If you’re the next Isaac Newton, you could probably get by with “reading to the walls.” If you’re not, you must learn how to communicate effectively in science if you’re going to be successful.
This semester, I’ll do my best to disabuse you of these “reasons.”
1) I’m a physicist; I do math, not prose...

Increasingly, physicists work in collaborations; good communications skills are essential

Getting hired and getting promoted often depend on good communications skills

Funding depends on good communications skills

Executives and professors spend most of their time communicating—supervising, delegating, evaluating, clarifying, leading—all of which require clear, precise writing and speaking.
2) I’m too busy...

Good communication skills save time and increase efficiency by eliminating mistakes and misunderstandings

Good communication skills cut down on revising and editing time
3) My word processor will correct my missteaks

Electronic checkers do not “read” your work; they look for suspect patterns based on algorithms

The best grammar checkers cannot help you with organization, emphasis, or tone

The best spell checkers cannot distinguish between “assess” and “asses”
4) Copy editors will correct my papers

Copy editors are a nearly extinct species at most journals nowadays; authors submit text that is usually published “as is,” mistakes and all

Copy editors won’t see the slides for your talks, your proposals, your reports to funders, your email to collaborators....

Your reputation is in your hands and dependent on your communication skills
5) I’m just not a good writer or speaker

Writing and speaking well is a *craft*, not a talent

The same aptitudes that make you a good scientist (logic, rigor, carefulness, attention to detail) are *exactly* what you need to be a good scientific communicator

Like everything else in physics, it requires instruction and practice
As a scientist, you will communicate your ideas in all of the following venues:

- Presentations at group meetings, work shops, conferences, and job interviews.
- Publications in journals.
- Teaching and training.
- Grant proposals.
- Reviews of other people’s manuscripts and proposals.
- Applications and nominations.
- Evaluations and recommendations.
- Websites and electronic media.
Communication is not broadcasting—it is successful only when the receiver understands the content of a message as the sender intended it.
An enormous gulf divides “talking” or “writing” and effective communication. On the left is NASA’s explanation for the Challenger accident. On the right is Richard Feynman’s admittedly flawed experiment that galvanized the American public.

“I took this stuff I got out of your [O-ring] seal and I put it in ice water, and I discovered that when you put some pressure on it for a while and then undo it, it doesn’t stretch back. It stays the same dimension. In other words, for a few seconds at least, and more seconds than that, there is no resilience in this particular material when it is at a temperature of 32 degrees. I believe that has some significance for our problem.”


You must provide explanations that are understandable and meaningful to your audience if you’re going to succeed as a science communicator.
Some scientific communications (particularly written communications), have no mechanism for Steps 7 and 8. Consequently, writers must be particularly careful that the meaning they seek to convey is encoded precisely and unambiguously and in words that the receiver can understand.
Writing and speaking are practice-based skills; you learn how to do them by doing them.

There’s no substitute for practice.
Because we think in words, the act of expressing observation in language—of distilling amorphous thoughts into words—is a powerful tool for clarifying your thinking.

Translating your thoughts into words so that you can communicate them to someone else forces you to question your assumptions. To look for holes. To fill in gaps in your thinking.

“The act of composition disciplines the mind; writing is one way to go about thinking, and the practice and habit of writing not only drain the mind, but supply it too.” Strunk and White, The Elements of Style, 3rd ed., p. 70.

“It’s also through writing that we learn to articulate our thoughts clearly; our critical thinking is strengthened and clarified by our expression of it in writing.” J.L. Craig, “Writing strategies for graduate students,” Proc. ASEE Ann. Conf. & Exposition (Nashville, TN, ASEE, 2005).
Some common problems in novices’ scientific writing:
Inappropriate scope or emphasis
Lack of logical organization, cohesion, transitions
Organizing narratives chronologically
Wordiness and superfluous information
Imprecise or ambiguous language
Failure to adhere to scientific writing conventions
Poor use of graphics or presentation of data
“Mechanical” errors—in grammar, usage, spelling, punctuation
Underestimating the time needed to write, revise, and proofread

During this semester, we’ll concentrate on helping you to overcome these common problems in science writing.
Here’s a famous paper that has a writing flaw…can you spot it?

“Evidence of a positively charged electron was found in cosmic ray tracks produced in a vertical Wilson chamber. Of 1300 photographs, 15 were found to contain this unexplained particle. Analysis of the tracks indicates a particle of positive charge, having a magnitude comparable to that of an electron.”


This paragraph was taken from a paper published in 1933, announcing the discovery of the positron, for which Carl Anderson shared the 1936 Nobel Prize in Physics.

Now, admittedly, Carl Anderson won a Nobel Prize and I didn’t. But I still think this paragraph could (should) have been written more carefully.

Can you spot the problem?
“Evidence of a positively charged electron was found in cosmic ray tracks produced in a vertical Wilson chamber. **Of 1300 photographs, 15 were found to contain this unexplained particle.** Analysis of the tracks indicates a particle of positive charge, having a magnitude comparable to that of an electron.”


“Of 1300 photographs, 15 were found to contain this unexplained particle.”

The “photographs” did not **contain** any “particles” (other than in the sense that they were made of matter).

*Tracks recorded on the photographic film could not be explained by the behavior of any known particles.*

There is a huge gap between saying “I have a photograph of some weird-looking tracks” and

“**I have a photograph of Sasquatch.**”

Write precisely!
Writing lucidly and speaking confidently are learned skills

They require having an adequate vocabulary and a sensitivity to words’ nuances.
They require practice and iteration.
They require constructive criticism from experts and peers.
Train yourself to recognize excellence and emulate it.
Seize every opportunity that presents itself to improve your skills.
Your investment in improving them will affect your future success.

Practice may not make “perfect,” but it definitely makes “better.”
Recap:

- Good communications skills are essential for your success
- Communicating is more than broadcasting
- Strive to explain clearly and write precisely
- Writing and speaking well are learned skills—they require instruction and practice

For good advice and further reading:


