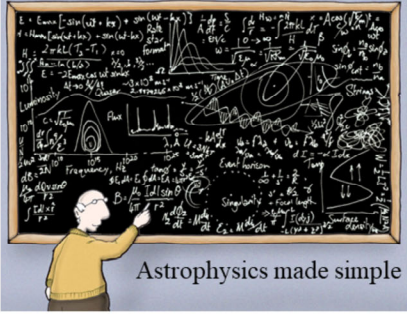


**Evaluating a  
colloquium/scientific talk**



Astrophysics made simple

Taylor Hughes,  
Vidya Madhavan, Nadya Mason,  
Celia M. Elliott, Jessie Shelton  
*Department of Physics, University of Illinois*

© Board of Trustees of the University of Illinois  
All rights reserved

© Nick Vini, CSL, Cartoonstock  
Used with permission

*With thanks to Brian DeMarco for useful suggestions*

One of our goals for this class is not only to teach you how to present good talks, but also how to listen to them.

[A good communicator recognizes the three major constraints on speakers and plans his talk with them in mind:

1. Who is the audience? What is their level of expertise? How motivated are they to listen? What is likely to confuse or bore them?
2. What is the purpose of the talk? To present new results? To inform? To solicit feedback on a new idea? To entertain? To get a job?
3. How much time has been allotted? It takes about 5–7 minutes to adequately motivate, explain, and summarize one main point in an oral talk. A speaker cannot cover six main points in a 10-min. APS-style presentation, no matter how fast he talks. ]

As you listen to a talk, ask yourself how well the speaker planned for these three constraints.

PHYS 496—Colloquium Report Template

Your Name:

Date of Colloquium/Seminar:

Title/Speaker:

Write a narrative report; do not simply fill in one-sentence answers to the suggested outline shown below. To receive full credit for the report, evaluate all three elements of the talk—the title and abstract, the scientific content, and the presentation style.

**Evaluate the Title and Abstract**

- Did the title attract your attention and interest you in the talk?
- Did the abstract adequately prepare you for the talk? Did it preview the main ideas?
- Was the abstract written at an appropriate level for the audience?
- Did the abstract use excessive jargon or undefined terms?
- Did the abstract engage your interest?

**Discuss the Content**

- What was the main scientific **goal** of the research being described?
- Summarize the main activities or methods reported in the talk.
- Summarize the results or significant conclusions.
- Was the information presented at an appropriate level for the audience? Could you follow the flow of information? Were there any “speed bumps” where the speaker lost you?
- How well did the speaker answer audience questions? Did he or she repeat the question so everyone could hear it? Did the speaker treat questioners courteously and respectfully?

**Assess the Presentation**

- Comment on the quality of the slides. Did they enhance or detract from the presentation? (readable, right mix of text and graphics, visually interesting, distracting effects, typos, poor slide aesthetics)
- Comment on the speaker’s pace and vocal delivery. (too fast, too slow, hard to understand, mumbled)
- Did the speaker have any distracting mannerisms? (did not maintain eye contact with the audience, paced, read text off the slides, fiddled with things)
- How could the speaker improve his or her presentation?

Report #1—Due by 9:00 p.m., Friday, February 18; rewrites not accepted after March 25

Report #2—Due by 9:00 p.m., Friday, April 1; rewrites not accepted after May 5

Late reports will be downgraded.

**No colloquium reports (initial or rewrites) will be accepted after May 5.**

**IN THIS LECTURE WE WILL**

**Learn to evaluate talks analytically and  
critically—think about the delivery as  
well as the scientific content**

Giving good talks is a skill. And like every skill, you improve by practicing and learning from others.

## Why?

Listening to talks and evaluating them critically will make you a better speaker

Learning the art of listening and evaluating talks will allow you to get more information from talks and allow you to learn more effectively

Excellent advice from Professor DeMarco:

“Few people take the time to evaluate a talk that they have heard. Doing so is really the key to learning how to give a better talk.

[“If you want to become a better speaker, after giving or listening to a talk **\*every time\***:

**Think:** What was ineffective about the talk? What are a few things that could be improved? Be specific. Try to identify details and larger issues.

