


**Technical  
Communications  
in Physics**

Celia M. Elliott  
Department of Physics  
**University of Illinois**  
[cmelliot@illinois.edu](mailto:cmelliot@illinois.edu)

*...so few went to hear Him,  
& fewer y<sup>t</sup> understood him,  
y<sup>t</sup> oftimes he did in a  
manner, for want of  
Hearers, read to y<sup>e</sup> Walls.*

—Humphrey Newton, about Sir Isaac Newton



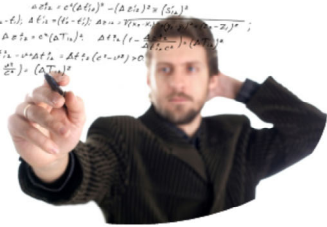
© 2022 The Board of Trustees of the University of Illinois  
All rights reserved.

If you're the next Isaac Newton, you could probably get by with "reading to the walls." If you're not, you must learn how to communicate effectively in science if you're going to be successful.



This semester, I'll do my best to disabuse you of these “reasons.”

**1) I'm a physicist;  
I do math, not prose...**



**Increasingly, physicists work in collaborations;  
good communications skills are essential**

**Getting hired and getting promoted depend on  
good communications skills**

**Getting recognized for your scientific  
contributions depends on good communication  
skills**

**Funding depends on good communications skills**

3

Executives and professors spend most of their time communicating—supervising, delegating, evaluating, clarifying, leading—all of which require clear, precise writing and speaking

## 1) I'm a physicist; I do math, not prose...



Show me a physicist who cannot communicate effectively, and I'll show you a physicist who cannot get papers published, cannot get proposals funded, isn't invited to give talks at meetings, cannot get hired, doesn't get promoted...

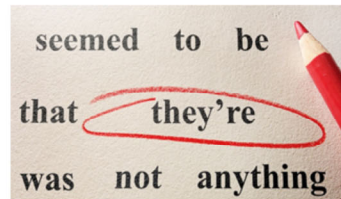
## 2) I'm too busy...



**Good communication skills save time and increase efficiency by anticipating readers' interpretations and eliminating mistakes**

**Good communication skills reduce time spent in revising and editing**

### 3) My word processor will correct my missteaks



**Electronic checkers do not “read” your work; they are only as good as their algorithms, which are geared for business writing**

**The best grammar checkers cannot help you with organization, emphasis, or tone**

**The best spell checkers cannot distinguish between “assess” and “asses”**



6

#### **4) Copy editors will correct my papers**



**Copy editors are a nearly extinct species at most journals nowadays; authors submit text that is usually published “as is”—mistakes and all**

**Copy editors won't see the slides for your talks, your proposals, your reports to funders, your email to collaborators or your supervisor**

**Your reputation and success is in your hands and dependent on your communication skills**

## 5) I'm just not a good writer or speaker



Writing and speaking well are *crafts*, not innate talents

The same aptitudes that make you a good physicist (logic, rigor, attention to detail, pattern recognition) are *exactly* what you need to be a good scientific communicator

Like everything else in physics, communication skills require instruction and practice

8





As a scientist, you will communicate your ideas in all of the following venues:

- Presentations at group meetings, work shops, conferences, and job interviews.
- Publications in journals.
- Teaching and training.
- Grant proposals.
- Reviews of other people's manuscripts and proposals.
- Applications and nominations.
- Evaluations and recommendations.
- Websites and electronic media.

**Communication is a two-way process**



**Broadcasting, *not* communication**

**Communication is an exchange of meaning between a person and an audience**

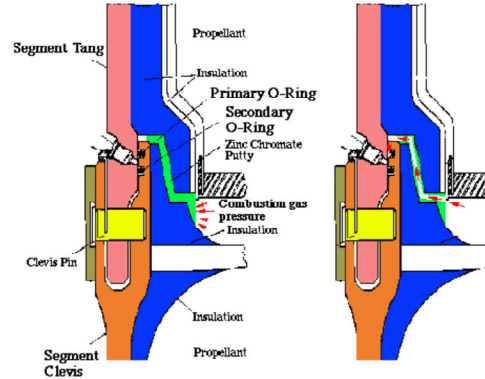
10

Communication is not broadcasting—it is successful only when the receiver understands the content of a message ***as the sender intended it.***

## When communication fails—



January 28, 1986--Space Shuttle Challenger broke apart 73 seconds into its flight, killing all seven crew members aboard.



Report of the Presidential Commission on Space Shuttle Challenger Accident, 1986

11

The U.S. space program was brought to its knees on January 28, 1986, when the space shuttle *Challenger* exploded 73 s after launch.

