Science & Technology

# No-Spin Zone

How to talk when we talk about science.

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How do you convince a skeptic that climate change is real? Or persuade a creationist that humans share a common ancestor with chimpanzees? "What we try to do in this class," said Claudia Dreifus, a veteran correspondent for the *New York Times*, "is teach scientists, or scientists-to-be, the basics of journalism, so that they can communicate their own science to the world." But on this spring evening, the class, Writing About Global Science for the International Media, offered by the School of Professional Studies, had a twist: the lesson was how *not* to talk about science.

Dreifus's guest was Cornelia Dean, the former science editor of the *Times*. Dean had just published a book, *Making Sense of Science: Separating Substance from Spin*, which seeks to help nonscientists evaluate scientific claims.

One sign of spin is a posture of certitude. "We can't say in science that something is *true*," Dean said. What we can say is that there is "no credible challenge" to a theory.

Dean suggested that people often misunderstand the scientific method. "If you take a chem lab or a physics lab in high school, you're typically given ingredients and a set of instructions for your so-called experiment, whose outcome is known in advance," said Dean. "Nothing could be more antithetical to the spirit of scientific inquiry." Rather, science "is filled with blind alleys, bad ideas, failed projects. But we don't describe it that way."

As a result, many people see science as infallible, so that when new evidence comes along and shakes old assumptions — which is how science works — they can lose faith in the whole enterprise.

A student raised her hand. She had recently interviewed a climate scientist, who told her that there are people who, “no matter what you say, no matter how much you try to convince them otherwise,” won’t accept the evidence that the planet is warming. How, as a journalist, the student wanted to know, did Dean approach people like that?

“You’re not there to persuade people,” Dean said. “You’re there to give them information.”

Worth remembering for your next assignment — or family barbecue.

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