



REVIEW

Collection shows crafting science journalism requires heart

Reviewed Book

Carpenter, S. (Ed.). (2026).

The Best Science Stories and How They Work: a Collection with Commentary.

The University of Chicago Press

Reviewed by

J. D. Allen

Abstract

Journalists make science meaningful to lay audiences through a mix of narrative rhetoric techniques and science communication strategies. Siri Carpenter argues in her book *The Best Science Stories and How They Work*, as well as through her selection of eleven works of science journalism with annotations and interviews with fellow writers, that person-centred storytelling, which is relevant and relatable to society, helps audiences examine complex science topics purposefully. The collection comes at a time when science communication weighs approaches that build trust in the people, process and outcomes of science.

Keywords

Science and media; Science writing; Professionalism, professional development and training in science communication

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Siri Carpenter's *The Best Science Stories and How They Work* pairs eleven works of science journalism with annotations from fellow writers, turning close reading into a craft seminar [Carpenter, 2026]. Its subject is technique — how a lede, a nut graf, or a well-placed kicker carries a reader through unfamiliar science. That focus makes the book a generous teaching tool, though its attention to the “how” of storytelling sits alongside, rather than answers, a separate scholarly conversation about “why” it's important to communicate science strategically [Lindenfeld et al., 2025]. This review situates the collection within that conversation.

The book arrives amid a broader push in science communication toward a person-centred approach, leading with shared human experience rather than technical findings alone [National Academy of Sciences, 2026]. Carpenter's introduction makes a related, more concrete case: because nearly every issue society faces has, in her words, “science at its heart”, the narrative skills good science journalism requires are a competency every communicator now needs [Carpenter, 2026].

That premise shapes the book's structure. Modeled on the “Storygrams” series Carpenter developed at her organisation, The Open Notebook, each of the eleven selections runs alongside an annotation from a second writer and a short interview with the original author [Carpenter, 2026]. This format exposes decisions usually invisible to readers, such as why a lede opens where it does, what a nut graf is doing besides explaining, and how the humanity of science is captured in compelling journalism.

The entries show the value of that transparency. Sabrina Imbler's essay on the house centipede, annotated by Mary Roach, uses humour to turn a household pest into a creature worth respecting [Imbler, 2026]. It's an example of essential science journalism that captures both a sense of wonder and confrontation of biases to appreciate, instead of squash, this creepy-crawly. Ed Yong's reporting on long COVID, annotated by Amy Maxmen, relies on sustained, patient listening that keeps illness centered on the person, not the virus [Yong, 2026]. Ashley Smart's piece on genetics and racial mythmaking is the collection's hardest reflection of craft, modeling how a science writer holds a firm line against false balance [Smart, 2026].

Across the collection, the annotations name the tools — rhetorical devices, structural framing and other editorial choices — for other fascinated writers to admire and adopt. The book's real contribution is that it treats storytelling craft as learnable rather than innate, while also echoing calls for scientists themselves to tell their stories [Nwanaji-Enwerem et al., 2026].

The collection's limits are a matter of scope, perhaps for scien(tist) writers, by science writers. Besley and Dudo [2022] distinguish tactical support — clear writing, plain language, narrative craft — from strategic help, which identifies and prioritises audience-specific behavioural goals; Besley et al. [2026] find this distinction holds up empirically, since most communication support available to scientists remains tactical rather than strategic. Carpenter's book lives entirely in that tactical scope. It teaches the “how” of a story well and says little about the longer-term behavioural goals both studies treat as success's real measure. That is not a flaw so much as a division of labor — a cookbook is not obligated to double as a nutrition textbook — but readers hoping this book will also serve as a strategy guide for writers to build trust or comprehension with target audiences should pair it with another work, like Lindenfeld et al. [2025].

That pairing matters more given the institutional realities these sources point to. Besley et al. [2026] find that few scientists have had the chance to work with anyone helping them pursue concrete, long-term communication goals. A National Academies workshop similarly finds that university reward structures still undervalue public-facing work relative to grants and publications [National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2026]. Early-career researchers describe a matching gap from the other side: institutions may welcome individual acts of public engagement while remaining, in one researcher's words, "merely permissive" toward it ['What motivates early-career researchers to communicate science?', 2026] — rewarding the intrinsically motivated without building the work into anyone's job description. A parallel shift toward short-form video adds further pressure the book doesn't address ['Scientists in the future will not read articles like this', 2026].

Neither critique undercuts what the book sets out to do. If journalism can function, as one contributor's closing line suggests, as a kind of "caretaking profession" [Yong, 2026] — showing up for people and stories that lack support elsewhere — then *The Best Science Stories and How They Work* is best read as equipping the caretakers with technique, and leaving questions of strategy to scholars and institutions.

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