

# Sustainable development, climate emergency, and journalism: The emerging role of medical writers

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## Abstract

The Sustainable Development Goals, set up by the UN in 2015, provide a framework for the policy makers in government and other advocates to work towards planetary health in a more holistic way. For the general public, these goals might not always be clear. Thus, conveying the climate emergency that we are in, its impact on health, the measures being taken, and what we as citizens can do, without causing panic among the audience, is of paramount importance. In this article, we provide a brief overview of reporting on sustainable development, the role of medical journalists and medical writers, the changes that have happened in terminology, and the resources available for medical writers who want to consider medical journalism (with special focus on sustainability) as a career option.

*"Humans have pushed the climate into 'unprecedented' territory, landmark UN report finds."*<sup>1</sup>

*"It Rained at the Summit of Greenland. That's Never Happened Before."*<sup>2</sup>

*"We must act now for a fast, fair and sustainable COVID-19 recovery."*<sup>3</sup>

**T**hese were the headlines from a couple of months ago. Reporting on climate change, environmental health, equity, and accessibility to various resources has taken centre stage in recent years and is going to occupy this spot for the

foreseeable future. The independent media are at the centre of sustainable development as they can create powerful stories about sustainable development, influence government policies, create and raise awareness among the public, bring relevant research to the foreground and bring communities together for common sustainable development goals.

## Roles and responsibilities of medical journalists and medical writers

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), set up in 2015, are a collection of 17 interlinked goals

developed by the United Nations to end poverty, protect the planet, and to ensure peace and prosperity for all by 2030.<sup>4</sup> With the climate emergency that we are in, these goals have taken on a significant role for preserving planetary health. Conveying these goals, the measures and policies governing them, and our role in achieving them, has now fallen on journalists. In this information age when knowledge is available at the click of a mouse, it is important that journalists themselves understand the science and report responsibly.



### Know your science and tell a story<sup>5</sup>

With the decline in print media and increase in online content, the distinction has blurred between medical journalists and medical writers interested in writing media articles, blogs, and creating other media content. Reporting science and creating environmental health stories does require due diligence from the authors. Understanding the science behind a story, not sensationalising the science, and conveying the climate emergency to your audience is a skill in itself. Science reported in scientific journals often uses technical and opaque terms, and jargon, that need to be presented clearly and simplified for the audience.<sup>5</sup> This is where medical writers can shine as most have advanced science degrees and are used to writing science for a variety of audiences. In fact, some of the top science reporters who report on climate change and sustainability these days are scientists and advanced science degree holders who have

chosen the career of science reporting.

Talking about climate change and sustainability to children and young adults requires special skills, which many medical writers (particularly illustrators) are equipped with. Simplifying science and providing visuals that add to the text can engage children in dialogues relevant to these goals without overwhelming them or causing panic and hopelessness, which is important.<sup>6,7</sup>

### Guidelines on reporting sustainability and climate change

With evolving terminologies on reporting science and gender and the use of more inclusive language, most print and online magazines now recognise that reporting on sustainability as well as climate change needs to be standardised across the media. In 2018, the BBC came up with a crib sheet on reporting climate change.<sup>8,9</sup> The most significant item here was to accept that climate

change is real and, thus, there should be no more debates on *if* climate change was happening. With this, came further guidelines on terminologies to use, providing training to the journalists on climate change, how to sensitively report on these topics without causing despair and hopelessness among the population, but still be able to get people to act.

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Similar guidelines have now been issued by most global news agencies. For example, guidelines from *The Guardian* (a British newspaper) included using the words *climate crisis* instead of *climate change*, *fish populations* instead of *fish stocks* and similar changes to reflect the crisis we are in and, to put the onus on us all, to come up with solutions.<sup>10</sup>

### Medical journalism vs medical writing

Medical journalists need to cover climate conferences, climate accords, and SDG meetings as well as report on pandemics, epidemics, ecological changes, and the latest research. This involves background research, talking to experts, and reporting in an unbiased manner. Thus, journalists are in a much more fast-paced and deadline-driven environment than medical writers. Medical writers, on the other hand, write science publications or online articles on the latest research or a topic, but do not report current events. Thus, they have more time to research and develop a story.

