

Speaking Economics

By

Robert A. Margo
Professor of Economics and History
Vanderbilt University

Overview

- Success in Economics Does Not Depend (Well, Only a Little) on Solving Problem Sets
- Success in Economics Depends on Writing and Speaking
- Getting a Good Job: The Job Market Presentation is Critical
- Getting Ahead: Presentations are Critical

Step #1: Choose Your Topic Wisely

Proverb: It is very easy to give a bad presentation of a good paper but very difficult to give a good presentation of a bad paper

How to Choose Wisely

- Read, Read, Read: And Not Just Economics
- Make a Contribution to the “Literature” But Don’t be a Polluter: Think Big
- Do Economics, Not Bad Applied Mathematics
- Repeat One Hundred (100) Times: “My Job Market Paper is Very Important. My Job Market Paper is Very Important. My Job Market Paper is Very Important ...”

Step #2: Some Rules of Paper Writing (Claudia Goldin and Larry Katz)

- Even if You Think Big You Probably Won't Have a Great Idea – But You Can Still Write a Great Paper
- Your Paper Will Be Judged by the Quality of Your Writing
- Rhetoric is King: Your Goal is to Persuade
- All Great Papers are Rewritten Many Times
- Ask, No Beg for Comments
- Eschew Surplusage (Be Not Wordy)
- Re-write the Abstract and Introduction Many, Many Times
- Be Your Own Worst Nightmare Because If You Won't Someone Else Will
- There are Many More Rules: See Goldin and Katz (Harvard Economics Website)

More Advice:

Deirdre McCloskey, *Economical Writing*,
2nd Edition, Waveland Press

William Thomson, *A Guide for the Young
Economist*, MIT Press, 2001

William Thomson, “The Young Person’s
Guide to Writing Economic Theory,”
Journal of Economic Literature (March
1999)

Step #3: How to Get to Carnegie Hall

Proverb: Practice, Practice, Practice

- When Opportunity Knocks Take It:
Class Presentations
- Graduate Student Tea
- Brown Bag
- Choose Your Advisor Carefully
- Talk About Your Work With Your
Advisor, Other Faculty, Other
Students, Your Significant Other, Your
Family, Your Dog, Your Cat, the Clerk
at Tower Records But Talk
- Go to Conferences and Listen or
BETTER Go to Conferences and
Present
- Learn from Your Mistakes
- Go to as Many Faculty Workshops that
You Can Stomach and Pay Close
Attention to Form as Well as
Substance

Step #4: Putting Your Talk Together

- Plan Ahead: How Much Time? (Tailor Your Message to Fit the Time Allowed)
- Know Thy Audience: General or Specific?
- (Almost) No One Will Have Read Your Paper in Advance
- Cf. Thelonus Monk: “Less is More” (Breathing Space)
- Visual Aids: Power Point vs. Overheads
- Lists are Good
- Make All Overheads Easy to Read at a Distance
- Spell/Grammar Check
- Practice Your Pronunciation, Especially Names
- Plan to Write on the Board Only if Your Writing is Legible (see Thomson 2001 for a Different Point of View)

Step #5: Showtime

- Thank Your Hosts
- Begin With: What is the Topic? Why is it Important? What are the Findings?
- Make the Introduction Short and Sweet
- The Literature Review is a Means to an End, Not an End
- The Middle if Theory: See Thomson (2001)
- The Middle if Empirical: “Theory”, Data and Estimation, Results
- And in The End: Summarize and Suggest

Performance Tips:

- Personality Counts (Big): Show Enthusiasm but Don't be Cocky
- Be Clear: Enunciate!
- Orchestrate: Pay Attention to Tempo, Dynamics, Phrasing, and Architecture
- Stage Fright is Very Common: Practice and Planning Make Perfect
- Be Like "W": Don't Apologize or Make Excuses
- You are the Master of Your Fate: Stay in Control (Loss of Control = Loss of Job)
- Look Your Audience in the Eye
- Work the Room: Talk to Everybody Not Just the People Who (Appear To) Get It
- You Should Be the Expert in the Room (Not Someone in the Audience)
- Listen to the Question Before You Answer It
- Make Notes as You Go
- Don't be Defensive!

- Answer All Questions Truthfully – if You Don't Know the Answer, Don't Make One Up
- Backward Induct: Figure Out Answers to Common Questions Before Your Talk (see Step #3 and “Make Notes as You Go”)
- Leave the Stand-Up to Jay Leno
- Finish on Time (or Early)
- Review Your Performance at Home: What Worked? What Didn't? (See “Learn From Your Mistakes”)
- Be Serious But Don't Take Yourself Too Seriously: Have Fun