University of Amsterdam
Faculty of Science



IvI All Hands Meeting 2024

Workshop:

Storytelling & Pitching

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In this workshop…



Theory (+- 20 mins)



Practice (+- 20 mins)



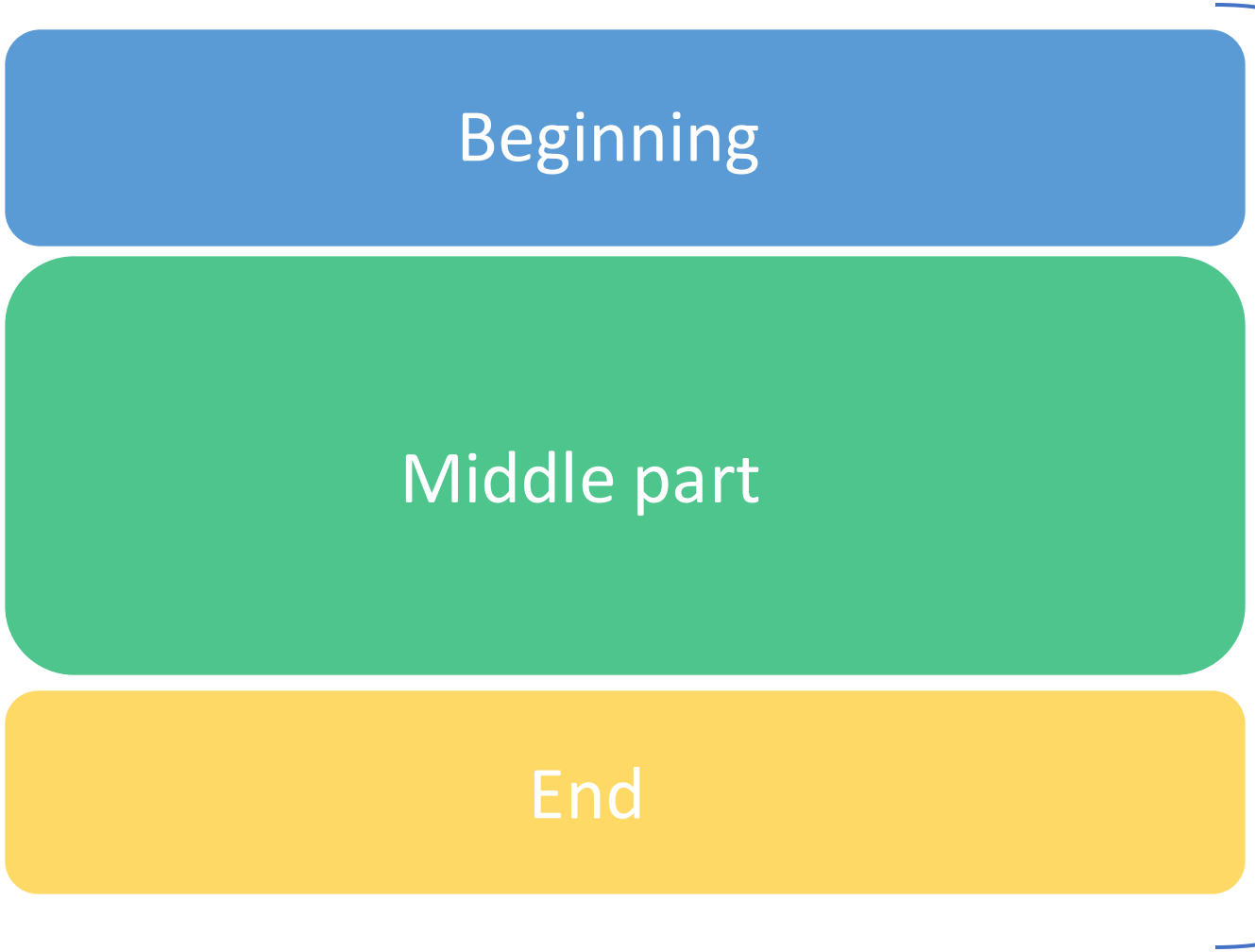
Discussion (+- 20 mins)

