Advancing Social Change Worldwide

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SUPPORTED BY A GRANT FROM THE MAYDAY FUND

Training Materials from IASP 2018 World Congress on Pain

Breaking Through the Clutter: A Primer on Communicating Science and Health to the Public

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Being Memorable

You get one shot. Don't plan on another. So here's what you should do:

1	**Be yourself and have fun.** Don't segment yourself into the worker person and the real you. The real you will always make a better impression.
2	**Obsess about accuracy, but let go of precision.** Don't talk about the "process" it took to get there or the exact percentage to the decimal; be accurate but less detailed.
3	**This is an opportunity, not a moment to be feared.** Either you're in charge, or the other "guy" is in charge. You decide.
4	**Speak with conviction.** Don't excuse or qualify your point before you make it. Nuance and gray areas can be explained once you've set the stage, but ambiguity leads to doubt.
5	**Be clear about your message.** What are the two or three points you want the person to learn or remember—not the 20 or 30 points. Test your message with a teenager or a neighbor. Do they get it? Are they "sold"? If not, try again.
6	**Speak simply and clearly.** Leave your buzzwords and other jargon at home.
7	**Know your audience.** Think about their perspective—what do they need to hear? What is in it for them? Be as specific as possible when asking them to do something.
8	**Think action, not process.** A meeting or collaboration isn't an end goal, it's one step in a process. Talk about the ultimate goal when delivering your "ask."
9	**The messenger is more important than the message.** Both are crucial, but don't underestimate the power of your personality and your delivery. It matters more than the content of what you have to say.
10	**Tell stories—brief stories.** People are moved by stories and the emotion behind them more than they are by data.
11	**Your interview or meeting is brief, not a seminar or lecture.** A typical face-to-face meeting, interview or chance encounter runs about 15 minutes – or less. You have about 3 minutes or less to make your point.
12	**Anticipate tough questions and practice the answers.** You should almost never be caught off guard or surprised. Sometimes the hardest question is "how can I help." Know what you want them to do. Be prepared to make a plan and agree on next steps.

Remember, be yourself and have fun!

About Message

What is Message?

Message is the crux of the matter – the reason why anyone should care about your study, initiative, or announcement. It gives the big picture by providing context, a sense of urgency, and/or possible next steps. Most importantly, it allows you to get your point across in the way that you want.

It must be clear, compelling, accurate – and short!

Tips for creating messages that resonate:

- **Know your audience.** Your message should directly relate to the interests of your audience. What are they looking for, and what's in it for them?
- **Use "people-speak," not "brand-speak."** A message isn't a slogan or a tag line; it provides context or paints a picture for your audience. Use punchy, visual language. How would you talk about this in a face-to-face conversation with a friend or neighbor?
- **Think 1, 2 or 3 – never 8, 9 or 10.** Enumerate the points you want to get across, but know that your audience won't remember more than a few.
- **Avoid jargon – use examples.** Instead of using terms only you and your colleagues understand, use examples that make "jargon" understandable. If you must use a buzz word from your field, always briefly define it before you move on.
- **Show, don't tell.** Demonstrate the challenge or the solution; don't just tell someone it exists.
- **Engage and challenge your audience with a question.** You can engage your audience by asking them a rhetorical question and "showing" the problem or challenge you are addressing. Speak with your audience—not at them.

Messaging Worksheet

Message is the crux of the matter—the reason why anyone should care about your work—be it a study, initiative, or announcement. It gives the big picture by providing context, a sense of urgency, and/or possible next steps. Most importantly, it allows you to get your point across in the way that you want.

There are several types of messages that we use in explaining our work, the urgency of it, and a call to action. The four most important types of messages are:

1. **Problem message.** This message explains to your audience what you seek to address or fix. Problem messages are well suited to stories and visuals—describing a victim or group of people who are suffering or being treated unfairly, for example.

2. **Solution message.** This message describes what you and others plan to do or have done about the problem. While a problem pulls at the heart strings and can sometimes seems hopeless or insurmountable, a solution helps your audience invest energy or become engaged in the issue.

3. **"Ask" message.** Not everyone has a clear or simple "ask," but it's important to provide next steps—something people can do—when you're engaging new audiences.

4. **Urgency message.** It's always important make it clear why now is the time to act. You may say, "All this is important right now because…." What will happen if nothing is done? What do we stand to lose or how will the problem get worse?

Additionally, it's important to think beyond the here and now. Be ready with a message that explains what you hope to accomplish—your work is about more than the immediate next step.

5. **"I hope" message.** Tell them why you're seeking change. The ask is to get you one step closer, and the "hope" message is about where you're headed or your ultimate goal. You could say "My hope is that someday soon (*or name a timeframe*), our work will… (*lead to what positive change?*)"

When developing messages, it's important to think through a few questions to ensure that what you are saying is both well-targeted and engaging. Try answering these questions before developing your message:

- **Who is your audience?** Be specific.

