

NB: *This essay is intended to promote good public speaking, on behalf of bored audiences everywhere. It is being circulated widely on the Internet. As a result, I am receiving large volumes of email from students and others requesting help with presentations. Unfortunately, I do not have the ability to respond to the many emails I receive about this. I already have many students here at the University of Michigan, and that's about all I can handle.*

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How to Give an Academic Talk: Changing the Culture of Public Speaking in the Humanities

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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/her through the heads in front of you.*) S/he begins to read from a paper, speaking in a soft monotone. (*You can hardly hear. Soon you're 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/her watch. S/he announces — in apparent surprise — that s/he'll have to omit the most important points because time is running out. S/he shuffles papers, becoming flustered and confused. (*You do too, if you're still awake.*) S/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 finally rouses you from dreamland.*)

Why do otherwise brilliant people give such soporific talks?

First, they do this because they're scared. The pattern is a perfectly understandable reaction to stage fright. It's easier to hide behind the armor of a written paper, which you've had plenty of time to work through, than simply to talk.

But second, and much more important, it's become a part of academic culture — especially in the humanities. Graduate students may actually learn it from professors who have these bad habits themselves. Or their professors may not consider teaching the skills of public speaking a legitimate part of education.

Stage fright is something everybody has to handle in their own way. But academic culture is something we can deliberately change. This short essay is an attempt to begin that process with some pointers for effective public speaking.

Principles of Effective Talks

Any effective talk must do three things:

- (1) communicate your arguments and evidence,**
- (2) persuade your audience that they are true, and**
- (3) be interesting and entertaining.**

In our obsession with persuasive argumentation, academics sometimes forget about the third item on this list. Sometimes we think it follows automatically from the first two. (It doesn't.) Sometimes we even scoff at the goal itself. Perversely, we seem 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 listen to many talks over many hours, *people need the speaker's help* to maintain their focus. This is the true meaning and importance of “entertainment.” In an academic talk, entertainment isn't about making your audience laugh or distracting them from their troubles, but simply about keeping them focused on and interested in what you have to say.

How to Give a Great Talk: Some Rules of Thumb

No rule applies always and everywhere. But the following principles work almost all the time. Try them!

USUALLY BETTER

- Talk
- Stand
- Move
- Vary the pitch of your voice
- Speak loudly and clearly, toward the audience
- Make eye contact with the audience
- Focus on main arguments
- Use visual aids: outlines, pictures, graphs
- Finish your talk within your time limit. Corollary: rehearse your talk
- Summarize your main arguments at the beginning and end
- Notice your audience and respond to its needs
- Emulate excellent speakers

USUALLY WORSE

- Read
- Sit
- Stand still
- Speak in a monotone
- Mumble, facing downward
- Stare at the podium
- Get lost in details
- Have no visual aids
- Run overtime. Don't practice.
- Fail to provide a conclusion
- Ignore audience behavior

This list really says it all. But a little discussion may help make clear why these principles are so important.

- 1) **Talk** rather than read. It's easier to listen to and understand, and it allows you to make genuine contact with your audience. Furthermore, it ultimately helps you to think more clearly, by forcing you to communicate your points in ordinary terms.
- 2) **Stand up** unless you're literally forced to sit. People can see you better. Standing also puts you in a dominant position. This may sound politically incorrect, but it's not. Remember, you're the focus. The audience *wants* you to be in charge. Listeners need your help to maintain their attention.
- 3) **Move around**, rather than standing still. It's easier to keep focused on someone who's moving than on a motionless talking head. (Hand gestures are good, too.) It's possible to overdo this one, though; simply walking back and forth from one side of the room to the other every three or four minutes is probably enough, and gesturing too much will create distraction.
- 4) **Vary the pitch of your voice.** Monotones are sleep-inducing. Many people don't realize they do this. Get a trusted friend or colleague to listen to your delivery and give you honest feedback. (This is an important principle in itself.) Even better, tape or videotape yourself and check out how you sound.
- 5) **Speak loudly and clearly, facing the audience.** Be careful, when using visual aids, that you continue to face the audience when you speak.

An important element of vocal technique is to focus on the bottom (the deepest pitch) of your vocal range, which is its loudest and most authoritative tone. (This can be especially important for women.) Speak from the gut, not the throat. Breathe deeply — it's necessary for volume, and will also help you keep your mind clear.

