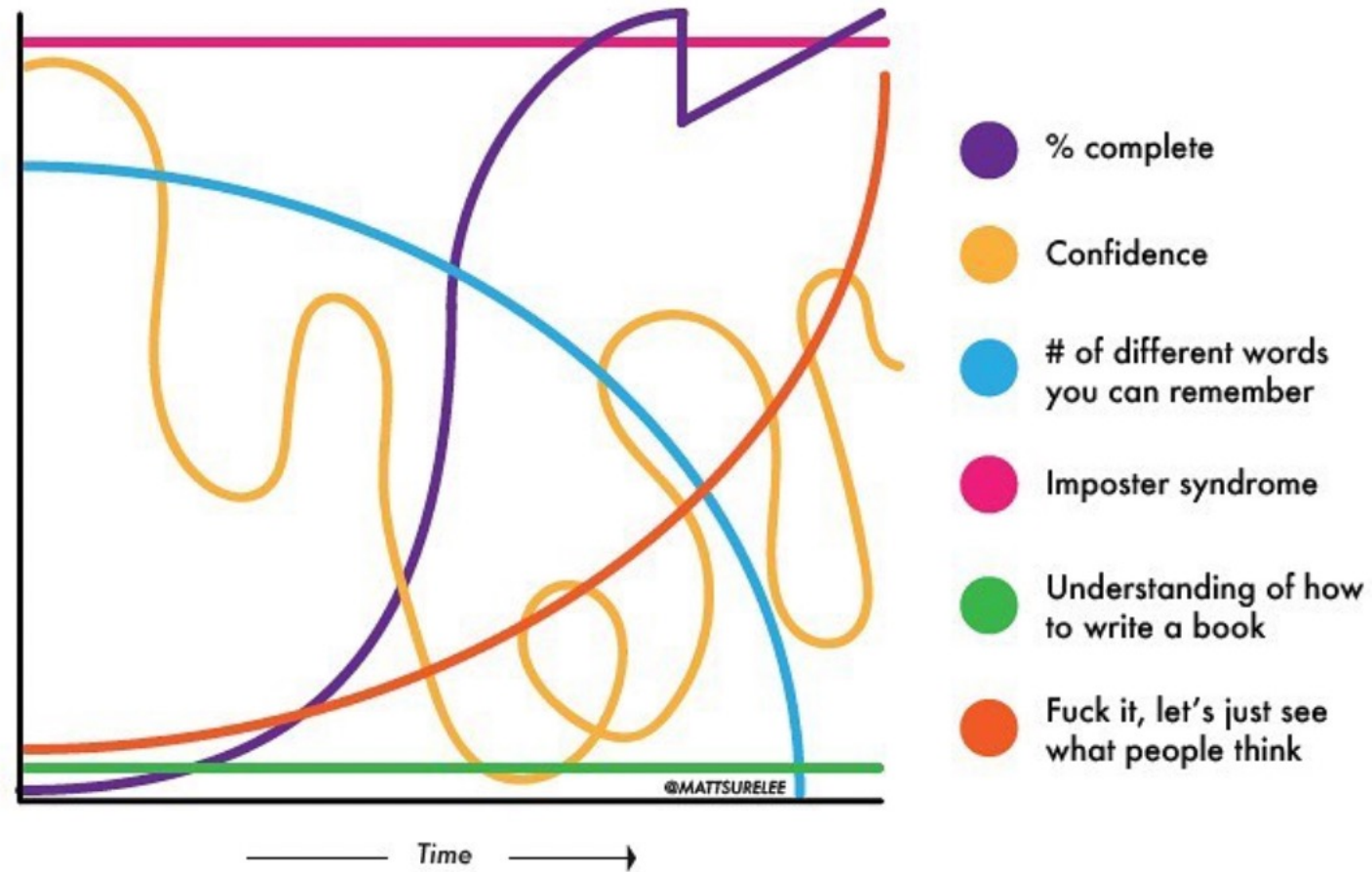


# WRITING A BOOK



# JOURNALISTS



what my friends  
think i do



what my mom  
thinks i do



what society  
thinks i do



what my editor  
thinks i do



what i think i do



what i actually do



SINCE 1828

GAMES & QUIZZES

THESAURUS

WORD OF THE DAY

FEATURES

SHOP

JOIN MWU

LOG IN REGISTER



Dictionary

Thesaurus

Words at Play

# Star Wars and Plain Words

The surprisingly plain language of *Star Wars*

The old is the new in the latest *Star Wars* movie, with a return to the original storyline and a back-to-basics (well, multi-million dollar basics) approach to filming real [practical effects](#) and less dependence on CGI.



