How (not) to give a seminar

Jeff’s view

Sometimes I wonder how many seminars I have sat through. My brain tells me ‘several thousand’, but my gut says ‘zillions’. Let’s see: progress reports, journal clubs, faculty seminars, job seminars, The Harvey S. Benefactor Distinguished Lecturer Award, acceptance speeches for prizes, the list goes on and on. When advising large institutions I often heard forty or more seminars in a few long days. Yes, ‘zillions’ sounds about right. We spend an inordinate part of our life in seminars. And here is the bottom line: Most seminars are bad. Real bad.

Yet seminars are important. As a postdoctoral fellow, I published my results in the best possible journal and then thought of the plaque and did the opposite. That’s how they discovered great things. So here is how (not) to give a seminar. They never work right away, so you must go out and sell your stuff. To be at science’s forefront, you must head for the storefront.

I would not even dream of telling you how to give a seminar. Three children, fifteen PhD students, and 84 postdocs have taught me that raising a finger is just as bad as raising your voice. My postdoctoral mentor left me a little wooden plaque that says, ‘He who agrees with you cannot be very bright’. Yes, it’s sexist, but that’s how they did things in those days. The plaque adorned my office and greatly impressed my students and postdocs. When I told them what to do, they thought of the plaque and did the opposite. That’s how they discovered great things. So here is how (not) to give a seminar.

Let’s start with the basics. Your seminar should not inform, but impress. And don’t call it ‘seminar’, for God’s sake. That’s a seminar.

As with any show, the title matters. It must be flashy and get the adrenaline flowing. ‘Signal transduction in the inflammatory response’ is precise, scholarly – and, well, scholarly. ‘TNF RI, RIP, TRAF2 and FADD in NF-kappa B activation’ is more like it. ‘This guy is hot stuff, a real deep thinker’ your colleagues will suspect, and flock to your lecture. A hip title is also OK: ‘Sex, drugs and yeast mass mating’ should catch their attention in Europe and at most major centers in the US, but do check things out before you speak at the Pontifical Academy in Rome or in the US Bible Belt.

Don’t bother with introductions. General background, biological significance, earlier work by others – that’s for the birds. The presence is now, so get right down to business. The opener ‘When Jack, Mary and I did Westerns with RIP monoclonals, it was me...’ your colleagues will suspect, and flock to your lecture. A hip title is also OK: ‘Sex, drugs and yeast mass mating’ should catch their attention in Europe and at most major centers in the US, but do check things out before you speak at the Pontifical Academy in Rome or in the US Bible Belt.

Don’t bother with introductions. General background, biological significance, earlier work by others – that’s for the birds. The presence is now, so get right down to business. The opener ‘When Jack, Mary and I did Westerns with RIP monoclonals, it was me...’ your colleagues will suspect, and flock to your lecture. A hip title is also OK: ‘Sex, drugs and yeast mass mating’ should catch their attention in Europe and at most major centers in the US, but do check things out before you speak at the Pontifical Academy in Rome or in the US Bible Belt.

Don’t bother with introductions. General background, biological significance, earlier work by others – that’s for the birds. The presence is now, so get right down to business. The opener ‘When Jack, Mary and I did Westerns with RIP monoclonals, it was me...’ your colleagues will suspect, and flock to your lecture. A hip title is also OK: ‘Sex, drugs and yeast mass mating’ should catch their attention in Europe and at most major centers in the US, but do check things out before you speak at the Pontifical Academy in Rome or in the US Bible Belt.

Don’t bother with introductions. General background, biological significance, earlier work by others – that’s for the birds. The presence is now, so get right down to business. The opener ‘When Jack, Mary and I did Westerns with RIP monoclonals, it was me...’ your colleagues will suspect, and flock to your lecture. A hip title is also OK: ‘Sex, drugs and yeast mass mating’ should catch their attention in Europe and at most major centers in the US, but do check things out before you speak at the Pontifical Academy in Rome or in the US Bible Belt.

Don’t bother with introductions. General background, biological significance, earlier work by others – that’s for the birds. The presence is now, so get right down to business. The opener ‘When Jack, Mary and I did Westerns with RIP monoclonals, it was me...’ your colleagues will suspect, and flock to your lecture. A hip title is also OK: ‘Sex, drugs and yeast mass mating’ should catch their attention in Europe and at most major centers in the US, but do check things out before you speak at the Pontifical Academy in Rome or in the US Bible Belt.

