
HOW TO GIVE A "GOOD TALK" IN PSYCHOLOGY

by Daniel T. Gilbert, Harvard University
(with a few additions from Dr. Pitts)

1. HAVE A PLAN:

Nothing is as important as having a cohesive organizational plan in which one point leads naturally to another. Usually this begins with (A) some background about the area of research, which leads into (B) background on the specific hypothesis, which leads into (C) the specific experimental question you want to address, which leads into (D) the procedures you followed, which leads into (E) your findings, which leads into (F) their interpretation, which leads into (G) the relevance of your findings for the problem you are addressing, which leads into (H) implications for the "big picture." In addition, each one of these sections must be logically organized in and of itself. A logical argument is the basis for communicating with your audience. If you don't have one (a logical argument) you won't have one (an audience). Write your plan in (at least) outline form, and use these notes during your talk. If you must, you can write the talk out word for word. If you must have a canned talk -- memorize it! Then use your notes as a prop. Ultimately, reading a talk is better than giving a terrible talk -- but only a little. *[My addition: Do not read your power point slides! Use slides to supplement, not replace, your role as speaker].*

MY ADDITION: Outlining a talk: Mostly taken from Dana Dunn (2003). *If you have already written a detailed paper (or are in the process of doing so), remember that no talk is supposed to completely reflect the content of your paper. The easiest way to begin an outline is with the hourglass model we've learned about for writing manuscripts (e.g., Bem, 2003). Reread the introduction, method, results, and discussion sections of your paper, and identify only the key or essential points within each section. You cannot describe every detail found in the Method section, for example, but you can summarize the basic procedure (from the participants point of view!), emphasizing manipulated and measured variables. The results are really the heart of any good talk, and the bulk of your presentation should be focused on them. Of course, material from the introduction and method sections lead into the results, and points raised in the discussion section provide context for the results, but the actual findings are really the main message in any talk. When you discuss the results, revisit the hypothesis, highlight the dependent measure (again), make note of the statistical analysis you used, and then describe what happened in terms of people's behavior – not conditions, per se. When pointing to differences between means, for example, characterize the relationship behaviorally and thus, in conceptual, not operational terms (e.g., NOT that the "Low" group was faster on the reaction task than the "High" group, but rather: ...that male participants who looked downward at female images on a computer screen were slower to recognize the emotions on the faces of the images than did male participants who looked upward at the same images of women on the screen. In other words, male participants in a more powerful vertical position relative to the female images were slower to recognize emotional expressions on female faces. (Notice the redundancy here in my example ☺)*

2. TELL THE PLAN:

It is often useful to give listeners a road map for the terrain you wish to cover. Tell them in just a sentence or two the organizational plan (e.g., "I'd like to talk today about the effects of alcohol on reasoning, specifically, how alcohol enhances some cognitive performances and impairs others. I'll start with some general background information about research in this area, and then I'll present to you some research that Professor Snorkworth and I have conducted on alcohol use and motor performance. Finally, I'll try to show you how this research addresses the important question of whether motor systems can function independently"). On occasion you may wish to use suspense and thus this "Tell the plan" heuristic is inappropriate. Generally, however, you should forego suspense in favor of comprehension. *Also, you should use speech markers as transitions to tell your audience where you currently are in the organizational plan* [emphasis added] (e.g., "Having briefly outlined the past research in this area, let me now turn to the experiment that we recently conducted").

3. START AT THE BEGINNING:

Every experiment is part of a long story that begins with an idea by Aristotle. There are two things you can do wrong in choosing a point in the story at which to begin your talk.

(A) First, you can start too late. You have started too late if you are not talking about your specific hypothesis within 10 minutes. You are starting too late if you mention Aristotle anytime after the first sentence. You must know the audience and try to figure out what they already know. You can refresh their memories briefly, but get to the point as quickly as your audience's knowledge will allow.

