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How to Handle Questions During an Academic Presentation

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At a recent conference, I was reminded that people sometimes get a bit unpleasant, when they ask questions to the speaker. Most often, people who attend your academic presentations will approach your work with curiosity and respect. But if you happen to be unfortunate and come across people who ask aggressive, dismissive or disrespectful questions, here are some approaches that I've used over the years. To be clear, people can and should ask *critical* questions during a scientific talk. What I'm referring to here, is the tone and way of asking more so than the content of the question.

1. **Let them finish their question.** It can be tricky to remain calm, especially if the person repeatedly interrupts you or is condescending. But if you remain calm and let them finish their question, this makes you appear confident and sets the tone for no further interruptions.
2. **If they interrupt your answer.** Try leaving an awkwardly long pause after they stop talking to indicate: "...So it's my turn now?"
3. **If you don't know the answer.** You can say: "That's an interesting suggestion, I'll look into that after the talk."
4. **If they won't let it go.** If they keep asking, even after you state that you don't know, try saying: "Let's talk about this offline/after the talk" and attempt to move on.
5. **Help from the chair.** If that doesn't work either, an alternative is to

look to the chair for help or attempt to use humor (see below).

6. **If they get aggressive.** Remind yourself that, most likely, the rest of the audience will also notice their aggression and probably feel the same way about this person as you do.

One of the worst experiences I've had during a talk was at an invited seminar. A very senior professor interrupted my talk to say that the premise for my work wasn't valid. I explained how the math worked, but he continued to repeat that what I was saying wasn't true. I tried to explain it in a different way. After the professor still didn't believe me once I'd referenced where in Binney & Tremaine (textbook) they could see the derivation, the talk came to an awkward pause. The rest of my talk relied on this one fact, so I wasn't sure how to continue. In hindsight, the chair of the seminar could have stepped in at this point and said "let's move on". In my case, however, another senior professor, who's in my subfield, spoke up and stated that I was correct. This was not an ideal situation. I finished my talk, but was quite thrown off by this experience and rushed through the rest of the slides.

In a different seminar, I found that humor was a good deflector. A person in the audience asked me about the density ratios of stars in the spiral arms of the Milky Way vs. the density in the galactic bar of the Milky Way. I said that I'd have to look it up after the talk. The person then immediately asked me the exact same question again. I explained that I wouldn't want to say a wrong number, and stated, again, that I would look it up after the talk. My talk wasn't about spiral arms, so an immediate resolve was unnecessary. When the audience member then asked me a third time, I left a pause, broke eye contact, looked out in the room and said: "5". Everyone laughed because they knew that I had made up the answer, and I think the audience member felt a bit silly for pushing an answer, when I obviously didn't know. After my talk I did send the person a reference to a relevant paper and we had a productive conversation.