Storytelling:

Elements of a story



Basic structure of a story



Every story,

no matter how short,

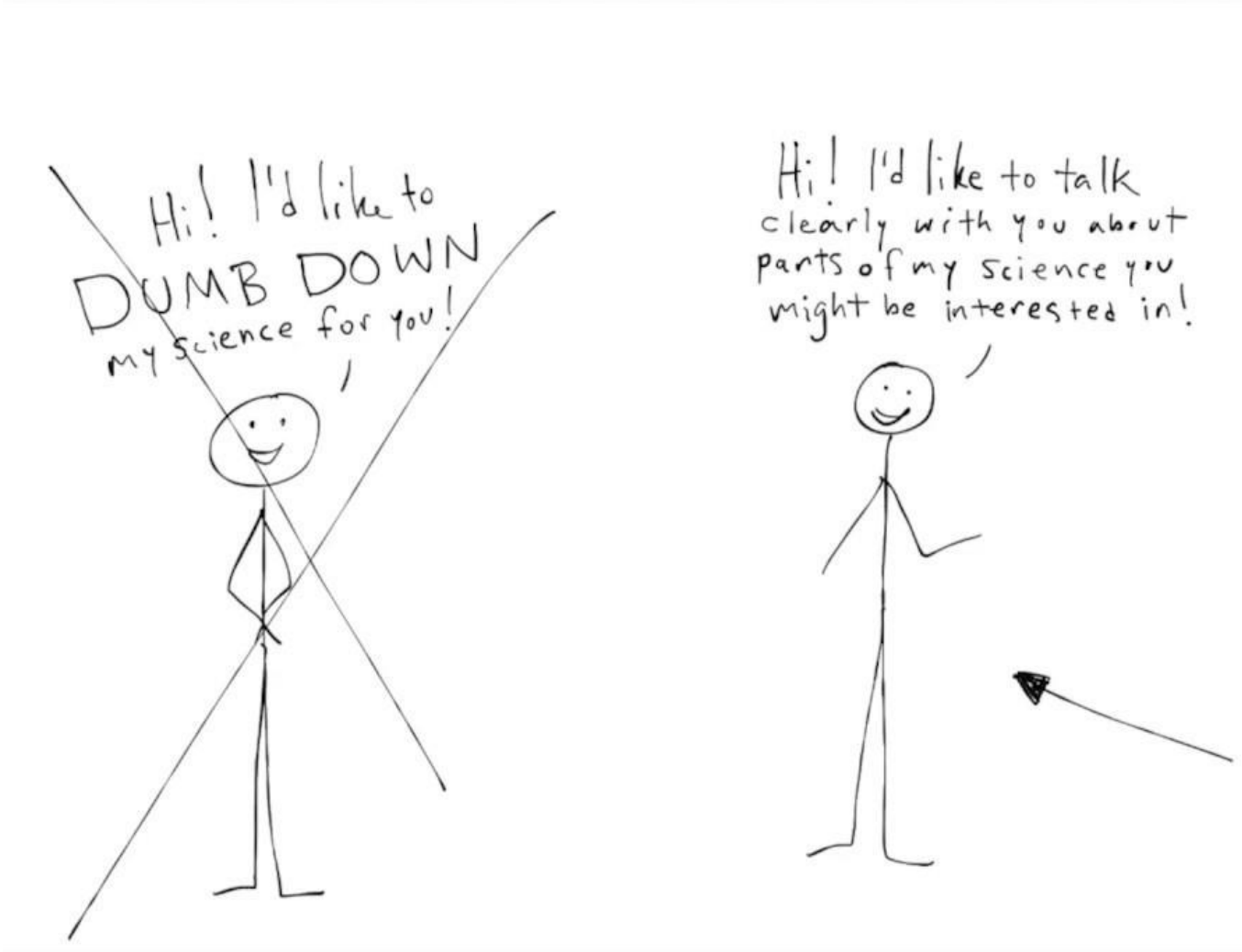
has these three basic parts.

