

Title: The Scientist and the Journalist

Speakers: Patchen Barss

Series: Colloquium

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Abstract: Presented as part of the SciComm Collider 2 workshop.  
All PI Residents are invited.

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While scientists and journalists have many overlapping interests and skills, they often differ in their goals, resources, and expertise. This talk covers strategies, tips, and approaches researchers can use to make their interactions with writers and journalists rewarding and enjoyable. It will also cover ideas about pitching and writing for popular science and mainstream media publications. This session will be as interactive as possible, so feel free to bring your questions, concerns, and ideas.

Speaker Bio:

Patchen Barss is a Toronto-based science journalist and author. He has designed and run many workshops and training sessions for scientists and other researchers engaging in media relations and public engagement.

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Zoom link

# The Scientist and the Journalist

Patchen Barss

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# The Family Page

## Spotlight on youth

# Patchen Barss youthful astronomer

By L. Toomey

Patchen Barss, a 10-year-old, Grade 5 student at Petite Riviere Elementary School likes to study the stars. It all started in June of 1979 when his father Peter taught Patchen a few constellations. Patchen was immediately hooked on star gazing.

In July of the same year Patchen got a telescope and really started studying the heavens. He has seen Jupiter and its four moons and has looked at craters on the moon. He has also seen Mars and Venus.

His telescope does not let in enough light to study the stars but Patchen is very involved with the planets. In the summer he uses his telescope every night. He says in the winter it is harder to focus because the telescope doesn't work well in colder temperatures.

"I've studied a few books and have learned a lot about black holes. I know 20 con-



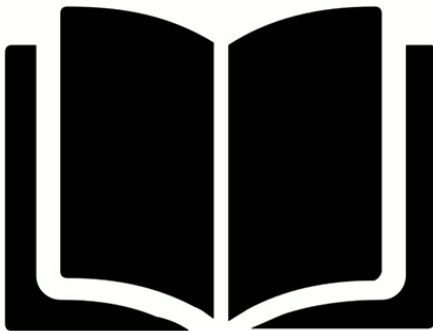
favorite subject in school. He reads a lot and prefers

Patchen has studied the planets and their order in the

to invent the most powerful battery. study the stars more

## Paragraph 1

"Patchen Barss, a 10-year-old Grade 5 student at Petite Riviere Elementary School likes to study the stars.



# Common concerns

- Misrepresentation and mistakes
- Sensationalism – Cancer cured! Alien life detected!
- Loss of nuance, complexity, and subtlety
- Dumbing down
- Loss of control

# Benefits

- Journalists connect experts and the general public
- Knowledge, insight, and ideas should go places and do things
- Influence public opinion, policy, and practice
- Promote trust in, understanding of, and support for science
- Transparency and accountability
- Talking about science improves science
- Fun



# Pitching

- Media interviews
- Writing for popular science and mainstream media publications

**Pitching affords maximum control over the story**

# Scientists and Journalists: Common Ground

- Make a living asking questions
- Balance skepticism with open mindedness
- Research intensive
- Dedicated to getting the facts correct
- Professionally curious





# The Scientist and the Journalist: Four important differences

## Specialist/Generalist

- Science journalists tend to cover broad subject matter
- Many science stories covered by general reporters

## Process/event

- News hook
- Answers vs. questions

## Expertise/Opinion

- "I want to you know what I know" vs. "I want you to believe what I believe."

## Ideas/Stories

- Understandable vs. relatable
- Humanizing research

# Idea to story

Be more than an explainer. Be a storyteller.

- Plot, theme, setting, characters, point of view
- Surprise, drama, conflict, humour, loss, elation
- Character arc

