Description

Academics are constantly asked to explain their research to colleagues, at conferences, in interviews, sometimes even to our grandmothers! Of course, being able to give a highly technical and detailed account of your project is necessary when you are discussing work with colleagues. But most people, even within academia, will not be privy to your field's specific terms, methods, and literature. Therefore, knowing how to explain your research to a variety of audiences is essential.

The Common Questions

There are four common questions that people ask academics, and although your aunt and your potential co-author may ask them in different ways, at heart, they are the same questions:

- What is your profession?
- What do you study?
- Why do you study what you study?
- Why does your research matter?

Think about how a person from each of three different groups—a colleague from your specific field, an academic who is not from your field, and a non-academic—might ask these questions and why they are asking.

Answering Colleagues and Other Academics

Your colleague is probably asking because they want to discuss something that is specific to your field. With your colleagues, you can use the most complex and technical language. For instance, an entomologist might say "my project demonstrates that the *Scarabaeidae aphodiinae* uses biodirectional celestial cues for nocturnal navigation."

But providing a short, relatable explanation of your research may be necessary when, for instance, you are applying for an academic job or research funding. The interviewers might be from your general field, but often will know little about your specific literature or methods.

This group generally wants to know that you are a serious scholar who has produced progressive research. Therefore, an appropriate explanation of the entomologist's work might be "I study the nighttime movements of the *Scarabaeidae aphodiinae*—more commonly known as the 'dung beetle.' My research has revealed that dung beetles use the stars to navigate a straight path at night." A quick jargon-free explanation of the literature surrounding your subject and a basic explanation of your methods will be all that you need to accompany this description of your work.

Explaining Astrophysics to Your Grandmother

Finally, when the average non-academic asks what you do, they are probably asking in the course of polite conversation. Instead of answering, "I am an entomologist," it might be more effective to say

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something very simple and even slightly humorous: “I study bugs.” This is effective because it is relatable: the average person understands what bugs are. Put your work into the most understandable and relatable terms.

This rule works for handling follow-up questions from non-academics as well. For instance, our entomologist might adapt her explanation of her work to:

“I knew that dung beetles could travel in a straight line during the day but I wanted to see what happened at night. When I realized that they traveled in a perfectly straight line at night too, but only on nights when there was a clear sky, I realized they were navigating by the stars! They get off track when it’s cloudy, poor guys. They’re the only bugs we know of that use the stars to find their way.”

This entomologist has just answered the questions:

- What do you study?
- Why do you study what you study?
- Why does your research matter?

…but she has answered in a way that any average person can understand, which gives her the ability to share her research not just with other scientists or academics, but with anyone.

Take a few minutes to figure out how to answer questions about your work for three different types of inquirers. Most academics find it difficult to create succinct answers for at least one of the different levels. But this exercise can also help you understand your own work better by thinking about it from three different vantage points. Once you become comfortable with these questions and how to answer them for different types of people, you’ll be ready to explain your work to anyone, whether they are the head of your department or the matriarch of your family.

Category

1. Promoting Research
2. Using Online Media

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