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'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 part of academic culture — especially in the humanities. It's embedded in our language: we say we're going to "give a paper." As a euphemism for a talk, this is an oxymoron. *Presentations are not articles.* They are a completely different medium of communication, and they require a different set of skills. Professors often fail to recognize this, or to teach it to their graduate students.

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	USUALLY WORSE
● Talk	● Read
● Stand	● Sit
● Move	● Stand still
● Vary the pitch of your voice	● Speak in a monotone
● Speak loudly and clearly, toward the audience	● Mumble, facing downward
● Make eye contact with the audience	● Stare at the podium
● Focus on main arguments	● Get lost in details
● Use visual aids: outlines, pictures, graphs	● Have no visual aids
● Finish your talk within your time limit. Corollary: rehearse your talk	● Run overtime. Don't practice.
● Summarize your main arguments at the beginning and end	● Fail to provide a conclusion
● Notice your audience and respond to its needs	● Ignore audience behavior
● Emulate excellent speakers	

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. Written academic language is too complex and too awkward for reading aloud. *Just talk* — it's easier to understand, and it allows you to make genuine contact with your audience. Furthermore, it ultimately helps <u>you</u> 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. If you jump around like a pop star you'll distract people from the content of the talk. Simply walking back and forth from one side of the room to the other every three or four minutes is probably enough.

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, especially 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 vocal "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 so 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 details. 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.

Slides should be extremely concise and visually uncluttered. Slides are maps, not territories; they are tracking devices that let both you and your audience follow the flow of the talk. So they must not be overfilled. 6 lines of text per slide is good; 9 lines is a lot; 12 lines is pretty much unreadable. If you need more space, use more slides.

Pictures, graphs, and other images are especially helpful (if they are related to your topic!) People are visual creatures. The old adage that a picture is worth a thousand words is especially apropos in the context of a talk.

Always choose white or light-colored slide 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.

Don't talk to the screen. If you do, not only will the audience be looking at your back, but also they'll be unable to hear you. Have a paper version of your outline in front of you; speak from that, rather than from the one on the screen. *This takes practice.*

About Powerpoint:

Microsoft Powerpoint — now standard issue in many presentation settings — can be a great tool, not least because its default presentation formats encourage brevity.

But beware: Powerpoint's fades, transitions, backgrounds, sound effects, and so on can be a real pitfall. Preparing glitzy presentations can be a serious time sink for you. Worse, they can give your audience the impression that you care more about surface than substance. My recommendation: choose simple, light-colored backgrounds with relatively dark type, and limit the use of special effects.

If you haven't completely mastered the software, *don't use it.* Nothing irritates an audience more than watching somebody fiddle with a computer. Since they introduce many possible points of failure, Murphy's law applies in spades to computerized presentations. Something can, and usually does, go wrong with the computer, the projector, the software, the connector cables, or your presentation itself. One of my worst experiences as a presenter happened the day my hard disk crashed, permanently, on slide number 3 of a one-hour talk.

What I learned from that: if you insist on using a computer, **bring backup**. That's **backup, backup, backup.** There is no more basic principle of operating in a high-tech environment. Bring printed notes or outlines. Have a copy of your presentation on a CD-ROM, a USB key, or some other format that most computers will accept. Even better, print transparencies as well. Finally, always be mentally prepared to deliver your talk without the slides, just in case.

9) **Finish your talk within the time limit.** Don't diss your audience by running overtime. *Never* go on longer than 45 minutes — most people's maximum attention span. If you exceed this limit, you'll lose them at the crucial point, namely your conclusion.

In conference settings, exceeding your time limit is also incredibly rude, since it cuts into other speakers' allotted time and/or the discussion period. Don't rely on panel chairs to enforce time limits; do it yourself. You can make real enemies by insisting on continuing after your time is up — but nobody has ever been criticized for finishing two minutes early.

Timing is also crucial. Nothing is more embarrassing — for both you and your audience — than getting only halfway through your talk before hitting the time limit. The only way to be sure you time things right is to **rehearse** your talk. Timing is a complicated, learned skill that requires a lot of practice — so practice where it's easy, i.e. at home.

You are (or are becoming) a professional presenter. So invest in a watch especially for this purpose. Some digital watches have countdown timers. These are better than ordinary watches because you don't have to perform mental math to know how much time remains. But they only work if (a) you remember to use the timer, (b) the numbers are large and well–lit, so you can read them while talking, and (c) you're paying attention, so you can turn off the timer before it begins to beep. An analog watch with large, easy–to–read hands can be almost as good.

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).

Another tip: Say you have 20 minutes to talk. When you're rehearsing, mark your notes at the 5, 10, and 15 minute points, and maybe also the 18–minute point as well. This way you won't be caught by surprise if you start to run overtime.

My last tip on timing: until you've really mastered presentations, *never, ever improvise* in front of an audience. This doesn't mean you can't interrupt yourself to tell a joke or a story, or digress a bit from the main thread — those can be important techniques for maintaining attention. What it does mean is that when you're rehearsing, you must rehearse those things as well, *because they take time*. If you haven't practiced, you won't know how long they take. Like a professional comedian or actor, you need to rehearse *everything* you plan to do.

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 too cold? Is it too dark, or too noisy? 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 slide or computer 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, which often take place in exceedingly dim rooms. 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: how they move, how they use their voices, how they look at the audience, how they handle timing and questions. If you find an excellent model and work hard to emulate that person, you can't go wrong.