THIRTEEN RULES

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When I was five or six my father paraded me around the neighborhood as a mental marvel able to multiply three-digit numbers. I think he enjoyed it more than I did (my savant powers are seriously limited) but it did give my little boat a first push into the big river of Statistics.

So, after all these years, am I grateful for the push? Oh yes. (Thanks dad!) Statistics is a uniquely fascinating intellectual discipline, poised uneasily as it is at the triple point of mathematics, philosophy, and science. The field has been growing slowly but steadily in influence for a hundred years, with an increased upward slope during the past few decades. "Buy stat futures" would be my advice to ambitious deans and provosts.

At this point I was supposed to come across with some serious advice about the statistical life and how to live it. But a look at some of the other COPSS volume entries made it clear that the advice quota was being well met. (I particularly enjoyed Hall, Rubin, and Reid's pieces.) Instead, let me offer some hard-earned rules garnered from listening to thousands of scholarly presentations:

Thirteen Rules for giving a Really Bad Talk

1. Don't plan too carefully; improv is the name of the game with technical talks.
2. Begin by thanking an enormous number of people, including blurry little pictures if possible. It comes across as humility.
3. Waste a lot of time at first on some small point, like the correct spelling of "Chebychev." Whoever heard of running out of time? (See Rule 13.)
4. An elaborate outline of the talk to come, phrased in terms the audience hasn't heard yet, really sets the stage, and saves saying "I'm going to present the beginning, the middle, and the end."
5. Don't give away your simple motivating example early on. That's like stepping on your own punchline.
6. A good way to start is with the most general, abstract statement possible.
7. The best notation is the most complete notation — don't skimp on those subscripts!
8. Blank space on the screen is wasted space. There should be an icon for everything — if you say the word "Apple" an apple should tumble in from the right, etc. And don't forget to read every word on the screen out loud.
9. Humans are incredibly good at reading tables, so the more rows and columns the better. Statements like "you probably can't make out these numbers but they are pretty much what I said" are audience confidence builders.
10. Don't speak too clearly: it isn't necessary for those in the front row.
11. Go back and forth rapidly between your slides. That's what God made computers for.
12. Try to get across everything you've learned in the past year in the few minutes allotted. These are college grads, right?
13. Oh my, you are running out of time. Don't skip anything; show every slide even if it's just for a millisecond. Saying "This is really interesting stuff, I wish I had time for it" will make people grateful for getting "Chebychev" right.