

THOUGHTS ON ORAL PRESENTATIONS -Dr. Robert Zink, U. Minnesota

DISCLAIMER: The following ideas are not cast in stone, and some will disagree with all or some of these points. The following is not a guarantee to a successful oral presentation. I have assembled these ideas over the last 10 years, in part due to hearing a seminar at Berkeley by Dr. Richard Eakin, and attending a paper at a Cooper Society meeting on giving oral presentations by Dr. Peter Stettenheim. Various persons at UC Berkeley also gave me critical advice, including Ned Johnson, J. P. Myers, J. Cadle, and F. A. Pitelka. Also, being on the Student Awards Committee of the American Ornithologists' Union has served to help focus my thoughts. I thank members of the Student Awards Committee of the American Ornithologists' Union, D. Cannatella, S. Hackett, M. Hafner, and J. Remsen for comments on this document, or whatever it is. I would be honored to accept criticisms, further comments and suggestions.

Planning your talk:

Giving a talk is very different from writing a manuscript. Sometimes, you get the impression that someone is reading a manuscript to you (rather than the text of their talk). Manuscripts often have long sentences that are simply too hard to follow during an oral presentation; keep your sentences short. In planning my talk, I project each slide and talk about it (to myself), and then try to write down what I said; thus, if I get stuck during the actual presentation, and am forced to read my text, at least I'm reading something I once said (and hopefully not something that sounds like a passage from a manuscript)! If you have to read your talk, try to inject enthusiasm and life into it. Be careful that your word:meaning ratio is not too low. However, during 12 -15 minute talks, every word has to be carefully chosen, so keep a careful organization. Do not spend more than a couple of minutes on your intro and methods - in a short talk, only the results and discussion can be emphasized. But, do state the general significance of your study during your introduction. Emphasize the scientific merit of your work and put it in proper context.

As I mention below, illustrations for talks are often not those used in a manuscript. Instead, think of the point you wish to make and design a simple slide to illustrate it. Do not photograph a large table and then inform the audience that they should ignore the first 8 columns and concentrate on columns 9 and 17 in the middle of the slide.

Practice your talk several times in front of a critical audience (i.e. not your cat), and do this well before you are scheduled to give it. Listen closely to your helper's criticisms. **REMAKE SLIDES THAT ARE CONFUSING**; if you're not sure, they need to be redone! Be sure you will finish within the time constraints imposed by the meeting (getting booted by the session moderator is extremely poor style). In a full seminar (especially a job seminar), **never** go over the allotted time. Everyone

is busy, and speaking past your time is extremely rude. Be sure to leave time for questions. Thus, a seminar scheduled for 1 hour should include 45-50 (MAX) minutes of talking by you, leaving time for your host to introduce you and questions. Incidentally, an hour-long talk is rather different from a meeting presentation; you can take more time for general background (put at end, not in introduction, which should be short) and explanation of methods. However, in a full seminar you can't make effectively more than a few major points. The country preacher approach is pretty good: tell em what you're going to tell em, tell em, and tell em what you told em.

Before your talk:

1. If it is a job seminar be sure to ask (insist) for 30 min. to calm yourself before your talk [and do the things in 2) below].
 2. Visit the podium or wherever you will give your talk from and:
 - a. Get comfortable with the podium or place you'll speak from. Meet the moderator ahead of time so that he/she knows who you are.
 - b. Locate the pointer, slide advancer, light switches (and who controls them), and podium light (NOTE: Many places forget to have a pointer and podium light - don't be caught unprepared). It is really silly when a speaker says "May I have the lights" or "Slides please" or "next slide", and someone from the audience says "You have the controls .."
 - c. Locate the proper position for microphone if there is one.
 - d. preview your slides (especially if someone else put them into a carousel for you).

Beginning your talk

1. After you are introduced: **THANK THE PERSON WHO INTRODUCED YOU**, even if it's a short talk at a meeting. If this is a job or invited seminar, have a very short, not too flowery acknowledgment for the people who have hosted you, thanking them and telling them that you appreciate the opportunity to visit their department. I have really botched this important courtesy because I hadn't planned it out, and it came out poor off the top of my head - which did not set a good stage for beginning the formal talk itself.
2. Far too often, the opening words of a talk are "**Uh, well um, o.k., let's see ...**" **BE SURE THAT THE FIRST WORDS OUT OF YOUR MOUTH ARE NOT "WELL, UH, UM, OK, YOU KNOW," OR SOME SIMILAR SILLY THING.** Begin decisively. It is my **opinion** that you should **not**

begin your talk with "May I have the slides please." It is important to capture the attention of the audience, by LOOKING at them and establishing contact with them, with the LIGHTS ON. Begin with your general introduction, and then ask for the slides. Some talks are effective that begin with slides, but rarely.

