THE UNIVERSITY
of NORTH CAROLINA
at CHAPEL HILL

Writing for General Audiences

Creating simplicity out of complexity

Meg Palmer, Communications Specialist

UNC Gillings School of Global Public Health

Do people want to hear about my work?

YES!

You might just have to explain it. A little bit.

People are curious

There is a misconception that the public isn't interested in science.

- Trust in scientists, academic institutions and medical experts is still high; some partisan gaps. (MIT, 2022)

- Half of Americans recognize a hypothesis. (Pew Research, 2019)

- Two-thirds think the scientific method produces accurate conclusions. (Pew Research, 2019)

- 94% are interested in one aspect of science. (Kavli Foundation, 2022)

Trust increases when research is accessible

- 57% of Americans trust research more when data is openly available. (Pew Research, 2019)

- "Accessible" is subjective
  - Is the research accessible?
  - Is the language accessible?
  - Is the medium accessible?

- **Getting science from publication to the public is a matter of equity.**
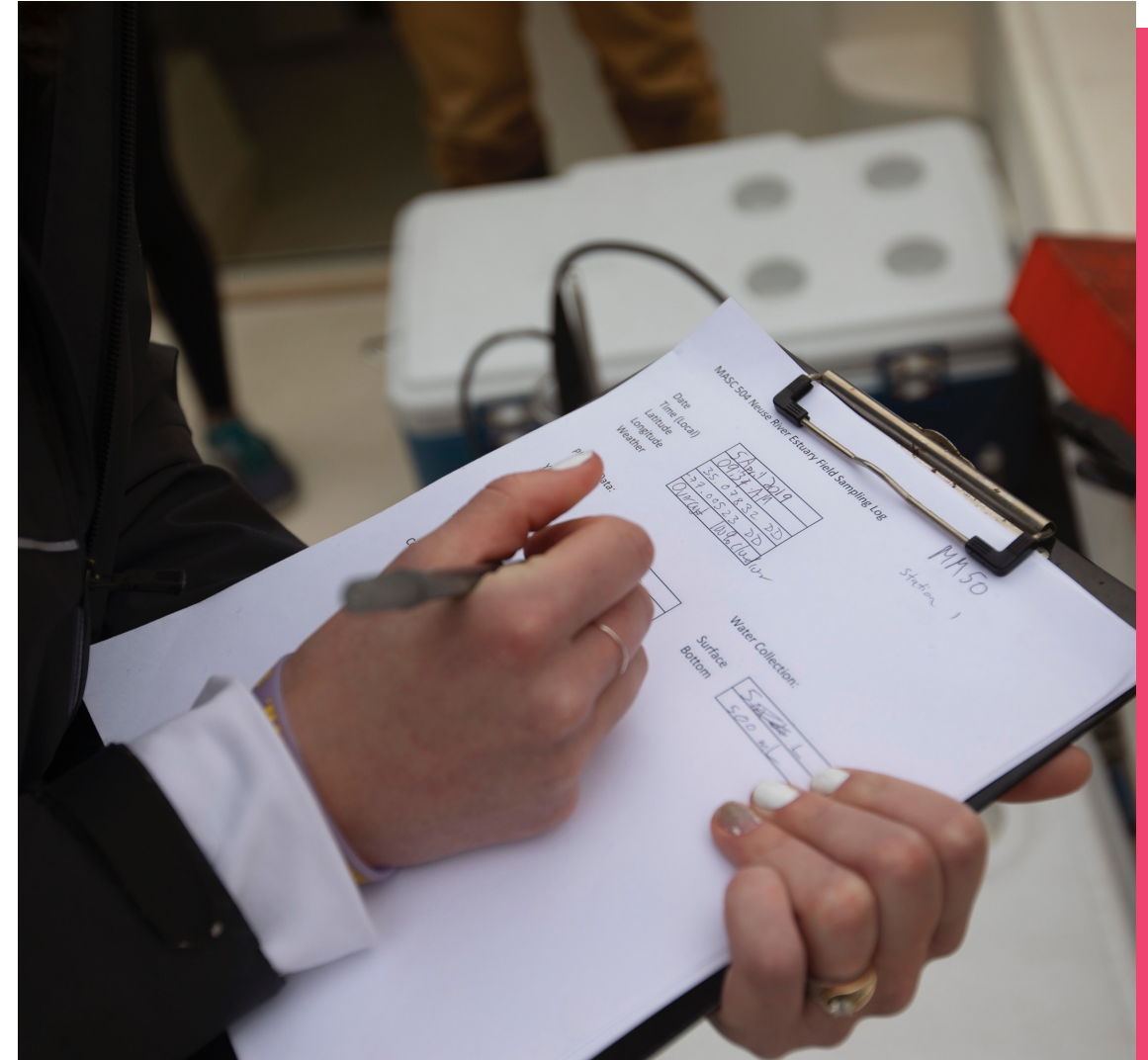
OK, but why *ME*?

