

Putting on the Best Job Talk You Can: Guidelines and Tips for Doctoral Students

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You just got the email. You have a campus visit. Of course, you are relieved – since this means that you might actually get the job. From the dozen preliminary interviews, at least one school shortlisted you into the list for their campus visit. Once the initial excitement is over, you have some apprehension. The campus visit is a different ball game. Questions run through your mind. Will they like me? Will I blow my job talk? What if I make a fool of myself? What if I can't answer their questions? Your biggest apprehension however is regarding the job talk. You know how this talk can make or break your visit. "Nail the job talk and you will nail the job" – is something you have repeatedly heard and observed at your school.

So, how should you deal with the job talk? Let's divide the talk into three stages and assess what needs to be done for each stage. The first is "preparation." The second is the "actual presentation." Finally, we have "the questions." Of course, depending on your chosen format, questions could be interspersed with the talk itself. Each stage can have its own set of guidelines and tips, but unequivocally the *preparation* stage is the most critical, as it sets you up for the other stages.

Preparation

As a doctoral student, an ongoing preparation for the job talk is getting familiar with the format, and atmosphere of a job talk, as well as the considerations for a good research presentation. Hopefully, for the latter, you have attended research

presentations at your institution as well as presentations at conferences. In attending these, you have made mental notes of what a good presentation looks like. If you have presented your research at your school and/or at a conference, hopefully you received some feedback and you have a sense of where your presentation strengths and weaknesses are. Sometimes, despite sitting through innumerable presentations, you focus so much on the content, that you miss out on noting what the presenter is doing to present well. So, make a point to jot down notes on research presentations you see. Observe successful tactics. Observe dynamics with the audience. See whether there are things that you can adopt – keeping in mind that presentation tactics could be idiosyncratic. What might work for one person may not work for another. So, separating the general tactics and idiosyncratic ones may be useful. For instance, a speaker may ask the audience to hold questions until after the talk. You might feel that is a good general tactic that would help maintain the flow and timing of the presentation. On the other hand, a speaker might make his slides quite animated, with new things jumping in at every click. You might feel that this particular tactic would not work for you, as you like to view things holistically and then systematically go through them.

Getting familiar with the format and atmosphere of a job talk requires that you attend them at your institution. Here too, you will observe what works and what does not. You will see how candidates dress, the confidence they exude, the way they handle questions, the audience reac-



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tion to stylistic elements, and how they navigate out of difficult situations. Observe keenly, and presume that you will be faced with a similar environment and format – typically around 1.5 hours in a room with faculty and possibly doctoral students as your audience.

The most important preparation you can do is to set up your slide deck and get feedback from faculty. Then, practice, practice, and practice. Try to present to various audiences – your mirror, your family and friends, your fellow doctoral students, your advisor, other faculty, etc. Take their feedback seriously and adjust. As well as helping you fine-tune the content, this is an opportunity to rehearse your presentation tactics. Practice taking questions throughout or asking for questions to be held till the end. In both cases be cognizant of timing. It would reflect poor form if you set aside time for questions, but you leave no time and were forced to rush through the back-end of the presentation.

In general, it is better to know the content of your research well, and not refer to notes. This requires you to be comfortable with the research. Go through each slide in your deck and envision questions that could be asked. Be prepared for common questions – In what way does your dissertation contribute to the field? If you were to do it all over again, what would you do differently? In which journals do you expect to publish your research? What research related to your dissertation do you see yourself doing 5 years from now?

Just before you leave for the campus visit, do not hesitate to ask your contact about the talk – the room, the equipment (i.e., do you need to bring a laptop or just a memory stick), the duration, and the audience. Hopefully, you will have enough time to set-up your slides and get comfortable with the room and equipment just before the talk. And turn off your phone (not vibrate) before you start the presentation!

Actual Presentation

It is natural to be a bit nervous before the actual presentation. Nerves (within

limitations) can be good to keep you alert and at the top of your game. However, keep in mind that no one in that room has invested as much time in understanding and contextualizing your research – so you are the expert!

It is usually good practice to start the talk by thanking your host institution and your key contact person. Some people like to lighten the mood by starting off with something humorous. That is fine, but limit the humor in the presentation – and avoid any humor that might be viewed as controversial (e.g., humor that requires a certain world view to appreciate).

Some general heuristics to keep in mind for a good presentation:

- The best kinds of research presentations are those that appear to be simple, but it is obvious that a lot of work and thought has gone into them.
- Slides in general should not be cluttered, should be easily readable and should make no more than three key points.
- Frame your entire presentation by providing a (i) Roadmap of the presenta-

tion, (ii) a Roadmap of your Research Program (beyond the presentation), and (iii) a Roadmap (timeline) of your Completion.

