

Welcome to Column 24 of Hey Jane! This is a project of the SWS Career Development Committee. Questions and answers are generated by the committee and SWS members. Answers are compiled from several anonymous sources. All columns are archived on our committee's page on the SWS website <http://www.socwomen.org/page.php?ss=26>. If you have a question for Hey Jane, please send it to susan.hinze@case.edu.

HEY JANE!

I am currently on the market and preparing for my first campus interview. What advice can you offer as I prepare my job talk?

JANE SAYS:

The job talk is one of the most significant phases of the campus interview process. While a good job talk will not ensure that you will be offered the position, a bad job talk may very well disqualify you from further consideration by the search committee. In addition, your handling of the Q&A is an important piece of the job talk. Delivering a solid, well-organized job talk and Q&A session is thus essential to performing well during the campus interview process.

SO WHAT ARE THE COMPONENTS OF A GOOD JOB TALK?

A good talk is a clear talk. You should organize your job talk around a clear question, a clear argument, and a clear conclusion. It's a good idea to simplify your basic argument (summed up in a sentence or two), state explicitly both at the beginning and the end of the talk, elaborating on the simplified argument throughout the rest of the talk. In order to construct a well-organized presentation, the substance of the talk should be clearly framed around your argument. You want to make sure you don't draw the audience into a thicket of other issues. Structure the talk like a story. Make clear what you are asking, why your research question matters and how you have answered your research question. It is also vital that you clearly address the "so, what?" question! Be certain that the title of your talk reflects the argument you'll be making as well.

A good talk is on something you know well. Resist the urge to develop a talk around something new, a line of inquiry that you have not yet fully fleshed out or examined in the work you've completed thus far. Choose a dissertation chapter with which you've developed a good bit of familiarity, even one you have already published or submitted for publication. It will take a lot of the stress out of the preparation of the talk, and you will look a

lot more knowledgeable and smooth. There are times to take risks; this is not one of them.

A good talk is interesting to the broad range of sociologists or interdisciplinary scholars that will be listening to the talk. The job talk differs from the presentation of a conference paper in that it is more an introduction to your intellectual biography and research agenda, not a talk geared specifically toward subfield specialists. So don't write a talk that is focused for a specialty audience or journal. Write a talk that has clear relevance outside of your subfield, one that will allow the audience to connect with your arguments. Don't use highly technical or specialized terms, and if you are presenting sophisticated statistical analyses that some may not be familiar with, present them as simply as possible, but offer to answer any additional questions during the Q&A portion of the talk. In the same vein, rather than focusing narrowly on the significance of your work within your subfield (or within your discipline, for those interviewing for positions in multidisciplinary departments), make clear the broader context of your work and its implications in the wider world.

A good talk does not summarize the dissertation. It is fine to devote one slide at the beginning and/or end of the talk to set it within the broader context of the dissertation. It's also fine to spend one slide at the end of the talk contextualizing the talk in relation to a larger research agenda. But a talk that attempts to summarize all of a dissertation – no matter how good the dissertation – will come across as diffuse and confusing. You could focus on one empirical chapter from the dissertation, or organize the talk around one or two key contributions of your work to sociological theory, research methods, or a specific substantive area.

A good talk is a short talk. Many places will ask you to prepare a 45 minute talk; if so, prepare one that's 40 minutes. If they ask you to prepare an hour talk, prepare one that's 50 minutes. Your audience will thank you, and will be more awake and interested if your talk is shorter. Also, don't make the talk shorter by talking fast. A 40-minute talk should use no more than 12-15 slides (and fewer is generally better). Never go over time!

A good talk incorporates visuals. Power Point has become a norm in sociology. It is possible to give a great talk without it, but many people are more visual than auditory, so they will appreciate the visual cues that Power Point provides. You can keep Power Point from taking over your talk, however, by making sure that the slides are simple, with a minimal amount of text (4-5 points per slide max), so you don't lose your audience. Don't use animations or lots of bells and whistles. You can incorporate

pictures, but don't use canned Power Point images. And always have a backup plan in case the technology fails (Power Point on a USB drive, transparencies made from Power Point slides, a printed set of slides or an outline of the talk, etc.).

Other tips:

Be sure you have a clear idea of the search committee's expectations for your job talk. How long should it be? Who will be in the audience (in some places deans attend, in others undergrads attend, etc.)? What level of technology will you have access to?

