

# Faculty Training Workshop Jemez Springs, NM January 2011

Talking to the media: why it matters and how to do it.

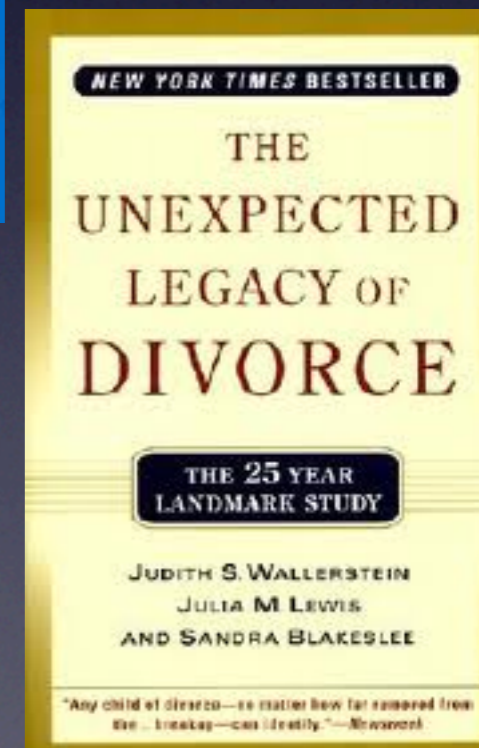
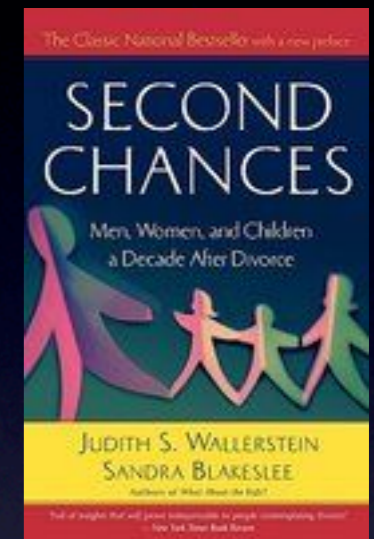
