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

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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

Never give a talk after 2pm!*

* Especially not on Friday!

flickrcc: rofltosh
Rule #3

Never read your talk!

George Woodward, *Man reading to a sleeping audience*, 18th century
Rule #4

Finish on time
(Even better to leave time for questions!)

flickrcc: Lynda Giddens
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

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**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

Don’t Be Distracting
• fancy backgrounds, useless animations, laser pointer, physical mannerisms

Don’t Be Boring
• If you are bored, you are boring

Don’t spend two minutes on every slide: one 8-minute slide, some 2-minute slides, some 15-second slides

Do Structure Your Talk
• Make sections clear and how parts connect

Do Use a Remote Presenter
• Do have peaks and valleys
• Build and release tension
• Vary Pacing
• Do Use Anaphora

Outline
• Introduction
• Motivation
• Approach
• Results
• Conclusion
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

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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)