Opinion

OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

# Alien Life, Coming Slowly Into View

By Ray Jayawardhana

March 26, 2011

 Share full article  

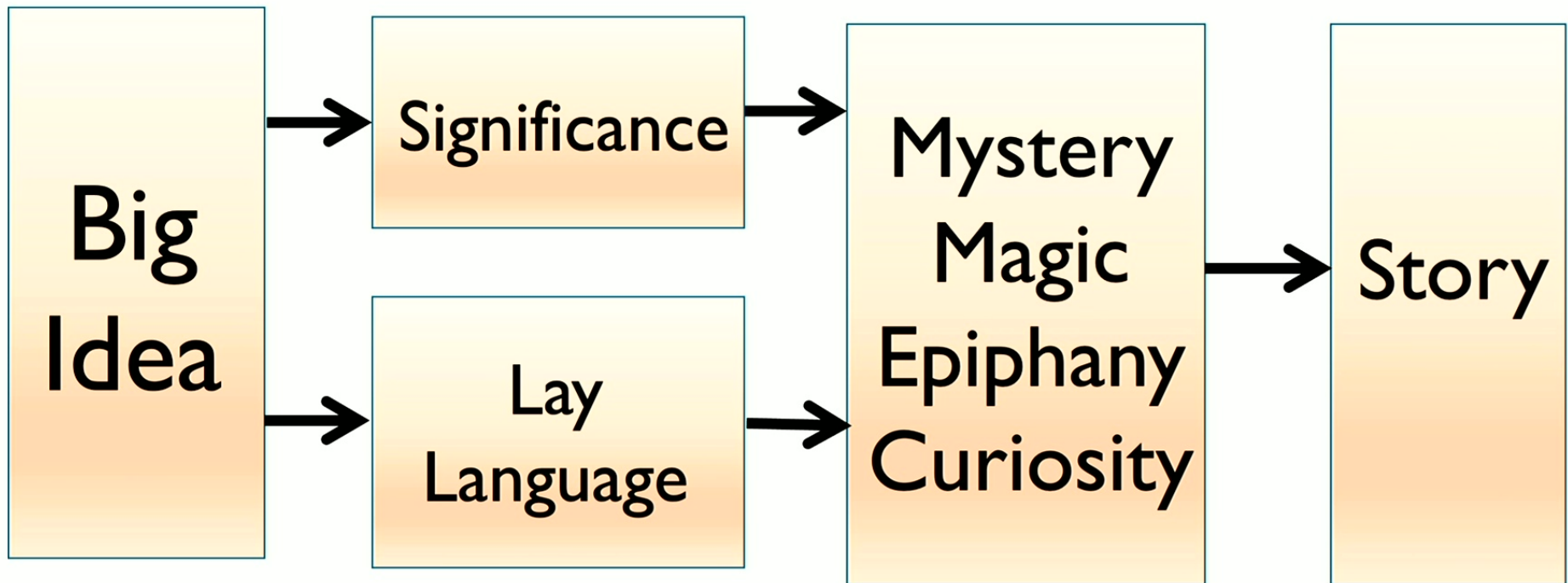
## Toronto

I REMEMBER the first time the concept of another world entered my mind. It was during a walk with my father in our garden in Sri Lanka. He pointed to the Moon and told me that people had walked on it. I was astonished: Suddenly that bright light became a place that one could visit.

