

# Lab Dynamics

Best Foot Forward, Part 3  
How to Give a Great Job Talk

*Exercises*



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## Best Foot Forward. Part 3: How to Give A Great Job Talk

### Pre-workshop material and assignment

#### 1. Workshop Assignment- must be completed by all participants

Everyone attending this workshop will deliver a 5 -minute job talk to the group on Zoom. Imagine that you have applied for a job (you can decide whether it's an academic or industry job) and after screening many candidates the organization has told you that you are one of three finalists. Part of your virtual visit will include giving a 5 minute talk on Zoom. When you asked who will be present at the talk, they said "Its open to everyone in our organization - we post announcements all over."

*Prepare this 5 minute Zoom job talk and be prepared to give it during the workshop. You may show no more than 4 slides, including any data slides that you may wish to show.*

#### 2. How to organize your job talk

**Technical level:** Calibrate the level of technical expertise needed to understand each part of your talk using the following definitions.

##### Levels of technical expertise:

- **Very general:** Your uncle who drives a bus could understand it.
- **General:** Your aunt who has a PhD in anthropology could understand it.
- **Intermediate:** A first year grad student gets it.
- **Intermediate/expert:** People in your field but unfamiliar with your specific system get it.
- **Expert:** Maybe only one of these in the room.

**Talk structure:** Your talk should be structured to include a preview of what you're going to say ("Tell them what you're going to tell them"), the body of the talk ("Tell them") and a summary ("tell them what you're going to tell them").

### Structure of talk (times are approximate)

- **1 minute:** Introduction, big picture, objective.
  - Say Hi and that you’re thrilled to be here. Thank whoever invited you.
  - Overview of this talk with hint of one big result.
  - How your work fits into the field (**why** it’s important).
  - *Level: very general*
- **1 minute:** Strategy, approach, methodology.
  - *Level: general to intermediate*
- **1 minute:** Results - one big result.
  - *Level: intermediate/expert*
- **1 minute:** Future directions - where this works leads.
  - *Level: very general*
- **1 minute:** Summary of talk and thank.
  - *Level: very general*

Tell them what you’re going to tell them.



Tell them.



Tell them what you told them.

### 3. Pointers on giving a job talk

- They have to like you. They’re going to hire **you**, not your research project. You need to prove the value of you more than the value of your ideas or project.
- They don’t care about your journey. Your talk shouldn’t be about how you got here - the millions of experiments you did? - no one cares. It’s about where you are now and where you’re going.
- Customize your talk for every job interview - what are they interested in? You may not be able to show each institution unique data, but you can customize your emphasis.
- For an academic talk include “implications for future work” and how your project will develop into a robust research program.
- For a private sector talk include “implications for future work” but leave out your plans to do it **because you won’t be doing it.**

### 4. Guideline for your slides

1. Show a title slide with your talk title, your name and institution.
2. Present a brief background - why they should care about this stuff.

3. IN general, plan on NO MORE THAN ONE SLIDE every one to two minutes (not applicable in the 5 minute talk exercise).
4. Use big fonts - make sure every word is visible to the viewer with the smallest screen.
5. Use more images than words.
6. Pay attention to font consistency - USE the **same font** and **don't use too many colors**.
7. Avoid distracting background designs on slides.
8. Minimize graphics and "clip art".
9. ALWAYS label axes and show units of measure!
10. Every data slide should have a conclusion on it - preferably in the title.
11. Absolutely avoid jargon, acronyms and abbreviations. Most people won't know what you're talking about.

## 5. Guidelines for Speaking to an Audience

Don't believe that all you need to do is present convincing data or a strong argument to get people to pay attention to or get excited about what you have to say. We have all heard speakers who undermine their presentation by showing a mass of unintelligible data in a listless, unenthusiastic manner. How you present yourself and your information is every bit as important as what you're presenting.

### A. General tips:

1. **Organize your talk.** Remember the dictum about how to give a talk:
  - Tell them what you're going to tell them.
  - Tell them.
  - Tell them what you told them.

Your presentation should have the same structure as a research paper, i.e. a logical progression from introduction (thesis statement) to body (supporting arguments) to conclusion (re-state thesis, summary, and conclusion). Know when to stop talking. Just as you don't use unnecessary words in a written paper, don't bore your audience with repetitious or unnecessary words in your oral presentation. Remember, however, that there is a difference between spoken words appropriate for the ear and written words intended for reading. End your presentation with an interesting remark or punch line. Leave your listeners with a sense of completion.

