

Chapter 3

What to say

The biggest problem with communication is the illusion that it has taken place.

George Bernard Shaw

Good speaking doesn't happen by accident. It comes about because the speaker probably spent a lot of time preparing what they were going to say. It takes work – sometimes weeks' worth of work – to turn a complex subject into one that makes an impact at the level at which it needs to be understood.

When you spend your days in your own echo chamber, as we're all inclined to do, it can be hard to appreciate what it takes for people who aren't your peers to grasp the meaning of your work. The dangers of ignoring this are clear. Take the example of a drugs awareness campaign that was run a few years ago during Freshers' Week at a group of London universities. The aim was to educate new students about the effects of drugs and alcohol so they could make informed choices. To facilitate this, a survey was run that showed 90% of students had been offered one or more of these substances during that week. No surprise there, you might think, given that alcohol was included in the mix. The team working on this interpreted the result as a clear sign that there was a need for education about drugs; they believed students should have information to make choices, given the data. But the figure of 90% was irresistible to journalists, who took a different view: 'London students rush to drugs' screamed the headlines.

Imagine if something similar happened due to reporting on data from your research. I've seen results from a medical study showing a 60% response rate reported as 'Drugs chief says our drug doesn't work in 40% of patients'. The reality is that two people can look at the same piece of information and reach completely different conclusions, as shown in the cartoon in Figure 3.

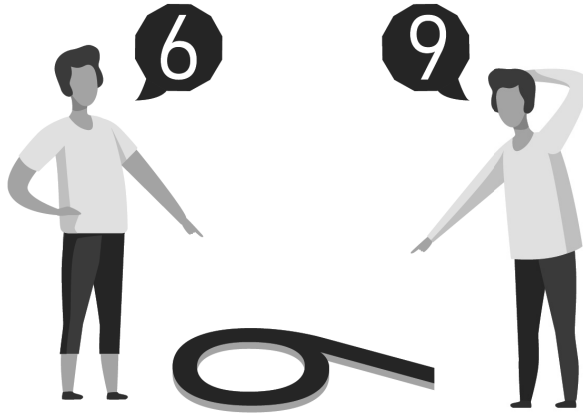


Figure 3: Interpreting information can often depend on your perspective

The bottom line is that if you don't understand the perspective of the people with whom you're communicating, you can be misunderstood. To appreciate that perspective, you have to spend time thinking about who those people are and how they want to be spoken to.

In the previous chapter, you learned about setting your goals in order to get what you want out of your talk. In this chapter, you'll discover how to plan your message so it lands meaningfully with your specific audience and helps you to achieve those goals. Great ideas deserve great communication, so it's worth investing time and effort in tailoring your content appropriately.

Plan backwards

Whenever I start working with a new client who wants to deliver a brilliant presentation or give great interviews, I always ask them what they'd like to gain from our sessions. Invariably, they see this as a cue for them to explain what they want to say – in other words, to start with themselves. This is understandable because we do tend to focus on ourselves more than anyone else; we're always the most important person in our own minds. But when it comes to communicating, you can't afford only to think about what you

want; in fact, you need to skip to the end of the process as your first step and start with your audience instead (see Figure 4).

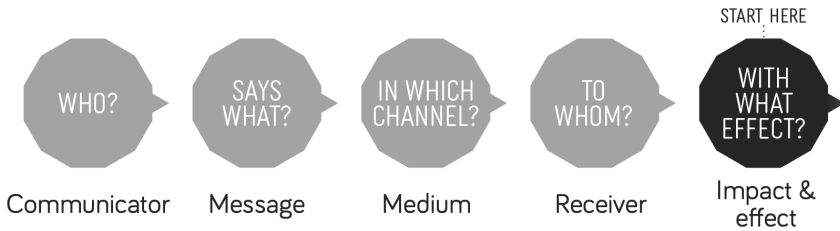


Figure 4: Start by asking 'With what effect?'

