

How Do You Give a Great Lecture?

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Part 1 of this series appeared in the June issue of SGIM Forum.

Preparing and Giving a Talk: A Brief Outline

Preparing

1. Find out what you can about the members of your audience
 - a. What do they know about the subject?
 - b. How do they feel about it?
 - c. What issues might be on their minds?
2. Identify the two to three “take home messages” that you will deliver to the audience by the end of the talk
3. Identify the literature, observations, and experiences that inform the take-home points
4. Create an outline of the rational basis of the talk: key points, data to support those points, and summary
5. Identify stories that will help illustrate points in the outline
6. Add pictures to the slides that increase interest, illustrating the outline and the stories

Giving the Talk

1. Learn the talk well enough that few prompts are needed; avoid having speaker notes (and/or a podium) come between you and the audience
2. If there is a close colleague who will be in the audience, ask that person to listen critically and give feedback on the strong points of the talk and how it might be improved
3. Find a comfortable place to stand that allows you to see everyone in the audience and the slides
4. Make eye contact with people sitting around the room
5. Put yourself “into” the talk; show enthusiasm for the topic; have fun

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Preparing and Giving the Talk: A Descriptive Approach

Preparing the Talk

Most all of us use slides. Most all of us were never taught how to use slides. Start with the basics:

- *A slide is not your lecture notes.* Don't write a stream of words on the screen. No one will see them or read them. Use large fonts; space the slide; make it interesting; and highlight the main points you want to emphasize. Use pictures, preferably cartoons, to illustrate your ideas, and your audience will always remember and relay them and not the

words on the slide. As to the “highlight” recommendation, with new PowerPoint features that essentially allow you to animate your slides like Disney/Pixar cartoons, resist the temptation. Too much “bling” makes you look like PT Barnum, and you don't want your talk to be a “circus show.”

- *Break your talk into sections.* Use your slide titles as cues to you and the audience of the transitions you are making. As in a paper, the core sections should alert the audience in a familiar way: Introduction: Why is this an important topic? What are your goals/objectives? Methods: What are the core processes used to accomplish these goals/objectives? Evidence: Show me the data. Discussion: Explain the data. Conclusion: Give me something to take home. The last point bears clarification. The “big picture idea” should be kept in mind in preparing the talk and should be conveyed simply and clearly throughout the talk. Don't just save the punch line for the end. If you run out of time, you won't get your point across.
- *Shorten your talk.* You should carefully determine what you can cover in the time allotted. Remember to leave time for questions and answers. Our tendency is to try and give the audience every last bit of information on the topic. Don't drone on and bore the audience or try to impress them with “verbal acrobatics.” The role of a really good teacher is to motivate your learner to want to understand more and to provide them guidance on how to do so. Leave them wanting more—that's the real excitement of learning.
- *Proofread your slides.* Do they say what you will speak? If the visual images don't reinforce what you will be saying, you are wasting your time, and you will lose the audience as they begin to zone out trying to decipher your slides. One typo or grammatical error and all your efforts to establish credibility are jeopardized. Have someone else double check your slides before you finalize them.

Giving the Talk

First and foremost, know your audience. This is not all about you (although you are advertising yourself). Who are they? Don't give a technical lab talk to clinicians and vice versa. How much does the audience already know? Speak to both the “well-informed” and the “clueless”—that way everyone gets something that they can understand and find interesting and exciting.

- *Be comfortable.* Know how to move the slides forward and backward, how to use the microphone properly, and how to hold the pointer so that people

know what you're pointing at. (Remember that you are not signaling planes in for a landing, so hold it steady!) I have had the occasion of having the slide projector and the computer malfunction during my talk. Don't panic! You should become so comfortable with your message that, even if this catastrophe occurs, you can go on and give the talk "acapela." If you believe in your subject, you will motivate your audience.

- *Enjoy yourself.* Everyone gets nervous. Pay attention to your body, your voice, and your rhythms. Watch your verbal and nonverbal behaviors, including repetitive words ("um," "you know," "basically"), pacing, twitching, fidgeting, clearing your throat. These are the unconscious ways we manifest nervousness, and they will break the audience's concentration so that it never hears a word you say. Instead, the audience will fixate on your gestures. Talk to your audience, not to the slides. Focus on making the connection with individuals. Some people are naturals, but most of us have to learn this ability to reach outside of ourselves to others and do that while talking at the same time. It will come with practice, just like walking and chewing gum at the same time.
- *Don't dread answering questions.* This is your opportunity to grow and learn. Always repeat the question for the whole audience—rephrase it to make sure you understand it. Also, don't be defensive; instead, learn from criticism. Don't thrust and parry with the audience. Use a sense of humor to defuse any tension. And always leave them laughing.

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Using a Talk to Educate Your Audience

As a veteran of many presentations both good and bad, both as a speaker and a learner, I can confidently say the key to giving a good talk is to remember that **you're a teacher, not a lecturer**. Your goal in giving a talk is to educate the audience. So teach, don't lecture. The latter simply imparts information that often just drifts uselessly to the ceiling. The former ensures knowledge transfer through understanding and learning. So, "How do you do that?"

