

Writing a *Space Scoop* in Seven Steps

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Summary

Formal and informal primary education has traditionally shied away from the latest scientific breakthroughs. Yet sharing the excitement of the latest scientific discoveries is one of the best tools that we have to inspire the public — including young children. The question isn't whether astronomical news can inspire children, but how we can best communicate this information to youngsters.

The IAU-endorsed programme EU Universe Awareness has now produced more than 100 astronomy news stories for young children, called *Space Scoops*. It has successfully tackled a wide variety of subjects — everything from dark matter to cosmic reionisation. This article reveals the tips and tricks used to craft science news stories for children.

Prologue

In February 2011, EU Universe Awareness (EU-UNAWA) launched an astronomy news service for children aged 8+, called *Space Scoop*, in partnership with the European Southern Observatory (ESO). Since then, the following organisations have joined the *Space Scoop* family:

- Netherlands Institute for Radio Astronomy (ASTRON)
- NASA Chandra X-ray Observatory
- European Space Agency (ESA)
- Europlanet
- National Astronomical Observatory of Japan (NAOJ)
- Dutch Research School for Astronomy (NOVA)
- Royal Astronomical Society (RAS)
- South African Astronomical Observatory (SAAO)

This has made *Space Scoop* the biggest astronomy news service for children, with releases now available in up to 16 languages. (The number of translations varies, as the work is done by a team of volunteers.)

Writing for children: The basics

1) The general rule when writing for young children is to keep sentences short and

simple and don't assume any prior astronomy knowledge. This means talking in the first paragraph about a "cloud of gas and dust" and only using the term "nebula" after it has been explained. In general, try to keep the technical jargon to an absolute minimum, or back it up with things that children can relate to. For example: "You use infrared light at home to turn on the TV with a remote control." If that doesn't work, you can also take a light-hearted approach and mock the "catchy" name for that new exoplanet!

2) It is better to fully explain one or two concepts clearly in the story, rather than trying to cover every detail about a new discovery. The original press release can go into a lot of detail that isn't relevant for a 250-word *Space Scoop*. Furthermore, by isolating a key concept that you want to explain, it is easier to construct a story that has an intro, middle and an end.

Be creative

3) Before you start writing, try to look at the picture that is released with the story for a few minutes from the perspective of a child. Consider the following:

- What are your honest first impressions of the picture, based solely on appearance (disregarding for a moment how

scientifically interesting the image is)? If it looks boring or complicated to you, then it will to a child as well. Be honest and say what you see and then explain why this image is incredible^{1,2}.

- What does it look like? For example, does it resemble something from everyday life or science fiction^{3,4}?

4) Scientific breakthroughs are much easier to write, as the content of the *Space Scoop* is already there: the new discovery. For photo releases, it is often best to write something that is completely different from the original release in order to make sure that the story teaches children something new. This doesn't always have to be a lesson about the astronomical object in the picture. For example, *Space Scoop* has already covered the work of space artists⁵, general scientific principles⁶, how professional astronomers collaborate around the world⁷ and citizen science⁸.

5) References to popular culture and fairytales make for eye-catching headlines for children. Beyond this, they can also be useful for explaining difficult topics in a fun way⁹. It's important to keep in mind that the references must be familiar to the young audience. Furthermore, for *Space Scoop*, children from all around the world must understand the reference. Currently, *Space Scoop* has mentioned



Figure 1. Space Scoop releases are now available to download from the EU-UNAWA website (www.eu-unawe.org) as a PDF to make the resource easier to use in classrooms. The new templates have been designed to appeal to young girls and boys, while maintaining the feel of a professional news release. Credit: EU-UNAWA

*Indiana Jones*¹⁰, *Star Trek*¹¹, *Twilight*¹², *Lord of the Rings*⁹, and indirectly referred to *Little Red Riding Hood*¹³ and *Snow White*¹⁴. And why not refer to a big event in current affairs, such as the Olympic Games¹⁵?

Be open

6) Don't shy away from telling kids how much we still don't know about the Universe¹⁶. Instead, use it as an opportunity to highlight how there are many areas of research that they can contribute to when they are older. Furthermore, why should children be led to believe that scientists always have the right answer? Mistakes and failures help to show that scientists are real people.

7) The best way to know whether you have written a successful article is to listen to comments from parents and educators. In addition to inviting feedback from the organisation's network, every *Space Scoop* is evaluated before publication

by the National Project Manager for EU-UNAWA in Germany, Natalie Fischer, who has many years of experience in educating young children.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

Space Scoops quoted in the article:

- 1 www.eu-unawe.org/kids/unawe1217
- 2 www.eu-unawe.org/kids/unawe1149
- 3 www.eu-unawe.org/kids/unawe1138
- 4 www.eu-unawe.org/kids/unawe1125
- 5 www.eu-unawe.org/kids/unawe1149
- 6 www.eu-unawe.org/kids/unawe1209
- 7 www.eu-unawe.org/kids/unawe1230

- 8 www.eu-unawe.org/kids/unawe1150
- 9 www.eu-unawe.org/kids/unawe1138
- 10 www.eu-unawe.org/kids/unawe1119
- 11 www.eu-unawe.org/kids/unawe1232
- 12 www.eu-unawe.org/kids/unawe1147
- 13 www.eu-unawe.org/kids/unawe1214
- 14 www.eu-unawe.org/kids/unawe1225
- 15 www.eu-unawe.org/kids/unawe1235
- 16 www.eu-unawe.org/kids/unawe1222

Biography

Sarah Reed is Editor-in-Chief of CAPJournal and the International Outreach Coordinator for the IAU Office for Astronomy Outreach, which is hosted by the National Astronomical Observatory of Japan. From February 2011 until September 2012, she was Science Editor for EU Universe Awareness and responsible for writing its *Space Scoop* releases.