1 Inform legislators who can impact policy you care about

2 Get funding from donors and other agencies

3 Recruit future scientists and practitioners

4 Meet requirements for projects that require public outreach and education

5 Improve trust and appreciation of science

6 Increase understanding of the societal benefits of your work

7 Improve likelihood that your research will be seen/cited by your peers

8 Get connected to potential collaborators

9 Put a face to an otherwise impersonal concept

10 And much more!

Audiences can be broad

Experts in your field

- Peer reviewers
- Journal editors
- Grant reviewers/funders
- Conference organizers

Experts in other fields

- Journalists
- Policymakers
- Businesspeople
- Educators

Non-experts

- Community leaders
- Students
- Donors
- General public

Listen before you write

- Who is my readership?

- What do they care about?

- Look for questions they're asking
  - Google search queries or trends (https://trends.google.com)
  - Questions from colleagues, students, friends or family
  - Discussions on social media, message boards, news articles, etc.

Make the public health connection

- What public health challenge is your work addressing?

- How does your work connect to lived experiences?
  - Does it have health equity implications?

- What impact does it have on the future of public health?
  - Policy
  - Practice
  - Clinical care
  - Research

- What are you doing next to build on your work?

"Enduring writing goes beyond fun facts to present big ideas. One trick that helps me turn fun facts into big ideas? Three simple questions: What? So what? Now what?"

HEATHER L. MONTGOMERY, "WHAT? SO WHAT? NOW WHAT? SCIENCE WRITING THAT STANDS OUT"

What is "newsworthy," anyway?

1 Impact

2 Timeliness

3 Debate/Conflict

4 Prominence/Celebrity

5 Human interest

6 Proximity

7 Novelty/Exceptionality

8 Pathos

9 Continuity

10 Convenience

WRITING FOR GENERAL AUDIENCES

Let's Talk About It!

Storytelling helps connect the complex

- Tell a story in a few sentences.
  - Aim for 3-5 sentences.
- Build a narrative:
  - Did you feel an emotion?
  - Did a trigger cause you to act?
  - Did things go the way you expected?
  - Could you draw comparisons or analogies that aid comprehension?

- Keep it succinct. Think:
  - Elevator pitch
  - What, So What, Now What?
- Consider the story arc:
  - Landscape ("We used to think…")
  - Problem ("But we noticed…")
  - Solution ("Our research shows…")
- And, But, Therefore (ABT) technique

The ABT technique

- **_____ and _____, but _____, therefore_____.**
- An easy formula for telling the story of your work in one sentence (or a few)
- "In my lab, we study physiology AND biochemistry, BUT in recent years we've realized there are important questions at the molecular level, THEREFORE we are now investigating the following molecular questions..."
- Set up facts, identify a problem, establish a resolution.

Olson, R. (2015). *Houston, We Have A Narrative*. University of Chicago Press. p 16

Always put people first

- Language evolves, and we must evolve with it.
- The roadmap is empathy
  - Can I make a more inclusive word choice? (terms that are non-gendered or broader in scope, e.g., "health care providers" instead of "doctors")
  - Is there person-first language I can consider? (e.g., "older people," "people without housing," "people with diabetes")
  - Can I reduce harm? (terms that reduce stigma, e.g., "Global South" vs. "third world," or "substance misuse" instead of "abuse")
- These are not settled terms. Even ones acceptable today may change.
- Honor the language preferences of the communities you work with.