Basic structure of a story

Beginning

- This is when you need to sketch the problem & grab the attention
- How? Some tricks:
  - use an anecdote, maybe even a joke
  - make it personal
  - show why it is relevant for your audience (“So what?”)
  - speak to their imagination
  - be descriptive, appeal to people’s senses
  - show your own enthusiasm!

A common misconception…

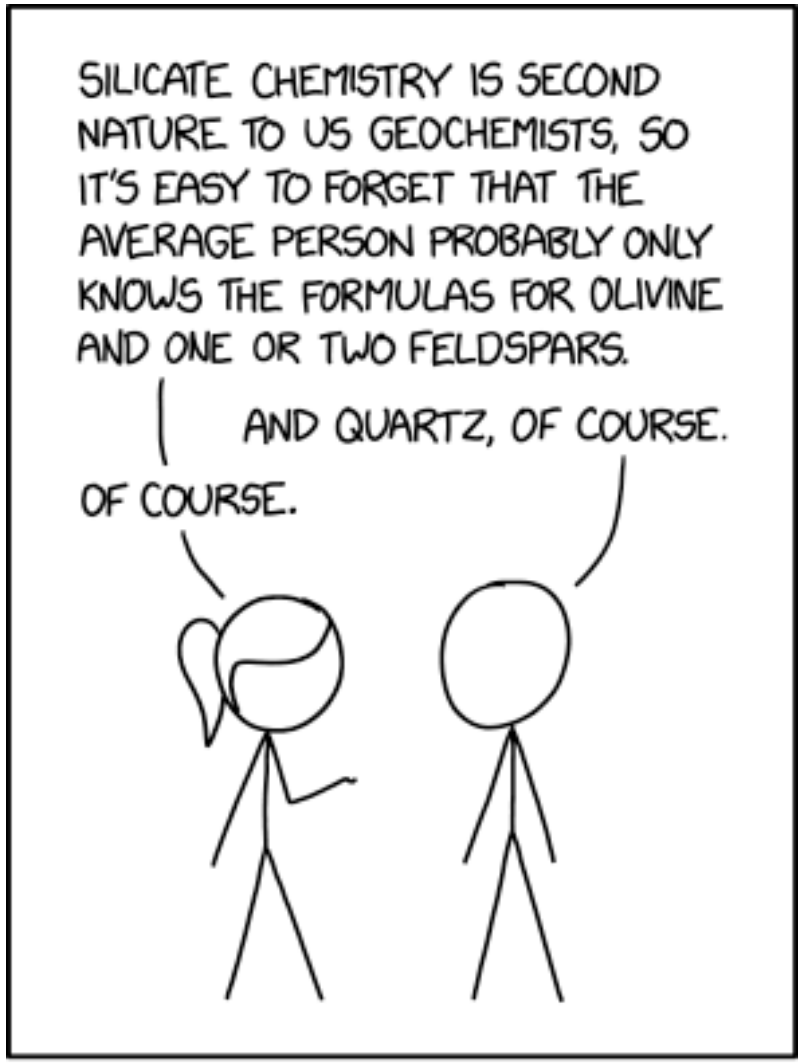


So: know your audience!

Basic structure of a story

Middle part

- Make the bridge to your own topic. You have just sketched the problem; so, what are you going to do about it?
- Keep your explanation short and simple
- Concepts are often more important than (detailed) methods
- Avoid jargon; use synonyms or explain it
- Metaphors can help (but don’t overdo it)
- Oversimplification can be an issue, but not for most scientists
- We tend to overestimate both the knowledge level & interest of others



EVEN WHEN THEY'RE TRYING TO COMPENSATE FOR IT, EXPERTS IN ANYTHING WILDLY OVERESTIMATE THE AVERAGE PERSON'S FAMILIARITY WITH THEIR FIELD.

