

Shaping the story

How can we identify the really important themes in our research narrative without over-simplifying and distorting the message?

Who are your audience?

- Research users: industry, education, policy makers, or public?
- Research contributors: community groups, children, parents, colleagues or volunteers?
- We might also want to reach: funding bodies, potential collaborators, friends, family, academics, newspapers, people in schools and colleges.

For each potential audience, we need to think: what message do we want to send and why? Which parts of our research are most interesting to this audience and what background do we need to give to our work?

Different strategies work for different people, but some are to:

1) Tell it shorter

Tell someone about your research and listen to the questions they ask to find out what they didn't understand. Then tell it to someone else (or yourself) in 5 minutes, 3 minutes, 1 minute. You will find that only the really important themes are left.

2) Make a story board with three sections

Use an image – camera snapshot - or a phrase in each section, for beginning, middle and end of the story. Cluster other facts or items of information around your one image.

3) Make a story map (or a Memory Palace)

Take a tour round the landscape (or building) of your research narrative. Draw, or mark with key phrases, each landmark you encounter. Put in signposts to direct you from one area to the next. Add in different geographical features – key words, key facts, key images or issues.

Presentation skills

There are many ways of getting your message across and commanding attention from an audience, including:

1) Eye contact and expression

Before starting, look round your audience and smile. This will help reassure them that you have a message they want to give and that they might want to hear. Mentally divide the audience into four sections. Try to give equal amounts of eye contact to each section.

2) Voice

Notice changes in volume, tone, pitch and speed of voice, and the importance of pauses and silence.

Try: stop and breathe in deeply before you start to talk.

3) Body language

Never underestimate the importance of open body language, facing your audience, arms by your sides rather than crossed protectively over your body.

Try: if you don't know what to do with your hands, imagine you are holding a heavy suitcase in each hand. Only let go of the suitcase to make a deliberate gesture.

These notes accompany a series of short courses to enhance the range and impact of public engagement with research at the University of Cambridge. For more information, contact Dane Comerford: www.cam.ac.uk/publicengagement or Marion Leeper: www.marionleeper.co.uk/