Uninformed ≠ unintelligent

- Technical terms are not off limits!
- Define them on first appearance.
- **Do not expect audiences to "look it up."**
- When given a choice between a technical term and a more familiar one, choose the latter (if you do not lose precision).
  - Elucidate vs. explain
  - Proximal vs. close
  - "I write about the shapes of living things but not the morphology of organisms." – Ed Yong
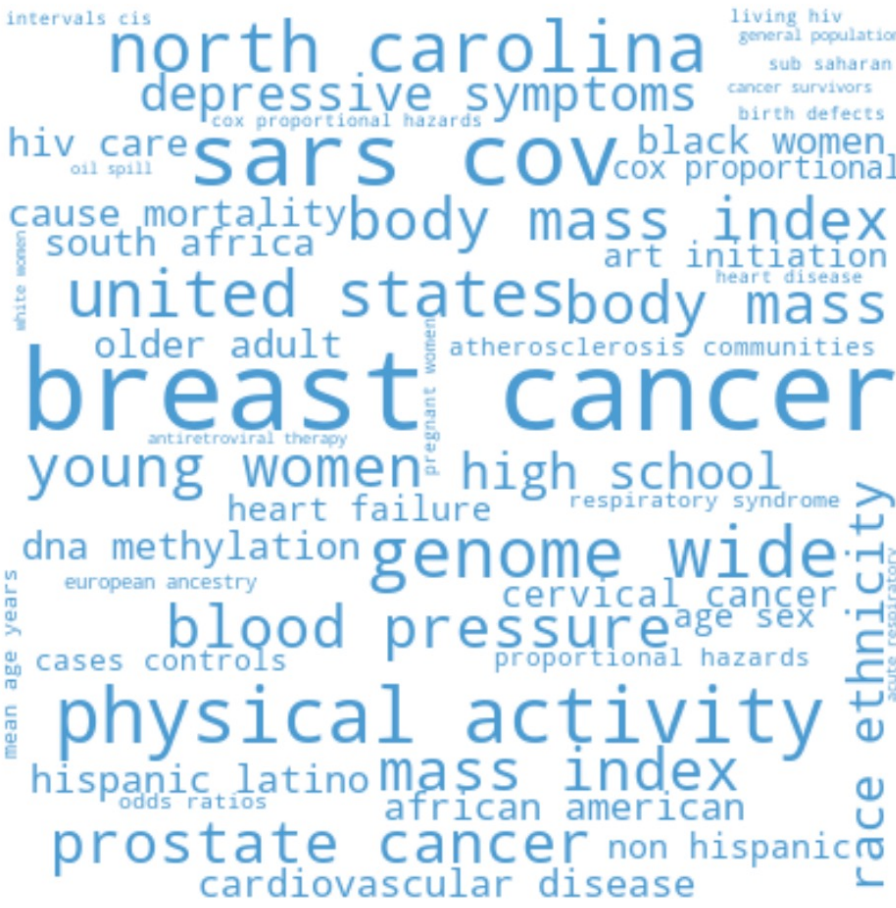
Name that department

Name that department
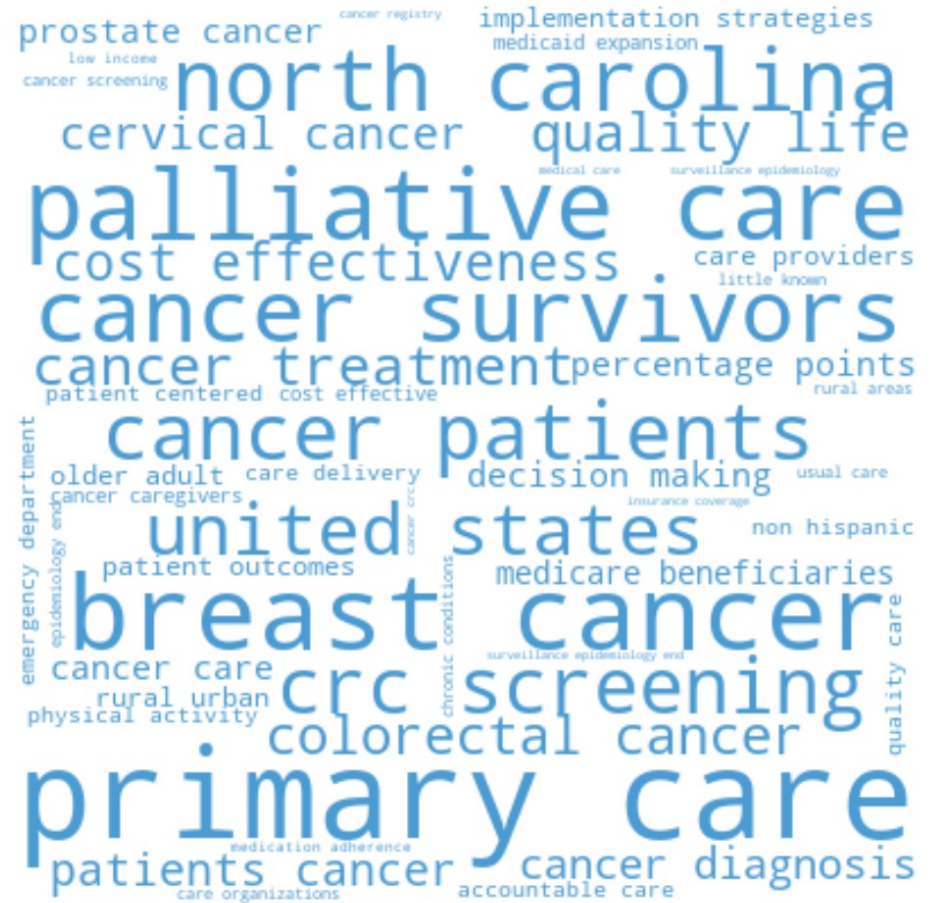
Name that department

