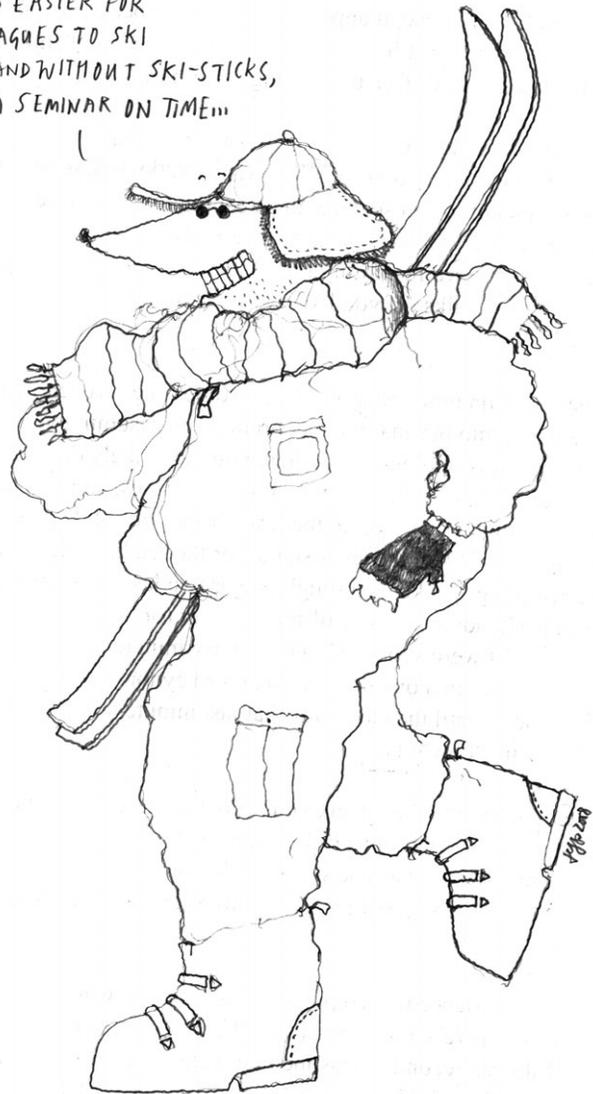


An occasional column, in which Mole, Caveman and other troglodytes involved in cell science emerge to share their views on various aspects of life-science research. Messages for Caveman and other contributors can be left at

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Any correspondence may be published in forthcoming issues.

SADLY IT SEEMS EASIER FOR CERTAIN COLLEAGUES TO SKI BLINDFOLDED, AND WITHOUT SKI-STICKS, THAN FINISH A SEMINAR ON TIME!!!



Presentations of the damned I

“Hey Mole! Are you going skiing?” chirps a bright, perky lad, as I lumber about the back of the meeting room in my ski boots, pants, jacket, goggles, hat and gloves. “No,” I say, “I just like the look.” Because, it appears, speaker number five of five is going to go on into horrendous overtime, just like the four before her. It’s a *ski* meeting, Professor I-just-have-six-more-slides, and all I’ve been doing so far is *meeting*.

Okay, so the sun is shining, there’s tons of fresh snow, and I love falling nose-first down mountains, but that isn’t the point. This is: why can’t speakers stay on time when they give their talks? It’s not rocket science, this keeping to time – or even

molecular biology – so how hard can this be? Well, *very* hard, apparently. Drone, drone, blah blah. I’m getting bitter. So while we’re waiting for the end (still six slides to go), let’s pass the time by talking about, well, talks. If you like, we can call this ‘The Mole’s Guide to Presentations’.

Rule the First: Stay on time. Really. Here’s something I’ve learned about talks that appears to be wired into our mammalian brains (I’m assuming you’re a mammal; if you are poikalohermic, my apologies, but then, you are most likely to not attend meetings in chilly places). If a talk is to be, say, twenty-five minutes, and you have reached the end of your time, you should just skip to the last ‘thank you’ slide and end. Because *nobody is listening anymore*. When the chair stands, or the red light flashes, we turn off our brains. So

attempting to take us through one or two last points is essentially worthless – your audience is already in when-will-this-be-over (or WWTBO) mode. I know, it's strange, because if it were supposed to be a thirty-minute talk, we'd still be listening, except that we aren't. In a one-hour seminar, or keynote address, or the like, we don't go into WWTBO mode until the clock hits that last minute, and then – oops – we're not listening. That's just how it is.