1. *Know your topic.* The audience came to hear an expert. Be one. Talk about things you know. Or, take the time to truly learn the topic.
2. *Entertain.* People want to be entertained, and entertained people learn more. This is hard to do, but watch what happens when a speaker tells an anecdote, relates an interesting case, or shows a funny picture. The audience immediately perks up and pays attention.
3. *Be appropriately light-hearted.* I nearly always start a talk with something light hearted as a hook to

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grab the audience's attention. It can be a joke, a funny slide, or a great anecdote. It's usually not very funny, but then again the audience knows they are not at a comedy club. Rather, they'll appreciate that you tried to make it entertaining and gave them a chance to get to know you a bit—sort of like the author's book introduction. Revisit light-hearted material often during your talk.

4. *It's not about the slides.* Speakers often read from, stare at, or over-emphasize their slides. This is always a bad move. Your audience has come to hear you speak, so it will want to look at you. Turn the audience's attention to your slides to make an important point. Beyond that, your presentation should demand that everyone focuses on you. Al Gore illustrated this brilliantly in the movie, *An Inconvenient Truth*.
 5. *Get out from behind the podium.* There's no better way to focus the audience on you. The best speakers get out in front and establish a presence. Moving around also allows you to engage people at the edges of the crowd. If you're really brave, walk the aisle to connect with the people in the back. This will force the folks in the front to rotate in their chairs to see what you are up to, re-engaging them as well.
 6. *Practice.* I don't advocate writing out or memorizing your talk, but I do strongly recommend being well rehearsed. A general rule that I use is to be able to flip through my talk and stop on any slide and be able to present it without pause.
 7. *Know your audience.* I recently flailed through a talk because I had misread my learner group. I assumed they knew more than they did and that they would learn well through a more Socratically designed talk. I was wrong, lost them quickly, and never got them back. Ask who will be in the audience, what they know, and what they expect.
 8. *Memorize the first few slides.* The first few moments of a talk are the most important. You're nervous, and the audience is restless. Starting strong will calm your nerves, grab their attention, and show them that the talk is worth 60 minutes
- continued on page 12

HOW DO YOU DO THAT? PART II

continued from page 9

- of their life. Facilitate a good start by memorizing what you'll say for the first few minutes. After that it'll be smooth sailing.
9. *Make your transitions flow.* Know your transition from slide to slide. Slides can enhance a talk, but they also make for unnatural breaks in your presentation. Minimize this by seamlessly moving from slide to slide.
 10. *Honor thy pause.* The pause is the single most beneficial talk tactic. Use it often and vary its pregnancy to the desired effect. Frequent short pauses ensure you won't become monotone and allow you to take a deep breath and think of your next point. Longer pauses refocus people. Just as they begin recounting the myriad tasks that await them after the talk, they will note that no one is talking. "That's odd," they'll think. "I better see if the speaker is on the ground suffering a massive MI." At that point, they look up, and you begin to talk—with a re-engaged audience.
 11. *Speak often.* To be great, you have to suffer through a bunch of less-than-great talks. Get those out of the way as quickly as you can, honing your skills as you go. Always accept opportunities to talk; even go so far as to search them out. This will and should be uncomfortable. No one wins a foot race without having pushed themselves beyond their limits during training.
 12. *Learn something from every talk you attend.* I'm referring not just to content but also to the style of the presentation. I always ask what the speaker is doing well and poorly. I try to emulate the former and eschew the latter.
 13. *Try something new every time you speak.* Every talk is an opportunity to try out something you learned from others. Don't be afraid to fail with something. Remember, you want to be better than good. So, try the joke, give a five-second pause, and walk to the back of the room.
 14. *Anticipate the questions.* If you know your audience and the topic, you should be able to anticipate the questions you receive. Doing this will help you feel comfortable and appear learned during the Q&A session.
 15. *Come early.* View the room and layout before the talk. Visualize yourself giving the talk in that room. Then show up 15 minutes before the talk to rub elbows with the early comers. This will calm your nerves and engage the audience.
 16. *End early.* Few of us can maintain our interest beyond 30 minutes. Stop an hour-long talk at 40 minutes. This allows time for the important Q&A session, refocuses your learners, and ensures that you don't try to impart too much information

during your talk. And be honest—is anyone going to be upset if they can grab a coffee before the next talk, get back to work ahead of schedule, or hit the restroom a bit earlier?

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Summary Points

These experts identified several critical elements of giving a great lecture:

Prior to the lecture...

- Learn who your audience members will be, and gear the talk toward them.
- Avoid PowerPoint animation gimmicks. They can be distracting.
- Make sure font size is not too small to be read from the back of the room.
- Make sure the beginning and end are just as good as, if not better than, the middle.
- While it is important to know the topic, don't try to provide too much information.
- Anticipate questions.
- Memorize the first few slides.
- Practice, practice, practice.
- Arrive early, check audio-visual equipment and layout of room, and bond with early attendees.
- Make sure you are given a good introduction, even if it means writing it yourself.

During the lecture...

- Try to connect with audience through eye contact and frequent smiles. If you're not good at telling a joke, use a humorous slide. Appropriate pauses can add effect.
- Whether you are or not, try to appear relaxed.
- Consider getting out from behind the podium.
- Try not to read directly from slides.
- End early.

After the lecture...

- Reflect on what went well and what didn't.
- Seek out additional lecturing opportunities!

Lecturing is an extremely important activity. Altruistically, it holds the potential to edify, excite, and educate an audience. Selfishly, it holds "academic currency," can be a break from the mundane, can improve your perceived standing, and can help with the promotion process. If done well, it can lead to many additional opportunities. As they say, "Success begets success."

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