

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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