

How to Give Highly Effective Lectures—and Job Talks and Conference Presentations

Over the course of your academic career, you will give countless oral presentations: lectures, conference presentations, and, most important of all, job talks. Many of us find it excruciatingly painful to speak publicly. We feel nauseous. We can barely breathe. Our bodies tremble. We lose track of time, find it difficult to concentrate, and babble.

Public speaking is the world's most common phobia. Forty percent of Americans say that public speaking is their biggest fear. Many of us are more afraid of public speaking than we are of snakes, heights, spiders, the dark, enclosed spaces, or a root canal. As Jerry Seinfeld put it, at a funeral, most of us would prefer to be in the coffin than at the lectern delivering the eulogy.

Remember: Help is around the corner (in 302 Philosophy Hall) I'd be happy to meet with you to brainstorm and help you organize and practice your talk. I will gladly offer feedback and advice.

How to Give an Awful Talk

1. Make sure your audience can't see your face:

Do NOT read a script and fail to look the audience in the eye

2. Make sure your audience can't hear you:

Do NOT drone in a soft monotone

3. Make sure your audience worries about you--not your presentation:

Do NOT act flustered and confused or display nervous tics or distracting mannerisms.

4. Make sure you bore the audience to tears:

Do NOT give a contentless and rambling presentation

Why Do Good People Give Bad Talks?

1. Because they're nervous

It's stage fright: people hide behind their sheets of paper

2. Because they misunderstand what a talk is

It's a presentation and a performance.
It's not the reading of a journal article.
It needs to be interesting and entertaining.

3. Because they try to wing it.

4. Because they are imitating a mentor—who has 30 years of experience



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To arrange a one-on-one consultation, contact:

Steven Mintz
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7 Rules of Thumb

It is better to:

1. Talk than read
2. Stand than sit
3. Move than stand still
4. Vary your voice's pitch than speak in a monotone
5. Speak loudly facing your audience rather than mumble and speak into your notes or blackboard
6. Use an outline and visual aids than present without them
7. Provide your listeners with a roadmap than start without an overview

Preparing Your Talk

1. *Generate a lot of ideas and then cut away the extraneous information*

Ask yourself: What are the questions you are most often asked about your research?

2. *Prioritize and organize your main points.*

Arrange and outline your main points in a logical order.

3. *Consider turning your research into a story.*

The most common way to present one's research is to give it in the form of a research report. You identify a research question, a hypothesis, your methods, your findings, and your conclusions.

I want to suggest an alternative. Present your research as a story. Stories build rapport, entertain, and teach. By conceptualizing your talk as a story, you can arouse your audience's curiosity and connect yourself to your listeners.

Perhaps the best story to tell is how your research is like a quest. It lets your audience know why your research matters to you and why it is meaningful and significant.

- Explain why did you decided to study this topic.
- Describe the struggles and difficulties you encountered.
- Tell your audience about the discoveries that surprised you.
- Describe the "ah hah!" moment when you suddenly understood your work's significance
- Conclude by telling your audience what you discovered and why it is significant.

The Secrets of Effective Job Talks

Rhetoricians say that public speaking, at its best, is conversational. Take into account the needs of your listeners.

In general, an audience only captures 20 to 40 percent of a lecture's main ideas. After three weeks, most students can remember less than 10 percent of a lecture's main ideas. What, then, can you do to ensure that your audience remembers what you want to convey?

There are three phases in the learning process

- First, listeners decide what to attend to.

Therefore you need to capture the audience's attention and retain their attention.

- Second, listeners need to organize the materials into a mental pattern or structure.

The more you can provide your audience with a framework for understanding the material, the easier it is for them to assimilate and process the ideas.

- Third, listeners must move this information into long-term memory

The audience needs to rehearse the new information and integrate it into a framework of knowledge.

What does this mean in practice?

1. *A talk is not a journal article or a book chapter.*

Listeners can't process as much information as readers.
Listeners have difficulty sustaining attention or retaining information.
In short, you need to translate your written text into an oral presentation.

2. *The first 30 seconds have the most impact.*

Begin with a bang. Listeners tend to remember what they hear first and last. During the first 30 seconds, you need to connect with your audience, arouse their interest, place your work in a larger context, and preview what is to follow.

- Begin with a surprising statistic, a startling statement, a vivid anecdote, a rhetorical question, or a provocative quotation.
- Or explain to them why they “need to know” about your topic.
- And present your argument in a nutshell.

