

# Communicating Science to Skeptics

## What is a Skeptic?

A skeptic is a person who questions or doubts things (where they may be skeptical in general or in relation to specific claims or statements).

## Why Work with Skeptics?

Any audience may have skeptics present. Understanding how to engage with them (particularly if they are disruptive) can help you communicate more effectively and positively.

## Tips in Working with Skeptics

These tips are actually relevant to talking to any audience. However, keep in mind, if you have vocal skeptics, the intent of discussing with a skeptic is not necessarily to change their minds but rather to ensure open, robust and professional (non-antagonistic) and hopefully pleasant discussion.

- **Know Your Audience** – Knowing your audience helps you understand what is relevant and the type of language to use to best communicate with them.
  - Make your comments relevant to their interests. Ask them what they are interested in.
- **Communication**
  - Keep it simple. Avoid jargon. Use analogies (Examples: “Life is a race”; “like trying to find a needle in a haystack”; “like a roller coaster ride”; a genome is like a recipe book...)
  - Note that sometimes we talk too much; simple explanations; allow follow-up questions
- **The Power of Questions** – Promote as appropriate two-way conversation
  - Invite questions – acknowledge good questions.
  - Ask questions back to engage audience. Explore their views if relevant to the topic.
- **Make Connections**
  - Look for common ground.
  - Don't have canned answers – Listen to people's concerns. Answer their question – do not give broad general irrelevant answers.
  - You can take a strong stand on an issue, but doing so can potentially close down conversation or create divisions. So take stands carefully.
  - Engage with people – ask them questions (If you are presenting online, try and use polls and other tools.)
  - If you can, use humor (but never use such humor to put someone down.)
- **Be Honest**
  - Answer as factually as you can.
  - Don't be afraid to say “I don't know”. You can always get back to them, take their contact information and make sure to get back to them!
- **Stay cool.**
  - Take time before responding, if needed, to remain calm. If you confront someone, you often lose your point.
- **Provide additional resources**
  - Let people know where there is more information. Provide your contact information.



*Know your audience. Then you can better communicate; using more appropriate examples and language.  
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