


# How to give a bad talk

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It is crucial to know how to communicate your work by delivering an effective talk, but our training for doing so is limited, so it is a skill often learned by watching others – who sometimes do it badly.

Giving an effective talk is not easy and it took me many years of practice to become a good speaker. Here, I walk through some common misconceptions about presentations and offer my advice on how to fix them.

## Begin the preparations by putting some slides together

No! Slide making comes only after you have figured out what you want to say and how you want to say it. Spend considerable effort in thinking about who your audience is and the common background knowledge they have. Then think carefully about what the main point is that you would like to communicate, remembering that if you try to communicate too many points the audience will not retain any of them. Develop a ‘story’ by ordering your points – working backwards from the point you want to get across to the background required to build up to it – so that the audience has the best chance of understanding what you have to say. You can do all this in a text editor, on paper, by taking a walk and/or by talking it over with a science buddy, just as long as you do not think about slides yet. It is not procrastinating – this is the actual work.

## Your goal when giving a talk is to impress

No! Your goal is to explain to the audience a concept, a discovery, an insight – anything – just as long as you communicate some knowledge. Many scientific talks (say in conferences) are not clear – probably because the speaker is trying to impress rather than to explain – and so there is no way to understand even the general idea or the basic premise of the work. Make your talk as clear and as simple as possible by removing unnecessary details, no matter how proud you are of them, and use no more jargon than you must. An understandable talk is infinitely more impactful than an unclear one.

## The more slides you squeeze into your talk, the better

No! Each slide in the talk adds a cognitive burden for the listener, because it is one more thing they need to figure out. This is why you should have a very good basis for including each slide. Fully discuss the slides that you do include and limit the text on each slide to just the essential labels and information. Ask yourself whether each slide is crucial for your argument, and if not, remove it despite any sentimentality. For clarity, it is helpful if the title of each slide is a summary of its main point, written as a sentence. Memorize and practice the precise order of the slides so that you are in full control of them when speaking. Finally, remember that slides are just props to help you communicate your insight; they are not the talk themselves.

## It is fine if you run a little over your allotted time

No! Force yourself to practice the talk, word for word, many times. This helps you to ‘chew’ the text so that you get used to saying things in the simplest possible way. Practicing like this is the way for you to stick within the allotted time – as the audience stops listening when your time is up.

## Distractions help you to get the audience through the talk

No! As you are speaking, allow yourself to improvise because this makes things more engaging for the audience. However, you must try your best not to distract them with unrelated things – as they need to be engaged with your concept. Avoid too many jokes, unrelated stories, animation and jargon. Try to read the room to see whether your points are getting across. In particular, read the responses of the ‘sunflowers’ – those audience members making eye contact and listening closely.

## A questioner is an adversary – try your best to win the debate

No! Although answering questions may be a daunting aspect of giving a talk, this interaction is also the best place to make your point and, if done right, creates an atmosphere in which the audience gets to a higher level of understanding and satisfaction. Instead of viewing a questioner as an adversary, view them as providing you with important feedback and an opportunity to better explain your work. First, listen attentively to the question – without interrupting. This is very hard for some people, but you have to really force yourself to understand what exactly the question is. Next, repeat the question in your own words back to the questioner and audience, to show your understanding of it. And here is the magic part: as you are doing this, you will have the time to naturally begin to plan your answer. Start with a simple answer: “The answer is yes/no/I don’t know”. It is fine to say “I don’t know” as long as you follow up with a discussion mentioning related things that you do know that could help frame a hypothesized answer. Then finish by summarizing again: “So, the answer is yes/no/I don’t know”. Try to keep your response as succinct as possible, so you have time for other questions.

## Design your talk so that <30% of the audience understands it

No! Giving a talk should begin with you sincerely believing that you have something important to say. This notion makes it easier to realize that you owe it to the audience to present it clearly. It also helps you to overcome the jitters that come with presenting: you realize that the talk is not about you – it is about the audience, and your mission is to explain your important idea clearly to them.

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