Evaluating Scientific Talks
What makes for a good talk?

0. Did you learn something?
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wow 50 minutes is a really long time
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- wow 50 minutes is a really long time
- I never want to work in this research area yikes
What makes for a good talk?

0. Did you learn something?

- That font on that background is completely illegible
- Wow 50 minutes is a really long time
- I never want to work in this research area yikes
What makes for a good talk?

0. Did you learn something interesting?

- Wow, 50 minutes is a really long time.
- I never want to work in this research area yikes.
- That font on that background is completely illegible.
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/floven/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?