3. *Address the “So What” Question*

Explain why listeners need to know about your topic—why they should care

4. *Offer a roadmap.*

- Share the structure of your talk with your listeners
- Direct your audience's attention to the most important points you are making
- Use verbal and visual cues to highlight major points and steps in your argument

5. *Maintain eye contact.*

Eye contact binds you to your audience. Don't go more than 10 seconds without making eye contact with your audience

6. *An effective talk has:*

- **Signposts:**
Have explicit transitions, internal summaries, and words that mark your progress—first, next, finally.
- **Reminders** of your central argument.
Let your audience know where you are going.
- **Breaks:**
Break up your talk every 10-15 minutes to revitalize the audience's attention.

7. *Use concrete examples and simple syntax.*

It's difficult to listen to abstractions for very long.
▪ Avoid long, complicated sentences and technical jargon and acronyms.

8. *Sustain audience engagement*

Don't simply read your talk. Engage and involve your audience.

Do not render your audience passive. Integrate active learning into your lecture.

1. *Organize your presentation with a high-order question that you will answer*

Ask:

- Initiating questions: Questions designed to provoke your listeners.
- Probing questions: Questions that encourage listeners to probe the material more deeply.
- Divergent questions: Questions that have more than one correct answer.

2. *Make the material relevant*

- Use examples from real life, current events, or popular culture
- Show how the information can be applied to real-world problems

3. *Pepper your talk with challenging questions.*

4. *In a classroom lecture, consider using a cooperative learning strategy known as “turn to your partner.”*

Stop lecturing and have students briefly discuss an issue.

5. *Consider making your lecture interactive.*

You might ask your audience to make a prediction or to comment on a controversy, a case study, or an illustration.

6. Use a visual or audio resource or a demonstration that the audience can respond to.

Delivering Your Talk

You don't have to be Woody Allen or Jerry Seinfeld to be a successful public speaker. Humor is great (though very difficult to bring off), but the keys to effective public speaking are clarity, organization, and substance. Public speaking is a skill you can learn.

1. Overcoming stage fright

How can you cope with shyness and anxiety? Here are five ways to conquer stage fright.

▪ **Physical activity helps**

Exercise reduces tension, releases nervous energy, and helps you concentrate. Go for a walk. Stretch. Inhale deeply, then exhale loudly.

▪ **Practice.**

An effective performance is grounded in an effective rehearsal.

▪ Practice in front of a mirror.

▪ Give a mock job talk in your department.

▪ Know your material well enough so that you don't have to read your notes word for word.

Rid yourself of distracting mannerisms, such as finger tapping, lip licking, playing with coins or jewelry, adjusting hair or clothing

▪ **Focus on your message and your performance, not on your emotions.**

▪ **Don't drink caffeine before your speak.**

It will make you hyper.

2. Prepare for the worst

Leave nothing to chance. Bulbs burn out. Adapters get lost. Have a backup plan: Multiple copies of your presentation; a one-page outline; and handouts.

3. Speak to your audience

Resist the temptation to simply read your presentation, or from your PowerPoint slides.

Begin by speaking to one person.

4. Be animated.

Your talk's success doesn't depend solely on its content. Non-verbal communication is also important. So be lively and enthusiastic.

Students can predict a teacher's ratings with significant accuracy after watching a 30-second silent video clip of the teacher at work. Students pick up on extraneous motion, facial expressions, fidgeting, utterances, and other nonverbal behaviors so subtle that the speaker is entirely unaware of them.

1. Maintain eye contact

2. Have an erect posture

3. Use appropriate movement and gestures

4. Use vocal special effects, including dramatic pauses, repetition, varying your pitch and volume

Visuals

Visuals can greatly enliven your talk and effectively and efficiently communicate complex information. Indeed, search committees often expect visuals.

But if poorly done, your visuals can weaken your talk. We've all sat through presentations that consist of endless screens of boring text. A speaker simply places his or her lecture notes on slides. The phrase "death by PowerPoint" comes to mind.

1. PowerPoint is not a teleprompter.

Don't read your slides. Instead, talk from your notes.

2. Put the visual into visuals.

- Avoid text-heavy slides.
- Ask yourself: How can listeners benefit from visuals? Are there ways that I can illustrate key concepts or arguments with images, graphs, charts, or video clips?

3. Remember the Zen of Presentation

- Less is more
- Limit the number of words on each slide
 - Don't show complete sentences and paragraphs
 - Use a bold, simple, and large font
 - Avoid busy backgrounds
 - Dump the bulleted lists

The presentation mantra is: Simplicity, clarity, brevity, elegance

- One slide, one idea
- Avoid extraneous information

4. Don't hand control over to PowerPoint

The B Key allows you to block out the screen. Keep the lights on.

5. You don't have to be linear

With ctrl + K you can add a hyperlink to another slide or another presentation or a website

6. Crunch your numbers

Consider their implications and sum up the conclusions on each slide.