If your research is very technical, how do you get a non-technical audience?

- Like grandma.

- To appreciate it.

Oooh...
You have to give context by somehow relating your work to the world that she understands.

One way to do this is to use a narrative.

Giving Context

Narrative answers the question: “Why?”

Using Narrative
"Why?" Should the audience care about your research?

WILL IT IMPROVE THEIR LIVES?
OR MAKE SOMETHING EASIER?

ALLOW THEM TO DO SOMETHING THEY COULDN'T DO BEFORE?
THE NARRATIVE TAKES SOMETHING ABSTRACT AND THEORETICAL IN YOUR MIND - AND MAKES IT CONCRETE AND PRACTICAL IN THEIRS.

IT SETS YOUR AUDIENCE IN A SITUATION THAT THEY'RE FAMILIAR WITH - SOMETHING THAT THEY'D FIND OR IMAGINE THEMSELVES IN -

AND IT QUICKLY HIGHLIGHTS A PROBLEM THAT THEY CAN TOTALLY RELATE TO.

OF COURSE, WHAT SITUATION YOU CHOOSE WILL DEPEND ON WHO YOUR AUDIENCE IS.
THE ABILITY OF YOUR RESEARCH TO SOLVE THIS PROBLEM IS WHY THEY SHOULD CARE.

FOR EXAMPLE, SAY YOUR RESEARCH IS ABOUT HOW SURFACE PATTERNS AFFECT AERODYNAMICS.

FOR CERTAIN AUDIENCES, YOU COULD START YOUR PRESENTATION BY TALKING ABOUT HOW A GOLFER MIGHT LIKE GOLF BALLS TO FLY FARTHER. BUT THINGS (LIKE WAKE AND DRAG) SLOW DOWN THE BALL AND CAUSE IT TO NOT TRAVEL VERY FAR.

SIX COMMENTS ABOUT NARRATIVE:

1. KEEP IT SHORT BY PROVIDING JUST ENOUGH DETAIL TO GET THE POINT ACROSS.
2. THERE'S NO TIME FOR THINGS LIKE CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT.
3. YOU MAY NOT ACTUALLY BE APPLYING YOUR RESEARCH TO SOLVE THE SPECIFIC PROBLEM IN YOUR NARRATIVE AND THAT'S OK.
4. IT'S JUST AN ILLUSTRATION OF WHAT'S POSSIBLE IN THEORY AND IS ONLY MEANT TO BE AN EXAMPLE APPLICATION THAT YOUR AUDIENCE CAN WRAP THEIR MINDS AROUND.
5. MAKE A NARRATIVE MORE PERSONAL BY TELLING IT IN THE SECOND PERSON.
6. YOU YOUR YOURS
Don't know how to start? Try starting with words like:

Imagine, Suppose, If, & If You've Ever
Imagine playgrounds made of safer and more durable materials instead. Materials that can easily be shaped into fun, creative structures—infused with color, lights, nets and sound.

Narrative is an effective way to establish context at the start of a conversation or presentation about your research.

By the way, you don't have to use the narrative for the rest of the conversation or presentation...
H O W E V E R ,  
I F Y O U S T A R T  
W I T H A N A R R A T I V E ,  
C O M E B A C K T O I T  
A T T H E E N D ... 

Y O U ' L L  
K N O W T H A T O U R  
P O L Y M E R R E S E A R C H  
M A D E T H E S E D E S I G N S  
P O S S I B L E  

A N D ,  
S O -  

T H E N E X T  
T I M E Y O U P A S S B Y  
A P L A Y G R O U N D -  

- N E I T H E R Y O U , N O R  
Y O U R G R A N D D A U G H T E R ,  
H A V E T O W O R R Y A B O U T  
R U S T O R S P L I N T E R S  
E V E R A G A I N . 

T A L K A B O U T  
H O W Y O U R  
R E S E A R C H F I X E S  
T H E P R O B L E M . 

P R O V I D I N G  
C L O S U R E I S A N I C E  
W A Y T O F I N I S H.
IN SUMMARY,
NARRATIVE QUICKLY ESTABLISHES CONTEXT.

NARRATIVE DESCRIBES THE PROBLEM YOU ARE SOLVING AND ILLUSTRATES THE IMPACT AND IMPORTANCE OF YOUR RESEARCH IN A RELATABLE WAY.

NOW THAT'S COOL.
ONCE YOUR AUDIENCE UNDERSTANDS WHY YOUR WORK SHOULD MATTER TO THEM-

THEN YOU'VE SET THE STAGE TO BEGIN TO TALK ABOUT WHAT IT IS YOUR RESEARCH-

-YOUR RESEARCH-

-Actually is.

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THIS COMIC IS PART OF A LARGER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT EXPERIENCE FOR GRADUATE STUDENTS TO AID AND ENHANCE RESEARCH COMMUNICATION SKILLS. THIS COMIC, AND OTHER RESOURCES LIKE IT, ARE AVAILABLE ONLINE AT:

GRADX.MIT.EDU

Office of Graduate Education
Gradx is a project that seeks to expand access to professional development to all MIT graduate students and faculty. Its first offering, Gradcommx (both an online & live course availability TBA), will focus on communication skills for graduate students.

**Design Principles**

Pedagogical design principles strive to make the course simple in concept, complex in practice; customizable to student needs; connected to resources via links and gateways to other MIT resources and services; and featuring differentiated approaches to increase comprehension.

Teaching materials can be adapted by faculty to any population.

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Gradx consists of a series of learning experiences that are fun and user-friendly. These elements include:

- Comics
- Instructor Lectures
- Podcasts
- Expert Interviews
- Activity Prompts
- Research Exercises
- And more!

**Topics Covered**

1. **Choosing appropriate language** to avoid overwhelming your audience
2. **Using narrative** to explain why your research is important
3. **Synthesizing prior work** to convey where yours fits in by highlighting differences
4. **Controlling focus** in order to minimize cognitive load when presenting data
5. **Leaving time** for an audience to process when explaining how something works
6. **Distilling your message** when time & attention spans are short

Find out more at: gradx.mit.edu

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