Copyright: XKCD, source link: xkcd: Average Familiarity

Basic structure of a story

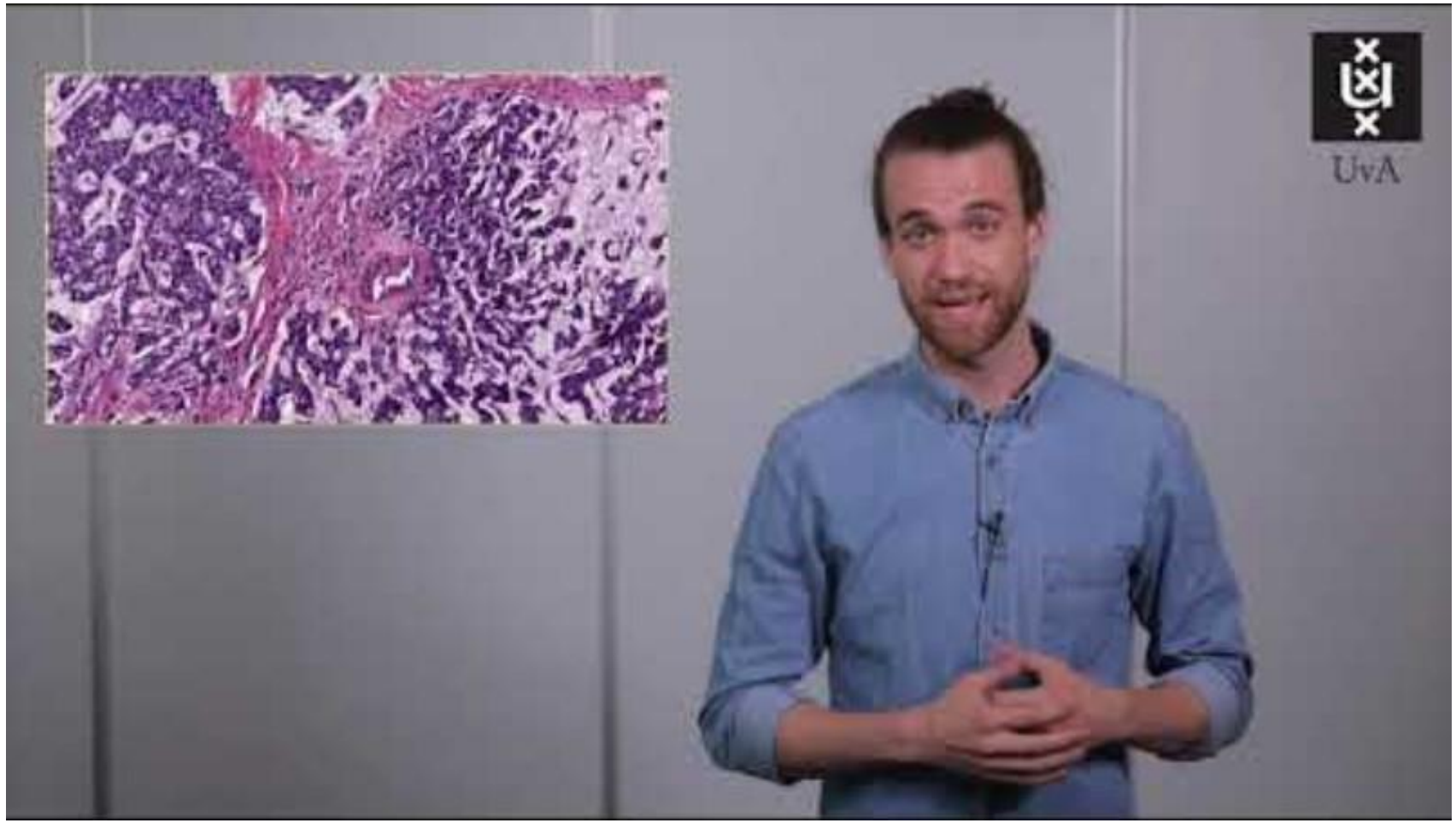
End

- Round up your story
- Try to refer to something you began with
- Add a take-home message
- Make sure your key message has been clear

