

Ten Rules to Giving an Effective Talk

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Every academic career is filled with presentations. In fact, giving a good presentation is one of the more important tasks of our careers. Talks/presentations are how we inform our peers and students about recent developments in science/medicine, our research, new techniques, etc. They are how we inform colleagues (who might also be reviewers) of our work before they see it in grants or papers. And, they can and should be fun to give. How many other situations can you be in when you can basically talk “non-stop” about yourself for 30 to 40 minutes! While many educational specialists might argue that talks/presentations are a thing of the past, in academic medicine they will likely be around for years to come. Therefore, to ensure that you get your message across and do not completely bore or overwhelm your audience, I would suggest following these “Ten Rules.”

1. Tell them what you are going to tell them, tell them, and then tell them what you told them. This particular rule does not require a great degree of explanation. However, it can be easily forgotten. Remember the introductory slide, follow the order of that slide, and conclude with a slide that generally lists, at a minimum, the most important points you were trying to make.

2. Keep it short and simple. While some of this is dictated by the people asking you to give a talk, shorter really can be better. Most studies have suggested that 30 minutes is the limit for most people’s attention span, with the best attention early and some pickup at the end. If you are asked to give a longer talk, consider giving the “less important information” between one-half to two-thirds of the way through, and finish with the most important data. In general, don’t try to cover too many topics during your talk, especially if your audience is relatively new to the area. Finally, as a general rule of thumb, plan on one minute per slide. For example, if your talk is 30 minutes, 30 slides would be ideal.

3. Know your audience and environment. Unless you are giving a talk at your local institution, check with the organizer to determine who is attending. It can be uncomfortable to give a very simplistic talk to a well-educated/knowledgeable audience and vice versa. In addition, it is helpful to know the venue that you are talking in. If this is rather early in your career, it is even helpful to see the room and its setup before you speak. While computer/projection systems have become much better over the last few years, there are still occasions when they don't work. Make sure you arrive in plenty of time to fix any glitches that arise.

As a small caveat to Rule 3, it is very important if you are going to tell a joke, that you know your audience and tell it well. A word to the wise—do not attempt to tell a joke in a country in which the language is not your own. Trust me, it will never translate. Having said this, humor is still a wonderful aspect to giving a talk, but make certain that it is not offensive to any segment of your audience.

4. Look at your audience. All too often, presenters are so busy looking at their slides or their notes that they forget to interact with their audience. Focus on individual faces, but change your focus frequently. Find a few that appear to be engaged. It not only makes the listeners believe that you are interacting with them, it also allows you to better gauge the response of your audience. Check for the number of people nodding off! If you see that, try to change something (cadence in your voice, speed of your talk, etc.) so that you regain their attention.

5. Use effective slides. While many segments of society give talks without slides, we almost always interact with them in some manner. In fact, the content/format of slides can easily make or break your talk. Good slides require the right amount of data. Do not try to put too many points in a single slide, and never put in a large data table with unreadable fonts. Rather, create your own summary table to highlight your key points. In addition, pay some attention to the title of the slide. The title should be a “mini-summary” of that slide, giving the most important point.

When you are first putting together slide presentations you can be overwhelmed by the number of PowerPoint options available. However, like the talk itself, keep the slide format simple. Do not have additional background graphics, as these are usually distracting. Make certain the color scheme is appropriate and do not put red on blue background, green on red background, etc. In general, white on blue or black, or black on white yield the most readable slides. If you are using some other combination, project your slide format once before using it so that you are certain the slides are readable and somewhat appealing to the eye. In this regard, it is also important to remember font size. Do not use much/any text that is less than 24 point. While many default presentations still use Times or Times New Roman, simpler fonts such as Arial and Helvetica generally are more readable.

With the advent of computer-assisted presentations, many new techniques have become available. One of the simplest and most helpful is the build-up slide. This slide can be used throughout your talk to emphasize the particular point you are at. However, in addition, it can be used to help transition from one point to the next on a single slide. There are numerous options for these slides, from fading in and out, to flying in and out, to graying in and out. In any case, make certain that you are aware when a build-up slide is occurring, have the order of the build-up correct, and practice that particular slide if it is more complicated. In a similar vein, many presentations now include video clips. These can have a definite “WOW” factor. However, as for any newer technology, make certain that you are comfortable that your video will work with the computer and projection system that you are using. Again, if at all possible, run through that part of your talk on the system that you will be using before you give the actual presentation.

6. Know and interact with your slides. As boring as it can be, practice, practice, practice. Practice “talking your talk” in front of an audience at least once, if at all possible. Reviewing your slides silently is just not the same thing. However, it **is** important to know what is on each slide and to be able to anticipate the next slide. As part of interacting with your slides, learn to use the pointer. The pointer is not a weapon to be brandished wildly around the room! It should only be used when it helps to emphasize your point and should specifically interact with the portion of the slide you are attempting to highlight.

7. Have a logical progression. This obviously refers back to both Rules 1 and 2. You can set the stage for this with your introductory slide and then build your story from the ground up. Try your best not to “jump” from point to point or area to area, as this can be more difficult to follow. And, again, remember to end with your most important data or point, as this is when attention may be picking up again.

8. Work on segues. This, of course, also refers to Rule 6—knowing and interacting with your slides. If at all possible, try to begin to *introduce* your next slide before you actually *show* it. Obviously, this is easier if the two slides are related to each other. However, in transition areas of talk, this may require an actual “mini-introduction” which serves to begin the discussions on the next topic.

9. Quote at least one other person’s data. Believe it or not, this point is often not observed by seasoned presenters. Yet, to me, quoting other people’s work makes you look more knowledgeable. And, it can be very stimulating to point out differences between your work and others. In general, we all learn from the differences and the similarities of our work with others. Believe it or not, **most** of what we do is a “model” of disease with its own inherent limitations.

10. Deliver with passion and a sense of humor. If you have the option, give talks primarily on topics you can have some general sense of excitement about. If you are **not** excited about *giving* your talk, then no one will be excited to *listen* to that talk. Some of the hardest talks to give are those when your data did not work out as you had hoped (i.e., the experiments failed). But in that case, remember to refer back to Rule 9. There probably was some reason/experiment that led you down this path. Perhaps even the negative experiment can teach us something, including some concern that the original studies may have some “issues” surrounding them that could not be repeated or built upon. Finally, **do** throw in some humor. Personal and humorous anecdotes are almost never offensive and generally can help you connect with your audience. This can be particularly helpful when you are talking about negative results... a situation we **all** have been in at some point or other.

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