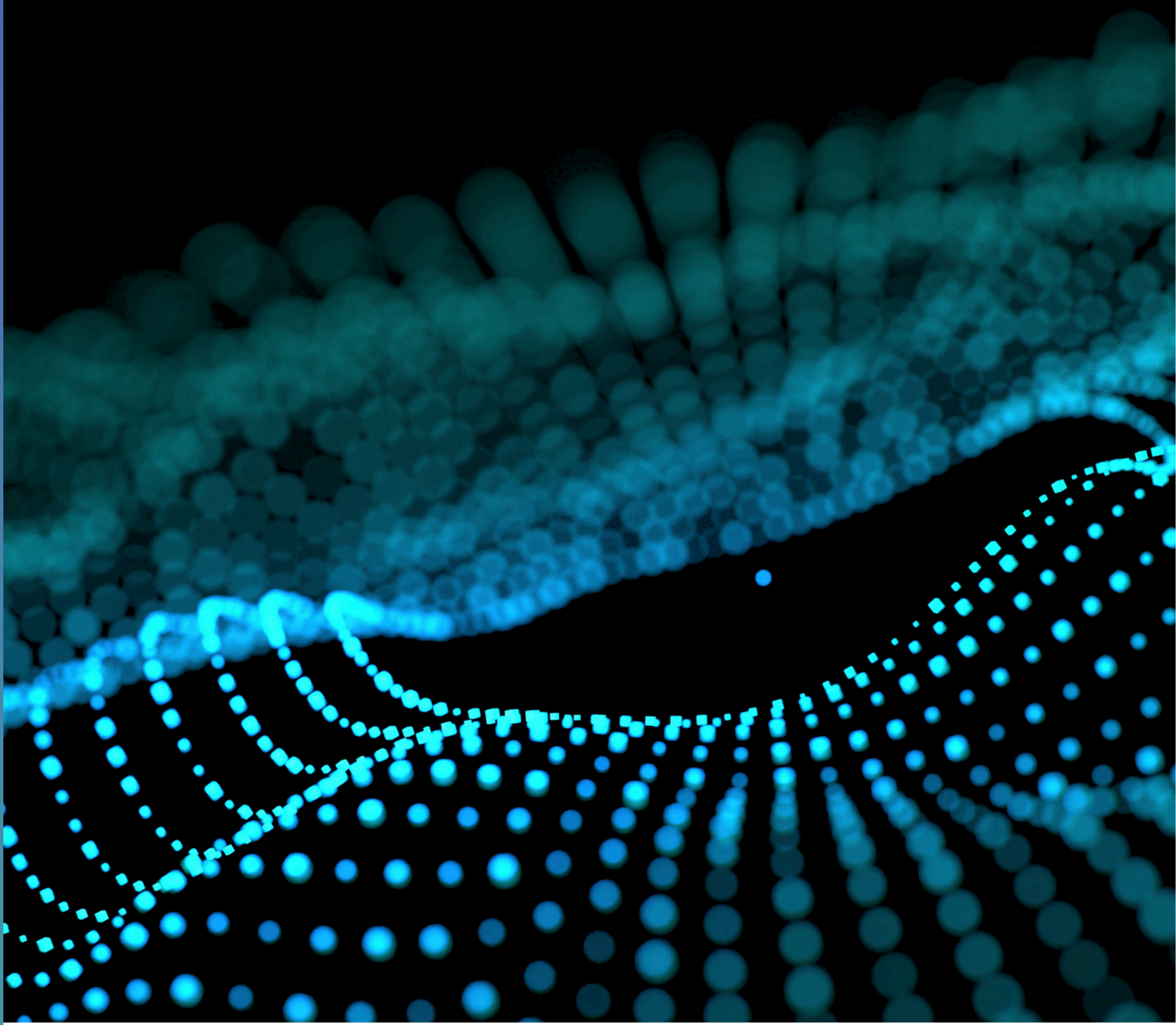

COMMUNICATING AT THE EDGE OF INNOVATION

Insights to Help You and Your Team Master the Art of Innovation Communication and Get Buy-in for Your Brilliant Ideas

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Clarity CONNECT

Foreword

The difficulty of communicating at the edge of innovation

Creative thought-work is hard work, and one of the ways I build up my mental stamina for the work I do as a communication coach is by referring to motivational quotes.

Several years ago, one of my favorite aphorisms came from the Victorian essayist, Walter Bagehot, who wrote: “One of the greatest pains to human nature is the pain of a new idea.”

When I first came across those words, I assumed they pertained to the intellectual effort of birthing an original thought. However, I recently tracked the quote down to its source and discovered that’s not what Bagehot was really saying.

In his 1872 book *Physics and Politics*, Bagehot maps emerging scientific theories about evolution onto the development of political and social structures. In his Darwinian reading of history, societies progress by moving through “an age of discussion,” during which novel ideas are publicly aired and debated.

But this process is not easy, and not all societies are willing and able to endure it—because encountering a new idea is “one of the greatest pains to human nature.” In other words, the difficulty associated with novel concepts isn’t creating them but rather absorbing them. Here’s how Bagehot expands on this assertion:

> One of the greatest pains to human nature is the pain of a new idea. It is, as common people say, so “upsetting;” it makes you think that, after all, your favourite notions may be wrong, your firmest beliefs ill-founded; it is certain that till now there was no place allotted in your mind to the new and startling inhabitant, and now that it has conquered an entrance you do not at once see

> which of your old ideas it will or will not turn out, with which of them it can be reconciled, and with which it is at essential enmity. Naturally, therefore, common men hate a new idea, and are disposed more or less to ill-treat the original man who brings it.[1]

The obvious classism, sexism, and racism that pervade Bagehot's analysis mark it as a product of its time. Yet his observations point to a timeless truth: for many people, the idea of something new and improved is NOT a welcome thought. The status quo is comfortable and comforting while change is disconcerting, even threatening.

As an innovator or someone who supports innovators, you may find it hard to relate to Bagehot's depiction of how "common men" relate to unconventional thinking. But getting buy-in for innovative ideas starts with recognizing the hurdles you face, including the common fear of the unknown.

Bagehot paints a stark picture of what it's like for someone who's not an innovative thinker to come face to face with a bold new idea. He likens it to experiencing a home invasion.

The violence of the metaphor is rather shocking but very apt. Watch how Bagehot plays out the comparison. The new idea enters the mind as "a new and startling inhabitant." As it breaches the threshold, it throws the home into a state of chaos, jockeying for space with the old, familiar ideas. The result is inner turbulence, the mind at war with itself as it tries to sort out which ideas to keep and which to "turn out."

More than 150 years ago, Bagehot put his finger on the quintessential challenge of selling innovative ideas—making them feel approachable and safe for people who don't have a high tolerance for intellectual risk.

Innovators live for intellectual risk. Like sky divers or polar explorers, they're driven by curiosity and the desire to push the boundaries of the knowable. But few of the collaborators they need to move their innovation forward share that risk profile.

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[1] *Physics and Politics, or Thoughts on the Application of the Principles of 'Natural Selection' and 'Inheritance' to Political Society*, No. V., available on Project Gutenberg at https://www.gutenberg.org/files/4350/4350-h/4350-h.htm.

People like funders, investors, clients, policymakers, and industry partners crave certainty. They want assurance that the novel will deliver on its future promise without wrecking their current world.

Communicating at the edge of innovation therefore requires a specialized set of skills. It's not enough to clearly explain how the innovation works and provide evidence to prove potential benefits. Innovators who get traction for their ideas understand that their primary task is to build trust. They must earn the right to share disruptive concepts by first establishing common interests and showing they're likable, reliable, and good-natured.

In addition, successful innovation communication must overcome peculiar problems. Experts who are genuine pioneers in their field are often communicating in a contextual and linguistic vacuum. There are few historical precedents or current examples to point to, and they may need to invent new language to introduce ground-breaking discoveries. The abstractness of revolutionary ideas can make them bewildering and vaguely frightening to audiences who find it hard to grasp the intangible.

Over the past seven years, I've had the privilege of working with innovators in various settings, across a wide range of academic disciplines and industry sectors. Time and again, I've noticed clients wrestling with the complexity of communicating new ideas without inflicting on non-experts the pain Bagehot describes.

Typically, these researchers and technical experts are strong communicators when they're speaking or writing peer to peer. Many of them have published in academic or trade journals and delivered conference presentations. Their challenge isn't putting an intelligible sentence or paragraph together—it's bridging the gap between their zone of expertise and the space where their audience lives and makes sense of things.

Through the Clarity Connect blog, I regularly share insights and tips to help innovators connect more effectively with the collaborators they need to move innovation forward. In this short e-anthology, I've collected the 10 blog articles that seem to have resonated the most strongly with researchers, engineers, software developers, data scientists, social innovation specialists, and other change-makers.

I offer these short pieces, written between coaching and consulting engagements, in a spirit of collaboration. I hope they spark for you some fresh thoughts about how you can frame and express innovative ideas in ways that engage, educate, and inspire your audiences. May they help you communicate the true value of the knowledge you have to share, which I know has the potential to provide so many benefits and change so many lives.

Enjoy!

Dawn

Dr. Dawn Henwood
Founder, Clarity Connect Inc.

Section 1

WHY IS IT SO HARD TO SELL INNOVATION?

When you're the inventor of a new idea or solution, its brilliance is bedazzling—and it's hard to understand why others don't see how brightly it's shining.

The following set of essays helps explain why it can be so challenging to reach across the intellectual and imaginative gap separating you from decision-makers, such as funders, investors, and clients. Understanding the problem is the first step toward solving it!

What to Do When You're in Love With the New But Your Audience Is Afraid of It

One definition of innovator might be "someone who's in love with the new." When you see the world through innovator eyes, you see the potential to do things differently. While everyone around you thinks things are running along just fine, you see how they could be running so much better — whether "better" means quicker, leaner, cleaner, brighter, or just newer.

Your visionary capacity sets you apart from the pack. However, it also creates a divide between you and your customers.

Most innovators I know would agree with the modernist poet William Carlos Williams who practically made a religion out of worshipping the novel. In one of his most iconoclastic works, Williams throws down the gauntlet in defence of newness:

> *"Nothing is good save the new. If a thing have novelty it stands intrinsically beside every other work of artistic excellence."*
>
> *— William Carlos Williams,* Prologue to Kora In Hell *(1920)*

As a change-maker, you'd probably find Williams a kindred spirit. But I bet that most of the collaborators you need to get onboard to move your mission forward would find him scary.

For many people, novelty is frightening. Because newness brings change, and change brings various kinds of discomfort: uncertainty, ambiguity, adjustment, to name just a few.

As I'm sure you've heard, people tend to buy from (and invest in) people and organizations they know, like, and trust. As an innovator, you're presenting your audiences with solutions that are unknown, and therefore hard to like or trust. Newness is not necessarily a strong selling point.

A tale of two sales calls

For example, let's consider two different sales calls to a store that sells paper products (notebooks, greeting cards, and so on). In the first call, the sales rep from Company A presents stationery produced from conventional (tree-based) paper featuring the latest colors and designs. In the second call, the sales rep from Company B presents a similar product line, but their paper is produced from apple peelings.

Who has the tougher sales conversation? Even if the customer is an advocate for environmentally friendly products, chances are that the rep who's peddling paper made from apples will have a harder job.

Just think of all the questions that could come up as the customer considers this innovative product, that may be completely foreign to them. How durable is the paper? How easy is it to write on? How expensive is it? How does it feel in the hand? How popular has it proven with consumers?

In contrast the sales rep with conventional products will likely face just some predictable questions about price, product track records in similar stores, and so on.

The customer probably won’t question the basic functionality of their product, or their personal integrity or sanity ("Apple peels? Really? Are you pulling my leg? You must be crazy if you think I’d put that out for my customers to laugh at!")

The novelty paradox

This fictional scenario perhaps presents an oversimplified situation. Or does it?

I notice many innovators pitching their novel ideas or solutions on the assumption that their audience will automatically welcome new, unfamiliar (and perhaps untried) features. Yet newness, even when it initially excites your audience, inevitably draws out skepticism. Newness on its own is seldom your strongest selling point.

