

The One-Minute Talk

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What if you spill your water on the other person? Just apologize and hand over your napkin.

When someone asks you who you are and what you do--whether it's a random stranger on a conference elevator (who may just end up being your next boss), or a Nobel Prize-winner sitting next to you at dinner after an on-campus lecture--your answer needs to be clear, crisp, accurate, interesting, informative, pleasant, friendly, optimistic, articulate, and succinct all in a single, relaxed burst of speech measured in seconds, not minutes. You need to say all the things you mean to say without going off course; rambling; giggling; stumbling over your words; speaking to your navel instead of the person you're supposed to be addressing; mocking yourself; inadvertently insulting the person you're meeting or his or her place of employment, country, family, or favorite athletic team; spilling your coffee; forgetting to breathe; apologizing for being unworthy; or stating unequivocally that your scientific work is irrelevant, small, and likely to burst into flames at any moment.

When you introduce yourself, you must give a tiny talk, full of facts about yourself and your work without forgetting that the entire moment is about not you, but, rather, this person to whom you are speaking.

Only a moment

When it's time to introduce yourself, you typically get only a moment. At that moment, all eyes are on you. How do you make the most of your moment? Or, at least, how can you avoid embarrassing yourself or making your science seem dull, trivial, inane, or wrong?

With a little forethought, you can become more confident at delivering the "1-minute talk." That's good, because over the next few years you will find yourself giving this talk over and over again, to peers and senior scientists at meetings, to seminar speakers who have come to visit your institution, to visiting dignitaries or new recruits you may be asked to shepherd from place to place. And if you manage to hang on and establish a career in science--and probably even if you don't--you'll give versions of this talk hundreds, maybe thousands of times over the next 30 to 40 years.

Who, what, why, and why

When you meet someone new in a professional context, your goal should be to communicate four things: who you are, what you do, why you're meeting them, and most of all, why they should care that they are meeting you. A little reflection will help you develop your opening lines and find natural answers to these four questions. Thinking about the particular words you will use to start these tiny talks will help you be more at ease in professional conversations. Then, once you've got those answers mapped out, try them out at every opportunity. Seek out strangers in scientific settings and practice. A little practice can make a tremendous difference on the type of impression you make and how lasting it is. And that can make a big difference in your professional life.

The personal introduction is a tiny speech, but it's more than that; it's an exercise in fulfilling expectations. Your 1-minute talk is part of a common transaction, which, just like a knock-knock joke or a waltz, has an expected rhythm that leads both participants through the ever-changing terrain of the exchange. In science, you're likely to find yourself, more often than not, conversing with someone who'd rather be writing code, plating gels, or hiding in the bathroom. You can win points by keeping to that expected rhythm, allowing your partner-in-conversation to remain comfortable and at ease--or as comfortable and at ease as it is possible for them to be.

The seminar lunch

The seminar lunch is one important occasion during which you can practice giving your 1-minute speech. There you sit at a table full of napkins, water glasses, menus, and other obstacles, with The Biggest Person in Your Field or a Nobel Prize-winner seated to your left. The group sits and pleasantries are exchanged: "This seems like a nice place." Or "How was your flight into town?" Menus are fiddled with; a waiter appears; drinks are served. Some members of the group cower behind menus; others look out the window; some guzzle caffeine; at least one is furtively fingering a BlackBerry under the table. The speaker, who seems comparatively approachable, turns to you. She looks you in the eye and starts the show: "So what are you working on?"

What do you do? First, relax. No matter how important the guest is, he or she is just a person. Trite as it may sound, that observation is a key to becoming comfortable around intimidating people and allowing them to be comfortable, too. Be calm. Take a moment to think through what you want to say. The story you tell should have a beginning, a middle, and an end. Who are you? What do you do? Why are you here? Why should the person you're speaking to care?

Breathe, then start talking. Say your name clearly and indicate your status--student, postdoc, whatever. Mention what lab you work in. Then frame your work with the big picture: what you're interested in, how you approach it, and how it got you an invite to this lunch. Look the other person in the eye as you speak. If the angle is bad, pull out your chair slightly so that you can address Nobel Laureate face-on. Don't glare like a vulture, just make eye contact--"check in" often to see if his face registers understanding, engagement, or a strong desire to ask a question. Pause if there seems to be a question brewing. Finish up by connecting what you've said back to the guest's interests or work.

When you're done, stop talking and smile a natural smile. The guest might ask a question or just nod and shift his or her glance to the next person at the table, indicating that it's time for them to give their own introductions. You're off the hot seat.

But what if things go wrong? What if you spill your water on the other person? Just apologize and hand over your napkin. What if the speaker turns to you just as you unhinge your jaw and commit wholeheartedly to an ear of corn? Just as you would at a big family dinner, raise your eyebrows, shrug your shoulders, and shift your eyes toward the person sitting next to you--the international signal for "skip me and come back when I don't have my mouth full."

What if you say your name incorrectly, forget where you work or what you work on, or can't even bring yourself to speak? It happens. Relax. Bobbling the 1-minute speech is rarely fatal. If you start speaking and nothing comes out right, it's fine to acknowledge that you're nervous and start over. It's just us humans here, so focus, relax, breathe, and make sure that you keep the second try short. Smile. Look 'em in the eye. Be confident that you know yourself and your science, and begin to speak.

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