

An occasional column, in which Caveman and other troglodytes involved in cell science emerge to share their views on various aspects of life-science research. Messages for Caveman and other contributors can be left at caveman@biologists.com. Any correspondence may be published in forthcoming issues.

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Let's talk! Different ways to communicate science in the lab

You don't need to be a talkshow host like Joan Rivers, who inveigled her guests with 'let's talk', to be able to communicate with members of the lab about science. However, it is interesting to look around and see how different people in the lab and those in other labs choose to communicate their progress.

Lab meetings are de rigor in most labs, the weekly coming together to hear a colleague discuss their progress during the period that has elapsed since their last meeting. For a small lab, this can be a little painful, because each person's turn comes around so frequently: only a few gels run, a small mouse litter genotyped, a screen established, progress slowed by the necessity to complete a mid-term in a course or the unexpected arrival of friends from a distant land. For someone in a big lab, the problems are different but no less difficult: the infrequency of the talk and the constant turnover of personnel requires a long regurgitation of the purpose of the project ('it sounded so promising and well defined!'), the recitation of the early results ('they were

so portentous!'), and the culmination in the latest problems ('still not much advance even after all this time!').

Formal lab meetings provide, in my opinion, several important lessons in communication. First, for the presenter, this is a chance to learn how to present his/her science formally. My advice to new students is that they should treat this like a seminar but one that is given to a friendly, but hopefully critical, audience. They should prepare a short introduction of the importance of the biological problem that they are addressing, then a short summary of the purpose of the experiments that they are going to present, followed by a careful rendition of the approach, results and conclusion of experiments, and finally discuss how the results/conclusions reflect on the original purpose of the experiments. In other words, get into the habit of formulating the telling of your ideas, experimental approach and findings - all forms of science communication follow this format (publications, grant applications, seminars/posters, discussions with a colleague). You might think that I take this too seriously, but I think that it is important to learn and entrain these habits early.

Second, it is important that the presenter

