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Introduction

I’LL START with a confession.

I love many things about being an academic: teaching and doing research, writing and editing, mentoring and advising. I have even been known to find some joy in committee service.

But I don’t always love listening to academic talks. The reason is simple: most academic talks aren’t designed or delivered to engage the people listening to them. We’ve all had to sit through talks where professors showed cramped illegible slides, never looked up from their screens or their scripts, delayed making their most important points, talked down to us or sailed way over our heads, exceeded their allotted time, and capped all that off by failing to answer questions clearly and directly. Some talks are amazing, but the greatest talks often seem impossible to replicate for those of us not blessed with unusual talent and charisma.

I’m not the only one to think that the average academic talk could be a lot better. When I told colleagues that I was writing this book, their most common response was this: “Are you going to tell people how to make their talks less bad?”

Yes, I am.

How to Give a Good Academic Talk will not turn you into the next Mary Beard, Carl Sagan, or Cornel West, but any professor or graduate student with solid ideas, evidence, and reasoning who follows this book's advice will be able to give better academic talks.

Giving talks is one of the most important things academics do. On many academic résumés, the section that typically takes up the most space is the one listing "Invited Lectures and Conference Presentations." Over the course of a career, a professor at a research university might deliver anywhere from a dozen to hundreds of talks to other academics. Scholars give academic talks for many reasons: to get feedback on unpublished work from experts and nonexperts inside and outside their disciplines, to build professional networks, to demonstrate their ability to present information and answer questions. But even scholars who enjoy all those aspects of being an academic often dread speaking in public and worry, not without reason, about their ability to present their work effectively. "Would you like to come give a lecture in my department some time?" is an invitation every academic wants to receive, but many have mixed feelings accepting.

Giving talks is also one of the activities for which academics receive the least guidance. Like many aspects of academia, presentation skills form part of a hidden curriculum: something academics are expected to learn by osmosis, without any explicit instruction. I'm very aware of this because as an undergraduate, I was terrified of speaking in class. If I thought of something to say, my heart would start pounding, I'd get butterflies in my stomach, and I'd decide to save my ideas for my

essays. When I started graduate school, I realized I had to do something about this, and I did, but in a makeshift, haphazard way. My advisors were dedicated and attentive mentors who gave me detailed comments on my writing. When it came to presentations, however, they had far less advice, and their feedback usually focused on what I said, not how I said it.

Today, many graduate programs offer workshops on how to write conference abstracts, grant proposals, dissertation prospectuses, teaching statements, and cover letters. But it's still quite common for doctoral candidates to receive no formal training in presentation skills. Many graduate students get no feedback on those skills until the last year of their degree, when they start applying for jobs. At that late stage, most departments give students opportunities to do mock interviews and talks. These mock job talks and interviews typically take place only weeks or even days before the real thing, which doesn't leave students much time to act on feedback about what they're doing well and what they could improve.

After landing a job, professors are likely to give many more presentations, but when it comes to refining and improving them, they're mostly on their own. Given this lack of formal training, it's not surprising that brilliant scholars often deliver talks whose format and delivery don't live up to the strength of their ideas and material.

That's where this book comes in. Whether you're a graduate student who has yet to deliver a talk, an early-career scholar interested in improving your presentation skills, a seasoned academic ready to take your talks to the next level, or an advisor looking for resources to recommend to advisees, this book can help.

Here's a preview of what's to come. Because this book addresses scholars in all disciplines, chapter 2 sets the stage by addressing a question that scholars in the sciences, social sciences, and humanities handle quite differently: To script or not to script? Chapter 3 offers concrete tips for the most important challenge of any talk: engaging audience attention. Chapter 4 tackles how to begin and end a talk, and chapter 5 deals with the question-and-answer sessions that follow most academic presentations. Chapter 6 addresses how best to use slides. To give a talk inevitably involves using our bodies, so chapter 7 covers delivery, chapter 8 guides you through rehearsal, and chapter 9 discusses how to dress. Chapter 10 addresses the most effective ways to deliver a talk using videoconferencing platforms such as Zoom.

As this chapter list suggests, giving a talk requires many different skills, and the information presented here can be a lot to absorb and implement. In an ideal world, you'd read this book long before giving the talk that inspired you to pick it up. In that situation, I recommend reading the book through in its entirety and identifying the tips that you think would benefit you most. Once you've done that, decide which tips you're most open to trying out immediately and which you'd rather save for a later date. If you're a first- or second-year graduate student, you can start working on your top priorities when giving presentations in seminars, colloquiums, and working groups. By the time you give your first major conference paper or full-length lecture, you will be more comfortable with, say, projecting your voice or answering questions and can then move on to honing other skills. If you're a seasoned scholar, you can similarly read the book through before starting to

develop your next presentation and decide what would be most useful to experiment with in the short and long term.

