

## ADVICE FOR OUTREACH COMMUNICATORS

Your goal as an outreach writer is always the same: Have the reader understand, comprehend, and apply your information to affect their beliefs, attitudes, decision making, and actions. To meet that goal, you must write differently for different audiences.

People who work in the technical field you are describing already possess the banks of prior knowledge to create context, relevance, and empathy. They need only the new information. That is not true, however, for the wider audience you hope to reach with your outreach writing.

It may be technical information that you want to convey. But it is *story* that creates context and makes it relevant. It may be new science developments you want to communicate, but it is character that makes it meaningful. It may be important new concepts you want to communicate, but it is the details of the human experience that make it memorable. It may be new accomplishments you want to describe, but it is the struggles en route to those accomplishments that will make readers relate to, and care about, the accomplishments.

Bruner (1986) put it this way. "Science strives to define universalities of the world that are context independent. Stories strive to create universalities through context dependent situations." The two are neither mutually exclusive nor incompatible. Instead, they act as complements to each other, creating a powerful and effective whole. Use story structure to create context and relevance for unfamiliar topics.

Put a face on it. Science doesn't happen by itself. The people who do the work, their challenges and struggles *are* the story. Tell readers about the people in order to make the science comprehensible and meaningful.

Avoid the family story syndrome. When telling family stories to family members, there is no need to include character description (everyone already knows them), goal, or motive. (These also are general common knowledge.) Family stories are then reduced to plot descriptions laden with family jargon and phraseology that have developed over the years. It's fine for those in the family, but meaningless and boring for those outside the family.

Science fields and scientists have traditionally written for other scientists already in the particular field of science. For brevity's sake, they have left out the same information omitted from family stories and have achieved the same result. Science writing is perfect for those already in that particular field, but a morass for others. The job of the outreach writer is to translate from "family" jargon and its implied information into the story-based form needed for non-family members.