Because here’s the paradox: **even people who buy into innovation want to avoid risk.** So, they desire solutions that push the boundaries of the possible, but they also want the assurance that success is not only possible but also predictable. They get enthused about driving a never-before-seen, rocket-powered automated car — and they also want to feel safe on the highway.

So, what’s true of the store owner poring over paper products is equally true of the investor listening to a pitch or a potential partner reading a proposal. In each case, your challenge is to generate curiosity and excitement about the new while also creating a comfortable feeling of familiarity and trust.

Help customers connect with what they know

One of the best strategies for achieving this tricky balance is to associate the new with the old, to intentionally relate a novel aspect of your solution to a product, service, or approach your audience knows well.

For example, let’s go back to our friend selling the apple-based stationery. They might address questions about durability by pointing out that plant-based scrolls produced by Ancient Egyptians (the papyrus most school-aged children have heard about) still survive today.

Of course, when you’re drawing such a comparison, you want to make sure that the known thing to which you’re comparing your unknown solution is easily recognizable to your audience. If the shopkeeper has never heard of papyrus, then the sales rep has just made their product even more strange and inaccessible.

In a recent coaching session, a client mentioned how frustrating she finds it when prospects "pigeonhole" her complex service into "something they've heard of." While this response can be exasperating, it can also give you valuable insight into how to truly connect with your audience. When people misinterpret the "new" you're offering as something old, that's your cue to pivot and follow their lead. Let them guide you into their familiar territory, where you can attach what you're selling to ideas, beliefs, and virtues they've already bought into. They've just given you a glimpse of the mental frame through which they view the world, which gives you the power to position your solution within it.

For instance, let's say our apple-paper salesperson notices the shop owner is standing next to a rack of "eco-friendly" cards made of recycled paper. The concept of eco-friendly paper made of recycled materials provides a ready-made frame for viewing the apple paper as eco-friendly paper made of organic, replenishable materials. With just a slight adjustment, the sales rep can shift from selling something Brand Scary New to selling something that's simply Newer Than.

Whether you're pitching your audiences on paper, planes, or software applications, remember that your essential task is always to build trust. Novelty may grab your audience's attention, but it's your ability to tune into what your audience understands and appreciates that will gain their confidence and move your business ahead.

Pushing the New Frontier of Innovation Communication

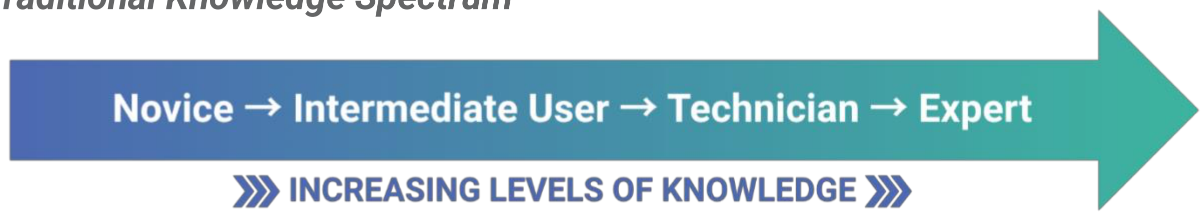
At a recent research conference, I enjoyed networking with scientists and social scientists from a wide range of backgrounds, all of them domains far beyond my knowledge base. As I sidled from one conversation to the next, I got glimpses into fields as diverse as psychiatry, pediatrics, molecular genetics, social services, biomedical engineering, kinesiology, biology, transportation engineering, and occupational health.

As someone who loves to learn, I was in my element. Yet I'll confess there were moments when I found the amount of intellectual stimulation almost overwhelming. My brain was working overtime on decoding technical terms and contextualizing topics so I could at least listen intelligently to the conversation even if I couldn't really contribute to it.

Then, toward the end of the conference, I had an aha moment. I found myself in a conversation cluster with a molecular geneticist and a handful of other scientists, and I discovered I wasn't the only person at the conference encountering a steep learning curve.

This realization helped me understand that one of the teaching tools I've been using for years, The Knowledge Spectrum, needs a revamp. Today's science has become so complex that it's no longer enough just to consider where your target audience sits on a continuum of technical knowledge, as shown below.

Traditional Knowledge Spectrum



In this diagram, the level of knowledge increases as you read from left to right:

- A **novice** is someone brand-new to a topic.
- An **intermediate user** is a practitioner who interacts with and applies the technology or science without understanding its inner workings.
- A **technician** has practical knowledge of how a piece of technology or an aspect of science works but does not create new knowledge.
- An **expert** knows how to design and create new technology or make scientific discoveries.

While this traditional scale works well in standard situations, such as a consulting engineer communicating with a client or a science journalist writing a blog post, it's time for an upgrade. Given the pace and complexity of science and science communication today, we now need more sophisticated tools to think through the difficulty inherent in a piece of knowledge and consider how that maps to the audience's capacity for understanding.

This distinction is critical for researchers and R&D teams who aren't just opening doors to new insights but are blasting doors off their hinges. If that's your situation, then the communication challenges you face don't really fit under the rubric of traditional technical communication, science communication, or knowledge translation.

You're engaged in **innovation communication,** and that means you must work harder to connect successfully with audiences such as funders, policymakers, practitioners, and customers.

Esoteric subjects require new communication strategies

Let's get back to my conversation with the molecular geneticist. As they explained to me, a complete novice, what their research involved, they joked that few people at the conference could readily understand their work. Molecular genetics, they said, is a topic so complex that even doctors, biologists, and scientists in adjacent fields have trouble grasping it.

Nods around the group confirmed this communication dilemma. So I turned to the scientist standing next to me, a kinesiologist who studies the effect of exercise on health, and asked whether they faced the same degree of difficulty in sharing their research with nonexperts.

The answer came without a moment's hesitation: "No, most people get the general idea of what I do."

"Kinesiology" may not be a household word, but most people these days recognize that exercise affects physical well-being (even if many of us don't put that knowledge into daily practice). They understand, therefore, that someone might study the different effects of different kinds of exercise on different people. They may not be able to interpret the data, but they get the general drift of the research activity.

That doesn't mean that Professor Kinesiology doesn't face challenges in translating their academic knowledge into language and visuals that resonate outside the lab. But Professor Molecular Genetics faces a far greater challenge because knowledge in their field isn't just-out-of-reach of the audiences they communicate with. It's so complex, so unfamiliar that I'd describe it as arcane: mysterious to all but a select group of the initiated.

When you're dealing in the esoteric, you can't rely on the simple, one-dimensional strategies used to share generic technical information. You need to think in at least two dimensions by considering not just the level of your audience's knowledge but also the level of the knowledge you're trying to convey and the difference between them.

Traditional approaches don't fit emergent fields

"Know your audience." "Conduct a detailed audience analysis." "Put yourself in your audience's shoes."

These are all phrases I've repeated hundreds of times, to hundreds of students, over the past 20-plus years as I've taught communication to engineers, software developers, and scientists. While such audience-centric advice is generally sound, I now see that in some circumstances it may make sense to go against conventional wisdom and start with the subject matter.

When an entire field is new and the knowledge being generated is still emergent, then the best place to begin may be the topic itself. In such a case, it's useful to ask yourself questions such as these:

- How long has my field of inquiry been considered a knowledge domain in its own right?
- To what extent is the general public aware of my field of inquiry?
- In a room of scientists from adjacent fields, how many of them would recognize my specialized vocabulary?
- How much of that vocabulary existed 20 years ago?
- How easy is it to express my specialized knowledge through analogies to everyday things or processes?
- How easy is it to convey my specialized knowledge through language that's concrete, rather than abstract?

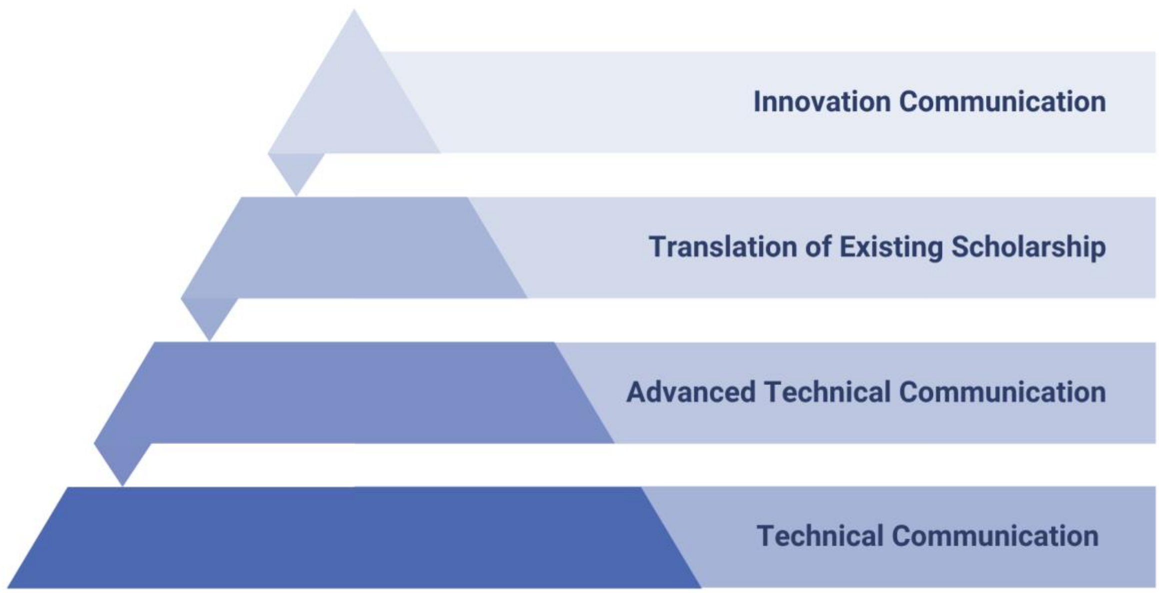
Let's say, for instance, that you're a specialist in quantum biology, a field that is just finding its feet as researchers attempt to apply quantum physics to biological processes. Many people, including scientists in other specialties, are likely unaware not just of your research but also of the field within which you operate. Because the whole discipline is just emerging, it is also extra-challenging to express its tentative findings through everyday analogies and abstract language.

Contrast your situation with that of a civil engineer building bridges and roads. While many of the audiences this expert communicates with don't understand the physics and math behind the engineering process, they're familiar with the results of that process.

They use bridges and roads in their daily life, so they don't have to stretch far to imagine someone designing and testing those structures. They probably even use a few engineering terms in their everyday conversations, such as "friction" and "incline."

We can place the civil engineer and you (the quantum biologist) on a hierarchy of communication difficulty based just on your topic area. In the diagram below, the engineer's communication activities and yours constitute two different levels of what we broadly consider "knowledge translation." The engineer engages in "technical communication" while you engage in "innovation communication."

Hierarchy of Communication Difficulty Based on Topic



In between the base and peak of the pyramid, we find two intermediary categories, which I define as follows:

- **Advanced technical communication:** Topics that relate to familiar situations or technology but incorporate new research or data. For example, a civil engineer using software to model flood risks does work similar to what civil engineers have done for years, but with updated software.

- **Translation of existing scholarship:** When students or practitioners synthesize existing scholarship, they are engaging with complex—but not novel—ideas. For example, at a student research conference, I recently encountered a poster describing the Indigenous concept of “two-eyed seeing” (viewing science from both an Indigenous and Western perspective). The student’s work summarized the current understanding of the concept but did not enlarge upon or alter it to generate new knowledge.

