

Rules for Preparing a Talk

These rules are time-tested.

So even if you do not believe them, use them anyway.

1. In a talk,

- tell the audience what you are going to tell them,
- then tell them, and finally
- tell them what you told them.

(In a paper these three items are the introduction, body of paper, and conclusions.) If the audience is to follow your presentation critically, they must know where you are going. Do not spring any surprises.

2. Carefully prepare those pictures or diagrams you want the audience to take away from your talk or, at the very least, to understand while you are talking. Devote the whole talk to explaining these; discard any material unnecessary to this task.
3. Do not say anything essential to your talk that is not on one of your viewgraphs. In other words, assume the audience will miss everything you say and see only the viewgraphs. These must carry the central message. (A very common mistake is to purposely omit the main point of a viewgraph. This tactic has two dangers: you may forget to say the point or the listener may not hear it. Your talk could consist of only buildups, with no punch lines!)
4. Do not use any important symbol (on a graph or in an equation) that is not defined on a viewgraph. If it is a symbol unfamiliar to most of the audience, define it on every viewgraph where it is used. In addition, avoid reduced variables. (For example, don't use t when you mean T/T_c .)
5. Be specific. Whenever possible use sentences, not ambiguous phrases. Number or, in some other way, clearly delineate your main points or conclusions.

6. As a rough guide, a 30-minute talk should fit on 6 viewgraphs (and a 10-minute talk on 3!) and have no more than 10 equations. This is the toughest rule but sticking to it will force you to remove material not essential to the central points of the talk.
7. If you have not given many talks before, write out the talk . Practice it at least once in front of colleagues who will tell you what is unclear. Revise the talk if it is too long; do not just talk faster.
8. You can never underestimate the attentiveness of your audience. You may have heard this with "attentiveness" replaced by "intelligence" but I think that is incorrect. No audience has ever been insulted by a clear talk.

Some prejudices about viewgraphs

- a. PRINT, don't use handwriting. With the ready availability of word processors, MACs, etc., it is easy to produce clear lettering in large, easily readable type.
- b. BLACK is the easiest color to read. And red is generally the hardest. So far, red viewgraph pens do not make a dark and long lasting mark. Use red, orange, pink, and yellow only to underline or highlight. Many different colors on the same viewgraph make it hard to read -- the reverse of what you might think.
- c. MORE material on a viewgraph is better than less. Talks that consists of many viewgraphs each with a single image are hard to follow. Every time you switch viewgraphs you risk losing the listener. With effort you can squeeze a lot on one viewgraph. Then you can spend many minutes on it; the listener has a chance to catch things missed the first time; connections between the material can be discerned in a glance.

Your [comments and suggestions](#) are appreciated.

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