THEORY LUNCH
Department of Systems Biology, Harvard Medical School

Theory Lunch is a "chalk" talk (whiteboard only, no slideware) that is held from 12-2pm on most Fridays during term. The "theory" designation refers to conceptual rather than mathematical problems. The audience is interested primarily in conceptual issues in modern biology. It is sophisticated in the use of mathematical techniques that address such issues but this is neither a requirement nor an expectation.

Theory lunch has been running since 2003 and attracts a broad audience from across the Medical School, Harvard College, MIT and sometimes further afield. Most members of the audience are engaged in some form of experimental biology or medicine but they may also have backgrounds in one of the physical sciences, computer science or engineering. They include faculty members,

Uri Alon giving Theory Lunch on 16 May 2008, showing the layout of the room that is normally used. A YouTube video of this is available on the website but the song and guitar act is entirely optional.

postdocs, graduate, and some undergraduate, students and visitors. A wide range of topics and of areas in biology, including aspects of history and philosophy, have been presented, as can be seen from the titles and abstracts on the website, whose address is given below.

Theory Lunch became Theory Zoom during the pandemic years of 2021 and 2022, which has prompted some changes. We acquired an audience from outside the Boston area, which we have tried to retain by moving to a hybrid format that allows remote participation. Talks were also recorded and this remains possible with the new format. We encourage speakers to make their recordings publicly available but the decision to do so rests entirely with the speaker. We are happy to make reasonable edits to videos at the speaker's request. Finally, it is possible for speakers to join us remotely if they are unable to do so in person. Further information on how this works is provided on the next page.

The chalk-talk format may be unfamiliar to some speakers. Those who have become wedded to PowerPoint are pleasantly surprised at how liberating divorce can be; the need to draw pictures, or movies, by hand focusses attention on their most relevant aspects and the results are often more memorable than the overloaded details in many slide presentations. For those speakers who make use of equations, simple calculations can be informative but it is better to convey the ideas behind a derivation than to undertake it in detail. Talks that distill conceptual problems from experimental data are particularly appreciated. Speakers are encouraged to present perspectives and opinions and to discuss work in progress.

The format of theory lunch is intended to provoke questions and often leads to lively discussions, which are always friendly. Maintaining a "give and take" with the audience helps to create a receptive atmosphere for ideas, although speakers may sometimes find it necessary to defer questions to after the talk, so as not to get diverted from their main story. While a few participants may be knowledgeable about a speaker's field of interest, most will not be, and it is very helpful if the speaker lays out the scientific background with a diverse audience in mind.

A catered buffet lunch is served at 12 noon. The talk itself starts at 12.15pm and officially finishes at 1.30pm but informal discussions often carry on around the whiteboard for some time.

For more information, see the website, http://vcp.med.harvard.edu/tl-schedule.html, or contact the organiser, Jeremy Gunawardena, jeremy@hms.harvard.edu.

Options for a Remote Speaker

To maintain the "give and take" of Theory Lunch, we suggest the following three options if a speaker has to join us remotely over Zoom.

1. **Talking only**. The speaker talks directly to the audience without slides, or at most a very small number of (no more than 5) pre-prepared slides. Hashim Al-Hashimi's talk on 4 Dec 2020 is an example of this. Alternatively, participants can download slides in advance from our website and the speaker can refer to them without having to show them.

2. **Talking and writing on a whiteboard**. The speaker is equipped with an actual whiteboard and uses that to draw, as he or she would during an actual Theory Lunch. Catherine Marler's talk on 19 Feb 2021 is an example of this. It is tricky to keep both speaker and whiteboard in acceptable focus without a camera operator but our IT staff can help to optimise camera and microphone settings beforehand.

3. **Talking and writing on a tablet**. The speaker is equipped with an electronic tablet, such as an Apple iPad with a pen, and uses that to draw. Jessica Feldman's talk on 19 March 2021 is an example of this. If a tablet is not available, we may be able to provide one temporarily for the talk. Here too, our IT staff will be available to help with the setup. This kind of setup requires familiarity with the tablet controls to work smoothly.