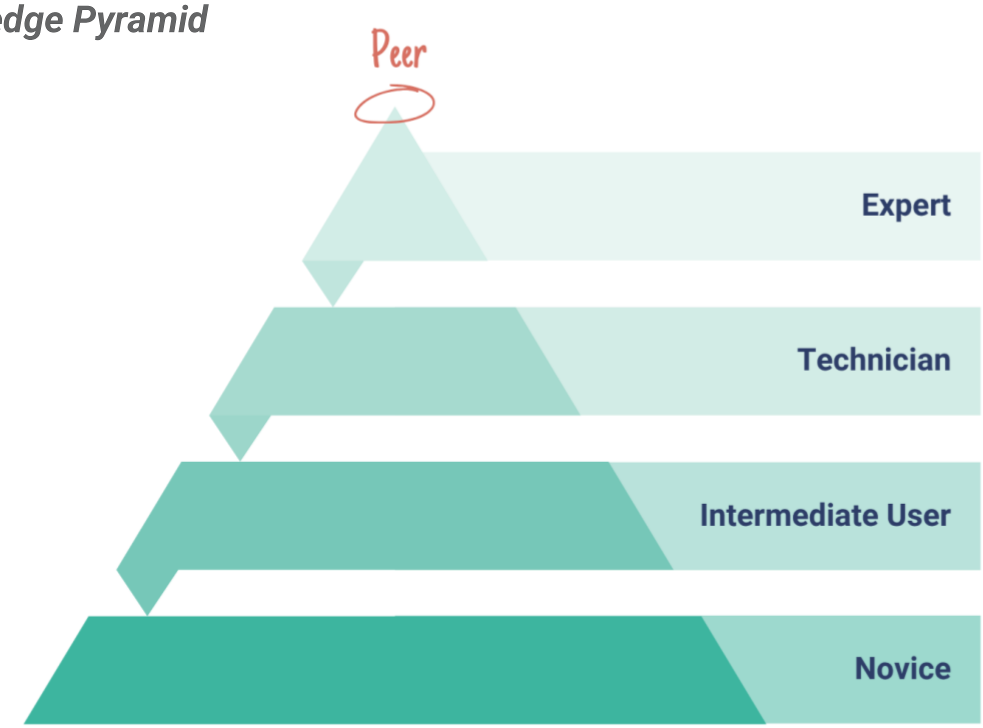
If you’re a quantum biologist, then you’re operating at a more advanced level than either the civil engineer doing flood mapping or the student presenting a research poster. As someone doing innovation communication, you need more sophisticated strategies. Pat advice to "adapt to your audience," which usually entails emphasizing high-level concepts and simplifying your communication style, just won’t do the job.

Coping without a peer group

The world of innovation can be a lonely place. If you operate in a domain of arcane knowledge, then you have few (maybe zero) similar colleagues among the audiences you want to impact. Recognizing that is the first step toward closing the huge chasm between you and the nonexperts you’re trying to reach.

Once we acknowledge innovation communication as a unique zone where meaning is made and explained, then we see that the traditional Knowledge Spectrum I shared earlier is missing a heading: **Peer**. Visualized as a pyramid, rather than a line, here’s what the revised Knowledge Pyramid looks like:

Knowledge Pyramid



The special challenges faced by some innovators now appear obvious. Whereas many technical and scientific experts form part of a sizable peer group, researchers in emerging fields don't enjoy that luxury. As a result, even when they think they're talking to someone like themselves, communicating expert to expert, they probably aren't. The knowledge differential is almost certainly present, making the labor required to translate research more demanding than it is for other people with advanced technical knowledge.

Strategies for communicating from an emerging field

So, let's say you're a quantum biologist, or a molecular geneticist, or an interdisciplinary innovator working on a solution so novel you have to invent language to describe it. What can you do to narrow the chasm between you and your target audience?

The first thing is to start at the level of strategy, not tactics. Strategy considers the big picture, how you'll connect with the audience's frame of reference by selecting and structuring ideas and information. Tactics are fine-tuning — simplifying language choices, streamlining sentence structure, and breaking up text into units of meaning that are easy to digest (e.g., short paragraphs, vertical lists, tables, and graphics).

Here are three strategic steps to take:

#1. Pay attention to framing. Framing provides a cognitive and emotional context for the knowledge you want to share. When you frame a topic, you select certain aspects of it to emphasize (which means de-emphasizing certain other aspects). This enables you to align your topic with your audience's perspective, including their values and beliefs.

When you frame science, you place it in the context of situations or trends your audience is already aware of. For example, you might frame a discussion of nanomaterials by mentioning the trend toward smaller and smaller computers, requiring tinier and tinier internal components.

One of the most powerful ways to frame research findings is to link them to a human-interest story. For example, you could connect quantum biology to new healthcare treatments that could save lives.

#2. Use old terms before you introduce new language. When you're working in an emerging field, you probably find that you need new terms to accurately convey new concepts and observations. But when you're sharing your knowledge outside the lab, use a soft-sell approach. Rather than introducing the newly invented term and then defining it, state the concept in language familiar to your audience, and then explain how the neologism perfectly expresses the new finding. (Did you see how I just did that in the previous sentence?)

This approach may feel counter-intuitive because it goes against the vocabulary-first way that's often used to teach technical subjects, such as math, biology, and engineering. However, as constructivist educators have been telling us for years and cognitive scientists now affirm, learners can absorb new information only by connecting it to something they already know. Starting with old language, even if it's not as accurate as the new, will create the surest path toward comprehension.

#3. Cultivate an attitude of hospitality. Consider how you can welcome newcomers to the emerging field you call home. While it's important to recognize barriers to comprehension, take a positive attitude toward your audience and look for common ground. In many situations, while you and your audience may differ dramatically in your level of topic-specific language, you may share common interests, beliefs, and values.

For example, let's say you're working on new technology for batteries for electric vehicles. I may not understand submolecular physics, but I can easily share your desire to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and save our fragile planet.

Also use your enthusiasm for your subject to attract your audience's interest. Let your passion for your research shine through and your audience will find it infectious even if they don't understand every syllable you say.

Emotion is a language that speaks directly to the heart (or to the amygdala if you prefer a more scientific perspective) and provides a shortcut to persuasion. As a scientist, you've been trained to communicate in an impersonal style, but as you reach outside your research community, you can let some of your guard of objectivity down. Focus on fostering a genuine human connection with your audience, and you may be surprised by how little scientific detail it takes to get them excited about your findings.

As scientific knowledge pushes the boundaries of the possible, our understanding of how communication works must also evolve. The practices that have brought us to where we are today—the tried-and-true methods of technical communication, advanced technical communication, and translation of existing scholarship—won't get us to where we need to go.

It's time to venture past a new frontier into the domain of innovation communication. Here, there's no conventional or one-size-fits-all approach. We must be willing to try new strategies and to embrace communication challenges with compassion for both our audience and ourselves as we meet in this strange new territory.

Why Knowledge Mobilizers Need to Listen to Flat-Earthers

It was the most staggering statement I'd ever heard from a preacher's mouth: "No love without justice." I'm not exaggerating when I say it left me gasping for air.

My husband and I had recently moved to a new city, and we were looking for a church to join. One Sunday morning, I was flipping through church websites and came across sermon videos from one of the most popular congregations.

The topic of the shocking video I'd stumbled across was harm reduction, and the target of the preacher's outrage, I believe, was a local safe injection site. He saw harm reduction as morally wrong because, in his view, it meant feeding someone's sinful addiction. No love (safe drugs in a safe environment) without justice (repentance and reform).

At the time, I didn't know much about harm reduction, so once I'd caught my breath, I called a nurse I know — who also happens to go to a conservative, evangelical church — to find out which end was up.

I asked her whether she found that the practice of harm reduction conflicted with her religious beliefs.

"I never really thought about it," she said. "It’s just best practice."

Do we even see competing perspectives?

That response floored me — because it made me recognize how invisible the webs of different belief systems can be to us.

We tend to be so enmeshed in our own belief system that it’s hard to even imagine the alternative webs that others have spun around themselves.

The preacher’s set of beliefs made it impossible for him to reconcile evidence-based care with his definition of Christian compassion. Similarly, the nurse’s belief framework didn’t allow her to see any possible conflict between professional standards and Christian compassion.

How often, I wondered, do my beliefs prevent me from being fully aware of the range of competing beliefs circulating around a particular topic?

Lessons from Flat-Earthers

My encounter with the "no love without justice" slogan reminded me of a radio interview with a scientist who went out of his way to attend Flat Earth conferences. He was convinced that he needed to spend time listening to Flat Earthers so he could engage in genuine conversation with them.

Of course, the scientist found this practice challenging. I’m sure that every fiber of his being bristled when he heard the opinions of the conference attendees, which must have sounded to him outrageous and backward. But he fought the urge to apply such labeling, in the interest of developing relationships and fostering meaningful dialogue.

I’m not sure that I could treat Flat Earthers with such consideration. I often find it hard to put my own perspective aside, especially when I’m communicating about a research-related topic I care deeply about, like housing, healthcare, food security, or mitigating the climate crisis.

Yet as knowledge mobilizers, it's part of our job to monitor the whole conversation around a topic and to make room for competing perspectives, even if we find them difficult to entertain. Otherwise, we fall into the trap of proselytizing rather than empowering people to make informed decisions for themselves.

Cues from literature

This is where literature can shine a guiding light. Vincent Lam's novel, *On the Ravine*, is a great example. It explores controversial issues, such as harm reduction and the ethics of clinical trials, without judgment, in a way that encourages readers to reflect, and perhaps reframe, their beliefs.

Literature has much to teach us about how to communicate our point of view while creating space for other opinions. It shows us techniques we can use to create communication products that foster genuine conversation about a topic.

If we pay attention, accomplished creative writers like Lam can show us ways to embrace paradox, incorporate multiple and competing voices, and respect the autonomy of the audience.

Taking some cues from the way literature works can help us avoid the oversimplification of what Wendell Berry calls "the industrial formula: Science + Technology + Political Will = The Solution."[2]

If the answers to the questions that now threaten humanity were as simple as the industrial formula pretends, then we would have arrived at a consensus on them long ago. Persistent, one-sided argumentation isn't the path to change. Curiosity and compassion — though difficult to embrace — are what it will take to transform research into solutions with real, lasting traction.

[2] Berry, W. (2016). *A Small Porch: Sabbath Poems 2014 and 2015.* Counterpoint,p. 78.

Section 2

STRATEGIES TO BRIDGE THE INNOVATION GAP

Once you recognize the peculiar challenges of innovation communication, how do you navigate them?

Success begins with a willingness to abandon old paradigms for new frameworks and methods, even if these feel a bit awkward at first.

The next set of essays draws on insights from a range of fields—business theory, literary studies, and user-centered design—to provide new entry points into communicating the value of innovative concepts. I encourage you to explore these with a curious mind. To effectively communicate your novel ideas, you may need to experiment with lenses from various fields until you find the perspective that enables you to connect with your audience and lead them down the path to change.

A Simple Mental Shift That Will Make You a More Strategic Communicator

One of the reasons I love working across a wide variety of industries is that I get exposed to many different modes of thinking, and that stretches my brain in different directions.

Through my work with startups, I've been exposed to a product development concept that neatly expresses the outcomes focus needed to craft impactful communications: **Jobs to be Done (or JTBD** for short).

The JTBD approach, popularized by innovation theorist Clay Christensen, addresses a trap many innovators fall into—unleashing their creativity on the market without understanding what the market really wants.

In entrepreneurial circles, this common hazard is often called "falling in love with the solution."

In the realm of strategic communication and knowledge mobilization, a similar risk shows up: falling in love with "outputs."

Let me share a couple of examples to illustrate these parallel problems and show how shifting thinking to a JTBD perspective can correct the issues.

The lure of invention

Let's start with an entrepreneurial situation. Imagine you're an engineer who enjoys tinkering with routers. You're also an accomplished drummer; rhythm is in your blood. You decide to design a router that can be configured without any input from a keyboard. All the user has to do is tap a certain rhythm out on a hard surface, such as a desktop or counter, using a pen or pencil. Think Morse Code for setting up and maintaining your Internet connection.

Brilliant, right? And the best part is that the rhythm can be customized. You can program the router to respond to the beat of your favorite tune or to spell out a word in Morse Code.

Of course, as a bonus, the router technology has the potential to be applied to many other technical devices. The prototype is just the beginning….

Now, if you're not an engineer with a passion for drumming, you can instantly spot the flaw in the logic. Is there an actual need for the novel router? Who would use it? Why would they use it?

Our ambitious inventor should have started by considering the people who use routers, especially those tasked with configuring them. What router-related jobs do they truly need help with?

Perhaps resetting a router without having to touch the device is something that needs to be done. Or maybe not. Maybe the IT technician in an office welcomes the opportunity to get up from behind their monitor and walk across the room or down the hall to correct a setting. (During a typical workday, I'm glad of any chance to stretch my legs!)

In this story, the moral is clear: beware the lure of invention for invention's sake. However, when you're responsible for "inventing" creative communication products, it can be so easy to slide into the same mistake our fictional engineer made.

