

A LOCAL NEWSPAPER COLUMN ABOUT ASTRONOMY AND THE NIGHT SKY

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A good way to communicate astronomy to the general public is to convince your local newspaper to print an astronomy column. (Every newspaper has an astrology column, so you can argue for equal time for astronomy!) I write a biweekly to monthly column (during the summer months) called “The Big Sky”, in the *Missoulian* of Missoula, Montana. Each article always has two parts: a description of how to find something interesting in the sky, along with some astronomical background information about the object. Good examples would be a lunar eclipse or a meteor shower.

Most newspapers in smaller cities carry no stories about astronomy, except those that they get from the national wire services. These same newspapers always have a daily horoscope, however. Astronomers who find this situation deplorable should consider approaching their local newspaper about publishing a column about astronomy. Many newspapers welcome columns from local experts about many subjects. Perhaps your newspaper would run a monthly astronomy column. This would serve several purposes:

1. It would provide a welcome contrast to the astrology columns.
2. It would give readers some useful information about the sky and astronomical objects.
3. It would provide you, your department, and your parent institution with some good public exposure.

I have been writing “The Big Sky” column for the *Missoulian* for several years now. The column started as a biweekly one, but it has since changed to a monthly column which is longer and contains a star chart. Having such a star chart is important for two reasons – providing a visual reference for the sky object, and giving a graphic to serve as a “grabbing device” for the article.

Topics I have covered include: conjunctions of planets and bright stars, the brightness of the planets, meteor showers, the Milky Way galaxy, the Andromeda galaxy, the phases of the Moon, the rings of Saturn, the ecliptic and the seasons, the constellations of the zodiac, lunar and solar eclipses, the impact of Shoemaker-Levy 9 on Jupiter, the distances of stars, and the colors and temperatures of the stars. As you can see, “hot topics” in astronomy and space are effective, but popular subjects in backyard astronomy also represent a great way to excite the public’s interest in observational astronomy, and even advertise other activities that they can participate in [planetarium shows, astronomy club events, star parties, workshops, etc.]

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