Telling Your Story
Communicating with the public about research

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Tell us about yourselves

- How many are faculty? Postdocs? Grad students? Staff?
- How frequently do you write?
- Do you use social media?
- How much do you enjoy writing?
Communicating science = big issue
Good communication matters

• Effective communication is key to success
  – To convey your ideas, findings, viewpoints
  – To reach target audiences
  – To explain your work’s importance

• Ineffective communication is costly
  – Lost opportunities for funding, publishing
  – Diminished perception of work’s value
  – Potential misunderstanding of your research
  – Reputation, recognition
Understanding the critical difference

Research/science writing
- Process
- Methodology
- Details

Non-technical writing (and audiences)
- Outcomes
- Benefits
- Payoffs
Visualizing the critical difference

- Most important, newsworthy (Bottom line, take-home message.)
- Supporting details (So what, who cares, why? Additional facts)
- Less vital info

Scientific Writing

Background

Process, methods, details

Results, outcomes, conclusions, discussion

Popular Writing
Know and respect your audience

- Who are you trying to reach?
- What do they know or care about this subject?
- What most interests them?
  - Audience needs, interests are diverse
  - Tailor the message to the audience
Style and approach

• Match style and approach to audience
  – Narrative, storytelling or email, report
  – Take time to find out what’s effective, appropriate
• Clear language is critical
• Focus on why your audience should care
  – What’s in it for them?

Clear, concise, on-message communication wins
Translate, translate, translate

- Make it understandable, relatable, approachable
- Trade details for understanding
- Remember, you are not writing for peers
- No one complains that academics are too easy to understand

Become the narrator and translator of your work. Tell an interesting story.
Sage advice

“If you can't explain it simply, you don't understand it well enough.”

Albert Einstein
Keeping it simple

• Focus on key points/messages
• Provide only essential background, data, details
• Avoid jargon
  – Use simple, familiar words
• Keep sentences short
• Don’t overwhelm with details – you’ll lose readers
Identify the essentials

- Key components of effective messaging
  - Issue, problem, situation, need
  - What are we doing/proposing to do about it?
  - What difference will it make?
  - Why does it matter?
  - What is the benefit, outcome, payoff, possibilities?

The bottom line:

*So what, who cares and why?*
Outline the problem

Concussions are common contact sports injuries with potentially long-lasting consequences. Although initial symptoms usually disappear within a week, players may suffer cognitive effects for years, especially with severe or repeated concussions.

A research partnership between UNL researchers and Nebraska Athletics is helping expand understanding of concussions, brain function, head injury and human performance. Findings have the potential to influence athletics nationwide and improve treatment and prevention strategies for all types of head injuries.

By Ashley Washburn
ORED
Familiarize the unfamiliar

- Research and science are mysteries to most people
- Never assume what audiences know
- Demystify technical info
- Helpful tools
  - Examples that audience relates to
  - Information that paints a picture
  - Explain what it means to them
Familiarize the unfamiliar

Phase transitions refer to changes in a material’s properties, often driven by temperature changes. The ubiquitous phase transition of water, which transforms from ice to liquid water to steam as the temperature increases, serves as an excellent example. Pressure significantly alters water’s transition temperatures, as anyone who has baked a cake at high altitude well knows. We are investigating the effects of rapidly changing pressure on phase transitions of technologically important magnetic thin film materials by focusing a very fast (ultrasonic) sound wave on the material. …

By UNL Physicist Shireen Adenwalla
NCMN Interfaces newsletter
Compare with the familiar

The same quality that buffers a raincoat against downpours or a pan against sticky foods can boost the performance of solar cells, according to a new study from UNL engineers.

This study showed that constructing a type of organic solar cell on a "non-wetting" plastic surface made it 1.5 times more efficient at converting sunlight to electricity. …

By Scott Schrage, University Communications
UNL news release
Paint a picture

Short and descriptive

Algae, those slimy, primordial throwbacks often considered a nuisance, could help fuel the future.

But we need to know a lot more about them before effectively harnessing them for renewal biofuel. That’s what UNL’s Nebraska Coalition for Algal Biology and Biotechnology aims to do.

By Gillian Klucas
ORED
The rule of threes

- Identify three most important points
- Build message around these
- Focus on outcomes, benefits
- Make your work compelling
- Avoid temptation to add more detail

Clear, concise message
When you write

• Remember the inverted pyramid
• Write a compelling first paragraph to grab attention
  – Focus on most important
  – Make it meaningful
  – Don’t over-promise
• Following paragraphs
  – Flesh out info in first paragraph
  – Keep key info high in story
• Don’t save the best for last
  – Readers may never see it
Choose and use words carefully

- Simple, familiar words are powerful
- Big words don’t make you sound smarter
- Jargon is the enemy of clear communication
- Avoid acronyms, abbreviations
  - If you must, clearly define
- Never assume understanding
Words of wisdom

• “Just because you're dealing with a scholarly discipline that's usually reported in a style of dry pedantry is no reason why you shouldn't write in good, fresh English.”
  – William Zinsser, *On Writing Well*

• “Write with precision, clarity and economy. Every sentence should convey the exact truth as simply as possible.”
  – Instructions to authors, *Ecology*, 1964
Questions?

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