The peril of creativity for creativity's sake

Let's imagine a situation that strikes closer to home. Joelle works for a research institute, and she's just been asked to develop a communication plan for the next year.

"Let's come up with some creative approaches," Joelle's director has said. "I want to see some really eye-popping communications this year. Maybe some video. Have you seen what AI-generated avatars can do now?

We have excess funding in our outreach budget, so let's spend it on some innovative campaigns."

"Ah, finally video!" Joelle thinks. She's been wanting to exploit this medium for a while, and time and budget constraints haven't allowed her this creative opportunity. Now, it looks like the pathway has just opened up!

So after spending a couple days researching emerging tools and best practices, Joelle draws up a detailed communication plan with AI-enabled video at its core. The plan includes an ambitious social media calendar, regular posts on YouTube, and an email campaign to distribute the videos to school districts.

I have to admit, this sounds like a lot of fun. Personally, I get excited about trying out new media. In fact, I can quickly fall prey to the same temptation that's taken hold of Joelle.

Can you see the danger here?

> ***In her enthusiasm for producing creative "outputs," Joelle hasn't stopped to consider the outcomes. She hasn't considered the "job" each communication product needs to do for her audience so it can achieve the institute's strategic goals.***

If I were coaching Joelle, I'd invite her to articulate the reason for making the videos in the first place. What practical outcomes are they intended to achieve?

I'd also ask her to think about the target audience and how they'd be interacting with the videos. What would they be looking to gain from them? What "job" would the audience be trying to achieve by interacting with the videos?

Working with JTBD guardrails

The JTBD concept provides helpful guardrails to keep your creative energy focused on the impact, not the number of social posts or fact sheets, you're producing. Here are four job-related questions it's useful to ask before creating any communication product:

- What strategic outcome do you want the communication product to achieve? (Examples: elevate our profile, send people to our new website, get us a meeting with the Deputy Minister)
- To achieve the desired strategic outcome, what job must the communication product enable the intended audience to do? (Examples: see us as the leading authority on the topic, find up-to-date information on their health issue, reach out to schedule a meeting with the Deputy Minister)
- How else could you fulfill the audience's need to perform those jobs? (Generating alternative possibilities will ensure you choose the best idea rather than the first idea that comes to mind.)
- How will you know the communication product is successfully enabling the audience to do the intended job? (How will you gauge impact?)

Remember the engineer-drummer from the first story I shared? He needs to stop falling in love with his solution and start falling in love with his audience and the jobs they want done.

The same goes for those of us who are engineering communication products to drive change. If your communication products are failing to deliver results, then you may need to fall in love with your audience more deeply and think more strategically about helping them achieve their goals.

How to Use History to Sell Innovation

Dip into any field of art — literature, painting, music, dance — and you'll quickly discover that the concept of "originality" is problematic.

Was Shakespeare the most original playwright of his time, or just the cleverest borrower of plots and characters? Was Picasso an iconoclast, or by so obviously defying the "rules" did he also show them reverence?

When I was immersed in the world of literary scholarship, much of my thinking was shaped by theories of "intertextuality." Intertextuality acknowledges that no imaginative production happens in a vacuum. Any form of human artistry invokes the collective imagination, both historical and contemporary.

As a literary scholar, I came to view each text I encountered through a prism of earlier texts, each contributing to the meaning of the writing in some way. In certain instances, the intertextuality was clearly purposeful, as evidenced by the author quoting or alluding to an earlier work. In other cases, the relationships among texts appeared more subtle, as layers of cultural bedrock beneath the work's surface or as faint echoes of half-familiar voices.

Either way, at the end of the day, viewing a novel or poem through the lens of intertextuality showed me what an oversimplification it is to praise an artistic work for being "original." **Novelty isn’t self-generating; it is, in many ways, a communal act.** The new always hearkens back to the old, and the seemingly solo artist is really part of a creative network.

In my work with innovators, I often think back on the habits of intertextual reading I used to practice. Just like literary production, innovation depends on a web of previous wonders. Once you recognize that, you gain access to an array of metaphors and language that can help you explain what you’ve created, how it works, and why it matters.

The risks of overaccentuating the new

When you’re pitching an innovative solution to potential investors or customers, of course you want to emphasize what a breakthrough you’ve engineered. You need to show what makes your invention different, and that usually means showing what’s new about it.

At the same time, if you spout too intensely about "leading-edge" or "revolutionary" technology, your enthusiasm may backfire. Yes, you want to whet your audience’s appetite for the novel. But you also want to feed their desire to anchor the new in the familiar framework of the old.

To absorb new knowledge, our brains need such a framework. We make sense of incoming information by filtering it through what we already know, looking for connections that will help us interpret strange data. Without such connections, we struggle to understand and retain new perceptions and ideas.

When you’re caught up in pushing the boundaries of the known, it can be easy to overlook or underestimate the value of referring to the conventional. But invoking the familiar is often the fastest way to get your audience excited about your innovation.

A common mistake many innovators make is to assume that their invention stands alone on the frontier of the New. In reality, name any breakthrough, and I’d be willing to wager that you can find an antecedent for it, a shared reference to help bridge the gap between your expertise and your audience’s prior knowledge.

Skip the Dishes, Victorian Style

This principle of creating a historical frame for an innovation came to my mind forcefully last week, through a most unlikely source — a novel by Charles Dickens.

Dickens, as you may know, is famous for his detailed depictions of mid-nineteenth-century life in London. Near the beginning of *The Old Curiosity Shop*, he describes how a profligate young bachelor goes about ordering and digesting a meal of boiled beef.

The young man, Mr. Swiveller, sends a message (via a servant, we assume) to an "eating-house" at some distance from his rented rooms. (We're told that the distance is necessary because Swiveller has incurred debts at the neighborhood eatery and so can't order from there.)

Once the message has been delivered, it is followed by "the speedy arrival of a small pewter pyramid, curiously constructed of platters and covers, whereof the boiled-beef-plates formed the base, and a foaming quart-pot the apex; the structure being resolved into its component parts afforded all things requisite and necessary for a hearty meal."

This feast is made possible on short notice, without any cash exchanging hands. Since the meal is served on pewter plates, it generates little waste. The "curiously constructed" tower of dishes, and the rapid delivery process, seem a marvel of Victorian ingenuity, an app-free, plastic-free version of Skip the Dishes.

Except that, for many Londoners in the mid-1800s, ordering in wasn't a luxury. It was their daily habit, as it is in some parts of the world today where not everyone has access to individual cooking facilities. In 1840, when *The Old Curiosity Shop* first launched as a serial publication, it was also routine for a message to travel rapidly from one part of the city to the other. The postal service delivered mail to homes twice a day, and servants and young boys were readily available to run a note across the street or across town.

The service that Skip the Dishes offers today wouldn't have been news to residents of Victorian London. In fact, you could say that Skip the Dishes isn't so much a novelty as a return to an old-fashioned way of getting a "hearty meal" on the table.

Find the historical frame

So, with this historical perspective in mind, imagine that you've invented an app to rival Skip the Dishes. Dr. Who has heard about your innovation, kidnapped you, and taken you back in time to 1860. He wants you to demonstrate your innovation to lodgers in a London rooming house.

What a daunting task! Your audience has no concept of a computer, let alone a smartphone. The Internet won't be created for another two centuries. And aside from chicken dinners and curry plates, many of the dishes on the app's menus are completely foreign to the British palate.

Where do you begin? It might be tempting to start with the "basics": explain what a computer is and how it operates, and then give an overview of the Internet and wireless communication. With those key principles in mind, you could then explain how the app works, click by click so to speak.

Such an approach may sound scientific and logical, but it will almost certainly baffle your audience. Remember, they'll also be struggling with your 21st-century accent and staring at your funny clothes while they try to absorb what you're saying.

A smarter approach would be to start with what your audience knows, the process of ordering food from the local eating-house or inn. Establish this historical frame and then introduce some of the issues with the current process, such as spillage, cold food, and customers who refuse to pay.

To underline this last point, you might share the story of Mr. Swiveller, who made a practice of deceiving landlords with the promise of future payment that was never delivered. Without any means of verifying his credit from one neighborhood to the next, he could swindle dozens of food providers before getting caught.

Once you've established this common, historical ground with your audience, then — and only then — is it time to enlighten them about the marvels of your mobile app. As you explain the app, peg each function you describe to the familiar frame, the known process for ordering a meal.

Do this, and you'll easily have your audience eating out of your hand, so to speak.

What’s your historical frame?

The gloomy philosopher of Ecclesiastes (one of the Bible’s "wisdom" books) observes, "What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun" (Ecclesiastes 1:9-10).

As an innovator, this may be exactly the kind of statement that gets your blood pumping. You thrive on seeking out new discoveries and making the impossible possible. Barriers are meant for breaking.

But let’s give the ancient pessimist his due. Innovation doesn’t happen in an isolated moment in time, and the audience you’re trying to woo doesn’t exist in isolation either. Give history its due, and you can make it work for you.

In many situations, including pitches to investors and strategic partners, the quickest path for taking people from perplexity to understanding is a historical route. Enable your audience to view your revolutionary solution through a frame they can recognize and relate to. Invite them into tomorrow through the portal of the past, and they will be eager to follow you forward.

What Story Do You Need to Subvert to Make Your Bold Idea Heard?

When we're pitching a novel idea, most of us behave as Lockeans, whether or not we recognize our connection with the seventeenth-century philosopher. Faced with an audience of nonexperts, we tend to ascribe to Locke's belief that the people we're pitching to are *tabulae rasae*, blank slates.

Consequently, we do all we can to engrave our novel story onto those empty surfaces. We go to great pains to educate our audience, filling them up with technical details. We emanate enthusiasm and confidence, hoping our positive emotions will overflow into the people we're trying to persuade. And we rally both logical evidence and social proof so as to leave no room for doubt.

But, in our zeal to impress the audience with our story, we overlook a critical fact: **the people we're pitching to aren't blank slates. They're slates filled with layers and layers of stories, some of which contradict the story we're telling.**

You can have the most riveting, spell-binding story to tell, but if you don't first dismantle the counter-story (or stories) your audience holds dear, it will fall flat.

Consider the case of creationism

If you come from an academic background, then you've been reared on the milk of logic. You've spent years sharpening your analytical thinking skills, learning how to craft watertight arguments and mount an impermeable defense.

And because you're used to operating in a domain dominated by rational thinking, you may expect that the rules of engagement that apply inside academia also apply beyond the walls of the Ivory Tower.

However, in discussions outside the academy, emotion often counts for more than "facts" or "reasoned opinion," and strong emotions tend to take root through story.

Story weaves individual beliefs into a cohesive platform. Through drama, it makes the conceptual concrete and memorable. It gives faceless ideas faces, turns ideological conflicts into straightforward battles between good and evil, and enables the audience to live the life of a hero.

Consider one of the most intransigent stories in Western culture, creationism.

It's been nearly two centuries since Charles Lyell published *Principles of Geology*, a work that shattered the bedrock of literalistic faith for many Victorians. Since then, geologists have learned to read the "rock record" showing the changes in the Earth over millennia, and geneticists have mapped the human genome. How, a rational-minded person might wonder, can anyone persist in the belief that the world was created in seven, 24-hour days and that humankind appeared *ex nihilo*, as a species without a pedigree?

When a belief defies logic, you can be sure it's rooted in a compelling story. And what a story the Christian account of humanity's origins provides.

The Bible actually gives two accounts of creation, but the version that has stuck includes all the elements of a mesmerizing tale. The hero is Adam, God's crowning creation, brought to life after five days of intense cosmos-building. The villain is the serpent, who deceives Adam's wife, Eve, into transgressing against God's rules and betraying Adam. The drama pits man against woman, humanity against beast, and free will against divine decree. The crashing finale describes how Adam and Eve are driven from paradise, with flashing angelic swords posted at the entrance so they can never return.

This story of humanity's origins speaks powerfully to existential themes (such as the origin of evil, gender roles, and the limits of human agency) while completely side-stepping logical explanation. It creates — and memorializes — meaning without referring to data or "hard" evidence.

If you've ever tried to "prove" to a creationist the legitimacy of evolution, then you know it's futile to try to fight this kind of emotional power with logic. Data points and footnotes prove no match for the ferocity of story-driven feeling.