You've already set your goals, so that's the first stage complete. Then, if you move one step to the left, you'll see that the receiver is the next element to consider. We'll bypass the medium at this stage because we cover that in a later chapter, but after that we come to the message. Only when you know what that message is can you explore the role of the communicator – that's you (and how to develop yourself as a communicator forms the basis of the rest of the book).

This shows that you can't decide what you're going to say, or how you're going to say it, until you know and understand your audience. This is critical. Your messages and your audience are inextricably intertwined, and if they don't work in harmony you're in danger of confusing or alienating the very people you want to convince.

Your audience

Who are you speaking to?

The better you understand your audience, the more deeply your message will resonate with them. To begin this process, you first need to create a clear image of exactly who you're speaking to (see Figure 5).

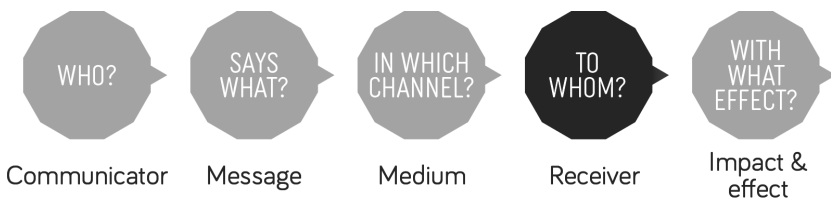


Figure 5: Establish who you're speaking to

Usually this isn't too complicated – for instance, you might be presenting at a conference as part of a plenary session to a group of peers, or at a university to students. In many professional contexts, you're likely to be familiar with your audience because they're similar to you in many ways. But there will also be situations in which your audience is more complex. They may be unfamiliar to you, such as if you're presenting to a group of policy-makers for the first time. Or you may have multiple audiences to take into account – your talk might be filmed and live-streamed to a wider group of people with an interest in your topic, but who aren't in the room. In a media interview with a journalist your audience is actually their viewers or readers, not the journalist. Be clear about who you're speaking to, then make sure you do the work to understand them as deeply as possible.

No matter how well you think you know who you'll be speaking to, it's always a good discipline to 'check in' and make sure you're not making wrong assumptions. Have the people you're addressing at the forefront of your mind as you prepare your content. Ask yourself:

- What do they already know about my topic?
- What aspects of it will they be most interested in?
- What's their level of understanding of it?
- What vocabulary would they use to talk about it?

These are the main areas, but you can also use the following questions to broaden your understanding:

- What are their pressing concerns?
- Why do they need to know about this?
- Why is this the right time for us to have this conversation?
- Is there a related and topical event that they'll be thinking about right now?
- Could they be hostile to what I have to say, or would they feel positive about it?
- Why?
- What are they expecting from me?
- What do they want?
- What don't they want?
- Which words would have special meaning for them?
- What topics do I want to emphasise or avoid?

- What will persuade them to back my point of view?
- What's the least they need to know?

You can't always assume you know or can imagine what (and how) other people think, so to do this properly may involve some online or in-person research. If you know the people you're speaking with, or others like them, you can conduct your own 'market research' by asking a few of them about their thinking on your topic. This will help you to understand their perspective in more depth.

It's also important to think about the environment in which you'll be speaking; it could be a symposium, a conference hall, a video livestream, an interview, a press briefing or a telephone interview. We'll explore these individual scenarios later in the book, but for now have a think about these top-line questions:

- How long will I have?
- What are the norms of the situation?
- Will it be distraction-free, or noisy and crowded?

I hope you're starting to see how you can't possibly know how to deliver a persuasive message until you've put yourself in your audience's shoes. It's not enough to inform or educate them: your aim is to persuade them to take action on your goals. To do this, you must move and inspire them, or at least create a level of curiosity so they want to know more. I'm sure you instinctively understand this in any case. Suppose you were giving a presentation to some high school students with the aim of encouraging girls to go into STEM careers. You'd naturally tailor your content to a level they could understand. You wouldn't deliver a dry lecture at postgraduate student level and skip telling inspiring stories about successful women in science. If you want a specific outcome you need to begin with where your listeners are *right now*.

