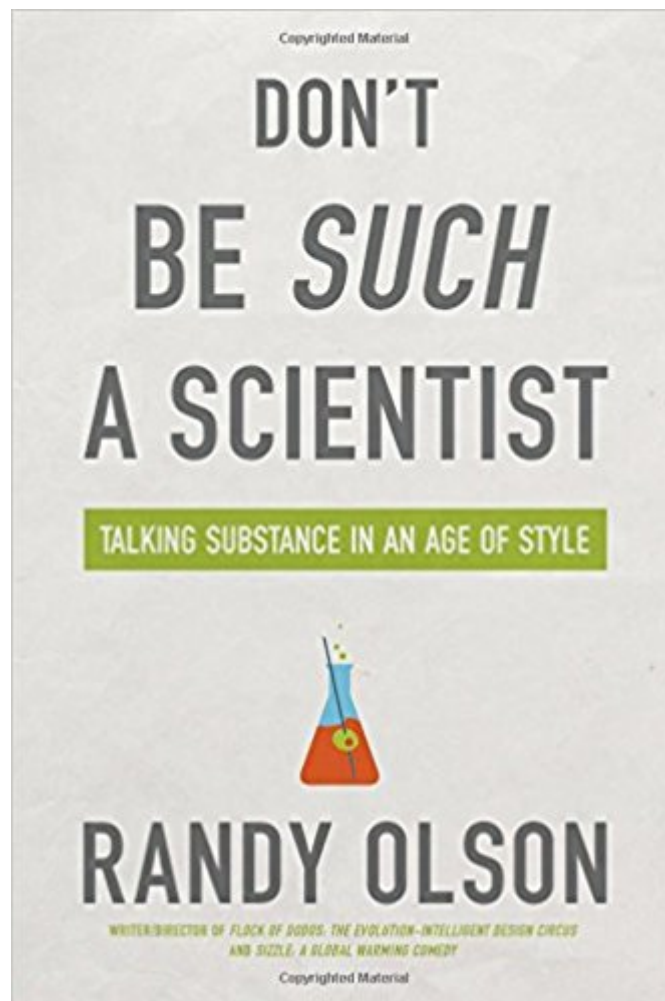




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Don't Be Such A Scientist: Talking Substance In An Age Of Style



Synopsis

"You think too much! You mother F@#\$%&* think too much! You're nothing but an arrogant, pointy-headed intellectual. I want you out of my classroom and off the premises in five minutes or I'm calling the police and having you arrested for trespassing." Hollywood acting teacher to Randy Olson, former scientist After nearly a decade on the defensive, the world of science is about to be restored to its rightful place. But is the American public really ready for science? And is the world of science ready for the American public? Scientists wear ragged clothes, forget to comb their hair, and speak in a language that even they don't understand. Or so people think. Most scientists don't care how they are perceived, but in our media-dominated age, style points count. Enter Randy Olson. Fifteen years ago, Olson bid farewell to the science world and shipped off to Hollywood ready to change the world. With films like *Flock of Dodos: The Evolution-Intelligent Design Circus* (Tribeca '06, Showtime) and *Sizzle: A Global Warming Comedy* (Outfest '08), he has tried to bridge the cultural divide that has too often left science on the outside looking in. Now, in his first book, Olson, with a Harvard Ph.D. and formerly a tenured professor of marine biology at the University of New Hampshire, recounts the lessons from his own hilarious-and at times humiliating-evolution from science professor to Hollywood filmmaker. In *Don't Be Such a Scientist*, he shares the secrets of talking substance in an age of style. The key, he argues, is to stay true to the facts while tapping into something more primordial, more irrational, and ultimately more human. In a book enlivened by a profane acting teacher who made Olson realize that "nobody wants to watch you think," he offers up serious insights and poignant stories. You'll laugh, you may cry, and as a communicator you'll certainly learn the importance of not only knowing how to fulfill, but also how to arouse.