Fight story with story

As a set of "facts," a collection of fossils, evolution will never make sense to a creationist. But over the past couple of centuries, evolutionists have learned to weave their own narrative, a story that has displaced creationism for most people, including mainstream Christians.

The evolutionist narrative started off on rocky footing because, as the poet Alfred Lord Tennyson put it in his long poem *In Memoriam*, it seemed to show a world "red in tooth and claw." Instead of an orderly universe governed by a loving creator, it presented a universe ruled by random events and ongoing conflict. Whereas the creationist story positioned Adam at the peak of creation, the evolutionary narrative threw him down into the muck, where he became just another creature struggling to emerge from the primordial slime.

Over time, however, a revised story began to form, giving evolution a fighting chance against Christian mythology. The new evolutionary narrative centers on a new Adam, a hero who has emerged not at the tip of God's fingertips but through thousands of years of natural selection. In this version, the hero, now dubbed *homo sapiens*, struggles his way from ape-like origins to modern enlightenment. In contrast with the early evolution narratives that so shocked Tennyson and his contemporaries, this gentler story restores to humanity their dignity. It gives shape to a new way of thinking about what it means to be a meaning-making animal in a world where meaning is not spelled out by theologians but defined by the individual.

As the evolutionists learned, the way to establish a new idea is not by throwing data at the crowd but rather by wooing them through narrative. Tell a tale more gripping than the other guy's. Fight story with story.

Pay attention to grand narratives

The story of evolution has become what I'd call one of the grand narratives of our time, a story writ so large across culture that it underpins many other stories. When you're introducing a novel idea, it's important to understand how your new story fits in with or challenges existing grand narratives.

The evolution narrative represented as "the survival of the fittest," exerts an especially strong influence over much of Western culture because it shapes the overarching narrative of capitalism: through competition, the strong thrive and the weak die off. This grand narrative then seeps into the narratives that get told across various aspects of business. Strategy is the art of competition, how we make sure that our organization stays fit for survival. Marketing is the arena where we embrace competition head-on and try to take charge of the evolutionary battle. Human resources is the domain where we sort strong from weak employees to give the organization the best competitive advantage.

The evolutionary story also shapes economics and our obsession with growth. As a recent example, in a CBC interview with Matt Galloway last week, former Finance Minister Bill Morneau spoke about his new book, *Where To From Here: A Path to Canadian Prosperity*. When asked what the federal government should be doing in response to help Canadians cope with rising prices and economic uncertainty, he said he'd make "growth" his number one concern because growth breeds confidence. He went on to explain:

> "People are only going to be optimistic if they can see that that promise that's come around for Canada for generations — that the next generation will be better off than the one before — that it's real."

The "promise" to which Morneau refers is really just the evolution story retold. As he points out, this grand narrative intertwines with our national story. The grander the narrative, the more likely it is to be embedded in religious, social, and political institutions, and the harder it is to dislodge.

When you're pitching a new or controversial idea, it's important to recognize the breadth and depth of the narratives you're up against. Only once you've detected the existing stories that shape your audience's reality and traced them back to their source in grand narratives, can you challenge them.

Practice narrative subversion

In *The Story Paradox: How Our Love of Storytelling Builds Societies and Tears Them Down*, Jonathan Gottschall examines several conspiracy stories, which engineer alternative realities for millions of Americans. Such poisonous narratives fuel anti-Semitism, fear of aliens, and the belief that the Earth is flat.

Conspiracy stories wield such influence because they intentionally subvert a prevailing narrative. Such false narratives may be misleading and even harmful, but they can give innovators insight into how to displace and replace the stories that stand between a new idea and the target audience.

For example, in America (as in Canada), an existing narrative describes the government as transparent. Its secular story of creation shows how it was formed on rationalist principles to protect the rights of the people and was shepherded by honest leaders such as George Washington (who could not tell a lie about chopping down a cherry tree) and "Honest Abe" Lincoln. However, according to Gottschall, most Americans believe in or feel neutral about the story that the government has hidden alien spaceships in Area 51 of the Nevada desert. In other words, more than 50% of Americans believe in a counter-story that subverts the existing story of a transparent government.

Conspiracy stories catch on, says Gottschall, because they tend to portray a simple battle. Hero vs. villain. Right vs. wrong. Justice vs. Injustice. In the case of the Area 51 conspiracy theories, the villain is the American government, who has betrayed the trust of the American people by hiding its interactions with aliens.

As an innovator, you can practice narrative subversion — without sacrificing your integrity or frightening your audience. Just follow these four steps:

1. Identify the narratives that dominate discussion of your topic.
2. Dig beneath those stories to find the grand narrative, the root or master story.
3. Call out your issues with the grand narrative.
4. Offer an alternative narrative that shows the triumph of Good over Evil.

An inspiring example of narrative subversion

Late last year, I noticed a great example of these four steps to narrative subversion. Five countries — Finland, Iceland, Scotland, Wales, and New Zealand — stood up to the grand narrative of economic growth as the sole way for humanity to evolve. Together, they formed a partnership called the Wellbeing Economy Governments.

For years, individuals and organizations within the five governments have been challenging various narratives related to poverty and wealth, to environmental protection, and other social ills. Now, they've gone a step further by calling out the grand narrative beneath the many different narratives that validate and create injustice: the obsession with economic growth.

Members of the Wellbeing Economy Governments would probably label Bill Morneau's confidence in ongoing economic expansion as either naïve or reckless. As we look around at a planet pillaged of resources, it's clear that what got us here won't get us to a sustainable future. We need a new story to drive our economics and our politics. And that's what the Wellbeing Economy Governments are framing up.

According to this group, the old story relies on an outdated method for measuring economic prosperity. Instead of tracking a country's GDP (gross domestic product), we should be tracking wellbeing indicators. Going forward, in a world where resources are scarce, it's not how much growth we generate that will ensure our survival but rather how well we learn to share.

I'm rooting for the Wellbeing Economy Governments — not just because the initiative is mainly women-led, and not just because it chimes with my personal values. I'm also a fan of this movement because it illustrates so well how to lead social change through narrative subversion.

What stories are keeping your audience trapped right now? How does your research discovery or innovative solution show the way out? How can you subvert the narrative to connect with your audience, empower them, and turn them into collaborators?

How to Avoid the Slippery Slope from Simple to Simplistic

Complexity is not a four-letter word.

As cognitive scientist and design guru Donald Norman says, living in today's world means dealing with activities, systems, and tools that are necessarily complex.

He opens *Living with Complexity* with the example of an airplane cockpit. To someone who's not an aviation engineer or a pilot, the rows and rows of dials, switches, and screens are dizzying. But that doesn't mean they're badly designed.

Norman explains:

> The airplane cockpit is not complex because the engineers and designers took some perverse pleasure in making it that way. No: it is complex because all that stuff is required to control the plane safely, navigate the airline routes with accuracy, keep to the schedule while making it comfortable for the passengers, and be able to cope with whatever mishap might occur en route.

> For the typical airplane passenger, a simpler instrument panel might be less overwhelming and more aesthetically pleasing, but it would also put their comfort and safety at risk.
>
> When we insist on simplifying the communication products we use to share complex ideas (writing, presentations, graphic, videos, and so on), we also run serious risks. [3]

When we start to worship at the shrine of simplicity-for-simplicity's sake, we jeopardize our ability to communicate nuanced meaning, forge human connections, and reflect critically on the state of our complex world.

If you're engaged in sharing breakthrough knowledge with non-expert audiences, then you're familiar with what Norman calls "the cry for simplicity." You've felt the pressure to "dumb down" sophisticated concepts to a Grade 3 level or to package a revolutionary thesis into a five-word slogan.

I know what that kind of stress feels like: I once walked away from a lucrative contract because I was asked to reduce scholarly research to "slogans and soundbites." I also know that caving in to the demand for lowest-denominator thinking isn't the only option.

As Norman maintains, we can use thoughtful design to help non-expert audiences navigate and engage with complexity. As deep thinkers, we can empower others to think deeply by giving them tools that are up to the job, communication products that are both accessible and serviceable.

The opposite of "complex" is not "TLDR"

In the current climate of anti-intellectualism, the adjective "complex" has taken on a negative moral tone. Complexity, so popular opinion would have it, has become a crime because it imposes an unfair burden on the uninitiated, exacerbating the gap between experts and nonexperts.

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[3] Norman, D. (2011). *Living with Complexity*. [Kindle Edition]. MIT Press. https://a.co/d/0jhRhoGf

Yet as Norman points out, the opposite of "complex" is not "simple." Complexity is not in itself the problem. The problem is confusion, and that happens when tools for handling complex situations are poorly designed:

> Forget the complaints against complexity; instead, complain about confusion. We should complain about anything that makes us feel helpless, powerless in the face of mysterious forces that take away control and understanding.

If you're an expert who wants to share complex ideas outside your zone of expertise, your mission shouldn't be to create a four-bullet "TLDR" (too long; didn't read) summary. Your mandate is to combat confusion.

Resist the pressure to turn your weighty ideas into empty fluff. That's not a real solution to the problem of nonunderstanding. Instead, communicate in ways that give nonexperts what both confusion and oversimplification rob them of, "control and understanding."

Three ways to fight the decline toward meaninglessness

Conscious communication design enables learning. It meets the audience where they are, but unlike simplified communication, it doesn't leave them there.

When you craft a communication with learning in mind, you invite your audience to join you on a journey of meaning-making. You entice them to grapple with ideas that might require them to stretch outside their cognitive comfort zone. You help them connect, compare, and make sense of new bits of knowledge and fit those bits into their existing worldview.

You can't do this with just a few bullet points or a slimmed-down, jazzed-up graph that distorts your data. In fact, some of the moves that facilitate learning contradict popular advice, which tends to make a virtue of brevity to the point of minimalism.

Shorter, however, is not always better, just as a so-called "simple solution" may fail to resolve a complex situation.

Here are three practices that resist the current trend toward oversimplifying research-based communication and will transform a skeptical audience into allies:

1. Bring back the paragraph

Bulleted lists serve a useful purpose. They stand out visually on a page or screen and make it easy for the audience to quickly skim through a list of examples, related items, parts of a system, or steps in a process.

But bulleted lists are NOT your best choice when you need to guide the audience through the development of an idea. A bulleted list is a sequential, not hierarchical structure, so it can't help an audience understand relationships among ideas.

The genius of the paragraph is that it provides an adaptable unit of meaning that allows us to group ideas in ways that promote learning and understanding. By establishing one main idea, it gives us the flexibility to evolve that idea by adding to it, contrasting it with other ideas, supporting it through examples, and so on.

When you remove the structure of the paragraph, you take away important cues that help the audience quickly comprehend and evaluate your ideas. That's why, when I see a bulleted list like this one, from a best-selling book on business communication, I want to shudder:

> It does not matter if you work at Apple, a small business or a new start-up, it has never been harder to get people focused on what matters most.
>
> - The work-from-anywhere reality of a world changed by COVID-19 has turned communications into a profound and critical weakness for every company, every leader, every rising star, every restless worker.
> - This problem will echo loudly through every organization because a vibrant culture, a clear strategy and swift execution rely on strong communications in a scattered world.

- Stewart Butterfield, the CEO of Slack, told us that, in a hypothetical 10,000-employee company that spends $1 billion on payroll, 50 to 60 percent of the average employee's time is spent on communication of some sort. Yet no one provides the tools and training to do this well. [4]

On an emotional level, the list structure works: one by one, the bulleted items drill into the reader fear and anxiety about living in a "scattered world" where communication has become a "critical weakness" associated with stress and financial vulnerability.

Rationally, though, it's hard to make sense of the salvo of disconnected assertions. What is the main idea we're meant to take from the litany of laments about the ineffectiveness of communication in a post-COVID world other than that this ineffectiveness is a problem?

In a world of soundbites, firing off bullets in scattershot mode may catch the audience's attention, and it may convey the contours of vague ideas. But it won't enable them to grasp and grapple with complex ideas because meaning-making happens when we understand ideas in relation to one another.

2. Hold opposite-but-true ideas in tension

Critical thinkers understand that it's possible for two ideas to be true and yet contradictory. To judge the merit of each idea, you must be able to view it dispassionately rather than succumbing to a knee-jerk reaction.

Such rational disinterest doesn't play out well in today's media, which prefers catch phrases that stir up strong positive or negative feelings. Antagonism gets better ratings than impartial assessment.

