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Career Description

Animal Magazine

My name is Lesia Winiarskyj. I'm the director of publications for the National Association for Humane and Environmental Education (NAHEE), which is the youth education affiliate of The Humane Society of the United States. We publish books, posters, newspapers, and Web sites that help teach kids and teens the value of kindness to people and animals and respect for the environment we share.

My career at NAHEE started in 1993. I had recently graduated from college with a B.A. in English and was excited about becoming a real-life writer. What made it even more exciting was that I would be researching and writing about a topic near and dear to my heart: animal protection. Before coming to NAHEE, I was mostly writing about real estate issues, such as laws about radon testing, lead paint removal, and the possible presence of ghosts in houses--no kidding.

In my earliest days at NAHEE, I worked as an editorial assistant. My job involved reading wildlife encyclopedias, magazines, field guides, and other reference books and periodicals to learn interesting facts and news from the animal world. I would take notes about things kids would find especially interesting and turn them into articles they could read and learn from, projects they could take on, and tricky puzzles they could solve. Before long, the Web made my job a whole lot easier. Instead of spending hours with my nose in a book (which I still like to do), I was finding good, up-to-date animal and environmental information with a couple of mouse clicks. I was also getting my hands on breaking news and quirky, offbeat stories that otherwise might not have crossed my desk.

Over time, I sharpened my writing skills and was promoted to a job that involves not only writing my own articles but also editing other writers' work. Today, as director of publications, I plan what goes into most of the publications NAHEE produces. I divide research and writing tasks among our staff and carry projects from manuscript to finished product. That involves creating production schedules, editing drafts and proofs, reviewing art and photos, and meeting with graphic designers and printers. Lots of details, from fonts to folds to format, go into every piece.

One of the biggest challenges in writing for kids in particular is presenting information in a limited space with short sentences and words that are not difficult to understand. To make sure I do my job right, I have tools that help: dictionaries, style guides, thesauruses, and books that tell me things like whether the word "habitat" is part of a fourth-grader's vocabulary or an eighth-grader's. Of course, the best tool is often a second set of eyes. That's why we have a team of editors who review each other's work. What one pair of eyes overlooks, another quickly sees.

My best advice for anyone pursuing a writing career in humane education or any other field is this: Don't rely on the praise and encouragement of friends, family members, or the third-grade teacher who once suggested you become a writer; instead, ask a professional editor to give you an honest critique of your work. One of the myths about writing professionally is that you need only creative ideas to succeed. The skill that is often underemphasized is good, solid writing: copy that is free of embarrassing grammatical errors, odd sentences, and long, dull prose. My theory is that if you can

write well, you can write for any audience about almost any subject. I just happen to be lucky enough to have landed a position that lets me write for my favorite people (children) about my favorite subject (animals)!

Last but not least, if you want to write about humane issues, get to know the issues. Find out what's important to people in the trenches: wildlife rehabilitators who treat oiled penguins or orphaned raccoons, animal care and control officers who rescue a community's stray, neglected, and relinquished pets, investigators who videotape the atrocities at canned hunting preserves or corporate farms. Surf the Web. Make calls. Send e-mails. Read works by respected animal protectionists. Ask questions. Listen. Learn everything you can about the ever-changing humane movement and treat every day as an opportunity to learn more.