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Are you falling for this expert trap?



Morgan Depenbusch, PhD 

Helping analysts grow their influence through better charts, clearer stories, and more persuasive communication | Ranke...



October 4, 2025

[Quick note before we dive in: every other Tuesday, I share one practical, career-boosting tip with my email list. The post below is from a past issue. If you'd like to get these fresh (instead of months later), sign up here: www.morgandepenbusch.com]

When I first started at Google, a team asked me to lead a stats workshop. Basic stuff: standard deviations, t-tests, confidence intervals.

I was thrilled. I love teaching. I love stats. I love teaching about stats.

So I poured hours into prep: digging through old textbooks, mapping out the perfect flow, designing the slides and mini-exercises.

I pictured my colleagues nodding along, soaking it in, maybe even walking out saying, "Wow, that was amazing!"

Instead... crickets. Confused looks. A few people clearly checking email.

It wasn't until months (okay fine, years) later that I realized what went wrong: **I fell into the trap of the curse of knowledge.**

The curse of knowledge

It strikes all of us, all the time: it's when you forget what it's like to not know what you know.

The more experienced you get, the harder it becomes to think like a beginner. So you explain things in a way that makes perfect sense... to *you*. But not necessarily to your audience.

That's what happened in the workshop. I skipped steps I didn't realize were steps. I went too fast. I didn't leave space for questions or confusion.

It's like teaching someone to ride a bike by saying: "Just keep your balance, pedal, and steer."

But they're thinking: *How do I even get started? What if I tip over? How fast should I go?*

They're not ready for the big-picture summary or the advanced lesson. They need the steps that get them there.

Same goes for your charts, insights, and presentations.

If you've been neck-deep in the data for weeks, what's obvious to you might be totally foreign to your audience.

They haven't seen the raw data. They haven't tested five hypotheses. They're just seeing this chart, right now, for the first time.

So how do you break the curse?

Break the curse: 5 ways to make your insights actually land

1. Zoom out first

Before diving into a chart or slide, step back and ask: *What would I need to know if I were seeing this for the first time?*

Give 1–2 sentences of context before showing any data:

- "We wanted to understand what's driving churn among new users."
- "This chart compares sign-up rates across four landing pages we tested."

2. Simplify the setup

Explain the why before the what: Why did this analysis matter? What decision did it inform?

Analysts often lead with *methods* ("We ran a regression...") when what people want first is *meaning* ("We found a surprising trend in customer behavior...").

3. Ditch the jargon

You may love the phrase "significantly negative relationship," but most people outside your team don't know what that means (or worse, they think they do, and they're wrong).

Try this instead: "As X increases, Y tends to decrease, and the pattern is unlikely due to chance."

4. Show, don't just tell

Don't just describe what's happening in the data, help your audience see it.

If you're making a comparison, visualize the contrast.

- Example: Instead of saying "Group A performed better than Group B," show two bars side by side and say: "Group A outpaced Group B"

by 15 percentage points - the gap you see here.”

If you’re describing a trend or shift, use a mini-story or metaphor to make it stick.

- Example: Instead of saying “Customer churn started slow but then really picked up,” say: “What started as a trickle became a snowball, picking up speed until churn became a real problem.”

5. Test your message

Perhaps the most important tip of all: Before you present or send off the report, do a dry run with someone unfamiliar with the analysis. Ask them to explain it back to you in their own words.

If they can’t, it’s a sign to simplify. If they can, you’re on the right track.

The bottom line

Expertise is valuable, but it can also make you blind to how confusing your message might be to others.

That’s what makes the curse of knowledge so sneaky: you don’t realize it’s gotten you until it’s too late. But if you want your insights to land, you have to slow down and actively guard against it.

Cheers to breaking the curse,

Morgan

P.S. Don't forget to sign up at www.morgandepenbusch.com to get future issues directly to your inbox! You'll also be the first to hear about any new resources, guest speakers, or reader discounts.

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2d ...

Many thanks - an excellent and engaging piece that doesn't fall into the gap :-)

In the interests of falling into the gap could I suggest it's not the amount of knowledge that makes experts hard to follow—it's that we are often crossing paradigm.

...more

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2d ...

[Morgan Depenbusch, PhD](#) your article is perfect, I dropped in the 'hole of knowledge' (as I'll brand it) to rephrase to talking up and the difficulties of talking across.

If we were standing on pillars of knowledge then 2 experts tal ...more

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2d ...

The more we know, the harder it becomes to explain things simply. That curse of knowledge sneaks up on everyone, especially when you're deep in the weeds of data or AI.

Your point about testing your message with someone unfamiliar is ...more

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2d ...

Morgan Depenbusch, PhD, of course. Analogies and concrete examples have always served as universal translators for complex ideas. Thanks for sharing!

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2d ...

Fantastic advice, whether for a professional or a professional educator! I just helped a university professor with 40 years experience retune a dissertation overview prezco because, as someone not an expert (and a potential member of his audience) he lost me shortly after "hello". ...more

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Morgan Depenbusch, PhD Author

Helping analysts grow their influence through better charts, clearer...

2d ...

[Diane C Welker](#) such a great poignant example!

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