Don’t bother with introductions. General background, biological significance, earlier work by others – that’s for the birds. The presence is now, so get right down to business. The opener ‘When Jack, Mary and I did Westerns with RIP monoclonals, it was me...’ your colleagues will suspect, and flock to your lecture. A hip title is also OK: ‘Sex, drugs and yeast mass mating’ should catch their attention in Europe and at most major centers in the US, but do check things out before you speak at the Pontifical Academy in Rome or in the US Bible Belt.

Don’t bother with introductions. General background, biological significance, earlier work by others – that’s for the birds. The presence is now, so get right down to business. The opener ‘When Jack, Mary and I did Westerns with RIP monoclonals, it was me...’ your colleagues will suspect, and flock to your lecture. A hip title is also OK: ‘Sex, drugs and yeast mass mating’ should catch their attention in Europe and at most major centers in the US, but do check things out before you speak at the Pontifical Academy in Rome or in the US Bible Belt.

Don’t bother with introductions. General background, biological significance, earlier work by others – that’s for the birds. The presence is now, so get right down to business. The opener ‘When Jack, Mary and I did Westerns with RIP monoclonals, it was me...’ your colleagues will suspect, and flock to your lecture. A hip title is also OK: ‘Sex, drugs and yeast mass mating’ should catch their attention in Europe and at most major centers in the US, but do check things out before you speak at the Pontifical Academy in Rome or in the US Bible Belt.

Don’t bother with introductions. General background, biological significance, earlier work by others – that’s for the birds. The presence is now, so get right down to business. The opener ‘When Jack, Mary and I did Westerns with RIP monoclonals, it was me...’ your colleagues will suspect, and flock to your lecture. A hip title is also OK: ‘Sex, drugs and yeast mass mating’ should catch their attention in Europe and at most major centers in the US, but do check things out before you speak at the Pontifical Academy in Rome or in the US Bible Belt.
minds. Even the international language of science, Bad English, loves New Speak. No wonder, the two are close cousins. You never read journals; you keep abreast of the literature. You don’t do good science; you are at its cutting edge. Your postdocs are not simply good; they are the brightest and the best. You never work hard; you seek aggressively. And experiments are never unfinished, inconclusive or a failure, but in press.

Half-way through the talk, your time is usually up. Now is the moment to think of a scientist’s three most important goals: (a) the Nobel Prize, (b) unlimited research funds, and (c) unlimited speaking time. To get (a) and (b), you must have brains; to get (c), you must have guts. So don’t skip anything – say it faster. Give the audience a rousing coda – they know that the coda is always the fastest part of a piece. No matter how much longer you still want to go on, keep saying ‘now, in closing’ or ‘in these last few diagrams’. That’s a great way to keep people from leaving.

When you have finished, do not summarize what you have said. Who wants to hear things twice? Get ready for the discussion, because that’s where things might get tricky. Without those beamed diagrams you are left out in the cold. And some listeners may turn cranky, because the lights wake up the old geezers in the front row, and switching off the beamer sends the young ones into Acute Visual Deprivation Shock. It’s wartime. Take every question as an excuse to continue your talk. Don’t answer to the point, and make discussants feel guilty for their inane question. If you are cornered, don’t say ‘I do not know’ or ‘you are right’, but tell them that your many papers in press will answer everything. And if you cannot be right, be wrong at the top of your voice.

On leaving the lecture room, face the usual hand-shakes and small talk in good humor. This can be quite a challenge, particularly if you remember faces as badly as I do. If somebody who looks vaguely familiar traps you with outstretched arms and a familiar grin, try a generic opener such as ‘How was the trip?’ That’s a safe one, because biologists get around. Stay away from inquiring about the spouse; as I just said, biologists get around. Relax and enjoy your drink while your intimate stranger gives you his horror story about the canceled flight. But then it is time to go. Do not stay for the official Dean’s Reception and the dinner. Mumble something about next day’s lecture at a famous place, and head for the airport. Being a hit as a lecturer gets your career off the ground; a hit – and – run lecturer has arrived. Besides, you can get home early and write those papers in press.

Thanks to my friend Stuart J. Edelstein for his comments.

Gottfried Schatz
Swiss Science and Technology Council
Bern, Switzerland
E-mail address: gottfried.schatz@unibas.ch