

How (not) to give a talk

Jan P. de Ruiter

Have you also sometimes wondered why more than 90% of the scientific presentations you go to are so excruciatingly boring? Would you like to be responsible for compelling a large group of busy professionals to politely but reluctantly freeze their brains and put their entire mental lives on hold for up to two hours, and simply wait until you have finally stopped making sounds? If you don't, I suggest you follow the following rules strictly.

Rule 1: Do not EVER read your talk from paper.

As soon as the brain of a listener detects the 'reading aloud' situation, it responds by automatically interpreting the incoming signal as being spectacularly irrelevant, and starts entertaining its owner by generating elaborate sexual fantasies or other mental simulations of choice. Read from paper, and lose your audience immediately. This is why there are no exceptions to this rule. None. Ever. Not even in departments where this is a 'tradition'; torture was a tradition in the middle ages, but these days most countries have laws against it. The persons reading their talk from paper may be very smart. They may be brilliant. They may even be Nobel Laureates. But they are nevertheless giving a bad talk.

Even if you have to present in a language that you are not fluent in, you should not read from paper. Losing your audience after uttering approximately three words (even if these words are grammatically perfect) is always worse than having people listen to your non-native tongue. Besides, most talks are followed by a discussion period, in which you will have to produce spontaneous speech anyway. If your audience already knows how well you speak the language by having listened to your talk, they will have gotten used to it, and will not be surprised by a sudden loss of fluency during the discussion period.

Rule 2: Do not talk for longer than your allotted time

Talking for longer than the time that you have been allocated is simply very rude. It also usually means either a) that you are talking during the time that was allotted for discussion, robbing you and your audience of a valuable opportunity to engage in an exchange of arguments and/or clarifications, b) you get cut short by the organizer, which is embarrassing, or c) you will cause coffee breaks to be shortened or schedules to run late, which will make people hate you.

Rule 3: Do not talk for more than 45 minutes.

While many people would tend to agree with rules 1 and 2, this one appears to be harder to swallow for many presenters. Still, it is a very important rule. I have witnessed hundreds of talks in my scientific career, and after 45 minutes it is obvious from looking at the behaviour of the audience that more than half of the audience has completely lost interest. They are staring in the distance like zombies, or they are doodling, dozing off, inspecting their fingernails, or in some cases, snoring. And they are most certainly not paying any attention to what you are saying. And they can't be blamed. It is unreasonable to expect human beings to be focused and concentrated on another person's topic for

more than 45 minutes at the time. As your most important take-home messages will tend to be at the end of your talk, you want people to be reasonably fresh and paying attention when you deliver these final messages. You don't want them to be in a coma.

Do not worry about disappointing your audience or the organisers by being shorter than they might have expected. The event you are participating in is probably already running late, due to the other speakers before you who violated rule 2.

It is always possible to give any talk in 45 minutes. You only have to know how. Many people start at the wrong end. They take a two-hour presentation and start cutting content until they arrive at approximately 45 minutes of talk material. This does not work because there will be 'holes' in the story. These holes will need to be filled in with explanatory talk, so that your talk will secretly become longer again. There is a very simple way in which anyone can say everything they need to say within 45, 30, or even 5 minutes. It works like this. Start with writing a talk that consists of one sentence. Yes, seriously, express your main message in one sentence. If I had to give a talk about the paper you are reading now, this sentence would be something like: "If you want to give good talks, do not read from paper, don't talk too long, and avoid boring detail." The one-sentence formulation is obviously far too short for a real talk, but it does represent the essence of what you are trying to get across. Then, expand the one-sentence talk to a 1-minute talk, consisting of one slide. Now move towards a 5-minute, 5-slide presentation. Now you can go into some more detail, but of course, only add material that improves the audience's understanding of the short version of the talk that you already have. Go on adding explanatory material until the desired length (45 minutes or less) has been reached. By starting from the single sentence and then expanding towards the available time, you are guaranteed to have a coherent talk that says what you want to say as well as you can, and nothing more.

Rule 4: Distribute your time evenly.

Often, speakers go through the first half of their presentation with excruciating attention for detail, and then find that they have 5 minutes left for the rest of their talk. They then have a choice between two equally silly alternatives. They can increase their speech rate until they sound like Donald Duck on amphetamines, or they can skip a large number of slides saying lame things like 'Unfortunately, I have no time to go into this' (often accompanied by an angry look at the organizers) and hastily jump to the conclusions slide which now has become totally incomprehensible, because of the material they have skipped over earlier in their talk.

Rule 5: Use projected slides.

Visual information projected on slides helps your audience to keep track of where you are, and if they have lost their concentration for a few seconds, to reorient themselves. It also makes your talk more appealing, and gives you the opportunity to use cartoons, graphs, and pictures, or, if you don't use any of these, keywords and definitions that would fade from memory much quicker if you were speaking without these visual aids.

Rule 6: Do not literally read aloud what is on your slides.

On your slides, use short keywords and key phrases to guide and structure your presentation, and talk about these keywords and phrases in spontaneous, entertaining speech. It is a very bad idea to read aloud the text on your slides while following every word with a laser pointer or stick. This gives off the impression that you believe your audience needs help with the process of reading, and makes you look like a fool.

Rule 7: Use BIG FONTS on your slides.

What is surprising about this rule is that everybody knows it, and yet many people still ignore or forget it. There is a wide variety in the quality of the eyesight among the people in your audience, and some people are sitting in the back. You want your audience to be able to read what is on your slides. Also, if your font is small, it probably means that you have too much text on your slides.

Rule 8: Do not use fancy animations or sounds effects with text items.

It can be tempting to use the flashy features that your presentation software offers in displaying your bullet points. These are animation methods that make your text items swirl to their final position or materialize from clouds of shimmering dots, like in the trailer of an SF movie. There are also sound effects that you can activate with a certain text item, like screeching tires, ambulances, and even pre-recorded applause. These features are only there to show that the people who wrote the presentation software are industrious and competent. They are not there to be used on real people in actual audiences.

Rule 9: Skip the details.

The big picture, the bottom line, the take-home message: all these expressions indirectly relate to the same phenomenon, namely: details are boring. Unless a specific detail is the topic of your talk, in which case it is not a detail anymore, but rather, the topic of your talk. So if you are giving a talk about the effect of watching television on people's attention span, and you spend 15 of your precious 45 minutes on describing the software library that you used in the computer program that you used to measure television viewing times, you are getting lost in the details. However, if the title of your talk is "software libraries for eye-tracking", this may well be essential content. To avoid getting lost in the details, use the trick described in rule 3: start with a one-sentence version of your talk and expand outwards. That way, you will not even think about presenting boring details.

Rule 10. Imagine you are in your own audience.

Both while writing your talk, and while presenting it, you should try to imagine what it would be like to be in the audience. To some this may sound trivial, but I once spoke to a colleague (an established scientist) who told me that he went to a course about giving good presentations. I asked him what he'd found useful, and he said that he'd learned a great trick: imagining that you yourself are in your own audience. He didn't find that trivial at all; he thought it was brilliant and he said he wished he'd been told before. So if you find this rule trivial, good! If not, please realize that all the other nine rules are special cases of this last rule.