President Ronald Reagan appointed a blue-ribbon commission of scientists and engineers to investigate the accident and report to the Congress and the American people what went wrong.

The commission concluded that the solid rocket booster O-rings failed to seal properly, allowing flames from combustion gases to burn through the external fuel tank. Faulty design of the solid rocket boosters, insufficient low-temperature testing of the O-ring material, and **failure of communication between different levels of NASA management** were determined to be the cause of the disaster.<sup>1</sup>

---

1. <https://onlineethics.org/cases/engineering-ethics-cases-texas-am/space-shuttle-challenger-disaster>

## Explaining the *Challenger* disaster

NASA's explanation

Richard Feynman's explanation

© Marilyn K. Yee, NNT Pictures

12

An enormous gulf divides “talking” or “writing” and effective communication.

On the left is NASA’s explanation for the Challenger accident. On the right is Richard Feynman’s admittedly flawed experiment that galvanized the American public.

“I took this stuff I got out of your [O-ring] seal and I put it in ice water, and I discovered that when you put some pressure on it for a while and then undo it, it doesn't stretch back. It stays the same dimension. In other words, for a few seconds at least, and more seconds than that, there is no resilience in this particular material when it is at a temperature of 32 degrees. I believe that has some significance for our problem.”<sup>2</sup>

You must provide explanations that are understandable and meaningful to your audience if you’re going to succeed as a science communicator.

---

2. “What Do You Care What Other People Think?” Further Adventures of a Curious Character, Richard P. Feynman, as told to Ralph Leighton (W.W. Norton and Company, New York, 1988), pp. 151–153.

### ***Communication occurs in eight steps***

1. You have an idea and an audience that you want to convey it to
2. You select a medium to transmit the idea
3. You encode the idea in a message
4. You transmit the message
5. Your audience receives the message
6. The audience decodes it (assigns meaning)
7. The audience transmits a message back to you about how they interpreted the message (feedback)
8. You confirm that the message has been understood as you intended or make corrections and send a new message

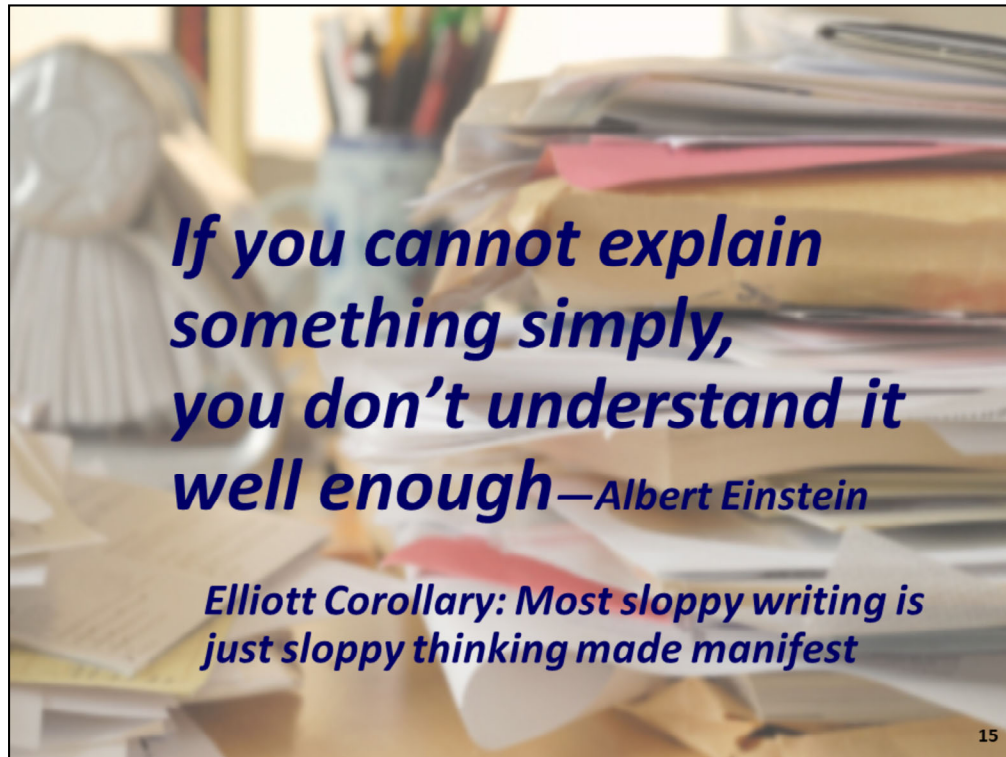
13

Some scientific communications (particularly written communications), have no mechanism for Steps 7 and 8. Consequently, writers must be particularly careful that the meaning they seek to convey is encoded precisely and unambiguously and in words that the receiver can understand.