(B) Second, you can start too early. You have started too early if your first sentence has anything to do with an experimental manipulation. An introduction sets the stage and explains why you did the experiment you did. Don't say "I did an experiment on alcohol and reasoning because alcohol abuse is a real problem in society" but say "For centuries people have been using substances that affect their ability to think, feel, and act. Alcohol is one such substance. Yet, we still don't know precisely how alcohol affects performance..." Don't relate the entire history of psychology, but don't act as though there were no history. Even if your experiment is completely novel and revolutionary, you must tie it into something your audience already knows about or cares about. The introduction of a talk locates your work in the body of other work.

(C) Before you can tell what you did, you must tell why. You must make the audience realize that your experiment is potentially an important one. You must intrigue them by showing the hole in the body of knowledge that your experiment serves to fill. It is wrong to assume that everyone shares your interests or that any experiment is worth doing. In the introduction you must impress the audience with what needs to be done (and later you'll impress them even more by having done it). Thus, a rationale such as "Emotions are important because everybody has them" does little to make the audience ready for your contribution. On the other hand you might intrigue the audience with something like, "Emotions lie at the heart of social behavior -- from altruism to aggression, the emotions we feel compel us to act towards each other in a variety of ways. Yet, very little is known about the physiological basis of emotion..." You must have had a

reason for doing the research you want to talk about, so tell the audience what it was in the most interesting way possible.

MY ADDITION: Begin on a strong, positive note. Have an opening gambit memorized. Just as with papers, don't begin with theories, results, or researchers. Begin with people and their behavior, cognition, or affect.

4. BE PAINFULLY CLEAR:

Once you are talking about your experiment, you should strive for three things: clarity, clarity, and clarity.

Nothing matters if the audience doesn't understand what you did and why. A few points to remember:

(A) When you describe your experiment, explain first what conceptual variable you manipulated (e.g., "In order to test this hypothesis we manipulated the anxiety level of the subjects"). Only then should you explain the operational variable (e.g., "We did this by exposing half of the subjects to an uncaged lion. These subjects were the 'high anxiety' group. We exposed the other subjects to an uncaged rabbit, and these were the 'low anxiety' subjects").

(B) Be redundant. Say the same thing several times in different ways. Be redundant. Remember that your audience cannot process your speech nearly as well as they can process your writing because they can't go back and re-read something you said, and they can't listen at their own pace. Any important point should be stated twice (e.g., "We think alcohol impairs some cognitive processes but not others. In other words, while some performances are enhanced by the ingestion of alcohol, others are disrupted").

MY ADDITION: The best line of defense for lack of clarity is detailed preparation and practice so that complex issues are made as concrete as possible and main ideas are repeated. If you use a word or concept that may be unclear or unfamiliar to your audience, make sure you explain it in clear, everyday language immediately after using the term. (This can be especially useful in results sections. Don't mention "varimax rotation" or "bootstrapping" or other such terms unless you are darn well prepared to explain in comprehensible language what that means to a potentially naïve audience.)

(C) It is generally unprofessional to say, "Is all of this clear so far?" but it is better to do this than to lose the audience. If you think the audience is lost, you can ask. But ask someone who you know won't be afraid to tell you the truth. Most audience members will be too embarrassed to tell you they're lost, but they will look around, exchange glances, and make you feel foolish.

(D) Make use of visual aids (e.g., a drawing of your 2 x 2). A picture (*graph*) is worth 1,324 words. Supplement your speech with pictures. [*But only if they are directly relevant to your point – my addition*] But -- remember that a complicated picture is useless and causes the audience to stop listening to you while they try to figure out your picture. Thus, when you use a picture, use a simple one with BIG letters. Also, give the audience a moment to read all of the words on a slide before you start talking again; otherwise they may miss what you're saying as

they scrutinize the slide (*see my addition below*). Remember also to get rid of a slide when you're done with it. It can prove distracting when left on too long. Last, you should note that handouts are usually a bad idea, because you cannot determine what the audience looks at any given time. People always look ahead with handouts, and may miss your preliminary comments while they peruse the handout. Use slides or overhead transparencies instead.

