



Tips for an Academic Job Talk

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Forum

The purpose in making these distinctions is that they suggest different lines of attack. If two out of three reviewers respond with a category one statement, then revisions may well not be necessary and the article should be sent to another journal. If two out of three reviewers respond with category two or three, then before sending it anywhere something needs to be done to the presentation. If two out of three respond with category four it might be most useful to go back to the drawing board.

Two questions have frequently been raised by authors: (1) can a rejected manuscript—one that was not invited back—be revised and resubmitted? and (2) can an author challenge the reviewers? The answer to these questions will depend in large part on editorial policies which differ from journal to journal and editor to editor. There are, however, some rules of thumb that can be noted. First, an uninvited manuscript should never be resubmitted unless it has undergone fairly substantial revisions. Second, if the comments are of category one or category four types, then no amount of revision will make the study float, and it should not be resubmitted to the same journal. When the comments are of types two or three, I was willing to reprocess the article, provided extensive and not just cosmetic changes had been made.

In my experience, an author should challenge reviewers only under very special conditions. Such challenges are largely unproductive for both author and editor and seldom lead to the reversal of a decision. Too often authors translate comments of categories two and three as indicative of the reviewer's lack of expertise. This may be the case, but in 99 out of 100 cases it is not. I have been intrigued by the challenges that some authors have leveled at some of the most sophisticated and major contributors in the profession. In general, there would appear to be a basis for a challenge only if (1) the comments are largely of category four type and (2) there are clear factual bases for rebutting the statements made. When this is the case, then the rebuttal must be well developed and clearly presented and documented. In these rare cases it may well be useful to challenge the reviewers

as it can help the editor better understand a problem and the capabilities of various reviewers.

Perhaps the most important point to be made is that while reviewers can certainly be wrong, as can editors, the burden of the proof ultimately lies with the author. It is the author's job to communicate the ideas, not the reader's job to read between the lines to try to understand what the author may be saying. □

Tips for an Academic Job Talk

Robert Axelrod

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Before the Talk

1. Ask about the format of the talk so that you will know how much time you will have.
2. If possible, schedule the talk early in the visit. This will make the individual meetings more productive.
3. Practice your talk, even if it is in front of just a few friends. This will help you be realistic about the timing, get the phrasing down, and learn what parts are unclear.
4. Try to get a half-hour to yourself just before the talk to review your notes.

During the Talk

5. Start by giving the title.
6. Next, ask people to hold their questions until the end (except for brief questions of clarification). Otherwise you are likely to get interrupted and never finish the talk. If you are interrupted, and you can't give a very short answer in a single phrase, ask the person to save that question until the end.
7. Be sure to explain near the beginning why a nonspecialist might be interested in your work.

8. Be realistic about the time it will take to give your talk. Be ruthless with yourself in planning what you will be able to say, and what you'll have to leave out. If you are running short of time during the talk, it is better to cut a pre-planned optional section in the middle than to be prevented from giving the conclusion.

9. Near the end, be sure to explain why your substantive conclusions are of importance beyond the immediate topic of the work.

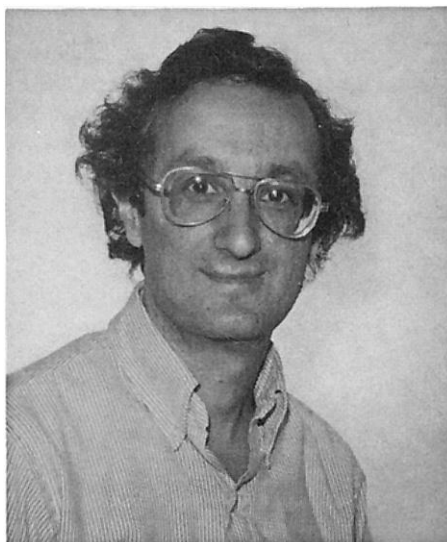
10. A good talk, like a good musical, has a theme that people can whistle to themselves on the way out.

11. For most speakers, it is better to use a detailed outline than a script. If you do read your talk, be sure that you do not read too fast, that you don't use a monotone, and that you maintain eye contact.

12. Use a blackboard to help focus attention and to have a common reference point with the audience. Use handouts if the material is too detailed to put on the blackboard. Be sure the handouts are not too complex and are well labeled. Have plenty of copies of the handouts with the pages stapled together.

After the Talk

13. The hardest task is to appreciate what a questioner is getting at. Ask for clarification if you are not sure, for example, by restating the question in your own words and asking if that is what was meant.



Robert Axelrod

14. It is not a crime to pause before you reply. It might even make you look thoughtful.

15. It is not a crime to take notes on the remarks from the audience, especially on an interesting point that you hadn't thought of. It might even make you look like you care.

16. It is not a crime to say "I don't know" or "my data aren't decisive about that but I'll be glad to speculate."

17. If a few people are dominating the questioning (which often happens), say "I'd like to call on the person in the back of the room now who hasn't had a chance to ask a question yet." □