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How To Give A Talk: Better Academic Speaking in a Nutshell

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The Awful Academic Talk

You've seen it a hundred times.

The speaker approaches the head of the room and sits down at the table (*You can't see him through the heads in front of you*). He begins to read from a paper, speaking in a soft monotone (*You can hardly hear - soon you are nodding off*). Sentences are long, complex, and filled with jargon. The speaker emphasizes complicated details (*You rapidly lose the thread of the talk*). With five minutes left in the session, the speaker suddenly looks at his watch. He announces - in apparent surprise - that he'll have to omit the most important points because time is running out. He shuffles papers, becoming flustered and confused (*You do to, if you are still awake*). He drones on. Fifteen minutes after the scheduled end of the talk, the host reminds the speaker to finish for the third time. The speaker trails off inconclusively and asks for questions (*Thin, polite applause from an audience relieved the experience is over finally rouses you from dreamland*).

Why do otherwise brilliant people give such soporific talks?

One reason is stage fright. It's easier to hide behind the armor of a written paper, which you have had plenty of time to think through, than simply to talk. This is a perfectly understandable reaction, and in some circumstances, it's still the best thing to do.

But a much more important reason is that this kind of boring, incomprehensible talk has somehow become part of academic culture. Graduate students may actually learn it from their professors. One reason this has happened is the dominance of written language in academic culture. Although writing and public speaking are very different arts, it has become acceptable to treat public speaking as a mere reading of a written text. Ironically, rhetoric - the skill of persuasive oral argumentation - is one of the most ancient academic disciplines, dating to Plato's and the like.

Stage fright is something everybody has to handle in their own way. But academic culture is something we can deliberately change. This article reviews the principles of academic public speaking, in hopes of contributing to long-term improvement of our norms, and to help you do better when you compete for the Robinson Prize.

Principles of Effective Talks

Any effective talk must do three things: communicate your arguments and ideas, persuade your audience they are true, and be interesting and entertaining. In our obsession with persuasive argumentation, academics sometimes forget about the third item on the list. Some people feel it follows automatically from the first two (it doesn't). Some even scoff at the goal itself. Perversely, we seem to have come to believe that if a talk is entertaining, it's probably not very deep.

These attitudes are seriously mistaken. It is impossible to communicate and persuade effectively without entertaining as well. Keeping your audience interested and involved - entertaining them is essential because in order to communicate your work and its value, you need their full attention.

Listening is hard work, especially at conferences, where audiences attend many talks over many hours. People need the speaker's help to maintain their focus. This is the true

meaning of "entertainment." In an academic talk, entertainment doesn't mean making your audience laugh or distracting them from their troubles. Instead, it's about helping them to stay focused on and interested in what you have to say.

The following suggestions as to organization, presentation style, and the use of visual aids are designed to help you give a better presentation. Please study them carefully - they are based on the experience of a large group of people, and can help you avoid giving yet another "Awful Academic Talk."

Content

The key to any good talk is its content. Without that, all the techniques discussed in this paper will do you no good. While a detailed discussion of research techniques is beyond the scope of our present discussion, remember that your audience will expect you to have mastered the material you are talking about. Make sure you have reviewed the relevant literature, and that you have read carefully the archival evidence your paper is based on.

Above all, make sure you have something new and interesting to say. While it's almost a certainty you find your topic interesting (you've just spent a lot of time researching it, after all), others may not be so fascinated. Make sure your paper is based on the part of your research that has the most relevance to the larger world of scholarship - that's the whole point of giving a paper at a conference, after all.

If you are unsure about what part of your work is of the most interest to other scholars, talk it over with your friends and colleagues. Having them review a draft of your paper can be of great help - pay attention to the sort of questions they ask. Above all, you should be able to answer the question "So what?" with a brief sentence or two, explaining why the wider world should care about your findings. If you can't answer that "So what?" question, it's probably a sign you need to do more thinking and perhaps more research.

However, don't let the need to master your material overwhelm you. Remember, you are almost certain to know more about the topic of your paper than anyone in the audience. It is your responsibility to communicate the importance and relevance of your work to them, so make sure you have something interesting to say before you open your mouth.

Organization

The single most important thing to remember about your presentation is that it is an oral, not a written one. This may seem a self evident statement, but you would be surprised at how many SHOT presenters simply write their remarks and then read them verbatim to the audience. This can create problems, for the act of reading is very different from the act of listening. A reader can go at his or her own pace, can re-read sections that are not clear, and can put aside the paper to look up words in a dictionary or think about a complex concept the author has presented.

