

## PLEA FROM A SYMPOSIUM GOER

I am sitting in the eleventh incredibly boring 30 minute 'paper' in two days, nodding my head in somnambulistic time, drowsily wondering how we are going to break this cycle. Head on attack. Get off your larded minds, my fellow scientists.

Now just what right do you have to ask for the attention of 200 people for 30 minutes? It is certainly not to orally repeat what you have written. I can read 3 times faster than you can talk; give me the manuscript, let me read it, and spend 20 minutes asking you the questions. It is certainly not to present prose through extemporaneous babble; you can never orally present it as clearly as you can write it, to mean what you say and say what you mean. It is certainly not to convey 30 minutes of data; I have no hope of remembering more than 3 minutes worth of numbers more than one hour after your talk. It is certainly not to document your research conclusions; you don't have to show me a table with numbers on it for me to believe you when you say that you have found that elephants can eat baobab fruits faster than baboons.

The function of asking for my time is so that you can send me off carrying 30 minutes worth of punchlines that I can use to better understand other people's work, that I can use to improve my own research, and that will inspire me to do things I would never have thought to do on my own. So how can you do all these things?

1. Use no notes. If you, the person who knows more about it than anyone else, cannot remember something for 30 minutes, how do you expect me to remember it more than 30 minutes after the end of your talk? An oral presentation is the antithesis of the archival function of science.
2. If you need a prompter for the sequence of thought presentation, use an aid that is simultaneously perceptible to your audience. Draw them into your train of thought. When that slide pops on the screen that reminds you to now take up the case of seed spitting by horses, you want your audience to get the same reminder; that prepares them for that earthshaking punchline you are going to lay on them. And remember you are talking to a TV generation.
3. Organise your talk by deciding the take-home messages and then dressing them up with those devices that are necessary to make them sink in. It may be a table with a single enormous number in it, a photograph of a little girl spitting watermelon seeds, or a white slide in the projector that puts you and your depressed face in the spotlight.
4. Never give the same talk twice. Even if you simply have to change the order of the presentation, always have part of the talk totally new to you. If you are bored, so will the audience be bored. Introduce some slop, some error, some slight blur, make your audience work a bit, recover along with you, when you have to back up two slides or repeat a point to state it more clearly.
5. Never tell a lie. You never have to remember what you said then. If you show five slides of five frogs in your study plot, and one of them is of the same species but taken 30 miles away, say so.
6. Never hesitate to simply stop and collect your thoughts, look at the clock, or state that you have simply forgotten the point you were going to make. Go on, it will drop out of the sky 3 slides later.
7. Listen to your audience; watch their faces. And pick out one friendly soul near the front row to become the other half of the discussion you are about to have.
8. Every audience is different. Put your talk together for THAT specific audience. Even if you use the same slides as you would have for another audience, go through a dry run with today's audience in your mind's eye.

9. Never give a seminar on published work unless it is to draw attention to unappreciated or requested material. Your seminar should be on those things that are live and new and fresh to you, right now. Incomplete, yes.

Let your audience in on your research in the fun stage, before you have drained the mystery from the problem. Remember, you don't have to prove to the audience that you know more than they do about the subject; that you do is self-evidenced by your presence. Perhaps the strongest kick you can give your imagination to spot an unnoticed potential solution is to have to face an audience of peers and tell them you don't yet have an hypothesis to test for this baffling problem.

10. Never apologise. We will make up our own minds as to whether to forgive you.

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