MY ADDITION:

Avoid overloading slides. Do not include much text on slides. People came to hear you speak – not to read slides. In fact, you should rarely if ever include complete sentences on a PPT. Use an outline format and present the bullet points on the slides in such a way that people are not tempted to read the material while you are talking. I highly recommend making the bullet points come up one at a time. Try not to talk while people may still be reading. Better yet, make the points on the PPT so brief that it takes only a fraction of a second to read.

Avoid flashy, distracting gimmicks. Rely on simple backgrounds, simple fonts, and simple transitions between slides. Do not use unusual or fancy effects. Use high contrast colors (e.g., white backgrounds, black words). White text on a dark background often does not work well! Use larger size font than you think you'll need. Stick with size 32 or larger for most fonts.

How many slides should I include? It depends, but a good heuristic is to allocate about one-minute per slide. In a 15-minute talk if you have 10 slides, it's probably too few; if you have 25, it's probably too many.

(E) Present data kindly. If you must present lots of data, present each piece separately on a different slide. Nothing is worse than a slide full of numbers. Use figures instead of tables whenever possible.

Present the most important data first! Don't present the manipulation checks first unless it is absolutely necessary to your argument. What the audience wants to know is "Did your experiment support your primary hypothesis?" so answer this question before they start asking, "Can I go home yet?"

MY ADDITION: As suggested by Professor Gilbert, it is usually best to present your data with graphs or tables when at all possible. Graphs are preferred over tables in most circumstances. Use tables only when you have a number of results or different results you *want* to compare (e.g., perhaps for different DVs). Generally, I would **not** include entire statistical statements in prominent form on your slides (e.g., F ratios, etc.). It is fine to include them as a footnote near the graph, or elsewhere not center stage. Whether you include the actual means of your conditions depends on how many of them there are and whether or not they can be easily discerned from the graph. **IMPORTANT** - When you present a graph, it is important to orient your audience to it. It is a good idea to start by orienting your audience to what is on each axis. As you describe the data illustrated in the graph, point, literally, to the data points as you mention them (e.g., "As shown by the lined bar on the right side of the graph..." – you should be pointing to that bar on the graph – you can see that XYZ...").

(F) Take the audience's perspective. This is true in every facet of the talk. Try to see your ideas

as a naive audience member would. Of course you know that exposure to lions is a way of manipulating anxiety, but does the audience? If not, did you say it? Don't leave anything important unsaid. The best way to take the audience's perspective is to get a practice audience (spouses and intimates are traditional victims) and give your talk to them. Did they follow? You shouldn't have to be a psychologist to understand the talk -- any reasonably bright person should follow it. Address your talk to a bright colleague in the Art History department. And listen to the practice audience's advice! Think about this: when a listener tells you that something is confusing, they are always, by definition, correct.

MY ADDITION:

Practice, Practice, Practice. Never assume you can present your talk for the first time in front of your audience and achieve your goals. Read your talk aloud, practice in front of others, and repeat. Take good notes of what went wrong and correct it right then and there – don't wait, or you may forget. Repeat again. And, then again. Focus on the rough spots and work through them until you are comfortable with the language. For most talks, especially undergraduate talks, it is usually obvious to the audience when a speaker has memorized a challenging point or phrase, but clearly has little understanding of what it is she is saying. It's usually better to use simpler language that you understand, even if it is a bit less “polished” sounding, assuming than language isn't too colloquial. Lastly, but importantly, some people find it useful to try to memorize their entire talk. I used to do that because I have a good memory for that sort of thing. However, I often found that made me more anxious (see below). My talks became much better when I remembered my “lines” rather than the entire talk word-for-word. What I mean is that actors remember their lines not by memorizing them word-for-word. They remember them by remembering the story, their character, and so on. If you “know” the story, then there is no need to remember every detail. But, if in doubt, you may want to memorize it.