Be prepared. Write a talk beforehand, and practice it so many times you almost have it memorized (practice to your mirror, to friends, to your advisor, and to department members). Strong talks often look exceptionally smooth, but it's only because the person has practiced a lot. If you have had experience teaching, use that experience here! Being prepared also allows you to be spontaneous, such as showing how your work relates to others in the department where you are giving the talk.

Be enthusiastic, use lots of examples, and try to bring in humor if you feel comfortable doing so. It's nice to start the talk with a joke to diffuse tension. There will almost always be one person who starts nodding off during your talk, or simply looks disengaged. Don't worry about that person but do try to keep most of the audience engaged and with you. Enthusiasm – about the department, about your research, and about the questions they ask– is almost always viewed positively (but, of course, don't go overboard). If you find yourself getting nervous, be sure to remind yourself what it is you enjoy about your research. Remain connected to the passion you have for your research and this can serve to quell your nerves if you're feeling stressed.

HOW SHOULD YOU PREPARE FOR A Q&A?

If someone offers to field questions, let them. You don't want to be the person trying to remember everyone's name or worry about insulting someone by skipping over their question

Practice the Q&A beforehand with friends and others. Ask friends to ask you the hardest questions that they can think of. Ask them ask you the easiest questions they can think of. Prepare answers to them all. You will be judged on how well you think on your feet.

It's often useful to reframe a question in your own language, and then ask

the questioner if you got it right. This shows that you are taking them seriously, while also ascertaining that you understood what they were asking, and gives you time to think about the answer. If you are not sure of the answer, it's fine to say, "I need to think about that more" (but don't say it again and again), or to say, "My data doesn't really speak to that question, but I don't mind musing on the answer." But be honest... it could be potentially disastrous if you offer a fabricated response to a question posed by an audience member who is well aware of the answer to his or her own question.

Take notes as people ask you questions. It signals that you take their ideas seriously and would be an open and engaged colleague, and that you are also interested in making your work better. It also gives you time to think. And, these notes can be useful in preparing for later job talks (and Q&As).

Be enthusiastic about the Q&A. You want these people to think of you as someone who enjoys an intellectual back-and-forth, rather than a terrified job-seeker (even when the second may be true). Many people note "That's a good question," but try not to say that more than once. However it's fine to come up with alternative ways to tell people that you've appreciated their question and the back-and-forth. You may also follow up with anyone who asked you a particularly insightful question after the session or even after the interview is over.

Don't spend a long time answering any one question. If you've spent 5 minutes answering a question, it's been too long. Keep your answers short (if possible) and signal that you're willing to keep talking even after the session or via email.

Always treat questions seriously, even if one seems uninformed or suggests that they didn't actually pay attention. Answer directly and with respect.

Recognize that there are different norms regarding Q&A. In most places, people are trying to impress their colleagues more than challenge you. In many places, Q&A can seem hostile (they rarely really are), but if you answer graciously and make it clear how much you value the speaker's perspective (even if you disagree), you will win points. In other places, you'll get lobbed a bunch of softballs, but it still matters that you respond with enthusiasm and come off like someone who'll be fun to chat with in the hallways. If you receive relatively few questions, don't freak out – again, it may be a norm of the place.

You do not always need to agree with a person who asks you a (challenging) question. You should, however, attempt to show why their point is a valid one, but also why you think your argument is still the better of the two. At times, the same question will be repeated by a number of audience members. This suggests that they are not sure that you understood the question, or are dissatisfied with your answer. But try to avoid getting caught up in an endless loop with one person, or on one issue. If most people aren't buying your answer-approach, and the issue comes up repeatedly, try to step back and acknowledge this, repeating the point you started with: "Well, I can see many of you are skeptical about my answer. You are making the very valid point X. [I acknowledge and appreciate that, and if that hasn't been clear let me state that now -- if that's true.] But I want to emphasize the other side of that, counterpoint Y, and here's why."

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The main things to keep in mind are delivering a clear, well-organized, well-developed, and broadly-oriented yet focused talk, that doesn't run over time. Preparing for the talk, practicing multiple times in front of colleagues and professors, and conveying enthusiasm all help turn a good talk into a great one. Similarly, practice the Q&A and try to prepare answers for the variety of questions you may receive. Use the Q&A to convey that you are a thoughtful scholar, interested in and respectful of other people's ideas, but able to articulate your own perspective clearly.

CAVEAT to all professional advice: Always check with your departmental colleagues, chair, dean, etc. to find out what the norms and expectations are in your institution. And consult with your professional mentors to determine what is most appropriate in your specific situation.