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Customer Reviews

In 1997, marine biologist Olson recognized that scientists needed better communications skills to address a growing backlash against "rational data-based science." Inspired by the "power of video," Olson gave up a tenured professorship and went to Hollywood to reach a broader audience through filmmaking. The crucial lesson he learned was how to tell a good story, a largely absent concern for scientists, who focus on accuracy rather than audience engagement. It was a lesson Olson learned the hard way, after his intelligent design documentary, *Flock of Dodos*, flopped for lack of a lively story line. By "starting with a quirky little tidbit" about his mother and the intelligent design lawyer she lives next to, Olson found the hook he was missing. Olson values motivation over education, looking to Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth* ("the most important and best-made piece of environmental media in history") for a hugely successful example of his principles in action. As if to prove all he's learned, Olson packs this highly entertaining book with more good stories than good advice, spurring readers to rethink their personal communication styles rather than ape Olson's example. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

"If you are a wildlife professional who has ever been faced with hunters not believing your data and questioning your management recommendations, or have had to deal with angry property-rights advocates questioning not only your results but your integrity, then *Don't Be Such a Scientist* should be on your professional reading list." (Wildlife Professional)"Don't Be Such a Scientist is a stinging critique, yet it's also a funny, heart-felt account of one scientist's efforts to make non-scientists care about the natural world." (Carl Zimmer, author of *Microcosm* and the award-winning science blog *The Loom*)

Not what I thought it was . . . but am very pleased. As a science teacher he's reminding me what really communicates and sometimes - "just the facts" is not what communicates.

The rating words "I love it", do not really reflect how I feel about this book. I did NOT love reading it. But, like some bitter tasting medicines, I think it has benefited me greatly. I am a scientist (with Ph.D., post-doc and everything). Many of the people I work with are also scientists. Most of us

probably went into science because it suited our innate interest in analysis and experimentation as a way to understand the universe. Any honest scientist will be able to give case after case in which the tools of science have forced him- or herself to abandon previously held opinions or beliefs. This trains us to respect the scientific method, quantitative and qualitative evidence, and to view intuition and emotional responses with distrust. It is probably human nature to think that others think and work the way we do. Thus many scientists are really mystified that homeopathy, creationism and the like remain unvanquished, and science-sounding arguments are being used to argue against vaccination (perhaps the greatest benefit-to-cost ratio of any human endeavor)! Because of our value system, scientists (including me) tend to think that getting that additional piece of support for the mainstream science ideas will make a difference in how everyone views the science. However, a very little thought reveals that this is probably not a good approach. After all, most of the pieces of evidence that are still bandied about by modern creationists (including "intelligent design") were actually disposed of by Darwin. (There are things that Darwin got wrong, and there has certainly been a lot of biology discovered since then, but the evidence obtained since then has verified the truth of common descent and of natural selection being an important [though not the only] driving force of change through time.) The common approach yields yet more evidence that convinces other scientists but not the general public. Randy Olsen makes the (somewhat bitter) suggestion that scientists should spend less effort gathering the evidence itself and more effort in "selling" its value. What hit me the hardest was his analysis of the Pew Oceans Commission report which was a geek's dream full of careful analysis and topical points. The Commission spent less than 3% of its budget on distribution and marketing. In contrast the movie Napoleon Dynamite, released in the same year, spent 96% of its budget on distribution and marketing. Is it any wonder that everyone has heard about the movie, but hardly anyone about the much more important Pew Oceans report? Olson's chapter titles give an overview of his arguments and include "Don't Be So Cerebral", "Don't Be So Literal Minded", "Don't Be Such a Poor Storyteller" and "Don't Be So Unlikeable". Any good scientist will be really conflicted reading this. Olson's recommendations go against most everything our training stands for. Certainly being cerebral and literal minded and not being overly influenced by a good story are important to finding science truths. But having a cadre of knowledgeable scientists who are ineffective at communicating these ideas outside of their community does not benefit society very much. This is not a particularly scholarly book, and it will not take long to read. But its point is very important. I suspect that the world would be a better place if all scientists read this once a year, even if there are parts that are very uncomfortable. It would also be a book that laypersons who are interested in science could read to get a glimpse of the values of

scientists that can prevent them from being effective advocates of their positions.

I've thought back to this book over and over again since I've read it. Some of its points have been proven to me quite dramatically such as the point in the book where he talks about how a scientist could get up in front of a crowd of scientists in a clown suit, give a serious talk and the audience would take him seriously, but if it was a crowd of the general public they would never get past the clown suit. I actually watched a man give a lecture on organic chemistry wearing an angel suit since reading this, and it is very true. That, of course, isn't the main point of the book. This book is arranged how scientists arrange formal papers with figures and charts and whatnot appropriately inserted and referred to. It is a book built for a scientist, trying to give good advice for how to get your ideas heard outside of the scientific community and essentially how to change the perception of the sciences in the world today. The book gets major points for content, the only reason that it is four stars and not five is that some of the language wasn't as flowing as it could have been and some places could have used greater depth. Still worth it in my opinion. I wouldn't have finished it if I thought it was a waste of time.

