

# “I Love Helping People Communicate Their Ideas and Maximize the Impact of Their Work”



Sarah Treit



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**Abstract** In our interview with Sarah Treit, she shares her journey from completing a PhD in neuroimaging to becoming an entrepreneur and consultant. Initially planning for a research career, Sarah became interested in science communication, realizing her passion for making figures and writing grants. She started her own company, Figures First Consulting, through which she provides services editing manuscripts and grants, making figures, and teaching workshops on effective visual communication. Sarah highlights the importance of networking with peers and exploring interests outside your PhD. She advises those considering consulting to be self-motivated yet adaptable, gain experience publishing and reviewing grants, and learn business skills. Though no longer doing her own research, Sarah finds meaning assisting others and exploring diverse topics. She values the autonomy consulting provides to pursue interesting projects.

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## **Chris: Can you introduce yourself and tell me a bit about your current position?**

Sarah: My name is Sarah Treit and I am the founder of a company called Figures First Consulting. Through this company, I offer consulting services to PIs who are writing manuscripts and grants by helping with grant development, writing, editing, and creation of figures. I also offer educational workshops and online courses to help graduate students and other trainees learn how to create more effective scientific figures, graphical abstracts, posters, and more. Scientific figures are a critical aspect of science communication and can have a huge impact on how results are interpreted, remembered, and shared. I love helping people communicate their ideas to maximize the impact of their work.

## **What was the focus of your PhD?**

I received my PhD in 2015 from the University of Alberta. My area of research was neuroimaging (structural MRI) of brain development in children with fetal alcohol spectrum disorders. My project was very interdisciplinary (one of my supervisors was in Biomedical Engineering and the other was in Pediatrics), which provided me with lots of unique experiences and opened my eyes to the importance of effective communication between disciplines.

## **As you were finishing your PhD, what were you thinking about your career plans?**

When I finished my PhD, for personal reasons I had to stay in Edmonton, so I knew doing a postdoc was not really in the cards. I had never planned on pursuing a tenure-track position, but also knew I wanted to stay in research so I struggled to figure out what that might look like career wise. I worked for several years as a Research Associate in Biomedical Engineering at the University of Alberta, which allowed me to continue publishing and build some research experience in other areas (mostly within Neurology). Eventually, I decided I wanted the autonomy of working for myself and was excited by the prospects of entrepreneurship, so decided to start my own company.

## **How did you decide what would be the focus of your company?**

I have always had a passion for communicating science. My favorite part of every project is sitting down with the results, visualizing my findings, and writing the paper. I have always loved making figures and coming up with new and creative ways to display data. At the same time, I have noticed that this is an area that many students struggle with, in part because most students learn how to make effective visuals through trial and error. This led very naturally to the motivation to create an online course to help teach students some of the fundamentals of effective scientific figure design and, in doing so, hopefully make this process easier for everyone (including their PIs). Beyond this fundamentals course, I also now teach workshops on creating effective figures for grant applications, crafting a compelling graphical abstract, and designing scientific posters. On the consulting side, I have also always loved writing and editing and in particular, helping with grant applications. So this was natural for me to want to build out part of my business to do these things on a regular basis. Grant applications are still my favorite type of consulting project. I love getting to learn about new research areas, problems I often didn't know much about, and the novel ideas and innovations scientists have created to solve them, all while helping make sure their ideas are being communicated in a concise and compelling way.

## **How have your career plans changed as you've continued on to your current position?**

I wouldn't say my career plans have changed, but I have definitely been led in directions that I didn't anticipate. For example, one thing I'm currently really interested in is trying to work directly with Journals to improve the quality control process

they implement when reviewing figures, without just passing this onto reviewers. The peer review system has many flaws, and inconsistent quality of review is a real challenge created in part by the fact that it's an unpaid task that many academics don't have enough time for. Evaluation of the science will always need to be external, but I think the editorial team can do more to evaluate other aspects of the manuscript quality (including certain aspects of the statistical analysis, methods, and figures) to make it easier for reviewers to do a good job in less time.

I have also really enjoyed running my Instagram page (@figures.first) and coming up with fun ways to convey small concepts to a wide audience. This has led to many connections and some opportunities that I look forward to pursuing and has also piqued an interest in science communication with the public.

