

Seminar/Job Talk

Taken from “**The Ph.D. Job Hunt – Helping Students Find the Right Positions,**” by Edward D. Lazowska, Department of Computer Science & Engineering, University of Washington.

Preparing a great talk

We tell students: Iterate on an outline with your advisor. Iterate on slides with your advisor. Go through a dry run with a couple of students. Go through a dry run with your advisor. Try it with a larger audience.

Be sure that your audience includes people from outside your subfield – the only way to be sure that your talk works with a general audience. Remember that, while the goal of a conference talk is to inform a specialized audience about a particular research result, the goal of a job talk is to convince a broader audience that you’ve identified an important and difficult problem, that you’ve come up with an innovative and effective solution, that you have concrete ideas for a future research agenda, and that you’ll be a strong contributor to their scholarly community.

Here is the secret weapon: videotape your presentation (our department has owned a video camera for more than a decade for this explicit purpose) and *force yourself to watch the tape*. After you’ve recovered from the shock, fix the many annoying things that you are bound to have observed.

Rehearse responding to questions – a critically important aspect of the presentation. Beg people at your dry runs to ask more questions, even bizarre questions – you’ll get plenty of these on the road, and practice definitely helps. Under questioning, be honest, not glib. If a question points to a flaw in your work or a limitation in your understanding, acknowledge this, promise to follow up, and do so! Practice gracefully disengaging from rat-holes – time management is the speaker’s responsibility.

Giving a Job Talk

Taken from “**Giving a Job Talk in the Sciences,**” by Richard M. Reis.

Not long ago, the chairman of the physics department at Stanford University told a colleague of mine that he had just hired a young physicist who had given “the best academic job talk the department had ever seen.” Curious, I called the new physics professor and asked what it was that she had done.

Although flattered, the assistant professor was taken aback, since in her mind she hadn’t really done anything all that special. “I just asked myself what were the three things I wanted them to remember from my talk and then told them those three things over and over in as many different ways as I could,” she recalls. “I wanted the audience to leave my talk talking about my talk, and to be able to grab anyone in the hallway who had not attended and say, ‘You won’t believe what I just learned.’”

In short, she succeeded by following a simple, yet often forgotten adage, “Tell them what you are going to say, say it, and then tell them what you said.”

As a doctoral student or post-doc seeking a professorship, your academic job talk may well be the most important presentation you will ever give. An excellent talk can get you the job, while a poor one will almost surely eliminate you from contention.

Your ability to communicate well, to show enthusiasm, and to make good use of various media in a job talk all correlate highly with good teaching.

For most department heads and deans, making the correct hiring decision is their most important task. It is their legacy. Your job is to convince them, within a very short period of time, that you are the most qualified candidate. They want to know what kind of researcher, thinker, and teacher you are going to be. Thus, it is important to place your current work in a broader context and to tie it to key issues and problems particular to your field.

Michele Marinovich, assistant vice provost and director of Stanford's Center for Teaching and Learning, has counseled hundreds of students and post-docs about their academic job talks. She offers this advice:

- Don't wait to prepare your job talk until the last minute -- it is more than just a "brain dump" of your dissertation. It's crucial to be able to go beyond your dissertation. Be well enough prepared that you can allow yourself to be spontaneous.
- When you write out your talk in advance, focus on what you want people to be thinking about as they leave; it will help you concentrate on the essentials. And make your talk interesting with good examples, relevant anecdotes, and significant details.
- If speaking to a mixed audience, avoid highly technical or specialized terms.
- Science is changing and increasingly includes previously underrepresented groups. Use inclusive language -- "she" as well as "he," for example -- and language that is respectful of all groups.
- Using humor in your job talk can be risky, but if it comes naturally to you, go ahead and be funny. If it doesn't, don't try to fake it.
- There will usually be a question-and-answer period. There is no way to predict all the questions you might be asked, but you can practice by having friends listen to your talk and then ask you the hardest questions they can think of.
- Few speakers reach every listener all the time, so don't focus on unresponsive audience members. In fact, you may see a lot of unresponsive listeners. Be aware that in many science and engineering fields, there is a tendency for much of the audience at a job talk to act that way, either because they're trying to make the experience more challenging or simply because they're concentrating on critiquing the presentation. Try to stay in touch with your audience, but don't try to decide the success of your talk while you're still giving it.

Job talks in the sciences are often based on extensive data, charts, and graphs. If you have materials that summarize the key results of your research, by all means include them in your presentation. However, raw data and detailed statistical analysis are best handled

either as a handout at the end of your talk or through overheads shown during the question-and-answer period.

Ms. Marincovich offers the following tips for using a laptop display or an overhead projector:

- Talk to the audience, not to the projector image or the projector.
- Give a "roadmap" (overview or outline) of your talk at the beginning and/or as a handout.
- Turn off the projector at appropriate times (it can be distracting to be talking about one topic while a slide of an unrelated topic is still projected on the screen).
- In addition to the slides you plan to use in your talk, have a few extra slides in reserve that you can use during the Q&A period to elaborate on your research.
- Check for consistency in the appearance of your overheads and slides.
- Don't use too many overheads or slides. Every phrase on an overhead or slide should "say something" or summarize the main point of what you will be saying. Also, be careful not to just recite the phrases on your overhead. Overheads should not be your notes.

You can further reduce the mystery surrounding the academic job talk by sitting in on a few given by candidates for positions at your own institution.