

A year ago, a non academic friend listened to a talk I gave. I thought it went great. My friend disagreed. She said that academics are experts at making interesting stuff boring and that we should all take a speech class. So I did. And here are 6 most useful things I learned.

1. Practice speaking in your natural voice.

- a. The moment academics step in front of an audience, they often put on a "speaker voice."
- b. I spent 8 weeks practicing my natural voice. Pauses, rhythms, speed, emphasis, and loudness. It was fun and taught me to speak more dynamically.

2. Break up your talk.

- a. Why is it that we say no to a 3-hour movie but yes to binging six 30-minute episodes? Because episodes break things up.
- b. I now think of a 60-minute talk as 4-6 episodes. Each should give people a brief break (e.g., for questions) and leave them wanting more.

3. Don't cram in material.

- a. If you cram in too much, you'll exhaust your audience.
- b. We have to remind ourselves that most people don't care as much about the details as we do. Even if they do, hopefully they'll just ask.
- c. Awesome! Now you have a great Q&A session.

4. Research the setting.

- a. Ask what the room looks like.
- b. Visualize the room when you practice. When you show up, it will feel familiar; you'll know how loud to talk and how to work the space.
- c. Ask about your audience too, and consider tailoring your materials to increase relevance.

5. End early.

- a. People complain when talks go long-not short.
- b. If you plan to end early, you'll be less likely to go long.
- c. Ending early also makes it feel like time flew by.
- d. It also gives more time for Q&A and discussion (which should be lively if your talk went well).

6. Prepare two conclusion statements.

- a. Academic talks often end with a Q&A.
- b. But this can mean that the last thing your audience hears is a subpar question or an awkward "No more questions?"
- c. You can ensure that things end on a high note if you prepare a post-Q&A conclusion.

These six pieces of advice are opinionated. And there's lots of nuance. But these tips have worked well for me.

In the last talk I gave, several audience members emailed me and said it was one of the best talks they've recently attended. I NEVER got that kind of feedback before.

Academics study interesting and important things. But we often lack training in how to effectively engage an audience.

I hope my advice helps. Because if we want to maximize the impact of our scientific endeavors, we need to keep working on our public speaking skills.