

How to give a job talk

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Job talks are important

- They are given disproportionate weight in the searching process
 - Search committees have to decide among invitees
 - Whole department doesn't read material
- 3 key questions faculty want to answer
 - Are you likely to be tenurable?
 - Will you be a good colleague?
 - Can you teach?
- The job talk is really the whole campus visit

Some perspective

- Most job talks are bad
 - This is true at Yale
 - All first practice talks are horrible
- Job talks are bad in many different ways
 - The research is poor
 - The organization and structure of a talk is poor
 - The person cannot answer questions effectively
 - The person is annoying
- You can give a good talk

4 stages to discuss

1. Pre-visit planning and logistics
2. Visit part #1: The campus visit
3. Visit part #2: The job talk itself
4. Post-visit

Planning and Logistics

(Yeah, they've called!)

- Interview begins on the phone
- You want to know what is going to happen during your visit
 - What kind of talk? How long? What audience? Can you use Powerpoint? Can you defer substantive questions?
- Learn about the department
 - Do you know anyone who can help you?
 - Are there people who work in your area?

Logistics

- Don't plan to travel on the day of your talk
- Get a decent night's sleep.
- Eat something
 - But don't drink too much coffee (or alcohol)
- Dress appropriately
 - Check the weather
 - Look professional
- Prepare for “disasters”
- Reimbursements take forever

Visit part #1: The campus visit

- Your visit begins immediately
- Be personable and diplomatic
- Be prepared to talk about your work and defend it
 - To faculty, students, and administrators
 - 1, 5, and 15 minute versions
 - Engage with others too
- Expect questions

Things people ask about

- What's going on with the dissertation?
- What do you want to work on next?
- What courses can you teach? How?
- What are you reading?
- Things that are inappropriate/illegal
 - Are you married?
 - Do you have/plan to have kids?
 - Hint: Outright hostility may not be your best response
- Be prepared to ask questions too
 - Balancing interest and presumptuousness

Visit part #2: The job talk itself

- The job talk is two key tasks
 - Engage 25 faculty and students for 1.5 hours
 - Non-trivial
 - Non-obvious
 - Not painful
 - Leave a positive lasting impression
 - Can we remember your argument/finding 2 days later?
 - Are you intelligent and competent?
- Good job talks require both design and execution

Designing a good job talk

- A job talk is not a paper or a dissertation chapter
 - Start with a blank slate
 - Cover less to communicate more
- Your audience is diverse
- Key parts of a talk
 - Why we care: Motivation/Significance
 - Question (and relationship to prior work)
 - What you did: Research (design) and data
 - Finding, counter arguments, and objections
 - Implications, limitations, further work, conclusion
- Structure guides the listener
 - Good slides are like an outline. They provide structure for you and the audience

So which content? The important stuff

- What is important will be context specific
 - Your area of research will guide what is necessary
 - Not proportional to space in the written work
- Example: My own work
 - Survey data show polarization. Concern it upsets representation. Is partisan bias real? Prior work assumes it is. Conduct experiments where pay people for correct responses. Find that doing so substantially reduces polarization. Survey polarization is therefore largely affective rather than sincere.
- Reminder: You can tease things you don't do in the talk

Presentation and Delivery

- Practice, practice, practice
 - At the extreme, start with every word written, winnow to outline, retain outline as backup
 - Record yourself giving the talk. Repeat with friends/etc.
 - Practice questions too
 - You need to be comfortable with the material
- Everyone is afraid, you learn to deal with it
- Common pitfalls
 - Talking too fast
 - Catch phrases (“like”, “umm”)
 - Physical movements (tapping foot, magic fingers, bottomless glass of water)
 - (Remember your cell phone/Skype account)

The misuse of Powerpoint/Beamer

- Pointless animation
- Clutter (Beamer!)
- Too much/too small text
 - Simply reading slides
- Pointless math or pictures
- Poorly labeled tables and figures
- Needing a slide for everything
- Assuming a slide can speak for itself

Answering Questions

- Department norms vary
 - Can you defer questions? Are people aggressive?
- Let people finish their questions
 - Take notes, feel free to clarify if necessary
- Remember the “Fast Food Rule” of talking to toddlers
 - You get points for simply restating the question because it shows you understand and care
 - Politeness and calmness are valued
- Engage every question, even if you can’t answer it specifically or convince the listener
 - Show that you can move from theory to data, and engage in rigorous thinking. (Show you can think like a social scientist.)
 - Deploy your entire body of knowledge and research

4 Common Lines of Questioning

1. The non-question/piece of advice
 2. Why should I care?
 3. How does this relate to other work?
 4. What about this alternative explanation?
 - Address this criticism of your theory/research design/etc.
- Prepare for anticipated questions
 - May guide talk, acknowledge known limitations
 - Practice answering unanticipated questions
 - Pitfalls:
 - Failing to understand question
 - “That’s a great question” / “I’m not a History Buff”
 - Hostility/Defensiveness
 - Filibustering

Post-visit

- Do what you said you'd do
- Improve on bad performances
- Be personable
- Keep the department informed

Concluding Remarks

- Everyone here can give a good talk
- Giving good talks is a distinct skill
- Perfect both design and delivery