



# Meta Talk:

## How to Give a Talk so Good People Will Ask You To Give Talks About Talks About Nothing

JMRL In-Service Day

11 . 11 . 11

David Evans

[www.cs.virginia.edu/evans](http://www.cs.virginia.edu/evans)

Who Gives Talks?

# Rule #1

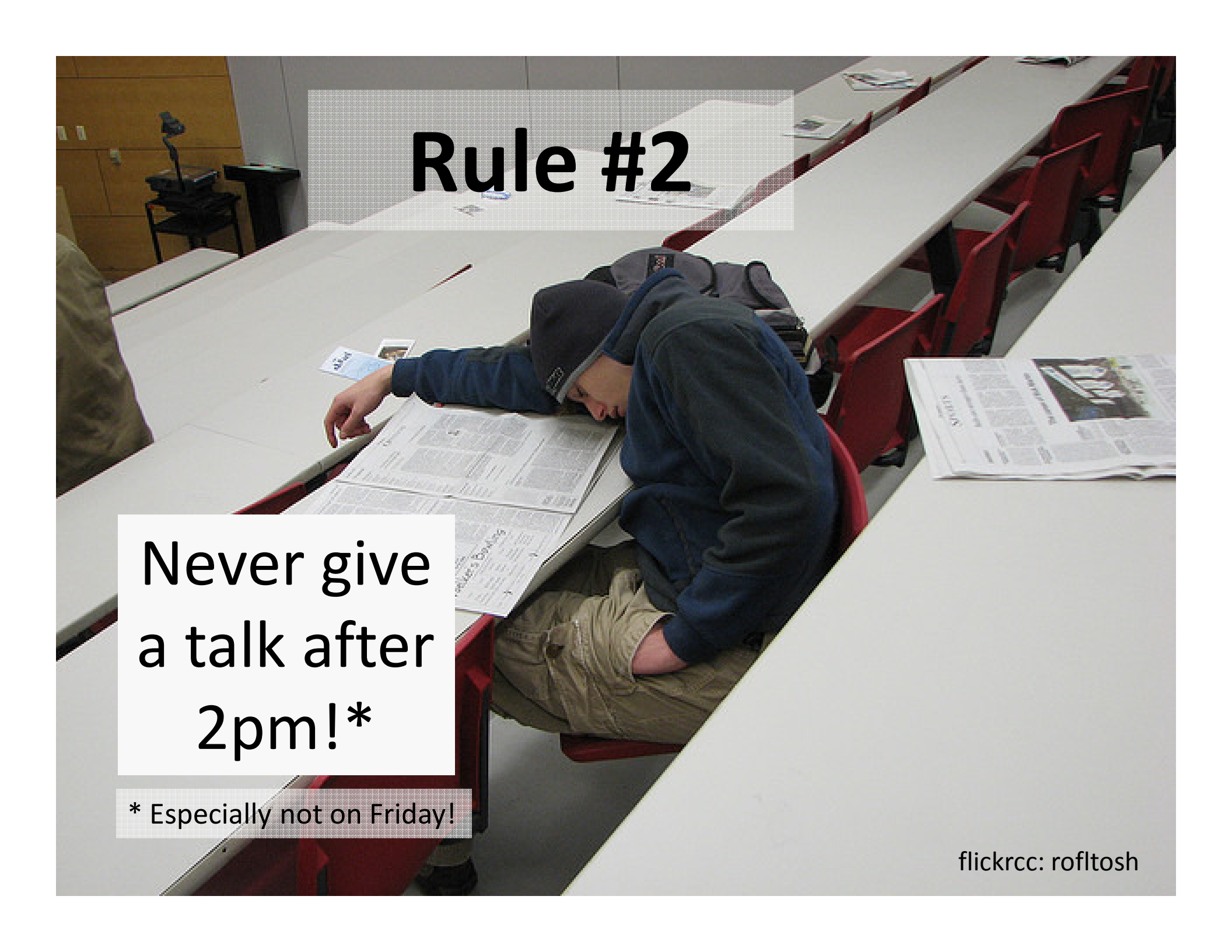
Never give a  
talk about  
giving talks!

*It might be a good rule simply  
to avoid any prestigious task. If  
it didn't suck, they wouldn't  
have had to make it prestigious.*

Paul Graham,  
*How to Do What You Love*



# Rule #2

A photograph of a person in a blue hoodie and khaki pants sleeping at a long white desk in a classroom or office. They are leaning over a newspaper. The room has red chairs and other desks in the background.

Never give  
a talk after  
2pm!\*

\* Especially not on Friday!

## Rule #3

Never  
read  
your  
talk!