- It's usually good practice to be a bit redundant in order to reemphasize key points. Colloquially, "tell 'em what you're gonna tell 'em, tell 'em, then tell 'em what you told 'em."
- Pitch the presentation at a high level, but remember that many in the room may not be in your area, and so too much jargon without simple explanations may turn them off.
- Be engaging – use illustrations and examples when getting into complex concepts to explain your point.
- If you start strong, try to maintain the energy throughout the presentation. Be aware of whether you are "fading out" toward the end.
- Set up a time management system – perhaps your cell phone or computer clock can be noted at certain slides to see whether you are sticking to your schedule.

Job Talk Preparation Checklist

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|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Have you attended other research job talks? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Do you generally note tactics in presentations that work well? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Have you made research presentations? Have you obtained feedback on your own presentation skills? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Are you very comfortable with your dissertation? Do you know the key literature around your dissertation well? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Is your slide deck well organized, not cluttered and systematically evolves as a story? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Do you have contingency slides for certain details? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Have you obtained feedback to hone your slide deck? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Have you repeatedly practiced your presentation in front of different audiences? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Do you have a system to manage the timing of your presentation? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Have you worked on common and specific questions related to your research? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Have you contacted the institution regarding audience, equipment, etc.? |

- Do not make disparaging comments about a method or a theory. You never know who in that room might be deeply invested in the object of your disparagement.

You can close your presentation by thanking your audience and opening up the floor. Consider having your research model on the screen if you would like to encourage questions about your dissertation, or a summative slide (e.g., your research program) on the screen to encourage broader questions.

The Questions

Questions offer the interviewing institution the opportunity to assess your competence and ability to think on your feet. The whole presentation experience also serves as a demonstration of your ability to teach in the classroom and respond to student questions.

Even if you have taken questions throughout, after you have finished your talk, it is usual to open up the floor to questions. There may be many hands that go up. It is usually good practice to take questions from faculty first over graduate students (assuming you can distinguish between the two). It is perfectly acceptable to take a few seconds to understand the question before responding – or even to ask for clarification. If the question asks for justification of what you have done – the best response would include a rationale as well as citations of others that have followed the same approach. If the question deals with your lack of consideration of some factors in your model – again the rationale and boundary conditions for your model can be described. Be sensitive to methodological questions – and try to have detailed slides on things you did (e.g., testing of assumptions for statistical tests; validity and reliability analysis for constructs) that you can readily display if the question is brought up. Finally, if you are truly stumped with a question – do not pretend to know or try to obfuscate the issue by throwing out complex concepts. Just say that you do not know – but are curious to learn more.

Phew, it's finally over and you have received the ceremonial applause. Now you can relax and (try to) enjoy the remainder of the interview process. With one real job talk under your belt, the next one should be a bit easier..... ■

From RESEARCH OPPORTUNITIES, page 7

misfolding: the examples of Alzheimer's and Parkinson's diseases." *Nature cell biology* 6(11): 1054-1061.

Shi, X., et al. (2011). "A sampling-based method for ranking protein structural models by integrating multiple scores and features." *Current Protein and Peptide Science* 12(6): 540-548.

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From CALCULATING LAST DATES, page 20

' Ask user for the row that contains headers

header_msg1 = "Macro will enter a header called Last Scored"

header_msg2 = "in header row. Enter header row number."

header_row = InputBox(header_msg1 & header_msg2, "Header Row")

If col_start = "" Or header_row = "" Or row_start = "" Then

MsgBox ("One of the required entries is blank. Try Again")

Exit Sub

End If

no_of_col = Cells(header_row, Columns.Count).End(xlToLeft).Column

' Enter a header for the last date scored

Cells(header_row, no_of_col + 1) = "Last Scored"

' Get the last date column from the first row

date_col = Cells(1, Columns.Count).End(xlToLeft).Column

' Loop through the rows and columns

obtaining dates for any score > 0

For i = row_start To last_row

' Reset array size based on number of date columns. Also serves to erase previous array values

ReDim date_array(date_col - col_start)

' Loop through columns in a given row

For j = col_start To date_col

' Enter date in row 1 for any score > 0, otherwise enter the beginning semester date

If Cells(i, j).Value > 0 Then

date_array(j - col_start) = Cells(1, j).Value

Else

date_array(j - col_start) = Cells(1, 1).Value

End If

Next j

' Use the max function to obtain the last date scored

last_date = Application.Max(date_array())

' Enter the last date scored in its proper column, format as short date

With Cells(i, no_of_col + 1)

.Value = last_date

.NumberFormat = "m/d/yyyy"

End With

Next i

End Sub

References

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The College Board. (2014). *Trends in Student Aid*. Retrieved December 15, 2014, from Trends in Higher Education: <http://trends.collegeboard.org/student-aid>

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