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Hit the Mark: Make Complex Ideas Understandable

6 ways to communicate challenging concepts to an audience.

March 29, 2018 | by Matt Abrahams



Communicate complex ideas more clearly with these tools. |
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Think back to the last time you had that “what the...?” moment when you were listening to someone explain concepts that were highly technical, detailed, or nuanced. You most likely experienced confusion, stupidity, or even anger. We have all been there. Conveying complex information in a clear, concise manner is a huge challenge for communicators of all stripes — scientists, technologists, business professionals, etc.

In order to make your complex information understandable for your audience, you first need to address some bad habits that get in the way.

When it comes to communicating, we tend to fall victim to two tendencies: We suffer from the “curse of knowledge,” and we explain things in ways that

work best for us, not our audience.

The curse of knowledge (a term I first encountered in Dan and Chip Heath's great book *Made to Stick*) simply means we know too much about our topic. Therefore, we make assumptions about our audience's knowledge and take shortcuts in our explanations or use jargon. Second, we tend to relay concepts to others in the manner we are most comfortable receiving information. This is to say that if we rely on data and detail to learn, we naturally tend to provide data and detail when we explain. These two communication habits serve to make it more difficult for our audiences to understand and learn from us.

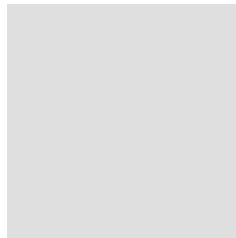
Taking an audience-centric approach to your communication serves as the antidote to these two tendencies. Rather than start drafting your presentation, email, or meeting agenda by asking, "What do I want to say?" start by asking, "What does my audience need to hear?" In order to answer this, you must first think about what your audience knows and how they go about knowing. This reflection helps you to include information that you might have left out as well as to consider using different ways of explaining, such as stories, images, etc.

From your audience's perspective, you need to consider ways to make your complex material more

accessible. Below are six tools you can use to help your audience understand your complex concepts: Diagram, deconstruct, compare, picture, backward map, chunk.

See how we illustrate the steps in archery by using these tools below.

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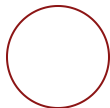
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