GRADUATE JOURNAL

The final straight

I did a crazy thing this week. I signed up to run a half-marathon in four months' time. Me, a complete novice. Someone who hates running. Why? Because, crazy as I am, I love a challenge. They say running is all about mental discipline. It's just as well, because it's not the only race I'll be running in the next few months. I'm also entering the final straight of my PhD.

At this stage, the end is in sight. But getting there is still going to be a slog. The view is rather daunting, but I know I have to keep a cool head and take one step at a time.

In truth it's an exciting period in my PhD, a time of consolidation. Things are supposed to come together as a cohesive whole, although it sometimes feels like a frenzied rush. Will the experiment deliver enough data by the time I have to submit? I don't know, but that's the unpredictability of research. It doesn't always fit to a neat timetable and I may have to adapt, depending on what happens. At the same time I'm faced with major career decisions.

I think you have to trust that it will be all right. Writing up is a test of many things, chiefly patience, wits and sanity. I'm in for the long haul. It's too late to turn back now, but I believe it will be worth it when I cross that finishing line. ■

Amber Jenkins is a graduate student in particle physics at Imperial College, London, doing thesis research at Fermilab in Batavia, Illinois.

NUTS & BOLTS

Introductory matters

With Deb Koen
Careers consultant

You only have one chance, as the saying goes, to make a good first impression. Because their work is so complex, most scientists could use a little help in simplifying their message when introducing themselves and describing their research.

Scientists often find themselves called on to work with peers in other disciplines, as well as with non-scientists in business or administration, and with the general public. To the uninitiated, detailed descriptions of your work may be incomprehensible.

Avoid the 'blah, blah, blah' syndrome by working on an introduction that is concise and memorable. The ability to highlight yourself and your work in an introduction can lead to job offers, funding and generally more engaged conversations.

Starting with your name, make sure your introduction is heard and understood. If it's a long or unusual name, you may have to offer a clue to help the listener remember it. For example, "Karin Smith: that's pronounced Karin, like 'car in the garage'." Repetition also helps, as in "Good afternoon. My name is Joseph. Joseph Lonnergon."

Once past the name, you are on to what you do: a brief, understandable and memorable description. Here, think 'talent show'. Focus on a skill (talent) and an example of it (show). Mention something you have just completed or are involved in now, such as a project or study.

Take an example from last week's *Naturejobs* (see *Nature* **429,** 484–485; 2004). Virologist John Alderete might introduce himself in the following way: "Hi, I'm John. John Alderete. I'm co-founder of a biotech start-up that recently created a test for a sexually transmitted disease and took it through to approval by the Food and Drug Administration." Repeating the first name will help the listener remember, and the 'talent show' statement is concise yet meaningful.

Although this approach may initially strike you as contrived, you will be sold once you experience the resulting improvement in communication. A clear and concise introduction of yourself goes a long way in opening the door to more meaningful conversation. ■

Deb Koen is vice-president of Career Development Services and a columnist for *The Wall Street Journal*'s CareerJournal.com.

MOVERS

Andre Pernet, president, Quark Biotech, Fremont, California

Andre Pernet had a dual education in science and business. The biochemist, who last year took over as president of Quark Biotech in Fremont, California, earned his MBA and PhD more or less at the same time. Since then he has put his skills to good use, carving a career path that has taken him from the lab bench to the corporate boardroom.

Most of this transition took place at Abbott Laboratories in Montreal, Canada, and Chicago, Illinois, where he worked for 26 years. But his abilities — and his mettle — were tested when he became chief executive of Genset, a French biotech firm near Paris.

When he arrived in 2000, he found a company that had several divisions doing interesting science. But the goals of many of these sections bore scant resemblance to the core technology of the company of gene and protein identification. As Genset had yet to bring a product to market, the company was losing money.

To turn the situation around, Pernet sought buyers for those interesting but unprofitable components. "In the end we had a company that was coherent and had a lower cash-burn rate," he says.

But that experience was double-edged. "Being able to transform the company into something that is viable and successful is the most exciting part of the job," Pernet says. But it also meant laying off people, a process that Pernet describes as "not so fun — but you've got to do it".

Pernet says that being involved in different phases of drug development has taught him how the whole business works. In his early years at Abbott, his main goal was to create chemicals with different but specific properties. As he rose through the ranks there, he learned how to manage the increased complexity of trials that involve human subjects.

And first at Genset and now at Quark, he says that communication skills are most important — how to get diverse teams of people to talk about basic and clinical problems with the aim of achieving specific business goals.

Quark is currently making a loss, but Pernet hopes that, with good communication skills, he can help turn it into a profitable company. The business lessons he learned at Genset should make that transformation easier for him. ■

CV

2000–02: Chief executive, Genset, Evry, France
1973–99: Abbott Laboratories, Montreal, Canada, and Chicago, Illinois (joined as a research chemist, rising to divisional vice-president, worldwide development of pharmaceuticals in 1992)
1973: MBA, McGill University, Montreal, Canada
1973: PhD in chemistry, University of Montreal, Canada