How to give an academic talk

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Research is not just about creating ideas, it is about sharing them with others. An essential part of this is the 'academic talk'. If you're reading this, you have probably already seen some good ones and some... not so good ones. Here are my own thoughts on how to give a good academic talk.

1. What to talk about

You've been invited to give an academic talk! Whenever you agree to do this, make sure you're talking about an idea that is worth sharing. Think about what you have to say, and why you care about it. If it isn't an idea that's worth caring about, not even for your specialist audience, then change your topic! Find something that *is* worth sharing, and talk about that. This is a crucial but often overlooked step.

Make sure you do justice to your important idea too. Some audience members may be hearing about your idea for the first time. So, make sure you do the best job you can, so that they are more likely to go away as excited as you are about it. This means spending some serious time preparing your talk. As an experienced lecturer, a one-hour talk on a completed piece of research generally takes me two full workdays to complete — and often more!

To create your slides, first sketch how your talk will be organised. Then move on to individual slide design. Here is what to keep in mind in each of these steps.

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2. Organisation

In my view, a good academic virtually always has the following basic structure:

- Introductory material
- Background material
- Sections that establish the main idea.

A good talk should consist in a relatively small number of sections. For example, a one-hour talk should have at most six, and ideally fewer, or else things will be hard to follow. A 20min talk should have three or four sections. Make each section topic clear and simple, and as you pass through each section, remind your audience what they've learned in the talk already and what they're going to learn next. Most importantly, **assign a target time to each section**, representing the amount of time you plan to spend on that section. For example, in a 20min talk, you would usually want to spend 2-3 minutes on introductory material, 3-5 minutes on background material, and the remaining time on the main sections.

The *Introductory material section* is short, but very important to set the tone of your talk: it serves to engage your audience with your topic and thesis. As a simple template, I recommend that it contain the following three (or four) slides, and usually nothing more.

(1) **The Title slide.** Your opening slide should be simple and visually appealing, and state the following basic content: a) your talk title; b) your name and institution; and c) the date and location of the talk. This slide will generally be displayed as you are being introduced by the moderator.

(2) **The Hook Slide.** Start by spark the philosophical curiosity of your audience in just 1 slide (and spending no more than 2min). Use an example, story, picture, activity, or anecdote to help spark your audience's interest in the question you're discussing. Here you might also mention some other authors who have worked on this issue, but you don't need to.

(3) **The Thesis Slide.** Then go straight to your thesis slide. Remember that your aim is to convey *one main idea* that is worth sharing. Philosophers refer to this as your *thesis.* Convey it in a very simple slide containing the word "**Thesis:** " — and follow this with a statement of the one main thing you will argue for. Every philosopher (and every scientist for that matter) will be looking for this, so give it to them straight away. Then make sure that the rest of your talk is focused like a laser on establishing this thesis. If you find yourself designing material for

something unrelated to this thesis, then stop. Cut it down to size. Recreate your talk in your mind, to convey just this one big idea.

(4) **The Outline Slide** (Long talks only.) If you're giving a long, complex talk (say, 45min or more), then it is often helpful to outline what you will do in the talk. This can be conveyed in an outline slide, which expresses the main sections of your talk. Some do this for shorter talks too, but I would advise against it: there usually isn't time to discuss a long outline if your whole talk is only 20min.

A good introductory section is what makes the talk. Spend plenty of time developing it, and think creatively about how to do it!

Next, turn to your background material slides. Here you will generally explain things that have already been said by others about your topic. An important strategy here is the following:

- **Begin with what the audience already knows.** Start the main part of your talk by describing something the audience already knows, and then use this to connect to your thesis. It's always easier to understand things this way. But, note that it means you have to know something about your audience. If you don't know their level of background-knowledge, feel free to ask the organiser! For example, whether the audience will be general public, academic, PhD level specialist in some topic, etc.

As you proceed through the remaining sections that establish the main part of your talk, make sure that everything is going towards establishing your thesis. When you have finished your argument, you should generally end with a final slide that states your thesis again:

- **Conclusion Slide.** Repeat the thesis here, so that the audience can now see that you established what you set out to do. It's a good idea to end with this thesis displayed, so that it helps focus questions on the main point, and so that the audience is more likely to go away remembering what you argued for.

