COMMUNICATE YOUR SCIENCE! ...

TACKLE THAT TALK!

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T - TELL, TELL, TELL

A very old tip on giving a talk is to 'tell them what you're going to tell them, then tell them, then tell them what you've told them!' This means that you should first set the scene by outlining what you are going to cover. Then give the details, then finish by summarizing what you have covered. You need to do this for a very good reason. You have spent many months doing your research and are, therefore, thoroughly familiar with it. You know why you did what you did. In the time that you spend preparing your talk, you have even strengthened this familiarity. But, your audience comes to the subject cold. You need to lead them in gently or they won't understand what you are saying. Since the purpose of your talk is to tell people about what you have been doing, you will have failed.

You can begin to set the scene for your audience, even before they enter the lecture theatre, by publishing a title and abstract. The title should be a single sentence that gives an accurate idea of what your talk is about. The abstract can contain a little more detail. A useful exercise is to follow Anholt's suggestion for three-sentence abstracts. The first sentence introduces the basic question that your work tries to answer and gives the overall background. The second summarizes the major experimental findings. The third gives the overall conclusion. Even if you don't publish your three-sentence abstract, you should be able to write one for yourself to give you a bird's-eye view of your talk.

A - ARRANGEMENT OF MATERIAL

What is the best way to arrange your material to produce an effective talk? The 'tell, tell, tell rule' gives us the clue: your talk has three main parts. These are the Beginning, the Middle and the Ending. (These parts are also known as Introduction, Body and Conclusion.) The Beginning outlines very briefly what is to come ('tell them what you're going to tell them ...'). It then gives the background to the work. It will start with the big picture - how your work fits into the general scheme of things - then move on to your own work. The Middle is the main part of the talk. It gives the audience the information you wish to impart ('... then tell them ...'), but should have a single major message. This is done most effectively by telling an interesting story. To do this, you can split the Middle into a number of related subsections, each introduced by a question. The question will be answered, and its answer will lead on to another question and another subsection. The content could be similar to the Materials and Methods and Results sections of your Report, but containing less detail. The Ending rounds off the talk by summarizing what was said before ('... then tell them what you've told them'), then gives a clear parting message.

You will, of course, illustrate the various sections of the talk with some super seminar slides1.

L - LECTURE NOTES

By this, I mean not just notes on pieces of paper but, in addition, points you should note in preparing and giving the talk. If you are feeling nervous (you will!), you may be tempted to write out your talk beforehand and read it to the audience. Don't do it! You will bore them and, if your eyes never leave your typescript, some of your audience may sneak out before you've finished. Besides, you won't sound natural because written English is not the same as spoken English. You will be better received if you talk to your audience rather than read to them. And look at them when you're doing it. Indeed, if you can manage it, imagine that you're telling a friend about your work. Even the biggest audience is only a collection of individuals. Try to talk to them in the same informal manner you would use in talking to just one of them.

You may need to have some notes, however, if only to keep you on track. But, what sort of notes? Think about it. Suppose you want to talk about how you've been staining cells with a particular stain. All you need to do is write the heading STAINING CELLS in your notes, then talk about it when you come to that part. There's no need to write out in advance exactly what you're going to say - you're familiar with it, remember. You can do without paper notes altogether if

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1 Advice on how to produce effective slides was given in: Super Seminar Slides [Brown, B. S. (1996) Trends Cell Biol. 6, 74 76] the second in the 'Communicate your Science' series.

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you use slides as notes. Up goes the first slide and you talk about it. Then the next, then the next and so on to the end.

**K – KIND TO YOUR AUDIENCE**

For your talk to be successful you need to be kind to your audience. This means treating them with consideration and courtesy. Remember that you have the advantage of being far more familiar with the material than they are, so you need to help them along. Some of the tips given so far will help you to help your audience, but there are other things you can do. The best thing you can do is to let your enthusiasm show. If your audience sees that you are excited about what you are saying, then some of the excitement will rub off onto them. If you are enthusiastic, then you will solve many of the problems that may worry you as a first-timer speaker - can they hear me?; is my voice too monotonous?; am I ‘umm-ing and err-ing’? If you do feel nervous and show it, then you will make your audience uncomfortable. A few deep breaths taken before you start the talk will work wonders for your nerves - at least they do for mine! Another point to note is that your audience will not like you if you are arrogant, or even too apologetic. Be yourself.

**S – STOPPING ON TIME**

You may find it hard to believe while you stand quaking, waiting to begin, but one of the most difficult things in giving a talk is stopping! The worst moments are the few minutes before you start, when you’re watching the audience take their seats, and the few minutes after you’ve started, before you’ve warmed up. But then you will begin to enjoy yourself. You’re there as an authority on the subject; you’re telling a clear, exciting story; you’ve got some intelligible and interesting slides; you sense that you’re going down well – they’re even laughing at your jokes. How could you not enjoy it? So, when it’s time to stop, you are understandably reluctant. But, you must. Time seems to pass more slowly for the audience than for the speaker, so, what seems like five minutes worth of talking to you, may seem like half an hour to your audience. If you go on for longer than they expect, you will annoy them. So, be sure to stop on time. And don’t use closing signals unless you really mean them – if you say: ‘In closing ...,’ then make sure you do close. It’s best to close with the audience wanting to hear more, rather than being glad that you’ve stopped. You may be glad that it’s all over, but you don’t want them to be!

**Here’s where to find more help:**


CALMAN, J. and BARABAS, A. (1972) *Speaking at Medical Meetings - a Practical Guide*, Heinemann


STRUNK, W., Jr, and WHITE, E. B. (1979) *The Elements of Style* (3rd edn), Collier

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