

# Style and Substance: Twelve Tips for a Better Job Talk

September 01, 2006

The one-day interview that is a rite of passage for all academic job candidates can feel more like an endurance test than anything else. The key event in this day is the dreaded “job talk” – one hour in which you must speak cogently about your research while showcasing your public speaking and teaching skills. Despite its importance, however, many candidates approach this talk unprepared and unfocused. Having served on recruitment committees and listened to dozens of such talks, we have some practical pointers on preparation, style, and substance.

## Before the Talk

**1. Know your audience.** Your audience is not a random assemblage of listeners. Investigate the research and teaching interests of the faculty to whom you will speak. If relevant, refer to this information during your talk. Faculty appreciate being cited (correctly!) by a candidate and it demonstrates your interest in the position. By the same token, if you think that your theoretical views or empirical findings might conflict with those of a particular faculty member, tread lightly. Don’t use your talk to single out and berate any theoreticians or schools of thought – the job talk is not the time or place.

**2. Tailor your talk to the faculty.** In some cases, you will have the opportunity to teach a class *and* give a talk. If so, you can tailor your material to students and faculty separately. However, if the job talk is your only speaking opportunity, tailor your talk to the faculty. As much as you may think that they want you to “speak to the students,” they don’t. Faculty members want to see if you can speak articulately about your topic and, above all, they do not want to be “talked down” to. Having said this, however, you should still be prepared to answer student questions in a manner that is respectful and free of jargon, and that takes into account their knowledge level.

**3. It’s all in the timing.** Your job talk should be 10-15 minutes shorter than the allotted time. This allows sufficient time to address questions from the audience or deal with technical difficulties that unfortunately are all too common in these situations.

**4. Practice, practice, practice!** By the time you deliver your talk, you should have presented it multiple times to honest and critical colleagues, friends, family members, the dog, and anyone else who will listen. This gives you the chance to address questions, check the length and “flow” of the talk, edit slides, and, most importantly, become familiar with the material. Ideally, you shouldn’t even need to rely on your notes during the talk, but should be able to move comfortably around the room and speak directly to your audience.

**5. Dress for success.** Dress conservatively, appropriately, and comfortably. If you aren’t sure what this means, try on outfits ahead of time for someone who does.

## During the Talk: Style Pointers

**6. Set the stage.** Don't just launch into the substantive portion of your presentation; introduce yourself to your audience. Explain who you are, the evolution of your interest in the area or topic, and provide some general guidelines (e.g., should the audience interject questions during your talk or hold their comments until the end).

**7. Set the tone.** Your job talk is not open-mike night at the Improv. While a little light humor can enliven the mood in the room and endear you to your audience, too many wisecracks and jokes can make you appear flippant, diminish your message, and cast you as an ineffective speaker. You also run the risk of offending those who don't share your sense of humor.

**8. Listen to your audience.** Be prepared for various types of questions or comments during or after your talk. Some faculty members view job talks as a chance to show off, flex some academic muscle, or bait an unwitting job candidate. You may be tired or a bit anxious at this point in your day, so it is critical that you take the time to listen to questions and to answer as completely and non-defensively as possible. Answer questions as best you can, and if you truly can't answer a question, be honest.

**9. Assume that your audience is literate.** Don't read your slides or overheads. They should guide your listeners. It is boring and irritating when a candidate recites word for word the material on slides. We can read, and we know you can, too. Also, your slides or overheads shouldn't be too text heavy. More on this later.

During the Talk: Substance Pointers

**10. Know your material.** This should be self-evident. You should possess an encyclopedic knowledge of your topic and your particular study, set of studies, or program of research. Even if you used someone else's data or relied on someone else's analysis (not at all uncommon), you are responsible for knowing about all elements of data composition, collection, and analysis. We once had a speaker say that he didn't know the N in a particular cell of the design because the data weren't his. While truthful, this answer had the unfortunate effect of making him appear incompetent.

Corollary: You should never seem surprised by your slides. We listened to one candidate who seemed genuinely surprised by the material on many of her slides ("Wow, hmm, look at this. I forgot about that."). Create your materials yourself and practice to the point where you could recite them blindfolded.

**11. Avoid the technology trap.** a) Do not overuse technology. Many candidates fancy themselves master animators, creating frenetic slides with words and pictures that fade in and out, jump here and there, and are punctuated by explosive sound effects. When used appropriately, slide animation allows you to introduce important points sequentially; if overused, however, you run the risk of visually distracting your audience and losing their attention.

b) Less is often more. The point of visual aids is to provide your listeners with an outline or to illustrate the points you are making – not to present your talk in its entirety. We had one speaker whose talk had 192 slides. He managed to read about 70 of them to us before he ran out of time.

c) Expect technology to fail. Technology can and often does fail at job talks (the projector dies, won't interface with the laptop, etc.). If possible, bring your own projector or laptop. At the very least, bring a

back-up disk and have a set of transparencies available – they're not as sexy as slides, but they are better than nothing. Bottom line – can you showcase yourself and your research with only a chalkboard and a piece of chalk?

**12. Start strong and end strong.** Sadly, many talks start with a bang and end with a whimper. Don't start your talk with an elegant presentation of theory and literature, only to end weakly with a limitations slide or a repetitious summary statement. Present a take-home message, and ideally discuss your plans for future programmatic research. This is not a 15 minute conference presentation. Your potential colleagues are less interested in what you *have* done and more interested in what you *will do* should you be hired. If you are interviewing at an undergraduate institution, discuss whether and how you will incorporate students into your research program. Remember that the goal of this talk is to sell you as a member of the faculty – someone who will make a sustained contribution to the department.

Above all, remember that this is your day to showcase your knowledge, skills, and training, and to convince the recruitment committee of your strength as a researcher, teacher, and colleague. Good luck – now all you have to worry about is tenure!