**Think:** What was effective? Find three things. Be specific. Try to identify details and larger issues.”]

## Some practical tips for understanding content

- All talks have an **abstract** — so read it before you go
- **Take notes** — preferably on paper/tablet
- **Listen** critically
  - DO try to understand what the speaker is trying to convey
  - DON'T get hung up on a detail, instead try to stay with the speaker
  - DO try to get the big picture: Why? How? Results
- **Watch** critically
  - Evaluate the quality of the presentation
- **Pay close attention** in the first 15-20 minutes for big picture motivation and ideas

**To evaluate the presentation you should know:**

**What makes a good talk?**

**If you didn't like a talk, don't assume it's "your problem." There is a surprising universality to good or bad talks.**

There are very few boring topics. I've seen great talks on the smallest results. And terrible talks on really exciting research.

**1) Did you learn something interesting? Were you engaged?**

- **Be targeted to specific audience**
- **Have good presentation and delivery**

**If you didn't like a talk, don't assume it's "your problem." There is a surprising universality to good or bad talks.**

There are very few boring topics. I've seen great talks on the smallest results. And terrible talks on really exciting research.

**1) Did you learn something interesting? Were you engaged?**

- **Be targeted to specific audience**
- **Have good presentation and delivery**
  
- **Tell a STORY**
- **Be structured well/pedagogical**

**If you didn't like a talk, don't assume it's "your problem." There is a surprising universality to good or bad talks.**

There are very few boring topics. I've seen great talks on the smallest results. And terrible talks on really exciting research.



**2) The talk should tell a story**

**A good talk tells a story:**

**There should be a  
beginning  
middle  
and end..**

**The way to tell a story is to identify the most  
important points you want the audience to  
take away from the talk**

**Then weave your story around it**

### **3) Structure: the talk should be well structured**

- **Background and Motivation:** Why should you care? How well does the speaker convey the importance of the results and the bigger picture they fit into?
- **Clearly explain the methods used:** How was the work (theory or experiment) done? What cool new tools did they develop or use?
- **What did they find?** What was the primary discovery?
- **Circle back to the motivation?** How did their discovery move the field forward?

***Evaluate the Title and Abstract***

- Did the title attract your attention and interest you in the talk?
- Did the abstract adequately prepare you for the talk? Did it preview the main ideas?
- Was the abstract written at an appropriate level for the audience?
- Did the abstract use excessive jargon or undefined terms?
- Did the abstract engage your interest?

***Discuss the Content***

- What was the main scientific *goal* of the research being described?
- Summarize the main activities or methods reported in the talk.
- Summarize the results or significant conclusions.

***Assess the Presentation***

- Comment on the quality of the slides. Did they enhance or detract from the presentation? (readable, right mix of text and graphics, visually interesting, distracting effects, typos, poor slide aesthetics)
- Comment on the speaker's pace and vocal delivery. (too fast, too slow, hard to understand, mumbled)
- Did the speaker have any distracting mannerisms? (did not maintain eye contact with the audience, paced, read text off the slides, fiddled with things)
- How could the speaker improve his or her presentation?
- Was the information presented at an appropriate level for the audience? Could you follow the flow of information? Were there any "speed bumps" where the speaker lost you?
- How well did the speaker answer audience questions? Did he or she repeat the question so everyone could hear it? Did the speaker treat questioners courteously and respectfully?

Write a narrative report; do not simply fill in one-sentence answers to the suggested outline shown below. To receive full credit for the report, evaluate all three elements of the talk—the title and abstract, the scientific content, and the presentation style.

**Current Colloquium Schedule**

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS URBANA-CHAMPAIGN Equity / Give / My.Physics

**Physics** Search

Admissions ▾ Academics ▾ Research ▾ People ▾ News Outreach ▾ Alumni ▾ Make a gift ▾ **Calendar ^**

**Calendar**

- All Events
- Colloquium**
- Careers Seminar
- Research Seminars
- Academic Dates

<p>Physics Colloquium</p> <p>No Physics Colloquium</p> <p>Wednesday, Jan 19, 2022 4:00 PM</p>	<p>No Colloquium</p> <p>N/A</p> <p>Wednesday, Jan 26, 2022 4:00 PM</p>	<p>POSTPONED**--Beyond BCS: An Exact Model for Superconductivity and Mottness</p> <p>Phillip Phillips, UIUC</p> <p>Wednesday, Feb 2, 2022 4:00 PM</p>
<p>Clues to the properties of dense matter using NICER observations</p>	<p>Andrew Houcke</p> <p>Andrew Houcke, Princeton</p>	<p>TBA</p> <p>Aida El-Khadra, UIUC</p>