Your message

We're continuing to move to the left of the communications model (Figure 6), and now we come to your message (or messages, as we'll see in a moment). You're going to create one key message and four subsidiary ones, but for now let's just focus on the main one.

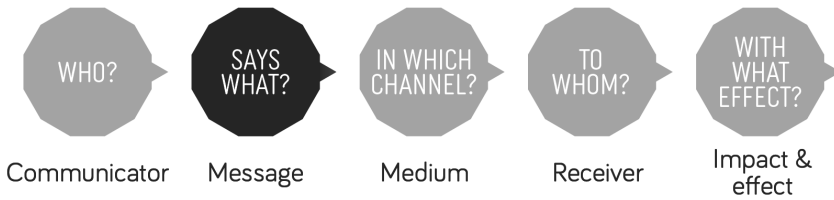


Figure 6: Next focus on your main message

Again, we're going to take inspiration from journalists and use the questions they ask themselves as a way of harvesting the basic information for your talk:

- Who?
- What?
- When
- Where?
- Why?
- And ... so what?

Write your answers longhand or in a mind map, keeping them as clear and concise as possible – they should be top-line rather than detailed. Remember that you're basing them on your goals and also your topic. This is just a brain dump to help you get the information out onto paper – think of it as a harvesting technique to create some 'headlines'. It's an excellent way of ordering your points, and it gives you a hierarchy of information – what's most interesting and important versus what's least significant.

Tailoring your message to your audience

In Australia, as part of a campaign to reduce the level of skin cancer, research was carried out with focus groups to understand what information would encourage people to use sunscreen. It seemed that the risk of skin cancer wasn't a key driver – in fact, people didn't want to think about 'dying' when they were on the beach. They were keen to look good and get a tan. But when probed more deeply, it seemed that vanity could be a useful motivator for messages supporting the use of sunscreen. The very same people who were turned off by the 'dying from the sun' message were also those who cherished their appearance and didn't want to look old before their time. So the advertising agency created a visual of sets of twins, some of whom had lived in Australia's sunny climate for years and

others who'd lived in the United Kingdom. Those who'd lived in Australia looked decades older than the others, and this had a motivating effect on sunbathers. The goal was to persuade them to wear sunscreen, and the message helped to achieve it. Although this example is based on visual images rather than speaking, the point is that attaining a successful result depends on the communicator both knowing what they want to achieve and truly understanding their audience.

Do you want your listeners to appreciate what you're telling them, or do you want to tell them what they'll appreciate listening to? The first is 'you' focused and the second is 'audience' focused, just as it was in the Australian ad campaign. It's the second one that you should aspire to. It might take time to discover the special something that will move your audience, but don't skip this step. Find your core message and tailor it to them before going any further, because it gives shape and direction to everything that follows. Without it, you run the risk that you will ramble on, veering from one unrelated topic to another, and look up from your notes only to see people scrolling through their phones in search of something more interesting.

Getting your message across in a way that works for your audience can seem like a complex task, which is why I've come up with a three-step process for planning it out. It's pretty foolproof, so I highly recommend that you follow it.

1. Plan your journey

Looking at what you know about your audience, ask yourself three sequential questions:

1. What are they thinking about my subject right now, if anything?
2. What do I want them to think if I'm to achieve my goals?
3. What would take them from where they are now to where I want them to be?

Let's say your goal is to encourage as many people as possible to get their flu vaccinations. Right now it's not on their radar, or if it is it seems like an unpleasant inconvenience that's not worth the hassle. To achieve your goal, you want them to think, 'This is a priority for me and worth making time for – I'm definitely booking a shot tomorrow.' But what would take them from A to B?

