

Speaking of Science: The Art of Science Communication

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Good communication strategies are useful for talking to the public, to colleagues, to students, in talks at conferences, and in papers!

There is a lot of overlap between key messages in effective *education* and in effective *communication*.



The deficit model does not work. Treating your audience like they simply “lack knowledge,” and you need to fill that gap, does not work. People are not empty vessels, don’t just try to dump information into their heads.

The data don’t speak for themselves. Don’t simply present the facts, but explain what you think your audience should make of those facts. Give them the “so what”.

What’s your elevator speech? Can you make a short pitch with your message, with no more than three main points? Follow the journalist model of communication: Bottom line, then key details, then some background if you have time.

Walk the fine line between understandability and accuracy. Don’t be so simplist that it’s wrong. But don’t be so worried about accuracy that it’s incomprehensible. Most scientists err towards the latter!

Respect your audience. Don’t alienate them with prejudices about what they can understand, and don’t just try to “fill their empty heads with facts.” Pay attention to what they already know, and meet them there.

Arouse, and then fulfill. Motivate, and then educate. Give them a “need to know.” And then fulfill that need.

Weave a story. Don’t make the mistake of giving historical background and assuming that that makes it a “story”. Rather, find the narrative thread in your argument or idea.

Tell us why we should care. If talking to the public, give the bottom line first, rather than background details. If talking to a professional audience, make it clear why people should listen to what you have to say.

Resources:

Don’t Be Such a Scientist, by Randy Olson

A Scientists’ Guide to Talking with the Media, Union of Concerned Scientists

Communicating Science website, communicatingscience.aaas.org

How People Learn, Bransford and Brown