

# THEORY LUNCH DURING COVID19

Department of Systems Biology, Harvard Medical School

On account of the COVID19 pandemic, Theory Lunch cannot at this time be held in its usual format of a speaker talking to an audience in a seminar room. During this period of pandemic restrictions, we will hold Theory Lunch remotely on Zoom. It is a “chalk talk” (whiteboard only, no slides, no movies) and the unique atmosphere of interaction and questioning has been an essential part of its success. Replicating this atmosphere on Zoom is not easy. Questions from remote participants can be moderated by the host but it is essential for the speaker to be the focus of the audience's attention. It is that personal interaction which makes the difference between a Theory Lunch and a conventional Seminar. What we want to avoid is the all-too-familiar “slide dump”. With that in mind, the following options suggest themselves.

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. 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, either at home or work, and uses that to draw, as he or she would during an actual Theory Lunch. It can be 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. This may require two separate Zoom connections. If an iPad 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. The disadvantage of the iPad, in comparison to the whiteboard, is that the former corresponds to a single page and requires some practice in manipulating writing and erasure, while the latter allows more freedom and ease of action.

This is an experiment for all of us and you may have your own ideas for how to improve the give-and-take with an audience for which we are striving. We can discuss variations and get help from our IT staff to implement them but selecting one of these options, depending on your own inclinations and circumstances and what you hope to discuss, will help us get started.

More information about Theory Lunch as it used to be is provided on the next page.

Theory Lunch is a “chalk” talk (whiteboard only, no slides, no movies) 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.



*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.*

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, 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.

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](mailto:jeremy@hms.harvard.edu).