- **Why are you engaging this person/group?** What can they do and how is it in *their* interest to help? (Altruism only takes you so far—especially with policymakers) **What common ground do you share with your audience?** How can you "go to them" rather than making them come to you?

- **What story can you tell that will capture them?** Stories and examples are the quickest and most engaging ways to explain a problem or successful solution. Stories are one of our oldest means of communication (think of Aesop's fables)

because they tie into emotions and can instantly make your audience relate with your subject.

Here is a short worksheet to help you flesh out your messages (remember to keep it short, clear and concise!)

Planning Questions

Who is your audience?	
What do you want from your audience?	
What is in it for them?	

Messages

Tell us the problem (provide context)	
Tell us about solutions(s)	

Tell us what we can do to help (the “ask”)	
Tell us a story that explains the problem, solution or ask	
Why is this urgent? Why today and not tomorrow?	
What is it that you hope will ultimately happen or be different	

Strategically Using Stories to Deliver Your Message

We all use stories as shortcuts to understand the world around us—and how we fit into it. These stories provide context that allow us to understand data and facts—and ultimately to create a cohesive world view. Data and facts matter, but a well-told story is one of the most powerful tools to persuade, educate or engage.

Whatever type of story you're telling (narratives or simply examples or anecdotes—there is more on types of stories below), there are a few guiding principles to make sure you are using your stories strategically:

- **Understand your audience.** Know where your audience is coming from, what they believe already, and what will resonate with them. Anticipate how they relate to your story (will they most closely relate to the central character or someone else). Always be aware of your audience's perspective (their principles and lens through which they view the world), life experiences and bias (their knee-jerk reactions and judgements). You do not always need to change your story or choose a different example, but know in advance how it will land.

- **Know if your story is already understood or will challenge your audience.** Unless you're introducing an entirely new topic to an audience, they already have a story that serves as a framework for how they understand your issue. For example, there are narratives about the United States that are on opposite ends of the spectrum. Some view the US as a pure meritocracy and "land of opportunity for all," while others see a society rigged for the wealthiest and built on systemic oppression (with many variations in between). Understanding if your story is confirming and refining your audience's existing narrative or understanding or trying to challenge and replace it is critical to how you shape it.

- **Always know *why* you're telling a story and what you want the audience to learn from it.** It's not enough to tell a compelling story and leave your audience to infer what you want them to know. Be explicit. Go so far as to use the phrase, "I tell you this story because…" when you're done.

- **Know why you are telling your story.** What are you trying to accomplish (it can be more than one goal)?
    - Teach something new or explain how something works
    - Connect emotionally with an audience, build empathy or establish a shared vision
    - Inspire or motivate your audience to act
    - Provide context for new data or information

Types of Stories

We all have stories to tell, but they're not all traditional stories about a single person. Full stories about real people are your most effective tools, but also challenge yourself to think about using examples and language that paints a picture in the eye of your audience. Here are different ways you can think about stories:

- **Narratives**. The most effective stories you can tell help your audience invest in your story and characters. When you have the time and attention to tell a longer story, it's a powerful too. A single story can even serve as the backbone of an entire presentation. But know your audience and the environment. If you have five minutes to present your idea, a three-minute story chronicling a series of events may not be the right tool.

- **Anecdotes**. We all have brief stories that bring to life the excitement of our work or its impact. Just a few sentences can make your work vivid and real when told in the right way. Infuse these as often as you can.

- **Examples**. Abstract concepts and theories are hard for an audience that doesn't know your work and risks losing some of your audience. Use a single, concrete example to bring this to life. Think of this as a "mini-story."

- **Hypotheticals**. Sometimes your work is too far removed from the general public to tell a story of impact. Hypotheticals are useful for explaining concepts, even if they lack the emotional engagement. When explaining the implications of reforming the health care system in the United States, the Obama Administration tried to describe the impacts of health reform on a hypothetical woman (Julia) at different ages in her life.

- **Analogies.** The quickest way to help someone understand a new or complex idea is to connect it to something they already know. An analogy is less about storytelling than tying a new concept to an existing "story" your audience already understands. You're tapping into their experiences to introduce something entirely new.

- **Visual language.** Sometimes you can start to tell a story just by painting an image in the mind's eye. In fact, some neuroscience research has shown us that simply using visual words (or words related to movement) engage more parts of the human brain. For example, using the word "grasp" rather than "hold" activates the part of your brain that controls the movement of grasping.

What Goes into a Story?

What is a Story?

At its core, a story is about a relatable character who is overcoming a clear obstacle to reach a goal.

- Your "**character**" can be an individual or a specific group of people. The character should be relatable, compelling and feel authentic.
- The **obstacle or challenge** facing the character should be understandable and seem like something that can be overcome.
- The **goal** that your character is pursuing should be admirable and realistic.