Know that anxiety is normal! Even polished speakers routinely report having a bit of stage fright before they give talks (Hahner, Solokoff, & Salisch, 1993). Believe me – I've given a lot of conference talks in my lifetime, and essentially, I give one everyday as a professor. Still, especially at conferences, I do indeed get a little anxious before going on stage. As with many performances, a little anxiety can actually help facilitate your performance. I've found that my anxiety lessens when I remind myself that it is perfectly fine to make mistakes, lose my train of thought, etc. The best medicine for speaker anxiety is good preparation. By knowing what I want to say, without necessarily memorizing everything word-for-word, I'm less likely to get flustered by not remembering something exactly in the same way I thought I should say it. Rather, I know what I want to say, and say it – even if it's not precisely the way the “script” was written. And, given that I know the story, if I lose my way a tad it's not too difficult to get back on track quickly.

5. TALK ABOUT ONE INTERESTING THING:

(A) A good talk must have substance. You can't give a great talk on a stupid, dull, or boring idea. However, the converse is not necessarily true: A brilliant and exciting idea can easily be the topic of a bad talk. Thus, the first rule for giving a good talk is "Have something interesting to say." In his

Rules for Writing, M. Polya added an important second rule: "Have something to say. If by chance you have two things to say, control yourself." A talk must have a central theme -- people can only handle one major idea per talk. Ask yourself "What is the take-home point here?" That is, what is the one-sentence summary that you hope a listener will give to his or her spouse when the spouse says, "What was the talk you heard today about?" Of course your experiment has complexities and nuances of great beauty. Go home and write a poem about them. But give your audience one and only one message, and give it clearly.

*MY ADDITION: **Summarize the main point throughout the presentation.*** As Gilbert notes, every talk should have an easy-to-understand main message. You should identify it at the beginning, perhaps somewhere in the middle, and again at the end. See 4-B above. Tell the audience at the beginning what you intend to demonstrate, draw their attention to it again when you review the results, and remind them of the main point as you conclude. Try to make the same point in a slightly different way each time.

(B) Talking clearly means not doing certain stylistic things that distract your audience. Do you pace?

Chain yourself to a chair. Do you say "uh" between every sentence? Get therapy. Do you touch your nose or your chin all the time? Cut off your hand. All of these things can be distracting because when you are anxious, you will do them very fast. As a result, you will not pace in a relaxed, professorial fashion; you will actually run from one end of the room to the other. (A note on pacing: If you pace you will often find that you need to look at your notes and they are on a different side of the room than you are). To find out what annoying stylistic nuances you have, film yourself.

MY ADDITION: To nuance what Dr. Gilbert is saying, you certainly do not want to pace too much, but it is ok and even advisable to move around a bit rather than standing like a statue.

(C) Humor can be useful. A light remark puts the audience at ease and shows them that you are relaxed and confident. However, too much humor is probably worse than none at all. People will only consider your work to be as serious as you seem to think it is. If you think of it as a big joke, they will come to agree with you. In addition, nothing is worse than a joke that just doesn't cut it. Here's a good rule: If you don't know how much humor is too much, don't use humor. Not everyone can or should. And never under any circumstances tell long jokes that sidetrack you.

MY ADDITION: Use numerous examples. The best way to maintain focus when speaking is to pepper the presentation with well-chosen examples. Illustrate concepts with good examples that will stay with listeners throughout the talk and beyond (Dunn, 2003).

