Scientists speak a strange and intricate language that is often very difficult for nonscientists to comprehend. To complicate matters, each field of science has its own unique dialect. Scientists can even have a hard time understanding each other.

And yet it is very important for the general public to understand scientific discoveries and how they relate to health. However, conveying information about science to general audiences clearly, simply, and accurately is not an easy task.

As a graduate student in pharmacology, I do understand science. I also love to write. So I have sought to become a translator of science. At first, I thought science writing for the general public would be a walk in the park. Well, it hasn’t been all that easy.

Pathways: About two years ago, I approached the editors of Dartmouth Medicine and told them of my desire to write for the magazine. They were kind enough to offer me an assignment. My first article was to be about research on cell-signaling pathways, work conducted by a principal investigator in my department. I had done a research rotation in his lab and knew him and the science well. So that first interview was pretty easy for me. And the interviewee was articulate, so I ended up with a lot of quotable material.

However, as I started to write the article, I found it very difficult to tell the whole story in only 500 words. After spending countless hours rewriting and editing and rewriting again, I thought I had done a decent job explaining the work. Since it was my first science article for nonscientists, and my first article for Dartmouth Medicine, I e-mailed my draft to a couple of friends to get their reactions.

The feedback was not so good. One friend was an accountant and the other was an attorney, so they were intelligent, well-informed individuals. Yet they couldn’t understand the science I was describing. I had written like a scientist, not like a science writer. I had failed to translate it into a story for the general public. A mistake at any point along the way can result in either losing the significance of the finding or explaining to readers the excitement of science as well.

My next assignment involved interviewing a scientist I’d never met, someone who conducted research in a field outside my own. This article proved even more difficult than the first one. Not only did I not understand the science fully, but I made the mistake of telling the interviewee that I was a scientist myself. “Ooohhh,” he said. “Well, then, I guess I don’t have to water it down so much.”

I have sought to become a translator of science. At first I thought it would be a walk in the park, but it hasn’t been easy.

Lost in translation?

By Kristen Garner

The Student Notebook essay offers insight into the activities or opinions of students and trainees. Kristen Garner, a Ph.D. student in DMS’s Pharmacology and Toxicology Program, was an editorial intern at Dartmouth Medicine in 2005 and has continued to write for the magazine. She is also a member of the magazine’s Editorial Board.