

Bench philosophy (11): Writing a short biography

All about me in 100 Words

A good print advertisement should be well written and tailored to the type of media and possible readers. The same applies to a short biography; it needs to be good to successfully promote a scientist and to communicate desired information to the intended audience.

Writing a powerful short biography is challenging. A good short bio contains information relevant to a specific audience. This makes it a personal advertisement and marketing tool, so should be crafted carefully.

Short biographies are needed for a variety of professional situations, including all kinds of imaginable publications, lectures, competitions, prize nominations, press releases, professional websites, etc. The biggest problem of the short biography is that it's, well, short. Frequently, a scientist will be asked to provide "a very short (maximum of 100 words) biography", "a few words about what you're doing", or "a paragraph or two describing yourself". What all of these requests are looking for is a short text of five to six sentences. While they do not spell out what to write, each calls for a different approach, a biography tailored for a certain audience. For example, when submitting a short bio with an abstract for a scientific conference, precious biography space should not be wasted on writing about your exceptional tennis skills. To achieve the best possible effects with a hundred words or so, one needs to choose an appropriate style and content.

Formal or personal style

There are two basic styles: formal and personal. A formal biography is written in the third person, treating writing style and tone as if written by someone else. Direct and matter-of-fact, a formal biography



Avoid glowing descriptions of yourself in your short bio.

should be written objectively. For example, one can start with "Dr. Jane Scientist is an Associate Professor at the Some Institute" or "Jane Scientist obtained a PhD degree in Chemistry and Biochemistry from the University of Hogwarts".

The short bio can be made personal if written in the first person, as in, "I am the Editor-in-Chief of a peer-reviewed journal 'Science Rocks'". The personal style is appropriate for personal communication and private websites, while a professional setting invariably calls for the formal style.

Content

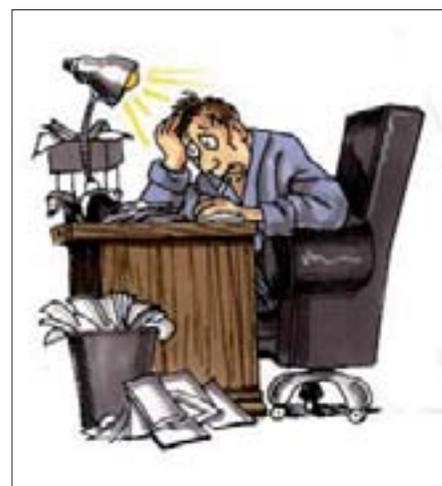
Short biographies highlight basic facts of someone's life. Start with a sentence summarising your professional self in a nutshell. For example, "John Scientist is Head of the Department of Cool Virology at the Old University".

The core of the bio should describe areas of expertise and current scientific interests. If relevant, degrees, certifications, licenses and the conferring institutions can be included. Use your closing phrases to address relevant information. If you are entering an essay into a contest, include something about your previous writing and editorial experiences. For a conference on diabetes, mention your diabetes expertise.

Short bio for an experienced scientist

For established scientists who have a multitude of publications, awards and achievements under their belt, it is important to only include information pertinent to the occasion. For example, when invited to speak about melanoma research, Dr. Scientist can provide such a bio:

"Dr. John Scientist received his PhD from the University of Certain-Town. He then worked at the Institute of Probable Research and, subsequently, served as Associate Professor and Professor at the Wonderful University in Frankfurt. Dr. Scientist has contributed greatly to the understanding of consequences of mutations in serine-threonine kinase B-RAF, which frequently occur in a melanoma. He is involved in the devel-



Writing a good short bio is hard work.

opment of drugs that are currently in clinical trials for treatment of melanoma".

In a "publish or perish" culture, it is not a bad idea to mention your publication record but in general words, not by naming each and every of your PubMed listings, "Dr. Scientist has published seventy journal articles and six books. His publications reflect his research interests in melanoma. He is also an Associate Editor of the Melanoma Times".

Short bio for a junior scientist

Junior scientists may only have a publication or two, or no publications at all, which makes it a bit more difficult to brag about a myriad of prestigious publications in a short bio. In that case, the space may be filled with the subject of a PhD thesis and more in-depth description of current research interests, memberships in associations, student awards, visiting scholarships or anything else that is newsworthy and that will set you apart from the bleak crowd.

Limited as it is, the short bio should promote you, not your city of birth, children, spouse, house, associates or hiking club. Also, avoid glowing descriptions of yourself and egoistic adjectives. None of the following is appropriate for a formal biography:

How to prepare a professional short biography

It is good to:

- ▶ Use formal style
- ▶ Tailor it for a specific occasion
- ▶ Be concise
- ▶ Define yourself in the first sentence and afterwards establish your credentials
- ▶ Use clear terminology that your audience will understand
- ▶ Spell out abbreviations
- ▶ Use strong action words to convey your experiences and illustrate your qualifications with phrases like “Dr. Scientist has a strong background in” and “Dr. Scientist identified X species for the first time”.

It is not so good to:

- ▶ Make spelling errors or typos
- ▶ Use humour, irony or sarcasm
- ▶ Provide salary information, address, age, name of the spouse or children
- ▶ Include irrelevant personal information or job experiences
- ▶ Overstate your accomplishments or contradict your curriculum vitae

“Dr. Jane Scientist was born in London in 1953 and raised by two crazy scientists. She is married to Dr. John Scientist and they have two children, Mycoplasma and Formaldehyde, aged 21 and 17. Dr. Scientist and her family have lived in a beautiful Victorian house in London for the last 25 years. Dr. Scientist enjoys spending time with her poodle Mimi. Dr. Scientist is committed to the highest standards of excellence. She

spends most of her free time with friends from the Hiking Club for Feminist Scientists. Highly intelligent, extremely devoted to her research and hard working, Dr. Scientist makes this world a better place.”

What about age? If a template for the short bio is provided, which asks for your age then obviously you should write how old you are. Otherwise, keep it to yourself. You are entitled to some secrets, after all.

Beware of humour

While jokes may be welcome when describing yourself in private communication or on a personal web site, a professional biography should be businesslike and exclude humor, irony or sarcasm. Avoid attempted witticisms, such as “Dr. Jane Scientist was conceived 56 years ago when her father’s sperm and her mother’s egg fell in love in the dark, warm corridors of a Fallopian tube”, or “For the last ten years Dr. Scientist has immensely enjoyed handling non-cooperative cells and grumpy rats”. Not even all scientific and accurate information is appropriate, such as “Dr. Scientist is a member of Homo sapiens species”.

Final note

The purpose of the short biography is to introduce yourself, impart information, spark interest and attract attention to elements of your background. When asked to provide a short biography, don’t just send your full curriculum vitae and tell the person to “pick what they like”. A good biography may take time and many drafts but it is well worth it; you never know who is going to read it.

LIVIA PULJAK

Fancy composing an installment of “Bench Philosophy”?

Contact Lab Times
E-mail: editors@lab-times.org

Hot of the presses: Lab Times polo shirt Euro 19,95 (VAT and shipping included)

Available in three colours



blue



black



bordeaux

Please pick your size (S, M, L, XL or XXL) and order via email: subscription@lab-times.org