

Tips for Talks

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- Decide on the central idea or graph or picture that you want your audience to remember. Devote your talk to building up this idea: you will need many discussions, experiments, derivations, examples, and so forth to drive that idea home, but don't add discussions, experiments, derivations, examples, etc. extraneous to the main idea. At the appropriate point in your talk, you may want to simply state the main idea: "What I want you to get out of this talk is... [one sentence]".
- You will be nervous. Get used to it and anticipate it. Write down and memorize your first three sentences.
- Don't expect to work something out correctly while speaking. Your IQ drops by 30 points when you step before an audience.
- Consider a summary or some other ending. (Memorize your last sentence?) Number or, in some other way, clearly delineate your main points and conclusions.
- Begin your talk with an outline or some other summary of what is to come.
- Tell your audience why this is an interesting problem. Give plenty of background.
- By the time you give your talk, you're an expert on the subject. Remember that your audience is not: A point you consider so simple that it needn't be stated will be completely foreign to them.
- Assume your audience is deaf: write out all important points.
- Consider using handouts for graphs, diagrams, pictures, etc.
- Before giving your talk to the intended audience, practice on a knowledgeable friend.
- Anticipate questions, and perhaps rely on them. (Plan your talk so that a listener is sure to ask you a question that you wish asked. Failing that, prime one of your friends.)
- In Exodus, God appears to Moses in a burning bush and tells Moses that he is to lead the Jews from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the promised land. Moses, reluctant to become God's instrument, could have offered up a number of arguments why God should call on some one else: Moses was wanted for murder in Egypt; he was in exile; he had a wife and child to support; he had flocks to tend to. But in fact he doesn't raise those arguments. Instead he says (Exodus iv.10) "O LORD, I have never been a man of ready speech, never in my life, not even now that thou hast spoken to me; I am slow and hesitant of speech." That is, Moses's first argument was fear of speaking before groups. Fear like this has been with us for 4000 years. Get used to it and learn to live with it.