

Chalk Talks

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What are Chalk Talks?

- Part of the interview process for most tenure track academic research positions
- NOT the same as your job talk
- “Informal” 1-2 hour evaluation of “worthiness” for the position
- Not applicable to every job interview
 - you should ask if you will be expected to give one
- Formats can vary (ask about the format)
 - Research aims
 - General knowledge
 - Teach a class

What do they want to know about you?

- Do you have a plan?
 - What is your plan for the next 5 years?
 - Specific aims/goals/projects
 - Preliminary data
 - How are you going to accomplish this?
 - Experimental plan/tools
 - Sources of funding
 - Do you have the right balance of safety and risk?
 - Do you have a back-up plan?

How are you different from your advisor?

- Distinguish yourself as an independent investigator
- Preliminary data from your postdoc lab: who is first/last author?
- Have you discussed boundaries and which projects you can take with you?

Can you teach?

- Know your audience
- Can you bring everyone on the same page?
- Do you explain things clearly?

Can you think on your feet?

- Expect interruptions
- Expect that you will not finish, don't waste time or words
- Expect to be taken off topic, tactfully regain control

Are you the person I want down the hall?

- Will I be able to work with you?
- Will students and postdocs be able to work with you?

“Suggested” format for a research based chalk talk

1) What to bring

- 2-5 power point slides (back-up on email & portable drive)
 - Check in advance if a projector will be available.
 - outline
 - background (1-2 slides max)
 - specific aims / projects
 - preliminary data
- White board pens (two colors, not red & green)

2) Start with “Big Question” and a little background on what motivates you as scientist (<5 min).

- Don't assume they remember your talk (or were even there).
- What is your big question?
- Why is this an important area of research?
- Why are you the best person to address this question?
 - Background
 - Skills/techniques
- How are you going to address the question?
 - Short-term goals
 - Long-term goals

3) Outline your “5 year plan” (25-35 min)

- specific aims (NIH R01, NSF style) or 2-3 parallel projects
- state hypotheses, specific tests/experiments (not all the details)
- expected outcomes, identify pitfalls and potential solutions
- present preliminary data if you have it
- If you need a specific piece of equipment, justify here
- Have a blend of safe and risky projects,
- Have a timeline (regardless of funding)
- have a back up plan or suggest how you can “tweak” your research to pursue alternate avenues for funding

4) Questions you should be able to answer:

- a) When do you plan to submit your first grant?
- b) What if project A, B or C doesn't work?
- c) What is your hypothesis?
- d) What will be your first manuscript? How long will this take?
- e) What is an appropriate project for a grad student, post doc etc?
- f) Where do undergraduates fit in? (if this is component of the program)
- g) How will you staff your lab?
- h) What are your potential funding agencies (NIH/NSF/Private foundations)?
- i) How do you see yourself fitting in here?