

Hopefully, someday, you will be invited to give a job talk. Hopefully, someday, you will be invited to give several job talks at different universities. Hopefully, these will all be highly respected places that pay well. But until then, it is never too early to prepare yourself. Consider these pointers:

Attend Them. Until you actually give a job talk, it is a good idea to attend as many as you possibly can. And just don't listen to the substance of the talk. Observe the presentation. Watch how faculty members react to job candidate (e.g., leaning forward in interest, falling asleep in boredom) as this can tell you a great deal about how successful a job talk is. Feel free to talk to a trusted faculty member about the talk following the presentation.

Presentation Matters. There is something about academics that makes many of them think that sheer brilliance alone will get them through life. Hardly. If presented incoherently and in an uninteresting manner, the most brilliant theory will be incoherent and uninteresting. You need to engage and interest your audience.



You Are The Expert. This cuts two ways. First, it should give you confidence and allow you to relax. You likely know more about your subject than anyone else in the room, therefore you can speak from a position of authority. However, you also need to make your talk accessible to your audience. Try to avoid highly specific jargon or references to people not widely known. If you need to do this, explain your terms and reference your sources.

Practice. Although you should have notes in front of you, you shouldn't rely on them too heavily. (Never, ever "read" your talk from a paper.) Your talk should be conversational in style, you should appear comfortable and you need to make eye contact with your audience. All of this comes from practice. Give a practice talk to a couple fellow grad students. Give another talk in front of the department with all faculty invited. One of my favorite techniques is to go for a long run and practice the talk in my head. In doing so, I try to raise difficult questions and think about possible answers or responses. You can do this in the shower, on a bus, etc.

Content. Try to present the core of your dissertation, but don't feel obliged to present the whole thing. You only need to raise and answer one question, not a whole litany of issues being raised in your research. Pick a representative piece and let others know that there are other things being addressed in the dissertation that won't be discussed. (Invite them to ask about these issues during the question and answer period.)

Presentation Order. Presentations can vary, but there is a general pattern to most of them.

- *Hook* – start with an interesting story/anecdote to grab the audience’s attention. It can be a story from your fieldwork or a joke. However, it should tie directly to the question/puzzle you are about to raise. Even better, tie your conclusion back to the initial story.
- *Question/Puzzle* – Tell your audience what the question or puzzle is. Be explicit. Perhaps have an overhead transparency with only that question. Remember, a counterintuitive puzzle is more interesting than a simple question, so try to make it as “surprising” as possible.
- *Conventional Theories* – what are the typical explanations for this puzzle.
- *Your Theory* – explain yourself in concise terms.
- *Your Empirical Results* – again, try to be concise.
- *Conclusion/Other Avenues of Research* – your conclusion should summarize the question, the theory and the main thrust of the evidence in just a few sentences. Also use this time to reveal other avenues of research. Be proactive and show that your project generates other questions. This signals that you have an active research agenda beyond the dissertation.
- *Questions/Comments* – ask for questions and comments on ways the project could be improved.

Question and Answer Period. This is probably the most critical part of the job talk. Many candidates can present a good talk, but wilt in the heat of questions. Prepare yourself by trying to anticipate questions (in practice job talks, etc.). Also, you should try to “plant” questions ahead of times by raising them in your talk. (“I won’t be going into this topic in the time allowed, but perhaps we can discuss it during the question and answer period.”) It is also possible to intentionally leave some puzzles unanswered in your talk that will be potential fodder for questions. This is a very subtle and difficult skill to master. Be humble during the Q&A. Defend your results, but do NOT get combative. If you can’t answer a question, say that you will think about it and get back to them. Write down who asked the question and e-mail them with a response later.

Presentation Style. Do what is most comfortable for you. Be yourself. If you are a more somber person, don’t try to yuck it up with jokes and vice versa. Always present yourself professionally and with a small amount of humility. Use overhead transparencies or computer presentations to highlight your main points and to showcase your data analysis. Keep the overheads simple and uncluttered. Use charts, graphs or diagrams to make your points. Color helps. (Yes, I know. Intellectuals should be able to see through these little presentation tricks, but think to yourself, would you rather see a boring and dry presentation or one that is a bit more lively, all other things being equal?) Try to avoid “handouts.” With handouts, people have a tendency to look at the paper and not you. Keep attention always focused on you. Also, handouts allow people to comb over your analysis and find more holes, not to mention providing a platform for doodling.