Photo: Kory Westerhold CC BY 2.0

## TRENDING NOW

- 1 codify**  
Draft Supreme Court decisio...
- 2 contempt, held in contempt**  
Trump was found to be in co...
- 3 aphasia**  
Bruce Willis is retiring from ...

[SEE ALL >](#)

A close-up photograph of two guinea pigs nestled together inside a green, fuzzy hood. The guinea pig on the left is light brown with dark eyes, and the one on the right is black with a white blaze on its face. The background is dark and out of focus, showing a person's hand holding the hood.

# The Care and Feeding of Your Editors

*Happy editors, happy writers*

Michelle Nijhuis · May 5, 2022

## Your editor



- Risk averse
- Hates surprises\*
- Easily distracted
- Can bite (metaphorically)
- Can be very helpful

\*except in the form of stories

## My teenager's guinea pigs



- Risk averse
- Hate surprises\*
- Easily distracted
- Can bite (literally)
- Can be very charming

\*except in the form of carrots

# What do editors want?

“Editors want to know that they are going to get copy on time in something approaching house style and that is properly reported and accurate. Those things sound so basic that you’d think every reporter would do them. I wish they did.” — Peter Aldhous, *New Scientist*

Editors want to help writers develop and deliver great stories, and they want to help shape stories into the *best possible form for their publication*. They also want to cultivate relationships with writers who seem likely to deliver more great stories.

# My editorial process\*

- Receive intriguing (not necessarily perfect) pitch, discuss with colleagues, get approval from HQ
- Discuss reporting plans with writer, approve travel budget, negotiate fee, issue contract, alert art/photo desks
- Communicate with writer occasionally throughout reporting and writing (amount of communication can vary wildly)
- Receive thoroughly reported, carefully constructed (again, not perfect) draft on deadline.
- Edit for content and organization — the “structural edit.” Discuss edit with writer
- Receive revised draft in which all my questions and suggestions have been taken seriously 🤖
- Edit for language — the “line edit.” Arrange for factchecking and copyedit.
- Request annotation for factchecking, send thoroughly annotated draft to factchecker
- Adjudicate factchecking questions, send checked draft to copyeditor, update art/photo
- Send copyedited draft to writer for resolution, adjudicate any remaining copy questions
- Schedule story
- Help with headline brainstorming, settle on 3 options for testing
- Publish and promote ... and at the end of the year, remind writer to enter story for awards and anthology consideration
- 🍺🍺🍺
- So, what’s your next idea?

\*under ideal conditions

# What don't editors want?

- To be bored
- To never hear from you
- To hear from you every day
- To get a “read this one instead” draft
- To get a draft that is double the word count or otherwise departs from the assignment\*
- To find large holes in your reporting
- To pick up your grammatical socks
- To have to kill a story
- To hear that you were rude to a factchecker
- To have to append a correction
- To watch a fine story disappear online

\*unless said departure has been previously discussed and agreed upon



# What do writers want?

- Timely responses
- Reasonable contract terms and pay rates
- Constructive advice (on pitches as well as drafts)
- A pair of fresh, attentive, and perceptive eyes
- A respectful collaborator
- An in-house advocate
- A byline and a prompt paycheck ... and compliments never hurt
- An ongoing relationship

# What writers don't want

- Silence
- Crappy contracts/pay rates
- More than three rounds of edits (or more than two editors)
- To be rewritten before having a chance to rewrite
- Edits that introduce errors or misconceptions
- Inaccurate/ridiculous photos or illustrations
- The sense that your editor would rather be writing

# How to get what you want

- Remember that editors are navigating the distance between you and their publication
- Be in touch regularly (while respecting your editor's time)
- If in doubt, ask (ditto)
- With slow responders, follow up at reasonable intervals
- On contracts, rates, and matters of accuracy, push back politely but firmly
- On edits, ditto, but pick your battles
- Always, always be nice to interns and factcheckers
- If an editorial relationship is working, build on it (and if it's not, move on)
- Help promote your story, and say thank you!

