Your Audience Comes First:
The Key to Effective Communication and Engagement

Elyse L. Aurbach, PhD

Public Engagement Lead, Office of Academic Innovation
RELATE Co-Founder and Former Director
Lecturer, Program in Biomedical Sciences
University of Michigan
“If you build it, they will come.”

Field of Dreams
Idea
Build it
Publish!
Is it functional?
Is it of high quality?
What is a gateway?

(my experience ≈ naïve user’s experience)
What I notice: variance
(in audience, purpose, content, context)
Variance in audience

With potential users

With current users

With advisors/collaborators

With funders
Variance in **purpose**

Draw in potential users

Guide first time or current users

Seek suggestions for improvement

Secure funding
Variance in **content**

**Need**  (the problem the gateway solves)

**Application**  (the approach the gateway uses)

**Uniqueness**  (how the gateway is different from other tools)

**Functionality**  (how the gateway works)
Variance in **context**

Website/portal

**Professional meetings** *(posters, talks)*

Listservs

Social media?!
What I notice: variance

...where does that come from?!
Idea

Build it

Publish!
Working assumption:

You want your gateway to be successful.
What defines success (developer)?

- Gateway is functional
- Gateway is of high quality
- Gateway gets used & cited
- Gateway is sustainably supported
Changing perspective:
from developer to user
Can I use this to accomplish my goals?  
How can I finish my task?
What defines success (user)?

- Easy to find the gateway
- Easy to navigate the gateway for different purposes
- Easy to apply the gateway to different tasks
“Design based on the way that people are, not how we wish that they were.”

Holly Witteman

(Adapt your communication approach to help to determine a gateway’s success.)
Assume a user-centric communication strategy.
Focus on the foundation.
Audience
Goals
Message

High impact decisions
(relatively) little time
The Checklist

- Define/profile the audience
- Align the goals (yours, the audiences’)
- Uncover and polish the central message

Anyone can be a great communicator!
#1 Rule of Communication:

Know Your Audience!

(& communicate for *their* benefit!)
Context? How many people? How similar?
Context? How many people? How similar?

Their interests? Why are they there?
Context? How many people? How similar?

Their interests? Why are they there?

Background knowledge/expertise?
The Curse of Knowledge
Context? How many people? How similar?

Their interests? Why are they there?

Background knowledge/expertise?

Shared specialized vocabulary?
Context? How many people? How similar?

Their interests? Why are they there?

Background knowledge/expertise?

Shared specialized vocabulary?

Use this understanding to tailor your effort.
The Checklist

- Define/profile the audience
- Align the goals (yours, the audiences’)
- Uncover and polish the central message
Commander’s Intent
(your goal)
Audience Goals

Learn/explore something new?
Apply research to a problem?
Find a valuable resource?

Speaker Goals

Share your latest research/data?
Highlight application of tool to problems?
Raise awareness of a valuable resource?
Effective communication: audience and speaker goals align

Audience Goals
Speaker Goals

(Can help to determine a “good” speaker goal.)
The Checklist

✓ Define/profile the audience
✓ Align the goals (yours, the audiences’)
☐ Uncover and polish the central message
focus
A note about webpages…

…one message per page.
Define *one* central message
“Every block of stone has a statue inside it, and it is the task of the sculptor to discover it.”

Michelangelo
Half-Life
“Everything should be as simple as possible, but not simpler.”

Albert Einstein
The Checklist

✓ Define/profile the audience
✓ Align the goals (yours, the audiences’)
✓ Uncover and polish the central message
The Checklist

✓ Define/profile the audience
✓ Align the goals (yours, the audiences’)
✓ Uncover and polish the central message
☐ (Develop everything else)
With a solid foundation, the features of the house have stability
The Checklist

✓ Define/profile the **audience**
✓ Align the **goals** (yours, the audiences’)
✓ Uncover and polish the **central message**
✓ (Develop everything else)

**Anyone can be a great communicator!**
Rinse, repeat

Draft

Feedback

Revise
Beyond gateways…

…all the same recommendations apply.
Short-form vs. long-form communication
Papers
Posters
Professional talks
Lay-audience talks
Elevator pitches
Lab meetings

Grants
Advisory Board Meetings
Interviews
Reviews
Podcasts
Listservs
The Checklist

✓ Define/profile the *audience*

✓ Align the *goals* (yours, the audiences’)

✓ Uncover and polish the *central message*

☐ Construct the *narrative*

☐ (Develop everything else)
Narrative is (also) foundational.
Most scientists speak like…

What's the takeaway?
Stories are vehicles to deliver messages
Necessary qualities for a good story:

1. Your audience must understand it.

2. Your audience must care about it.
Make a narrative understandable with structure:

1. A.B.T.

2. 

3. 

(ABT: Randy Olsen)
Make a narrative *compelling* with tension:

What’s compelling for your *audience*?
Practice these skills.

**PIs:** This is critical for your students to succeed. (And good for you, too!)

**Trainees:** This is critical for your professional development.
Learn more:

Stand up for Science: Practical Approaches to Discussing Science that Matters

In this Teach-Out, scientists and non-scientists reach out and RELATE to build communication skills to more effectively discuss knowledge.

About this course

This is an Archived Course

EdX keeps courses open for enrollment after they end to allow learners to explore content and continue learning. All features and materials may not be available, and course content will not be updated. Check back often to see when new course start dates are announced.

What you’ll learn

- Understand why science communication is both important and challenging
- Develop strategies to effectively bridge communications between public audiences and scientific researchers
- Understand expert perspectives on different areas of public engagement with science
- Shape a compelling, message-focused STEM narrative for a specific audience
- Discuss important issues in science communication with others

Share this course with a friend
Focus on the foundation.