This is where your audience research comes in. For most of your audience, it's probably not the thought of falling ill that's the motivator, but the desire to protect their family from infection and serious consequences, or to avoid taking time off work – both the result of being ill. More recently there may be the additional benefit that flu vaccination helps in the management of COVID-19, as those who've been vaccinated have certain strains of flu ruled out as a potential differential diagnosis. These are the things that matter to your audience and are the areas to focus on if you want to encourage them to have a shot, not the research on the vaccine or the success rate percentages. (Of course, if your audience was made up of scientists rather than the general public, your message might be different.)

In another scenario, you might want to encourage people to feel more curious about an area of your research, or to change their medical practice. Alternatively, you may be talking to people who are critics of your work, or who have strongly held preconceived ideas about what you're presenting. In this case, you'd need to fully understand their perspective and arguments so you're able to challenge their assumptions without alienating them. You adapt your message to suit who you're speaking to.

2. Play some games

Here's where you can have some fun – in fact it's compulsory. The purpose of games is to loosen up your thinking and encourage you to make new mental connections between audience and message. Try these options:

- If you were writing a newspaper headline about your talk, what would it be?
- If you were going to summarise your talk in one sentence, what would you say?
- Could you do it in a tweet?
- If you were going to search for your talk on Google, what would the question be?

You can see that the process of answering these questions not only means thinking about your message from different perspectives, but also cuts out extraneous detail. It's essential to do this to clarify what you want to say.

However, your answers still might not be completely right for your audience, so when you've finished ask yourself whether you should tweak them. How can your main message be more relatable? Do you need to change the

vocabulary, or to sound less erudite? Do you need to keep it formal, or can you be less ‘scientific’? Keep going until you’re happy with it.

3. *Build your temple*

So far, you’ve focused on one core message, but clearly you’ll need more than just one to convince people, however long or short your speaking opportunity. You must have a structure, and this is where it’s helpful to think of your messages as making up the elements of a Greek temple (Figure 7).

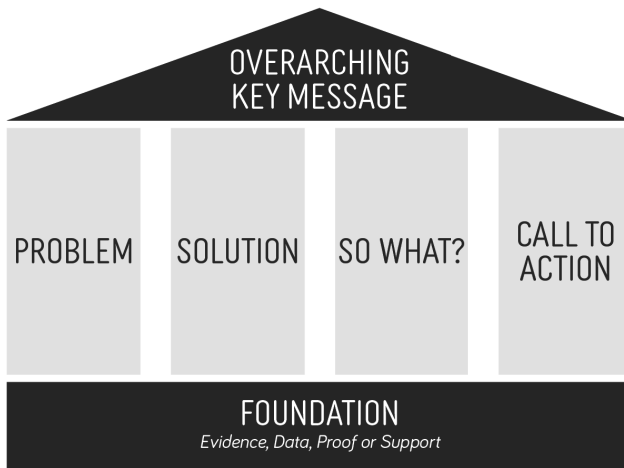


Figure 7: Your messages in the form of a Greek temple

The top, triangular part of the temple is your overarching message (the one we’ve worked on already), which dictates everything that comes beneath it. Underneath that you have four pillars containing your subsidiary messages, and under each of them you will find some data or evidence to back up your arguments.

- *Pillar 1:* an explanation of the problem you’re solving through your talk.
- *Pillar 2:* a summary of the solution you’ve come up with. Note that for a non-scientific audience you’ve skipped the details of your work entirely here; they’re less interested in the structure of your study than in the implications of what you’ve discovered.
- *Pillar 3:* what the solution means for your audience (the ‘So what?’). What can the science do for them?
- *Pillar 4:* your call to action (what you want your audience to do as a result).

Here are a couple of examples so you can see what I mean.