Ask yourself: Will my audience relate to (and believe) the character, understands what the character wants, believe the goal is achievable, and understand what has to be done to reach it?

Structure of a Story

When you're developing a story that is more than an anecdote, it is helpful to think about the structure of a story. Here are a few questions for which your story should have a simple answer:

1. **What is the context that your audience needs to understand this story?** *What is a character's life, neighborhood or family like? What helps an audience to understand your character's motivations and make them feel more authentic?*

2. **What is the moment or action that activates your story?** *What has changed and why are you telling this story? (A story without a moment of change is boring!)*

3. **How are the stakes heightening?** *It's not enough to have a problem and a resolution—something has to build suspense or raise the stakes. How are you getting your audience more interested in the character overcoming their obstacle?*

4. **How is the story resolved?** *What is (or will be) the resolution and how was the obstacle overcome?*

5. **What does this mean going forward?** *Be explicit about what your audience should take from this story. How does it support your message?*

Telling Stories Effectively—and Responsibly

"When I was in the Senate, it was stories—probably more than all the factual information—that really moved you to want to act."

– Fmr. Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle, *Washington Post*

Over the years, countless state and federal policy initiatives have been named for men, women and children whose stories motivated policymakers to act. Here are a few:

- AMBER Alerts (public notices of missing children, adopted by Congress)
- Ryan White Care Act (a federally-funded program for people with HIV/AIDS)
- Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act (modified laws around equal pay for men and women)
- The Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act (hate crimes legislation adopted by Congress)

However, a story alone won't produce powerful legislation (or if it does, it may not be good legislation). Stories should be grounded in data and used carefully. In fact, research has shown that choosing the wrong story or providing it without context can backfire. Here are a few cautionary lessons:

- **People often overestimate how well a single story represents a larger issue.** Once a story is heard and believed, data alone won't change it. The story that President Reagan told about the "Welfare queen"—intended to emphasize fraud and abuse of social services—was not based in fact, but became a racist narrative that many voters accept and continue to tell.

- **Choosing the most extreme stories can distort how people view the larger issue.** Research from the FrameWorks Institute found that when stories about child abuse and neglect focus on just extreme cases abuse, audience often overestimate cases of abuse and underestimate the severity of neglect. Sensationalizing can actually harm your cause.

- **Stories of "superheroes" can shift burden to everyone else.** Telling the story of someone who surpasses all expectations and excels where no one else has—especially in communities that are stereotyped—can make an audience shift blame to everyone else (an audience may ask, "If she can do it, why can't everyone else?")

Tips to Avoid These Pitfalls

- **Tell solutions stories that can't be seen as a triumph for the "up-by-the-bootstraps" mentality**. Rather than tell a story about the most exceptional person who defies all obstacles, try finding a typical (and relatable) person and telling their story exceptionally well.

- **Balance the stories of individuals and the system**. Telling stories about policies and programs can be pretty boring, but often those are what we need to talk about. Find ways to tie together the stories of process with compelling individuals. Be explicit about how the person or group of people relate to policies.

- **Use data to provide a clear context for any individual**. Be honest and transparent about how representative your story is. And always be explicit about what the data mean (contrary to the cliché, data do not speak for themselves).

- **Capitalize on the notion of "full" and "empty" spaces in your story**. When telling a story, it is important to let your audience fill in some blanks with their own experiences; this will help them to connect more deeply with your story. For example, if you talk about a kitchen without describing it, they will fill in the story with something like their own kitchen (this is empty space they're filling). If you describe the kitchen in great detail, you are completing the image for them (that is full space). You can use empty and full spaces strategically to engage an audience in your story while also dispelling stereotypes or unhelpful pre-existing beliefs. Use empty spaces to allow your audience to insert themselves into your story and use full spaces to avoid faulty assumptions or reinforcing stigma or stereotypes.

- **Reflect on what the story means to you while you tell it**. One of the clearest ways to connect with your audience and make sure that the story is accomplishing what you hope is to pause and reflect on what the story means to you (or, if you were present in the story, how you felt). If an audience trusts you, they'll take your cues about what a story means and how to feel.

Tips for Crafting Successful Stories

Despite the science behind storytelling, being successful is an art and it takes practice. Here are some tips for developing and crafting stories:

- **Know and "cast" your audience**. Understand how they fit into your story. Stories generally have heroes, victims, helpers and other archetypes. Think about which character your audience will identify with…and be careful not to cast your listener as the" villain" or the barrier to a good outcome. Show them how they can be part of the solution.

- **Know your message.** Why are you telling this story?

- **Keep it short (and simple).** Your story doesn't have to be long and complicated and neither do your sentences. Keep your writing and delivery short, punchy and impactful.