3. Furthermore, it is my **opinion** that most audiences are not totally asleep, and they do not need to see the title of your talk as your first slide. In addition, do not begin your talk with a list of collaborators - put it at the end if you must (just mention them, and please don't show us pictures of your collaborators, unless you really have a good reason).

About slides:

- Do not have too much information on a slide - on the order of 7 lines of text is sufficient. This means that you should make **simple** slides with one or two general points. If you have long tables or complicated or large figures from a manuscript, DON'T make them into slides. Make figures for your talk that illustrate only the points you wish to make. Use a large font, and have someone check your figures for misspelled words before you make slides.
- Plan your presentation so that you have about 1 slide per minute or 1.5 minutes. You can get away with more slides if they are simple habitat shots, but many talks are compromised by having TOO many slides.
- IF YOU HAVE TO APOLOGIZE FOR ANY SLIDE (LIKE IT'S HARD TO READ, TOO DARK, TOO MUCH INFORMATION ON IT, ETC.) DON'T SHOW IT.** There is no excuse for bad slides. If you must show it, don't apologize.
- Be aware that hand-colored slides will fade over time
- Scientific names are italicized, even in slides!!!
- Avoid "heading" slides, like "Methods", etc.
- 10% OF MEN ARE AT LEAST PARTIALLY RED-GREEN COLOR BLIND. DO NOT USE REDS AND GREENS.**
- DO NOT USE TOO MANY FANCY COLORS - THEY WILL NOT BE CLEAR IN A LARGE ROOM**

During your talk:

Do not talk to the screen or your notes. Talk to your audience.
 Do not jingle your keys or change in your pocket.
 Don't talk too fast - write notes to yourself in the margins of your notes (if you use them) like "slow down" or "take a deep

breath"

Avoid reading the text on slides to the audience, unless you have a quote or some passage. In this case, don't talk about something else and expect them to both listen to you and read the slide.

Practice your talk so that the closing statements about one slide directly lead into the next one (i.e., anticipate the next slide for your audience).

Beware of "filler" slides of scenery, sunsets - they often detract from important transitions, or worse, your conclusions. It might be better to leave up a slide you've finished discussing rather than inserting a filler/distracting slide.

Personally (and this is strictly RMZ's feeling), I have seen enough Gary Larson slides, although I think he is terribly funny and I have all his books.

Be careful in using humor - it's great when it works, and worse than not great when it fails (trust me on this).

Work on not saying "uh" "um" "ok" "you know" by having listeners during your practice talks stop you every time you say one of these filler words. It is ok to have pauses during your talk, which is what I try to substitute for the temptation to say one of the fillers. It is hard to get used to, but pauses are effective devices to let your audience catch up with you - they will not think you are **dumb** if there are short pauses, especially at key points. Pauses always seem longer to the speaker than to the audience.

Include some general conclusions; there must be something of general interest in your talk. Also, especially for long lectures, I think it's important to end with the LIGHTS ON. YES, it's good to stop hiding behind darkness and face your audience, and reestablish the eye contact you made in the beginning.

Remember, it is probable that no one knows more about your topic than you, so be confident and at ease.

Ending your talk

END YOUR TALK DECISIVELY. Do not just stop and mutter something, as the audience wonders if you are done. **DO NOT END WITH: "ARE THERE ANY QUESTIONS"** because someone will ask you one, and the proper protocol calls for applause first. Thus, say something like **"THANK YOU FOR YOUR ATTENTION"** or simply **"THANK YOU"** this cues the audience to applaud. Try to avoid the classless ending like "WELL, THAT'S ABOUT ALL I HAVE."

In handling questions, avoid combative answers. Personally, I don't like it when the speaker replies to your question, "I get that question all the time." Frankly, I think it's akin to saying "Boy, what a common question - can't you think of something insightful?" My impression is that if you are asked a particular question all the time, your seminar is deficient in not addressing an obvious point. Be sure to ask for clarification if you don't understand a question, and don't hesitate to say you don't have an answer now but would like to think about it and talk later.

Dr. J. V. Remsen noted: The best talks are those in which the introduction clearly establishes "what and why" issues, the transitions between data slides are smooth and logical, and the conclusions return to the introduction. I agree.

New Additions October 99:

Please remember that ca. 10% of human males are at least partially red-green color blind, so putting RED and GREEN dots or lines on a slide make it impossible for that audience (which includes me).

Also, avoid making really busy color-rich slides with available software. Keep slides simple enough to make the point. Too many people are making fancy slides that cannot be easily digested in the approximately 1 minute they are shown.