The Title

Legacy and emerging airborne per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) collected on PM$_{2.5}$ filters in close proximity to a fluoropolymer manufacturing facility

https://pubs.rsc.org/en/content/articlelanding/2022/em/d2em00358a/unauth

The Headline

Forever chemicals found in air pollution near Fayetteville manufacturing plant

https://sph.unc.edu/sph-news/forever-chemicals-found-in-air-pollution-near-fayetteville-manufacturing-plant/

The Title

Life Course Racism and Depressive Symptoms among Young Black Women

https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11524-021-00574-7

The Headline

Experiences of racism in adolescence raise risk of depression for Black women

https://sph.unc.edu/sph-news/experiences-of-racism-in-adolescence-raise-risk-of-depression-for-black-women/

The Gillings Communications Team

- **Matthew Chamberlin**, Associate Dean for Communications and Marketing, mchamberlin@unc.edu

- **Branson Moore**, Associate Director for Strategic Marketing, eb@unc.edu

- **Jennie Saia**, Associate Director of Communications, jsaia@unc.edu

- **Meg Palmer**, Public Communications Specialist, meg@unc.edu

- **Will Frazier**, Public Communications Specialist, frazierw@unc.edu

- **Mark Scott**, Web Communications Specialist, mark_scott@unc.edu

- You can reach all of us in one convenient place: sphcomm@unc.edu

UNC | GILLINGS SCHOOL OF GLOBAL PUBLIC HEALTH
OFFICE OF COMMUNICATIONS AND MARKETING

Tell your story.

**Research, practice and beyond – we can help you share it with the world.
One email is all it takes. Send one to sphcomm@unc.edu to get started!**

YOU → COMMS → THE WORLD

How we can help:

Photo and video

News media engagement

Event communication

News features

Print and mixed media

Social media

27

Our Monthly Themes

Month	Theme
January	Innovation and Entrepreneurship
February	BIPOC Public Health Champions
March	Mind and Body
April	National Public Health Week
May	Our Graduates are the Future of Public Health
June	Celebrate Pride Month
July	Addressing Climate Change
August	Healthy Families
September	Working Toward Systemic Change
October	Global Health
November	What Is Public Health?
December	Public Health Wins

Helpful resources

- **Public Health Communications Collaborative** (https://publichealthcollaborative.org/)
- **The Diversity Style Guide** (https://diversitystyleguide.com)
- **CDC's CERC training** (https://emergency.cdc.gov/cerc/)
- **Carl Zimmer's list of banned words** (https://carlzimmer.com/the-index-of-banned-words-the-continually-updated-edition/)
- **CDC's Clear Communication Index** (https://www.cdc.gov/ccindex/index.html)
- **The Open Notebook** (https://www.theopennotebook.com/)
- **Kavli Foundation** (https://kavlifoundation.org/)
- **Writing in the Sciences** - University of Guelph (https://writinginthesciences.uoguelph.ca/storytelling-in-science-writing/)

THE UNIVERSITY
of NORTH CAROLINA
at CHAPEL HILL

Let's tell your story!

Meg Palmer | Rosenau 112 | meg@unc.edu | 919-966-8317