someone with his background, I ask, what made him choose writing about science instead of conducting actual scientific research?

Smith laughs at the question. “I didn’t want to take organic chemistry in college,” he says. “That prevented me from applying to medical school.” But more than that, he adds, writing about science instead of practicing it allows him to learn about a wider range of subjects.

“Had I gone to medicine and become a doctor, I probably would have wound up studying the same thing for ten, fifteen, or even twenty years,” he says. “As a journalist who writes about science, I can write about dozens of different things every year. Sure, it doesn’t pay as well as being a doctor and doesn’t have the same prestige. But I’m satisfying my curiosity about the world. For me, that’s what really matters.”