How to Give a Bad Talk

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Tom Anderson, Dave Patterson, ...
(Channeled by Mike Dahlin)
I. Thou Shalt Not Illustrate

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?

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<th>NFS BW</th>
</tr>
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</table>

Client xFS BW 0 MB/s 8 MB/s 16 MB/s

Bandwidth

Clients

0 MB/s 8 MB/s 16 MB/s

xFS

NFS
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
    § For themselves
  • 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