Tip: here are two effective "special effects." First, when you come to a key phrase that you want people to remember, repeat it. Second, pause for a few seconds at several points in your talk; this breaks the monotony of a continuous flow of speech. It also gives you a chance to sip some water.

- 6) **Make eye contact with the audience.** If this is anxiety-inducing, at least pretend to do this by casting your gaze toward 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 to the right half, or only to the front or the back, of the room.
- 7) **Focus on main arguments.** Especially in a conference situation, where talks are short and yours is one of many, your audience is not going to remember the details of your evidence. In such a situation, less is more. Give them short, striking "punch lines" that they'll remember. They can always read your written work later, but if you don't get them interested and show them why it's important, they won't want to.
- 8) **Use visual aids.** This is one of the most important principles of all. At a minimum, have an outline of your talk. Some people seem to think they're giving everything away by showing people what they're going to say before they've said it. But the effect of a good

talk outline is exactly the opposite: it makes your audience want to hear the details. At the same time, it helps them understand the structure of your thinking.

Talk outlines should be extremely concise and visually uncluttered. 7-10 lines of text per slide is plenty. Microsoft Powerpoint — now standard issue in many presentation settings — is a great tool, not least because its default presentation formats encourage brevity. But beware: glitzy presentations can be distracting. Worse, they can create the impression that the speaker cares more about surface than substance. My recommendation: choose simple backgrounds, and limit the use of special effects.

Pictures, graphs, and other images are especially helpful. People are visual creatures. The old adage that a picture is worth a thousand words is especially apropos in the context of a talk.

One very important principle of slide presentations: always choose white or light-colored backgrounds. To see dark slides, you'll have to turn off the lights. This will make it hard for you to see your notes, and will also tend to put your audience to sleep. Really. If at all possible, do NOT turn off room lights or close window shades! Light-colored slides can usually be read with lights on.

- 9) **Finish your talk within the time limit.** Not to do so is disrespectful of your audience, not to mention bad strategy. Never go on longer than 45 minutes, which is most people's maximum attention span. If you exceed this limit, you'll lose them at the crucial point, namely your conclusion.

Furthermore, in conference settings, exceeding your time limit can be incredibly rude, since it cuts into other speakers' allotted time and/or the discussion period. You can make real enemies by insisting on continuing after your time is up.

The only way to be certain you can keep within your limits is to **rehearse** your talk. After lots of experience, some people can gauge talk times accurately without this. But nothing is more embarrassing — for both you and your audience — than getting only halfway through before hitting the time limit.

Tip: If you use Powerpoint or some other presentation system, you can develop a good sense of timing by always using the same slide format. After you've given a few talks with the same format, you'll know about how long it takes you to talk through each slide, and you can gauge the length of your talk this way (at least roughly).

- 10) **Summarize your talk at the beginning and again at the end.** "Tell 'em what you're gonna tell 'em, tell 'em, and tell 'em what you told 'em": this ancient principle still holds. Following this rule helps your audience get your main points. Even more important, it helps them remember what you said, which is, after all, what you're there for.
- 11) **Notice your audience and respond to its needs.** If people seem to be falling asleep or getting restless or distracted, the problem may not be you. Is the room too hot or cold? Too dark? (This is especially important.) Can people see you? Is the microphone on? Is something outside the room distracting people? Don't hesitate to stop talking in order to solve these problems.

Alternatively, you may have gone on too long, or you may need to speak louder. Whatever the case, notice what's happening and use it as feedback. If you can't figure

out why your audience is responding poorly, ask somebody later and fix the problem next time.

If you're not sure whether people can see or hear, ask someone in the back row directly. (This is also a good technique for setting up initial communication with your audience. It makes listeners feel included, and puts you in touch with them as human beings.)

Tip: NEVER let someone else take control of room conditions. Many audiences — thinking they're being helpful — react to overhead projectors by jumping up to turn off lights and close window shades. Unless this is truly necessary, avoid it at all costs, especially at conferences. Taking charge of the talk environment is part of your job as a speaker.

- 12) **Emulate excellent speakers.** Perhaps the best way to become an excellent speaker yourself is to watch really good, experienced speakers and model your talks on theirs. Notice not just what they say, but what they do.