George Woodward, *Man reading to a sleeping audience*, 18<sup>th</sup> century



## Rule #4

**Finish  
on  
time**

(Even better  
to leave time  
for questions!)

# Story

*The Rabbit, the Fox, and the Wolf*  
(author unknown)

# All Talks Should Tell a Story

## Stories

*Beginning, middle, and end*

Everything is **motivated** by earlier events

Build and resolve **tension**

## List Talks

- Could be in any order

- Points are disconnected

- Tension is whether it will ever end

**PowerPoint** is designed for making List Talks!  
**Fight the Power** (or use something else).



# The Beginning

## **Introduce characters**

If your characters are not cute and furry, give your audience a reason to care about them

Your characters may be abstract ideas

## **Put them in a predicament**

Motivate a problem: interesting and important

## **Suspense:** use judiciously in talks

Give clear idea of the big message at the beginning

If your audience is bored by the beginning of your talk, they will be doing other things before you get to the rest.

# The Middle

Build up to resolution of the problem

**Short talk** (20 minutes): **one** nugget idea (~10 minutes)

**Long talk** (45 minutes): 2-3 small nuggets (~5 minutes each), 1 big one (~15 minutes)

**Longer talk** = 45 minutes + more question time

The goal is to get **one** interesting idea across,  
not to explain everything shallowly

# What is the Goal of your Talk?

“Get to the end without passing out”

***Sell*** something

- Always: yourself, your institution
- An idea, an approach, a direction

# Some Concrete Dos and Don'ts



# Dos and Don'ts

## Don't Apologize

"I didn't have time to prepare a good talk..."

"I don't have time to explain this well..."

## Don't Be Arrogant

dismissing questions,  
belittling previous work,  
wasting your audience's  
time, **giving talks about talks**

## Do Be Nervous

If you aren't nervous, you don't care about your audience or aren't taking any risks

## Do Be Confident (with cause)

**Be well prepared**

**Set up early:** before the audience arrives

# Dos and Don'ts

**Don't Have Useless Outlines**

**Do Structure Your Talk**

## Outline

Make sections clear and how parts connect

**Don't Be**

fancy b  
animati  
physical

- **Introduction**
- **Motivation**
- **Approach**
- **Results**
- **Conclusion**

**Do Use a Remote Presenter**

**Don't Be**

*bored,*  
Don't sp  
every sl  
slide, some 2-minute slides,  
some 15-second slides

**Do have peaks and valleys**

Build and release tension

Vary Pacing

**Do Use Anaphora**

# Slide Tips

**Fonts:** simple, sans serif font

**But please don't use Comic Sans!**

Color text to convey **meaning**, not to distract

**Lighted room:**

White background, black text

**Dark room** (but only if you have no choice):

Dark background (black, dark blue, dark green)

Light text (white, yellow, grey)

Show your creativity with your **ideas**, not your font/color choices

**Animate Judiciously**



The real entertainment gimmick is the excitement, drama and mystery of the subject matter. People love to learn something, they are “entertained” enormously by being allowed to understand a little bit of something they never understood before... The faith in the value of the subject matter must be sincere and show through clearly. All gimmicks, etc. should be subservient to this.



## Richard Feynman

Letter to Mr. Ralph Brown,  
Advisory Board in Connection  
with Programs on Science (in  
*Perfectly Reasonable Deviations  
from the Beaten Track*)

# The End

**Resolve** the Predicament (or explain what is still open)

**Summarize** why the problem and solution are important and interesting

Good stories have a **moral** not just an end!

Something to **takeaway**: idea + handout

It is dangerous (except in meta-talks) to have a slide titled “The End” that is not your last slide!

# Why You Should Give Good Talks

You **care** about your audience

More **fun** than giving a bad talk

**All** talks are “**job talks**”

Typical talks are quickly forgotten

Great talks are remembered for years

Horrible talks are remembered *forever*

# How to Learn to Give Good Talks

## Observe Bad Talks

Think how to present the same material better

## Observe Good Talks

Think how to present the same material better

“Steal” things that work, but adapt to your style\*

## Practice, Practice, Practice

In your head, with imaginary audiences, with friendly audiences, with critical audiences

\* I mostly try to steal from Patrick Henry Winston, John Guttag, Avi Rubin, Steve Jobs, Neil DeGrasse Tyson, Bill Maher, etc.

Moral of the Story

**Respect your Audience!**



Remember Rule #4:  
Finish on Time?

# Thank you!

<http://www.cs.virginia.edu/evans/>



Always end with a slide that makes it clear you are done and shows how to contact you (gratuitous picture optional)