

Early Career Members

Oral Communication Tips for Early Career Members



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Oral communication skills are critical for early career professionals in their teaching, extension, and outreach programs. Many of us were formally trained in science, but not necessarily in communication, with the exception of an undergraduate speech or technical writing course. Generally, the type of communication will differ depending on our intended audience. As a faculty member or industry professional, you may be communicating to four or five different audiences in the same day. For example, faculty may have an early morning lecture, an afternoon research seminar, a conference call with a newspaper reporter, an extension phone call from a producer, and grant proposal to write all in the same day.

To help you in your oral communication efforts, I've compiled a list of tips and strategies adapted from AAAS's website titled "Communicating Science: Tools for Scientist and Engineers" (<http://communicatingscience.aaas.org>):

1. Know your audience and the venue. Teaching soil science to university students would be much different than having a soil science outreach program aimed at K-6 graders. You must think about what background knowledge the audience already possesses or lacks. You can try to anticipate what type of questions the audience may ask. Also, it is important to understand the facility and what type of A/V equipment is or is not available. I do not have a loud, booming voice, so I typically request a microphone when speaking in larger venues. Also, on one of my first extension talks, I assumed there would be a computer and projector, so I created a PowerPoint presentation. Once I arrived at the venue, I had to make a quick change as there was no A/V equipment available. After that incident, I now pack a university laptop and projector to extension presentations to serve as backup just in case the unexpected happens.

2. Be careful with technical jargon and choose words wisely. I have read many reports and have seen many slides with too many acronyms and abbreviated words. While many of these acronyms can be second nature to us, the audience can often become lost or uninterested if they cannot understand your references and abbreviations. For non-technical audiences, it is a good idea to practice with your spouse, a colleague in another field, or a friend (although they may not stay friends if you practice on them too many times). This can help you to cut out the technical

jargon and forces you to choose words that make sense to a broader audience. Word choice can be just as important when writing grants because grant proposal reviewers may not be from your specific field or area.

3. Develop speaking and slide points in 3's. Try to establish three main points that you want your audience to remember according to your presentation. For instance, develop three main points about the importance of the work, three important points about your research results, three main summary points, etc.

4. Don't copy and paste figures or slides from your dissertation or journal manuscript for oral presentations. After picking out the main topics you will present, make scaled-down versions of tables or figures for presentation slides. I think we have all sat through presentations and have witnessed slides with size 6 font, 20 columns, and 20 rows copied from an Excel file. This is impossible for the audience to read or comprehend. For oral presentations with no slides, try to concentrate on speaking points that can be conceptualized, or bring a visual aid to help the audience understand the concept. Also, if the graph, table, or data is not directly pertinent to one of your main speaking points, don't include it in your presentation just because you spent three days making the graph for a journal article.

5. Illustrate but don't distract. The best communicators seem to have a special knack to tell stories or create analogies that end with emphasis on one of their main communication points. At the same time, I have sat through presentations where you wonder what point the presenter is trying to make as they weave through three or four layers of a long-winded story. Try to identify stories or analogies that will identify with your audience's experience.

6. Be aware of your nonverbal communication. Good posture and a comfortable stance express confidence to your audience. Speaking tone and pace are also important. Practice so that you don't speak too fast or with a strained or shaky voice. This can sometimes be one of my weaknesses, and I often need to make a couple of practice runs for certain talks. I can easily talk all day long at an extension conference with producers and industry reps, but I have become nervous when speaking at larger venues with very large audiences. Maintaining eye contact with the audience is also important. Try not to look down at the laptop or back at the projector screen during your presentation. Lastly, use purposeful and confident hand gestures during the presentation, but do not keep your hands in your pocket or jiggle coins or keys.

For more communication tips for early career scientists, visit the AAAS website at: <http://communicatingscience.aaas.org>.