

Distilling Your Message: What's the story?

In Improvisation for Scientists, we focus on connecting with your audience and paying attention to verbal and nonverbal cues so you can tell if people are following you. In Distilling Your Message, we focus on using language to interest and engage listeners and make it easier for them to follow your meaning. These two approaches overlap, work together and strengthen you as a communicator.

Here are some points to remember about Distilling Your Message.

- Look for a human connection you share with your audience. For each audience, you may need to use different language and tone.
- Know your goal. What are you trying to get your audience to know, think, feel or do? When they walk away from you, what do you want them to remember? Focus on making that clear and memorable.
- Use conversational language. Avoid jargon. If you must use a technical term, explain it (explicitly or by context) before you use it. If they don't understand it, you might as well not have spoken
- Answer the "so what" question. Why is this important? Why should the listener care about it? Why do *you* care about it? (You don't need to claim a practical application, but you do need to answer this question.)
- Tell a story: Something happens, and things are not the same. Someone wants something and tries to get it, despite obstacles. Something is at stake. There is a turning point, and a change. As a result, we have new knowledge or a new perspective or a new goal or new problems.
- To find science stories, think about turning points in your own life or work. How were you inspired, frustrated, excited, puzzled?
- Don't be afraid to elicit emotion. Emotion is memorable.
- Once your listener is interested, you can add layers of complexity and detail. You are aiming to make the listener want to ask questions, to want to know more.
- Look for examples, metaphors or analogies that will be familiar to your listeners. Use these to make the transition to less familiar material. Compare or contrast what you do to something your specific audience knows about.
- You can state something simply, but then say, "It's really more complicated than this. If you want to know more, I can tell you." This approach was used often by Richard Feynman, who was renowned for explaining science clearly.
- Look at your subject through your listeners' eyes. What would interest them or relate to something they have experienced?
- Beware "the curse of knowledge." This is the idea that once you know something, it becomes hard to imagine what the world looks like to someone who doesn't know it. To get beyond the curse requires memory and imagination.

*If you can't explain something to a six-year-old,
you really don't understand it yourself."*

--Attributed to Richard Feynman