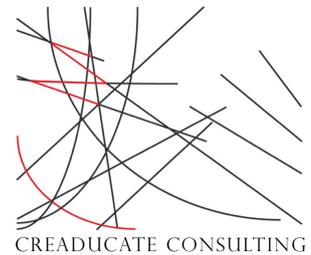


Mimicry, your ego, and your research story



Your success in science depends on fluency in jargon and smooth argumentation in English. When you present your own work, you want to sound like established scientists in your field, so you borrow elegant turns of phrase from their papers and conference talks. You mimic how they piece together the background in their Introduction, how they explain their analyses and string them together in the Results, and how they relativize their findings in the Discussion. Such mimicry, so long as it falls shy of plagiarism, is quite acceptable, even healthy, especially among younger researchers still molding their author's voice.

The problem with such mimicry is that you may blindly apply someone else's storyline to your own without adapting it to highlight what sets your study apart from the similar-sounding ones in your field. Your storyline probably closely resembles that of many papers in your field, and your job is to highlight the differences even more than the similarities. But you can't do that by dressing your story in the hide-and-fur of another one. You must tell your story "from within".

Blind mimicry is often why your audiences raise red flags when they read your manuscript draft or listen to your Powerpoint presentation. "What does this sentence mean?" they ask. "What's the point of this experiment?" You're surprised because you prepared your work to "sound" just like other studies in your field. So why don't your audiences get it right away?

You respond defensively with a kind of fundamental attribution error [1]: you assume that if people are confused by your work, it's because they're ignorant or didn't pay attention; whereas if you don't understand someone else's story, it's because that researcher can't communicate well. It doesn't occur to you that because you were borrowing someone else's packaging, you may have provided too much background that was irrelevant and distracting from your key messages; or you may have failed to provide information key to understanding your messages.

To test whether your audience has truly understood your storyline, invite them to answer the following questions [2] after reading your draft or listening to your talk:

- What is the knowledge gap that your project aims to fill?
- How does this project differ from the next most-similar study in the field?
- How should your results change the way researchers or practitioners work? In other words, what is the "before/after" transition that your project creates?

Do the audience's responses echo what you just told them? Or are you left scratching your head, wondering "Where did the audience get that idea?!"

In one of my recent communications workshops, PhD students had to deliver an "elevator pitch" about their projects [3], in which they explained within two minutes how their projects were important, useful and unique within their field. They were extremely fluent in English – too fluent, in fact – and their oral pitches featured long sentences sagging with jargon. They were recycling silver-lined phrases from papers in their field, but they either failed to highlight what set their work apart from those other papers, or they said it as whispers drowned out by the din of technical sophistication. As a result, the audience couldn't answer the three questions above.

In a word, those scientists put their ego first and spent more time polishing the shiny packaging than presenting the underlying message clear as day.

They are not alone: most scientists are as insecure as anyone else, and just as desperate to belong to a community of peers. Even when they know in their heart of hearts that they're clouding their story with

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packaging, they soldier on because that's what everybody else does, and they certainly don't want to stick out as outsiders. Many researchers would agree that the typical article or Powerpoint talk is incoherent, opaque, and overly dense, yet they insist on preparing their own articles and talks in the same way. To do differently would make them outsiders – precisely what most researchers want to avoid.

To regroup yourself and your audience, put your draft aside, turn off the Powerpoint, and look at your audience as if they were a colleague or friend you were meeting at the pub. How would you, sitting informally over beer or coffee, explain to your listener what your project is and why you're doing it? Chances are, you would not drag on for too long, your sentences would be conversational – you wouldn't need multiple breaths just to finish them – and you would systematically explain the “why?” of your research question. You would use jargon, but you would be generous with examples, definitions and links to the literature because you wouldn't assume that your listener had just read the last several papers in your field.

The lesson here is to place your ego aside and focus on communicating the real story, not fret about presenting (someone else's) impressive story with shiny packaging. The communication of science would be infinitely more effective if younger researchers told stories that were unapologetically clear and accessible and that painted concrete images in the audience's mind [4]. In the long run, this would be more impressive and ego-gratifying than any shiny packaging.

[1] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fundamental_attribution_error

[2] See an earlier version of these questions in
<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1002/bies.201200098>

[3] Developing an elevator pitch (also referred to as elevator speech, science pitch, or poster pitch) about your work can be effective for helping you distill or crystallize out the key ideas that will resonate strongest with your audience, to help them understand how your project is unique and necessary in a crowded field of “similar-sounding” studies.

[4] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_syOrxDoz5o