

Some Guidelines for Giving a Talk at Asilomar

Know your audience

The participants at Asilomar come from 3 main groups:

1. graduate students, including recently arrived first-years
2. postdocs from across campus, many of whom are also new arrivals
3. faculty

The students and postdocs may come from fields as diverse as computer science, chemistry, and psychology, as well as biology or neuroscience.

Know your goals

Are you trying to recruit graduate students? Find collaborators? Make sure the level of your talk is matched to the group you most want to reach.

Define your terms

Terms that are common knowledge in your area of expertise may not be so common even in other subfields of neuroscience. Don't assume a working knowledge of physics, biochemistry, electrophysiology, or whatever your field might be, among your fellow conference-goers.

Therefore : **Define each term you use (EPSP, beta-sheet, your favorite term here) the first time you use it. Especially define the abbreviations.**

Give background information

Providing background information burdens no one. Even people who heard you speak last year may not remember all of what you said. These points can be addressed in about 5 minutes with 2 or 3 slides.

Choosing the Content

People should be able to leave your talk with at least 3 points clearly established:

1. **What is the question? (whether general or specific)**
2. **Why is the question interesting and/or important?**
3. **What is the take home message from your results?**

That is, how did your experiments answer some or all of the question? State each of these explicitly

Have a slide or make a statement that says: What I want to know is (or my hypothesis is) X-Y-Z; therefore I am doing experiments 1-2-3. Don't assume your listeners will be able to infer what the question is from the background you've given.

So what?

Why your work is important and interesting may not be as obvious to the audience as it is to you, so make sure to include this in your talk. If you can convince your granting agency, you can convince your listeners.

Some other points that are nice to include:

- Why is your system good for addressing these questions?
- How do your experiments directly address the question you are asking (which you have, of course, already specifically stated).

Stylistic techniques

Reiterate important points. Repetition lets the listener know which points are important, and it aids in their retention.

Stick to **one theme** whenever possible. If you are going to talk about more than one project in the lab, talk about the projects sequentially and make it clear that you are changing topics.



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Try to banish the phrase "as you all know" from your repertoire. Someone (or many people) in the audience probably didn't know it.

Designing slides

DO:

Make the type big enough and dark enough to read, even on the axes of graphs, and even from the back of the room. San-serif fonts are often clearer than serif fonts, and using upper- and lower-case is easier to read than all capitals.

Use horizontal slides when possible. Vertically-oriented slides may have the top or bottom cut off when projected.

Define abbreviations (except for the very common ones) if they must be used at all.

Put each figure on a separate slide, so the viewer's attention is properly focused.

Make it possible to distinguish lines on a graph from the back of the room by **making the colors or identifying shapes very distinct** from each other and from the background. Also make them consistent across figures (e.g., the control is always blue).

Put as few lines on each graph as is possible to make your point.

Use only short phrases in word slides, so that the viewer can absorb them in a glance. You can then elaborate verbally. Short phrases are easier to remember, and don't distract from the point you are making.

Foreshadow -- e.g., "molecule Y is involved in this process as well; that's a point I'll come back to later." Or, more generally, "I will talk about 3 processes today, A, B, & C..."

Project all of your slides before the talk to make sure that they are readable.
End with a slide that summarizes the data, and draws conclusions from it.

DON'T:

Don't have lots of figures and lines on a slide that you are not going to talk about. If it is necessary to limit the discussion to only one portion of a slide, make that very clear from the outset, so the viewer isn't distracted.

Don't show large tables. While they are appropriate for publication, they can't be read at a lecture, and are confusing. Extract just the (few!) points you want to refer to, or summarize the data in a graph.

Don't put lots of text on slides, and don't read it verbatim.

Don't make all of your paper figures into slides and assume they'll be fine. Sometimes figures from papers are good for slides, sometimes they are not.

Don't forget to say what it all means!