

A Few of Will's Thoughts on Giving Talks

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An Unreasonable Schemer Production

Book 03 of Will's ShovelWare Book Pack
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To everyone who has sat through one of my talks.

About Will's ShovelWare Book Pack

In an experiment to see if I can train myself to finish writing a book on my own—instead of just poking at it for a few weeks before abandoning it and starting another—I have publicly committed to writing and releasing seventeen (17) books in one year, releasing one book every three weeks. I made the original announcement on Will Radio Part XXVIII¹ on September 15, 2025, with the experiment to end on September 6, 2026, when the 17th book is due.

Good or bad, short or long, my goal is to finish and release a book every 21 days, like clockwork.

The idea for this experiment came from my kiloTube Video challenge from a couple years ago. I had been wanting to make more videos, but was suffering from perfectionism—I would record 70 or 80 takes of a video before deleting it in disgust. So I publicly announced that I was going to make 1,024 (or 2^{10}) videos in a single year (one kiloTube worth), in an attempt to force myself to just make video after video, with the idea that I'd eventually learn the mechanics, and learn my own style for making videos. Although I didn't come close to making 1,024 videos that year (partly because making videos involved making noise, which caused some social issues), the practice of making an average of 3 videos a day for weeks quickly got me over my perfectionism block. I now have no trouble sitting down and making a video in one take, editing it, and uploading it in a single sitting.

My hope is that after finishing and releasing a dozen or so books, I'll start to relax out a little, and will be over the fear of releasing something less than perfect. There's a go adage, "Lose your first hundred games as quickly as possible." I'm trying to write and release my first dozen (or so) terrible books as quickly as possible. With 17 books to write, I might write a few decent ones, as well.

I am allowing myself to update books I've already released, so long as I continue releasing a new book every 3 weeks.

This is the third of the 17 books, due on Sunday, November 16, 2025, Anywhere on Earth (or whenever I go to sleep!). (Originally I was going to release the books on Monday nights, but Sundays work better.) I released book 02 early, so I had a little extra time to work on this book, which I took advantage of at first, before becoming

¹https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d6_cB-jtxYI

distracted by myriad issues shortly thereafter. The next book, book 04, will be due Sunday, December 7, 2025.

Contents

Preface	ix
1 The Essentials	1
1.1 Showing up	1
1.2 Audio/Visual	2
1.2.1 Audio	2
1.2.2 Visual	3
2 Venue	5
3 Time management	7
4 Conference Talks	9
4.1 Speaker's dinner and other special events	9
4.2 Sessions and session chairs	9
4.3 Stage	11
4.4 Release forms	11
4.5 Audiences	11

Preface

This book is about giving talks, including speaking at conferences. While the book focuses on talks, at least some of my thoughts and perspective carry over to other contexts, such as classroom lectures.

One objective of this book is to expand the reader's notion of *what* a talk can be, and *how* it can be performed.

Acknowledgments

My thanks to the countless people who has given talks I've watched in person or from a recording. I've learned from all of the talks I've watched.

I also thank everyone who has sat through my talks, terrific or terrible (especially those who sat through my terrible talks). I've learned from all of these talks, as well.

Thank you to Marco Marchesin for sending me errata to my previous ShovelWare books, and for pointing out that the PDFs didn't correctly display the table of contents, which I think I have fixed for this book.

And thank you to Sam Aaron and Amr Sabry who gave me the best advice of all when I was at my most nervous and anxious: "*Just be yourself.*"

Will Byrd
Mt. Pleasant, South Carolina
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Chapter 1

The Essentials

1.1 Showing up

Showing up is 90% of success.

Show up, in the right place, early. At least early enough to greet the organizer or session chair, and to test the audio/visual equipment.

Make sure you know location of the venue, and know how to get into the building and the room. I've spoken at conferences where I showed up at what I thought was where I was speaking, to learn that I was speaking in another building 15 minutes away. I have also spoken in large buildings with many entrances, most of which were locked. Exits or entrances to a venue might be locked at certain times or on the weekend; you may not be able to use the same entrance you used before.

If you are traveling internationally, did you remember to bring your passport?

Do the organizers have a way to contact you, and do you have a way to contact them?

If possible, visit the venue the day before your talk, to check out the room and setup.

Show up before the break before the beginning of your session, to test the audio/visual setup, and to talk with the organizer or session chair. And also to avoid having them freak out, and to make absolutely sure you show up in the right place at the right time, and can get into the building, and all that stuff.

