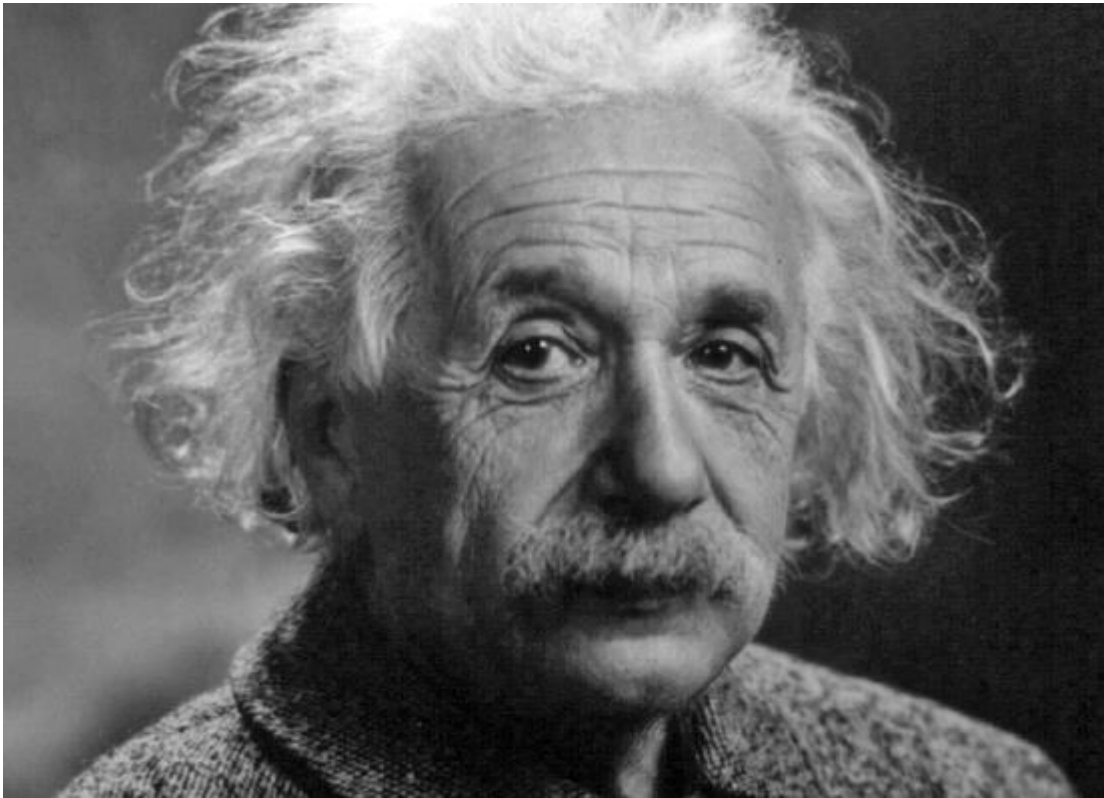


Writing Tips from Ellen Cassedy

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Are You A Scientist or a Writer?



“The greatest scientists are also artists,” Albert Einstein said.

What happens if we turn the great physicist’s statement on its head? Could it be that artists – writers – are also scientists?

Often, we think of scientist and artist as polar opposites – one driven by logic, the other by imagination.

But consider the case of Eva Saulitis, author of *Into Great Silence: A Memoir of Discovery and Loss Among Vanishing Orcas* (Beacon Press, 2014).

Saulitis began her career as a marine biologist studying whales that were struggling for survival in the wake of the 1989 Exxon Valdez oil spill.

When it came time to prepare her conclusions for publication, Saulitis felt constrained by the rigid protocols of scientific writing. The ban on the pronouns “I” and “we” seemed intolerably constricting, emblematic of a crippling detachment.

So Saulitis reached out to creative writing, hoping “to develop another language with which to address the natural world.”

To her surprise, her work as a scientist and her work as a writer turned out not to be nearly so disparate as she had expected.

“The poet collects data like a scientist,” Saulitis said. A sense of awe and a capacity for wonder are vital to both. Open-mindedness and curiosity are essential in both fields.

Saulitis decided she didn’t have to choose. She began to build a home in two disciplines at once.

Whether peering into a microscope or hunched over the draft of a novel, both scientist and artist pay close attention – as close as we possibly can. For both, the goal is to describe the world with accuracy and precision:

This is what I see. This is what I hear. This is what I smell. And this is what it means.

Writers and scientists both ask the big questions. Both set out in search of the truth without knowing exactly where we’re going. Both proceed ahead through experimentation, trying this and that, uncovering new uncertainties as we go.

Saulitis became both a scientist and a creative writer. Her book conveys scientific information in an uncommonly lyrical style. First-person pronouns and all, Saulitis's lovely sentences made me think in new ways – about whales, about science, and about writing.

Are you a scientist, a writer, or a bit of both?

Ellen Cassedy is the author of *We Are Here: Memories of the Lithuanian Holocaust* (Univ. of Nebraska Press, 2012). To see all of her Writing Tips, visit her website at www.ellencassedy.com.