

# How to Give a Bad Talk<sup>\*</sup>

Casey Burleyson, 11 September 2015

## The 10 Commandments:

### I. Thou shalt not consider thy audience.

You are an expert so it is reasonable to assume everyone in your audience is too. If you have to present to a general audience then make sure to use words and concepts they don't understand. Who cares if they actually learn anything? They will walk away feeling impressed by how much you know.

### II. Thou shalt not explain complicated figures.

You understand them, why can't everyone else? Assume that they do and do not waste 30 seconds explaining what you are showing. The smartest members of your audience will catch on eventually.

### III. Thou shalt present all of thy conclusions.

It is completely reasonable to discuss all 37 amazing conclusions from your paper in a 15 minute talk. Plus it is unfair to emphasize some conclusions over others. Wowing the audience by blazing through all of your conclusions is more valuable than having them actually understand only 2-3 of them.

### IV. Thou shalt not covet brevity.

You prepared all of your slides; people came for your whole talk; so just talk faster. If you are really pressed for time then skip your summary and conclusions slides if necessary. Definitely do not bother to leave time for questions. Remember, conferences are for showing the world how smart you are, not for discussion and feedback on your science.

### V. Thou shalt always end on a "Thank You" slide.

Who cares about your conclusions? You want your audience to walk away feeling appreciated that they suffered through your horrible talk. They will definitely remember all 37 conclusions anyways. Including a picture of a rainbow leaves everyone with a warm fuzzy feeling.

### VI. Thou shalt not practice.

Why waste valuable research time practicing a talk? It could take several hours out of your two years of research. If you must practice, do so by aimlessly flipping through your slides. Rehearsing what you are actually going to say takes the spontaneity out of your talk.

### VII. Thou shalt not make eye contact.

You should avert your eyes to show respect. Turning your back to the audience can also add mystery.

### VIII. Thou shalt overuse thy laser pointer.

Lasers are cool. Waving a laser around in a general location on the screen like you're teasing a cat will entertain your audience way more than using arrows and circles in PowerPoint.

### IX. Thou shalt always use stamp plots.

It is irresponsible to not show all of your data and plots. Who cares if nobody can make out anything in your plots because they are so small? It is unfair to emphasize some simulations over others, so show them all.

### X. Thou shalt not be neat.

All the great ones prepare their talks in the audience right before they present. Ignore spelling, grammar, legibility, and neatness. People came for your awesome science, not a clean presentation.

<sup>\*</sup>Inspired by and borrowing heavily from a 1983 handout by the same name from David Patterson at U.C. Berkeley with many thanks owed to Sandra Yuter at NC State University.

# How to Give a Good Talk

Casey Burleyson, 11 September 2015

## The 10 Commandments:

### I. Thou shalt know thy audience and tailor thy message.

Figure out and factor in the who, what, when, where, and why of your talk before you ever start assembling slides. Write down the 2-3 main results or ideas that you want people to walk away with and build your talk around conveying those points and only those points. If you are presenting to a general audience then make sure to include sufficient background information so that they at least have a fighting chance to understand your science. Even if you are presenting to a science audience consider if they are likely to be in your subfield or not. If you are going last in a long session on a single topic then be prepared to skip some intro material because it has likely already been covered.

### II. Thou shalt quickly explain complicated figures.

If you must use a non-conventional or unique plotting method to convey your results then be sure to take 10-15 seconds when you first reveal the figure to explain what it shows. Even something as quick as “The x-axis is \_\_\_\_ and the y-axis shows \_\_\_\_” can make life much easier for your audience. The more time they spend trying to figure out your graph the less time they are listening to you convey your message.

### III. Thou shalt present thy main conclusions and leave the rest for the paper.

There is simply no way you can cover every result from a 10,000 word paper in a 15 minute talk. Consider your audience and choose the 2-3 main points you want them to walk away with. If you do a good job conveying your message then they will find you or find your paper where they can read about all of your other findings. Making 2-3 points stick is better than covering 37 points that nobody will be able to understand or remember.

### IV. Thou shalt honor thy time constraints.

Like it or not 15 minutes is the gold-standard amount of time for a conference talk. Do not go long; do not end short; hit your mark. You should use 12-13 minutes to present your results and then leave the remaining 2-3 minutes for questions. If you go long then you lose the chance to get valuable feedback on your work, which is a key component of productively attending a conference. A good template for covering three key points is: 2 minutes of introductory material, 3 minutes to make each of your points, 1 minute to summarize and talk about future work, and 3 minutes for questions. Practice until you can hit your 12 minute mark within 15-30 seconds every time.

### V. Thou shalt always end on thy “Conclusions” slide.

End on your conclusions slide. Period. These are your golden take home points and you want them on the screen for as long as possible. Leaving your conclusions slide up during the questions section advertises to the audience that these are the points you want to discuss with them which helps to focus their questions. Having the conclusions up as long as possible also allows more time for those taking notes to finish jotting down your message.

### VI. Thou shalt practice until thou borest thyself to death.

This is the most unbreakable of all of the commandments. You should practice your talk until you have it down cold. For a 15 minute talk you should do three practices at a minimum. In the first run consider your message and the main structure of your talk. In the second run polish your slides and look for holes in your logic or material. The third run can be used to polish your delivery. It can be useful to print out your slides using the notes format in PowerPoint so that there are lines next to each slide to write down the main points you mean to say. This will speed up your delivery as well. Remember, 12

minutes is the blink of an eye so any time you spend talking about things that don't matter or stumbling through your delivery is time wasted. Every second counts and the only way to eliminate waste is to practice, practice, practice.

#### VII. Thou shalt remember thy basic presentation skills.

Speak loudly and clearly while facing your audience. If you have practiced enough then you do not need more than a passing glance at the screen every now and then. If you are holding eye contact with your audience then they are keeping their attention focused on you as well. Pace yourself and remember to breathe. Practice your talk in front of friends and ask them to point out common presentation flaws such as mumbling, using "uh" or "um", staring at the screen, etc.

#### VIII. Thou shalt smash the laser pointer into 1000 pieces.

You likely mean to use the laser pointer to point out specific features of a plot on the screen, but inevitably you end up just waving it around in a general area. Odds are you are going to be nervous and far away from the screen. Those two things combined mean that your hands are shaky and you will not be able to hold the laser still, so just forego the laser altogether. Use arrows, circles, bold text, or other PowerPoint features to highlight specific things you are talking about. Practice your talk enough so that you know exactly when to click the arrows onto the screen as you are making each point.

#### IX. Thou shalt choose representative panels to make thy points.

When you show 15 different model runs on the screen at the same time and discuss individual features from each panel there is a 0% chance your audience will see what you are talking about. Think about the long rooms at a typical conference center and what your 15 panel image looks like from the back of the room. Instead, choose some representative models out of the 15 to make your point and allude to the fact that other runs are more or less similar to the one you are discussing.

#### X. Thou shalt be neat and professional.

When you are up there giving your talk people in the audience are judging you and judging your science. It is a fact. When you put up slides with typos, blurry figures, jumbled words, or glaring mistakes you are sending the signal that you are not taking your talk seriously. Mistakes also distract the audience from your message. If you take the time and effort to make a clean and professional looking presentation then your audience will spend less time judging you (and your organization) and more time thinking about the awesome science you are presenting.