If you are speaking remotely, make sure your computer and Inter-

net connection are working reliably, you are in a quiet location with a decent microphone, and are able to log into whichever video software the organizers are using. Make you have tested screen sharing, have set up necessary security permissions in your operating system, and so forth, well *before* it is time for your talk.

1.2 Audio/Visual

If your audience can't see you or hear you, you may as well have not have given the talk.

Here are a few notes I wrote while watching a recent high-profile talk at a fancy venue in person. The talk was in a large room with a distracting echo. The lights were on, which washed out the projector's image a little, and produced glare. A heating unit was making lots of noise in the back of the room. People were coming and going throughout the talk. People's heads were in the way of my seeing the speaker during most of the talk. People were coughing during the talk. A group of students in a nearby "quiet room" were talking loudly. The host forgot to turn on microphone, and then held the microphone at arm's length away from his mouth while speaking. The volume of the speaker's voice kept changing. Sometimes the speaker was loud enough to generate feedback from the PA system.

In my experience, many of these distractions are very common. Some can be controlled, such as holding a microphone properly, while others will be out of your control as a speaker. At a minimum, you can avoid mistakes such as facing the screen instead of the audience when using a podium-mounted microphone, or using the microphone as a pointer, which are both mistakes I've seen over and over again.

1.2.1 Audio

Humans have low tolerance for terrible audio. Think of nails on a chalkboard. For video or for visual aspects, if it's terrible, the talk becomes radio.

Speaking with a mic, if you aren't used to it, and hearing your own voice, often, with a delay and perhaps with an echo, can be extremely distracting. The first academic talk I gave, I couldn't

handle the delayed echo to the extent that I took off my mic and just sort of yelled, which didn't work that well.

Speak into the mic, as opposed to facing away from the mic. If you are using a hand-held mic, you can probably keep the mic on your chin. Avoid using the mic as a pointer, pointing the business end away from your mouth as you talk. Changing the distance between your mouth and your mic, or greatly modulating the loudness of your voice, is likely to make the talk hard to hear, or annoying to listen to.

If you are using a lapel mic, is the mic secure? Will it scrape against your clothing, making an annoying scratching sound? Will the cord catch on anything?

1.2.2 Visual

When using slides with a digital projector, screen size, projected image size, room lighting, angle of the screen, angle between the screen and projector, and the projector brightness can vary greatly between venues. When making slides, and when choosing fonts, font sizes, colors, and contrast, I assume I'll be speaking in a room with bright overhead lights on, with a tiny projector with an old bulb, projecting on a screen at a weird angle to the audience. Large fonts, high contrast, and colors that stand out are my defaults.

I use the free "Caffeine" app for macOS to keep my computer screen from dimming, and my computer from sleeping, when giving a talk. I'm sure there are similar apps for other operating systems. Some projectors have trouble recovering from a lost signal, and may take several minutes to get working again if your laptop goes to sleep, which can throw off your entire talk.

Beware what is on your screen: email, texts and chat sessions, apps, browser bookmarks, shortcuts, and history, what is on your desktop, desktop background, etc.

Chapter 2

Venue

Make sure you know where the venue is, especially if there are multiple buildings being used for a conference or event. Don't assume that the buildings are close together, or that it is possible to easily walk from one building to another. Make sure you know how to get into the building, and that you have any ticket or speaker badge or whatever with you.

Check out the venue, room layout, and A/V setup at least a day before hand, if possible. If you are planning to use a blackboard or whiteboard, are there erasers and chalk, or working fresh markers? Are the blackboards and whiteboards of reasonable size and location? Do you need to activate a switch to move the boards, or to raise the screen to see the boards?

Chapter 3

Time management

The most important rule about timing your talk: *Don't go over.*

If your talk goes over time, you might end up taking time from speakers after you, or delaying the entire program.

The only exception to this rule is if the organizer or session chair tells you that you have extra time, or can continue going for a few minutes.

It's okay for your talk to end a little early. If your talk ends extremely early, such as only taking 10 minutes for a 25 minute time slot, something is probably off.

Many longer talks have a built-in question and answer time. If you know before hand that your talk is likely to go long, you can ask the organizer or session chair if it would be okay to use part or all of the Q&A time for your talk, in case you are running long. If they agree, you should still be sure to finish at the end of your total allotted time.

Some people speak much faster during a talk than they normally do, due to nervousness or adrenaline, which is one reason a talk might end early. A talk generally takes less time the more often you give it; usually by the 4th time, the talk's length has stabilized.