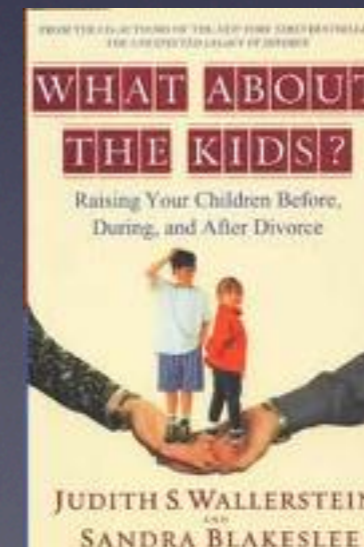
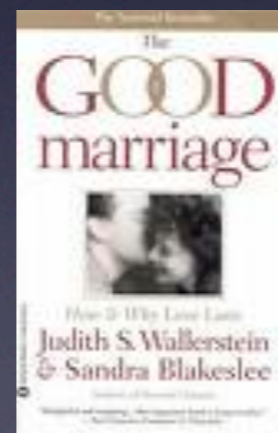
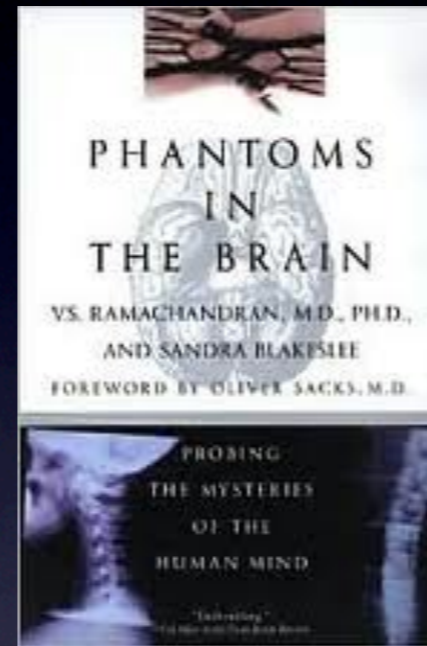
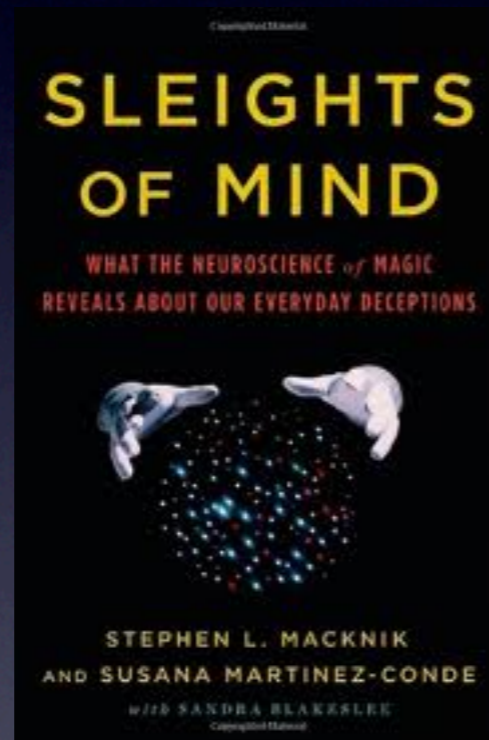
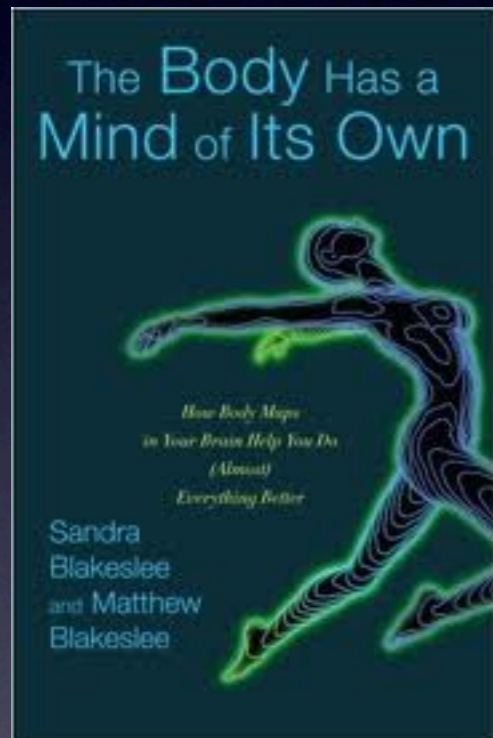