To educate nonexperts in complex ideas, however, you must show them how to handle this delicate balancing act of acknowledging the truth in apparent opposites. You must help them out of the popular trap of "us versus them," or "this versus that," thinking.

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[4] VandeHei, J., Allen, M., & Schwartz, R. (2022). *Smart brevity: The power of saying more with less.* Workman Publishing, p.6.

I recently heard a troubling example of the tendency to entertain just one idea at a time in a CBC conversation about Mark Carney's attitude to the US. A commentator complained that he was experiencing "whiplash" over Carney's apparent about-face in recent days.

First, the commentator said, Carney had positioned himself as anti-Trump. He'd said that Trump's actions and words had threatened our national sovereignty and ended the existing relationship between Canada and the US.

Then, the commentator claimed, Carney had pulled a sudden 360-degree turn by engaging in a conversation that both Carney and Trump said they found productive.

How, the pundit pondered, could Carney be so inconsistent? What was one to make of a leader who seemed so shifty in his approach?

What the commentator seemed unable (or unwilling) to do was to acknowledge two opposite truths, which I'd state like this:

- On the one hand, America has historically been Canada's closest friend, our ally in security and commerce.
- On the other hand, America has recently shown itself to be uncharacteristically hostile to Canadian interests and disrespectful of Canadian sovereignty.

A critical thinker can view the past and the present at once, can acknowledge the need to reset a relationship while still working within it. A one-idea-at-a-time thinker can't manage such complexity.

As you educate nonexpert audiences, the key is to acknowledge the bias toward one-track thinking while showing the possibility of dual-track thought. In many cases, this means explaining the difference between either-or thinking and both-and thinking.

It also means acknowledging the discomfort of holding two contrasting ideas in your mind at the same time. It's far easier to think "Carney is anti-Trump" or "Carney is pro-Trump" than to contemplate the challenges of navigating a multi-layered, troubled relationship with our neighbor to the South.

3. Provide multiple pathways

It doesn't take much to grab an audience's attention or raise their hackles. You can do that, as we saw in the bulleted list above, just by telegraphing a few alarming points.

It takes more time, and more words (and perhaps visuals), to guide a reader from where they are to the place of understanding where you'd like them to be. So be careful not to make conciseness a supreme virtue.

Rather than trying to vacuum-seal your meaning into the tiniest possible package, allow it room to expand to the necessary size. Give your ideas enough space that your audience can understand the background to your thinking, the different parts of the novel concept you're sharing, and the significance of it. Also allow room for the audience to raise and explore objections; encourage critical inquiry rather than shutting it down in the interest of scoring a quick point.

How can you allow for such exploration while still meeting the popular demand for "quick and dirty" explanation? Provide different paths through your content to accommodate the interests and informational needs of different audience members.

For example, let's say you're creating a briefing note for senior civil servants to share findings concerning the link between red algae and declining fish stocks. Some of the civil servants in your audience will already be familiar with red algae, its connection with climate change, and its threat to fish stocks. Others will be new to the topic. In addition, some of the readers will be highly interested in the subject matter whereas others will feel neutral or uninterested.

While your first instinct might be to craft a minimalist document that will be easy for anyone to skim, that approach would severely limit your impact. You'd lose the opportunity to engage those members of your audience who have the most potential to become champions for your cause.

A smarter approach would be to craft a comprehensive document that's accessible and easy to navigate. A short summary at the beginning would be helpful to give readers a preview of what to expect. You could use descriptive headings to break up the content, allowing readers to go deep into sections that interest them while skipping over others. Tables and diagrams could provide focal points to direct attention to key points that could be missed if readers are skimming hastily, perhaps over multiple reading sessions.

Through thoughtful design, you can facilitate different paths to learning without bogging down in detail those who aren’t yet ready to learn.

Complexity and clarity can co-exist

Despite the anti-intellectual zeitgeist, complexity isn’t going away anytime soon. And as the problems we face become increasingly knotty, complex thinking is our only hope of generating valid solutions.

This is where the power of design comes into play. Well-designed communication products enable the audience to get a grip on complexity. To borrow a phrase from a popular website on management thinking, they serve as "mindtools" to help the audience engage with the real world, which is neither flat nor simple.

The role of design, says Norman, is not to eliminate complexity but to "tame" it, to make it less wild and scary and more manageable. This is a key distinction for innovators to bear in mind. Our job is not to strip research of its complexity — to make the lion into a tabby cat — but to design innovation communication in ways that make it easier to handle.

It’s deceptively easy, according to Norman, to design a simple solution. What’s harder to create, and yet desperately needed in our world today, are complex solutions that are accessible and learnable.

There, in a nutshell, is the challenge of innovation communication: to put into the hands of change-makers "mindtools" that are suitably complex but also desirable and usable. Intelligent design is the opposite of unthinking simplification, and at this critical point in the evolution of our species and our planet, it offers the only viable route forward.

Section 3

BUILDING ORGANIZATIONAL STRENGTH IN INNOVATION COMMUNICATION

Innovation communication is a team sport because it involves sharing information and ideas inside an organization, among colleagues, and outside it.

Some branches of communication, such as public relation or technical documentation, are considered the responsibility of a specific part of the organization. But anyone contributes to innovation is de facto engaged in innovation communication.

Innovation communication takes place when:

- R&D experts brief Sales & Marketing on a new product
- Client-facing experts, such as consultants and business development professionals, share information with prospects or clients
- Scientists or inventors summarize findings for the C-suite, investors, or other decision-makers with a business mindset
- Researchers or advocacy groups present evidence-based recommendations to policymakers
- Technical experts give media interviews, appear on podcasts, or write for a public audience

This next set of essays provides some practical tips for strengthening innovation communication across your organization. As you'll see, this isn't a once-and-done effort. Like innovation itself, innovation communication is an iterative process that requires a willingness to fail fast and learn by doing.

How to Make Your Innovation Communication Antifragile

As a coach, I often wish that I could tell clients how easy it is to craft persuasive communication products that respect the integrity of complex ideas while winning over the audience. But the truth is that using language and visuals to convey thought is challenging work, even using AI as your helper.

Building any communication product — such as a pitch deck, a cold email, a website, a one-pager, or a blog series — is like constructing any physical product, such as a chair or a house. Try to cut corners, and you just won’t get the personalized product you need to grab your audience’s attention and nurture trust.

For more than 20 years, I’ve taught an "agile" method for generating communication products, which involves frequent touchpoints with the target audience and multiple iterations to get the message right. Nassim Nicholas Taleb, a former trader and the Distinguished Professor of Risk Engineering at New York University’s Polytechnic Institute, is now helping me understand why this approach works so well.

When you assume that your first communication attempts will be imperfect, you build an error-correction loop into your development process. As a result, you create communications that become stronger each time they "fail." To borrow Taleb's term, your messaging and collateral become "antifragile."

Customer discovery for communication products

When it comes to finding the right language (written and visual) to win over your specific audience, aiming to get it right the first time may sound efficient but is inevitably counterproductive. A perfectionist attitude racks up significant costs: wasted effort, high fees for creative services, and missed opportunities to genuinely connect with the people you want to reach.

In contrast, pursuing an iterative approach means embracing failure as the path toward success. This is the wisdom behind the customer discovery process that entrepreneurs use to validate an idea before taking it to market? So why do so many entrepreneurs and other innovators apply it only to physical or technological products, not to communication products?

When I help entrepreneurs with the communication skills it takes to navigate customer discovery conversations, I give them this warning: "If your discovery conversations don't surprise you, then you aren't leading them effectively." In other words, if your customer discovery doesn't upend some of your assumptions, then you're not risking enough with the questions you're asking.

The validation process always involves invalidation as well. Only by discarding features your audience considers useless can you shape the product they'll crave. Likewise, only by discarding false assumptions about how to communicate with your audience will you learn how to connect with them at that deep level where trust grows.

Why aim for antifragile

Embracing failure as part of developing communication products gets you out of the sand trap of "spray and pray," where you craft your message once and disseminate it widely. Welcoming missteps as part of the process enables you to create communications in collaboration with your audience. The result: communication products with the quality Taleb calls "antifragility."

I've just dived into Taleb's 2012 book *Antifragile: Things That Gain from Disorder,* which I recommend as a heartening read for any innovator. Taleb rails against our culture's obsession with de-risking complex systems and situations. Instead of trying to protect the fragile, he says, we should think about how to create the "antifragile."

Here's how Taleb defines "antifragility":

> Some things benefit from shocks; they thrive and grow when exposed to volatility, randomness, disorder, and stressors and love adventure, risk, and uncertainty. Yet, in spite of the ubiquity of the phenomenon, there is no word for the exact opposite of fragile. Let us call it antifragile.
>
> Antifragility is beyond resilience or robustness. The resilient resists shocks and stays the same; the antifragile gets better. [5],

Communication is by nature a process subject to random shocks. As much market data as you gather, you'll never be able to perfectly predict how a person will react to your words and visuals. People aren't machines, or Vulcans like Dr. Spock, so they don't always respond in ways we think logical.

That doesn't mean we shouldn't create detailed personas, analyze market data, and rehearse for important meetings. But it does make nonsense of the notion that we can craft the perfect brochure or website without subjecting it to the "random shocks" of audience interactions.

Once you let go of the belief that great communications hit a home run on the first try, you can start creating communications that get better with each swing. Your third (or thirteenth) draft won't just be a slightly modified version of your first; it will be a creature that has grown to become stronger and fitter for the purpose it's meant to serve.

[5] Taleb, N. (2012). *Antifragile: Things that Gain from Disorder.* New York: Random House.

How to create antifragile communications

The evolutionist perspective is significant because antifragility, in Taleb's view, is the property of organic entities. As Taleb explains, inorganic things tend to be fragile whereas organic things exhibit antifragility. Under physical stress, a piece of plastic breaks, but the muscles of a bodybuilder repair themselves and become stronger.

Communication, we must always remember, is an organic process. When I present a first draft to a client, I often compare it with a lump of dough that we'll knead and shape together. Taleb has helped me realize why I use this metaphor instead of reaching for mechanical concepts such as "tinkering" or "fixing." Dough is an organic substance, and the process of flattening and punching the dough activates the gluten that will cause it to rise during baking. The stress of kneading makes the dough more elastic and the bread tastier.

Reframing communication as an organic activity is the first step toward creating antifragile communication products. Here are five practical tips for putting that understanding into action:

1: Design stress tests

A few years ago, a startup asked me to develop a suite of marketing materials, including a presentation deck, website, and white paper. At our kick-off strategy session, it was obvious that the team had thought through their value proposition backwards and forwards. But they hadn't yet had the chance to communicate it to real customers and observe their response.

Rather than jumping into the collateral I'd been engaged to produce, I suggested that we add, at no charge, an additional item: a one-pager to use as a test piece. We needed an external audience of real customers to validate the language that resonated internally.

"Do you have any customer meetings coming up?" I asked.

Fortunately, the co-founders were about to head to a conference where they'd be meeting their ideal clients at an exhibition booth.

We quickly created a one-pager, using the language and visuals the client felt sure would land with their audience. The co-founders and I discussed how they'd observe the way people interacted with the headline, key points, and visual design.

The conference became a pivot-point in the startup's messaging. The co-founders had terrific conversations with the people who stopped by their booth and picked up a flyer. They also discovered that the messaging they found so clear left their audience cold.

We had successfully put the first expression of their value proposition through a stress test, and it had failed. Great news!

Because the co-founders had treated their exhibition booth as a testing lab, they could report on specific aspects of the messaging that had worked and those that had flopped. As we turned our attention to developing larger communication products, such as the website, we were able to build stronger messaging with clarity and confidence.

2: Invite friendly collaboration

You can spend hours, if not days, playing through "what if" scenarios involving your buyer personas. The best audience to give you feedback on your messaging is always an authentic audience.

Early in your creative process, invite real prospects to give you feedback on your draft. The key is to choose those prospects carefully. Your best collaborators will be people who are keen to see you succeed. These could be people who participated in your customer discovery process, for instance, or people in your network who can easily identify with your ideal customer.

One of my clients calls such folks "friendlies." Friendly reviewers have bought into your value proposition, so they understand what you're about and why it matters. They're well-positioned to give you constructive feedback because they already grasp your intended meaning and can help you express it.