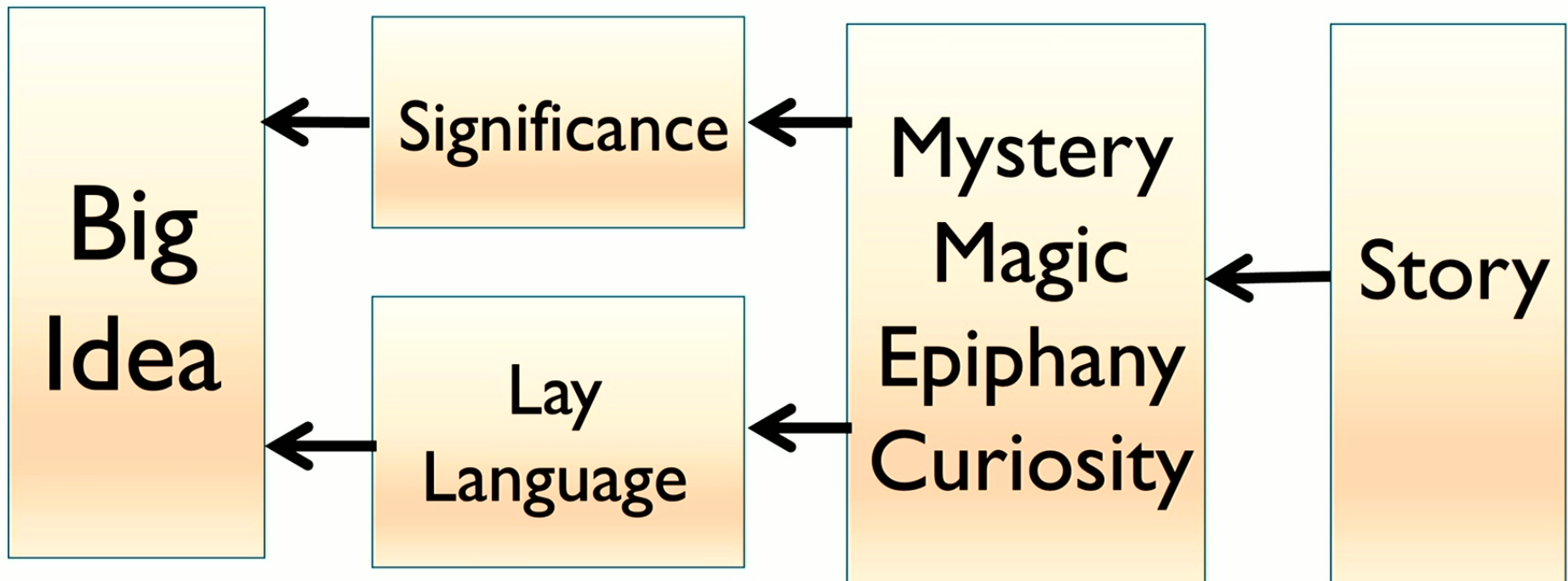
Schoolchildren may feel a similar sense of wonder when they see pictures of a Martian landscape or Saturn's rings. And soon their views of alien worlds may not be confined to the planets in our own solar system.

**Narrative is the alternative to dumbing down.**

# Writer's journey: Idea to story



# Reader's journey: Story to Idea



# Idea to story: More to think about when you pitch

- Who will read, listen to, or view the story?
- What should they know or understand by the end?
- What should they feel?
- What should they do?
- What do you personally have to contribute to this story?

**Offer journalists and their audiences something they couldn't get just by reading journals**

YOU'RE  
ONE IN  
A MELON



# Eons idea pitch: How many times did the nervous system evolve?

Nerves are how animals experience and process the physical world, and also how their cells communicate internally.

...

Nervous systems were clearly a big evolutionary step, that probably happened in animals about 800 million years ago. Some researchers, though, think nervous systems evolved a second time about 200 million years later. That's when a super-simple organism called *Trichoplax adhaerens* emerged.

...

Nerves and sensory systems are how we understand the world. That path to understanding, though, may have many more branches than just the familiar one available to us.



# Eons response: What's the story?

We're potentially interested in your pitch on the nervous system and would like a little more information to determine whether it could work as an Eons episode.

Our major concern is **how the arc of the story would work**. What would the beginning, middle, and end look like, generally? This is an important aspect of Eons episodes, and a few sentences on this could help us see how they could be **compelling stories rather than explanations of phenomena**. Perhaps this Eons episode on blood might serve as a helpful guide to how a story can be crafted from a similar topic.

Another question is, **what is the element of counterintuition in this story? If we could get a sense of these things then we could see this working for Eons.**

# Eons story pitch: It crawls! (But how?)

600 million years ago during the Ediacaran Period, life was soft. This was when the first known multicellular organisms flourished.

They lacked skeletons, shells, or other hard materials to contribute to the fossil record. As a result, our knowledge of them is limited. What we do know is that most Ediacaran organisms appeared to lack mobility: they were odd-shaped tubes or fronds anchored to the ocean's bottom, likely passively absorbing nutrients through their skin from the surrounding waters.

One extremely simple creature from this era, though, got itself moving. The Trichoplax was about a millimetre across, only had six distinguishable types of cells, and no identifiable organs. It also had nothing resembling a nervous system as we understand it today. Yet, it managed to squirm and wriggle its way around the ocean floor, and pause when it detected a food source – the kinds of things biologists normally think would take a lot of nerves.