nature research ACADEMIES

Communicating Your Science With The Public

It is becoming increasingly important for researchers to be able to clearly communicate their research to a broader audience, such as the public, the press, and even funding organizations. However, communicating complex specialized findings in an understandable and general manner is challenging for many researchers.

This 1-day workshop first focuses on the importance of science communication and what can happen when the public is misinformed. We then review how to communicate findings in a way that will be of interest to the public as well as writing strategies to improve understanding. Finally, we discuss how to work well with press offices and journalists to communicate your message to the public, as well as other communication platforms that can be used by the researchers themselves.

1. The importance of communicating science with the public (9:00 – 10:15)

- Common misconceptions by the public
- Important case studies and their societal impact
- How science communication can benefit researchers

This module introduces the importance of communicating science with the public. We begin by discussing why scientists are often reluctant to discuss their research publicly and how this miscommunication can lead to misconceptions by the public regarding scientific research. We then discuss the responsibilities that scientists have to the pubic regarding their research. Next, we introduce case studies of how public misconception of scientific research can have dramatic effects on the society (e.g., anti-vaccine movement and recent measles outbreaks). Lastly, we conclude this module by emphasizing how public communication can actually benefit researchers directly in terms of their reputation, citations, and funding.

Break (10:15 – 10:30)

2. Communicating research with the public (10:30–12:00)

- What makes a newsworthy story
- Understanding the expectations of the public when reading science stories
- Structuring science stories compared with scientific articles

This module is introducing how to communicate complex scientific ideas to the public who likely do not have scientific backgrounds. We begin by discussing which types of studies are usually of interest to the public (not all research makes a good news story), and what the public is expecting to learn regarding the research. The public wants to know how the research affects them (or the families or jobs) directly. Given the different goals and expectations between the public and researchers, we then conclude this module by comparing the different styles of structuring news stories compared with scientific articles.

Lunch (12:00 – 13:00)

3. Effective writing strategies (13:00 – 14:45)

- Logical flow and structure
- Improving readability
- Avoiding common mistakes when describing complex scientific ideas

Given the lack of a scientific background for most public readers, this module focuses on how to discuss complex scientific ideas in a clear and simple manner. We begin by discussing the importance of logical flow and structure in a news story and ways to improve the readability of public stories. Because public awareness and interest is so important, we review ways to keep public readers attention with using more subjective terminology, personal anecdotes, and concrete examples to better engage readers who lack scientific backgrounds. Lastly, we discuss some of the common mistakes when describing complex ideas, such as using technical jargon or not explaining theories that may be unclear or unknown to the public.

Break (14:45 – 15:00)

4. Platforms for communicating science (15:00 – 16:45)

- Working with press offices
- Working with journalists
- Other platforms to communicate your science with the public

This last module is focused on the output of this communication. For most researchers, they will not be the ones writing the news stories. This will be done by the press offices of their institutions as well as scientific journalists working with the media. Therefore, we discuss how researchers should work well with these individuals to ensure that they clearly understand the significance and interest their research has for the public. We also review some of the common mistakes that are made while preparing press releases and the impact that can have on the subsequent news story and societal impact. Lastly, we conclude the workshop by reviewing platforms that researchers can explore to communicate with eh public directly, such as institutional websites, blogs, social media, and videos.

Final Q&A (16:45 – 17:00)