

JOURNAL CLUB SURVIVAL STRATEGIES

(based upon advice from John Roth)

With minor modifications, these suggestions apply to class presentations, research reports, seminars, etc.

Why are Journal Clubs are important?

- No one reads enough. Journal clubs are an excellent way to keep up and expand.
- Not every journal club is memorable, but we tend to remember many of them
It's good practice even for experienced speakers

Choice of paper:

Choose a paper that is current, deals with important questions of interest to most of the audience, and lends itself to discussion

Basic Philosophy:

- Remember why you sometimes skip a seminar – boredom, wasted time you could've spent doing something productive.
- You have a moral obligation to your audience – make the seminar time worthwhile.
- You are the host. Can your guests hear, see, stay awake? Make sure they are having fun; encourage participation.
- Think of yourself as guide for a risky trip. The audience is apprehensive that they'll be bored, waste time. Therefore, you need to reassure them with your confidence and assurance.

Presentation:

- What is the “Big Picture”? Make sure that the audience understands the broad context of the paper. Where in our science does it fit? Refer to this throughout your talk, not just in the introduction.
- Start with an outline so your audience knows where you are taking them. Check it off as you go so the audience knows where you are.
- Avoid a “Who-done-it” presentation. Tell them the main conclusions right away.
- Facts are boring; ideas, questions, puzzles, paradoxes are interesting.
- Summarize the “take home” messages.

Preparation for the talk:

General considerations

- Consider the audience and their background.
- Make a conscious decision about what to leave out. Don't spend time on a digression that is not central to the mission of the talk. If you haven't time to explain something clearly, leave it out completely. Don't spend time on non-essential details.
- Give general background, underlying issues, burning questions, unresolved controversies.
- No one minds hearing what they already know if it's done quickly enough. People often even appreciate being reminded.
- Tell them what you plan to tell them. Remember the old ditty: *“First you tell them you're gonna tell 'em. Then you tell 'em. Then you tell 'em you told them.”*
- Write an outline use it.
- Repeat main points throughout the talk.

- Time your talk carefully. No one was ever angry because a talk was too short, but no one will thank you for talking beyond your scheduled time.

Detailed suggestions

Physical facilities.

- Keep the lights on to the max -- dark is for sleeping.
- Advantages of using the blackboard (“chalk talk”): There’s never too much detail at once since you have to write it out.
- You can refer to essential information on the board during the talk.
- Write legibly.

Personal behavior

- Watch for mannerisms -- they distract attention from the message
- Encourage questions from the audience, even interruptions. Interruptions break the tension and relax the audience.
- Avoid “talking head” syndrome. Don’t say anything important without reference to a diagram or even a word on the board. Lengthy verbal text hypnotizes people.
- Don’t take criticisms and objections personally. They are directed at the paper, not at you.

Design of slides and overheads.

- Do not just copy the figures from the paper. If material is too long for the blackboard, include overheads/slides for background, summaries, and road maps (e.g., “where are we so far?”).
- Keep detail on the screen to a minimum.
- Strip-tease approach to overheads -- combines an advantage of chalk talks.