You can use a timer with presenter's mode on some slide software to keep track of the time remaining, or use a watch, or ask the organizer or session chair to hold up signs or give you verbal warnings. In any case, *don't go over.*

Chapter 4

Conference Talks

4.1 Speaker’s dinner and other special events

At some conferences you may be invited to attend a Speaker’s Dinner with the conference organizers and the other speakers. Some conferences also organize special activities for speakers, such as a tour of the town. You may not know the full itinerary until after you arrive. I try to be as prepared as possible before arriving, and to be flexible. At the same time, I see my main responsibility as to give the best talk I have, so there are times I skip events to work on my talk. I always attend the Speaker’s Dinner, though, which I don’t consider optional.

4.2 Sessions and session chairs

At a conference it is typical to divide the program into sessions. Often a session chair will be assigned to each session to make sure the talks go smoothly. It is good to introduce yourself to the session chair and/or organizer when you show up for the event, and to ask if there are any special instructions.

Generally the session chair will ask you and the other speakers for your session to test your A/V setup during a break (or to make sure your slides display properly, or that the streaming works properly, or whatever). This is critical, and gives you a chance to test the microphone and video.

When it is your time to present, if you are not the first speaker in your session, it is important that you get set up to speak as

quickly as possibly, usually as the prior speaker is doing questions and answers at the end of their talk. If you take too long to get set up, you will lose time for your talk and may have to cut out material, you risk losing the attention of the audience, and you may delay the overall program. For this reason, speakers usually sit in the front row, where they can quickly and easily reach the presentation area.

Session chairs may offer to hold up signs with how much time is remaining during your talk—often 5 minutes, 2 minutes, 1 minute, and 0 minutes, or something similar—or otherwise indicate how much time you have remaining. Many speakers are so focused on their talk that they become completely oblivious to someone sitting several feet in front of them holding up signs, or otherwise trying to get their attention. If your session chair offers to indicate time remaining, make sure to periodically look towards them to see if they are indicating the time remaining. As always, the main rule is to not go over, since you then are taking time from the other speakers.

The session chair will usually ask you a question or two if no one else asks you a question during Q&A. Sometimes you might be given questions through a moderator—for example, if people submit questions online, which is becoming common. If you are presenting a talk remotely, you may not be able to see the audience or the questions being asked, depending on your computer setup and the software you are using. In these cases the moderator or session chair should ask the questions for you.

If your talk is later in the day, you might not attend every session in the room where you are speaking. You should be at the room well before your session begins, though, at least by the beginning of the break before your session to test your A/V setup and talk with the session chair. Also, it isn't kind to the session chair and organizer if they can't find you close to your talk. I make sure the organizer can contact me by email and/or text, in case they need to reach me for some reason.

My personal philosophy is I owe the best talk I can give, and preparing for that talk sometimes means that I miss other parts of a conference. At the same time, I always try to show up early for my session, and make sure the organizers know how to reach me. And I try to interact with people *after* I've given my talk, if I haven't felt sufficiently prepared.

4.3 Stage

Some raised stages, especially temporary stages built just for a conference or talk, can make lots of distracting creaking noises if you walk around. (Yes, I've learned this the hard way.)

If you are on a raised stage, beware of falling off the stage, which has happened to a surprising number of performers.

4.4 Release forms

If your talk is being recorded, or streamed online, you may be asked to sign a release form. I always read these forms carefully.

4.5 Audiences

Audience expectations and reactions differ between academia and industry, in different countries, and in different contexts.

There is no such thing as a perfect or ideal talk. Different audiences, or even the same person at different points of time and in different contexts, might love or dislike the same talk.

It is helpful to learn about your audience when planning your talk, if possible. For example, if you are giving a talk that involves technical concepts, will your audience include a mixture of experts and novices?

I recently attended a lecture in which the speaker gave a highly practiced and polished talk honed for a general audience to an audience full of experts on the topic. The talk didn't seem to be a hit.

If you are speaking to an international audience that includes many non-native speakers of the language in which you are presenting, the language barrier may be significant. Humor and complex stories may be especially tricky for some audience members to follow. You may need to speak more slowly and clearly than usual, and avoid slang and cultural references that may not carry over. If your talk is being translated in real-time, you probably will not be able to cover as much material as usual, and may need to pause on a regular basis for the interpreter to catch up.

For several international talks I've given, I was told by my hosts that many if not most of the audience members were attending to

improve their English listening skills, rather than due to interest in the subject of my talk. You might encounter this as well. I tried to give the best talks I could, and tried to avoid speaking too quickly or throwing in subtle references or jokes.