

# SciWri101 Tips: A Summer Slaminar

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**NASW Summer Internships / May 29, 2020**

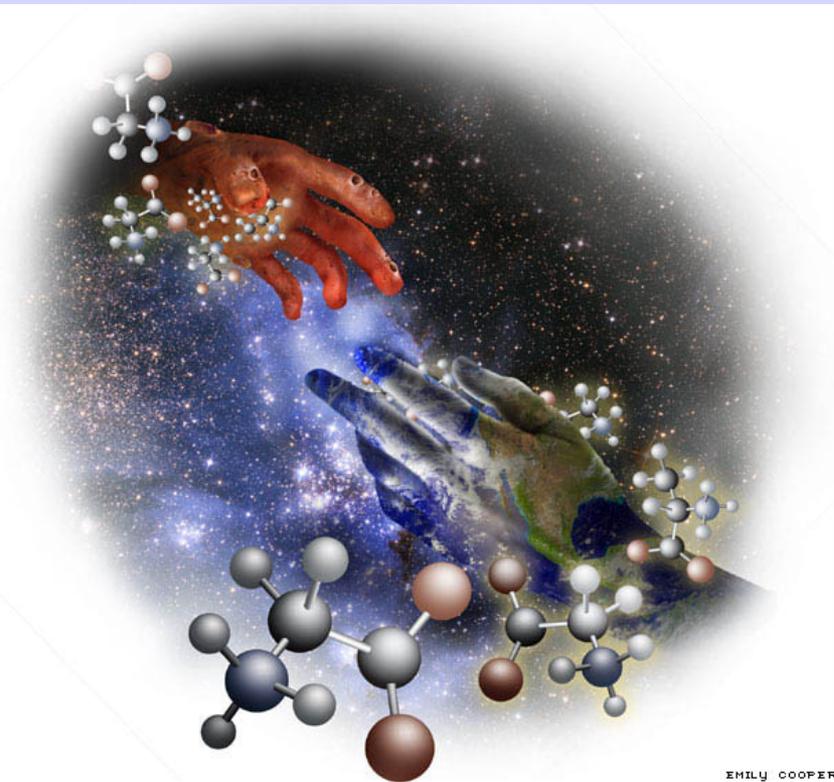
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# UC Santa Cruz campus



# These internships are about gaining experience and producing a story



EMILY COOPER

We cannot replicate a full-time summer internship. Rather, we will help you find, report, write, edit, and fact-check a research news story for publication. Your mentor will guide you on each step. Our goal is for you to see how this process works—and to give you the confidence to try it on your own next time.

# Today's slaminar

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- Keeping basic principles in mind.
- Defining your audience.
- Finding strong story ideas.
- Sourcing your story and conducting interviews.
- Writing that first draft:  
A few tips.



# Some basic principles

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- We all appreciate sharp, clear writing.
- Your story will appear in a world of distractions. Keep readers engaged.
- Your readers might remember *one thing*. Identify that one thing and state it clearly.
- Readers are *much more likely* to share your story if it includes photos, videos, or graphics. Supply them and we'll embed them.

# Who is your audience for this story?

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- Keep specific readers in mind. A good target is a *high school level* of understanding. For instance:
- The general public: readers curious to know more about your subject.
- Family and friends who think science is neat.
- Classmates, like you're telling them about a new study at a social gathering.
- The NASW community: Your future colleagues.

# Finding a summer story idea

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- There are many avenues to discuss with your mentor. I will focus on two:
- Scouring through research at your university, with a focus on your department.
- Checking out second-tier journals online and preprint archives for nifty unreported studies.

# At your university

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- The best sources are people. Talk with friends who are grad students or undergrads doing research in hot areas, especially in fields you are familiar with.
- Notify science writers in your campus PIO about this NASW internship. Ask for pointers to topical research. Offer your story to them in July for summer campus news.

# At your university (cont'd)

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- Find the online program for the annual graduate research symposium at your campus. It will be chock-full of current work, and grad students will have more time to talk.
- Use your own expertise from courses and research to scour the websites of scientists, focusing on their public-facing pages. Look for newsworthy angles or cool recent papers.

