Are You Average Enough?

Speaking in Average Terms Can Help You Relate to the Public

by Susan Fisk

I’m not sure it’s anyone’s goal to be average. I certainly wouldn’t call any of our members scientists or authors average! I’ve met some cool people doing great things in this job here at the Societies.

But with regard to public communication, average can get you somewhere. Trying to speak or write in average terms will get you further. What is “average” in this case? It depends on your audience, but for science society public communications, we aim to have a “readability” of 8th to 10th grade. Why? Because that’s the reading level of the average college graduate.  

Readability refers to the grade equivalent of written material. It is the basis of most reading literacy tests. All of our blogs are written at the 8th- to 10th-grade readability level as is the content on the public pages of our websites. And, it’s working. Year-over-year statistics show that more people are reading our blogs and web pages than ever.

Another important aspect of communication is to understand that people are reading our blogs and websites, watching our videos, or perhaps coming to your field days as part of their “infotainment.” Yes, they are looking for information, but they are, for the most part, off the clock. This is their leisure time. If they have taken the time to come to us for information, we need to present it to them in the most relatable way possible. A person’s top literacy level is when they are at their best. If they are tired, or hungry, or distracted—and who isn’t—their literacy goes down.

Jargon, Sentence Length, Numbers, and Acronyms

One of the biggest holdups to being average is the use of jargon. Jargon builds roadblocks, not the bridges we desire when communicating about our very important research or practice to the general public! Because use of jargon is such a big issue for scientists, I’m planning an entire column about it. You can look forward to more information about jargon in your January CSA News magazine!

The second culprit is sentence length. This pertains most to our written communications, but it has applications in oral (and video) communications, too. Readers rely on periods, and listeners rely on pauses. Pauses are the oral equivalent of periods. Both of these communication tools give the eyes and ears a break. Commas, semi-colons, and other punctuation do not have the same effect as periods. Please focus on using periods!

Numbers also increase reading levels in our public communications. Why? When you see or hear a number, that affects a different part of your brain. Words and numbers are different brain languages. Here are two examples:

- In a recent study, yield increased on 70% of the 1,000 acres.
- In a recent study, yield increased on seventy percent of the thousand acres planted.

Just a simple change in writing out the numbers into the English language equivalent reduces the reading level into the appropriate range. Our work definitely involves numbers, so this is an important change. Graphics should be simple and support your written communications—something like a pie chart might be a good representation of this statistic. If you are presenting to the public and speaking this sentence, give them a long pause to let those numbers sink in. If you have a PowerPoint, use your graphic on the slide.

Another thought about numbers: in presenting to the public, do we need to use them? Sometimes, yes. Other times, using terms like “the majority of our acres increased yields” would be enough information.

Lastly, acronyms. Yes, it’s painstaking to write out “best management practice,” chemical formulas (CO₂ versus carbon dioxide), or any of the thousands of acronyms I’ve seen in our sciences. They work great when communicating with your peers; to the public, they sound pretentious and cause confusion.

Readability Tools

There are readability tools in Microsoft Word that can help you as you plan out your communications. (Google “How to get a readability score in Word.”) My preferred is
This assumes, of course, that you are planning your public communications. Many of us are so familiar with our work that we assume we can just do presentations on the fly. However, to all those who want to communicate to the general public about their science, I suggest you plan out your communications. Run it through the readability tools we have available to make sure that you’re making your audiences’ job as easy as possible. Together, we can make a difference in getting evidence-based, peer-reviewed information out to the public!

(One side note: This communications piece is written at the 8.5 reading level! I hope that it improved your reading pleasure and absorption of this material. Please contact me for any information at sfisk@sciencesocieties.org).

S. Fisk, director of public and science communications

Improve Your Science Communications!

We’ve collected all our Science Communication tips and tools into one easy-to-find location!

For members only—login required:
- agronomy.org/communications-toolkit
- crops.org/communications-toolkit
- soils.org/communications-toolkit

December 2018

CSA News 29