

Elements of storytelling in medical journalism

Sonya Collins

Independent journalist, Atlanta, USA

Correspondence to:

Sonya Collins
Independent journalist
Atlanta, GA, USA
sonya.collins@gmail.com

Abstract

Medical journalists marry the techniques of technical medical writing and storytelling in their work. They need a high-level understanding of the science behind the story, but they must also skilfully employ techniques that draw in readers who may feel the topic is too complex for them. Journalists do this by hooking readers with the stories of the real people affected by the science and painting verbal pictures of hard-to-grasp concepts.

Keywords: Journalism, Medicine, Storytelling

I wanted to write before health and medicine ever entered my mind as my potential subject matter. They weren't even interests of mine. I had Bachelor's and Master's degrees in creative writing, and I wrote short stories and submitted them to journals while earning a very meagre 'living' teaching creative writing at a couple of colleges. I didn't feel like I had chosen that life. I felt like I had ended up in it. I meant to teach for a year or so, while I 'figured out' how to make a living as a writer. Suddenly I had been teaching for nearly ten. Teaching demanded more and more of my time, and writing got less and less. I felt that I was haemorrhaging wasted potential. I was extremely unhappy. I knew the next ten years teaching writing rather than actually writing would go by even faster than the first ten if I didn't plan my exit. I couldn't keep teaching while I waited for someone to publish my short stories. I needed to learn how to write something that people needed to read.

I wanted to learn a trade. I didn't want to get yet another Master's degree that was going to groom me for more academia. I already felt that my Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing had made me a teacher, rather than a writer. I was teaching at the University of Georgia (UGA) at the time. The only graduate program at UGA's Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication that was intended to prepare graduates for work

in the field, rather than prepare them for a PhD, was the Master's in Health and Medical Journalism.

Health and medicine? Where was the poetry, the storytelling in that? I didn't want to write about biology. I wanted to tell stories, develop characters. I was a writer, not a scientist. I said all of this to the program chair, Professor Patricia Thomas, who assured me that health and medicine were rich with stories waiting to be told as she pushed a copy of Anne Fadiman's *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* into my hands. 'Every story is a health story', she said. So I applied for the program and got in.

Everything I learned in journalism school and over the subsequent five years as a full-time independent journalist has refuted any preconceived notions I had about medical journalism – that it was dry, heartless, and devoid of storytelling and poetry. Medical journalists don't just have the opportunity to use the same literary devices taught in creative writing workshops; they *must* use these tools to engage lay readers in topics readers may otherwise think are too complicated to understand.

Human stories

Some readers will easily engage in a health story whose subject matter has a direct impact on them. Perhaps the reader is living with cancer, and the story describes a possible new treatment. To engage everyone else, however, reporters have to introduce readers to the people who live the stories – the characters needed to move any story along.

In a February 2014 story for *The Boston Globe*, Liz Kowalczyk reported on the risks of liver surgery for live donors.¹ A shorter story might have begun 'A Florida man died yesterday during live liver transplant surgery.' Kowalczyk, on the other hand, invests readers in the subject through the stories of Paul and Lorraine Hawks. Before readers learn of the risks of live liver donation that caused Paul Hawks' death, Kowalczyk paints a picture of a

devout couple who pray together; a husband who shares in household chores with his wife; a couple who had a lot of living ahead of them. The reporter chooses carefully the details to reveal about the couple in a just a few information-packed lines:

‘In that instant, Lorraine’s world shattered. The Hawks, married for 35 years, had big plans. Now they wouldn’t be building a new home in Tampa that summer, starting a small Christian ministry, or taking their road trip to North Carolina’s Black Mountains.’

Readers who didn’t have a personal interest in live liver donation now have an interest in this couple. They will read on to learn how a healthy man undergoing elective surgery could unexpectedly die.

Imagery

Reporters draw lay readers into scientific and medical stories by putting them at the centre of the action. This requires more than just a summary of the action. It needs images that appeal to the senses and give dimension to the scene. Kowalczyk doesn’t simply tell readers that Mr Hawks died in surgery. She recreates the scene:¹

‘[W]hen [the nurse] eventually led [Lorraine] and her family to a remote conference room, Lorraine began to weep, aware only of the nurse’s heels clicking on the tile. [...] As doctors and nurses in fresh white coats filled the room, she knew something very bad had happened.’

The images of heels clicking and fresh white coats make a lasting impression.

Metaphor

After a reporter has pulled the reader in with three-dimensional characters and scenes, there is still complicated science to explain. To help lay readers understand scientific and medical concepts, reporters might use metaphors. In her 2010 book-length work of journalism, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*,² about the origin of HeLa cells, Rebecca Skloot creates an image of a cell that puts all readers at ease. Readers of the paragraph below, which falls early in the book, are made to feel that perhaps this subject matter isn’t too complicated for them. With that, they press on to the next page.