this is what I do...



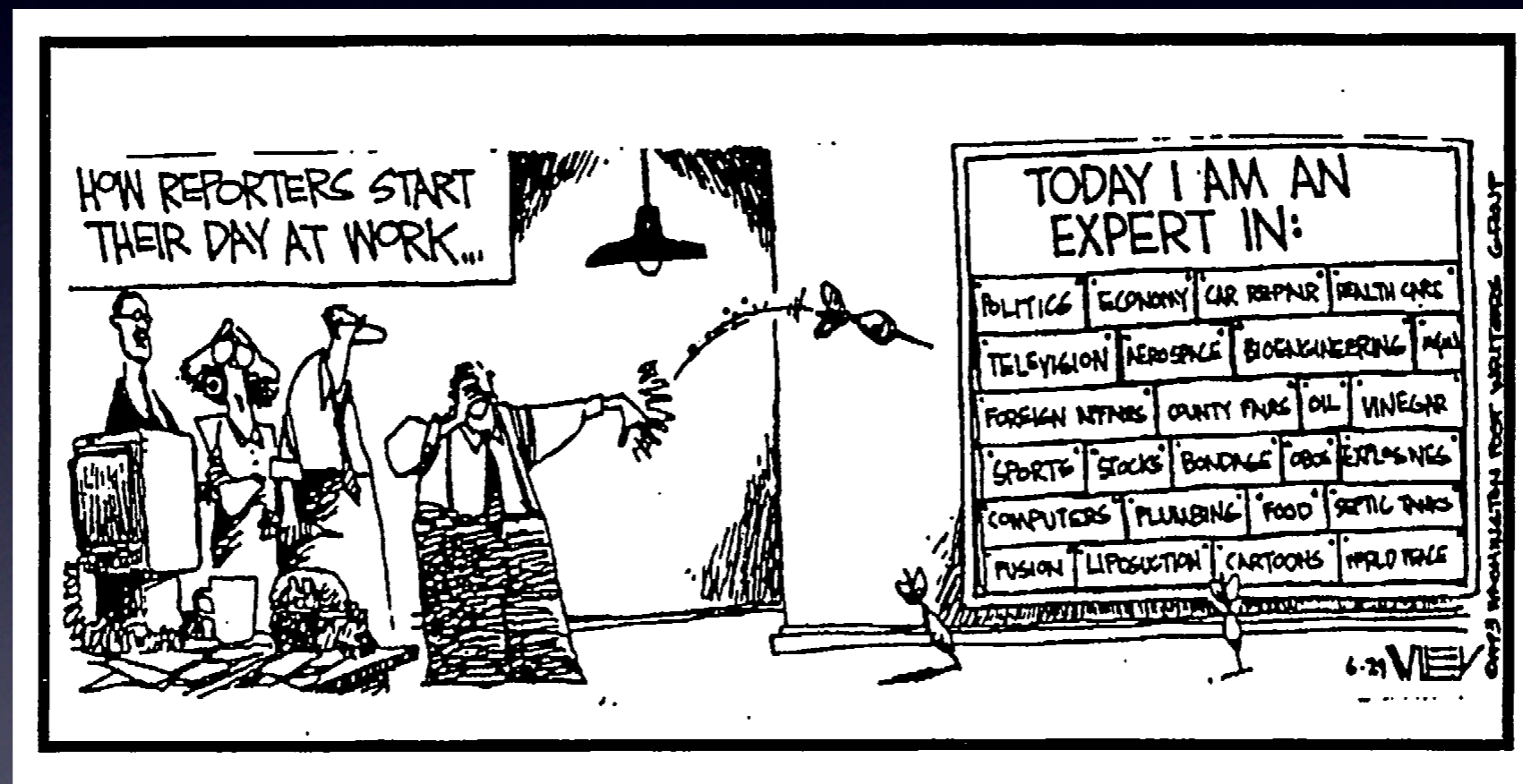
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