

The Art & Science Of Persuasion

- Part One

Knowing your audience

We generally communicate on a daily basis with different users of knowledge. To be effective as a knowledge leader you must convey the significance of your results to different audiences with different levels of comprehension of your topic. Consider the different levels of comprehension from those around you, your supervisor, fellow students in your research group, other students in your department or your faculty, a non researcher in your field, a politician, a member of the public, your parents, et cetera. You will want politicians, lawyers, business leaders, scientists, journalists, and a multitude of other disciplines to support your ideas if they are to be funded and grow. You will want your research peers to see the novelty of your work instead of a repeat of work already done. You will want those who you teach to grasp the underlying novelty of your work so that they may become collaborators or users.

VIDEO CLIP:

“Communication skills have always been and will always be essential to your success no matter what career you're aiming at. Communication is about making a connection with your audience to get your message through. And good presenters are not born, they're trained. It is important that you practice and improve your presentation skills in speaking and writing at any stage of your career.” - Dr. Maikel C. Rheinstafter

Crafting your message

Before you begin to craft your message, something about your research, for example, pause and determine what you know about the audience. Break down what you know or perceive about the people intended to receive the message. What are their wants, needs, values, or emotional connection with the topic? You may want to survey a few other people to make sure your interpretation of the audience is shared by others.

In this electronic age, we can expect our message to endure long after it is delivered to our intended audience. This is the secondary audience of your message which you should try to anticipate. For example, consider how a social media post to your friends will be received if they forwarded it onto their friends or another user group.

Be sensitive

In academia, one of the fundamentals of communication is opting collegial debate. Knowing your audience will help to anticipate what ideas or topics will initiate an intense debate. Make sure you know the difference between topics and declarations that will initiate debate versus insult segments of your audience. This may cause you to change the topic, or it may give you time to prepare for the audience's reaction. Avoiding conflict is not always the right course of action but avoiding malicious content is certainly preferred for civil debate. Even seemingly benign topics like the temperature of the sun, the use of medium versus average in statistics, or the impact of an additive in food can bring about unexpected conflict depending on the audience.

Purpose or reason for communicating

Along with knowing the audience, the purpose of the message needs to be well understood before crafting its content. This begins with establishing the purpose for the communication.

In academia the communications that we think about most are often to convey research results to a stakeholder, or to convince a stakeholder to fund a research idea. The reason for the communication should be well formulated in your head before starting to write and form the anchor around which the details of the document unfolds.

The purpose is generally to inform, persuade, propose, recommend, or entertain. The hypothesis, otherwise known as a research question is something different. However, its purpose often sets out to address the question in some manner. In all forms of communication, the purpose is to explore or to convince others about an idea or topic.

Relatability of the topic to the audience

The audience purpose and mode of communication will dictate the content. This is the act of converting findings, opinions, and other details into meaningful content since readers only want to learn about that which impacts them.

A literature review, experimental or clinical data, collected opinions, surveys, interviews, images, and videos are all examples of information. However, the reader's only interested in this information through the author's communication if it is offering something new.

Structure and establishing a logical flow

Flow of thought and writing is paramount to keeping the audience engaged in the topic and to supporting the purpose of the communication. Poor communication is when there's a lack of connected thoughts jumping around from topic to topic within a paragraph of a document or on a slide of a presentation. It conveys a lack of preparation, or worse, a lack of understanding of the topic.

VIDEO CLIP:

"As researchers we often have to deliver presentations in a variety of contexts, often to audiences that may have different backgrounds, expertise, and levels of knowledge about the specific topic of our lecture or our tone model. For giving a research or technical presentation that I often use and advise my grad students to consider is what I refer to as The Hour Glass Model. And the idea behind this model is to ensure that there's something in your talk for everyone in the room and that you don't lose the attention of too many people for too long such that by the end of your talk everyone is hopefully satisfied with the time that they spent listening to you speak about your research. And the model works like this. So you start at the top of the Hour Glass by giving a broad introduction to the topic. You know, why is it important? You know, what's interesting about what you're gonna say? Why is it relevant? And you say this in the most accessible way possible. In other words, very little technical knowledge is needed to understand this high level introduction. And then you gradually work your way down towards the middle of the hour glass by increasingly diving into the details of your topic. However, the tricks not to spend too long in the middle of the hour glass on those low level details, just long enough to appeal to those in the room that may be really close to your topic. So at this point, you need to work your way back down the hour glass by broadening your discourse such that you

regain the attention of more and more of the audience and such that by the time you're presenting your results and conclusions everyone in the room can appreciate why your work is really interesting, relevant, and they'll be excited to go home and tell their friends all about the amazing research that they learned about at your talk today."

- Dr. Joshua Marshall

Whether writing a thesis, journal article, book chapter, or a letter of reference, there should be a beginning, an introduction or overview, a middle, the discussion, and the end which is the conclusion. These headers should not appear in the document.

A thesis or book lies at one end of the spectrum with an introduction and conclusion being tens of hundreds of pages apart. In comparison a letter or email uses the same structure but is often less than one page.

Each paragraph should also have an introduction, discussion, and conclusion, though each topic will be different yet supportive of the purpose. Ideally, the conclusion of a paragraph should include some narration, setting up the next paragraph if a logical flow is going to be evident.

Paragraphs and content within a paragraph will be organized with details going from least familiar to most, general to specific, simplest to most complex, least important to most important. Vice-versa is also possible. Accepted format or style of the mode of communication dictates what is allowed but often it is a good idea to lay out the document or presentation before beginning with a series of headers and sub-headers.