A listener, on the other hand, does not have these options. Therefore, when you give an oral presentation, you must take this into account. Complicated sentence structures, complex arguments, or simply trying to cram too much information into a short presentation, are all things to be avoided.

At a SHOT conference, you will typically have around twenty to thirty minutes to make your presentation. This may seem like a long period of time, but it is not. For most people, getting across more than one idea in such a short time is very difficult - it is far better to concentrate on one story and do it well than to try to cover a wide variety of stories superficially. One very common thing that graduate students try to do is to present their entire dissertations this simply does not work. Selecting one chapter or one theme from your dissertation is much better - you can refer to the larger work in your opening remarks, and then focus on a more manageable chunk of material.

To sum up, avoid multiple topics or ideas, complicated language, and too much information in too short a time.

Now that we have discussed the things to avoid, here are some positive steps you can take to make your presentation better. The organization of an effective oral presentation is based on two factors: simplicity and repetition. By simplicity, we mean the focus on a single concept or bit of information that you want to get across to your audience. Before preparing your talk, think about what single idea or concept you want your audience to remember after the talk is over, and hopefully remember for years to come. Try to sum this up in a phrase or a short sentence - if what you are trying to get across can't be summed up so easily, it is likely too complicated a topic for a short talk, and you'll need to reconsider and simplify what you want to say.

It is important to note that simplicity and focus should not be confused with lack of sophistication. Concentrating on one topic does not mean you avoid using complicated arguments to support your point, that you avoid citing evidence, or that you neglect theoretical considerations. However, whatever you include in your talk needs to support your central argument, and you need to be sure you make that argument directly. Don't rely on the audience to make connections - do it for them, and point it out to them over and over again.

This leads us to the second key element of an effective oral Presentation: repetition. Unlike a written work, an oral presentation does not allow the listener to go back and refer to what was said previously. Therefore, it is essential in getting your main point across that you repeat that point several times so the audience remembers it. The American military uses a phrase that sums this up well: "Tell them what you are going to tell them, then tell them, and then tell them what you told them." This may seem to be overkill, but this technique dramatically improves the retention of information by the audience. Start your talk by giving the audience an overview of what you are going to say in outline form, then follow that outline, and then briefly review your most important points.

Above all, avoid saving your main point for the very end of your talk as a surprise. By that time, your audience will be tired and likely thinking about where the bathroom is or what's for lunch. The time to tell them your main point is at the beginning, when they are fresh and still most attentive - if you start by telling them what they need to know and you repeat that several times during the talk, by the time the end of your talk comes around you should have everyone in the room nodding their heads in agreement with you.

KEY CONCEPTS

- **Remember it's an Oral Presentation**
- **Keep it Simple**
- **Use Repetition**
- **Style**

One of the best ways of improving a presentation is to speak from notes or an outline, rather than a prepared text. By speaking in this way, you automatically make the language you use more simple and direct, and the audience will have an easier time understanding you. You are also less likely to fall into a sing-song or monotone form of delivery, putting the audience to sleep. Finally, and most importantly, you'll seem more confident and knowledgeable - anyone can read from a prepared text, but speaking from notes or an outline means you have really mastered your subject. Your audience will know that and subconsciously take you more seriously.

When you use an Outline or speak from notes be sure to keep track Of time. Take a watch with you to the podium and keep it in Plain view, or have a friend in the audience hold up cards to tell you how Much time You have left. It is helpful to mark on Your notes how long each part Of Your remarks should take, SO You know when to speed UP or slow

down. It is rude to exceed the time allotted, since it takes time away from other speakers and often makes the session chair do interesting things to make you stop talking. Don't worry about Stopping too soon - it almost never happens, and if it does, there will be more time for questions, and everyone Will be impressed with you for not babbling on past Your time limit.

The single most common **mistake** made by speakers is to spend too much time on introductory material, and then hurry through the remainder. This can be avoided by practicing Practice your talk carefully in advance, preferably in front of an audience. If your remarks do go too long in practice, carefully consider what you can leave out. It is usually best to simplify and leave out examples, with a brief explanation to the effect that the true story is more complicated and that You'll be happy to address the point during the question period. Most likely, no one will bring it up then, and you can discuss something else instead.

