

# How to Give a Bad Talk

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Tom Anderson, Dave Patterson, ...  
(Channeled by Mike Dahlin)

# I. Thou Shalt Not Illustrate

Clients	xFS BW	NFS BW
1	5.71995e+05	1.65997e+06
8	4.425325e+06	1.19731e+06
16	1.095445e+07	7.88792e+05
32	1.38927e+07	4.70548e+05

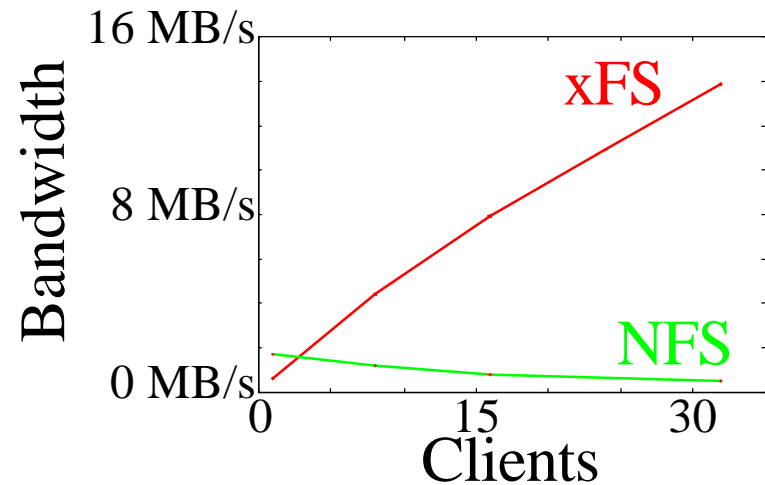


Table:

- Precision
- Allow Audience to Draw on Conclusions

Pictures:

- Confucious: "Picture = 10K Words"
- Dijkstra: "Pictures are a crutch for weak minds"

Who are you going to believe?

## II. Thou Shalt Not Covet Brevity

Do not omit technical material from your paper

- You did the work; it is important; make sure the audience understands all nuances of approach and also how smart you are
- Many in audience will never read the paper - they *\*must\** leave the room fully understanding your approach, motivation, and contributions!

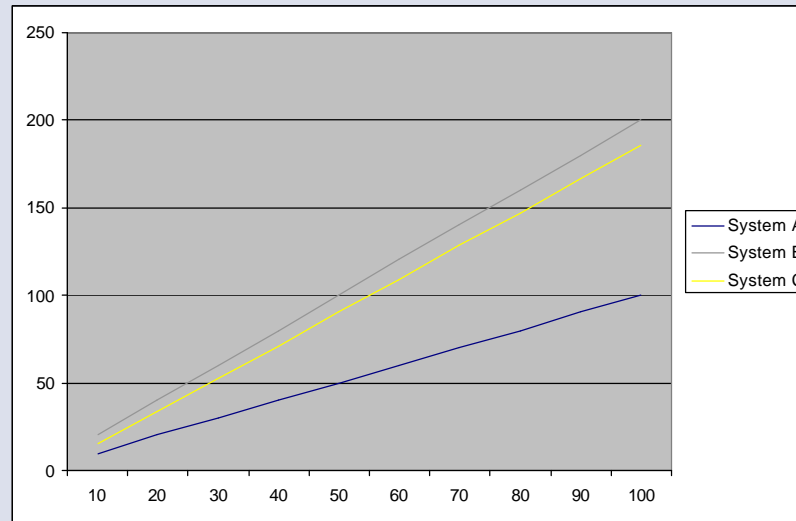
Include lots of material in each slide

- Avoid sentence fragments because they may make you look illiterate.
  - Also, if the slides have full sentences, then you can read the slides verbatim and audience will be able to follow along.
  - All points you make orally should also be on the slide, and vice versa.
  - Some may say that no item on a slide should span more than one line. Ignore this! Take as much room as you need to make your point.
  - Take advantage of technology - small fonts allow you to provide information-rich slides.
    - Fonts smaller than 24 point are fine
    - And the important people sit in front anyhow!
  - Make several points on each slide.

Include lots of slides in each talk

- 1 Lampson = 1 slide per minute
- Impress audience with difficulty of material
  - They should leave knowing that you did a lot of work and that it was hard, even if they don't understand all of the details.
- Avoid moving content to "backup slides"
  - You probably won't get a chance to show many of them

## II. Thou shalt Not be Neat



Slide layout << ideas!

- "I'm a **doctor**, Jim, not a graphic designer."
- spelling checker = waste of time
  - don't worry about consistent capitalization
  - Or structure/bullet/etc consistency
- Use **color** and 🧑🏻‍🔬 🚗 🚛 🚚 🚚 to **emphasize** key ideas

Who cares what 50 people think?

# IV. Thou Shalt Cover Thy Naked Slides

Keep audience on your point

Surprise them with your train of thought

- If they know the point before you make it
- They may think
  - That they could have figured it out
    - For themselves
  - Will they realize
    - How clever you are?

Advanced techniques



## V. Thou Shalt Remain Humble and Demure

No eye contact

- Bonus: Help avoid questions

Do not distract with motion

- Keep arms at side
- Stay at podium

Avoid rhetorical flourishes

- Keep voice level
  - Avoid raising voice on key point
  - Avoid pause
- Do not ask rhetorical questions
- Do not use humor

Key tool of the trade

- Laser pointer

## VI. Thou Shalt Not Emphasize Key Points

Do not introduce talk/talklet/slide

- Cover more technical material

Do not structure slide

- All points are important
- Graphs should speak for themselves

Do not summarize talk/talklet/slide

- Audience should pay attention

## VII. Thou Shalt Not Skip Slides in a Long Talk

You did the work

- The research
  - And prepared the slides
- Audience will be interested in seeing them
- Even if briefly

Audience can stay longer

- Your work much more interesting
  - Than the next speakers
  - Than the break
  - Than lunch

If necessary, skip conclusions

- Just repeating points you've already made



## VIII. Thou Shalt Not Plan for Q&A

Keep answers spontaneous

No such thing as dumb question

- Just dumb questioner
- Whose fault is it they don't understand?
- Universal answer:
  - Dismiss question as irrelevant/naïve
- Everyone remembers a good argument
  - Good publicity for paper

Approach

- Don't repeat question
- Start talking quickly
- Don't cut discussion short
- When in doubt, bluff

# VIII. Thou Shalt Not Prepare Slides Early

## IX. Thou Shalt Not Walk In Others' Shoes

You are the expert

- You've been working on project for years
- Anyone could present dumbed down version
- Audience's chance to hear the expert view

Don't worry if part of talk "drags"

- Present all technical details

# X. Thou Shalt Not Practice

## Benefits

- Practice wastes Hours
  - Out of several years of research
- Ensures spontaneity

## If you do practice

- Argue with suggestions
- Make talk longer than allotted time
- Audience:
  - Experts only (e.g., advisor and group)
- 1 Week is plenty
  - Converge on content by last practice  
(Night before presentation)

**Most Important Commandment!**

# Alternatives to a Bad Talk

See the handout

- My opinions
- A starting point for discussion