

## Do's and Don't for Brief Research Talks

(for mini-APA participants) - from Gordon H. Bower

1. A talk is not a written Journal Experimental Psychology paper. Talks have an informal narrative style and are dramatic rather than detailed or completely informative. Don't read your "speech". Speak it from memory.
2. The model for the short speech is the campfire story -- teller of a mystery, (or a Steve Martin skit), not the recitor of an encyclopedia.
3. You must be very *selective* of what you can say in a short time. Most short speeches can barely carry one main idea plus its support. Resist the temptation to tell everything you know or every thought you had about it: only the most interesting and important thing can be said.
4. Talk informally as though you were telling your grandmother what you did and why. Complexity of expression is uncorrelated with wisdom, intelligence, and originality; it's perfectly correlated with audience puzzlement and boredom.
5. A narrative style is preferable in talks. Research is done to tell a story, going from problem, goal, plan through actions (observations) to outcomes, resolution, and a moral (conclusion). Avoid a written journal-style organization.
6. Prepare your first two sentences like they were a Madison-Avenue advertisement for you and your talk. Grab the audience in these first sentences.
  - (a) Example *weak* start: "The research I will tell you about stems from earlier

work by Johnson published in *Cognitive Psychology* which led to a lot of follow ups; and I want to thank my collaborators, Jim and Dorothy Smith".

- (b) A *better* start: "How do we understand language? How can I figure out the meaning of what you say? Some people believe we have a mental dictionary with fixed entries and we assemble the meanings out of this fixed dictionary. Another theory is that we only have flexible procedures which decompose compound phonetic strings into basic morphemes from which we compute a meaning for the utterance . . ."

7. Get interest and attention first, with a rhetorical question, anecdote, or startling statement or paradox. Assume your audience is an Introductory Psych class of undergraduates.

8. In planning your talk, consider these steps:

(a) Write on paper slips ideas and points to be made.

(b) Assemble them into an outline and fill it out.

(c) Revise the outline, concentrating on transition sentences between sentences.

(d) Write out your speech as you speak it -- work on oral, not written phrasing.

(e) Make a new outline of the revised written version.

(f) Practice delivering the talk orally from the revised outline.

(g) Practice aloud before a mirror and with a clock in front of you.

Keep it to 11-12 minutes.

(h) Learn to give the talk with at most one 3x5 card of outline notes.

9. Use visual aids (overhead transparencies or slides but not both) if they help. In visuals, make it simple, clear and obvious. Don't clutter slides with irrelevancies. No more than 7 words on a visual. No more than 7 numbers on a visual (round them to one or two significant digits). Slides must be readable; print large. One word can abbreviate whole phrases. If you have lots of results you must show, use many slides, not one cluttered slide. *Idealize* graphs, no lightning-bolt data. Ask: are the exact values all *that* terribly important for my point?
10. Put up a slide only a moment before you want to refer to it. Give the audience time to read it or you read it to them. Remove the slide when you want the audience to attend fully to you again.
11. If a within-trial procedure is complicated, show a concrete illustration of it in a visual. If the series of events in an experiment is long or complicated, show diagram of it.
12. In narrative talks, descriptive and inferential statistics should be suppressed. Speak "eyeball-effects" rather than F-values. Say "These words were remembered very much better than those", NOT "The mean recall for the two categories was 8.76 and 4.37, and difference gave an F of 13.8 which with 1 and 14 degrees of freedom was statistically significant at the .01 level." A better attitude towards description is "Holy baloney, look at that!"
13. State the problem being investigated in *concrete, specific* terms. Help the audience understand specifics first before moving to generalities (if you ever do).

14. Describe exactly what responses your subject was making, perhaps give one or more concrete illustrations of materials for different trial types. That helps the audience instantiate the abstractions (you shouldn't be talking about).
15. You are not duty-bound to describe every condition of your experiment, not every result, not every analysis. In particular, suppress complications and unresolved loose-ends or incomprehensible pieces of results -- don't lay your confusions on the poor listener. Your goal is to tell a simple coherent story, to interest and to entertain, not to tell the complete unvarnished messy truth. Your first rule is: tell a simple mystery story that has a neat wrap-up and don't confuse or bore your audience. Not telling the *whole* truth is not the same as telling a falsehood. Speeches are for conviction, written papers for corrections!
16. Summarize your main idea and then clearly conclude. Make it completely obvious to your audience exactly when you have finished, by some words or gestures (e.g., by stepping back, smiling and saying 'Thank you'). Applaud one another at the end of his/her speech. (Ask -- Are there any questions? Then wait a long time).
17. Don't worry about "tough" questions: they almost never come. You know more about the research than anybody, so you have a great advantage. Don't be intimidated by "big shots" in the audience (if there are any): most are struggling to comprehend, and ask only simple questions.
18. If a question comes you don't know about, it's okay to say "I don't know". Or to say "That's a tough one I haven't thought about -- or I'll need more

time to think about that" -- or "Fine idea -- would be worth trying in an experiment". You don't have to have instant answers for everything. If you don't understand a questioner, ask him to rephrase it so you can understand. If he asks three questions, answer any one of them and move on.

19. Plant at least one pithy question with a friend so he/she can direct it to you in case no one else pops up with a quick question. Often the audience needs time to think of some question to ask about -- so give the audience a long time to come up with a question.
20. Smile, be and appear friendly and glad to be there. Dress sharp. Speak loud enough. Articulate clearly. Be Superman or Superwoman.