In general, speaking from notes is better than reading a prepared text. However, we do recognize that not everyone has experience with extemporaneous speaking, and may prefer to r Is comfortable particular, those for whom English is a second language. In written text an aid to richer and more sophisticate uage often find a their ideas. So, if you do decide to read from a prepared text, be sure it is written in the right style. You will find a more conversational, less formal choice of words will work best. Avoid long sentences with dependent clauses and parenthetical remarks, uncommon words, and long acronyms unless absolutely essential. if you are not a native English speaker, ask someone who is to look over your text and suggest corrections.

Whether you speak from notes or from a text, be sure to practice your talk in full at least once in front of an audience. If possible, have Yourself videotaped so you can review and improve your performance later. Try to make the situation as much like the conference as Possible - perhaps you have a departmental seminar or local historical society you can do your talk for. In any case, dress as you would dress for the SHOT conference, use all your visual aids and other supporting material, and stick to the time limit. This will help you make sure the talk is the right length, and that it is well organized. However, do not practice your talk too much, especially if it is a written text. Most people who are too familiar with their material read in a sing-song or otherwise monotonous fashion.

Just as important as good organization and a clear, informal verbal style is the body language you use while you speak. Remember that the audience will be watching you, and the gestures you make and the way you speak conveys as much to your audience as does. Keep the following suggestions in mind:

1) Stand rather than sit. People can see you better, and it puts you in a physically dominating position. This sounds politically incorrect, but in this context it isn't. Remember: You are the focus. The audience needs your help to maintain their attention. They want you to be in charge. By standing up you accept this invitation making both your job and theirs a little easier.

2) Move rather than stand still. It's easier to keep focused on someone who is moving than on a motionless talking head. Hand gestures are also good. It's possible to overuse these devices, of course. Simply crossing from one side of the room to another every three or four minutes is probably enough.

3) Speak loudly, clearly, and confidently, and vary the pitch of your voice. If you sound like you believe what you are saying, you are more likely to convince your audience. Focus on the lower end of your vocal range (the deepest pitch), since this will make you sound more authoritative (this can be especially important for women). Above all, avoid speaking in a monotone - it puts people to sleep.

4) Make eye contact with the audience. If this is anxiety-inducing, at least 'pretend to do this by casting your gaze to the back and sides of the room. Be careful not to ignore one side of the audience. Many speakers "side" unconsciously, looking always to the left or the right half, or only the front or the back of the room.

Finally, the single best way to become a better speaker is to emulate excellent speakers. Watch how they do things, and copy or adapt it for your own use. Above all, pay attention not just to what they say, but what they do: how they move, how they sound, how they structure their talks.

KEY CONCEPTS

- **Speak From Notes**
- **Move While You Speak**
- **Speak With Confidence and Clarity**
- **Make Eye Contact**

Supporting Materials

Visual aids have the power to make your presentation much more memorable and exciting for the audience. By using both oral and visual components, you reach different parts of the brain, and so help reinforce your message. We strongly urge you to use such aids. Most winners of the Robinson Prize have included visual materials in their presentations.

However, visual aids also have some pitfalls. When they go wrong, they can make you look like an idiot and detract from your performance. By observing the following guidelines, though, you can avoid the most common problems. Below is a discussion of the problems associated with the two most commonly used techniques: photographic slides and overheads.

Photographic slides provide good color and clarity, but problems with either the slide projector or the screen can create difficulties. First, be sure to get to the room well before your talk begins. Make sure the projector works, and run through ALL of your slides quickly to make sure they are in the proper orientation and that they do not jam in the machine, and that they are in focus. Be sure to use the same controller you will be using during your talk, and make sure it works properly. If the remote control provided does not work, ask a member of the audience to control the machine for you. Above all, avoid reversing to show a previous slide - if you want to show a slide twice, make a copy, since controllers most often malfunction when asked to reverse (don't ask why, that's just the way it is).

We recommend that you bring your own carousel slide tray with you - that way you can check the slides before you leave for the conference and make sure they are in the right order. The best type of tray is one of the "universal" type - it works with projectors of essentially all manufacturers. Use a tray that holds 80 slides in preference to one that holds 120 - the smaller capacity trays are less likely to jam. You should not be showing more than 80 slides in a thirty minute presentation anyway - a good guideline is no more than 2 slides per minute of presentation.

Jamming can also be a problem with European slides used in American slide trays - European slide mounts tend to be somewhat thicker than American ones. The best solution is to bring a slide tray with you from Europe. If that is not possible, avoid using the 120 capacity American tray. At worst, you can have an audience member drop your slides in one at a time, but we do not recommend this - better to bring your own tray.