Hi Ross,

As soon as mathematician Chad Topaz ripped the plastic off his copy of the American Mathematical Society's magazine *Notices*, he was disappointed. Staring back at him were the faces of 13 fellow mathematicians – all of them men, and the majority of them white.

Topaz, a professor at Macalester College, knew that his field had a gender problem. In mathematics, just 15% of tenure-track positions are held by women. Loads of recent research has shed light on how women are underrepresented in top labs and university research faculty — but Topaz was determined to understand the finer-grained details of what could be driving these disparities. So Topaz and colleague Shilad Sen decided to look at a new metric of academic success: the editorial boards of academic journals.

According to Topaz and Sen's analysis, just under 9% of math journal editorial positions are held by women. Their [research](#), published in *PLOS One*, analyzed the editorial boards of 435 math journals. I'd like to propose a piece on how why this duo undertook their analysis, and what the gender imbalance in academic journal editorial boards tells us about the underrepresentation of women in science. Editorial positions are an especially important role for scientists; editors are the gatekeepers of research, deciding which papers get published, which, in turn, sets the tone for the field about which areas of research are worthy of study. Furthermore, serving on editorial boards is an important networking and professional development opportunity for researchers. Being left out of these opportunities can affect female researchers' careers.

I'm in touch with the researchers, and I've previously [written on studies investigating gender disparity in the sciences](#), as well as on the [culture of academia](#) in general (including [a piece for the Atlantic](#) earlier this year). You can find links to my other work at [janehu.net](#). Happy to elaborate on any of this or answer any questions you may have — thanks for considering!

Jane

# Why Are There So Few Women Mathematicians?

How a corrosive culture keeps women out of leadership positions on math journals

By Jane C. Hu



Tatiana Kolesnikova / Getty

NOVEMBER 4, 2016

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As soon as mathematician Chad Topaz ripped the plastic off his copy of the American Mathematical Society's magazine *Notices*, he was disappointed. Staring back at him from the cover were the faces of 13 of his fellow mathematicians—all of them men, and the majority of them white. "Highlighting all this maleness and whiteness—what is the message that is being sent to the membership?" he wondered.

Hi Michelle,

I hope you're enjoying the holidays! Here's the worm pitch—sorry it took me a while to get it to you. Thanks again for considering, and hope to see you soon!

Best, Julia

### **Pitch: The worms are coming**

Van Cortlandt Park in the Bronx might seem a strange place to study one of the most profound ecological shifts underway in North America. But it makes perfect sense to Annise Dobson, a postdoc at Yale University. Here, among the joggers and strollers and weekday golfers, Dobson studies the advance guard of a potentially devastating biological invasion. She kneels beneath a stand of trees and pours a slurry of yellow mustard powder and water on the ground. Soon, the intruders reluctantly emerge from the duff. She corrals one and picks it up between her fingers. It's a fat, wriggling earthworm.

Most Americans learn from toddlerhood that earthworms are icons of environmental health. “We have this Eurocentric mindset that whatever is good in Europe has got to be good here,” Dobson says. But we are mostly wrong. The ice sheet that oozed across northern North America during the last ice age obliterated any native earthworms that may once have inhabited the colder half of the continent. But when Europeans colonized the new world, they brought over worms from the old world. And wherever the worms go, they change forests from the bottom up. “Every single thing that they do is transformative,” Dobson says.

