

Inredients of a good story



III. GET STARTED
by DIRK HANS

A “good” story – what is that meant to be? Probably something exciting, something entertaining, something you want to read or listen to. Maybe it has even been made into a film. But where does science come into play? Research rarely provides a James Bond plot. But science is full of great stories. A whole field of journalism thrives on it – science journalism. And there are piles of books about science, its achievements and its heroes. Easy to read, excitingly told.

But what makes a good science story? The first thing to think about is who you want to inspire with the story. Who is the target audience? Let’s focus on the big standard target group: the so-called “interested public”. How do I tell a story so that people outside the scientific community are excited and want to know more? The key is to make the fish take the bait – not the angler! So what aspect of your research would be of most interest to your father or niece who is not a scientist? This is something you should definitely ask yourself before you start telling your story.

And it is also advisable – and this is practical knowledge – to include at least four factors in the story: topicality, proximity, emotion and eye-catchers. If the story contains these ingredients, the chances of getting undivided attention are pretty good. Let’s look at the factors one by one, starting with “topicality”. In our news-driven world, if something has just been discovered or a research expedition has just been successfully launched, this is potentially more interesting



TOPICALITY



PROXIMITY

than yesterday's cold cup of coffee. But relevance is even more important. The content has to be relevant to me – it needs to concern my health, my children or where I live. If this is the case and proximity is given, I really pay attention. Besides, we humans are emotional beings. If there is suffering, a rescue or a long hoped-for breakthrough in a story, empathy arises. If the story can then be enriched further with great eye-catchers like pictures, insightful infographics or captivating video sequences, success is almost guaranteed. Knowing these things will be very helpful to you in front of an audience at an open day, but it's even more important when writing good press releases. Include these four “magic” ingredients in your communications with the media and your chances of getting coverage will increase dramatically.

And one final, perhaps disappointing but relieving insight: Most science stories are uninteresting to the outside world because they deal with the minutiae of continuous research: very important to the scientific community – unimportant to your niece. So there is also a great responsibility not to tell every story. Current science communication tends to overshoot the mark here and often tries to make mountains out of molehills.



Recommended reads:

- ♦ Martinez-Conde S. (2017), *Finding the plot in science storytelling in hopes of enhancing science communication*, PNAS, 114:8127. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1711790114>
- ♦ Jones M.D. & Crow D.A. (2017), *How can we use the 'science of stories' to produce persuasive scientific stories?* Palgrave Communications 3, 53. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-017-0047-7>