

## **Advice on doing the best chalk talk**

**Prof. Jason S. Carroll, Cancer Research Cambridge Institute, University of Cambridge**

### **What it is and makes it different from a research talk:**

~ 1 hour **no slides** – hence the name ‘chalk talk’ – writing on a white or blackboard live in front of a small group of PIs/faculty (10-12 people) rather than a formal talk followed by Q&A

About your **future work** e.g. 5 year plan, must be focused *what you are going to do* not what you’ve done. So it’s like defending a research proposal.

You will be interrupted all the time, this is normal, and don’t let it derail you. Stick to the most important things you need to say. For 1 hour prepare 30 mins content or less.

### **Why they do it:**

To see if you can think on your feet, defend your future plans but be open to others’ ideas

### **How to do one**

1. Get **your overarching goal right out in front** ignore specifics, need to be high level or you’ll never finish it and still be on goal 1. Write down on the top of the board–e.g. “I want to understand oestrogen mechanism in cancer” (FULL STOP)

NOT “I’m going to grow these cells and treat them with.... “

Then “I will get there doing the following”...write out on board

2. Three key goals– one safe; one medium risk; long term high risk one. There must be some cohesion between the goals. (Leave space to add detail later)
3. Go back to the first goal and start adding detail. What is known, what you want to know, how you’ll achieve it. Gauge response from crowd, how often are they interrupting tell you how much detail you will have time to give and still finish 3 goals (think of it like an exam, managing your time). If they are interested in more detail they will ask you.
4. Go onto goal 2, do the same, then goal 3....

See a real life examples of text and diagram on how to structure it with the link given beside the one for this document.

### **Common questions**

- What happens if X part fails or gives a different answer? Be ready with back-up plans for everything

- What will first postdoc work on? Justification of composition of lab why postdocs, technician?
- What will you bring to institute? Who will you work with at institute? (here mention ~2 names)
- How measure success at first review – need tangible research endpoints (e.g. I would like to have this knock out mouse characterised) not just high impact papers
- Funding strategy: Who'll you apply to? What will be in each grant?
- Who's your main competition and why can you stay ahead of them?
- What are you doing that's different from your postdoc supervisors and are you able to take this work with you?

### **Remember:**

Chalk talks are very hard to do well, no one does it perfectly.

You know more than anyone else in the room about your proposal & most likely your field.

Be excited about your research – it counts for a lot. Act like a PI in demeanour.

Be prepared to ditch less important parts of the talk if you think you will not be able to get to the most important bits towards the end.

Don't be afraid to flatter panel members (e.g. demonstrate you have read their latest papers)

Be realistic – don't have to change the world in time span (e.g. 5 years).

It's OK not to be completely right – it's about future work so things will change

You can bring a 'cheat sheet' but don't copy it out verbatim. Writing is not the point – but include pointers for members who may be distracted by phone, emails etc. to allow them to catch up. Diagrams are more effective than words.

### **What makes it difficult:**

It's harder to talk about future work than the past, to prepare a talk without slides, simulate a mock chalk talk and deal with the interruptions.

### **Common ways candidates go wrong**

Don't take it seriously and have 'switched off' after their research talk and think they nailed it already, the chalk talk is just as important.

Get upset about being interrupted. Don't say "I'll come back to that" you need to address the questions

Too much time spent writing/drawing on the board. Keep to minimum - is it actually helping?

## Your wins from the chalk talk

Chalk talks can be a painful exercise but also can be extremely useful as you'll have very smart people (faculty) giving you input on your future research plans

**Read more real life questions asked at academic panel interviews for lectureship and group leader positions in our academic interview skills booklet.**

<https://cam.joinhandshake.co.uk/edu/articles/87>

## Your action:

Follow the instructions on how to do one above, write it out on a board and get some colleagues to keep interrupting you. You can also do this with a careers consultant as a practice interview.

## Our summary infographic:

**Get that academic job series:  
Chalk Talks**

- Important part of the interviewing process**  
It's tough. Preparation is key
- Get into the mindset**  
It's not a Powerpoint presentation  
Interruptions and discussion = less content
- Talk about your future plans**  
Detail your five year plan with safe, medium and long term high risk goals
- Get your key messages up front.**  
Ignore the specifics, keep it high level
- Prepare for questions and interruptions**  
Why you? Why this institute?  
What differentiates you from your PI?
- Be enthusiastic**  
About your future research  
It's infectious and counts for so much