There's always a place in the creative process for naysayers as well, those reviewers you can count on for a merciless critique. But don't overlook the value of an appreciative audience with both the background knowledge and the goodwill to help you fine-tune your messaging.

3: Develop assessment criteria

A wise colleague once told me, "A piece of writing is never finished. You just decide to abandon it."

What's true of written documents also applies to slide decks, animated videos, and any other communication product you can name. You'll never reach perfection. Consequently, it's easy to get stuck in a loop of feedback and rework that goes on and on.

As Taleb points out, just enough stress on an object or system will strengthen it, but too much stress will break it. When you're developing communications, you must be able to recognize when to keep criticizing and revising and when to consider your draft done (or done for now).

This is impossible to do, however, unless you and your team agree on objective criteria for assessing the quality of a draft. Without such standards, it's too easy to waste time arguing over personal preferences, which may or may not be anchored in sound principles and practices.

The remedy to such chaos is to create an orderly approach to assessing a communication product. For some products, this could be as simple as a checklist, but for most products, I recommend a scorecard. Here is a basic scorecard for an infographic, for example:

Clarity CONNECT

Infographic Scorecard

Assess your infographic by examining seven elements of the data visualization.

	Green Treatment of this element helps make the meaning accurate, accessible, and appealing to the audience	**Yellow** Treatment of this element works to some extent, but there are aspects of it that could confuse or turn off the audience	**Red** Treatment of this element is problematic because it interferes with accuracy, accessibility, and/or appeal to the audience
1. KEY MESSAGE **is clear and unified**			
2. STRUCTURE **is logical, visually obvious, and easy to navigate**			
3. CONTEXT **is provided through textual content**			
4. AUDIENCE **is reflected in the choice of content, use of visuals, and overall look-and-feel**			
5. SPACE **is generous around text**			
6. COLOR PALETTE **is unified and professional-looking**			
7. STYLE **choices are applied consistently (e.g., typefaces, font sizes, colors, lines, iconography, shapes)**			

The more complex the communication product, the more detailed the scorecard should be. It’s also possible to develop a single scorecard to apply to various kinds of communication products across an organization. Below, for example, is part of the scorecard I use in one of my group programs. It has proven relevant to products as diverse as podcast episodes, blogs, impact reports, presentations, and infographics.

Innovation Communication Scorecard

	4 Great	3 Good	2 Fair	1 Not Ready to Release
Audience Alignment	The ideas and information are presented so as to align with the **audience's perspective and values**. The communication product focuses on exactly the ideas and information the audience cares about, using concepts and language that are easy for them to relate to.	Content focuses mainly on information and ideas the audience cares about, but in a general or high-level way. Framing and language choices align mostly with the audience's perspective, though there may be some minor instances of misalignment and some technical concepts or language the audience may find unclear.	Some of the content focuses on information and ideas the audience cares about, but there may be irrelevant or distracting details. There is a lack of intentional framing to align with the audience perspective, and/or the communication product uses concepts or language the audience is likely to find unclear or confusing.	The content focuses mainly on information and ideas the audience doesn't really care about, such as technical details beyond their scope of interest, and/or it may rely heavily on concepts or language foreign to the audience.
Structure	Content is arranged so it's **easy for the audience to navigate** quickly to the information and ideas that matter most to them. There's a precise, unifying **key message** and **a logical structure.** Content "flows" well from section to section, and each section holds together as a **cohesive** unit of meaning.	Content is arranged so the audience can identify the information and ideas that matter most to them. There's an obvious key message and a structure that's mostly logical. There may be some minor issues with "flow" and cohesiveness.	Content is arranged in a way that makes it hard for the audience to follow the logical flow of ideas and information. The key message may be weak (imprecise or not comprehensive enough), and/or there may be issues with "flow" and cohesiveness serious enough to cause confusion.	Content appears jumbled or rambling, without any clear organizational pattern. The key message may be weak or missing.
Wow Factor	The communication product is **comprehensive, accurate,** and **creative.** It includes all the key points the audience needs in order to make a positive decision or take other desired action. If appropriate, it examines topics from multiple angles and/or uses imaginative concepts to convey key points.	The communication product is **complete and accurate.** There may be missed opportunities to mine ideas or data for insights and/or to explore different perspectives on the topic. The content may rely on predictable or common ideas to relay key points.	The communication product is close-to-complete. There may be some places where additional content or another perspective would be helpful and/or information could be more accurate.	The communication product has **obvious gaps** where additional content or another perspective is needed and/or inaccuracies need correction.
Voice	The communication style is **clear, concise**, and **confident**. It rings with **authenticity**, conveying the unique strengths of the author.	The communication style is clear and concise. It may seem generic or impersonal, lacking a sense of distinct personality.	The communication style is inconsistent due to issues with clarity, wordiness, formal language, and/or negative phrasing.	The communication style is awkward, and the audience could find it off-putting, due to wording that's unclear, wordy, formal, and/or overly negative.

	4 Great	3 Good	2 Fair	1 Not Ready to Release
Visual Design	Layout and visuals are **uncluttered**, **engaging**, and **easy to navigate**. Graphic elements reinforce the intent of the text or audio, convey professionalism, and are easy to interpret.	Layout and visuals are mainly uncluttered and easy to navigate, but there may be missed opportunities to apply visual design and/or minor issues with crowding, consistency, labeling or matching of text or audio with visuals.	The communication product incorporates few elements of graphic design or incorporates them in ways that create an untidy or unpolished visual appearance. Visuals may be inappropriately matched with text or audio or hard to interpret.	The communication product makes little or no use of graphic design, or it uses graphic elements awkwardly (e.g., long paragraphs, garish colors, and/or visuals that are hard to interpret or mismatched with text or audio).
Compliance with Standard Edited English (SEE)	With negligible exceptions, the expression of ideas (word choice, grammar, punctuation, mechanics, word order, and sentence structure) complies with conventions of SEE.	Expression of ideas mostly complies with SEE. Occasional breaks with convention don't interfere with ease of comprehension.	Expression of ideas complies inconsistently with conventions of SEE. Breaks with convention are either so significant or so frequent that they "trip up" the audience and may even cause confusion.	Expression of ideas is seriously compromised by breaks with the conventions of SEE to the extent that the audience may need to review passages to extract the meaning, or they may not be able to figure out the meaning at all.

4: Establish a review protocol

Optimizing antifragility usually requires more than a draft or two. One client told me that he and his team had prepared 27 versions of a proposal, and that didn't surprise me. I think my personal record is 39, which I reached while revising a complex eLearning course a few years back.

To cope with multiple revisions, you'll need a system — even if you work mainly on your own. When I work with a team, one of my first questions is "What's your file-naming protocol?"

My own protocol is simple: ⟨file name_ver#_initials⟩.

As each reviewer makes comments in the document, they update the version number and change the initials to their own. For example, let's say that Shane Williamson and I are both working on a document called "Project Plan." If I started the document, I'd name it ⟨projectplan_ver1_DH⟩. After Shane's review, he'd label it ⟨projectplan_ver2_SW⟩.

Besides a method for file-naming, you'll also need guidelines for commenting on and editing shared documents. Here are some of the practices I use:

- Provide summary comments to put marginal comments in context.
- Call out strengths as well as weaknesses. (The easiest path to antifragility is to build on strengths.)
- Change the color of comments to a color other than red. (Red makes edits seem punitive, not constructive.)
- If someone else "owns" the draft, use a comment rather than making a direct edit. (You can suggest a rewording in the comment.)
- If phrasing is unclear, ask a question rather than trying to correct it. (How can you correct what you don't understand?)

#5: Control the means of production

I'm no Marxist, but I have learned some tough lessons about what happens when you, the founder, become alienated from the fruits of your communication labors. While you're in iteration mode, make it as easy as possible for you or your team to update drafts.

When you're faced with a tight deadline, or when you feel doubtful about your own abilities, outsourcing writing, graphic design, and basic video editing may seem the best solution. But what happens when that beautiful brochure your freelancer created in Adobe InDesign needs a quick edit to the color scheme so you can get it to a new prospect by EOD?

Then, my friend, you're stalled, at the mercy of your freelancer's schedule and subject to their fees for change requests. When you're an innovator, you can't afford that kind of delay or hassle, no matter how gorgeous the end result.

Create a communications tech stack that will enable you to work efficiently and produce high-quality products without having to over-invest in training. While you're iterating, create collateral in Canva or Microsoft Office. When you get to your ready-to-release version, then you can, if time and budget permit, take the time to use more complex software (or hire someone to use it for you).

Controlling the means of your creative production takes a bit of setup, but it’s definitely, as Marie Forleo says, "figureoutable." Take a cue from the teenager-next-door and YouTube your way to becoming a competent copywriter, graphic designer, or video editor. Or sign up for any number of online courses in those areas, read a book, or get a few sessions of one-on-one coaching.

At the same time, keep an eye out for the latest tools that can smooth out your workflow while keeping you close to the creative process. For example, I used to dread video editing until I discovered Descript, an application that allows you to edit video via the transcript.

"If you want to become antifragile," writes Taleb, "put yourself in the situation ‘loves mistakes’" (p.21). The easier it is for you to access and edit drafts, the better equipped you’ll be able to do that with your communication products.

In Taleb’s view, fragility and antifragility exist on a spectrum. It’s also possible, as the above quote suggests, to move along the spectrum, to "become antifragile."

As you develop communication products to spread the word about your innovation, where on the spectrum is your creative approach? Are you hesitant to put any message out into the world before it’s perfect? If so, you’re operating from the fragile side of the scale.

Or are you willing to test early versions of communication products with friendlies, to invite collaboration, and to set up the internal processes that will let you iterate quickly? If so, then you have at least the attitude, and probably some of the skills, to operate from a place of antifragility.

Either way, you have the power to cultivate greater antifragility in your communications. And learning to love mistakes in communication will help you fail fast in other aspects of innovation so both you and your organization can learn and grow.

Does Your Team Fall Into This Common Writing Trap?

Two heads may be better than one, but they are also less efficient. Teams tend to be great at generating interesting ideas but poor at producing focused, unified documents on a tight timeline.

The big mistake many teams make is assuming that the best way to divide writing work is to assign everyone a section of the document to produce. This approach makes little sense if you compare it with the way teams approach other kinds of projects.

The quickest way to improve team writing, then, is to bring some project management common sense to the task. Rather than using a piecework approach, leverage the strengths of your individual team members.

Why the piecework approach doesn't work

The piecework approach begins with the team lead making each team member responsible for one or more document sections. Team members then write their sections in isolation and submit them to the team lead shortly before the document or deliverable is due.

This divide-and-conquer approach is based on the false premise that everyone on the team shares the same writing skills. Each person essentially performs the same writing task (authoring a section of the document), and only the topic varies.

Imagine how crazy this approach would seem if it applied to product development. Let's say a multi-functional team is tasked with producing a prototype of a laundry robot, a machine that automatically sorts, washes, dries, and folds clothes. No matter their individual skill set, each member of the development team is asked to create part of the robot. Bill from Engineering will build the chassis, Allisha from IT will build the software, Yasmin from Marketing will build the control panel, and Allan from Quality Control will build the electronic circuitry.

During development, Bill, Allisha, Yasmin, and Allan work separately on their part of the machine. Yasmin and Allan struggle to meet their deadlines because they're both reaching well beyond their skill set. (As people with non-technical skills, they hardly know where to begin with the electronic engineering work they've been assigned.) Bill and Allisha believe they're making good progress, but neither communicates with the other to compare notes.

The day before the product launch, the team gathers to piece together the entire machine and do whatever tinkering is necessary to ready the robot for the market. As you might guess, because the parts have been created in isolation, they don't fit together well (or, in some cases, at all). As the team's frustration level rises, there's a lot of duct tape and some cussing involved.

At the eleventh hour, the team has finally assembled a lopsided laundry robot, but the machine performs only a few of the many planned functions. As Bill, Allisha, Yasmin, and Allan stand looking dejectedly at a pile of wrinkled, half-damp, soap-stained clothes, they wonder "What went wrong"?

Of course, any project manager would be able to answer that question immediately. Roles and responsibilities were not aligned; writing tasks were assigned arbitrarily, without consideration of individual skills or interests. Why on earth would the team lead expect someone from Marketing to be able to build a control panel?