Let me try to apply one of the suggestions in *Don't Be Such a Scientist* and practice a little concision: I love this book. I devoured it in one evening. Whew. Now, I can go back to my normal science mode. Randy Olson has been working in Hollywood for over a decade, but he's still one of us. He gets what being an academic scientist does to you: you become literal, critical, and absolutely focused on destroying error - and it never goes away. He gets us. But he also gets how other people see us, and Olson has a message for us, his former colleagues: For other people, it's not just about the data, guys. Olson isn't the first person to say that persuading non-scientists about the truth of things requires more persuasion than just evidence. This has not been a popular message, which have been characterized as weak-kneed capitulation, compromising the truth. For that reason, Olson will probably face his strongest criticism for suggesting that scientists not be unlikeable. It sounds a lot like admonitions of other writers never to offend, which has generated a growling response that there are some people that we scientists want to offend: the people who deal out lies, errors, and untruths. Olson has not cracked that hard problem: how to communicate with those nice people who are just like you and me, except for a few beliefs that are divorced from reality. You know the ones: the creationists, the climate change deniers, the anti-vaccine campaigners, the moon landing conspiracy theorists, the birthers, and so on. Olson's tips and suggestions won't matter when dealing with those people, but that's not Olson's book. It's a book

that somebody needs to write - badly - but Olson's approach shouldn't be dismissed because of that. He's pointing out that when you launch a full out assault on your enemies, you risk inflicting a lot of casualties on people who might have been on side. Part of what convinced that Olson is on the right track were uncomfortable moments reading this book when you recognize yourself, and think, "Oh, damn, he's right." For instance, Olson talks about how being an academic means being critical. We academics forget that even honest and correct criticism can be very deflating. Have you ever walked out of a movie that you loved, and you're replaying some of those favourite moments and lines in your head... and one of the people you're with points out something that's completely illogical? Do you happily respond to that honest and correct criticism, "Wow, I'm so glad you pointed that out!" If so, you're a better person than me, because my response was an irritated, "That's not the point." (For me, that movie was *Edward Scissorhands*.) And yet, we scientists are routinely praised for pointing out those annoying little untruths. On the very day I received my copy of Olson's book, one of my blog posts was picked as an editor's choice specifically because it was critical. On that note, I don't think it's any accident that the words highlighted in the blurbs on the back are the ones that say how critical this book is. After all, this book is aimed at scientists and academics, so if you want their respect, you've got to show them that you're criticizing! In fact, the tone here is very amiable and affable. The most critical sections of the book seem more exasperated than stinging. On a similar note, Olson also talks about how scientists are extremely literal. Here again, you don't have to look far. The new film *Creation* is starting to get reviews, and here's a snippet from a review by Eugenie Scott: "As someone with a stake in how the public understands evolution and it's most famous proponent, the bottom line for me was that the science be presented accurately. The second was that the story of Darwin's life be presented accurately." Her bottom line is not whether the movie has a good story, is emotionally powerful, well acted, or any of the other dozens of things that most people look for in a movie. Her bottom line is accuracy. Such a scientist. For many, looking for that first is missing the point of why they watch a movie. Finally, Olson has something in common with Adam Savage. It's not just that they do science-y stuff on film. MythBusters host Savage was quoted as saying recently: "I realized that my humiliation and good TV go hand in hand." Olson is not afraid to make a point at his own expense. *Don't Be Such a Scientist* starts with Olson on the receiving end of a truly terrifying bawling out by an acting teacher. Those four pages alone are near worth the price of admission, but it's not the lowest or most embarrassing moment for Olson in the book. This is self deprecation taken to a new high, and it's an illustration of one of Olson's key tactics for communication: don't "rise above," as he puts it. In other words, don't be high and mighty. Audiences tend not to like such people. I'm teaching a class on

biological writing this semester, and I hope I can bring some of the issues Olson raises into the class. Don't Be Such a Scientist is a rich source of ideas, and I'll be riffing off them for some time to come.

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