One handy tip if your machine does jam - be sure to have a coin in your pocket. Most slide projectors have a slot in the center hub - if the machine jams, insert the coin in the slot and twist. This will free the slide tray from the projector and allow you to clear the jam. You might also consider asking the audio-visual department at your institution to

give you a short course on how to run a projector and how to do simple repairs like clearing jams and changing the bulb. While you may never have a problem, having the training will make you more confident.

Once you have decided on the order for your slides, number them on the upper right side of the slide on the side, facing the rear of the machine. This will allow you to quickly reinsert them in the tray if you drop the slides and they become mixed together.

Finally, check to make sure that you know where the light switches are and that the room is dark enough when lights are turned out. You may need to adjust the blinds or change the position of the screen. Do not assume that all lights will go out when you flip the switch - fire codes often require that at least one light in a meeting room stays on at all times, and if you are unlucky that light will be the one just over the screen. Be prepared to rearrange the screen, chairs, and podium if necessary to make sure you get a good display.

Overhead projectors are the other common method for presenting visual materials. They are easier to prepare than slides, but look less professional in a presentation. Most of the advice given above for slides also applies to overheads. As with slides, if you are using overheads get to the room early and check to make sure the projector works and that the audience can read the screen.

One thing that will make you look very unprofessional is to pull your overheads off of the sheets they went through the copy machine on. This makes it look as though you just finished preparing for your talk a few minutes ago. Mount your overheads on cardboard or plastic holders, and write on the holder what each overhead is so you do not have to hold it up to the light and check it before putting it on the projector. Better yet, have someone from the audience change the overheads for you, so you can spend time doing your talk rather than sorting through a pile of plastic sheets.

In addition to technical problems, visual presentations can also fail due to their graphic style or because of the way the presenter integrates them into the presentation. There are a number of good books on creating visual materials, so we will not go into detail on that, other than the following suggestions:

- 1) limit lines of text to 6 on a slide, 12 on an overhead**
- 2) avoid numbers; use bar or line graphs instead**
- 3) make sure pictures are clear and cropped for emphasis**

Once you have made good slides or overheads, you then need to properly integrate them into your presentation. Be sure to refer to the pictures - tell your audience what they are about, and do not be afraid to point out what it is in each image that makes it important to your overall story. However, don't talk to the screen - look at the audience while you speak, and if you need to point something out, use a pointer in preference to your hand. Above all, do not read things from the screen - read them from your notes, ensuring that you will face your audience.

Other than talking to the screen rather than the audience, the most common mistake made with either slides or overheads is putting up an image that illustrates a point, and then leaving that image up when you go on to discuss something else entirely. The audience will continue to stare at the image, since it is probably at least as interesting looking as the speaker, and will lose touch with what is being said.

The best way to solve this problem is to remove the distraction from the screen. If you are using an overhead projector, take the image off and turn the machine off. If you are using slides, simply insert a blank, lightproof slide. This has the added advantage that the screen will go dark, and the audience will look at you since they are sure the projector

just malfunctioned. Since you are continuing with your presentation (you knew the slide was blank), the audience will admire your cool and will give you their undivided attention.

If you have some particularly complicated statistical material, you may want to consider preparing copies of your visual material as handouts, particularly if you have complex graphs or large amounts of data. Think about this carefully, though, since your audience may continue to read the handout after you have moved on to other topics and will not pay attention to you.

Finally, you may want to consider the use of other materials, such as sound recordings, video recordings, or the display of actual artifacts (assuming they are small enough). As with visual aids, be sure to check equipment beforehand and to practice seamlessly including material in your talk. If you do plan to use something other than slides or overheads, be sure to mention it to the program committee well beforehand so that they can make arrangements to accommodate you, and check the room well before your talk to make sure the equipment you need is there and it works.

KEY CONCEPTS

- **Use visual aids as much as possible**
- **Check room and equipment before the talk**
- **Speak directly to the audience**

Conclusion

Of course, none of the above principles and suggestions can substitute for excellent content. Nor will following them guarantee that people will agree with you! What it will guarantee is that your audience will understand you, will stay with you, and will remember what you've said. That's effective communication, which is, after all, the whole point.

Above all, relax. The people who are coming to hear you speak will be there because they saw the title of your talk and wanted to hear what you have to say. They want you to do well, and are looking forward to your presentation. SHOT members are friendly people, and the general climate at conferences is very supportive, especially towards newcomers. So, good luck, and we hope your presentation goes well.