

Why Are So Many Scientific Talks So Dull? Do They Have To Be that Way?

by D. Eric Walters, Ph.D.

When you attend a conference or a seminar, what is the probability that very good science will be presented in a very dull way? Unfortunately, this happens too often.

Why are so many scientific talks so dull? There are several reasons. First, science has a very strong written tradition. You are expected to write your results in such a way that others can reproduce them. You are expected to give sufficient data to support your conclusions. If you over interpret your results, others will discover this and your reputation will suffer. Data and detail are highly valued; hype is not. Therefore, scientists tend to be cautious and monotone in presenting their results, and they are thorough in showing the data. This can lead to extremely unexciting presentations, with overly complicated graphs, tables and diagrams.

There is another reason. Most of us do not get much formal instruction in oral presentation in the course of our scientific training. It simply is not considered as important as doing the science and writing the papers. Only later do we discover that our speaking skills can have a tremendous influence on the course of our careers.

Do they have to be that way? No, of course not. We can all improve our presentation skills. First, we must realize that oral presentations serve a role much different from our written work. Papers and books are the place to present all of the experimental procedures, details, and data. The oral presentation is the place to *tell the story* of your research. The story describes the circumstances and thought processes that led you to do the work, highlights the frustrations you and your colleagues experienced along the way, and conveys your elation when you succeeded. Most important, an oral presentation is your chance to share with others why you find your topic interesting. Be sure to share your enthusiasm with your audience. This helps the listeners to connect with what you are saying.

The oral presentation is *not* the place to tell everything you know about your subject. It is a good idea to decide in advance what will be the key message you want listeners to recall long after the talk is over. If you can state that key message in a single clear sentence, you will have a foundation on which to organize your talk. Your presentation will have a clear focus.

There are other ways to improve as well. Visual aids (slides, overheads, PowerPoint presentations, and others) are usually better if they contain a few key words in a large font than if they become a script which you read to the audience. They can read faster than you can speak. If you put the whole story on the screen, they will read rather than listen. On the other hand, if you just give them a few key words, they will *know* just enough about what you are talking about to desire to *listen* to what you have to say about it.

Practice and experience are helpful as well. Look for opportunities to speak, and enlist colleagues to give you constructive feedback about your presentations. Rehearse often if you have to give an important presentation, so that you will stay within the time limit and will feel comfortable with your talk.

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