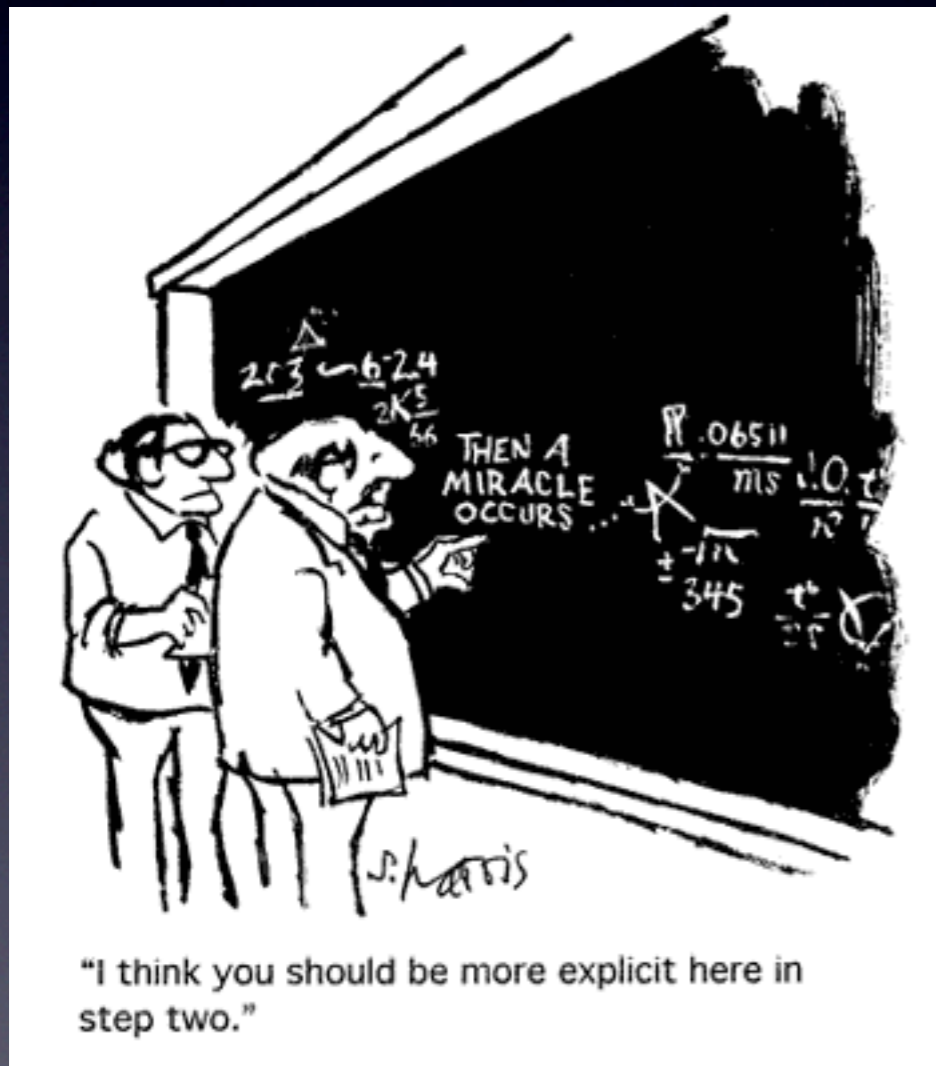
[www.sandrablakeslee.com](http://www.sandrablakeslee.com)