Example 1: If I were speaking about this book

- *Overarching message:* ‘Great science deserves great communication.’
- *Problem:* Speaking impactfully and accurately about science can be challenging – especially in the digital age – a situation made worse by the fact that effective science communication skills are not taught as part of science and medical degrees.
- *Solution:* You can learn to master the art of speaking well, equipping yourself with the skills and confidence to communicate effectively and authentically with all audiences.
- *So what?* When audiences are engaged, science can be advanced, systems can be enhanced and patient outcomes can be improved. Now more than ever, it’s important for scientists and doctors to cut through the noise, communicate the facts and connect with their audiences.
- *Call to action:* If you’re a scientist speaking in public on any platform, you would truly benefit from learning how to do it effectively if you want to enhance your career and advance the cause of science in the world.

Example 2: If you were speaking about quitting smoking

- *Overarching message:* ‘Giving up smoking can be the single best thing you can do for your health, and to be successful you need as much medical support as possible.’
- *Problem:* Smokers are at far greater risk of diseases that affect the heart and blood vessels than non-smokers. Smoking causes strokes and coronary heart disease, which are among the leading causes of death around the world. To add to this, giving up smoking is hard because nicotine is so addictive.
- *Solution:* You need both willpower and medical support if you’re to give up.
- *So what?* If you want long-term success as a smoker, you should seek help from a health professional and make a plan to quit.
- *Call to action:* Make this your year to give up smoking – sort out an appointment with a health professional today and make a plan to quit.

When you have your messages planned out, stand back and take a look. It’s tempting to add large amounts of detail, but resist this: short and simple is best. Remember that your aim is to be interesting and persuasive, so in your

hierarchy of information you should focus on the information that will be most motivating to people; this might mean leaving out elements that you find fascinating, but that would cause your audience to be bored or confused. Also keep your points concrete rather than theoretical, jargon-free, simple, clear and consistent. What's in it for your audience? Why would they care?

At the base of the temple are the foundations that support the pillars. These are the facts and figures that underpin your talk: the evidence from studies, clinical trials and epidemiological data. These foundations are critical parts of your messaging because without them your information is just assertion, so think about what evidence would make what you say most believable and authoritative. Having said that, the data are mainly there to support your argument rather than to take centre stage. Examples of how you could talk about the data are: 'We know this because the data showed ...' Or 'What's exciting in the data is ...' It's there as a backup rather than as the main point.

Of course, you would have a different temple for each audience, so if you're speaking on the same subject to divergent people, you'll need a temple for each.

Don't lose the emotion in the message

You shouldn't think of your messages as facts alone – there should also be emotion embedded within them. I often speak with people who are adamant that science is not the place for feelings. Of course, it's true that science tends to be fact based, and some audiences respond well to this, but I'm passionate in my belief that there's a definite need for emotion in the *communication* of science.

Many people are surprised and uncomfortable when I ask them what they want their audience to *feel* as a result of their talk. I think this is because they think of emotions as being dramatic – the type of intense feelings we see at the cinema or on stage, such as jealousy, rage or love. But the kind of emotions I'm talking about are more 'professional' than that, such as pride, suspense, anticipation or hope. In fact there's a huge range of human emotions that you can stimulate in your audience, and for inspiration you can use the Plutchik Wheel of Emotion.¹ Developed by Robert Plutchik, it analyses all the feelings we have and breaks them down into eight basic ones:

¹ www.6seconds.org/2020/08/11/plutchik-wheel-emotions

joy, trust, fear, surprise, sadness, anticipation, anger and disgust. The wheel also shows how many variations there are on these, and visualises them for you so you can use them as a way of imagining the effects that you might create.

I'll talk more about the importance of emotions in the next chapter, but for now just make sure you're taking them into consideration when formulating your messages.

The main points

- To speak persuasively, you must start with your audience and then tailor your messages to the people who are part of it.
- To do that, you need to understand and empathise with those you're speaking to.
- An effective talk requires a strong structure, which is what the Greek temple approach gives you.