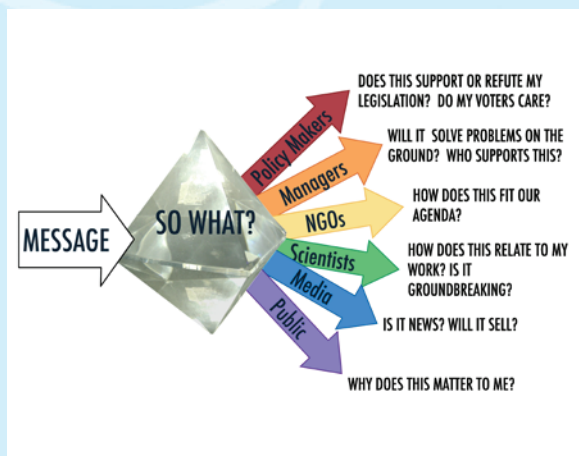


EXPLAINING YOUR RESEARCH: USING THE MESSAGE BOX TO COMMUNICATE COMPLEX IDEAS

Most researchers aren't trained to communicate effectively with the press, policymakers, or the public—or to handle the backlash that can accompany it. Moving beyond the safe, well-defined confines of research can be difficult and even scary. But as a global society living in/on a rapidly changing planet, we cannot afford to allow critical information languish in the pages of academic journals. That you are reading this handout suggests that you want to learn new skills in how to engage audiences beyond the scientific community. No matter what your specialty, the keys to success are knowing exactly what you want to say, understanding your audience, and using effective language to get your points across.

The window of opportunity for engaging journalists, policymakers, and virtually everyone else is narrow. Speaking faster, louder, or covering an endless stream of ideas in the hopes that some portion of the message will make it through the crack before the window slams shut is a common but ineffective strategy. To be successful, your message must be easily understood, memorable, and, most important, relevant to your audience.



STEP ONE: "SO WHAT?"

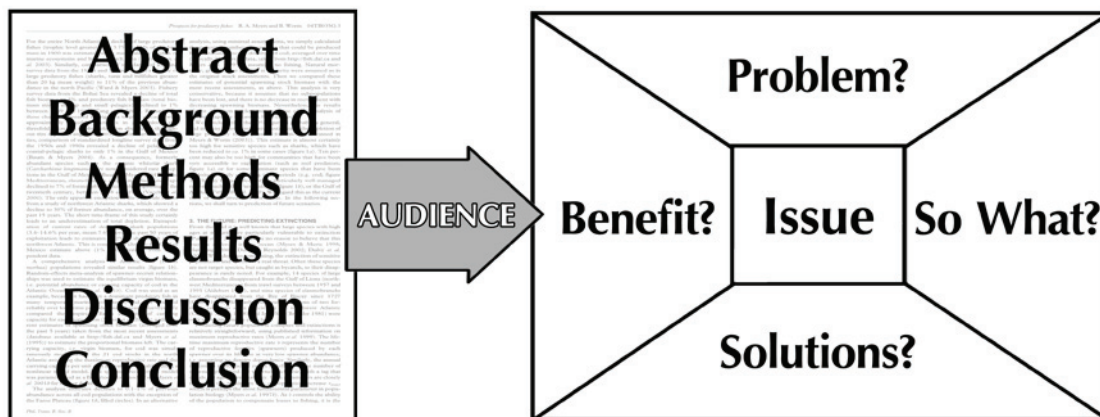
Your audience wants to know why they should personally care about what you are saying. If you begin by thinking about your audience's values, expectations, and interests, you can translate your information in a way that resonates instead of just dousing them with what's on your mind.

Every audience is different, so you have to be ready to modify the way you express your main ideas. Think of it as passing your message through a prism—each audience has a different "so what?" It's important to customize what you say and how you say it to your particular audience.

STEP TWO: THE MESSAGE BOX

As a rule, scientists know too much and struggle to simplify it. "Once we know something, we find it hard to imagine what it was like not to know it," write Chip and Dan Heath in their useful book, *Made to Stick*. "It becomes difficult for us to share our knowledge with others because we can't readily re-create our listener's state of mind." Scientists are bedeviled by the "curse of too much knowledge." It compels you to ignore the big picture and to flood your audience with too much information.

The message box is a deceptively simple tool that helps you sift through the mountain of information in your mind and focus on the few key messages that will be most salient for your audience. It helps you to prioritize the most important information and figure out how to effectively deliver it.



The message box consists of a central issue connected to four quadrants, each containing a question.

- Issue: In broad terms, what is the overarching issue or topic?
- Problem: What is the specific problem or piece of the issue I am addressing?
- So What?: Why does this matter to my audience?
- Solutions: What are the potential solutions to the problem?
- Benefits: What are the potential benefits of resolving this problem?

The message box is nonlinear so there here is no need to start with any particular component and work your way through step-by-step. If a conversation opens with a question about solutions, you can start there. The quadrant layout mentally prepares you to return to your main points no matter where you begin or how the conversation develops.

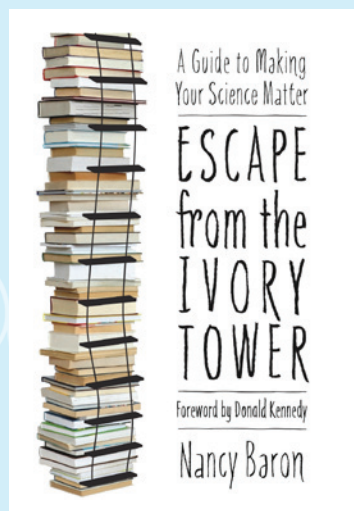
Used effectively, the message box strips away details that are irrelevant and distracting to nonscientists, and zeroes in on the core ideas that you want to convey. As you work through the message box, keep in mind that messages are:

- the core ideas you are trying to get across, not necessarily sound bites.
- simple, but not necessarily simplistic. They can be explained in one sentence.
- jargon-free.
- supported by sound bites, metaphors, statistics, and anecdotes (sparingly).

Despite some initial skepticism, the scientists we train inevitably say that the message box is a valuable tool for translating their research into accessible information. They use it time and again to prepare for interviews, design talks, and even to write papers and grant proposals.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Your goal is to be simple, but not simplistic, in order to make your important ideas accessible to a broad range of audiences. With a bit of effort, everything can be explained succinctly. The purpose of the message box is to help you do this. Many of the best scientist communicators we know swear by it—so give it a try.



This handout summarizes key ideas from our book, *Escape From the Ivory Tower: A Guide to Making Science Matter*. The book compiles practical and entertaining advice on how to engage your audience, ace an interview, promote a research paper, enter the political fray, and test the waters of social media. It includes advice from journalists, decision-makers, bloggers, and some of the thousands of scientists who have participated in our communication workshops.

For more information:

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