Within a few years of arriving in a new place, worms can chow through thick layers of leaf litter and radically accelerate the breakdown of organic matter in the soil. They break up subterranean networks of fungi and [outcompete many invertebrates](#), causing ripples in the food web that affect animals like salamanders and [birds](#). Their changes to the structure of the soil alter the very [composition of forests](#), and may even [contribute more carbon dioxide](#) to the atmosphere. And this may just be the prelude, Dobson says. A second wave of invaders, this time from across the Pacific, has now started to spread across the country.

Asian jumping worms—so named because they snap their bodies like angry rattlesnakes when disturbed—form much denser colonies than European worms, meaning their impacts are multiplied too, Dobson says. They have been in San Francisco and the worm-adapted woods of the southeast for decades. But they are just starting to infiltrate North America's once-wormless northern forests.

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Researchers documented the first Asian jumping worms in Vermont in 2012, in Wisconsin in 2013, and in Oregon in 2016. Dobson says there are only two known sightings of the worms in Canada. “It’s a very active and important time,” Dobson says. “This is when they are moving.” To get a preview of what this might mean, Dobson has taken advantage of the fact that Asian jumping worms arrived in many of New York City’s urban forests long ago. She spends her summers circling among half a dozen city parks, all of which have slightly different histories of worm invasions and landscape management. It’s a perfect—albeit accidental—experiment, she says.

While teaching people to identify Asian jumping worms is easy, Dobson says, getting them to appreciate the threat is harder. Universities and government agencies have started to [sound the alarm](#), and several other states, including [New York](#), have made transporting Asian jumping worms illegal. But it takes a lot to dent the reputation of a beloved creature. It requires undoing centuries of good earthworm PR. “Earthworms are very charismatic,” Dobson says. “People don’t take it really seriously unless they are actually seeing the impacts on the ground.”

I propose to write a feature for Life Up Close about the invasion of the Asian jumping worm, what it means for North American forests, and how difficult it is to change people’s minds about something so familiar as the earthworm. I myself grew up in Michigan, and had no idea that worms were neither native nor beneficial.

For the story, I will accompany Dobson as she does field work this coming summer in New York City’s parks. She is one of a small group of researchers who specifically studies Asian jumping worms, and her research will provide a natural opportunity to discuss the broader dimensions of the problem. She is also energetic and witty (she calls the global problem of invasive worms “global worming”) and she will make a compelling central character.

While in the city, I will talk to Clara Pretzgar of New York City Parks and Recreation, who did a survey of park ecology in 2015, and the groundskeepers who manage park forests. I will also visit Peter Groffman, a worm researcher at the City University of New York, and I will reach out to other experts.

My writing has appeared in *Nature*, *Science*, *bioGraphic*, *Hakai*, and *High Country News*, among other places. Please find samples of my work [here](#) and [here](#), and more on my [website](#).

Thank you for your consideration and I look forward to hearing from you.

Best, Julia



Myrian Wares

SCIENCE

## CANCEL EARTHWORMS

The “crazy worms” remaking forests aren’t your friendly neighborhood garden worms. Then again, those aren’t so great either.

By Julia Rosen

JANUARY 23, 2020

SHARE ▼

**O**N A SWELTERING July day, I follow Annise Dobson down an overgrown path into the heart of Seton Falls Park. It’s a splotch of unruly forest, surrounded by the clamoring streets and cramped rowhouses of the Bronx. Broken glass, food wrappers, and condoms litter the ground. But Dobson, bounding ahead in khaki hiking pants with her blond ponytail swinging, appears unfazed. As I quickly learn, neither trash nor oppressive humidity nor ecological catastrophe can dampen her ample enthusiasm.



# Pitching etiquette

- Know. the. publication.
- Email. No attachments please
- First names except in extraordinary circumstances
- Tell me how we know each other
- Pitch a story, not a topic, and let me know what it's about right away
- Tell me *why you* should write this story, and why now
- Disclose multiple submissions and/or potential conflicts of interest
- Practice “pitch hygiene”
- And finally ... remember what it's all about

A close-up photograph of two guinea pigs nestled together inside a green, fuzzy hood. The guinea pig on the left is brown with a white patch on its chest, and the one on the right is black with a white blaze on its face. The hood is lined with a soft, light-colored material. The background is dark and out of focus.

Thank you!

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