

How to give a 20 minute talk

The four commandments:

1. *Less is more: keep it simple.*
2. *Thou shalt not prove.*
3. *Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.*
4. *When the music is over, stop dancing.*

Expanding on these rules:

1. All you should try to do in the talk is to explain and motivate the problem, state the main result, relate it to the literature, and explain why it is interesting.
2. It is good to explain the key ideas that make the proof work but you should not go into much detail. To gauge the right level, suppose that you are standing at a party with a beer in your hand talking to a friend of yours about your research. You wouldn't start by stating Lemma 2.1, at least I hope not.
3. I know we have all experienced pain at the talks of others. It is important to remember your reactions to other people's talks when you give yours. When the speaker rushes headlong into his favorite proof, we often scratch our heads and say "what the heck is he talking about?" We look at "powerpoint" slides jammed full of text and equations and think "I can't read that."
4. When your time is up, stop. At conferences with parallel sessions you need to do this so that the whole process can function smoothly, but one should do this even when there is not that type of time constraint. Returning to 3, as you have probably experienced at seminars, once the allotted time is up, people's interest in what you are saying declines faster than the tail of the normal distribution. If you have two sentences to go in your proof of the Reimann hypothesis continue, but stop if it is something less important.

Returning to the first point if you tell your story succinctly and clearly, and a finish with two or three minutes to spare, you leave the audience with a warm and happy feeling about your talk. On the other hand if you reluctantly stop after 30 minutes and two warnings from the chair, and leave complaining about what you didn't get to cover ...