Oh, and when you skip to the 'thank you's' do one more important thing – shut up. Yes, you can mention one or two folks if they happen to be in the room, but they've also stopped listening anyway. Do you want to take more time, telling us all about people we don't know and don't remember anyway? No offence to them and their hard work, but we're not listening!

If you are very experienced in keeping to time, you know how to do this – but if not (yes, I'm talking to *you*) here's an essential tip: prepare your talk by having one slide per minute (see Rule the Second). This includes title slides, joke slides, thank you slides and, of course, the data slides – they *all* count. Because you are going to take one slide per minute on average, and if you have more slides, we're not going to look at them, once we're in WWTBO mode.

Rule the Second: Prepare. I give a lot of talks, and every single talk I prepare. Because I'm only going to show the number of slides that correspond to the number of minutes the talk is going to be, and I have some things that I have to include. Like this. The first slide is the title, and you'll take a minute to tell us about what you're going to tell us (or we'll lose a minute just in getting the microphone working – trust me, you need this minute). Then you'll show some introductory slides.

Don't overdo this – show just enough background so that we can understand your work, and (this is important) understand it without surveying the field. Remember, we're data junkies – try to get to real results as soon as you can, while ensuring we have a good idea of what you're talking about, what the question is, and why it's interesting. Now on to the data, and here there are another couple of tricks. Title your data slides, and make the title the thing your audience can write down – that is, make it the conclusion you wish us to draw from your data.

And there's a second trick, a sneaky one, and it flies in the face of conventional wisdom with regard to data slides. If you are uncomfortable speaking, or don't know the material inside-out and top-to-bottom, then please don't do this. It's this: make the data slide complicated. Yes, it has to be clear and readable (don't cram six figures into one slide) but show more data than you will discuss on the slide. Put a box around the data you *will* discuss (and if you want to discuss another bit, add another slide – and another minute – with the second bit indicated) because here's the thing – a somewhat data-rich slide conveys to your audience that there's a lot more information behind the conclusion, but we won't have time to go into it. It gives us confidence in the depth of your study, and we appreciate it when you say, "I want to draw your attention to only this experiment right here". Okay, it's an advanced technique, and the novice is best advised to keep it simple, but it's something you can aspire to. (Next time you hear a terrific speaker, notice how they do this and how they handle it.)

Rule the Third: One talk, one story. Okay, this really applies to talks of about thirty minutes or less, but we'll come to the exception later. In general, only tell one

story. Yes, I'm talking to *you*, Professor Ferret, who always begins your twenty-minute talk with "I have four things I want to tell you about". Listen – we're hearing *lots* of stories at a meeting, and it's simply hard to process all this info. The breaks between our talks give us a chance to collect our thoughts (if we can) and move onto the next speaker. The fact is, we generally stop listening after your first story anyway (and go into WWTBO mode), and it's for a good reason – if the story was good, we're still thinking about it, and if it was bad, we don't want to hear any more. That's just how it is.

This is one of my *big gripes* at meetings (oh yes, I've got others, but we'll save those for another time). Speakers try to expand their talks to fill the time allotted [and thus almost always go over (see Rule the First)]; but if your story doesn't fill a given time window, how refreshing to use the remaining time to offer us your insights into what your findings might actually mean. Or – perish the thought – end a few minutes early and leave some time for discussion! Nobody is going to complain if a twenty-minute talk takes only eight-teen minutes, but we'll fidget – loudly – if it takes twenty five.

I know, if you're a student given the opportunity to speak, then the odds are that you've only got one story to tell. But maybe you'll bring this novel idea to your mentor? Please? She might be the one who is just now, finally, *finally* (!) finishing up.

There are more rules, of course, but I'm hitting the slopes. We'll pick this up next time, après ski, oui?

Mole

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