# How reporters start their day at work



# this is what you do..



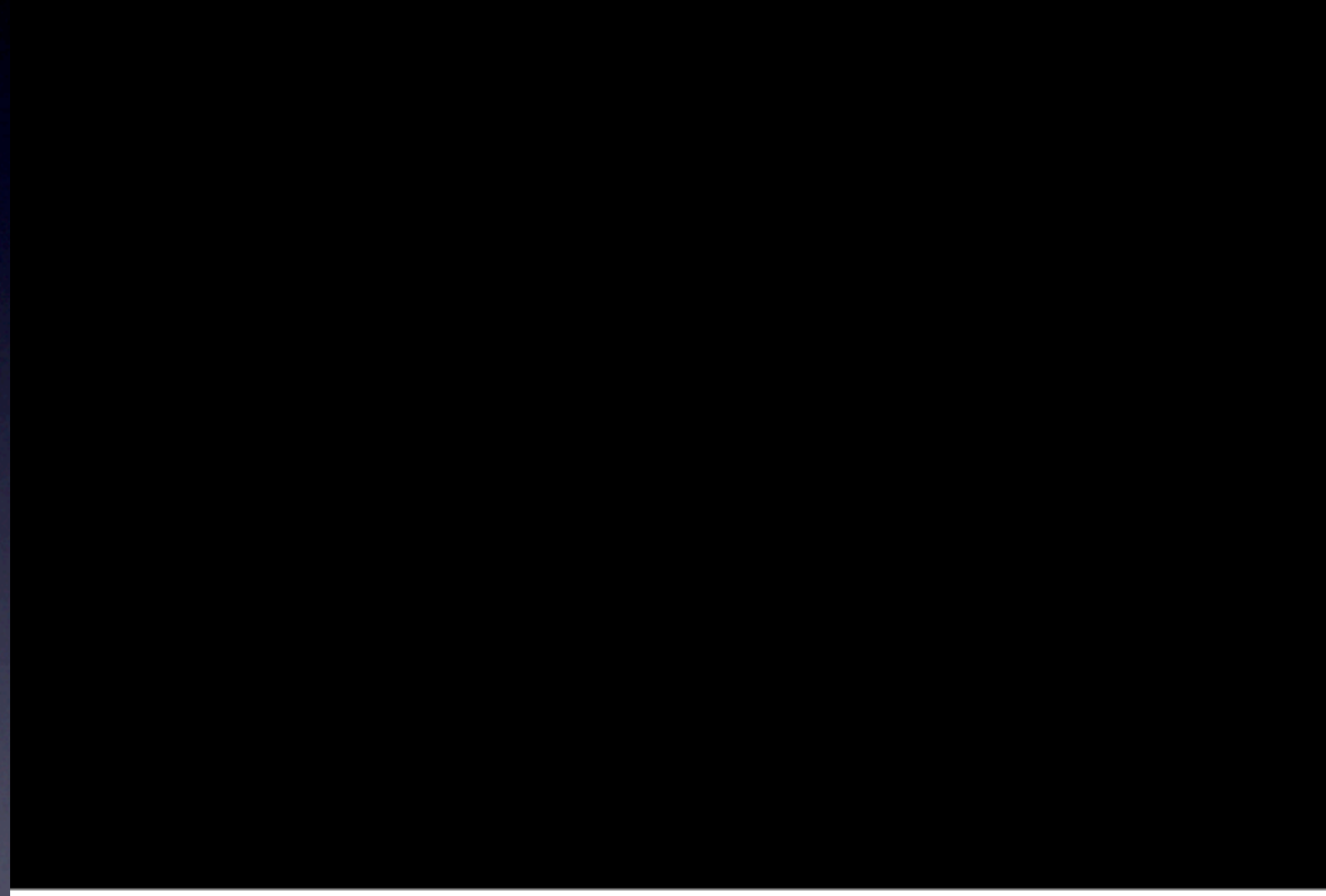


# THE PROBLEM ...

This is how the public perceives you



# The Brain Explained



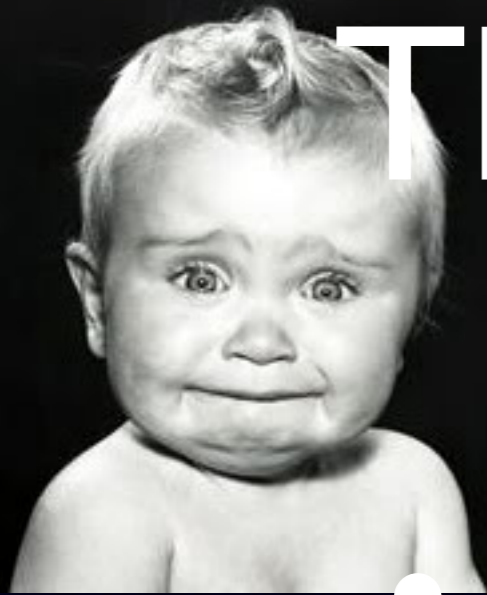


Before we get started -- tell me  
where do you get your news?

# epic2015







# The newspaper death watch

- In 2008 the newspaper industry lost 16,000 jobs.
- In 2009 the newspaper industry lost 15,000 jobs.
- In 2010, things are better. The industry only lost 2,800 jobs!
- Eleven daily papers in major cities closed and more than 100 weeklies shut down



- as for science reporting....
- “The disastrous decline of the print news business has probably been harder on science than on any other reporting beat. As things stand now, much of the useful news on breaking science events comes from blogs and informal sources of varying trustworthiness. As one commentator of this trend has pointed out, we are moving from the journalism of verification to the journalism of announcement.” Donald Kennedy



# What should you do?





# Start talking

- If you don't, who will?
- How come intelligent design got so much attention? (they talked and talked)
- Your work is funded by taxpayers
- You owe it to the public



# So, how do you tell your story?

- No one can translate your research better than you
- But you need to think about how to communicate the information



# Are you afraid? Are you worried that...

- you will be embarrassed
- you will be misquoted
- colleagues won't take you seriously
- you are told not to by your superiors
- your effort not rewarded, no payback for your time



But it is worth the risk!



You must unlearn what you have learned -- Yoda

You need to learn  
a new set of  
skills !