This book is designed to be useful to speakers at all career stages, so at various points, I flag where expectations tend to be different for early-, mid-, and late-career scholars. I'll note here that it's generally prudent for early-career scholars to err on the side of formality and strict adherence to disciplinary protocols. While in principle academia thrives on innovation and originality, in practice people give established scholars more leeway for winging it or marching to their own drummer.

If you have picked up this book days or weeks before giving a talk, I recommend focusing on chapter 4, which covers effective ways to begin and end talks, and chapter 5, on fielding questions well. Unless you thrive under pressure, now is not the time to redesign your slides or rethink your costume (unless you haven't yet decided what to wear, in which case, take a look at chapter 9).

If you have at least a month between reading this book and delivering your presentation, you have ample time to work with the suggestions in chapter 3, which covers how to engage the audience, and in chapters 8 and 9, on how to rehearse and how to dress.

If you have several months before you give your next talk, consider diving into chapter 7, on training your voice and body for more effective delivery. It's worth a look at any point, but you'll find it easier and more fun to act on this chapter's recommendations if you're not in a rush.

Chapter 10, on giving talks on Zoom or other videoconferencing platforms, covers a lot of ground. If you're reading that

chapter soon before delivering your talk, I recommend prioritizing the tips about lighting, background, and arranging your computer, desk, and chair. If you have at least a month, that should be enough time to optimize your equipment, find a setting that minimizes disruptions, create slides suited for a virtual presentation, and practice addressing the camera.

This book draws on experience and wisdom I've gleaned from four decades of attending academic talks and discussing them with colleagues, but I've drawn the bulk of my examples from sixty talks delivered between 2017 and 2024. By design, many of those sixty talks are available on YouTube, so that if you're curious, you can consult some of my examples for yourself. You'll find a list of those talks, with links to those available online, at the end of the book. Talks take many forms, and so do my examples, which include full-length lectures and shorter conference presentations, talks delivered from notes and talks read aloud from fully prepared texts, talks delivered in person only, talks delivered only on Zoom, and talks in hybrid formats.

All my examples are real. Everything I recommend for or against is something I've seen people do. When I describe someone doing something well, I name names, to give credit where credit is due. I've mostly anonymized negative examples, out of courtesy, and because anything I advise against doing is not some idiosyncratic blooper but a common misstep I've witnessed many speakers make.

Because this book aims to be useful to academics in a wide range of fields, my examples are distributed more or less equally among the sciences, social sciences, and humanities. In a modest way, *How to Give a Good Academic Talk* aims to

transfer skills across disciplines. Talks in chemistry or economics can teach literature professors how to use charts effectively. History presentations can teach biologists or musicologists how to build suspense into their arguments. Art history lectures can teach everyone about contextualizing and analyzing images. As you read this book, you'll be encountering wisdom gleaned from talks on linked administrative datasets, on Herodotus and higher criticism, and on the C-H functionalization of aliphatic amines, without having to attend them—because I did, with an eye and ear attuned to identifying the best practices underlying them.

Where relevant, I cite scientific studies, many drawn from communications and from cognitive science. Researchers have conducted rigorous, controlled experiments on how best to design slides and on whether vocal volume affects listeners more than vocal pace. The chapters that follow situate those technical findings in a cohesive, step-by-step guide and combine them with advice based on my own judgment. Throughout, I aim to make clear when I'm presenting a fact backed by evidence and when I'm offering my considered opinion. You don't have to agree with all of my opinions to benefit from them. If you find yourself arguing with some of what I say, that's great, because it furthers what I assume is your main goal in reading this book: to become more thoughtful about what makes for a good academic talk.¹

1. I also recommend the following resources, although some of my advice departs from theirs: Stephen M. Kosslyn, *Clear and to the Point: 8 Psychological Principles for Compelling PowerPoint Presentations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Chris Anderson, *TED Talks: The Official TED Guide to Public Speaking* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2017); Jonathan Schwabish, *Better Presentations: A Guide*

At this point, you may be asking yourself why you should listen to me. It's a fair question, and I have a few answers.

First, *How to Give a Good Academic Talk* taps my decades of experience. I began attending talks in 1982 as an undergraduate, delivered my first conference presentation in 1989, and became a professor in 1993. I have given close to two hundred talks and attended close to a thousand and have helped dozens of students develop presentation skills. As a researcher and teacher, sometimes an award-winning one, I've focused on understanding and explaining what makes some stories and performances more absorbing than others. This book also draws on experiences beyond my own. Throughout, I've added other voices to the mix by quoting from interviews that I conducted with eight colleagues known for giving great talks *and* great advice.