The key message

- This is the one-sentence essence of your story
- It answers the question: why is this story relevant / what does it teach us?
- It helps to write it out, even if you don’t use it literally
- Every story should have only one key message
- The key message can overlap with the take home message, or the take home message is a simplified version

Example: UvA Three Minute Thesis Competition 2021



-> Yoni Schirris (IvI & NKI) won this edition

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_Se6Ag3e20E&t=18s

Do you want more examples of good pitches?

- Search for Three Minute Thesis (3MT) competition or for FameLab on YouTube






Let’s practice!

Assignment

- Pair up with a colleague – preferably not from your own group
- Choose a single topic
- Together, write 1 (partial) pitch, max: 2 minutes
- Focus on either the beginning or middle part, and pay attention to:
  - Relevance for your target audience (‘general public’)
  - Avoid jargon
  - A clear key message
  - Try and keep it short & simple

You can use (elements of) storytelling for…

- Public talks
- Professional talks
- Teaching / lectures
- Video / vlogging
- Blogs
- Social media
- Etc

(but not: news articles or press releases; they follow a different, fixed format)

Interested in more?

- IvI communications: Mieke van den Berg, m.m.vandenberg@uva.nl

- Science communication and Outreach at the UvA Faculty of Science: Science communication and outreach - Faculty of Science - University of Amsterdam

- Keep an eye out in the faculty & institute newsletters for more workshops:

✓Social Media for Scientists
✓Storytelling & Pitching
✓Popular Science Writing
✓Introduction to Dealing with News Media

Re: questions that popped up

There were a couple of questions during the workshop I could not really go into because we had very little time left. So here are my slightly more elaborate answers:

Regarding the short discussion about titles: I realize that my answer that pitches / talks that use storytelling can be with or without a title (and that the title may not matter that much) was not very satisfying. The point I intended to make was that this is very context-dependent. The context of a pitch or public talk is often very different from for instance talks at conferences. If you've made a video-pitch for YouTube: yes, you need a title (and it needs to be an appealing one). But on other platforms titles can be less important or even lacking. And if you've made a pitch / talk for a live event, such as a science café, titles may also be completely absent. It all depends on the exact setting, but the promotional text might just for instance say 'X from the University of Amsterdam will talk about quantum computing / deep fake videos / AI chatbots' (preceded or followed by sentences referring to the relevance of the topic). And in some settings, your talk might not even be accompanied by a presentation / slides.

That's why I always recommend to start with thinking about which parts of your research are most relevant for a specific audience, or think of ways in which it might become relevant for them in the future. Then see if you can come up with a clear one-sentence key message, and start building your talk around that, with -->

Re: questions that popped up

…emphasis on an appealing start because it is so import to immediately grab people's attention and prevent them from tuning out. Depending on the platform/setting and the importance of titles on that exact platform, coming up with a good title is often a later step or even one you can skip.

Regarding my use of the term "the expert" (and "the hero of the story"): this should not be seen too literally & is also very context-dependent. I am fully aware that not many people would say they are *the* expert. (Most) people with scientific training will be even less inclined to do so, since we tend to be very aware of all the things we don't know. But if you are giving a talk about your research topic to a room full of people without a scientific background, or from a very different scientific field, then yes: your knowledge level is far higher than theirs, and in that specific room and at that time you are – in the eyes of the people listening to you – the expert. Also, in the setting of storytelling jargon: since in the context of the story you are the one trying to solve a certain problem, you are "the hero" of that story who defeats all the dragons (the main problem & everything working against you along the way).