

How to give a talk

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Here are a few tips on how to prepare a talk and how to present one. It is written by a physicist, with physics students as target, but should be of general enough use.

Preparation

Well begun is half done. This applies as much to a talk as it does to other things.

- Choose a topic with which you are comfortable, confident. You should be able to explain whatever you state or claim, otherwise it is wise not to open your mouth at all.
- Start preparing well in advance. Collect material for the talk from reliable sources, and verify for correctness.
- Organise your thoughts and ideas into a skeleton. Spend time over the skeleton. If the skeleton is well designed, well thought out, it will be easy to fill the gaps. If the skeleton is poor, you will not be able to establish a good flow of ideas.
- Make a robust estimate of how much material you can reasonably fit into the time allotted. This you will learn with practice.
- Practise, practise, practise. To yourself, to a mirror, to a willing friend. Time your talk. Ask yourself questions, assuming for a while that you are the listener, not the speaker.

Presentation

- Speak slowly, clearly and loud enough. Do not shout, do not mumble.
- Whether on a board, or a transparency, or on a computer viewgraph, write clearly, legibly. Do not clutter. Write large enough/too small and it will not be readable, too large and there will not be enough on one slide to make sense.
- Let the audience know the skeleton of the talk right at the beginning. Start from a simple, easily understood concept or fact.

- Do not assume that the audience will understand all acronyms, short-forms, symbols and, above all, jargon. Keep them to minimum and state their meanings clearly at the first occurrence.
- Communication is two-way traffic. Watch out for audience response and react accordingly. A speaker who keeps on talking in monotone with no regard to the audience is certainly not liked.
- Never make an excuse for (i) for not keeping time (ii) for shoddy preparation (iii) clutter and ambiguity. You alone are to blame for these.

Use of computers

Most of you would be using a computer to make your ‘slides’. Remember that technology is not a substitute for shoddy preparation. Over-dependence on technology is not a great idea. You should be able to give a talk even without a mike or a slide projector ! Very often, making slides is made out to be the the most important thing while preparing for a talk. This should not happen. Here are some things to be borne in mind when preparing slides using a computer.

- Use a simple style/layout. Use colour when necessary, but do not run riot with hundred colours. Never write ALL CAPITALS, all italics or mix indiscriminately font styles, colours etc.
- Do not write whole sentences. Just list points.
- Do not continue one slide over to the next. Keep each slide as self-contained as possible.
- Use figures, illustrations, graphs wherever needed. Very often they convey more than sentences.
- Don’t go overboard with unnecessary animations or cartoons or superfluous ‘transition effects’. The argument made in their favour is ‘it somehow looks nice’. It might, but only if the talk lacks in genuine content. They are distracting and do not generally improve the content of the talk.
- Equations cannot be avoided, but please do not use up the entire screen. Moreover, do not make references to equations on other slides - the audience are in no position to see them again.
- Make sure there is compatibility between the projecting computer and your desktop machine, by projecting a sample slide well before your talk. If this is not possible, e-mail a sample and request someone at the other end to check. Better still, use platform-independent software.