3. SLIDE DESIGN

(1) **Simple.** Keep each slide as simple as possible.
- Minimalism: minimise what the audience has to read, and never write a slide full of text.
- Compression of information: it is ideal when a slide does its job with just one picture, or one sentence, or one quote.

- Words, not equations: Display the absolute minimum number of equations, even if you're a mathematician.
- No calculations: there are almost always more effective ways to use your time than carrying out a calculation. If you're proving something, sketch the main ideas of the proof so that the audience can understand it, without displaying line-by-line calculations.

(2) **Engaging.** Design slides that keep the audience engaged with your material.
- Use effective ideas, images, videos to draw your audience in.
- Example: Make a quote more meaningful by displaying it on top of a full-screen image of the author being quoted.
- Do NOT use "superfluous" images just to get a laugh. Your audience may engage with it, but at the expense of engaging with your material.
- Do NOT use slides as bullet-point outlines of what you're saying. Use notes for that.

(3) **Visually appealing.** Choose colour schemes and fonts that are nice to look at.
- Do not use bright yellow on bright red, or bright blue on red.
- Instead, use nice-looking colour palette. Most slide presentation software will give you some pre-designed palettes and templates that will help you.
- Do not use unprofessional fonts like Comic Sans, or stylised fonts like Impact.
- Instead, use nice-looking, familiar sans serif fonts that are typical in online environments, like Helvetica, Verdana, Tahoma, Century Gothic, Trebuchet, Calibri, or Open Sans.

(4) **High-contrast.** Make things stand out with high-contrast techniques.
- The simplest example is a bare white background with one sentence, with the keyword highlighted in bold.
- You can also change the colour of the bold word, e.g. making it blue or red, to stand out even more (although note the limitations of this technique, below).
- Another helpful technique is to break up a long-quote by making a few key passages stand out in a bold, and/or in a different colour.

(5) **Inclusive.** Roughly 1 out of 5 people in your audience will have some form of dyslexia, and roughly 1 out of every 13 will be colourblind. To convey information to as many of them as possible, you should:
- Use dyslexia-friendly fonts, which are generally sans serif.
- Don't place text on busy background images.

- Don't be overly reliant on distinctions between red and green, or distinctions between yellow and blue, since these pairs will be difficult to distinguish for colourblind members of the audience.

4. Look at lots of examples

The best way to learn about how to give great talks is to attend lots of them. If you want to learn about how to give talks in person, then attend them in person. It's a very different experience from watching a video, since you will feel the reaction of the audience in a way that is not recorded in a video. In contrast, if you want to learn about how to give talks on Zoom, or recorded talks on YouTube, then watch lots of those too. This will help you absorb the techniques that work well, and help you avoid the techniques that don't. Here is one of mine:

- `https://personal.lse.ac.uk/robert49/talks/smolenice/`

5. On giving talks in person

- *Public speaking.* Follow ordinary public speaking guidelines: Face the audience. Make eye contact. Move with intention instead of pacing, weight-shifting or fidgeting. Project your voice at an appropriate volume for the room.
- *Practice.* As you're designing slides, practice what you'll say. See what it feels like to speak it out loud. Vividly imagine yourself pointing at the slide. If you're new to giving talks, or if it's a very important talk like a job talk, give at least one practice talk with a mentor or trusted friends.
- *Engage the audience.* When you're giving an in-person talk, you have the opportunity to engage the audience by getting them to interact with you directly. This can be an extremely effective way to leave convey your idea to an audience: for example, you can display a relevant prop, or get your audience to raise their hands in response to a question.
- *Arrive early.* Arrive early on the day of the presentation if possible, e.g. in the morning before any talks begin, to make sure your slides work on the computer and projector system. Ask the chair or organiser if they can help you with this, if they do not offer automatically!
- *Save your slides in a safe format.* When giving talks in person, technical difficulties can happen. For example, you may find that different versions of MS Powerpoint may display your slides differently. Or, your computer might not connect to the projector correctly. So, make sure you have backup options: save

your slides on a USB drive, in both its original format and as a PDF. If your presentation is based online, make sure you have downloaded an offline version, in case there are problems connecting to the internet.