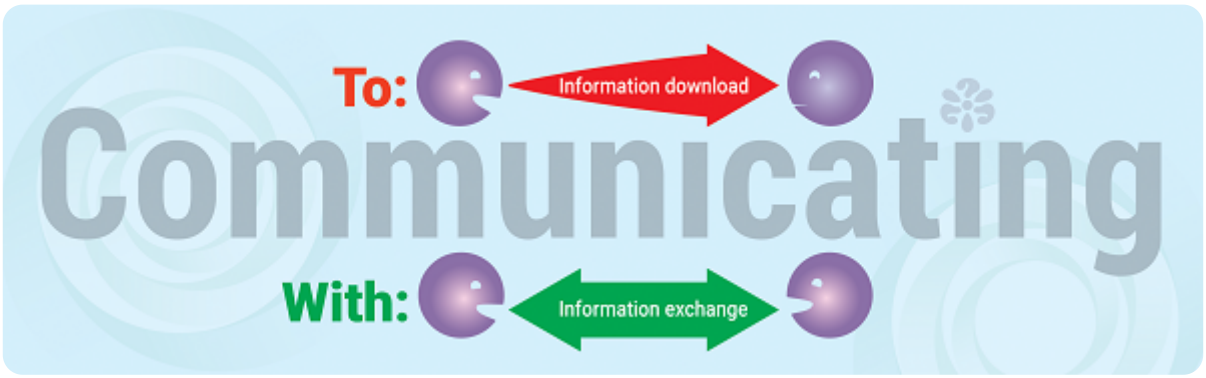
Science Societies

Moving communications from ‘With’ to ‘To’

Tiny Grammar Lesson Reflects Different Outlook on Communications

By Susan V. Fisk

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The words “with” and “to” are prepositions. They illustrate the relationship between two elements in a sentence. You, or your kids, may have learned the Preposition Song in school (if not, here is a YouTube video reminder **https://youtu.be/GLmjfJyZ-iM**).

A common view of the phrase “communicate ***to***” is that it is an action with ***one direction***. Sometimes, that’s OK. Articles in *CSA News* magazine are usually intended to be a unidirectional communication. “How to” videos that you watch online are one direction. There is a place for that type of communication.

When you “communicate ***with***” someone, there is interaction. This is an important distinction. During that interaction, you can build trust. You also can gain understanding from the person(s) you are communicating with. You start to build a relationship.

Reframing your communication style from “to” to “with” gains many more opportunities than the one-direction style of “to.”

How would this look like when teaching? Many of you are already applying it! Discussion groups, that you or students lead, teach students how to have a dialog.

How does it look when you communicate with the public? It could start with you giving a short presentation—say at a Rotary group, garden group, etc.—and then opening it up to a brief Q&A. Then go back to your original presentation, followed by more Q&A. You could even start by asking your audience a little about themselves. “How many people here garden?” Or “How many of you hike?” Asking and engaging might give you a better starting point.

By reframing your communication mindset from “to” to “with,” you increase your interaction with public presentations, making make it more a two-way rather than a one-way conversation.

With’ Requires In-Person Interaction

The only way you can experience “with” conversations is in person—either by being physically present, on the phone, or a perhaps via a group chat. The Societies have a great online presence, with web stories, blogs, and even videos. Getting our scientists out to interact with the public is a goal that I hope to build upon in the next few years.

All forms of communication are important and need attention paid to them, but, in-person communication takes more prep time to be done well. Christine Bradish, one of our bloggers who co-led this year’s communications workshop with me in San Antonio, experienced first-hand the difference of “with” versus “to.”

“I had taken my parents to a public farm demonstration,” says Bradish, a crop breeder in North Carolina. “A lot of agents spoke ***to*** the audience, but after, both of my parents said they really didn’t feel included in the conversations. They didn’t really pick up much information. I think it’s because not only were the agents using jargon, they were not conversing ***with*** my parents like they might with me.” Did these agents ever ask Bradish’s parents a question? No. A few questions and answers in their talks would have made a big difference!

The Societies’ Public and Science Communication Department collects its communication articles in “Communications Toolkits” that you can access from the web 24/7: **www.agronomy.org/communications-toolkit**, **www.crops.org/communications-toolkit**, and **www.soils.org/communications-toolkit**. The more personal interaction, using “with” versus “to” style, the more the public will understand our sciences and trust what we publish.

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