

# The Art of the Job Talk

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As any academic job candidate will tell you, the public presentation-or job talk-is the critical event in most on-campus employment interviews. Though constituting only a small fraction of the many hours you will spend on campus, the job talk is the one opportunity most faculty members have to meet you and evaluate your work. It is the moment when front-runners sometimes falter and more junior candidates steal the show and get the job.

The format of job talks varies widely. At some schools, you will be asked to make a presentation on your research; at others, a teaching demonstration or lecture is required. In either case, the job talk serves as a showcase of your public speaking skills and teaching abilities. There are several ways to prepare for this admittedly nerve-racking ordeal. In the long term, you'll want to get as much public speaking and lecturing experience under your belt as possible. Long before you enter the job market, you should be finding opportunities to present your work at seminars, conferences, and professional meetings. This will not only improve your presentation, but will also help you anticipate the kinds of questions and comments you will encounter about your work.

Once you have been invited to campus for an interview, you should find out as much as you can about the format and context of the job talk. Do they want a formal research presentation, a classroom lecture, or something in between? How much time will you have, and who will be in the audience (undergraduates, graduate students, faculty, or a combination)? If you plan to use technology in your talk, make sure to discuss it with the school so they'll have the appropriate room and equipment ready. Once you know what's expected, you should prepare the presentation and arrange to deliver a mock job talk beforehand. If your department has a forum for such events, by all means make use of it. If not, round up a few fellow students and faculty who can give you good feedback. Hopefully, you'll be able to return the favor for others.

## **The Research Talk**

The purpose of the research talk is to introduce the audience (usually faculty and graduate students) to your current research and to give them a sense of you as a teacher and colleague. In most cases, this type of talk should be pitched to the intelligent nonspecialist (such as historians in other fields or areas). Ideally, you'll want to provide a brief overview of your research project as well as a more focused example

or two of the substantive research and analysis. Do not give a chapter-by-chapter run down of your thesis-this will only frustrate your listeners without giving them a real feel for your work.

An engaging start is essential. You need to grab the audience's attention as well as give them a sense of who you are and why this research matters-to you and hopefully everyone else. One method is to start off by discussing how you discovered the topic-a kind of mini intellectual biography. Alternately, you might begin with an arresting image or source that can serve as an emblem or entrée into the research problem. In any case, let the audience know why your study matters, assert your thesis, and briefly explain how it contributes to the relevant historiographical debates in your field. You can then proceed on to some substantive examples drawn from one or more of your strongest chapters. For the conclusion, you should return to the big questions raised at the beginning and summarize how your findings advance our thinking in these areas.

While most job candidates prefer to work from a written paper, you should think in terms of delivering your paper rather than reading it. One way to do this is to carefully edit your text, reworking your prose into spoken English that avoids overly long or convoluted sentence structure. If you can, try to cut loose from the text now and then and speak extemporaneously about particular examples or issues (though be sure and budget adequate time to do so). Watch your pacing: if you find you're rushing through the paper, write in pauses and emphases where appropriate. Most important, be confident about your work and try to convey your own enthusiasm about the subject (even if you are sick to death of it).

Handouts or visual images can be useful tools in some talks and a vital necessity in others. If you decide to use slides or a PowerPoint presentation, however, be sure to arrive in the lecture room early to allow adequate time for set up and troubleshooting. To give yourself some peace of mind, always bring a stack of photocopied images as back up in case of total technological failure. They won't look as good as the slides, but at least the show can go on.

Invariably, the talk will be followed by a question-and-answer period. While it is tempting to relax once you've finished the presentation, don't. The Q & A is often the most critical part of the talk, an opportunity for the audience to see how you think on your feet and how well you defend your research. Take all questions seriously, and answer as directly and concisely as you can. Don't be long winded, especially if there are lots of hands raised and not a lot of time. If someone asks you a string of questions, answer the one or two you like best and then move on, saying you'll be happy to discuss the others afterward. If you are unsure of what someone is asking, try and rephrase the question back to them for confirmation. If you really don't have an answer, it's okay to say so (but

not more than once or twice). Whatever you do, try not to be evasive or defensive-even in face of a hostile question. Acknowledge that it is an important issue and one that you are continuing to grapple with as you revise the manuscript. Following the last question, take the opportunity to thank the audience for coming out and sharing their comments.

## **The Teaching Demonstration**

The classroom lecture or teaching demonstration is a somewhat different exercise, but one that is commonly required at smaller colleges or teaching-oriented institutions. The classroom lecture is the most straightforward: you are typically brought in as a guest speaker in a survey-level course. The teaching demonstration is a more contrived event in which you are asked to give a class lesson on your dissertation research or other topic to a mixed group of undergraduate students and faculty.

Again, you'll want to find out in advance as much information about the format and expectations as you can. Do they want you to lecture to a large class or lead an interactive session with a smaller group? If you will be stepping into an existing class, find out what they've covered in the past few weeks and if possible, have them send you a copy of the syllabus. If all else fails, take a few minutes with the instructor before class to find out what they've been doing. If you are asked to lecture on a topic that is outside your area of expertise, find someone in your department who can help you or at least point you toward useful texts and sources. As with all job talks, be sure and do a practice run-through with fellow students and faculty before you go.

Whatever the format, the goal of the teaching demonstration is to show that you are a capable and inspired teacher. The point is not to show how smart you are, but rather how well you convey the material and engage the students (especially in smaller classes). Since most teaching demonstrations do not involve assigned reading, you'll want to use primary sources, visual images, or other media artifacts as launching points for discussion. An evocative painting, photograph, or a short radio or film clip can be a useful tool for stimulating student participation (again, make sure you have back-up copies in an alternative medium if possible). Since you don't know how well students will respond, it's a good idea to bring more sources and images than you think you'll need. If the group is reticent, you'll have to take time to draw them out; very sharp groups, on the other hand, may race through your sources. You can adjust the number accordingly. Ideally, you should do something a little creative or innovative-something that other faculty can appreciate and even learn from for their own teaching. Above all, you should show regard for the students and take their questions and comments seriously.

If you successfully complete the job talk and feel good about it, the rest of the interview should be easier. You can follow up on questions about your talk over coffee or dinner.

Indeed, if people want to continue the conversation, it's usually a good sign. If for some reason the talk went badly, don't assume you're to blame. There are a million factors at work in every job interview, most of which you can't control. Chalk it up as a useful experience; the next interview will be the better for it.

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