

Public Speaking for Academic Economists

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Public speaking is a core skill for an academic

- Good ideas do not sell themselves.
- As soon as you are standing in front of a room full of people who do not know what you know, or believe what you believe, you are in sales and/or marketing.
- We became academics partially because we hate selling things.
- Too bad.

Know what your audience cares about

- You can sell ideas without being dishonest.
- You are selling your research, which presumably you believe in. It is not dishonest to try to explain to others why you believe in it.
- **You cannot sell ideas without understanding what your audience cares about and how they think.**
- What is convincing to you may not convince others. That's what makes this hard.
- That's also what makes the research community vet each other's ideas well. Yay science!

Your audience cares about themselves

- You have to convince your audience that what you're saying is relevant to them.
- Your presentation is not about you: what you wanted, what you thought, what you did.
- Your presentation is about them: what they want, what they think, what they did or might do.
- "People like to feel needed, like they are part of a conversation, and they hate having their time wasted." - Mike Monteiro

"You don't sell a house by talking about sheetrock.
You sell it by getting the buyer to picture
themselves in the neighborhood."

Mike Monteiro

Basics of Public Speaking

- Look at the audience, and talk to the audience.
- Be loud enough that they can hear you.
- Be slow enough that they can process what you say.
- If you can't say everything you need to say when you are talking slowly, you are trying to say too much.
- Use language they understand. If you must use jargon, explain it.

Basics of Public Speaking

- "Your first job is to inspire confidence." - Mike Monteiro
- Do not start with an apology!
- Do not pace around the room. It makes you look nervous and cuts you off from the audience.
- Move your body naturally, especially your hands – the way you would in a conversation with someone you care about, on a topic you care about.
- Do not stand in front of your slides.

Basics of Slides

- A slide should contain as little information as possible, conditional on it conveying your point at a glance.
- Never write anything on a slide the audience cannot read.
- Where possible, graphs > tables.
- For tables: never display irrelevant numbers. Not all numbers will be equally important, but there should be nothing extraneous.
- Slide tables will look different to paper tables.

Own The Room

- Take ownership of the room. You are responsible for what happens during your talk. This is your time.
- It does not matter that the audience is more accomplished than you. You have something to tell them.
- It does not matter if you make a fool of yourself. Commit.
- People will forgive committed foolishness. They will not forgive you for not taking the seminar - or their time - seriously.

How to take a question

- Questions are not a nuisance, they are why you are there.
- **Questions tell you what the audience cares about.**
- Don't interrupt or assume you know what someone will ask.
- Demonstrate "active listening".
- Avoid being dismissive: Figure out what is underneath the question and speak to that.
- Can say "I don't think we'll resolve this now, let's discuss offline" if you have tried to resolve a question twice already.

Questions are not requests for change

- This happens a lot in Brown Bags:

Audience Member: Why did you cluster at the state level?

Speaker: I can change it!

- The person who asks this wants you to explain your reasoning, not immediately capitulate.
- If you immediately capitulate it suggests you haven't thought about what you're doing.
- Counterpoint: they do not want your life story, they want a 1-sentence explanation of why you did the thing.

Don't get defensive

- You are not your work, and your work is not you. Criticism of the work is not criticism of you.
- Reacting defensively suggests that you think the work and the talk are about you.
- There is nothing your audience hates more than when you make things about you.
- If you cannot defend your idea without getting defensive, it is better to concede the point. Fine to say "I need to think about that."

Don't assume people know what you know...

- Grad students often vastly overestimate what the audience knows and how much information the audience can absorb.
- Much of what now seems obvious to you in the middle or end of your project is not obvious and actually has to be spelled out.
- You must give people the information they need to understand the results you will show them, and to see why the results matter.
- People must feel they understand your work well enough to critique it. They will not buy something if they feel they can't evaluate it. If they do not feel this, you are sunk.

...but don't try to show how hard you worked

- Really good ideas in economics are often obvious ex-post.
- But don't try to show how hard you worked. This is boring for the audience which makes them think you don't respect their time.
- The only way to manage this problem is to frame the talk correctly.
- If you can make the idea feel obvious now but remind the audience why it wasn't obvious before, they will buy the idea, and they will buy it from you.

Make contact with reality

- Present the work you have, not the work you wish you had.
- By the time you are standing in front of a room, the amount of work you have done is the exact right amount of work.
- **Nobody else knows what you wanted to get done but couldn't: that information is not in their minds. Do not put it there.**
- Brown bag seminars are a slight exception, but you should still be spending most of your time talking about what you have done or what your concrete plans are for the future.

Stay loose

- Confidence \neq perfection, omnipotence, etc.
- Expect to make a few dumb mistakes every presentation. Then when you fumble a question, you can think "I expected this."
- All ideas and all people are flawed. Sell on advantages, admit flaws where necessary.
- You can't control the audience nor the outcome of the talk. You can only control what you do. Do not attempt to micromanage reality.