

A Talk about Talks

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Elevator Pitch

In the worst talks no one in the audience understands anything.
The whole talk is a waste.

The median statistics talk is like that.

The least you can do is get your audience to understand the basic idea — the so-called “elevator pitch”.

But many speakers don't do that. They dive into minutiae from the beginning.

Elevator Pitch (cont.)

In a 10 minute talk, you can get the audience to understand one point (if you are good).

In a 25 minute talk, you can get the audience to understand two points (if you are good).

In a 50 minute talk, you can get the audience to understand three points (if you are very good).

They are not going to understand everything you say. Not even close. Have you ever understood all of a talk?

Don't Fidget

Don't use "overlays" in beamer (that reveal list items one at a time). Or the analogues in PowerPoint or Apple Keynote.

Don't wave a laser pointer at the screen. If you aren't pointing to something crucial, leave the laser pointer off.

Don't mumble. Don't read your slides.

Slideuments

Don't make a "slideument" — a cross between slides and a document.

Your slides should not look like a paper. Keep things brief. Keep things simple.

The slides should have nothing that doesn't help the audience understand the main point (or points).

Outlines and Summaries

Outlines and summaries are a waste of time too.

If you want to use the Army method of instruction, *first you tell them what you're going to tell them, then you tell them, then you tell them what you've told them, fine.*

But outlines and summaries don't do that. They just pretend to.

Bad Examples

Your talk should *not* look like the examples most familiar to you: textbooks and lectures in classes.

Those are *way* too detailed.

Motivation

Don't say anything unmotivated.

First tell them why they should find something interesting. Then introduce any technical details you really need.

Motivation and Notation

In particular, never define notation until just before you use it.

They won't remember your mathematical notation several slides after it is introduced.

Use the least possible mathematical notation.

The KISS Principle

Keep it Simple, Stupid.

Kac's First Law of Talks

From Bill Sudderth.

First law: The talk is not as important to anyone else as it is to the speaker.

Corollaries:

- 1 If you give a good talk, most people won't notice.
- 2 If you give a bad talk, most won't remember.
- 3 It does not pay to go over time.

Old Christian saying: Few sinners are saved in the last 5 minutes of a sermon.

Similar law: Don't save the best for the end. Most people will have already lost interest.

(Related to Corollary 3.) To a first approximation, no one in the audience knows anything about your subject.

Kac's First Law of Talks (cont.)

You are not talking to your thesis advisor and two of his or her former students.

Don't assume anything beyond what's in master's level core courses.

Spellcheck

Spell check your talk.

Carefully check for other typographical errors too.

Time your Talk

A practice talk is always a good idea. Your guinea pigs can tell you what they didn't understand and you must fix.

If you cannot do a practice talk, at least give the talk — speaking out loud in your normal speaking voice — so you can tell how long it takes.

Nothing ruins a talk like (1) going over time (2) rushing to cram a lot in at the end.

Very few speakers cut down their talk to what they can cover in the time allotted. But every speaker should.