

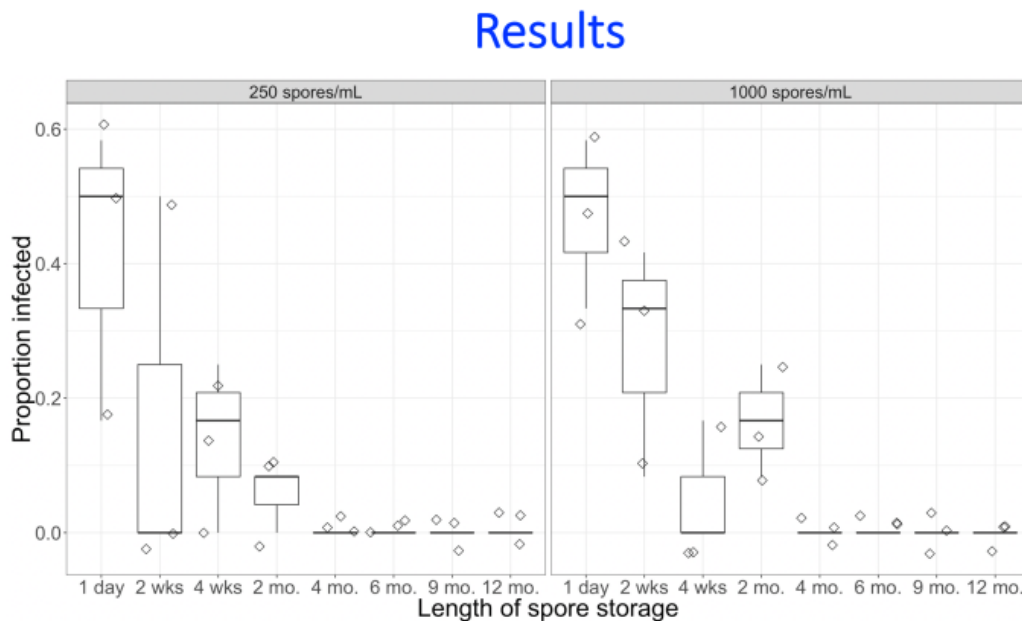
## Put your take home message at the top of your slides!

 Meghan Duffy

8 hours ago

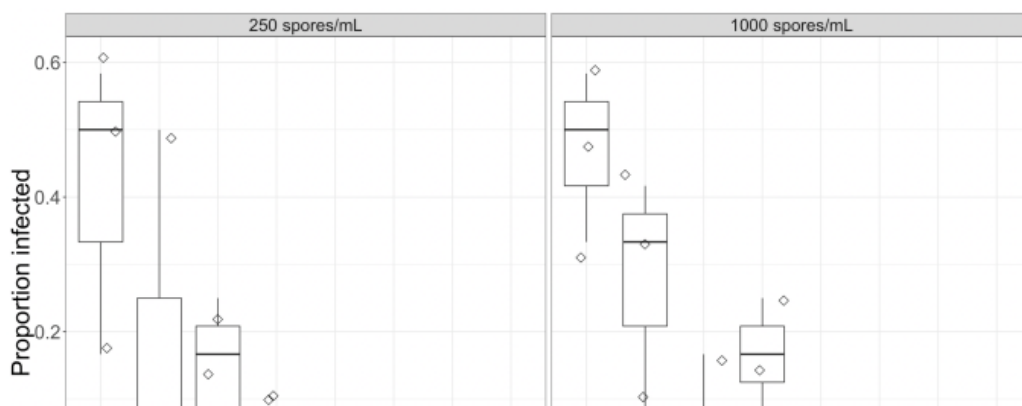
Imagine you're sitting in a talk. It's Thursday morning at the ESA meeting and your brain is a little fried from sitting in lots of talks all week. You momentarily zone out, then try to turn your attention back to the talk. Which of these would be most useful to see on the slide as you tune back in?