6. TAKE CHARGE OF THE INTERACTION:

(A) This is your talk. Don't let someone else take control of it by forcing you to deviate from your organizational plan. If someone requires clarification (e.g., "Were the anxious people exposed to the lion or the rabbit?") then answer them briefly and continue. If someone wants to argue philosophy (e.g., "But don't you think that psychology errs when it thinks of people as real?") don't take the bait. Audience members may try to throw you off track and you must not

let them -- but you must stop them with tact. Anyone can say "Shut up please, I'm trying to give a talk here." But the expert can say this in other words and still maintain an air of confidence and professionalism. A good standby is something like "That's an interesting question to which I've given much thought. I'll be addressing just that issue in a few minutes, but if I don't answer your question, please remind me at the end of the talk." Of course, you better damn well be prepared to answer it at the end of the talk. If you can't even understand the question you can always resort to something like "To be honest, I'm not sure I see the full implications of what you've said, but if I'm going to cover all the ground that I've set out to cover, I think I best delay a discussion of that until later." You may be scared to interrupt a questioner who is persistent, but remember what Ann Landers would say: The interrupting questioner is acting impolitely. You have every right to get the exchange back on track by taking charge. In fact, you owe it to the rest of the audience who have come to hear you -- not the questioner.

(B) Novices often make the mistake of agreeing with criticisms they can't understand, because they think they will look foolish otherwise, and they think that the questioner will get off their backs if they just agree with him or her. By no means should you verbally agree with any critic unless you really understand his or her point and agree with it. If you do, you will find yourself backed into a corner later on (e.g., "But you earlier agreed when I said people weren't real, so how can you now maintain that your data tell us anything about people?").

(C) Novices often make the opposite mistake -- they are sometimes too defensive. If a person attacks your study, they are not attacking you. (Well...actually, they may be. But pretend like they're not). If they have a valid criticism of a bad study, your refusal to acknowledge their point will make you look both stupid and immature. If you acknowledge their point you'll just look stupid. The best way to avoid damning criticism is by letting others hear your talk first. Let a practice audience member (who loves and adores you) find the weaknesses in your argument, and then repair them before you speak in front of people who don't even love you a little. This is another benefit of writing an organizational plan. When you try to write your argument you will see most of the flaws in your own logic. Better you than your audience.

MY ADDITION: From Dunn, 2003. Never panic if you cannot answer a question. No one expects you to know everything, nor can you anticipate every possible question. It is perfectly fine and entirely professional to admit when you don't know something. Be honest and admit that (until now) you never considered the question and need time to reflect on it. Tough questions are often the starting point for subsequent investigations.

7. END AT THE END:

(A) The same sins that pertain to starting also pertain to ending. You have ended too soon if, after presenting your results you say "So that's what we found. Any questions?" You must summarize in two steps: First summarize your findings (e.g., "So, these data show that people who are made anxious subsequently tend to show more interest in sex than do people who are not made anxious."). Second, show the meaning of your findings for the "Big Picture" (e.g., "Theorists have always construed anxiety as a deficit, but our findings show that it can indeed have positive consequences"). Finally, it is nice if you can point out what other provocative

questions your findings suggest (e.g., "It would be interesting to know if the anxious person's increased interest in sex is accompanied by an increased ability to perform. We have several field studies in the works that attempt to show...").

(B) You have ended too late if (1) the clock tells you so, (2) the audience is yawning, or (3) you are spinning your wheels. Part of being a good teacher is knowing how to pace yourself, and at a job talk people will be watching to see if you can end on time. If you have one hour to talk, plan a 45 minute presentation. If you run over your limit by more than ten minutes, look for another job. In any context, a verbose speaker may lose all the points he or she has previously won by going on and on and on and on. Don't leave the audience with a "bored taste in their mouths" -- even if the talk was good, all good things must come to an end. So, make your point, make it clearly, show why its important, and shut the hell up. Like this.

MY ADDITION. Well, not quite yet. Besides a good start, you need a good ending. The last thing you say is what people remember (Lucas, 1995), so let them know you are finishing up the presentation before you hit home the main point(s) one more time. Like a practiced opening, having the last few things you say committed to memory makes a favorable impression on listeners