

Reading List of Advice for Public Speakers

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1 Introduction

Below are advice articles that I found useful while mentoring undergraduate speakers. I will provide a brief overview of each document and a few comments on any weaknesses. If you are only going to read one, I recommend reading Linte's article [1]. If you only read that, take the part on introductions with a pinch of salt. Linte writes as though introductions are nearly pointless. I feel the introduction is the most important part of a talk. This is mostly my own experience, but if you need someone else to tell you, Agawal [2] says "telling people why your work is important and where it fits into the larger picture can ultimately make or break [a talk]."

To make best use of this document, I suggest skimming the overviews and picking a few papers that look interesting or like they will help address any concerns you have. I've attached reading time estimates to each one to help you. If you don't have any particular concerns, but don't want to read it all, I have starred (*) a few articles I found particularly interesting/useful. If you haven't read a paper before, Keshav's advice [3] is a very good starting point.

I have split papers up into sections. In section 2 I list some good overviews about how to give a talk. In section 3, I list some articles that talk specifically about the speaking part of giving a talk. Listing things not to do in a presentation is also a common way of conveying advice. I cover those in section 4. In section 5, I cover some articles that take a more scientific approach to the problem. Finally, in section 6, I cover survey papers on speaking advice.

2 Overviews

Feibelman [4] gives an excellent overview of how to give a good talk in Chapter 4. It focuses on a talk on the academic job market, but gives excellent advice generally. (Short read: 20 minutes).

Greenhalgh et al. [5] give a good, if uninspiring, review of what goes into a good talk. They go through and list what should go on slide X, which is something I'm not a fan of. This kind of advice strikes me as far too regimented. Outside of that section it's better. (Short read: 15 minutes)

Evans [6] gives a few examples of what not to do on slides. Most advice from the 70s is really dated, but Evans has examples that are independent of

the underlying technology. However, this is closer to an experimental practices paper than a “how to give a talk” paper. Because of this, it’s only really useful for people presenting research that they have done themselves. (Very short read: 10 minutes)

(*) Linte [1] gives the most flawless advice I have come across. If you are only going to read one, read this! It is generally weak when talking about introductions. (Medium read: 25 minutes)

(*) Garland [7] gives a good overview of how to speak. Unfortunately, it is very physics focused. I personally didn’t get much out of the first few sections. That said, the section “Interact with your audience” is fantastic. It contains the best advice for handling Q&A periods I have come across. Just like I recommend Linte if you are only going to read one thing, I recommend Garland’s Q&A section if you are only going to read two. (Medium read: 25 minutes)

Dee [8] gives a generally mediocre overview. It’s all correct, but I didn’t pick anything particularly insightful up from it. It has a few reminders not in other advice articles. (Sort read: 15 minutes)

Gosling and Noordam [9] has a similar problem. In my opinion, they have a good, if not particularly insightful, coverage of how to give a good talk. (Short read: 15 minutes)

Laidlaw and Hesketh [10] have an advice article that is missing a lot of things. However, the bits it does give are relatively good.

Salasche [11] gives a somewhat dated review. Nevertheless, if you read through the dated advice, there are lots of bits that are perfectly applicable to modern talks. (Long read: 45 minutes)

3 Speaking

Pain [12] gives advice for non-native speakers. I found it hard to apply her work, but this is likely because I am a native speaker! I have heard a lot of non-native speakers struggle, and wish I had a better grasp of how to apply her advice. Generally some excellent advice. There is a good quote in there about conveying enough enthusiasm. (Short read: 15 minutes)

(*) Yaffe [13] gives some reasonable advice for getting nerves under control. I generally feel that controlling nerves is a personal topic and so the more options people have the better. This paper is more of a “everyone is nervous, it’s OK” kind of vibe. The numbered points on pages four and five are most important. There is a good reminder about not apologising when possible. (Medium read: 30 minutes)

Holgate [14] has a few interviews with people talking about how each of them deal with nerves. In general, I think this is worse than Yaffe’s advice. But, nerves are personal, so this style of article is exactly right for the topic. (Short read: 20 minutes)

Fenton [15] focuses on technical writing. Among other things, he explains how to keep sentences short and meaningful. His advice applies well to verbose speakers. I highly recommend the whole document (long read: 80 minutes).

However, for the sake of speaking, focus on section three. (Medium read: 40 minutes)

4 Presentation Myths

Becker and McNulty [16] go through a list of myths. I think this is a pretty good one, especially myths 5, 6, 7, 8. It is from 1996, and some of their advice is a bit dated, e.g. 3, 4, 10. Skip things that are outdated. (Medium read: 25 minutes)

Ousterhout [17] has some slides that give a bemusing overview of what not to do. I'm not sure that I really learned anything from this, but it is occasionally useful to see a reminder of what you shouldn't do. (Very short: 5 minutes)

Patterson [18] has a very brief list of things not to do. A bit humorous, a bit dated, but some good points in there. (Very short: 1 minute)

5 Analyses

Tanveer et al. [19] analyze audience emotions throughout TED talks. They do this with sentiment analysis of timestamped comments on Youtube videos. The interesting results from this paper are in Table 4. The takeaway here is that varying emotions through a talk is a good idea. Of course, emotions don't apply so well to technical talks. I believe that there are worthwhile, applicable takeaways from this (after all, many TED talks are very good!). For example, finishing on a high-note is a good idea. (Long read: 40 minutes)

Wörtwein et al. [20] try to decompose what makes a good talk. They go through various talk features that experts extracted and look at how they correlate with how "good" a talk is. I haven't read it in as much detail as I'd like (a better review welcome), but figure 2 suggests to me that gestures are important. (Long: 1 hour)

(*) Craig et al. [21] talk about the positives and negatives of power point. It was written when power point was just coming into use, and it's a good reminder that slides shouldn't be the center of attention. It also has some very good advice for managing slides. For example, don't present sequential content in bullet points. It's a hard read. (Very long: 2 hours)

Curtis et al. [22] use a machine learning based approach to classify how good a speaker is. They find a few interesting results, see tables 1 and 2. For example, their ML algorithm finds people pay more attention when the speaker is varying their pitch. I suspect that a dig through the references will lead you to some interesting work. (Long read: 1 hour)

Golub [23] does an analysis of how well a chat room for the audience to use works. It's not particularly relevant to speaking techniques, but it seems like a neat idea to me. (Long read: 45 minutes)

6 Reviews

Fong [24] has an overview of a few computer science specific talk advice papers. Most of the papers he references are dated and focus on using old technology. I've included it because of the focus on computer science. I haven't included any of the papers he cites because they are so dated. A good one to dig through if you wanted CS specific advice though. (Very short: 5 minutes)

Blome et al. [25] give a long and detailed overview of many speaker advice papers. I think the main topics of advice that they extract are pretty obvious. This isn't unexpected: they report on the most repeated advice points. But, their bibliography is fantastic. Many of the papers I have presented here come directly from them. (Medium Read: 30 minutes)

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