Q&A

What’s the best science talk you’ve ever attended?

It takes a bold, fascinating presentation to stand out from the talk after talk that researchers sit through at a typical scientific meeting. Here, four HHMI scientists describe lectures that have lingered with them for years—because of their topic, eloquence, or abrasiveness.

— Edited by Sarah C.P. Williams

Robert B. Darnell
HHMI Investigator
The Rockefeller University

“Francis Crick at a Cold Spring Harbor meeting on neurobiology in 1990. Crick spoke at the end of the meeting and berated the entire neuroscience community for their presentations. He told them they scrupulously avoided the big question that they all wanted answered but were afraid to ask: how does the brain think? He went on to lay out a blueprint for finding a mechanism for consciousness, based upon his own thinking and his work with Christoph Koch on how to approach such a difficult question: make reasonable assumptions, establish a model system, and test assumptions quantitatively. It was brilliant.”

A. Belén Elgoyhen
HHMI International Research Scholar
Institute for Research on Genetic Engineering and Molecular Biology, CONICET

“The talk I attended that I liked the most was the 2005 Presidential Lecture of The Society of Neuroscience by Ramülo Romo from the UNAM, Mexico. He elegantly and very clearly showed how sensory information is processed in different parts of the brain. His findings have several implications. One of them is how a phantom perception like tinnitus (the perception of a noise in the brain in the absence of an external source) might be generated in the central nervous system.”

Daniel I. Bolnick
HHMI Early Career Scientist
University of Texas at Austin

“At the 2003 Society for the Study of Evolution annual meeting, I attended a talk by a graduate student describing his analysis of how Drosophila genes respond to selective breeding. On opening his PowerPoint file, the computer crashed and would not restart. He took a deep breath and delivered one of the clearest and most engaging talks I have ever seen, without any visual backup or notes, and without complaint. His grace under pressure and obvious mastery of the material earned him the only standing ovation I have seen at a meeting.”

Nancy Bonini
HHMI Investigator
University of Pennsylvania

“To me, best talk means most exciting. One related to my own research I heard as a grad student. Allen Laughon gave a thrilling talk on fly development that opened my mind to the realm of possibilities for Drosophila, a concept I eventually incorporated into my work by developing the fly as a model for human disease. A second spectacular talk was one I heard as a postdoc: Patricia Kuhl gave a seminar on language and the amazing ways we integrate facial cues into what we hear people say. Although unrelated to my own research, it highlighted truly fascinating aspects of cognition and I remember it vividly to this day.”

Darnell Rockefeller University  Elgoyhen: David Rolls  Bolnick: Sasha Haagensen  Bonini: Paul Fetters