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Sleepy cat and the cosmic dust: Lessons for non-fiction writing from 10 years as a magazine editor

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New Scientist magazine

To oversimplify things slightly, there are two types of story in journalism: the short ones and the long ones. I've spent much of my career so far focussed on the latter, known as features, which has meant an awful lot of head-scratching about how to keep readers engaged, excited, gripped by a story that goes on for several thousand words – no simple matter in the age of AI slop and TikTok.

In this lecture, I'll spill the beans on how we do things at New Scientist magazine, where I have worked for just over 10 years, with special reference to an idea known as “sleepy cat” from the mind of my brilliant former colleague Graham Lawton. I'll also show how I used some of the tricks of creating compelling narratives in one of the stories in my book, *The Meteorite Hunters* – namely the tale of Jon Larsen, the Norwegian jazz guitarist who hunts cosmic dust on urban rooftops.

Whether you want to better understand how journalists think, yearn to improve your own writing, or just enjoy thinking about how stories work, there should be something of interest here for you.