These include knowing exactly what you want to say,  
understanding your audience, and using common  
language to get your main points across clearly.

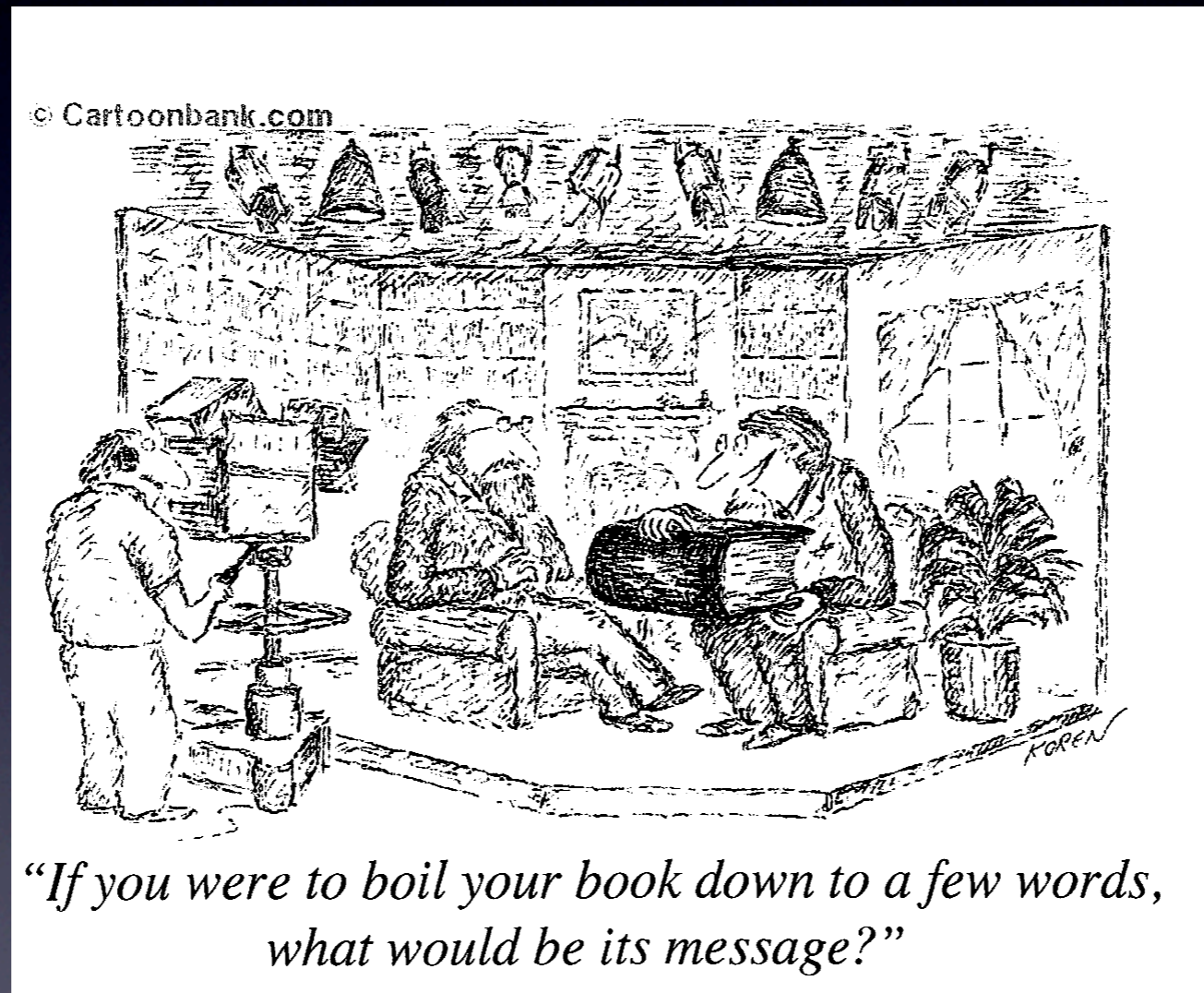


# Know your messages

- core ideas you are trying to get across, not necessarily sound bites.
- must be simple, but not necessarily simplistic.
- must be limited to three or four ideas -- one if it's for television.
- must be jargon-free.
- should be supported by sound bites, metaphors, statistics and anecdotes.



