

Giving a Chalk Talk

PDCO Career Resources

After you have secured an interview for an academic position, it is time to prepare for the interview process; this includes preparing for the “Chalk Talk.” Generally, graduate students and postdocs are not aware of what happens in a Chalk Talk, as they rarely get the opportunity to sit in on one. This crucial step in the interview process includes standing before a group of expert researchers in which you must describe your future research goals and showcase your talents as a scientist.

What are they looking for?

Traditionally, the Chalk Talk gives the search committee the chance to ask questions that determine your fit in their program. You will typically have 45-60 minutes, but plan on 30 minutes of talking with lots of interruptions along the way. Some questions to consider are:

Would you fit in as a colleague in their department?

The selection committee is hoping to find someone who will speak their mind and contribute new and unique ideas. You want to demonstrate your passion for science and discovery, as well as your excitement for their department. This is also a time for you and your colleagues to learn how you will work together. Are you open to suggestions, confident about your research, and not defensive or combative when presented with difficult questions?

Are you an independent and active researcher?

The selection committee will be looking to see if you are an independent thinker. You should discuss your future research aspirations and provide insight into potential research outcomes. Spend time reviewing the literature in any fields you propose to enter. What new ideas and prestige will your work bring to their department?

What are some opportunities for you to collaborate with faculty and students?

Interviewers will want to see that you know how to collaborate. When applicable, discuss how you have worked with others in the past to further your research aims. You might wish to do some research and mention how working with a particular member of the department would benefit you and your research goals. Show your commitment to teaching by describing research projects you will give to your graduate student(s) or trainees.

How to Organize your Talk

Chalk Talks are not meant to be a formal presentation with a set of slides. Typically, slides will not be allowed, so prepare to use a board provided in the room. Prepare notes for what you want to write and how you want to organize your ideas on the board. Consider bringing your

own markers/chalk. Discussing your thoughts and research in this manner allows faculty to see how you think and allows you to engage with the audience and highlight your talents as a scientist.

Beginning your Talk

- Start with a blank board. Write out your title, and on the side of the board give a short, bulleted list to outline specific aims for your future research, focusing on your short-term and long-term goals.
 - This process can, and should, be done before the talk begins.
- Give a few sentences about the overall importance of your research and explain why the search committee should care about your work.
- Follow this up by writing out your future aims as a faculty member and a few details for each so that the audience will remember them.
 - You should indicate a proposed timeframe for carrying out each aim.
 - Be brisk and confident, so you can quickly move into the content of your aims.
- Typically, you should plan on presenting at least two, if not three aims. Any less and you might quickly run out of ideas. You might consider beginning your preparation for the chalk talk by focusing on the following two aims:

AIM 1: The title of your first grant. This aim is based directly on your postdoc research or dissertation. Take the time to show why this research is feasible and fundable. Do not show a lot of preliminary data, but focus more on the vision of your research. You can always follow up with specific faculty members later if they wish to know specific details of your data. Summarize by discussing how these results will yield important questions.

AIM 2: The BIG picture. This aim can be related to your first, but it does not need to be. It is your opportunity to let your passion for your research show. Discuss what problems you intend to solve through your research. Share what gaps in knowledge and literature you intend to fill.

Key Points

- The Chalk Talk is a critically important component of the academic interview. While it is a significant part of your interview, it does not have to be a stressful task. If done appropriately, with sufficient preparation, it can be a fun and enjoyable experience.
- This is an informal setting that allows you the opportunity to interact and evaluate your potential future colleagues.
- Review the literature in your field and structure your aims.
- The most important tip: practice! Practice speaking, writing, and drawing diagrams. Ask your PI and other individuals from your department to sit in on your practice chalk talk.

Johns Hopkins Medical Institute Professional Development and Career Office
<http://pdco.med.jhmi.edu/>

Make an appointment to develop a career strategy and optimize your job search tools

Additional Resources

- [Chalk Talk for a Tenure-Track Position: Biomedical Sciences](#)
- [Q&A: How to Give a Chalk Talk](#)
- [Preparing Your Academic Job Talk](#)