


## THE DINNER TABLE CHALLENGE:

 **You** have been invited to interview at the university at which you most want to eventually gain tenure. You are staying at a hotel in town.

**The night before** the interview, the Dean has invited you to join her **and her colleagues** from the Faculty of Arts and Sciences at her home for a catered dinner.

When you get there, **you find you are seated next to** a physicist, a social worker, an artist, a journalist, and the department head's 16-year old son. The Dean is in the middle of the table, well within earshot.

Wanting to help you feel at home, the journalist invites you to tell her **what kind of research** you do.

The people around you are **all ears**. *How will you respond?*





## Possibly *Life-Saving* **POINTERS:**

- **Courtesy Essentials:**
  - Make eye contact.
  - Include everyone at the table.
  - Use language they can all understand. (If you have to use a technical term, define it clearly.)
  - Show interest in them as well.
- **Engagement Ideas:**
  - Hook the audience with an interesting idea or a “what if?” that points to a possible long-term goal of your research – something that almost anyone can identify as valuable.
  - Identify the broader challenge your research is intended to address.
  - Use examples or analogies or provocative questions that can clarify the big picture. Try to pick ones that relate to the experience or expertise of the people around you.
  - Use hands or nearby objects as props, to help visualize your point.
- **Signs of Success:**
  - The audience finds you interesting. (They do not immediately turn to another dinner guest and avoid you the rest of the evening.)
  - They want to know more; they ask further questions.
  - Other people overhearing the conversation want to get in on it.

## Common Pitfalls:

- **Too Long (TMI):** You go on and on, and they can’t wait to find a way to politely escape.
- **Too Short:** You say as little as possible, and they find you stiff and boring.
- **Too Technical:** Too detailed; too much about how; not enough about why.
- **Too Jargony:** You use terms, acronyms, units of measure, and concepts they may not understand.
- **Too Far Removed:** You don’t find a way to relate what you research to something they might care about.
- **Too Relentless:** You don’t give people an opportunity to ask questions or discuss.
- **Too Exclusive:** You focus in on the one scientist in the group who starts drawing you out with technical details and jargon, to the exclusion of others.
- **Lacking Affect:** You speak in a monotone, show little enthusiasm, don’t meet people’s eyes, seem bored with what you do,
- **Self-Absorbed:** You show no interest in what they do.