Psychologist, Heal Thyself: Perfecting the Art of Public Speaking

A review of

Public Speaking for Psychologists: A Lighthearted Guide to Research Presentations, Job Talks, and Other Opportunities to Embarrass Yourself

by David B. Feldman and Paul J. Silvia


Reviewed by
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Fact: Psychologists have a great deal to contribute to understanding human behavior. We have developed complex theories for investigating psychological phenomena and have created intricate processes and procedures for testing these theories: from research design and methodology to statistical analyses. We have used the data collected from these processes to generate intricate and detailed models of human functioning and theories on the etiology and maintenance of psychopathology—including the interaction and incorporation of biological and social factors. We have then used these models to generate evidence-based assessment measures and treatment protocols and, in so doing, have developed and refined efficacious and effective treatments for psychiatric disorders that rival those of many biological/pharmacological interventions.
Another fact: The same psychologists who have accomplished all of the incredible feats described in the previous paragraph are not always so effective at presenting and disseminating these data—to the public, to members of other mental health professions, or even to one another! In fact, some have argued that it is our (read: psychologists’) lack of sophistication in discussing, disseminating, and promoting our work that has hampered the awareness, acceptance, and use of psychological interventions, specifically, and growth of the field in general. In addition, our difficulties in, and anxieties about, discussing and sharing our data in front of others may also be hampering students from excelling at courses, early career psychologists from advancing in their careers, seasoned veterans from getting promoted, and especially hampering the general public—arguably the group of people who could derive the most immediate and significant benefits from our knowledge!

In writing *Public Speaking for Psychologists: A Lighthearted Guide to Research Presentations, Job Talks, and Other Opportunities to Embarrass Yourself*, David Feldman and Paul Silvia make a solid attempt to correct a pervasive and predominant flaw in our training: the near-absence of skill building in the science of public speaking. Using a few simple principles, augmented with a toolbox of rules and tricks, the authors cover the most common tasks that presenters in the field of psychology will face: research presentations at conferences, job talks, and talks given to the general public.

The book is divided into two sections, the first of which covers general principles and the second, specific presentation types. The General Principles of Public Speaking section includes a review of the central skills of public speaking, each of which is covered in a separate chapter. These include knowing the audience, preparing and delivering the talk, answering questions, dealing with public speaking anxiety, and handling the unexpected problems that are inevitable if and when one starts to give talks regularly. The remainder of the book is then designed to offer suggestions in dealing with specific types of presentations, each of which has again its own chapter. These include research talks, poster presentations, job talks, and presentations for lay audiences.

The chapters are written in a casual, humorous style, including many examples from each author of how things have gone wrong for them in previous talks (i.e., “Wonderful Tales of Woe”). In addition, the use of smaller subsections, bulleted points, tables, and figures affords readers the opportunity to pull together the main themes and pointers from each chapter with little effort. And for those with less-than-perfect attention and concentration, each chapter ends with a Reflections and Conclusions section that summarizes the previous content, which can serve as a memory check and pop quiz for what was just read.

While certainly useful for introducing the basic principles of professional public speaking, this book would likely be viewed as less useful by the more seasoned professional. This issue could have been resolved either by expanding on certain chapters (e.g., “Preparing and Delivering Your Talk,” “When Disaster Strikes: Handling Problems With Humor and
Grace,” or “Presentations for Lay Audiences”) and/or by adding a section on how to talk to the media.

In addition, regardless of the target audience, the chapter on poster presentations could probably be deleted, and while the use of the koala metaphor is initially endearing, like any joke repeated too many times, it quickly becomes old and eventually annoying. Finally, readers who purchase this book due to a more intense anxiety (read: phobia) about public speaking may derive more benefit from other books that are more specific to that topic, such as *The Confident Speaker* (Monarth & Kase, 2007) or *In the SpotLight* (Esposito, 2005).

Overall, however, this book does provide some excellent tips and strategies for those just starting their careers and can also serve as a refresher for those who have been giving presentations for some time. For example, for those just starting and for those who have given many talks, with even one or two presentations to slightly less “friendly” crowds, it can be easy to forget that the audience really is, for the most part anyway, on your side.

Similarly, after you have given a few or many talks, it is tempting to do all you can to fill the time, but this often comes at the cost of trying to do too much and not respecting your audience’s time. So whether you are about to give your first presentation or your thousandth, chances are you will find something in this book to benefit you—even if it is the understanding that, in order to do what we do as psychologists, we will encounter countless opportunities to embarrass ourselves!

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**References**


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