One of the biggest differences between the two is the human angle.<sup>11</sup> Journalists almost always cover the human stories – how the changes affect particular communities, families, and individuals. There are always elements of storytelling in journalism, whereas medical writers tend to focus more on the science angle.

There is also a middle path to tread where one chooses to be both a medical writer and a medical journalist. However, it might not be easy-going as the work involved is different and intense in terms of deadlines.

### Medical writing to journalism: how to make the move?

Medical writers who are interested in journalism can start by writing blogs for various online platforms on sustainability and climate crisis. For example, Medium ([www.medium.com](http://www.medium.com)) is a great option.<sup>12</sup> However, for someone who wants to consider this as a career move, I have listed some courses in Table 1 that are offered, both online and offline, on reporting sustainability and climate science. There are now wonderful opportunities available through online education platforms and even the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and similar organisations provide



**Table 1. Some of the courses available in medical and environmental journalism and communications**

	Course offered; online or offline	Offered by; duration	Website URL
1.	Environmental communication – research into practice (online)	International, Environmental Communication, Association (10 weeks)	<a href="https://www.theieca.org/training/environmental-communication-research-practice">https://www.theieca.org/training/environmental-communication-research-practice</a>
2.	Environmental journalism (online)	Thomson Foundation (self-paced)	<a href="https://www.thomsonfoundation.org/latest/environmental-journalism-why-local-matters/">https://www.thomsonfoundation.org/latest/environmental-journalism-why-local-matters/</a>
3.	Strategic communication for sustainability leaders (online)	edX (self-paced)	<a href="https://www.edx.org/course/strategic-communication-for-sustainability-leaders">https://www.edx.org/course/strategic-communication-for-sustainability-leaders</a>
4.	Science communication – Master's Programme (offline)	UC Santa Cruz (1 year)	<a href="https://scicom.ucsc.edu/about/index.html">https://scicom.ucsc.edu/about/index.html</a>
5.	MSc in Science and Technology Journalism (offline)	Texas A&M University (flexible)	<a href="https://vibs.tamu.edu/stjr/">https://vibs.tamu.edu/stjr/</a>
6.	Science, health and environmental reporting (offline)	New York University (16 months)	<a href="https://journalism.nyu.edu/graduate/programs/science-health-and-environmental-reporting/">https://journalism.nyu.edu/graduate/programs/science-health-and-environmental-reporting/</a>
7.	Graduate programme in science writing (offline)	MIT (1 year)	<a href="https://sciwrite.mit.edu/">https://sciwrite.mit.edu/</a>
8.	Environmental journalism programmes	Michigan State University (varied)	<a href="https://knightcenter.jrn.msu.edu/category/masters/">https://knightcenter.jrn.msu.edu/category/masters/</a>
9.	MA in Journalism (Science and Environment). Offline	University of Lincoln (1 year full time)	<a href="https://www.lincoln.ac.uk/home/course/jouscema/">https://www.lincoln.ac.uk/home/course/jouscema/</a>
10.	Environmental journalism courses (online)	Poynter's News University (varied)	<a href="https://www.poynter.org/newsu/">https://www.poynter.org/newsu/</a>
11.	Science journalism (online)	World Federation of Science Journalists (self-paced)	<a href="http://www.wfsj.org/course/">http://www.wfsj.org/course/</a>
12.	Media as partners in education for sustainable development: a training and resource kit (online)	UNESCO. Toolkit – not a course	<a href="https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000158787">https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000158787</a>
13.	Toolkit by FAIR	Forum for African Investigative Reporters (FAIR)	<a href="https://fairreporters.files.wordpress.com/2012/10/gwens-layout-proofed.pdf">https://fairreporters.files.wordpress.com/2012/10/gwens-layout-proofed.pdf</a>

toolkits on climate reporting.

Over the next few years, medical journalists will assume a greater role in reporting of climatic events happening around the world and other biological events that are triggered by the climate crisis. Furthermore, innovative sustainable solutions will also need to be reported. Thus, a medical writer and journalist has many hats to wear, including reporting the crisis responsibly.

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### Disclaimers

The opinions expressed in this article are the author's own and not necessarily shared by her employer or EMWA.

### Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.



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