# Online journal TOCs and preprint servers

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- More challenging, but you might find a research story to pitch to a national editor.
- Use your online university library access to go through tables of contents and abstracts in second-tier journals.
- Choose journals in or near your field. Avoid really obscure journal titles.

# Journal compilations

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- Wiley: [onlinelibrary.wiley.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com)
- Springer: [www.springer.com](https://www.springer.com)
- Elsevier: [www.sciencedirect.com](https://www.sciencedirect.com)
- Oxford Univ. Press: [www.oxfordjournals.org](https://www.oxfordjournals.org)
- Look for new “early view” papers or issues with publication dates of July 2020 or later.

# Preprint servers

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- Caution: Most preprints are not peer-reviewed. (Problem for COVID-19.) But they are public record, and they can lead to novel stories.
- Biological sciences: [www.biorxiv.org](http://www.biorxiv.org)
- Physical sciences: [www.arxiv.org](http://www.arxiv.org)
- If you cover a journal paper or preprint: It's essential to get an outside comment.

# Sources

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- We require quotes from at least one author. We recommend 2-3 sources. Consider interviewing students as well as faculty.
- Assigned reading: Guidance for whom to contact and how to compose emails to them.
- Mention your NASW internship and planned summer publication.
- We strongly encourage you to include **diverse sources** in your story.

# Interviews

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- In lieu of in-person meetings, try to set up video chats or at least phone calls.
- Email interviews: OK in a pinch for outside comment. Not recommended for main source.
- Assigned reading: A basic interview structure. Adapt it with specifics from your study.
- Keep your curious reader in mind: cool details, surprises, challenges, events from field or lab.

# Four commandments to make your story sing

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- Write clearly. Simplify jargon without sacrificing accuracy.
- Write actively. Use strong verbs.
- Write concisely. Shorten your sentences.
- Write creatively. Readers can sense when the writer *enjoyed* writing the story.

# What one fact about readers drives my editing?

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**Readers hear what they are reading, far more than you might realize.**

- Read your writing aloud. If you stumble, so will your readers. If you run out of breath in a long sentence, they will not understand what you wrote.

# How can you help your readers “get it”?

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- Tell *a story*. A mystery, a solution.
- Describe the *context*. What did we know prior to this research?
- Describe the *impacts*. What does this new finding mean for us, for the world?
- Try to use *analogies* or *metaphors*.

# Spend time—a lot of time— crafting your opening grafs

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- **The beginning is critical.** It is your one chance to grab readers and retain them.
- A good start: Active, crisp, either newsy or engaging. Compels readers onward.
- A difficult start: Too detailed, containing statistics, jargon, definitions, long IDs.

# Strategies to come up with a strong start

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- You have **two sentences** to describe the story to your friend in an elevator. Go!
- In the research, **what interested you the most?** That's always a good instinct.
- Try something **surprising, active, or clever**—if it's appropriate for the study.

# As you write that first draft...

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- Your story should read **briskly**. Use grafs of 1-3 sentences and pithy quotes that provide insight into key story points.
- Try for at least one “action passage” to describe what the team did.
- For impacts at key moments: Write sentences with 10-12 words or fewer.
- Keep IDs and affiliations concise.

# These two things will really, really help you

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- Propose stories that you will be excited to report, write, edit, fact-check, and publish!
- Please do not feel paralyzed by writer's block or perfectionism. Give it your best shot at each stage. Your mentor will guide you toward a publishable standard.

# Chapters 1-7 will sharpen your writing, guaranteed

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***On Writing Well*, by William Zinsser**

30<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition (2006)

ISBN 978-006-089-1541

Wonderful advice about how to make  
your prose active, clear, and concise.  
It's an acquired skill!

# Cultivate a summer science news reading list

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- Keep up with research news, COVID-19 and otherwise (especially in your area)
- Choose a few top-tier papers and online sites: NYT, WaPo, Science News, SciAm, NatGeo, New Scientist, Live Science, Inside Science
- Follow news releases from your university and nationally on EurekAlert!
- Stay in touch; the internships will come back!

Feel free to follow up with questions as you work on your assignments. Enjoy!

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