Evidence suggests that spatial skills are highly malleable and that training in spatial thinking is effective, durable, and transferrable. Understanding how meteorologists employ spatial skills in the forecasting process has implications for operational weather forecasting and meteorology education. This study began with exploratory research that identified mental animation and disembedding as key spatial skills used in weather forecasting. A follow-on pilot study tested the instruments, collected think-aloud data and found a correlation between spatial skills and forecasting. The complete study, in progress, is investigating the effect of spatial thinking, working memory, expertise on forecast task performance.

**Background**

**Research questions:**
1. What are the primary spatial skills used by meteorologists?
2. How do experts and novices use spatial skills differently?

**Methods**

**Sample:** 25 undergraduate meteorology students, 12 graduate meteorology students and 56 professional meteorologists. N = 93.

**Data collection:** Survey data were collected at the annual meeting of the American Meteorological Society, January 2016, followed by online administration Spring 2016.

Participants were introduced to 6 spatial skills described in the literature and interacted with 9 charts from a weather event in 2015. Examples:

- Mental animation: Developing a plausible scenario of a sequence of events based on static information (e.g., which direction will the last turn go when the string is pulled?).

**Data**

- Memory
- Object Location
- Disembedding
- Mental Rotation
- Perspective Taking
- Spatial Ability

**Results**

- **Mental animation:** Yes: 95.7%, No: 4.3%
- **Mental rotation:** Yes: 90.2%, No: 9.8%

**Analysis**

- Analysis of verbal think-aloud data align with findings from the exploratory study: novice meteorologists made superficial interpretations of the plots without attempting to conceptualize spatial representations. Initial process models:
  - Novices: surface plot > 850 mb chart > 500 mb chart > 300 mb chart > base map
  - Experts: base map > 500 mb chart > 850 mb chart > surface chart > base map

**Ongoing through Fall 2017.**

**Potential Implications**

The purpose of this research is to understand the cognitive underpinnings of weather forecasting. This is motivated by a desire to improve atmospheric science education broadly and weather forecaster training specifically, including multiple operational meteorology forums and training pipelines. The overall goal is to improve student learning and the ongoing training of the current and future weather forecasting workforce.

**Notes**


We gratefully acknowledge our participants’ contribution to this research.