

The basics of translating science

“What is your research about?”

Task: As a science communicator, interview a scientist from a different field and summarize his/ her work for the general public. Your summary of the interview should:

- isolate the big picture
- isolate the background needed to understand the big picture: What is the question, why do we need answers, what makes the approach taken or answers found so far essential?
- include quotes by the scientist that support and explain the big picture.

Background:

"Making understanding possible requires the expert and the nonexpert to connect in a shared, neutral space in which neither party is in control, but in which both parties stretch beyond their comfort zones. It is never a matter of "dumbing down". The goal is to make understanding happen by taking into account different experiences and points of reference in the communication process."

"Scientists and journalists... present information differently: Scientists begin with ample history and background, followed by the facts and their context – what the finding means in the bigger picture. Journalists and members of the public... consume information in the opposite order, with the most important questions being, What is the discovery? and What does it mean?" (Leslie Fink, in Johnsen 2010: 10)

Step 1: Use a key paragraph that contains the relevant information written by the scientist, distilling the research and relating it to the bigger context, as your guide. In a finished work, this is usually a paragraph in the discussion section at the end of the paper. In this workshop, use the prepared project summary.

- To the science communicator: This paragraph is a guide to what the scientist thinks is the main point.
- To the scientist: This paragraph contains scientific language. Be ready to explain the terminology in plain English, as you would to yourself when you were younger.

Step 2: The key questions below will prepare you both for an interview. The content reflects the elements of a good press release and provides the scientist with a protocol to follow, clarifying what is expected.

- What was your hypothesis?
- Please sum up the main finding of your work in one sentence.
- What motivated you to explore this subject?
- Does it relate to any major event known to the public?
- How will the results affect the public, either immediately or in the long term?

Step 3: Use the paragraph to reframe the questions if necessary. Then do the interview.

Step 4: Summarize the interview for the general public.

Step 5: To the general public, i.e. all workshop participants: Provide feedback to the scientist and the science communicator on the outcome of their collaboration.

Key questions approach by Kristine Kelly: *Translating Science. From Academia to Mass Media to the Public. In Johnsen 2010*
Carolyn Johnsen (ed.): *Taking Science to the People. A Communication Primer for Scientists and Engineers. U. of Nebraska Press 2010*