As bizarre as this scenario seems, it plays out every day in real workplaces, especially in environments where teams need to produce long, complex deliverables. Most team leads and project managers don’t pause at the beginning of a writing project to assess how individual skill sets align with the various phases of the writing process. Consequently, the writing products their teams create resemble lopsided, malfunctioning laundry robots. Their purpose is unclear, their structure is wobbly, and various writing styles are duct-taped together into a document that follows a sequence but lacks cohesion.

Seven steps to more effective collaboration

Team writing, like any collaborative work, inevitably takes longer to do than solo writing. But when collaborative writing is well-managed, it bears the positive fruits of diversity: deeper research, stronger ideas, more creative solutions, and a more impressive final product all-round.

To gain these benefits of team writing, the first thing to do is to trade in the piecework approach for a strategic, strengths-based approach. Here’s a step-by-step plan that will help you do that.

Step 1: Conduct a group audience analysis. A well-unified document starts with a well-unified team. That means that everyone must understand the goal of the writing. And the prerequisite to goal-setting is audience analysis.

As a group, invest time in discussing your audience — what makes them tick, what keeps them up at night, what their dreams are, and what they fight about. The more your team knows about your audience, the more focused and compelling the writing will be.

Step 2: Agree on your purpose. It's not enough for the team lead to have a clear goal and vision for the document. Everyone on the team must share the vision. As individual writers contribute to the writing, they must understand what its overarching purpose is so they can do their best to support it.

Step 3: Assess individual writing skills. Writing skills divide into two different categories: big-picture skills and detail-oriented skills.

Big-picture skills include brainstorming, organizing, presenting a logical argument, and storytelling. Writers with these skills are natural strategists. They're able to identify and articulate a clear key message and an audience-focused purpose for a document. They're also good at critiquing a document's ideas and organization.

Detail-oriented skills include designing, editing, and proofreading. Writers with these skills have a good ear for writing; they can detect when something doesn't sound quite right with an idea or a sentence. They also have an eye for visual presentation; they understand basic principles of document design and are able to spot inconsistencies and weak design choices.

Step 4: Map skills to phases of the writing process. Rather than dividing a writing project into sections, divide it according to the phases of the writing process. Depending on the kind of document you're producing, and on your team's, working style, your writing process might include all or some of the following:

- audience analysis
- idea generation
- research
- purpose
- strategy
- organization
- drafting
- revising
- editing
- fact checking
- graphic design
- proofreading

Since creating even a simple document involves several steps, it doesn't make sense for all team members to focus on a single step, drafting. Instead, match individual writing strengths with the phases listed above.

Let's say you have seven people contributing to a proposal. Following the piecework approach, you'd divide the proposal into seven sections and ask each team member to draft a section. The list of writing assignments might look like this:

- Research — Mary Jane
- Introduction — Phil and Sonya
- Current situation and problem definition — Ashraf
- Our solution — Monique and Mahmoud
- Costs and timeline — Artur

Then, you'd appoint an "editor" to duct-tape the sections together and proof the final product.

Following the strengths-based approach, the distribution of writing tasks would look quite different, perhaps like this:

- Research — Mary Jane
- First draft — Phil and Sonya
- Data visualization — Ashraf
- First critique and revision — Monique and Mahmoud
- Second critique — entire team
- Editing and proofreading — Artur

Under this model, some parts of the writing happen sequentially while some will happen concurrently. Close communication between team members during development is critical to overall success.

Step 5: Create a visioning tool. To keep everyone on track, some kind of visual organizer is essential. Such an organizer could be as simple as a traditional outline, distributed as a Word or PowerPoint document. Or you might experiment with more graphic alternatives, such as a flowchart, a mind map, or sticky notes on the boardroom wall.

Step 6: Find your development rhythm. Each writing team and each writing project needs to find the development rhythm that works best for it. In some cases, a detailed, highly structured timeline might be just the thing to keep the team focused and on schedule. In other cases, a few milestone dates with flexible outcomes attached to each might be all that's needed.

When charting out the development of your document, be sure to allow ample time for planning and revising. Those two aspects of the writing process tend to get shortchanged, resulting in the need for extensive rewriting (usually by the team lead or PM) at the last minute.

Step 7: Agree on success criteria. Just as team members must agree on the audience analysis and on the document's purpose, they must agree on what an excellent document will look like. Without a clear set of shared standards, team members fall back on personal assumptions about what constitutes "good writing," and those assumptions could diverge greatly.

Success criteria could take the form of an informal list of "must-have's." Or they could be presented more explicitly in a formal assessment tool, such as a matrix, checklist, or scorecard.

Moving from writing group to writing team

When a so-called team follows the piecework approach to creating a document, they're not really functioning as a team but as a group. The difference between a group and a team comes down to common purpose. On a team, everyone is pulling in the same direction to achieve the same goal whereas in a group there's not such a clear sense of purpose and shared responsibility.

So, the next time you and your colleagues set out to create a document, start by asking yourself, "Are we embarking on this project as a writing group or as a writing team?" Once you commit to taking a genuine team approach, you'll find that collaborative writing doesn't have to be the recipe for disaster it usually is. By drawing out and leveraging the writing strengths of your individual team members, you'll produce clearer, stronger documents than even your best writer could create alone.

Persuasive Writing Techniques to Get Buy-In for Your Vision

My dad was a pilot, which meant he was always watching the sky with a pilot's long-range vision. On family road trips, he could see sights his passengers would never have glimpsed without help.

"Did you see that hawk just circle above those trees? It was right over there."

"Is that a falcon or a crow?… Oh, it's gone now."

"There's an eagle… Whoops, you missed it. Again."

Visionary leaders engaged in innovation have that same gift of farsightedness. And, like my Dad, they can have trouble getting others to see what stands out so obviously to them.

When your team—or potential funders, partners, or clients—can't see how to get from the current state to the future state you envision, frustration can result all around. A roadmap can help, but that's just the starting point. On its own, a map offers nothing more than a two-dimensional, abstract sketch. That may be enough to get people intrigued, but it's seldom enough to gain their commitment.

To take your audience on a journey from aware to all-in, you must bring your vision to life. This is where it pays to pay close attention to your communication technique. Here are five specific moves you can make to create a vision that leaps off the page and gets your audience excited about making your imaginary future real.

1. Use Visual Language

If you want people to "see" what you see, then choose language that appeals to their sense of vision. Here are some examples of words and phrases you might use:

- I/we see…
- I/we picture…
- I/we envision…
- In my mind's eye…
- At first glance…
- We get a glimpse of…
- I/we visualize…

You can take this sensory language even further by incorporating words and phrases that appeal to the other four senses too (touch, taste, smell, and hearing). Grounding your writing in the world of the senses immerses your reader in the reality you see ahead and helps them connect to your research impact.

2. Include Conceptual Diagrams

Make important aspects of your vision more concrete by putting them into pictures. Are you envisioning a three-stage evolution of your company? What about representing that through a diagram instead of just a bulleted list? Are you suggesting a change in focus? What about a cluster diagram showing the new focal point at the center of your various research activities?

You don't need a graphic designer to create conceptual diagrams (images that convey ideas rather than data). Just take a tour through PowerPoint's SmartArt for a start. Here are just a few of the ready-made tools you'll find there:

- Venn diagrams (great for showing overlapping interests or pools of resources).
- Cycle diagrams (to reinforce a non-linear pattern).
- Process flow diagrams (to make steps easy to grasp and remember).
- Org charts (for showing any kind of hierarchy, not just a reporting structure).
- Nested circle diagrams (ideal for showing a ripple effect or layers of stakeholder interest).
- Cluster diagrams (an easy way to show a shift in focus or a hub-and-spoke model).

3. Give an Abundance of Examples

We hear a lot about storytelling these days, but not enough about the power of the individual anecdote. Yes, there's power in presenting your entire vision as a fully developed narrative, a series of events infused with drama. But don't overlook the value of small stories as illustrations of the possible.

People reading or hearing your vision will be repeatedly asking themselves one big question: *Why should I trust the person spinning this fantastic tale of the future?* To gain their trust, you'll need to answer that question again and again, and one of the most compelling ways to do that is by using real-life examples.

Those examples could come from your own life (stories of previous accomplishments, for instance), from history, from your research endeavours, or from the people in your life who inspire your work.

Seek out relatable vignettes that will inspire your audience and alleviate their concerns. Remember: it takes confidence, in you and your stories, to build commitment.

4. Watch your Pronouns

So much can hinge on the difference between *I* and *we*, or between *you* and *me*. If you're sharing your vision with a client or funder, rushing too soon into assuming that you and your audience are a *we* can sound presumptuous. On the other hand, presenting a vision that differentiates between *you* and *me* can place a linguistic barrier between you and your audience.

For example, let's say you're writing an initial email to a potential industry partner. Talking about "the strategic goals we will achieve" could sound a bit pushy. But if you've been working side-by-side with the industry partner for the same six months and insist on talking about "my project" or "the value I bring to the market," that could leave your collaborator feeling like they're getting the cold shoulder.

Gauge the state of your relationship with your audience carefully and choose your pronouns appropriately. Certainly, if you're presenting your vision to your team, then you'll want to speak almost exclusively in *we* and *our*. To get buy-in from colleagues, assume shared ownership from the beginning and make sure you communicate that collaborative approach throughout your document or presentation.

5. Tease the Imagination

Ultimately, effective innovation communication is about buy-in. If you capture your audience's attention, but don't engage them in an imaginative journey toward the future, then you've failed.

Two magic words will go a long way toward helping your audience see what you see: "Imagine that…"

Paint a compelling word-picture of what your audience's life will be like once your vision has become your shared reality. You might want to do this in the present tense. For example:

> Imagine you're a senior patient waiting for knee surgery, and by following this innovative physio program, you're now able to postpone the operation — perhaps indefinitely. How does your quality of life change?

> For starters, you're able to get daily exercise now. You start walking your dog again, and you lose 10 pounds. As a result, your blood pressure goes down, and so does your risk of heart disease. With the renewed energy you're experiencing, you're feeling more social, so you join a local choir. The social connections you make there boost your mental health and improve your overall sense of well-being. And you enjoy all these benefits without ever popping a pill, without any side effects from a pharmaceutical intervention.

Persuasion Dwells in the Details

As a visionary, you're adept at imagining, to the nth degree, the future you know is possible. Your funding agents and policymakers may not be so talented at forward thinking. This is where your ability to make your research insights resonate with your audience becomes key.

While we hear a lot about storytelling as a means to persuade an audience, it's not enough to just give the outline of a plot or a couple of character sketches. Powerful storytelling emerges through details that make your vision three-dimensional, in terms your audience can easily grasp.

The deeper you can immerse your audience in the world you imagine, the more easily they can picture the step-by-step actions that will lead to concrete results. Only once they buy into the viability of your vision can they collaborate with you to bring it to fruition.

Afterword

Further help with innovation communication

With each passing week, innovation communication becomes a more complex concern.

As AI-generated content saturates social media and replaces personalized emails, it becomes tougher and tougher to break through the noise, even when you have a breakthrough idea.

At the same time, AI-enabled apps are transforming the way we communicate, making communication more visual and dynamic. More and more, conversations are shifting away from traditional, text-based forms into visual-rich, or video-rich, alternatives.

According to As Cal Newport recently pointed out in his newsletter, AI is also producing a Jevons Paradox.[6] According to this nineteenth-century theory, making a process more efficient doesn't reduce the use of resources; instead, it increases it. This is exactly what's happening in the communication realm. The easier it becomes to generate infographics, videos, and white papers, the greater the demand for such items, and the greater the burden on the innovators who are expected to produce them.

I'm on a mission to help innovators like you conquer the unique and growing challenges of innovation communication. If you've found these essays helpful, then you may want to subscribe to my email newsletter. Every two weeks, I share a personal reflection to help you engage with the audience you want to influence, educate them on the value of your innovation, and inspire them to act. I also occasionally announce special offers just for the newsletter community.

Thank you for the groundbreaking work you're doing, and best wishes as you communicate with the collaborators you need to move your innovation forward!

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[6] Newport, C. (2026, May 18). *The dark side of the Jevons paradox* [Newsletter]. Cal Newport. https://calnewport.com/the-dark-side-of-the-jevons-paradox/