# Boil it Down





- never rely on your audience to do math in their heads. Round off numbers and translate them into conversational terms.
- use frequencies instead of probabilities. A value expressed as “only three in 10,000” is more easily understood.



- **Compare and contrast:** you may have worked for months to produce a single number, but it is useless unless you tell what it means. Comparisons are a natural way of putting a number into context. For example, on average, only one person dies from shark attacks in the U.S. each year. In comparison, lightning strikes kill almost fifty people.



- Explain significance versus magnitude: Lay audiences do not understand the meaning of significance in a statistical sense. Small but significant difference can sound unimpressive and unimportant. Try to present data so that the magnitude is striking. Instead of saying “we’ve seen a 4 percent annual decline since 1992,” say “we’ve lost more than 260,000 square miles in the past twenty years, which is an area the size of Texas.”



- Instead of saying “a 90 percent increase in population”
- say, “the population almost doubled.”
- Instead of saying, “the lifetime probability of developing liver cancer is 0.46 percent”
- say, “out of every 1,000 people, fewer than 5 will develop liver cancer.”



- Instead of saying, “Annual coral cover loss was 1 percent over the last 20 years and 2 percent between 1997 and 2003”
- say, “We are now losing coral reefs more than twice as fast as we are losing rainforest.”



- Instead of saying “microbiota” say “tiny living things.”
- Instead of “hypoxic” say “low on oxygen.”
- Instead of “trophic structure” say “food web.”
- Instead of “piscivorous” say “eats fish.”
- Instead of “pelagic” say “open water.”
- Instead of “phototactic” say “moves in response to light.”





Journalists are from Venus  
Scientists are from Mars



many tensions are rooted in the different time frames  
under which journalists and scientists operate.



ON THE SCIENCE NEWSBEAT

Come back in...  
oh... let's say a  
year or two.



search ID: shr1347

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We do have some things in common  
in our search for knowledge.

We are:

- curious
- love discovery
- analytical
- skeptical
- competitive (very competitive)
- independent thinkers
- love to drink and talk late into the night



# But!!!

we have nothing in common when it comes to  
reporting results



# Scientists vs. Journalists





# worlds in collision

- SCIENTISTS

- slow
- driven by caution
- in depth
- uncertainty
- specifics good
- credentials matter

- JOURNALISTS...

- fast
- driven by deadline
- quick overview
- certainty
- generalizations good
- emotions matter



# Who's Looking Over Your Shoulder?

SCIENTISTS...

the scientific community

JOURNALISTS...

The Editors



# Common misperceptions about journalists

- The “media” are all the same
- They will misquote you
- They don't know anything. They screw things up
- They sensationalize
- Do anything to get their story. Damn the facts
- Give scientific outliers a platform. Damn the credentials



# Common misperceptions about scientists

- They caveat things to death
- Overly interested in process
- Lack a bottom line
- Can't see the forest from the trees
- Speak in jargon



# Science coverage tends to be either:

- Breaking news
- Features
- Or, Darwin help us, the 24 hour feeding frenzy called the blogosphere. (this is not good.)



# What makes a good story?

- A new and surprising discovery
- Overturning conventional wisdom
- Conflict or controversy
- Passion
- An adventure
- Just plain cool insights
- AND.. it is not necessarily the WHOLE story



If you want to bore someone, tell them  
everything you know...

