

## Tips for Talks

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1. Don't try to talk about everything you know about your topic. Be selective. Tell a well-crafted story. Less content, slower pace, more clear.
2. Try not to read your talk aloud. A good talk is like a Vulcan mind meld -- a strong connection is created between speaker and auditors, such that ideas in the speaker's head flow into and blossom within listeners' heads. Reading weakens the connection between speaker and audience. When reading the speaker must attend to the text, which interferes with attending to the audience. Also, written prose tends to be denser and less easily understood than informal speech. A reader can pause and think, or re-read a hard-to-understand passage. When listening to someone read aloud, in contrast, those options are not so easy. And most people do a rather poor job of reading aloud; their pace tends to be too fast and the delivery less prosodic than natural speech. Reeling off a verbatim, memorized speech has similar drawbacks. Some ums and ers and stumbles are natural in speech, so don't worry about those. Just focus on communicating, the way you do when telling someone a story.
3. Pay attention to your audience. Eye contact with individual members of the audience helps build and maintain the mind meld, as does attending to their signals (e.g., do they look confused, bored, engaged?). This can help when monitoring your timing and clarity. When you're going at a good pace, your audience will nod their heads indicating understanding. Watch for the head-nodders.
4. Do not read aloud the text on slides – nothing is so stultifying. Glance down at your slides on the notebook in front of you; do not turn your head and talk to the slide screen; that is not your audience.
5. Minimize text on slides. You don't need full sentences. Bullet points should be short and clear. Don't display a slide with multiple different ideas all at once; if you do, while you are talking about point  $N$  some audience members will be reading and thinking about point  $N+X$ , undermining your mental bond with them. Make sure all text on your slide can be read from several feet away.
6. Use effective graphics. Graphs make it easier for people to see the patterns. But don't simply show the graph, explain the pattern you want your audience to notice. Leave the graph up long enough to describe the pattern and make sure your audience does see the pattern (heads nod). If you present data slides, make sure they display a measure of variability within conditions, that the axes have clear labels, that the fonts are easy to read, etc.
7. Have a well-rehearsed first line. A common opening is "So, OK, I um ah yeah, anyway, my project explores..." We do exactly the same thing when not well prepared. No biggie, but it sounds ever so much better to begin by looking at your audience, smiling, taking a breath, and saying "My project explores..." You can also open by stating your final claim: "95% of speakers go too fast when making a presentation." Likewise, it is common to wrap up with "So, yeah, um, I guess that's about it." Not so bad, but better to have something that briefly sums up the whole talk, underlines the bottom line, and signals auditors that the talk is at an end so that they can burst into applause. Listen to the applause.
8. Practice your whole talk aloud multiple times to get the delivery smooth and the timing down. Hideously awkward as it is, there is no substitute for practicing giving the talk aloud (to a mirror, goldfish, videocam, family member).
9. Be excited for questions. Questions mean your audience is interested. Questions give you an opportunity to consider other ideas and to develop your own ideas. A good talk inspires questions.