

Evaluating Scientific Talks

What makes for a good talk?

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What makes for a good talk?

0. Did you learn something **interesting**?

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Learning something interesting

- **What** are you learning: how clearly does the speaker establish their point?
- **Why should you believe it?** How well does the speaker support their claims?
 - Did the speaker clearly explain the **logic** behind their results?
 - Are there **references** for plots and key results?
- **Why should you care?** How well does the speaker convey the importance of the results and the bigger picture they fit into?

“Wow, 50 minutes is a long time”

- Was the talk interesting **as a talk**?
 - as distinct from its topic: it is possible to give an interesting talk about “boring” physics and a boring talk about interesting physics
- One of the easiest ways to make a talk boring is to **lose the audience**
 - did the talk do a good job of building up to its more technical results, or were you drowning in a sea of jargon on slide 2?
 - was there a natural progression from each slide to the next, or did the speaker skip from topic to topic without a clear connection?

“Wow, 50 minutes is a long time”

- Other ways to lose an audience: **presentation and delivery**
 - If you can't hear the speaker, it doesn't matter how good the script is
 - If the speaker's delivery doesn't help highlight the levels of importance of their material, it makes it much harder for the audience to keep hold of the main thread
 - If the speaker is overly arrogant or self-deprecating, spending 50 minutes listening to them can be excruciating

“I never want to work in this area yikes”

- When your main takeaway is something like
 - *“wow that was a lot of tedious calculation for an incremental result”*
 - *“wow that was a lot of person-time sunk into addressing an instrumental issue to get one incremental result”*
 - *“wow it sounds depressingly hard to get that research funded/flowed/published”*

then the speaker has spent way **too much time talking about the trees and not enough about the forest**

“I never want to work in this area yikes”

- A talk needs to be tailored to its audience; for a colloquium, this means a **broad audience of non-experts**
- Did the speaker do a good job of putting their research in context?
- Did the speaker explain **why** what they're doing is interesting?
- Too much technical information can be exhausting and offputting; on the other hand, too little can be unconvincing or facile

“that font on that background is illegible”

- Slide design is a critical part of any presentation
 - Are figures easily legible?
 - Can you read the axes? Do you understand what's being plotted?
 - Is it easy to identify the physics point being made, or is there a lot of extraneous information?
 - Are the slides visually confusing?
 - Are the slides visually distracting?

Some practical tips

- (Re)read the template first and keep its questions in mind as you listen
- All talks start with the abstract — so read it before you go
- Take notes — preferably on paper
 - do not let yourself check your phone
- Keep the big picture in mind
 - what questions is the speaker addressing and why?