Voltaire



# Put the hay where the mules can reach it

- frame it
- what is important. SO WHAT???
- Why now?
- Who cares?
- Make complicated issues personally meaningful. Be yourself
- Know your audience





*"I don't know why I don't care about the bottom  
of the ocean, but I don't."*



# F.A.Q.s

ABOUT THE

## HADRON COLLIDER



**Q:** How does the Hadron Collider work?

**A:** You didn't even understand eleventh-grade math, so why are you asking?



**Q:** What would happen if I went inside it?

**A:** Just. Don't.



**Q:** How many miles of pipes and whatnot are in it?

**A:** A bajillion.

**Q:** How much did it cost?

**A:** Forty squillion.



**Q:** What does this thing do?

**A:** Don't touch that.



**Q:** What would happen if you, like, put a cat inside it?

**A:** I don't know.

**Q:** If I concentrate ultra-hard, will I ever be able to understand it?

**A:** No.





# What the journalist needs from you

- ability to explain the “so what”
- why is this finding important.
- again, who cares and why now?
- responsiveness -- return that phone call or email right away
- who else should the reporter talk to?



# Remember! During the interview

- Be concise
- Avoid jargon
- Avoid lengthy sentences
- Be conversational
- Be passionate!



# Don't be afraid to lead the conversation

- The real issue here is...
- Yes, and in addition to that...
- I don't know that. What I do know is..
- Let me put that in perspective
- The most important thing you need to know is..
- What you're really asking is..



advice:

talk to the public information officer  
at your institution



Nothing is ever off the record



# Illustrations

- photos
- graphics
- audio clips
- video clips
- keep your website up to date !!!!!
- post pdfs of your papers, please!



# And most of all

- Tell a compelling STORY



this is not a waste of time

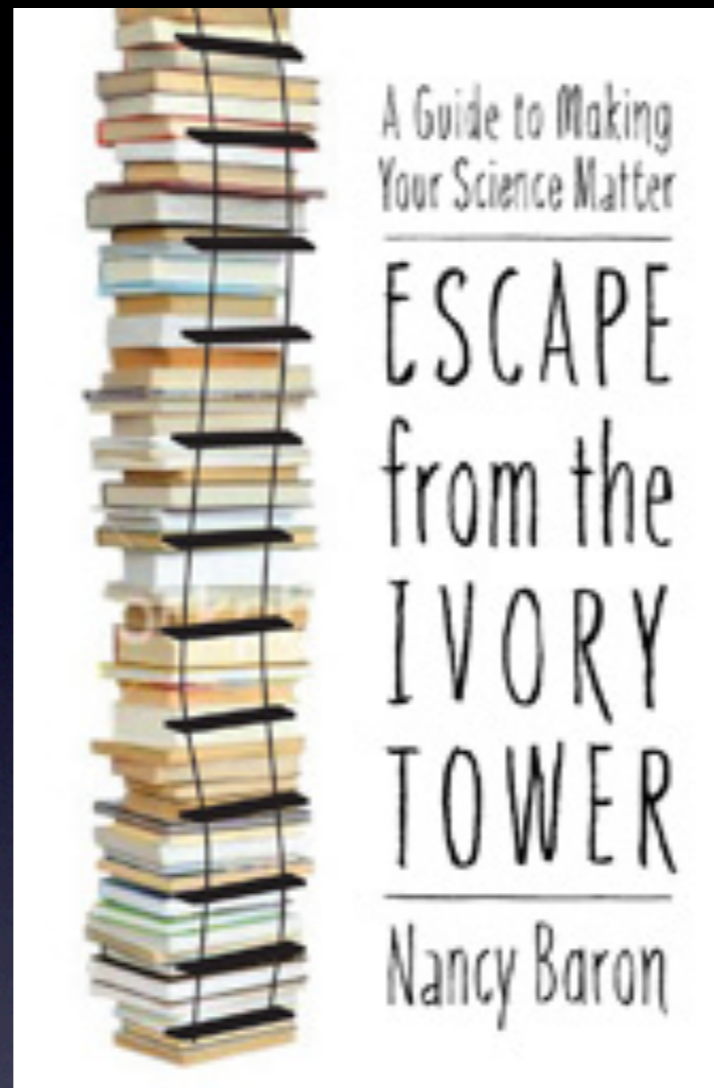
the new, shortened NIH grant applications favor better  
writers!



Let's role play...

- we are at a cocktail party.
- tell me, how is your work going?
- you are being interviewed by a reporter
- what is your message?





thanks to Nancy Baron!