

ACADEMIC CAREERS: Job Talks

What is a Job Talk?

A Job Talk is a presentation of your research to prospective academic departments as part of the interview process. Departments request job talks so that they can learn more about your research competencies, past and present research efforts, and current and future research plans. Successful job talks demonstrate a strong grasp of presentation and time management skills, professionalism, command of research, and the ability to think improvisationally.

Structure and audience

The job talk almost always includes a formal presentation time (usually 20-40 minutes) followed by a time for questions (usually 20-30 minutes). The formal question and answer session is often followed by a reception or meal, during which candidates may be asked additional questions. Always stick to the time limits given to you.

Audience members can include administrators, faculty members, students, and potential collaborators from the hiring department and related departments. Unless otherwise specified, gear your talk towards intelligent people who are familiar with your general discipline but do not have detailed knowledge about your specialty. Find the balance – discuss sufficient detail so audience members are sure you know what you’re talking about but make sure you’re not going over their heads.

What to present

Job talks for current students or recent graduates are typically on dissertation work or other major projects from graduate school. If you discuss projects that you have worked on with a team, be sure to articulate your contribution to the projects. However, in some cases a university might request another topic outside of your dissertation.

The audience will only remember a few key points – avoid a deluge of minute details, statistics, or lengthy explanations. Figure out what you really want them to remember – then say it in several different ways at several different times throughout your talk. Place your work in a broader context or framework. Be sure to address the “so what” question. Explain why your work is important and how it contributes to the field. When appropriate, give examples or anecdotes.

Structure your job talk in a logical and clear format. Have an agenda – and follow it. Consider discussing your past and present research efforts, connections between projects, and a few future ideas you have for projects. Other elements may include briefly sharing potential funding sources and collaborators and mentioning how

you involve students in your research. How much time you devote to any particular portion of the job talk (future research, collaborators, etc.) will depend on the customs of your academic discipline.

Be sure to thank the audience for attending and summarize your key points for a strong ending. This ending should be practiced several times so that you feel confident with how you are wrapping up your job talk.

Managing the Q&A

Almost all job talks will have time for audience questions. Be prepared to talk about any part of your research in varying levels of detail. Field questions from all parts of the room, being sure to answer all faculty questions. It is important to also answer questions from graduate students and other attendees. Spend some time prior to the job talk brainstorming how your research relates to the work of faculty members as this will help you anticipate questions.

Some presenters prepare extra slides with data they may need in the Q&A and keep those at the end of their presentation. That way they have easy access to supplementary information.

If the room is large, consider restating audience questions for everyone to hear. This will also give you a few seconds to formulate an answer. If someone asks a question that is confusing, take a moment to think or ask for clarification. Most speakers get a few confusing or random questions from every audience. The motives behind the questioners vary from genuine misunderstanding to curiosity about how your research fits with their work to deep interest in a topic that only tangentially relates to your research. If you encounter an audience member who is hostile or aggressive, it is important not to engage in an argument and to be respectful in your answer. Worried about strange questions? Role play with colleagues, friends or partners and ask them to come up with wacky and weird questions so you can practice responding tactfully and efficiently.

Tips on how to present

How you present matters. Speech volume, posture (or stance), and how much you use your notes factor into audience impressions. Make sure the entire audience can hear you clearly and easily. Stand tall and avoid crossing your arms or clutching a podium or microphone. Take several full, slow, deep breaths before beginning your talk. It helps some presenters to mentally reframe nerves as excitement, or “extra presentation energy.” Make eye contact with different audience members around the room over the course of your talk.

If you have notes, practice the job talk to the point that your notes are cue cards or quick reference points rather than full pages to read directly from. If you are using slides, do not read from the slides. When using visuals like charts or graphs, have notes about these in front of you so you don't have to turn your back to the audience to describe them. Know how long you will speak about each section of your talk or each slide and practice this until you know that you are consistent in your timing.

Using slides, handouts

Many presenters use slides to structure their job talks and to provide context and data for their research. The best slides have only one main topic or concept per slide and few words. If you will be including charts and graphs, be sure to enlarge font sizes so that audience members can easily read details from the back of the room. All slides and handouts should have the same overall formatting and look professional.

Prepare for technology not to work. Bring your slides in at least two electronic formats (email, USB, cloud, etc.), but be able to do the presentation without slides if necessary. Consider bringing one hardcopy version of your slides as a backup. Ask in advance if the room you will be presenting in has a projector and what kinds of connector cables are available (HDMI, VGA, etc.).

Handouts, if used, should have consistent formatting, be free of all errors, and make sense for your job talk. Practice how you will integrate the handout into the presentation and always make photocopies in advance.

Logistics and preparation

Consult with your advisor and other faculty members in your department about general discipline expectations for job talks. Then, contact the department interviewing you to determine:

- > Anticipated audience (faculty, graduate students, staff, etc. as well as size of group)
- > Time of job talk (and time allotted for the Q&A)
- > Technology available (projector, etc.)
- > Room layout (lecture style, conference room—if this is important for you)

Additionally, request a 15-25 minute break before your job talk so that you can prepare.

The two best ways to prepare for job talks are to attend several job talks in your UW department (and related departments) and to practice multiple times with different audiences before the real talk. When attending job talks, pay attention to structure, format, style, and what happens during the Q&A. While practicing, focus on the “so what” of your presentation and remember to practice the whole job talk through at least twice to map out the timing of sections. It is always better to finish a few minutes early than to go over even one minute late.