Option 1:



Option 2:

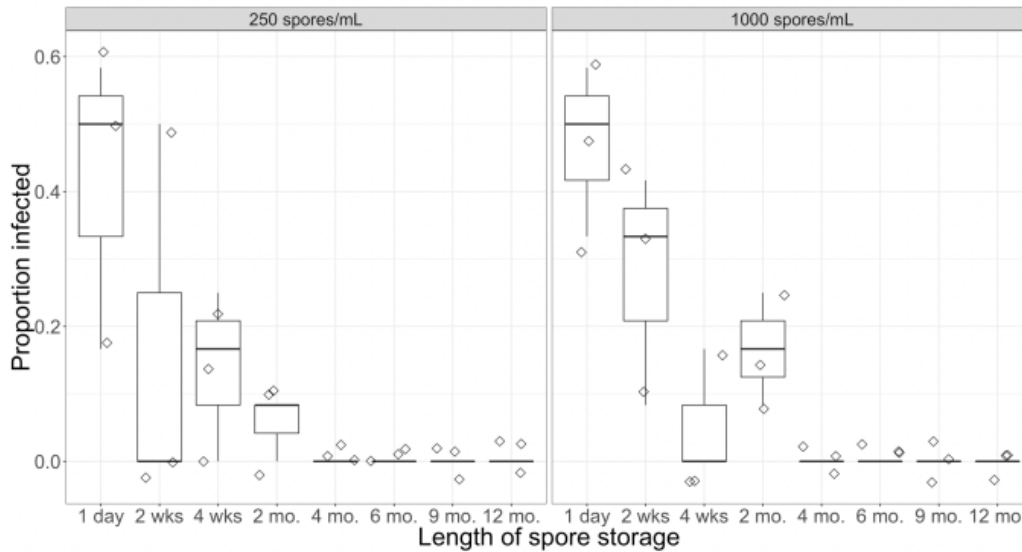
**Does spore infectivity change during storage in fridge?**





Option 3:

## Spores rapidly lose infectivity when stored in fridge



You chose option 3, right? (If you are curious about the data, you can read a [preprint here](#).)

Maybe you aren't always giving a talk on Thursday morning during a jam-packed meeting, but there will always be people in your audience who are tired or get distracted. **Make life easier for your audience by putting your take home message for each slide at the top!**

Or, to quote Stanley Dodson\*: “Make your top line your bottom line!”

This advice is similar to [my earlier post](#) asking writers to focus on their biological results and to have the topic sentences of the results section tell the biological story.

I think this is most important for the results section but, really, for all sections of a talk, it's kind of a waste to have the header say “Introduction” or “Results” or something along those lines. Instead, tell me the key thing you want me to take away from that slide.

What if you can't come up with a key take home message for a slide? This might be a sign that you are trying to do too much with one slide – in general, you can get away with

more complex figures in a paper than in a talk, so you might need to break things up for a talk. It might also be a sign that you need to spend more time thinking about your message.

What should you do if you can't figure out your message? I suggest trying out the [half-life activity](#) developed by Elyse Aurbach and colleagues. As they note, all communication (including scientific presentations) requires communicating your core message with appropriate framing and focus, yet it can sometimes be challenging to identify the core message. Their half-life activity helps you do just that. The general idea is to first take 60 seconds to present your message, then immediately start over and try it in 30 seconds, then immediately do it again in 15 seconds and then 8 seconds. If you are struggling to figure out the message you want to convey on a particular slide, try half life-ing it!

In short: use the top line of your slides to tell me the key message you want me to take away from that slide. If you are struggling to identify that message, or you have one but it's too long or complicated, spend time thinking about how to distill your message.

\*It's possible Stanley was quoting someone else. He led a course while I was a postdoc at Wisconsin that related to how to give presentations. I wasn't involved in it, but I remember Stanley and various people who took the course saying this over and over!

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