

TELLING THE RIGHT STORY TO THE RIGHT PEOPLE AT THE RIGHT TIME

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Module 2: DEVELOPING YOUR CENTRAL MESSAGE

There is one key thing to mention before we get started with this module's materials. This module and the remaining modules will involve some writing. As scientists, writing can often feel like a fraught affair for us. The hostile nature of the scientific review process very frequently reinforces the idea that any writing must be pored over and perfect. Don't worry about perfect here! Remember that anything you write is not going to be seen by anyone outside the group. The point of the short writing exercises is to learn concepts, not to produce material that you will immediately be able to put to use.

As we discussed in the prior module, centering your message within the concerns or interest of your target audience is essential for engagement success. One easy way to illustrate this is to examine our own lives. All of us in this course are ecologists associated with academic institutions, with many of us being early-career scientists. For almost all of us, there are some common things that we all worry about and spend a lot of time thinking about. These things include: concerns connected to our individual research, issues related to being employed by an academic institution, and future job prospects. If someone wanted to get our attention, that person would be much more likely to succeed if their message connected with things that matter to us. For example, a message that connected in some way with improving our academic job prospects would be pretty likely to get our attention. A message coming out of left field - let's say something focused entirely on advances in electrical engineering - would be likely

ignored by us. After all, we're all busy. Who has the time or attention to focus on something entirely new?

Any target audience we attempt to reach will be exactly like us: a message that is connected in some way to already-existing concerns will be much more successful than one that isn't.

The last module focused on selecting a target audience and beginning to understand where they are coming from. In this module, we'll put that knowledge to use in developing our core message. In your investigation of your audience, what interests or concerns seem to bubble to the surface? These issues don't necessarily have to be connected to your science. For example, perhaps your audience is focused on an unrelated political issue or perhaps they are huge Green Bay Packers fans.

What if there don't seem to be any common concerns in your target group? If you run into this, there is a strong possibility that your audience is not properly defined. Perhaps there is a subset of your initial proposed audience that does present a cohesive target or perhaps your target needs to be entirely redefined.

Here's an example of how one scientist worked through her difficulties in finding the right target audience. An ecologist that one of us has worked with focuses her research on monarch butterflies - specifically on how certain introduced species of milkweed plants are extremely deleterious to monarch populations (these butterflies require milkweed for oviposition and feeding). Her initial audience was people who care about monarch butterflies. Unfortunately, she found this audience to be extremely elusive. It wasn't that there aren't enough people that care about monarchs - quite the opposite, in fact. It turns out interest in monarchs spans widely across demographic groups - so widely, that she had real difficulty finding a cohesive set of interests and concerns that this group shared. She realized that she had to go back to the drawing board. After a lot of thought, she discovered the people that she actually wanted to connect with:

gardeners looking to plant milkweed in their home gardens. It was much easier to find a common set of interests with this more precisely defined group. As an even bigger benefit, this group was actually the set of people who were in the best position to act on the message she wanted to convey (only plant species of milkweed in gardens that are not harmful to monarchs).

Assignment One: List all of the issues of common interest that you have noticed coming up with your group. These issues don't have to be connected to your science. Be as specific as possible.

Once you have come up with your initial list, the next step is to determine how to connect your message with something on that list. First up, what are the kind of messages that you would like to convey to your target audience? Perhaps you want to make the science coming out of your LTER site more accessible to the local community around that site. Perhaps you want to connect your science to a stakeholder group affected by that science. Suppose your research focuses on marine spatial planning and you want to connect to fishers who could be affected by the results of your research. Issues of common interest might be: risk of damage to key fish habitat, influence of MPA locations on fish populations and health, influence of marine infrastructure projects on fish populations, what determines locations for harbors and boatyards, intersections of shipping lanes and marine life.

There are no shortage of potential messages that you might want to convey to such an audience. Here's one example. Fishermen are often fiercely opposed to MPA's due to the perception that they present a direct threat to their livelihoods. To decrease this political resistance, you may want to engage this group on economic grounds, presenting the evidence that MPA's often improve yields for local fishermen.

Assignment Two: List the kinds of messages that you would like to convey to your target audience. Don't worry about what your audience is thinking here. Regardless of where your audience is coming from, what do you want them to know or feel?

The next challenge is to connect the message we want to convey with things that our audience cares about. This doesn't mean that your message has to only focus on your audience's concerns - just that your message should be framed in the context of those concerns. For example, for an audience that largely happens to be obsessed with the Dallas Cowboys, you don't need to talk just about the players the team will need to trade in the off-season. Instead, can you frame your story within a football context while still finding a way to transition to the messages you want to convey?

Assignment Three: Identify which of your audience's concerns are the best fit for the core message(s) you want to convey. Write down how you might frame your message within the context of those concerns.

Let's now use all of our insights to create a potential written communication to our audience. Imagine this communication being a short article in a newsletter that your audience reads or perhaps a short post on a blog that is relevant to your audience. Once we have written these documents, we'll share them on the Google+ community for the class and give each other feedback.

Assignment Four:

Part 1: Writing the document.

In a document, write the following:

- Paragraph one. Who is your target audience and what are their concerns that you can connect to your message? This paragraph is intended for others in this class, not for your audience.
- Next line: the title of the actual communication to your audience
- The remainder of the document: your written message to the audience.

Let's focus on the last part. Again, be sure to frame what you are writing around your audience. Short is better than long here. 500 words is your absolute limit for this exercise. Try to write less!

Be sure that your communication only tackles one idea. Why? Your audience is likely to be reading your piece with far less care than you wrote it. Consequently, the more major ideas you include in your post, the more likely that at least one of those ideas will be missed or misinterpreted.

Lastly, as solid blocks of text usually don't seem very inviting, be sure to include at least one image or video in your writing.

Part 2: Sharing the document

In the Google+ community for this class, post your document. The best way to do this is to share the web link to your document. The simplest way to do this is to write your document in Google Docs and to share the link to it. Alternatively, you can upload a document to an online drive such as Dropbox or Google Drive and provide a link to the upload.

Part 3: Giving feedback.

Once you have written and uploaded your document, please do keep an eye out for the documents of others in the class. Please provide feedback to the posts of at least three others in their respective comment sections.

When providing feedback, please address the following points.

- Does the content of the post seem like it would be engaging to the target audience? How could the content be made still more engaging?
- Does the post seem to be adequately framed within the context of the audience's specific interests or concerns?
- Do you notice any jargon or potentially misleading language?
- Does the length seem appropriate?