

10 Ancient Rules for giving a conference/seminar/research talk in Mathematics

a new translation from the original cuneiform stone tablets
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1. Thou shalt finish your talk on time. This is the prime directive; obey this rule above all others. Preferably you should end slightly early: you will please your audience with the gift of extra minutes in the day. If you are late, you steal time from your audience and displease the gods.
2. Do not accomplish the goal of finishing on time by the artifice of speeding up a talk that is too long. The gods will not be fooled. Your audience did not volunteer to hear a 3 hour talk in 45 minutes. Instead, select what is best and omit the rest.
3. Practice your talk for time and pace. If you check the clock during your presentation and say “uh oh, I’d better speed up!”, this angers the gods. Prioritize. Do not spend more time on a topic than is warranted by your overall goal.
4. Have an overall goal. Keep it clearly in mind while preparing your talk. Remember that your job is to inform, not confuse or impress.
5. It’s easier to inform if your audience is paying attention. Therefore the gods grant you permission to entertain, as long as it does not interfere with your goal or violate the prime directive (rule 1). Give the talk you would like to hear.
6. Know your audience – you must know what things you should explain, what things require only a reminder, and what things everyone already knows. Explain what is needed, but don’t belabor the obvious.

7. The gods must be able to compile your talk. Therefore figures must be clearly labeled, and all terms and notation must be clearly defined before use.
8. If you project figures or words onto the cave wall, omit anything that you do not plan to explain fully. Describe, do not read.
9. Praise those whose work in the same crops have contributed to your harvest.
10. Do not hide your own weaknesses, or the gods may expose them for you on their own terms. The gods have not selected you to sell used chariots, but rather to educate.