Writing and speaking are practice-based skills; you learn how to do them by doing them.

There's no substitute for practice.



Because we think in words, the act of expressing observation in language—of distilling amorphous thoughts into words—is a powerful tool for clarifying your thinking.

Translating your thoughts into words so that you can communicate them to someone else forces you

- to question your assumptions.
- to look for holes.
- to fill in gaps in your thinking.

“The act of composition disciplines the mind; writing is one way to go about thinking, and the practice and habit of writing not only drain the mind, but supply it too.” Strunk and White, *The Elements of Style*, 3rd ed., p. 70.

“It’s also through writing that we learn to articulate our thoughts clearly; our critical thinking is strengthened and clarified by our expression of it in writing.” J.L. Craig, “Writing strategies for graduate students,” Proc. ASEE Ann. Conf. & Exposition (Nashville, TN, ASEE, 2005).

**Top 10 problems in scientific writing:**

10. “Mechanical” errors—grammar, punctuation
9. Inappropriate scope or emphasis
8. Failing to “write for the audience”
7. Wordiness, superfluous information
6. Use of imprecise or ambiguous language
5. Failing to adhere to scientific conventions
4. Poor use of graphics or presentation of data
3. Failing to discuss alternative interpretations
2. Failing to adequately support conclusions
1. **Underestimating the time needed to write, revise, and proofread**

16

During this semester, we’ll concentrate on helping you to overcome these common problems in science writing.



**Here's a famous paper that has a writing flaw...can you spot it?**

“Evidence of a positively charged electron was found in cosmic ray tracks produced in a vertical Wilson chamber. Of 1300 photographs, 15 were found to contain this unexplained particle. Analysis of the tracks indicates a particle of positive charge, having a magnitude comparable to that of an electron.”

Carl D. Anderson, “The Positive Electron,” *Phys. Rev.* **43**, 491–494 (1933).

17

This paragraph was taken from a paper published in 1933, announcing the discovery of the positron, for which Carl Anderson shared the 1936 Nobel Prize in Physics.

Now, admittedly, Carl Anderson won a Nobel Prize and I didn't. But I still think this paragraph could (should) have been written more carefully.

Can you spot the problem?

“Evidence of a positively charged electron was found in cosmic ray tracks produced in a vertical Wilson chamber. **Of 1300 photographs, 15 were found to contain this unexplained particle.** Analysis of the tracks indicates a particle of positive charge, having a magnitude comparable to that of an electron.”

Carl D. Anderson, “The Positive Electron,” *Phys. Rev.* **43**, 491–494 (1933).

18



“Of 1300 photographs, 15 were found to contain this unexplained particle.”

The “photographs” did not **contain** any “particles” (other than in the sense that they were made of matter).

*Tracks recorded on the photographic film could not be explained by the behavior of any known particles.*

There is a huge gap between saying “I have a photograph of some weird-looking tracks” and “I have a photograph of Bigfoot.”

Write precisely!



Patterson-Gimlin film, Frame 352  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bigfoot#/media/File:Patterson-Gimlin\\_film\\_frame\\_352.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bigfoot#/media/File:Patterson-Gimlin_film_frame_352.jpg)



They require having an adequate vocabulary and a sensitivity to words' nuances.  
They require practice and iteration.

They require constructive criticism from experts and peers.

Train yourself to recognize excellence and emulate it.

Seize every opportunity that presents itself to improve your skills.

Your investment in improving them *will* affect your future success.

Practice may not make "perfect," but it definitely makes "better."



**Recap:**

- **Good communications skills are essential for your success**
- **Communicating is more than mere broadcasting**
- **Strive to explain clearly and write precisely**
- **Writing and speaking well are *learned* skills—they require instruction and practice**

cmelliot@illinois.edu

20

For good advice and further reading:

W. Strunk and E.B. White, *The Elements of Style*, 3rd ed. (Allyn & Bacon, Boston, 1979).

V. Booth, *Communicating in Science*, 2nd ed. (CUP, Cambridge, 1993).

H.B. Michaelson, *How to Write and Publish Engineering Papers and Reports*, 3rd ed. (Oryx Press, Phoenix, 1990).

S.L. Montgomery, *The Chicago Guide to Communicating Science* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2003).

Michael Alley, *The Craft of Scientific Writing*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Springer, New York, 1996).

E. Tufte, *The Visual Display of Quantitative Information*, 2nd ed. (Graphics Press, Cheshire, CT, 2003).