2. **Visualize yourself giving your speech.** Imagine yourself speaking, your voice loud, clear and confident. Visualize the audience clapping - it will boost your confidence.
3. **Practice.** Rehearse out loud with all equipment you plan on using if possible. Work to control over-use of filler words ("So..", "You know..."). Practice with a timer and allow time for the unexpected. **For Zoom talks, record your talk in advance and watch the playback. You will be surprised.**
4. **Relax.** Begin by greeting the audience. It buys you time and calms your nerves. Pause, smile and count to three before saying anything. ("One one-thousand, two one-thousand, three one-thousand. Pause. Begin.) Transform nervous energy into enthusiasm. **Pause** on occasion. Allow yourself and your audience a little time to

- reflect and think. Don't race through your presentation and leave your audience, as well as yourself, feeling out of breath.
5. **Know the audience.** Greet some of the audience members as they arrive. It's easier to speak to a group of friends than to strangers.
  6. **Speak with conviction.** If you don't believe in what you're saying why should they?
  7. **Realize that people want you to succeed.** Audiences want you to be interesting, stimulating, informative and entertaining. They're rooting for you.
  8. **Don't apologize** for any nervousness or problems - the audience probably never noticed it.
  9. **Avoid weak words like hope, aspire, tried, seek, try.**
  10. **It's about THEM not about YOU.** Listen to your audience's questions, respond to their reactions, adjust and adapt. If what you have prepared is obviously not getting across to your audience, change your strategy mid-stream if you can. Remember that communication is the key to a successful presentation. If you are short of time, know what can be safely left out. If you have extra time, know what could be effectively added. Be prepared for the unexpected.
  11. **Never exceed your allotted time.** If you do, they will hate you.
  12. **When asked a question, repeat it for the audience** (unless there's only 5 people in the room).
  13. **Don't say "That's a great question"** after EVERY question.
  14. **Answer questions thoughtfully.** If you can't answer it say so and ask if you can follow up with the questioner later.
  15. **Never answer more than what was asked or a question that wasn't asked.** Answer - briefly - just enough to straighten it out Then carry on with your presentation.
  16. **A question that you will answer later in your talk?** Say "Good point; just wait two slides"
  17. **A question that requires a long answer?** Say "Good point. The answer is a bit complicated, but I do want to address it. Can I come back to that near the end?"
  18. **If you really don't know the answer to a question?** Say "That's a great point, honestly, I don't have the answer at that at the tip of my tongue. Can we discuss this after the talk?" Don't feel like you have to make up answers on the fly -- you are only human, and you can't have thought of everything.
  19. **If the questioner disagrees with you and it looks like there will be an argument, defuse the situation.** "Maybe we're looking at this differently (or "Maybe I'm not understanding the question")- can we go on to other questions and then you and I can talk about this later? I definitely want to answer your question if I can."
  20. **Let them know when you're ending** "This is my final slide..." Or, "In summary..... That completes my presentation. I am of course happy to take questions and I'd like to thank you all for your attention.
  21. **If someone jumps in with a question** before you can say this say "Great question. Let me just say before I answer it thanks to everyone for attending and for your kind attention. I'm happy to take questions. Thank you." (wait for applause).

## B. Use Body Language:

Your effectiveness as a speaker is directly related to your ability to invoke emotion and interest through non-verbal communication. Your listeners judge you and your message based on what they see as much as or more than on what they hear. In public speaking, body

language is a powerful tool for adding emphasis and clarity to your words. It's also your most powerful instrument for convincing an audience of your sincerity, earnestness and enthusiasm. Whether your purpose is to inform, persuade, entertain, motivate or inspire, your body language and the personality you project is sending a message every bit as important as what you're saying.