- **Use "telling" details.** The difference between a story that resonates and sticks with your audience and one that falls flat is the detail that makes it genuine. Paint a picture through some small detail that brings the subject to life. Specific details take your story to another level.

- **Build suspense.** If the end of your story is predictable, it's also forgettable. Surprising or counterintuitive endings stick with people. One way to do this is by repeating memorable phrases.

- **Be authentic.** If you don't genuinely care about your story as you're telling it, your audience will know.

- **Share your optimism and resolve.** Give people a sense of possibility.

Controlling the Interview

Every interview is an opportunity for you to communicate about your work. It's not a moment to be feared. You are the expert. You know what the audience needs to hear and can control where the interview goes. A reporter may have a different agenda than you, but they are not out to get you. You both have a shared interest in providing the audience with credible, factual and relevant material.

- **Know your message and keep going back to it**. Before the interview, identify the key message you want to delivery. Use every opportunity to get your message in, and don't be afraid to repeat it.

- **Anticipate potential misinterpretation on the reporter's part.** Understand that sometimes a tough question is based on a lack of understanding. Pre-empt possible these by having clear messages and politely, but firmly, correcting the premise. With good messages, you can helpfully redirect a reporter.

- **Rephrase loaded questions—don't repeat negative words.** Don't get caught repeating negative language. Be decisive and clear if you disagree or if there is something wrong in the question, but reframe your response to be positive. For instance, if a reporter were conducting an interview about a pandemic flu and asked: "So your plan is to isolate the sick and let them die?" A good response would simply be: "No, we will quarantine the sick and get them all the help that is available."

- **Bridge from negative questions to your message.** You can't simply ignore questions, but you can choose how you answer them. Acknowledge difficult questions quickly then bridge to the message that you want to communicate.

- **Be candid—always tell the truth.** Never say "no comment." This only invites suspicion and leads reporters to wonder if you have something to hide. Always answer questions honestly and accurately. And if you genuinely can't or don't think you should comment on something, use one of these responses:
  - "This is what I know, and I'll be glad to tell you…"
  - "I don't know, but I'll be happy to help you find out or refer you to someone who does know."
  - "I cannot answer your question because the information you seek is confidential." (For example, the name of a patient and his or her condition.)

- **Anticipate tough questions and practice the answers.** You should almost never be caught off guard or surprised. Before you go into an interview, think of the questions you would never want to be asked, and prepare answers.

- **Don't argue with reporters.** If a reporter seems to be heading down a path that is inaccurate or misleading, be sure to clarify the precise truth in the proper context.

But try to create a civil environment for the interview. In most cases, the reporter will try to do the same. Don't forget to stick to your message!

- **Don't assume that anything is off the record.** The rules for "off-record" vs "on-record" can be confusing. To be safe, assume that anything you say may be quoted.

- **Suggest additional resources.** It's helpful to suggest that reporters speak with people in addition to you. Recommend well-respected experts who share your view and add credibility to your message. You can also supply the reporter with written background material to support your point of view. This may include a press release, brochure, or fact sheet. This information will increase the likelihood that your view of the situation will be presented accurately.

Three Components of Bridging

Bridging is a technique to help you stay on message during an interview. This is particularly important when a reporter asks a question that is off-topic or difficult to answer, or when you have only a very limited window to get your message across, like during a TV interview.

Here are the three components to successful bridging:

Acknowledge the question.

You may or may not actually answer the question, depending on what it is and how connected it is to your message. But, at a minimum, you should address the question. Be as brief as possible in your acknowledgment.

Find your way back to your message.

Your goal is to get from the initial question to your message as quickly as possible. The key is to find the common theme that connects the question to your message, and transition from acknowledging the question to your message succinctly and smoothly.

You can also use transitional phrases to make the leap:

- What this study really says is …
- The most important thing to take away from this is…
- Let me put this in context…

Deliver your message.

Don't forget to deliver your message once you've bridged away from the question. Not only are you getting your key message in, you are redirecting the interview. If you've done your job and your message is clear and compelling, the reporter will hopefully find an interesting follow up question to ask rather than returning to the original question.

Remember: The reporter's job is to ask you questions, but your job is to deliver your message!

Bridging Phrases

“Yes…” (the answer), “and in addition to that…” (the bridge)

“No…” (the answer), “let me explain…” (the bridge)

“I don’t know… but what I do know is…” (the bridge)

“That’s the way it used to be… here’s what we do now…” (the bridge)

“It’s our policy not to discuss _____ specifically, but I can tell you…”

“I think what you’re really asking is…”

“That speaks to a bigger point…”

“Let me put that in perspective…”

“What’s important to remember, however…”

“What I really want to talk to you about is…”

“The most important thing you should know is…”

“The real issue here is…”

“I don’t know about that, but what I do know is…”

“It’s true that… but it’s also true that…”

“Just the opposite is true…”

“The bottom line is…”