

◆ *Mind the Gap: Communicating Science to Diverse Audiences*

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Speakers:

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Whether at the dinner table, a cocktail party, or a meeting with professionals from another field, many scientists encounter “that glazed look” when they talk about what they do.

“It’s not that friends, relatives, and colleagues aren’t interested in what we do,” noted Nature Publishing Group’s Publishing Manager Jennifer Henry. It’s just that for diverse audiences of scientists and nonscientists outside your own field—including those who may have funded your efforts—there is a need to communicate clearly your work’s essence and value.

“Diverse audiences” might include non-specialist scientists, such as a family doctor; scientists in other disciplines, such as a nephrologist fascinated by astrophysics; the general public; and those who read science in a language other than English. “For a whole host of reasons, these people are interested in what we do,” Henry said.

For such audiences, she said, it’s important to communicate and share the science in ways that will interest, educate, stimulate, inspire, and entertain people “to help keep them engaged in what we’re doing”.

She presented several case studies to illustrate how Nature Publishing approaches the challenge, always asking “What are readers interested in, and how can we provide it?” A technical article in urology, for example, might be rewritten as a commentary appropriate for a retired surgeon’s subway reading. An article about developments in cardiology might show up as a “perspective” useful to a hypertensionologist engaged in a collaborative project. Articles in various scientific fields are routinely rewritten as news articles or as “back stories” that highlight the people behind the research. All those are accessible to nonspecialist readers—from the humanities graduate student with a penchant for science to the bricklayer with a thirst for knowledge.

Ivan Oransky, managing editor, online, for *Scientific American*, noted that some of the most brilliant scientists can’t explain their work to anyone outside their laboratories. He suggested that scientists should be able to explain what they’re doing, both to PhDs in other specialties and to neighbors in the grocery-store checkout line.

Oransky offered a dozen basic principles for communicating with diverse audiences:

1. “Dumbing down” isn’t. A clear explanation is not offensive to the person who knows what you’re talking about and is helpful to the person who doesn’t.
2. Tell readers what you would tell a smart

14 year old.

3. Use active language. Tell readers what happened.

4. Nix numbers and acronyms. “About half” can be more intuitively meaningful than “54%”.

5. Write for the reader, not for the source. Resist the urge to use technical language to explain what something is or does.

6. People “read up”—to a point. Don’t forget no. 1 and no. 2, but don’t underestimate the reader’s intelligence, either.

7. Avoid the inside baseball—inside the Beltway syndrome. Don’t talk only to specialty “insiders”.

8. Make it about people. Weave a narrative about the person who is doing the work or the person who has the disease.

9. Use analogies and metaphors. Use things people do understand to help explain what they don’t.

10. When in doubt, leave it out.

11. Read it out loud. What you write should be conversational, declarative, and to the point.

12. Help Web readers find you. Use terms and phrases that will light up in a Google search or on a social networking site like Digg.

Not dismissing the need for technical articles for specialized audiences, both presenters agreed that ultimately “almost all audiences are general”. There are many others besides your laboratory mates who care about what you do and are inspired by how science works. “Try to capture what’s exciting about the science,” suggested Henry, and you will surely close the communication gap with diverse audiences. 🔥