1. **Start with eye contact.** Establish a bond with the audience. **In Zoom, this is incredibly easy because when you look at the camera every viewer feels like you're looking at them!**
2. Practice looking at the camera because it's harder than you think.
3. **Express emotion with your face - smile, look surprised.**
4. **Avoid distracting mannerisms** - have a friend watch as you practice or record yourself and look for nervous expressions such as fidgeting, twitching, lip biting, key jingling, hands in pockets or behind the back. Avoid repetitive gestures! Watching a speaker make the same gesture over and over during a talk is distracting. **In Zoom, record yourself and replay it. You'll be surprised what you're doing.**
5. **Telling a story?** Highlight action verbs and look for ways to act out one or more parts. Talking about neurons? Hold your hands out and jiggle your fingers like dendrites!
6. **Stay true to your personality.** Don't copy gestures from a book or other speaker, but respond naturally to what you feel and say.
7. **Make gestures convincing.** Every hand gesture should be total body movement that starts from the shoulder - never from the elbow. Half-hearted gestures look artificial. **When in Zoom, make sure your hand gestures are visible to the camera!**
8. **Vary your speaking position by moving from one spot on the stage to another.** For example, walk to the other side of the stage as you move to a new topic or move toward the audience as you ask a question. **In Zoom, move your position in the frame a couple of times during your talk.**

### C. Use Humor:

1. Well-executed humor holds the power to deliver messages in an entertaining fashion and can jolt us into seeing things from a broader perspective. It can enliven dull topics, diffuse tense situations and help the speaker connect with the audience.
2. Many science professionals project a deadly serious attitude - very different from the person they are with friends (hopefully). People listen and relate to you best when you are relaxed and display a sense of humor.
3. There's no sin in being mildly amusing instead of fall-down funny. Use your judgment to avoid upsetting or offending the wrong people. Relate some gentle humor to the situation at hand, and you'll probably be right on target.
4. The safest jokes you can tell are about yourself. Self-effacing humor is least likely to offend others, and also finding humor in your own life will make it fresh and appropriate to the audience. Keep track of funny things that happen in your own life, especially those that relate to the messages of your speeches. But be sure that your stories are truly your own - never pretend that someone else's story happened to you. Someone in the audience will know you're not being honest.

#### D. The 10 Biggest mistakes

2. **Starting with a whimper.** Right after you say “Thank you for that kind introduction” start with a bang. Give the audience a surprising statistic, an interesting quote, a news headline - something powerful that will get their attention immediately.
3. **Attempting to imitate other speakers.** Authenticity is lost when you aren’t yourself.
4. **Failing to “work” the room.** Your audience wants to meet you. If you don’t take time to mingle before the presentation, you lose an opportunity to enhance your credibility with your listeners. **In Zoom, use any opportunity to address people by their names, including when answering questions. E.g. “Thanks for that question Ning”**
5. **Failing to relax.** Do whatever it takes (within reason) - listening to music, breathing deeply, shrugging your shoulders - to relieve nervous tension.
6. **Reading a speech word for word.** Unless your intention is to put the audience to sleep. Instead use a “keyword” outline or illustrative slide to prompt you through the talk. Look into the eyes of the audience, then speak.
7. **Using someone else’s stories (or data!).** It’s okay to use brief quotes from other sources, but to connect with the audience, you must illustrate your most profound thoughts from your own life experiences. If you think you don’t have any interesting stories to tell, you are not looking hard enough.
8. **Speaking without passion.** Audiences pay attention to people who speak with passion and conviction.
9. **Ending with a whimper.** Often, speakers end a talk by prematurely asking for questions and thereby lose the opportunity to make a strong closing summation. Make sure to bring your talk to a proper conclusion: tell them what you told them, remind them why it’s important, thank the audience and wait for applause BEFORE asking for questions.
10. **Failing to prepare.** Your reputation is at stake every time you face an audience - so rehearse well enough to ensure you’ll leave a good impression! Don’t fall for the line “We just want you to come over and give an informal talk - no need to prepare. It’s just my lab.” Then when you show up you find 30 people in the room including the Chairperson who just happened to drop in. Prepare for every talk as though it’s the most important talk you’ll ever give and you’ll never be sorry.
11. **Failing to recognize that speaking is an acquired skill.** Think about learning how to present in the same way you think about learning a new scientific skill - it’s an acquired rather than an innate capability.

#### E. Watch the following excellent Ted talks before the workshop.

[http://www.ted.com/talks/amy\\_cuddy\\_your\\_body\\_language\\_shapes\\_who\\_you\\_are](http://www.ted.com/talks/amy_cuddy_your_body_language_shapes_who_you_are)

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