### **Can you tell us a bit about what day-to-day life is like in your current position?**

My day to day varies a lot depending on what projects I'm working on. Typically, it includes several hours of consulting work, mixed with time spent on "marketing" (content creation for social media, networking to set up workshops, etc.) and some time on the creation of my next course. Some projects are very time sensitive and demanding so those obviously shift my focus. I also try to deliver workshops in person (rather than virtually) whenever possible, so I spend some time traveling as well.

### **What do you like most about your work?**

I love learning about so many different research areas and having complete autonomy over what I do. I also enjoy teaching and working with students when running workshops, and remaining part of the academic world, without being fully entrenched in it.

### **And what do you like least about your work?**

I miss being part of a team and having coworkers to bounce ideas off of, brainstorm, and get feedback from. Working on my own is great in many ways, but I miss the team atmosphere and the inspiration that comes from working with others. This is one of the reasons I love working on grants, because I get to temporarily join someone else's team and help achieve something big.

## **How do you think having a PhD has helped you succeed in your current position?**

The work I do requires experience in academia (e.g. publishing in peer-reviewed journals, writing grant applications) that is generally not possible without a PhD. So I think a PhD is essential for the work that I do, in addition to providing credibility to the clients who hire me.

## **If someone currently finishing their PhD was considering a position similar to yours, how might they decide if it would be a good fit?**

To become a consultant you need to be very self-motivated (true of most aspects of academia) and capable of working alone, while also being able to work well with a huge range of working styles given the range in clientele you will come across. You also need to love academia. Although I consider this to be an "academia-adjacent" career path that avoids certain aspects (e.g. university administration), you are still very much working in an academic environment and need to enjoy the academic process and working style.

## **If someone was interested in pursuing a similar career path, what would you suggest they do to better prepare themselves?**

During your PhD I would attempt to get as much experience with the granting process as possible by offering to proofread, edit, or otherwise contribute to the grants of your PI and collaborators. I would also take opportunities to sit on review panels as a trainee (some funding bodies have training programs) even for smaller opportunities. I would also of course suggest trying to get as much experience publishing as you can and assisting with peer review if possible. If I could go back in time, I would have liked to gain some business or marketing experience, even if it was just a crash course or two.

## **A lot of people like academia because they feel it gives them an opportunity to work on a topic that they deeply care about. Do you think this is also true in your current position?**

This is one thing I may eventually miss about academia, as I'm no longer doing my own research and instead playing a part in other people's work. That said, I get to take part in learning about many different research areas that I find both exciting and

interesting, but would never have ended up in on my own. I am also still in the health research sphere, which has no shortage of topics to feel passionate about and which as a whole is also of great importance.

**Another reason many like academia is that they feel it provides them with more freedom than they think they would get in other positions. How much freedom do you feel you have to work on what you think is interesting?**

I definitely have a lot of freedom in my current position, and deciding what to work on is part of that. Given that I'm just starting out, I try not to say no to new consulting projects unless I really can't make the timing work, but already that is becoming more common and I think eventually I will be able to be quite choosy with what I take. The other freedom I have is to pursue interesting avenues in my business, not just with respect to the type of work I take but how I get that work, creating content on social media, making connections with new researchers and institutions, and thinking strategically about how to network and grow as a company.

**Have you thought about returning to academia?**

No, I can't say I have!

**Based on your journey, what advice or suggestions do you want to pass on to someone who's currently finishing their PhD?**

I think it's wise to think broadly about your interests and what you enjoy doing within and outside of your PhD. The vast majority of PhD students end up in careers outside of the tenure-track, so even if that is your goal (which is great!) it can still be good to think about non-tenure-track positions that might interest you, or where else you could see yourself. Try to gain experience in other areas (sometimes even through internships), take side projects that interest you and give you a new skill, and network with your peers. During your PhD networking is often focused on making connections with people ahead of you (professors, industry and government employees, etc). While those connections are of course very valuable, don't underestimate the value of making solid connections with the people around you at the same level, some of the places they end up may surprise you!

## **Is there anything else you'd like to tell someone reading this interview?**

If you want to learn more about what I do, feel free to check out my website ([www.figuresfirst.ca](http://www.figuresfirst.ca)) or reach out through email ([sarah@figuresfirst.ca](mailto:sarah@figuresfirst.ca)) or LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/sarah-treit-phd/>

**Thank you for sharing your journey with us, Sarah!**