‘Under the microscope, a cell looks a lot like a fried egg: It has a white (the *cytoplasm*) that’s

full of water and proteins to keep it fed, and a yolk (the *nucleus*) that holds all the genetic information that makes you *you*. The cytoplasm buzzes like a New York City street. It’s crammed full of molecules and vessels endlessly shuttling enzymes and sugars from one part of the cell to another, pumping water, nutrients, and oxygen in and out of the cell. All the while, little cytoplasmic factories work 24/7, cranking out sugars, fats, proteins and energy to keep the whole thing running and feed the nucleus. The nucleus is the brains of the operation; inside every nucleus within each cell in your body, there’s an identical copy of your entire genome. That genome tells cells when to grow and divide and makes sure they do their jobs, whether that’s controlling your heartbeat or helping your brain understand the words on this page.’²

While a cell biologist might not be completely comfortable with such a non-scientific description of a cell, by design this description makes readers quite comfortable. Had Skloot leapt right into the roles of the nucleus and the cytoplasm, she certainly would have lost some insecure readers. With the fried egg metaphor, she gives readers an image they can call up quickly in their mind. Then she zooms in on the cell, but she doesn’t let go of the reader’s hand. The image becomes more complicated, but no more so than a busy New York City street crammed with cars and factories. The image is as easy to conjure up as the fried egg. As Professor Thomas tells her journalism students, ‘A good health story makes readers feel smart.’ Indeed, readers can congratulate themselves at the end of the above paragraph: the author explained the inner workings of a cell, and they got it.

Numbers as images

Data and numbers can alienate the lay reader as much as a rote description of the anatomy of a cell. ‘Infographics’ are increasingly popular because they help readers to visualise data on countless topics. Journalists create these types of visuals with their words.

A common construct is ‘that’s enough to fill ...’. A December 2014 story by the Associated Press visualised the amount of plastic in the world’s oceans – 270,000 tons – as ‘enough to fill 38,500 garbage trucks.’³

The numbers that may be hardest for readers to picture, however, are the seemingly smaller ones. When a particular condition strikes one or two per

cent of the population, should the reader be concerned? Is that a lot or a little? Take for example a public health story about rising teen birth rates. For an epidemiologist, '26.5 births for every 1,000 adolescent females ages 15 to 19' means something.⁴ Many lay readers won't know what to make of this number. It's about two per cent of teen girls, which is easier to understand than 26.5 out of 1,000, but how does it apply to the reader? How does this statistic impact adolescent girls where the reader lives?

A reporter who wants to visualise this number for readers might think like this: In the U.S., there's about 12 or 13 girls in every classroom of 25 students. That's one pregnant teen in every four high school classrooms.

Science and storytelling

I never anticipated that reporting on medical research or the national impact of a particular disease would satisfy the same creative urges that writing short stories did. As a journalist, I still get to pore over how to unfold a story, choosing exactly the right moment to reveal each fact. I think and rethink which details about a character will portray her for readers exactly as I saw her. Which of her words will most accurately recreate

her voice? How can I describe this microbe, tissue, or number so someone else can see it?

The storytelling challenges that I relished as a short fiction writer are the same ones that make my work as a medical journalist so satisfying. When I treat the work as storytelling – filling it with sympathetic characters and accessible images – I tell readers that this is a topic that anyone, even they, can understand.

References

1. Kowalczyk L. Donor's Death Shatters Family, Stuns Surgeons. *The Boston Globe*; 2014 Feb 02 [cited 2015 Aug 17]. Available from: <http://www.bostonglobe.com/lifestyle/health-wellness/2014/02/02/death-living-liver-donor-calamity-for-two-families-and-lahey/q9iRF9nHyQdewWjvITgmRI/story.html>.
2. Skloot R. *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*. New York: Crown; 2010.
3. Study: 270,000 tons of plastic floating in oceans. *AP Online*; 2014 Dec 10 [cited 2015 Aug 17]. Available from: <http://www.wtsp.com/story/news/2014/12/10/study-270000-tons-of-plastic-in-oceans/20231325/>.
4. Trends in Teen Pregnancy and Childbearing. The Office of Adolescent Health, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; updated 2015 May 29 [cited 2015 Aug 17]. Available from: <http://www.hhs.gov/ash/oah/adolescent-health-topics/reproductive-health/teen-pregnancy/trends.html>.

Author information

Sonya Collins is a US-based independent journalist. A regular contributor to *Genome*, *CURE*, *WebMD.com*, *Pharmacy Today*, and *Yale Medicine*, Sonya's reporting has earned recognition from the Association of Health Care Journalists' Awards for Excellence in Health Care Journalism and the Association of American Medical Colleges' Robert G. Finley Writing Awards.