I firmly believe in the saying that “you are what you eat” (Brillat-Savarin, 1825); a powerful aphorism reiterating the enormous impact of nutrition and lifestyle on human health. Fortunately, I was introduced to an undergraduate instructor several years ago, who not only shares the same beliefs as me, but who has imparted her wisdom in inspirational ways. I thus chose to interview my highly valued former professor, Dr. Jessica Hodge, as I aspire to enter the field of medical and nutrition research after graduating with a Master’s degree.

Hodge served as post-doctoral researcher for Boston’s Tufts University before relocating to California in early 2000. Her education and career paths, however, have been anything but straightforward. Hodge, whose father was a publicized inorganic chemist, first studied Chemistry and Home Economics, with emphasis on Clothing and Textile Chemistry, before obtaining her Master’s degree in Biochemistry from The Rockefeller University in New York City, New York. It was at the Rockefeller Institute for Medical Research that she took her first biomedical research position, linking adipose tissue size to an increase in obesity, examining enzyme function in their role of cholesterol metabolism, and studying the connection between aging and dermatological cancers.
Although Hodge encountered a fair number of writing assignments throughout her college education, it was only during her years at Rockefellers that writing became pertinent and outright crucial to her career. With the help of mentors and instructors, she published several papers; the most noteworthy being her master’s thesis, printed in the *Journal of Biological Chemistry*. Hodge discussed in her dissertation, titled the **UBIQUITINYLATION AND UBIQUITIN-DEPENDENT PROTEOLYSIS IN VERTEBRATE PHOTORECEPTORS (rod outer segments) - Evidence for Ubiquitinylation of Gt and Rhodopsin**, that ubiquitin, a small regulatory protein, is in part responsible for macular degeneration of the eye. By utilizing bovine retinas, specifically light contrasting rod cells, Hodge studied the influence of ubiquitin in the development of cataracts and came to conclude that this molecule played a key role in the degradation of other functional proteins as well. Hence, ubiquitin’s foremost function lies in labeling complex protein molecules for protease enzymes to come in and destroy them. Interestingly, Hodge came upon some of her father’s publications while researching materials for her own dissertation, a fact of which she seemed very proud.

Hodge’s research took her to Boston, where she worked for Tufts University Research Laboratory in order to finance her Doctorate degree. She graduated in 1996 with a degree in Nutritional Biochemistry, but continued her work for the Tufts’ research labs while slowly transitioning into teaching positions. She stressed that educating, just as writing, is an imperative method to “get the word out” (Hodge). Thus, her recommendation to me was to
find as many teaching opportunities as I possibly can, especially since the field of Nutrition and Dietetics is all about educating the individual, and the public at large about healthy lifestyle choices.

“Years of research will take its toll on just about everyone”, Hodge explained, and it was this feeling of being “burned out” that enticed her to switch her career path once again. After moving to California, she accepted a teaching position at Folsom Lake College in Folsom in their Nutrition, Family and Consumer Science, and Early Childhood Development Department. However, the writing component in her current job greatly differs from her post research career. Where Hodge used to write for publication purposes, she now focuses on sharing her knowledge with college students and faculty. As adviser of the curriculum committee, she frequently communicates with course developers in order to establish new course outlines to be used by all staff and faculty in a specific department. Hodge’s present goal is to develop a new combination-style course, blending the fields of Nutrition, Biology, Geography and Early Childhood Education. For such, she needs to create a ten to fifteen page portfolio not only describing the course content, but including documentation as to why the aforementioned course is important to the community. The outline needs to further detail (1) the goals of the class, (2) the credentials needed to teach the course and (3) the textbooks requirements, etc. She suggested I read the book *In Defense of Food*, by Michael Pollan, as Hodge plans to make it “the required reading” for her combination course. I
feel honored that she asked for my feedback on the book and is willing to consider my input in her course planning.

By far the most extensive writing task Hodge partook in, however, was for Folsom Lake College’s accreditation process. She co-authored a roughly three-hundred page collection of justifications to be reviewed by the National Accreditation Committee. Although the accreditation manuscript was written in MLA style, Hodge has used many of the other style manuals as well. “Each journal has their own specific criteria for publication” Hodge stressed, and thus she recommended that I familiarize myself with the different style manuals available, as I no doubt will encounter some of them in my career. Fortunately, most journals provide templates.

Moreover, Hodge emphasized on the importance of including graphs, tables, charts and photographs by stating that “a picture is worth a thousand words”. In her career as a scientist, the inclusion of electron micrograph images, statistical tables and other visual aids was pertinent to the overall presentation of the article. Although Hodge’s papers have since changed from technical writing for publication purposes to formal writing for marketing reasons, the complexity of her writing has remained the same. As a matter of fact, she inferred that the volume, intensity and depth of her papers have steadily increased throughout her education and employment.

When I asked her about the highlight of her career, she smiled as she recalled a specific occasion in which she was invited as the key speaker to a
Nutrition and Medical Biochemistry Conference about the effects of enzymatic function after myocardial infarction (heart attacks). As she explained the forces of various enzymes - nature’s biocatalysts - in speeding up the degradation of signaling proteins, hormones and other organic chemicals after a heart attack, she noticed her father sitting in the audience. She swore that he must have had absolutely no clue as to what she was talking about, though he, nonetheless, gleamed with pride. Her father, who had wished for Hodge to never follow in his footsteps, suddenly realized that his daughter was more than capable of finding her own path in life. Hodge reminisced for a while about the different ways her father influenced her and how he guided her choices.

Similarly, Hodge has influenced me to a great extent and I am grateful for the support she has shown me. She continues to inspire me in unusual ways, like her suggestion to teach Nutrition in addition to finding volunteer positions in this field. I admire her dedication to research and education, and respect her perseverance in achieving the goals she sets forth. Mostly, however, I look forward to discussing Michael Pollan’s book with her. I believe that, as our student-mentor relationship continues, we will have plenty of opportunities to exchange ideas on the topics of “nature versus nurture”, childhood nutrition and the obesity epidemic, among others. I am confident that Hodge will lend a helping hand to everyone who asks, just as she did to me.

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Bibliography