Second, if you're a scientist or a social scientist asking yourself what a humanist could possibly teach someone in your discipline about giving a good talk, rest assured that I worried about that myself. I made sure to run my ideas by colleagues in the sciences and social sciences and to include talks from mathematics, statistics, computer science, chemistry, biology,

for Scholars, Researchers, and Wonks (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017); David L. Stern, "How to Give a Talk," <https://www.howtogiveatalk.com/>; Paul N. Edwards, "How to Give an Academic Talk," <https://pne.people.si.umich.edu/PDF/howtotalk.pdf>; and Lori Flores and Jocelyn Olcott, "A Few Rules of Thumb About Conference Presentations and Invited Talks," in *The Academic's Handbook*, 4th ed., ed. Lori A. Flores and Jocelyn H. Olcott (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), 64–66. Susan M. Reinhart's *Giving Academic Presentations*, 2nd ed. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), also helpful, is designed for undergraduates and international graduate students giving short classroom presentations.

sociology, economics, and political science in my examples. It's also worth mentioning that I wasn't always a card-carrying humanist. In high school, I was a science geek who worked after school in a university biology lab studying programmed cell death in moths. To this day, one of my proudest achievements is having been named a finalist in the 1982 Westinghouse (now Regeneron) Science Talent Search. You can find a photo of me with my fellow finalists online: I'm on the left, head tilted, hand under chin, apparently very ready for my close-up.² In college I started out in Brown University's BA/MD program, which meant that before shifting to comparative literature, I took several science courses and one grueling linear algebra class.

Third, if you're a historian, anthropologist, art historian, musicologist, or film scholar or if you work in area studies or on literatures written in languages other than English, you may be wondering if my experience as a humanities scholar is relevant to yours. It is. My research has always been comparative and multidisciplinary, drawing on social and cultural history, visual culture, and media studies. My work as an administrator has also given me valuable experience outside my specific areas of expertise. As an associate dean, I led a division that included Religious Studies, Philosophy, Art History, and Music. In over a decade of service on my university's promotion and tenure committee, including four years as chair, I read hundreds of academic dossiers in twenty-eight disciplines spanning the sciences, social sciences, and humanities. That

2. See <https://www.societyforscience.org/regeneron-sts/science-talent-search-1982/>.

administrative experience didn't make me an expert in fields far from my own, but it did familiarize me with the norms governing different disciplines, including the norms around talks.

I'll end this introduction with three things that surprised me as I moved from conceptualizing this book to researching it and writing it.

First, I started out assuming that good talks in the sciences, social sciences, and humanities would be so different that each field would require its own separate chapter. I was wrong. The more talks I listened to, the more it became clear that all good academic talks adhere to a core set of principles and practices. I found that when a talk was good, even if I couldn't follow every point being made about Liouville functions or cancer immunology, I could still understand the *moves* the speaker was making. Those moves were the same across disciplines, and they are the moves I share with you here: think of them as the DNA, the norms, the grammar underlying all good academic talks, whether they are full-length lectures, short conference presentations, or book talks. That said, one of my overarching pieces of advice is to learn and follow the norms specific to your discipline and subfield. When it comes to some of my more specific tips, always consult trusted advisors in your discipline and subfield about protocol in your neck of the woods.

Second, I thought that I would need separate chapters to cover the two most common ways of delivering academic talks: loosely, from notes and outlines, or tightly, from a carefully prepared, printed text. Once again, I found this to be something of a false distinction. As the next chapter explains,

whether extemporized or scripted, all good academic talks balance organization and flow.

Third, I would not have predicted that every single one of the scholars I interviewed would, at some point in our conversation, evoke theater and performance. Late in my interview with sociologist Michèle Lamont, she revealed that she did theater in high school and college. Historian Daniel Immerwahr described his brother, a theater director, asking him about the “costume” he would wear to deliver a talk and how it would interact with the color of his “set” (also known as his classroom). Physicist Robert Mawhinney capped a magisterial account of the components of a good science talk with this observation: “Talks are not shows, but a little bit of showmanship is not bad.” Unlike the first two surprises, this one didn’t change my plans. Instead, it reinforced my initial decision to include chapters on delivery, rehearsal, and dress. Academics don’t tend to love being in the limelight, but this book will help even the shyest speaker access their inner thespian.



This book is for every academic or budding academic who will ever have to give a talk—which is pretty much every academic—and for every student assigned a presentation in a seminar or working group. As noted above, I recommend going beyond what you read here by consulting colleagues and mentors who can advise you about best practices within your specific field. But if you’re hesitant to talk to other people about some of the bigger challenges you face as a speaker, and prefer to start getting advice by reading a book, you’re not alone. It’s also the case

that great mentors don't always give great talks and that even academics who do give great talks can't always explain exactly how they make them so spellbinding. That is why this book has something to offer everyone, from a seasoned scholar delivering their umpteenth lecture to a beginner who has yet to present their first conference paper. Onward, then, to chapter 2, which lays out some basic principles of giving a good academic talk, whether that talk is scripted or not.