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AAAS Communication Toolkit



Center for Public Engagement with Science & Technology

Communicating to Engage

Excellent public engagement with science builds on a foundation of clear, concise communication. This section provides guidance and tips to improve your communication skills.

The way scientists are trained is excellent preparation for communicating with precision about your work with colleagues. When communicating with public audiences, however, you need to shift to the way you would speak when 'off the clock.' Think about the last time you explained your work to a friend or family member. Those who care about you are highly motivated to understand the science you work on, yet they may struggle to engage with it.

As highlighted in the diagram below, typical scientific communication (such as the last journal article you read or wrote) includes a lengthy background, and then describes the methods and process used with great precision. It is not until the very end of the paper that results or conclusions are reported.

Public communication flips this approach on its head: the bottom-line is the lead, followed quickly by the "so what," and then the supporting details, as appropriate.



Adapted from Nancy Baron's *Escape from the Ivory Tower* 

Scientists and the public have different communication styles. While scientists often start by placing research in a historical context, the public wants to know the key point at the start. | Adapted from Nancy Baron's *Escape from the Ivory Tower*.

In a crowded communication environment, most people don't need to read or listen to content that is not immediately compelling to them. Start with the bottom-line in a way that is relevant to the audience, and then share more details. Being proactive about the way you phrase your key ideas to speak directly to an audience's interests, or even embedding a discussion of science in places where less motivated audiences might discover them accidentally, will help you more deeply engage with that audience, which will likely increase the odds of achieving your engagement goal. You should also consider tactics like removing jargon, and weighing the need for precise language with what is most relevant to your audience and will engage them.

When thinking about how to communicate, even before designing tactics, consider why you are communicating. What is your communication goal? From there, you can identify appropriate audience(s), and then the words or messages you'll use to engage that audience with your key ideas. This framework can be applied across communication channels, audiences, and goals.

GETTING STARTED
