

# Sarah Mirk

*How did you decide which format your work would take? How did you scope it? Who did you talk to? What research did you do?*

I'm the only person I know who's still on Plan A. I grew up in a house full of books and newspapers and thought the most incredible job in the world would be working as a journalist. Think about it: journalism is an excuse to be curious about everything. I get to call up people I think are interesting, ask them all about their lives and ideas, and then combine their thoughts with solid research to make an original story. That sounded like a dream to me when I was 12 and I still think it's a pretty great job these days.

I reported my first article when I was in college, for the campus newspaper. My best friend and I researched the best place to get a haircut in our small Iowa town. It wasn't groundbreaking journalism, but we had a great time poking our heads into these old-school salons and asking strangers if we could spend a few minutes bugging them with questions. Even putting together a little feature story about haircuts turned out to be surprisingly difficult: we'd forgotten to get people to spell their names for us, we hadn't asked the same basic questions of each haircutter, we weren't able to capture the strangeness of the gender roles between male-run barbershops and female-run salons within the confines of 100-word blurbs. Then, of course, we got flack for the shops we'd forgotten to include. When people tell me that they want to be a writer, I suggest they actually go through the process of writing and publishing an article before they decide its their dream career—even simple articles are often complex and stressful. I've hired a couple aspiring journalists as interns who learned very quickly that they hated everything about actually being a journalist. Researching an article, putting your name on it, and sending it out into the world can be terrifying.

When I was in college, I got the distinct impression that many journalism jobs were terrible. My college didn't have any journalism classes, but they did bring in journalists as

speakers pretty frequently. I would always go see these lectures and ask questions. That helped me realize that I didn't really like the sound of the environment at a big, corporate daily newspaper or at a TV news channel. I wanted to work somewhere that would let me have more of a voice and be excited about my political opinions, rather than making me hide them. I started reading Seattle's *The Stranger* newspaper online and loved the tone of the reporting. I emailed the news editor persistently, asking for an internship interview. He relented for some reason and seemed impressed that I knew a lot about the paper and read it often, but only online—this was in the early-ish days of the internet, so reading a newspaper online was kind of a rare thing to do. I followed up with two emails after the interview and he gave me a summer internship. Like I said, my college didn't have a journalism program, but they did offer grants to students who got unpaid internships. I won one of those grants and was able to move to Seattle for the summer to intern for the paper.

I was very nervous when I started working there and I wanted to do a kickass job. So I worked at it very hard and went out on a couple limbs, pitching stories all the time. I'm always full of ideas and I love working with other writers who are that way—people who see good stories all around them. The staff was super patient with me—my first story was supposed to be 500 words and I wrote it to 1,000. I still remember watching a more experienced read through my piece and easily cut out half of it. Now that's a skill. The job gave me a lot of anxiety because I had pretty much no idea what I was doing—I was presenting myself to strangers as a serious reporter and kept thinking someone would rat me out as being just a 19-year-old girl with no experience.

But I kept at it for about seven years and eventually I got pretty good at it. After I graduated from college, I got another unpaid internship at the Portland Mercury, which turned into a job as a staff writer. For five years, I wrote two blog posts a day and at least two print articles a week. It was such a grind! Regardless of my job, I'm always involved in other creative side projects and interesting groups. While at the *Mercury*, I decided to put together a series of nonfiction comics about Oregon history, which eventually became a really popular 10-issue series involving 10 artists and dozens of collaborators. I also taught

zine workshops at a local nonprofit and started writing a book about relationships, *Sex from Scratch: Making Your Own Relationship Rules* (which comes out in August!). In addition to my years as a reporter, it was these self-directed and community-oriented projects that I think made an impression on the *Bitch* staff when I applied for the job as online editor. I wanted to work at a national publication surrounded by smart people who cared a lot about doing a good job and about social justice. I've been here at *Bitch* for about a year and a half now and it's wonderful—I'm busy all the time, working with about 100 writers a year as I write and edit daily online articles, run all our social media, and host our podcast, but that's the way I like to be.