

The 12 Step Program (for Communicating Science): Mind the gap!

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We tell stories about science in many different ways. Some communicate about science visually, some communicate about science through the written word. The medium aside, the audience is still the audience, and they bring to both the written text and the film the same set of preconceived notions, education, and culture that can impact the ability of the medium to effectively explain, excite, and enthuse them about a field of study with which they likely have little direct interaction.

I come to the question of how to communicate science from a journalist's point of view. Science journalism is different from science writing and communication, and that isn't always obvious to everyone. Journalism isn't about teaching science, or about encouraging science literacy *per se*. It's about breaking news and, to quote the old saw, afflicting the comfortable and comforting the afflicted. But the two disciplines have a number of things in common, one of which is that they both seek to encourage an audience to think about science. Journalism urges skepticism, questioning facts and conclusions. That kind of skepticism helps people become lifelong learners, which is a goal of science communication in any format. Below are twelve rules I live by, sometimes consciously and sometimes unconsciously, when I write for any audience.

Rule 1. Why dumbing down isn't
What do you know about how your car works?

Rule 2. Working with scientists
Tell me what you'd tell a smart 14-year-old

Rule 3. Know your audience
Just because someone has a PhD doesn't mean she knows the same things
another PhD does

Rule 4. Numbers and acronyms
Why is this here?

Rule 5. Resist the jargonization of science
Language counts

Rule 6. People read (or watch) up, to a point
What happens when you create a magazine for postdocs

Rule 7. Why is this important? What does it mean to me?
Avoid the inside baseball/beltway problem

Rule 8. Stuck?
Make it about people

Rule 9. Use analogies and metaphors
You know, like a "brave new world" of science

Rule 10. Choose your battles
When in doubt, leave it out

Rule 11. Read (watch?) it out loud
If you read it and see it, so will they

Rule 12. Remember the Web!
A word about the web and that awful acronym, SEO